

Body Ministry

Landmarkism is the Baptist counterpart of the Roman Catholic doctrine of Apostolic Succession and Papal Authority. In the place of Apostolic Succession, Landmark Baptists claim Ecclesiastical Succession . . . that Baptists can trace origin directly to Christ. In the place of the absolute authority of the Pope, Landmarkers teach the absolute authority of the local church.

Apart from these two distinctions, both systems arrive at the same conclusions, basically. Both teach church authority in the Sacraments. Since Baptists do not use the word "sacraments," preferring "ordinances," seeing no justifying grace in them, and only observing two, this means church authority in the Lord's Supper and Baptism. This is the basis of "closed communion" and voting on water baptism and church membership. Implied in these is the old Romish doctrine that the Pope (originally Peter) holds the keys to eternal life, and consequently, the church is the door to salvation. If one does not bow down to the authority of the church, he has no access to the grace of God. While the Pope makes no bones about his ability to shut you out of heaven if you are not in good standing with the Church, Baptists are reluctant to go this far. Landmarkers have invented a handy doctrine to wield as a club to herd you into the Baptist community, however. If you are not a Baptist, you will not be I the Bride, but only a guest at the wedding. Granted, all Landmarkers do not go this far, but it is an integral part of the system to which most Baptists either knowingly or unwittingly subscribe.

While Roman Catholics own only one world-wide church (which they claim, as do Church of Christ, Mormons, United Pentecostals and a host of other sects, to be the only valid church), Landmarkers claim that the only church which can be considered a valid New Testament church is an individual *local* assembly, and that, of course, is a Baptist one.

We do not propose to go into the validity of any of the aforementioned doctrines except the last one, the claim that the only valid church as mentioned in the scriptures is a local one. This is the point with which we must take issue if we are to rightly understand "the fullness of Christ" and the complete fullness and sufficiency of the Church, and the validity and practicality of church authority.

Local-church-only adherents heavily draw spiritual force for their arguments from the Greek *ekklesia*, which is translated three times assembly and 112 times church in the New Testament. Its etymological meaning is a "called out assembly."

While it must be admitted that in the narrow meaning of *ekklesia* a church must, if it is to be properly described by its name, be a local assembly, only because it could not properly be called a church if it is not assembled; under such a definition, no universal or invisible church can exist as yet, since there is no such assembly.

But such a definition is inadequate to satisfy the language of such passages as Ephesians 1:22-23, 2:15, 4:4, 4:12-13, Colossians 1:18, I Corinthians 12:12, and many others. Such passages identify the church as Christ's body, as a "one new man," "one body." You may well speak of a local church, but you cannot speak of the local body of Christ. He has only one Body, and it is not exhaustively local as the local church is. He is entirely present in His office as Redeemer, King and Head, but as to His complete Body, He is not locally present. The church when considered as His Body must be viewed as the universal Church, or all the community of the redeemed everywhere on earth *and* in heaven (Hebrews 12:22-23).

Using the narrow definition of *ekklesia*, a church can only be considered a church when it is assembled. Thus even a local church does not exist except during those times it is assembled. After it disperses it ceases to exist.

It is precisely at this point that the narrow definition of *ekklesia* breaks down. Landmarkers and others who hold to the local-church-only theory do not intend their definition to go this far, but it cannot be prevented. The same people emphasize that God does nothing on earth in the affairs of men apart from the church. If this be true, and it also be true that the church only exists as a visible assembled local group, and that it cannot exist unless assembled, then God works and functions only during those few hours a week in which the church is assembled. Otherwise His hands are tied and He is out of business. This is absurd and our Landmark friends never intended to teach such a thing. But it is an inescapable conclusion to what they do teach.

A man may speak of his cattle as his herd, even though these individual animals may be scattered all over their grazing range or separated in different pastures or pens. They are his herd, regardless of whether they are herded together in one pen or not. When Jesus spoke of "other sheep not of this flock," He was not speaking of another local church somewhere, but of the Gentile flock in distinction from the exclusively Jewish flock which was the only one known at that time. God has now broken down that barrier and made both (flocks) one (Ephesians 2:12-16). He describes that flock as *one* new man. This, of course, speaks of the Church as the Body of Christ which is one. Such a church does now indeed exist.

The Holy Spirit instructs John to write to the messenger of the church at Ephesus or Smyrna or any other local church. Must we presuppose that such a church must be assembled at that time in order for it to be called a church? Certainly not. The church exists in that city, assembled or scattered.

Now, if a local church can be rightfully considered to exist even though unassembled, what is to prevent *ecclesia* from being properly applied to the unassembled people of God everywhere? Nothing, I think, except scriptural and spiritual ignorance, sectarian prejudice, and an overreaction against the universal claims of the Roman Church.

