

Chapter 5

Church Life Beyond “Oneness”

“The people are one and they all have one language...now nothing that they propose to do will be withheld from them”
(Gen. 11:6)

There is probably not one entreaty more compelling to serious Christians than believers being one. The sense of oughtness in joining hands and hearts seems an organic part of the very salvation package we have all received. The Lord Jesus prayed “That they all may be one” (John 17:21) and His petition echoes in the chambers of our inward being. The Bible uplifts themes of oneness, sharing, one accord, fellowship, like-mindedness, and equality. These are critical, as they all but decide the worth of our church experience. Alternately division is labeled as something of the flesh, mentioned in the same breath as idolatry, sorcery, and hatred (Gal. 5:20).

It’s not hard to see why, then, that seeking believers would be attracted to any group emphasizing Christian unity. When I first encountered the Local Church Movement and its boasts of oneness, I was certainly impressed. So, without knowing anything of the group’s checkered attitudes, I “bought the farm.”

The problem (which I could not have known as a newly saved twenty-one year old) is that religious groups can appropriate erroneous versions of oneness. It isn’t very hard to do. Consider the scenario: some

particular people are very concerned with oneness. They catch a vision to build something high and profound. They are like-minded, speak the same thing, achieve one accord in their efforts and are successful in the early part of their work. Later, some frustration begins to come in; different speaking, and then that which they greatly fear comes upon them—division. Those in the group blame each other for the problem, and some blame the devil, but no one blames God, who, as it turns out, is directly responsible for “messing up” their one accord. No, this is not per se, the account of a Christian group gone awry. It is none other than the story of Babel from Genesis chapter 11. It is also the first scriptural intimation that oneness, even for good reasons, can displease God.

But telling the difference between authentic God-endorsed oneness and a counterfeit can be difficult. There are not many warning signs along the way. Where some do appear, positive looking things will always seem to draw attention away from them. For example, the first time reader of Genesis 11 will not detect anything out of order. There was a common language and a group morale that involved energy and self-sacrifice. An accord, a general agreement of thought and action could be seen in their determination to “build a tower.” Their stated mission of “building” was constructive and their desire to make it “high” was inspiring. Yet the punch line was that God hated it. The “green” reader is a bit confused. What was the problem? The road markers were all positive. Indeed, things like zeal, one accord, and a vision of building are biblical. Why would God find the oneness generated by these things loathsome?

The answer lies in the most central proposition of the church life—Christ Himself. Before a oneness is sought of works and goals, the more primary matter of His Person must be held. This involves His virtues, like righteousness, truthfulness, love, kindness, and mercy.

Our oneness is firstly there. When we begin to do something, we do not forget the Person we are in. During their gospel work, John and James got frustrated and wanted to call down fire from heaven on those rejecting their ministry. Jesus rebuked them, and some Bible manuscripts add that He said to them, “You do not know of what spirit you are of” (Luke 9:55). Even the oneness of a spiritual enterprise can become ugly when it is outside the attributes of God.

Genesis 11:5 says, “the Lord came down to see the city and tower which the sons of men had built.” This implied that He was not a part of the project at Babel. We do not find God needing to come down and see Noah’s ark or Moses’ tabernacle or David’s temple, for He was intimately involved with all those efforts. Nor did He have to go down and see what Jesus or the Apostles had done. Yet, the oneness at Babel was forged outside of Him and so knew nothing of His Person. It was organized lawlessness. Without the restraint of His attributes upon their inward parts, nothing they proposed to do would be withheld from them (Gen. 11:6).

The LC Movement and other groups of the same ilk habitually assert that their oneness is of Christ alone. But one man’s claim is as valid as another man’s. Therefore, we don’t stop with asking what is taught about oneness. If oneness really is of Christ, there will be fruit of it—something visible, measurable, and verifiable. Alternately, if the advertised “oneness in Christ” is false, if it grossly contradicts His truth or virtues, then fruit will tell us that, too. Produce always reveals the nature of a tree, even if the decorative sign hanging on its branches tells another story.

In recent times, LSM-inspired attacks upon Midwest churches became a blunt unpleasant blessing to those of us who had been praying for clarity. In our particular situation here in Columbus, I recall looking across a courtroom at LSM followers who were hoping to

win a judgment against the church here. I was struck with the blind mockery of voices softly chanting “O Lord Jesus” to a God whose written word clearly condemned what they were doing—brother going to law against brother (1 Cor. 6:6). But in all of this, fruit was borne, rendering unnecessary the need for reasonable doubt, long continued seeking, or discernment on our part. We became clear that we were not dealing with the Body of Christ but with something else, an entity whose oneness was not divine.

