

CHRIST, THE CROSS, AND THE CHURCH

The apostle Paul's ministry reveals Christ as the center of God's economy, the cross as the center of God's operation in His economy, and the church, the Body of Christ, as the product of God's economy (1 Cor. 1:23; 2:2; Gal. 3:1; Eph. 3:8-10). Realizing this has profound implications for our practice of the church life. It constrains us to rely on nothing other than Christ and His cross to build up the church or to solve problems that arise in the practice of the church life.

How the Lord Builds the Church

These three matters—Christ, the cross, and the church—are the focus of the second half of Matthew 16, beginning from Peter's declaration that Jesus is "the Christ, the Son of the living God" (v. 16). The Lord responded, "And I say to you also that you are Peter, and upon this rock I will build My church" (v. 18a). Following this, Matthew wrote, "From that time Jesus began to show to His disciples that He must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes and be killed and on the third day be raised" (v. 21). Then in verses 24 and 25 the Lord told His disciples, "If anyone wants to come after Me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow Me. For whoever wants to save his soul-life shall lose it; but whoever loses his soul-life for My sake shall find it." Many times in reading this chapter we focus on the unveiling of who Christ is and of His intention to build the church, and we certainly treasure these matters. However, this passage also reveals the unique way that the church is produced and built up in two stages.

First, to produce the church the Lord had to pass through death and enter into resurrection (v. 21). In *The Exercise of the Kingdom for the Building Up of the Church* [Exercise], Brother Witness Lee explained, "The church comes into existence through the crucifixion and resurrection of Christ... If the Lord had not denied Himself and gone to the cross, He could not have been resurrected, and there would have been no church" (26). In the next chapter he added, "Unless Christ had been crucified and resurrected, He could not build up the church. The church came into existence through His death and resurrection" (29).

Second, for the building up of the church we must follow Him through denying the self, taking up the cross, and losing the soul-life (vv. 24-25). As Brother Lee said, "We must follow after Him. This means that we must deny ourselves as He did and must allow ourselves to be crucified as He did. Without this, it is impossible for the church to be built up" (26). It is through our identification with the crucified Christ that we can say in reality, "It is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me" (Gal. 2:20). Only through such persons can the Lord build the church.

Human opinions and methods cannot build up the church, because the church is something absolutely in resurrection, and only by applying the cross can we be ushered into resurrection. Without the Lord's death and resurrection the church could not exist. In the same way, without our following Him by denying the self, taking up the cross, and losing the soul-life the church cannot be built up.

Dealing with Problems in the Church Life

What the Lord revealed in Matthew 16 concerning denying the self, taking up the cross, and losing the soul-life is realized in the practical church life. It is in the practical church life that we can apply Christ and His cross to the problems that arise. The principle of the cross is found in the Lord's prayer in the garden of Gethsemane as He faced the ordeal of His crucifixion: "Not as I will, but as You will" (26:39b; Mark 14:36; Luke 22:42). Today, in order to do God's will, we must apply the fact of our having been crucified with Christ (Gal. 2:20). We must live under the killing of the cross so that we may live in His resurrection and walk in newness of life (Rom. 6:4-6).

What, then, is the will of God? The will of God is to build up the church as the Body of Christ with all the saints through their subjective experience of Christ (Eph. 1:9; 3:9-11, 16-19). A major aspect of this subjective experience is letting the mind of Christ—the mind of a God-man who submitted to the will of God by humbling Himself and becoming obedient unto the death of a cross—be in us (Phil. 2:5-8). It is significant that the apostle Paul spoke of this in an Epistle to an otherwise good church that was marred by friction between saints, causing them not to think the same thing or have the same love toward one another (4:2; 2:2). We need to realize that not only the universal church, the Body of Christ, is God's will but also all the brothers and sisters whom the Lord has placed us with are God's will. If we exercise our own preference among the saints, we are outside of God's will and are finished with the building. Thus, Brother Lee said:

If I say that I do not like a certain brother and will no longer spend any time with him, I spontaneously stop bearing the cross. As soon as I forsake the cross, the building ceases. The church has not been built over the past

nineteen centuries because not many have been willing to take up the cross... We must bear the church and we must bear all of the saints, whether we like them or not. If we have our preference, we are not bearing the cross, and there can be no building. (*Exercise*, 36)

