

BEING FAITHFUL TO OUR BROTHERS' COMPLETE MINISTRY CONCERNING THE PRACTICE OF THE CHURCH (2)

A different teaching has recently been circulated that says that those who function as apostles have no standing to touch the administration of a local church. To buttress that claim the following quote from Brother Witness Lee's *Truth Messages* is used:

Do apostles have authority? According to my knowledge of the New Testament, the apostles have no authority in themselves to control the churches. Only the word ministered by them has authority. If the churches and the saints go on according to the Word, according to God's oracle, the apostles have no authority to touch the churches. But if a church goes astray or is misled, then the apostles have the obligation and responsibility to deal with the situation according to God's word, which has authority.... The authority of apostles is spiritual and is in their ministry of the word. They have no authority in position to interfere with the church affairs. (34-35)

There is nothing wrong with this quote. However, the expressions it uses must be read and considered carefully in light of the New Testament and the complete ministry of our brother. To that end a bit of background is helpful. The message from which these words were taken was given in late 1978. The churches in the United States had just passed through a turmoil in which a brother had declared himself "the universal coordinator of the one new man" and tried to bring in a strong element of hierarchy by travelling to various places, removing elders, and installing those loyal to him in their place. He independently gave various orders in the name of the ministry. With this brief background we can rightly understand Brother Lee's word.

"No authority in themselves" – The ministry has been very consistent through the decades that no man has authority in himself. All authority comes from God. He is the unique authority, and He has given all authority to His Son, Jesus Christ, who is the unique Head of the Body, the church. Whatever authority the leading ones in the work, the ministry, or the church exercise derives from their being one with Him. They are merely channels through whom God's authority is manifested. Thus, they have "no authority *in themselves*" (emphasis added; see *The Collected Works of Watchman Nee [CWWN]*, vol. 22: *The Assembly Life & The Prayer Ministry of the Church*, 16, 19; CWWN, vol. 47: *The Orthodoxy of the Church & Authority and Submission*, 209, 211-212, 218). Concerning elders Brother Nee said, "The elders do not have any authority in themselves; they only have the authority of God" (CWWN, vol. 22, 29). Thus, the authority of the apostles and the elders is on the same basis. It is not something they possess in themselves. If their exercise of authority issues from themselves, it is not genuine. Only that which is out from God is real authority.

"To control the churches" – Any form of control, whether by the apostles or the elders, usurps the headship of Christ. Neither the apostles nor the elders are to "lord it over" the saints (2 Cor. 1:24; 1 Pet. 5:3). In the context of Brother Lee's speaking in the *Truth Messages*, to control meant to supplant a local church's elders as the ones who administer that church or to establish a hierarchical organization with a "CEO" at the top giving orders and those below him carrying them out. Such things are foreign to the organic nature of the Body of Christ and have never been the practice in the Lord's recovery.

"Interfere with the church affairs" – The term *church affairs* has a particular meaning in the ministry of Brother Nee and Brother Lee. As noted in the first article in this series, "The apostles were to keep their hands off the administration of the local church *in its business affairs*, not in its need of *the apostles' teaching, instruction, and charge*" (CWWL, 1986, vol. 3, 62) [italics added]. It does not mean that the apostles have no ground to intervene if the elders act improperly, as the last sentence in the first paragraph quoted at the beginning of this article makes clear: "But if a church goes astray or is misled, then the apostles have the *obligation and responsibility* to deal with the situation according to God's word, which has authority" (*Truth Messages*, 35) [emphasis added].

With such understandings it is clearly wrong to take Brother Lee's word in *Truth Messages* as ground to accuse those who function in an apostolic role of improperly exercising authority or control when they are carrying out their obligation and responsibility to deal with situations. This is more than evident from the New Testament and from the ministry of our Brother Lee. Most of the Epistles in the New Testament were written to address deviations or other problems in the churches. In particular, three passages, two in First Corinthians and one in