If we had not been certain enough, more evidence was forthcoming. For in order to explain the shriveled, rotten fruit they had produced, more untruths were to come. The group tried to say that it was only suing the corporation of the church, but not the church itself (although it wasn’t a disembodied corporate entity that ended up paying the legal expenses). In further attempts to establish the legitimacy of the group’s methods, allegations were made against the eldership of the church about mismanagement of funds (without which there could be no future for their lawsuit and no justification in front of others). And when all of that didn’t work, the most outrageous nonsense—saying that there had never been a lawsuit at all (this one got big laughs from the lawyers).

No limits seemed to exist as to how much the these people would feign ignorance, use exaggeration, play “nicey-nice” with prospective recruits in the church, utilize hollow piety, and spin the truth (both of the Bible and of the events going on in the church), while pleading their innocence. The “tree” eventually bloomed with this kind of fruit on every branch. We were fully convinced that it was not the oneness the Lord spoke of when He prayed that “they all would be one, as you Father are in Me and I in you.”

Oneness according to Paul, not Nimrod

Nimrod founded Babel (Gen. 10:10) and the oneness of his realm was primarily established in human endeavor and a common language. It is different in the New Testament. The Apostle Paul presented the oneness of the New Testament as “the oneness of the Spirit” (Eph. 4:3). From the moment a person receives the Holy Spirit, oneness with all other Christians is the immediate result. The Spirit in him is the same Spirit in them—not the same kind, but the same one. Since we are charged to keep that oneness (not invent it), the only real danger lies in doing ignorant things to disturb it.

Unfortunately, given our LC Movement background, many of us have been taught to combatively insist on numerous things, including non-essential items. Yet the intended framework of our oneness is not so complex, studded with tiny thoughts and nuances. It is composed of seven general items representing the Person and work of the triune God (Eph. 4:4-6). Attempts to forge unity outside of these things have historically damaged the Body of Christ. Every group that tries to do so, claims the Ephesians 4 framework, but then cites the necessity of additional items. Oneness becomes to them a matter on their own terms. They lament division and long for unity among believers, but think that it looks like everyone else dropping their “extras” and coming to join them and their extras. The classic LC mindset also runs along these lines. A popular consensus among the LSM strain is that oneness would occur if everyone would “get clear” about the Ministry of the age and the high peak of the divine revelation. If only the world would be full of pray-reading, loud repetitious calling, and a pervasive boundless respect for Witness Lee, then oneness would be found.

But the Apostle never expressed a hope that we would all agree on every point of doctrine. He commanded respect and toleration for a vast multitude of personal convictions (c.f. Rom. 14). Paul did however, write of his hope that we would all come to “the unity of the faith” (Eph. 4:13). If we were already one, then why would we need to attain to it? Because unfortunately, Christians accumulate many non-faith items that stick to them like flypaper. In essence we start off well as newly born Christians, exuberant about the faith and other believers. But then through various “helps” we learn to begin adding requirements. Usually these are beneficial things; some are even derived from scripture. But as the list of “helpful necessities” grows, the scope of inclusiveness shrinks. These new fixtures involve everything from modes of having the Lord’s Table to allowable music styles, to particular reading materials.

It is impossible for the entire Body of Christ to find oneness in those things, so the Lord must actually undertake a reducing work among His children, subtracting everything except for the seven items of Ephesians 4. Through a process of time, maturity, and hard lessons, He redirects our passion toward “the faith once delivered to the saints” (Jude 3). With our focus on this unadorned center commonly held by all believers, we will find ourselves at peace and in coordination with them far more often.

Who is “the Body”?

If receiving the Spirit produces an immediate oneness with all other believers, then we must confess that the body of Christ is huge, beyond finite scrutiny, and expanding daily. When these same people who have received the Spirit gather in the faith, they then become a visible expression of “one Spirit and one body” (Eph. 4:4). Even from that practical angle, Ephesians 4 and the spirituality contained in it are far too broad to

allow any special organization plant their flag on it. Yet the LC Movement, which represents a oneness far smaller than that of Ephesians 4, repeatedly speaks of itself as “the Body.” One of their workers recently said of departing members, “You can’t leave, there’s only one vine; you can’t go with a different vine.” This remark discloses a basic delusional assumption that the Local Churches are the fullness of the body of Christ. Whether this is an official teaching or not is immaterial. Once the membership commonly holds an attitude, it is every bit as powerful as an official decree. I was stunned at the singular unwillingness of LSM adherents to admit to this view as I spoke to a room full of them in Columbus. Yet spend time around the casual talk of anyone in the LSM camp and you will quickly find that they have named and claimed rights to the title of “the body.” In fact, “The Body” as a term is invoked so often that it has taken on a passcode significance. Decoded by context, it means those who continue submissively within the Local Churches and submit to LSM authority.