Many are able to get along with the church but not with some of the saints. If this is your situation, you are finished with the building. (37)

We need to see that Christ and His cross are God's unique way of dealing with problems in the church life. It was to the church in Corinth, a church beset with many serious problems, that Paul wrote:

For the word of the cross is to those who are perishing foolishness, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. (1 Cor. 1:18)

But to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. (v. 24)

For I did not determine to know anything among you except Jesus Christ, and this One crucified. (2:2)

In his *Life-study of 1 Corinthians* Brother Lee told us that in this Epistle "Paul makes it very clear that the unique solution to all problems in the church is Christ and His cross" (35-36). Following this he said:

According to the human way, negotiation is the means of solving problems or resolving entanglements. A brother and his wife may attempt to solve problems in this way. However, this is not the divine way. God's way is to supply you with Christ and terminate you by the cross. Whenever there is a problem in the family life or in the church life, the natural man may immediately try to negotiate and solve the problem through conversation. By the Lord's mercy I can testify that whenever I face this temptation, deep within I have the sense that there is no need for me to talk or negotiate. My only need is to go to the cross and be terminated. Then Christ comes in with the supply to solve every problem. This is God's way to solve all the problems in the church life.

We should pay our full attention to Christ. He is our unique preference and choice. Furthermore, we need to have a proper understanding concerning the cross, realizing that the purpose of the cross is to terminate whatever we are. We need to take this cross and enjoy Christ. This is the unique solution to all problems in the church. To the Jews the cross is an offense, and to the nations it is foolishness. But to us, God's called ones, it is truly God's power and God's wisdom (1:24). (47-48)

In *The Exercise of the Kingdom for the Building Up of the Church* Brother Lee points out that the Lord took up the cross willingly and that we should do the same (31-33). This matches the principle in Paul's Epistles that we must take the initiative to apply our co-crucifixion with Christ by the Spirit (Rom. 8:13; Gal. 5:24-25). We must take the initiative, but the effectiveness of the death of Christ is in the Spirit, who is the crucified and resurrected Christ (1 Cor. 15:45; 2 Cor. 3:17).

Consider the matter of offenses, real or imagined, between saints. Such offenses are common in the practical church life, and it may seem impossible to get past them. They can run deep, especially in times of turmoil, and be used by Satan to cause saints to stumble. There is something in the self, in the soul-life, of fallen man that is unwilling to forgive and often feeds on offenses. But what is impossible with man is possible with God (Luke 18:27). Here we should take heed to Paul's word to the Hebrew believers: "Looking away unto Jesus, the Author and Perfector of our faith, who for the joy set before Him endured the cross" (Heb. 12:2a). We should consider the joy set before us—the enjoyment of Christ (1 Pet. 1:8), the building up of His Body (Eph. 4:12), the accomplishment of God's eternal purpose (3:10-11), the Lord's return (Titus 2:13), and the reward awaiting His faithful ones (Heb. 10:35). This will strengthen us to bear the cross not as criminals but joyfully. Moreover, we should look away to the ascended God-man, Jesus Christ, who has pioneered the way into glory through the cross (2:10; 6:20; Phil. 2:9). We may also seek the proper fellowship of life from those in the Body who have the standing and capacity to supply us and render help (1 Cor. 1:11). This will strengthen us to put away the encumbrance of offenses (cf., Heb. 12:1). This does not mean that we overlook wrongdoing. Rather, it means that we allow the Lord to operate in us so that our motive and way of dealing with wrongdoings is pure. To do this requires much and thorough prayer through the exercise of our spirit and by turning our hearts absolutely to Him, so that our mind can be renewed and attuned to the Lord's mind (Eph. 4:23; 2 Cor. 3:16; 1 Cor. 1:10) and our will can be aligned with God's will (Luke 22:41-42; Acts 1:14). In this way we can be experientially one with Christ in His crucifixion and resurrection and can be those in and through whom He can carry out the building up of His Body, the church (Eph. 4:15-16).