First Timothy, show us ways in which the apostles carried out their responsibility. In 1 Corinthians 5:2 and 13 Paul charged the Corinthians to remove from their midst a person who was living in gross sin. Then in 11:34, after dealing with so many problems in the church there, he said, “And the rest I will set it order when I come.” In 1 Timothy 5:19 he told his younger co-worker, “Against an elder do not receive an accusation, except based upon two or three witnesses.” A person who narrowly applies Brother Lee’s word from the *Truth Messages* would fault the apostle Paul for exercising authority improperly, controlling the churches, and interfering with the church in Corinth’s affairs, but this does not accord with either the New Testament or with Brother Lee’s ministry. Brother Lee spoke at length on these portions of the Word in the mid 1960s and late 1980s. For example, in 1965 he said the following concerning the two portions from 1 Corinthians:

The elders, standing on the ground of the local church, are responsible for the administration of a church. Although this administration is independent of other localities, it is not independent of the apostles. At least two passages in 1 Corinthians demonstrate the apostles’ responsibility for and authority concerning the church. The first is in chapter 5, where Paul wrote to the church in Corinth to rebuke them for tolerating the sin of the evil brother and to tell them to remove him from their midst (vv. 1-5). The apostle Paul gave such a command to the church there because the church had failed to fulfill its duty. The second passage is in chapter 11, which Paul concludes by saying, “The rest I will set in order when I come” (v. 34). From this we can see that although the apostles commit the local administration to the elders, they still bear a responsibility toward the church and have authority concerning it. If the local elders were independent of the apostles, Paul could not have spoken to them as he did. That Paul was able to say, “The rest I will set in order when I come” is proof that he still bore a responsibility in Corinth. (*CWWL, 1965, vol. 4, 185*)

In 1988, ten years after he gave the *Truth Messages*, he said the following concerning 1 Timothy 5:19:

To whom should an accusation against an elder be made? The answer is clearly that it should be made to the apostles. This is another strong proof that after an apostle has appointed elders, the elders are still under the apostle’s authority and management. After they have appointed men as elders, the apostles still have the authority to deal with the elders, even to judge, condemn, and reprove the elders. This is the clear word of the Bible. (*CWWL, 1988, vol. 3, 281*)

These are not examples that happened only once. Many other portions from the ministry of both Brother Nee and Brother Lee that date from both before and after *Truth Messages* speak of these matters in the same way.¹ A brief word Brother Lee gave in 1965 shows that he saw no contradiction between saying that no co-worker should control the churches and saying that co-workers should intervene to correct misbehavior.

If someone is doing a work with the intention of controlling the churches in every place, his work will be rejected by the Lord. The work of the co-workers is to support rather than to control the churches. However, if certain ones misbehave in the churches, the co-workers should correct them. (*CWWL, 1965, vol. 4, 194*)

It is therefore unprincipled to criticize the leading co-workers for improper interference as they carry out their obligation and responsibility in their care for the churches and the Lord’s testimony. Those who hear such criticisms should be warned: It is dangerous to draw conclusions from solitary, isolated statements. Those who cite quotes taken out of context from Brother Lee’s ministry while ignoring other parts that contradict their conclusions are unfaithful stewards of this ministry. Saints who are presented such quotes in a way that undermines confidence in the present leadership in the Lord’s recovery should not receive them uncritically.

¹ *CWWN, vol. 22, 30; vol. 51, 143; vol. 57, 74, 309; CWWL, 1950, vol. 2, 287; 1956, vol. 2, 487, 511; 1965, vol. 4, 170, 185-186; 1967, vol. 1, 203-204; Life-study of First Timothy, 84; CWWL, 1984, vol. 1, 405, 410; 1984, vol. 4, 248, 271, 274, 496; 1985, vol. 2, 69; 1985, vol. 3, 337; 1986, vol. 1, 304; 1986, vol. 3, 63; 1987, vol. 2, 90; 1987, vol. 3, 187; 1988, vol. 1, 594; 1988, vol. 3, 144, 165-166, 202, 203, 213, 254, 277, 280-281, 292-293, 439, 543; 1988, vol. 4, 8, 12-13, 95, 209-210; 1989, vol. 4, 327, 507; 1991-1992, vol. 4, 315; The Conclusion of the New Testament: The Church, the Kingdom, and the New Jerusalem (Msg. 189-204), 2169; for a larger sampling see pages 8 through 21 of <https://shepherdingwords.com/pdf/Ministry Excerpts Pertinent to Facing a Recent Situation.pdf>.*