It is commonplace for exclusive groups to think that only their associated churches comprise the inward reality of the Body of Christ. J.R. Caldwell, a believer among the Brethren wrote,

...When we turn to the last glimpse historically of the church found in Scripture, namely in Ill John, and find there the Apostle John and the more spiritual of the saints “without” and Diotrophese and his followers “within,” it is vain to assert now, when confusion has developed a thousandfold, that any circle of confederate assemblies forms a full and divinely recognized “within.” As a matter of fact, the assertion is a mere assumption, and is disproved by the experience and testimony of very many who, though regarded by some as “outsiders” are really “inside,” and enjoying richly the fellowship of the Father and the Son. (Ironsides 142).

Oneness—Franchise or Otherwise?

I vividly recall one of the current “Blended Brothers” strongly asserting that oneness was not a matter of uniformity. Then in the very same breath he talked about how good it would be, though, if we were all on the same page in the same book. In one breath, an admission that oneness is not uniformity, in the next breath, a longing for that uniformity.

The same desire fills the heart of most Movement workers as they set up shop in new cities and seek to start a “proper” Local Church there. This involves the implementation of materials, practices, activities, conference and training schedules, meeting styles, and in-house lingo. It is fairly the same from one city to the next, a fact of which Movement members are very proud. After all, it shows their “oneness.” However, this oneness is very much the same as that of a fast food chain. McDonald’s, for instance, is immediately recognizable due to its golden arches. By seeing them, even without walking through the door, we know what is inside—the uniforms and even menu items and costs. With little variation, from Paris to Los Angeles to Singapore, we are all clear about what McDonald’s has to offer. In fact, if any location does not conform to the “oneness” of the chain, it is deemed “not proper” and will not be allowed in the franchise! Having traveled somewhat extensively, I came to realize that this was substantially the oneness of the LC Movement. Of course we cannot say that congregations sharing the same characteristics, activities, and even practices are wrong. But it is objectionable when such things are legislated as the oneness of the Body and on the basis of them, some churches are then said to be “proper” and others “deviant.”

A longstanding attempt at justifying the franchise approach has been the use of the lampstands in Revelation 2 and 3. “They are all the same,” is the

LSM teaching. However, stated without qualification, this thought has problems. Simple surface observation will show that plenty of differences existed between the seven churches and all of them were not negative. These had to do with their specific experiences of Christ (what He was to each of them), the environment in which the believers were charged to overcome, and their promised rewards.

The only dimension where all the churches were the same was in their spiritual reality and function. Even then, the criteria described is more than magnanimous, embracing nearly every serious Christian assembly that exists on this earth. Look at the inventory of necessary things according to the popular interpretation of the lampstands: Each is made of gold signifying the holy nature of God the Father. Each has the same shape—"Christ who is the image of God" (2 Cor. 4:4). Each has the same shining, signifying that their illumination comes through the Holy Spirit. These matters cannot be itemized on a checklist of physical things. They are spiritual realities. Thus, rather than demonstrating a universal oneness that is small and tight, the lampstands provide an extremely broad description, admitting just about any healthy congregation. The legitimacy of a church simply cannot be determined using the same externals that establish a franchise. At least according to the Revelation picture, the only required "sameness" between churches is the divine trinity. Naturally, these observations catapult us into a new way of looking at other Christian congregations. Rather than condemning their disparate worship and ministry styles, we should ask more profound questions. Are they living the holy life, glorifying the same Christ, and touching the same Spirit? If there are no definite indications to the contrary spelled out in scripture, we should be conservative about passing negative judgments.

Navigating the “Local Ground” Issue

While oneness is a strongly biblical fact, what we call the local ground (one city-one church) is far less certain. I realize that this will be received with some degree of trepidation, so I will state my positive convictions from the outset. I believe that a city-church pattern of sorts endured throughout the first century, running parallel to the original apostolic ministry. There are many verses that connect the practical church life with a city. This ancient example of assembly practice should invite our respect. While we cannot say that as a teaching it bears the same authoritative stamp as well-established truths like Jesus being the Son of God, neither should we arbitrarily discard it as meaningless.