It has been attempted to apply some of these claims to the local church and the result has been confusing, absurd, impractical, isolational, and sometimes, downright idolatrous. Others, finding them impractical, have abandoned them, and their confidence in the scriptures has been weakened. The trouble lies in the fact that these claims were never intended for the local church, but for the

universal Church. Those who have committed themselves to the concept of local church only have preempted themselves from the proper interpretation of these claims and promises, and likewise disenfranchised their churches from the riches they bestow.

Body Ministry

The subject I want to consider in this paper is what has been designated recently as “Body Ministry.” This doctrine is taken from such passages as Ephesians 4:11-16, “And he gave some, apostles; and some, prophets; and some, evangelists; and some, pastors and teachers; For the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ: Till we all come in the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, unto a perfect man, unto the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ: That we *henceforth* be no more children, tossed to and fro, and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the sleight of men, *and* cunning craftiness, whereby they lie in wait to deceive; But speaking the truth in love, may grow up into him in all things, which is the head, *even* Christ: From whom the whole body fitly joined together and compacted by that which every joint supplieth, according to the effectual working in the measure of every part, maketh increase of the body unto the edifying of itself in love.” Also Colossians 2:9-10, 19: “For in him dwelleth all the fulness of the Godhead bodily. And ye are complete in him, which is the head of all principality and power: And not holding the Head, from which all the body by joints and bands having nourishment ministered, and knit together, increaseth with the increase of God.” Also see I Corinthians 12:4-31. These scriptures explicitly teach the following truths:

1. The actual presence of Christ in the church.
2. The actual body of Christ in the church in a complete sense.
3. Therefore the completion of this body, and its complete sufficiency and adequacy for all its needs and its ability for self-education and growth.
4. The presence of all necessary gifts in the church.
5. Fitting bond and joints that effectually insures its unity, harmony and efficient function.
6. The church is *the* habitation of God. The one God indwells the one body of Christ.
7. Divine authority in the church.

Attempts to apply these teachings to the local church all fail, because they were manifestly never intended to be so applied. They apply to the local church in a limited sense only, since any local church is a part of the entire body.

One reason for this has already been stated. The church as the body of Christ cannot be confined locally, since the body is one, not many. The other reason is painfully evident. No local church has all the necessary members of the body of Christ. So far as the fulness of Christ is concerned, it is not complete in itself. It is complete in Christ, the whole body, not in its limited local members. Any time it attempts to practice “body ministry” in a restricted local sense, it cannot do it for the simple reason that it does not have all the gifts and ministries necessary to do so. Churches which know the scriptures and are honest about their needs are obliged to reach out beyond the confines of their immediate fellowship for ministries and gifts which they do not have. Churches that will not recognize this need suffer from lack of needed ministry. They so isolate themselves from the rest of the body and become lopsided, stunted, spiritually deformed monstrosities. All ears, lacking hands. Oversized hands, no feet. Strong overdeveloped legs, yet no voice. A big loud mouth with shrunken limbs. Such is the spiritual appearance of local churches gifted in a limited sense who magnify and flaunt these gifts as *the* necessary excellencies and ignore their own flagrant starvation by excluding or shutting themselves off from exposure to equally excellent gifts and ministries in other parts of the body in other churches.

Dispersion of Christ Through Gifts

When Christ was on earth in His one body of flesh, He was local. He could be in only one place at a time. All the authority of the Father was invested in Him. All power in heaven and earth (Matt. 28:18). With the advent of His death and resurrection, this power and authority was distributed and spread among multitudes of men that make up the body He left on earth after His ascension. This is clearly and systematically declared in Ephesians 4:4-12.

First the oneness of the body and Spirit is declared in verse 4, the oneness of Christ in verse 5, the oneness of God and Father in verse 6. *But* the reality of the distribution of this oneness among many is stated in verse 7. “Unto every one of us is given grace according to the measure of the gift of Christ.” Then the apostle reveals how this has been achieved in verses 8-11. “Wherefore he saith, When he ascended up on high, he led captivity captive, and gave gifts unto men. (Now that he ascended, what is it but that he also descended first into the lower parts of the earth? He that descended is the same also that ascended up far above all heavens, that he might fill all things.) And he gave . . .” The one Christ Who was buried rose and put the Captor in captivity (the devil), liberating his captives and gave (distributed) gifts unto men. The one Christ is present in the gift that is bestowed upon the man, “unto every one of us is given grace according to the *gift of Christ*.” He has distributed Himself fully among His church. He *fills* it. “That he might fill all things,” verse 10. “Which is His body, the fulness of him that filleth all in all” (Ephesians 1:23).

All the authority of Christ is in the church, not the local church, but in the universal church. It is in the local church in a limited sense, but not exhaustively, for Christ does not dwell completely in one local church. He has given Himself to the entire church.