Yet a few balancing thoughts should give pause to enthusiasts who covet “taking the ground” in every city. For one thing, each mention of the city-church in scripture is a description, an example, and does not involve commands. No verse amounts to a charge that says, “Thou shalt have one church in every city.” Obviously, this begs the question of how much biblical examples ought to count as binding truths, especially in the absence of an accompanying teaching or command. Actually, we have clearer scriptural support for the practice of head covering and foot washing than we do for the ground of locality. At least in either of those cases, there was not only an example recorded, but also a clear charge to practice alongside it. Not so with “the local ground.” Thoughts concerning its indispensability will only emerge from the Bible with the help of generous deductions and implications.

Yet with such tentative scriptural support, this particular teaching of church structure has warped into ecclesiastical primacy in the LC Movement. Time and tradition have served to transform the biblical record of

church practice into inflexible rules of form. Blueprints have been derived from passages that were more than likely never intended to be blueprints at all.

Tragically, what began as a proposition that contains exciting potential—all the Christians in a city are one church in that city!—has slowly narrowed to a myopic “vision” that is all but unlivable among Christians today. Even if it were the Holy Spirit’s mind to ratify one-city-one-church as a binding practical necessity in the Bible, we wonder about the long cavalcade of extras hitched to it: one-city-one-church-one-leadership-one-meeting-place-one-meeting-one-schedule-one-ministry-one-hymnal-one-Bible-translation-one-culture-one-opinion. It is doubtful that such an unwieldy package was ever meant for imposition on the saints down through church history.

However, rigidity and heaviness may be the least of the problems associated with “the local ground.” Wherever the teaching has found strict application, it has frequently inflicted harm upon its own adherents. The Brethren themselves became casualties of church ground politics. Ironside wrote of their “one rule of the solemn game of ‘playing church’...that there could only be one church in a city” (84).

He told the story of an aging, saintly man among the Brethren who located a small group of believers within a particular city, a godly group that had developed an interest in spiritual things along Brethren lines. However the local Brethren assembly in the same city was “rotten” with “unseemly gossip and un-Christlike wrangling.” The elderly brother decided not to direct the new group into the sick Brethren fellowship but counseled them to simply continue in their fellowship without abolishing their weekly meetings and to begin breaking bread. Upon the return to his home assembly, however, he was accused of “a definite overt attack on the ground of the one Body.” The new group was judged as being “off the church ground.” The

elderly shepherd was excommunicated and sat for months in the back of his home assembly “with tears streaming down his face” as he was made to occupy “the place of the immoral man or the blasphemer” (Ironsides, 84-85).

This scene is only made worse by the fact that the man was none other than Dr. Edward Cronin, one of the very founders of the Brethren Movement. What followed the incident was a rallying cry among zealots to support the quarantine both of the “outlaw” group and its instigator, called “the wicked old doctor” (Ironsides 89). Those who were reluctant to agree with it were also summarily excommunicated, not the least of which was William Kelly, a prolific writer and notable saint among the Brethren. John Nelson Darby pleaded from his deathbed for mercy upon Kelly, but it availed nothing. The “guardians” of church orthodoxy would eventually destroy Kelly as well. Thus a founder of the Brethren and some of its most notable champions became victims of the monster that “the local ground” had become.

If a city-church emphasis is scriptural, (which, I believe it is in principle, but not in legality), then rest assured that it exists to benefit the saints, stimulate their fellowship, promote their oneness, and not be a cage or a purging instrument. As Jesus said, “the Sabbath was made for man and not man for the Sabbath,” then we could also say that the local ground, a far lesser precept, was made for the saints and not the saints for it.

Our contemporary world also demands further contemplation when it comes to applying “the local ground” in modern cities. The setting of city-churches that we observe in the pages of the New Testament does not exist anymore. Neither that world nor that Christian community exists on this far side of twenty centuries. Pretending that things are the same will only succeed in making a Christian today look very strange.

I realize that it is risky to adjust church practice based on a theory of changing times. Nevertheless, in the absence of any scriptural data to forbid it, we must take changing times into consideration. For one thing, the geopolitical makeup of cities has altered dramatically. Now clusters of municipalities occur together and it is doubtful that the Spirit intended oneness to be measured along their finite borders. Rather, it seems that the divine intention was to establish that believers who live in proximity to one another should somehow fellowship and coordinate together. Unfortunately, human nature always manages to seize some principle of expedience from scripture and convert it into a gospel truth that is then legalized, boxed, packaged, and mass-produced.

Changes have not only occurred on the map. The Body of Christ itself has hugely proliferated and diversified beyond all human endeavors to bring it under one organizational roof. Yes, some Christians have acted divisively during this process but it is terribly shortsighted to think that all of the church's diffusion into every corner of the globe and into every gender, racial, and social-based need has come from sectarian activity. In fact, there has been noticeable progress made in terms of how congregations look at themselves and others. Just thirty years ago, it was a badge of honor to be known as a "Lutheran" or a "Baptist" first, and then as a Christian. Now many congregations refuse denominational names altogether, in favor of simpler, more inclusive designations. Chief among them are the community churches that seem to be appearing everywhere. Greater inter-congregational involvement rides the coattails of these new attitudes.

The LC Movement will dismiss all of this as being ecumenical. Yet, against a positive, shifting backdrop, such Scrooge-like judgments will sound like the worst forms of ignorance. The very central pillar that the Movement claims to stand for—oneness—looks

as though it is being accomplished through other avenues. As time passes, and the church at large progresses toward “making herself ready,” LC Movement principles which used to sound “cutting edge” will begin to seem redundant. While members tirelessly lecture themselves and others about oneness, the Lord imperceptibly carries it out in His body, without fanfare and issue making. Thus, the very people who make the most noise about Christians being one in a city might actually miss the Spirit’s operation of those things. It would be reminiscent of the Jews who taught in the synagogues concerning the Messiah day and night and then missed Him when He came. Two thousand years later, many still teach about Him and hope to meet Him in the future. This goes on even while they are surrounded with “unworthy” Gentiles who have not only met the Messiah but have a daily relationship with Him. In a similar way, if the overall developmental trend continues in the Christian public, the LC Movement may increasingly find itself campaigning for the horseless carriage in a world full of Cadillacs and jet planes.

Perhaps our changing world is the main reason why the Spirit refused to issue an authoritative “Thus says the Lord” about “the local ground.” Any model of church structure not allowing a high degree of elasticity might trap the saints in the cultural and spiritual setting of a bygone time. The church itself would harden into an Amish universe of sorts, an irrelevant oddity completely out of sync with its surrounding community.

Thoughts on Post-Movement City-Churches

“That local church has deviated!” is a popular charge from the LC Movement’s watchtower. Indeed, as long as the ideal of “the Local ground” is treated as truth, its pattern and accessories are non-negotiable

items, binding on all persons in all places at all times. Change is an ominous word, viewed with suspicion. Since the “pattern” of church has been received once for all it is thought, even small alterations to it can be alarming.

Let’s consider this matter from precedent. The blueprint of God’s house was originally delivered to Moses along with a charge: “see...that you make all things according to the pattern which was shown you on the mountain” (Heb. 8:6). The external features of God’s dwelling place—its boards, linens, furniture and vessels—were all defined, and, it is presumed, supposed to remain the same forever. Enter David. Probably no one in the Old Testament loved the house of God more than he did, yet no one was more instrumental in changing it. An age had passed and God’s people had entered a new era. Their spiritual progress (spearheaded by David) all but demanded a modification of God’s house. Over the years, the previous pattern of the tabernacle at Shiloh had become an empty shell. So, the things of the tabernacle were brought up into the temple and, functionally speaking, disappeared into it (2 Chron. 5:5).

David dared to build a house for God, not altogether different from the original Mosaic pattern, but not identical to it, either. Without knowing better, one might say that David had departed (deviated!) from the approved pattern delivered to Moses. But he described these alterations as the product of divine revelation impressed upon his inward parts (1 Chron. 28:11-12, 19). What was new about his blueprint? Everything. What was the same? Everything, depending on how you looked at it. Although the temple structure and furnishings were based upon previous tabernacle design, they were crafted into very new forms (see the similarities and differences by comparing Exodus 25-40 with 1 Kings 6-8). However, even as the external features of God’s house underwent rigorous

modifications, a set of constants remained untouched. The indispensable themes of propitiatory blood, spiritual washing, feeding, and light continued to be the unique way in which men would approach and fellowship with the Lord.