Christ’s authority is in the church now, not in a man as a man or in an office as an office, but in the gifts of that man. His authority exists not because of his office but his gifts: the office itself owes its existence to the gifts. Nor does Christ’s authority exist in a body of men as elders or in the entire congregation, except as that body of men and the congregation are gifted. In other words, Christ rules His church through His gifts of the Spirit to individual men. A man’s qualifications to rule are equal to his gifts. No more. No less. No human element or humanly designed organizational structure is permissible in the government of God’s people. Christ is counsellor and all the government is upon His shoulders (Isaiah 9:6).

Because Christ has so distributed Himself among His people by His gifts to men, the church as the body of Christ on earth now becomes real. The church is indeed the habitation of God through the Spirit (Ephesians 2:22, Psalm 68:18). It is in this sense, I think, that the scriptures most often speak of the temple of the Lord. "In whom all the building fitly framed together groweth into an holy temple in the Lord." (Ephesians 2:21). "In Christ dwelleth the fulness of the Godhead *bodily*. And ye are complete in him which is the head of all principality and power" (Colossians 2:9-10). The fulness of God dwells (presently) in Christ's body now. Since Christ's body on earth is the church, this can only mean that the complete body is now the complete habitation of all that God is.

That is not to say that Christ does not indwell each individual believer by the Spirit. He indwells him completely as Lord and Saviour and his Sufficiency for all that God requires of him. But men should not imagine that there is a "little Jesus" bodily dwelling in him, nor a miniature Holy Spirit dwelling in him. Nor must they vainly imagine that all the power and authority of Christ to do all that Christ does abides in him. The Spirit of Christ is in him as his personal needs may require and as the gifts necessary for his particular calling. But the fulness of the Godhead does not indwell each person. He indwells the whole church.

Nor do I want to leave the impression that Christ does not indwell the local church. He has most assuredly promised that where two or three are gathered in His Name, He is in the midst. He certainly abides as Lord and Head of that church; but He is not among them exhaustively in all His power and gifts. If such were true, there would be no need for them to have the persons or works of other Christians to supplement their own ministries.

Now, some of the hyper-separation churches and some of the big super-churches may imagine that they have become sufficient within themselves . . . that they are sufficiently large or are so powerfully spiritual that they survive and function quite well without any ministries outside their own membership. But that is an illusion. They surely use a Bible written by others and translated by yet others and printed and distributed by yet others. They use hymns penned by others, printed and distributed by others. Their ministers draw heavily upon the writings and works of others. Each person owes much of his spiritual development to a vast segment of Christianity that has no vital connection to the church in which he now serves. All of us stand on the shoulders of greater men who lived before our time. How vain of us to imagine ourselves independent of them and even taller than they!

Some will give great lip-service to the greatness of a deceased man of God who was not only not of his local church, but not even of his denomination or theological persuasion. Yet the same person may be too religiously bigoted to allow that man the status of a valid minister of Christ if he lived today. Yet if we are to practice the body ministry as taught in the scriptures and the only one that is real and effective today, we must be willing to avail ourselves of the ministry of Christ from whatever quarter it may come.

Practicing Body Ministry

There is something distressingly childish about the books, seminars and teachings on body ministry that are currently popular. We hear, for instance, of churches that are beginning to practice body ministry, of books telling how to find out what our gift is so that we can use it, of persons suddenly coming to a revelation of their particular ministry and beginning to "use" it. The church so exercised has its members closely inspecting themselves to find out who has this role and who has that one, and who is going to be the such and such and who is going to be the so and so. It reminds me of children playing house with certain ones designated to be the papa and the mama and the children. Actually, the impression is not too far wrong. It is simply another variation of the game of playing church. Many of the gifts and ministries which some assume must be in the church do not exist there at all. But someone feels they must take up the role in order to justify the scriptures that teach the completion of the gift in the church. What could be more pitiful than an eye playing the role of an ear?

Actually, the members of my body were practicing body ministry long before I even heard the term, and I can recall no period of instruction or training I gave to them in order to get them to so function. I am sure my eyes were never told they had the gift of seeing, and if they were, it would not enhance their abilities of doing so. In order for my body to behave any other way, it would have to be hindered or driven or unnaturally trained to do so. I am sure it is the same with the church.

Churches and members should be left free to function in their abilities and gifts that God has given them in Christ Jesus. They should also be left free to seek and receive of the gifts and ministries of Christ in others, whether of the local flock or not. This is not to say that elders do not have a responsibility to watch for what their flocks feed upon. They most certainly should guard that carefully. But on the other hand, they should withhold nothing good and wholesome from them that comes from without the immediate fellowship.

As Avery Rogers recently pointed out, the church is Independent . . . of any outside governing body. The church is Dependent . . . totally upon Christ. The church is also interdependent . . . upon other churches and Christians.

- C. M.