Eventually, the reality of God's house does not lie in a collection of surface arrangements. Rather, it is defined by attendant spiritual realities proceeding out of the Person and work of Christ. If we can't bring ourselves to think this way, and continue instead to grasp church structures as paramount, we will not be able to account for God's manifold blessings poured out on so many "incorrect" outward arrangements among congregations down through history. We will find it hard to explain why churches with the proper "pattern" (according to the LC Movement) are struggling for their lives today, yet slowly dwindling—a strange way indeed for God to vindicate His "very best."

Today various Christian groups are dramatically increasing not only in numbers but also with real disciples, indicating that the Lord's smile is upon them. In the midst of this continued blessing, however, I cannot locate one Local Church that has grown like their "Christianity cousins." Nor have I sensed a flow of life in any Local Churches that are currently pickled in LC Movement culture. But I have heard many stories from church veterans about how things briefly were that way back in the sixties and seventies. Under these circumstances, it seems that we are dealing with another Shiloh tabernacle, now largely empty of the ark, but full of memories about when it used to be there.

Our survival today depends upon developing new flexible attitudes. One of these has to do with how we see local Christians who do not meet with us. Are they our competition, our curse, or our supply of proselytes? I used to think of them as all three. But I can't see any of those poor attitudes when I look through the window of Romans 16. There the inward workings of a first

century city-church are on display, not taught, but shown to all. And what we see is a fellowship that knows nothing of the rigidity associated with LC oneness. Instead, the scene is alive with diversity not only between individual believers but groups as well (16:5, 10, 11, 14-15). I would grant the possibility that all the Roman saints met in Aquilla and Priscilla's home (although Paul strangely specifies the church that is in their house as opposed to simply saying "the church"—Rom. 16:5). Still, even if they did all meet together on a regular basis, Paul recognized definite group identities among them. Apparently, they were together enough to pass salutations to one another and yet not so integrated that their group distinctions disappeared.

Referencing this casual Romans template, workers from the Midwest (including me) restarted our labor in Uganda, Africa. Disappointing earlier efforts (which were still somewhat influenced by the LC Movement) had produced a predictably lackluster church. Tired of the stagnant growth rate and alarmed by narrowing attitudes, we began calling together pastors in Kampala (the capital). We invited them to participate in the church life without dropping anything.

Our implementation of "the ground" would allow for every born again Christian to be received on the basis of the biblical faith alone. They were allowed to keep their meeting places, peripheral beliefs, tongues-speaking, native music, and if they wished, their particular congregational identity and names. Neither were they required to meet with the congregation Keith Miller had raised up under his direct care during phase two of the labor. We did agree that once every six or eight weeks, leaders throughout the city would bring together people from their congregations for a "whole church comes together meeting" (1 Cor. 14:23). Since transportation issues in the third world are frustrating, only a limited number have been able to participate, but

as of the most recent count, there are over seven hundred. With children the number approaches one thousand.

Apart from these large corporate gatherings, a resident worker, Keith Miller, holds workshops for pastors, giving spiritual help to them but never assuming any official authority over them. All are free to come and go as they please, and to receive as little or as much help as they have appetite for. From the citywide perspective, he shares local administrative oversight with these men.

Naturally this will elicit cries that we have embraced the clergy-laity system. The truth is that rather than “open fire” on anyone with a title, we decided to take a step back and exercise a little reflective wisdom. First, we had to come to terms with the fact that these men raised up the people who were with them and that it would be irresponsible to tell them to abandon their posts (We had already lost hundreds of people by foolishly doing this). Instead, we stressed the need for them to be genuine servants of the saints, not kings, and to learn to bring others into their spiritual function. We have found this a far more winning strategy than to lash out at the pastoral system, neutralizing the shepherds, and scattering the sheep.

There are plenty of problems with the Ugandan model. However, as an approach to practicing the city-church, it is light years ahead of Movement assumptions that local oneness is about teachings, hymns, ministers, structures, leaders, etc. Such ideas continue to prove themselves ineffective the world over.

Admittedly, the limitations of trying to transplant this approach are fairly severe. Uganda is a lot different in culture and Christian development than nations like the United States or Canada. Much of Africa still has the advantages of Christian simplicity that industrialized countries do not. Parachuting into

an American city and then presenting a simple plan to church leaders that we should all come together will garner responses ranging from rejection to suspicion and perhaps rightly so. Oneness movements usually end up in the hands of “one,” and it is not Jesus Christ.

Still, in Columbus we have sought friendlier relations with other Christian groups than ever before. We exercise to overlook denominational walls, acting and living as if they do not exist. Recently we have had very positive encounters with various groups and their leadership entities. Each case has been pleasant and one of them recently involved our annual Mountaintop Youth Event, where a local megachurch coordinated together with us. We used their facility, while some of their members attended our Sunday morning gathering. We also joined forces performing community service in several Columbus area suburbs.

During all the years we counted “the ground of locality” as a central belief, we had never experienced such a thing. Our doctrine, while touted as the solution to achieving practical oneness, had actually become a way of excluding others. Not once in our history had we treated another Christian group as a legitimate part of the church in that city. It was a case of the belief-to-practice ratio being at an even zero. However, once we freed “the local ground” (and ourselves) from so many ridiculously binding restrictions, we suddenly felt as though there really was only one church in this city.

Even if the church landscape at large won't permit close coordination and fellowship, increased friendly contact will bring with it some important opportunities. There are plenty of spiritual and practical things to learn from cell-churches, house churches, megachurches, and community churches. Properly used, the ground of locality puts Christians next to one another to insure sharing in the common spiritual experiences of all. This community chest

approach should keep congregations from becoming anemic, shrinking and dying.

Get out, pay visits, and tell people that you are a student of the body of Christ. Many who are broad-hearted will, in turn, welcome your presence. A little humility can go a long way, so don't be afraid to admit that your church is not doing very well in this or that area. Schedule appointments with key people, but bear in mind that many will have serious time constraints. They probably won't have time to fellowship for hours.

As this sharing of ideas is going on, one consideration always needs to be kept in mind. That is, while XYZ Community Church has a lot of great ideas, programs, and perhaps lots of neat technology, it is probably composed of a very different social demographic than your church and has five thousand people. Obviously if you try to implement everything they have, you will "nuke" the thirty people who are with you. Let wisdom temper everything. Use the things that are helpful or that can reasonably improve the near future of the people you're with. Anything more grand than this involves time, fellowship, patience, and numerous steps. In the meantime, learn from everyone, but don't try to be everyone. Congregational identity is important. It becomes very disorienting if the church is like a chameleon, constantly committing to random, wholesale changes. The best way to avoid trouble is to understand the features, strengths, and weaknesses of the people you serve. Market the features. Accentuate the strengths. Minister to the weaknesses.

No More Name Games

On the note of congregational identity, let's consider how a church identifies itself to the city in which it is located. One of the great claims of the Local Churches is that they do not have a name. Now this is

where a serious contradiction emerges, because ninety-nine percent of them are called “The church in [city].” LC faithful protest, by saying, “That’s not a name, it’s a description.” But there is a limitation to how far a person’s common sense will allow him to go along with this explanation. After all, Kentucky Fried Chicken is also a description, but when we see it duplicated everywhere we know that it is more than a description. It is a name.

“This was how the Bible referred to the church,” says the response. And so we enter what I call “The Name Game.” When consulting the Bible, we find the church on the earth referred to as “the church in [city]” about ten times, “the church of God” ten times, and “the church of Christ” two times. Of course if you check the original Greek, “church” never shows up even once. That’s right. The Greek word for “church” is *ecclesia*, which means a called out gathering, or assembly. So, for those who wish to remain closer to the exact Apostolic thought, you could say “the assembly in [city]” or “the assembly of God” or “the assembly of Christ.” All of these, of course, are also “descriptions.”

With this in view, we wonder if it makes sense to argue for the formulaic “church in [city]” while using the Bible as grounds for it. *Ecclesia* is used about 115 times in the New Testament and is always incorrectly translated “church,” except for Acts 19:32, 39, 41, where it is properly translated “assembly.” The first complete English Bible was the Tyndale Bible, which appeared in 1524, and that Bible did not use the term “church” at all. It used the word “congregation.” Sometime after the Tyndale Bible was introduced, “congregation” began being replaced with “church.”

For those who grab a concordance and deduce that only the word “church” should be used to describe a congregation in a city, consider this bewildering etymology and ask yourself whether you would like to engage in “The Name Game.” Our English word,

“church,” is derived from the Greek kuriakon, meaning “the Lord’s house,” and referring to a building. However, the Greek word kuriakon does not occur in the Bible. Under its listing for “church,” Elwell Evangelical Dictionary says that the English word “church” derives from the late Greek word kurioton.” It was later than the Greek in which the New Testament was written. Upon hearing the word, the Apostles would have very likely said, “Huh, what?” Thus, the simple translation that we think exists between ecclesia and “church” is largely fictitious.

Even the English word “church” has roots of which most of us are not aware. Webster’s New World Dictionary (3rd Ed., 1988), tells us that “church” is “derived from the Middle English word chirch/kirke, which is derived from the Old English word cirice (and the old Norse kirkja) which is derived from Germanic kirika, which is derived from the classical Greek kyriake (oika) which means “lord’s house.” Again, all of this etymology springs from a word not even used in the Bible.

I am not presenting these things to outlaw the use of the word “church,” influence all the Bible translators on earth to change “church” to “assembly,” or cast aspersions on those who use “church” to identify themselves. I believe “church” is a perfectly legitimate word for use among Christians (God knows what we mean when we say it). My grievance is with those who adopt an intolerant stance on the name issue when a 30-minute word study will prove that it’s not worth a war.

Ironically, all of these concerns for the right name come from a group that adamantly denies possessing one. We recently received a phone call from a brother asking if we had given up the name, since we are now known as Columbus Christian Assembly. One of the elders here asked him in turn, “Well, what was our name before?” The point is well taken. Regardless of how they deny it, every no-name group eventually is

named, and perhaps even more strongly than those around it. Years back I heard about a congregation that refused to be called anything. With the passage of enough time and with their strong resistance to names becoming well-known, they were eventually called “The Group with No Name.” That was their name. The same is true of the simple groups of 19th century non-denominational brethren who became “the Brethren.” We also see “the Church of Christ” and “the Church of God” beginning with intentions of avoiding the denominational menagerie. They chose a thoroughly biblical way of describing themselves, but were clearly named, as time passed. Today when these groups make efforts to say, “That’s just our description” it boils down to arguments over semantics. They’re in the phone book, registered with the state, have a sign, and are identified by the people around them. They have a name.

All of this resistance to congregational identity is perhaps, missing the point, anyway. There is only one name in the New Testament that we are told never to deny or change. It is not what we call a congregation, it is what we call our Savior. “The name” is not “the church in [city]”. It is Jesus Christ. Many LC Movement people habitually overlook this point.

I personally do not treat the area of church names as an anything goes proposition, especially since the Bible designates churches by geographical location. A lot of Christians have gotten creative and departed from that thought, (i.e. The Vineyard, Calvary Chapel, Mars Hill, Mosaic, Xenos, or Baptists, Methodists, Presbyterians, etc.). But making an issue of names is the fastest way to invalidate the claim to not having one. The challenge back in our direction will always be, “Then what should we be called?” LC members, of course, will respond with “the right answer” of “the church in a city” consequently doing exactly what they condemn (of course, they will not realize it). In the

ensuing debate, the real casualty will always be the oneness of the Spirit, which “the local ground” and the “proper name” were supposed to preserve. The city church is invalidated when either an aggressive denominational or non-denominational stance is taken, thus restricting inter-congregational fellowship.

As we probe these much more liberal considerations of the local church, problems may very well surface. Congregational unraveling could occur, as present church members no longer feel bound by the strict application of “the local ground.” Neither will warnings about leaving the church life have the same electrifying effect as before. Without the restraint of one-city-one-church, saints might run wild. However, even those most faithful to “the local ground” have been accessories in destroying local churches. Ecclesiology is notoriously impotent to restrain the flesh. When divisive sentiments are kindled in the human heart, philosophies of oneness wither. This was why Paul did not confront the divisive Corinthian situation with a teaching of “the local ground.” He had a perfect opportunity—possibly the best in all of scripture—to espouse one-city-one-church. He could have said, “O, foolish Corinthians, do you not know that there is one church in a city?” Instead, he dealt with the heart, not church practice, presenting “Christ and Him crucified” as the solution.

Actually this places a tremendous responsibility upon us as leaders to consider the quality of discipleship that we are giving to people. If, in a church environment people can so easily leave and go somewhere else, it says something about the Christian life promoted in that congregational culture. Have the ethics of love and forgiveness, self-sacrifice and grace been deeply implanted in the membership psyche or at the first petty offense do they bolt for an exit?

Real spiritual substance must penetrate our relationships. Without it, views of the church and

teachings of oneness can only artificially prop up a group of people. We are to be one with each other as Christ is one with the Father. When structures such as the city-church can help facilitate that, we heartily endorse them. But when those structures begin offending the very reality they claim to preserve, then it is time to adjust them or change them.

Ironside, H.A. A Historical Sketch of the Brethren Movement (Loizxeau Brothers, 1985).