

BEING FAITHFUL TO OUR BROTHERS' MINISTRY CONCERNING THE PRACTICE OF THE CHURCH (1)

Isaiah 28:13a contains an important principle in knowing the revelation of the Bible. It shows that any truth in the Bible cannot be understood from a single passage. As Witness Lee explained:

It is mysterious and very meaningful that God has arranged His Word in this way. Isaiah 28:13 says that God's word is "rule upon rule, rule upon rule; / Line upon line, line upon line; / Here a little, there a little." God's intention is that we not take His Word in a light way. We must spend time to consider each verse and learn what other verses it is related to. If we consider each verse by itself, God's Word remains a puzzle to us, but after we fit the verses together, the Word conveys a clear picture to us. (*The Collected Works of Witness Lee [CWWL], 1971, vol. 3, 19*)

Many wrong teachings, even gross heresies, have arisen through selective quoting of the Bible. If we want to be preserved in the Lord's way, we must embrace all the truth in a balanced way.

The same principle applies to handling the ministry of Watchman Nee and Witness Lee, particularly in view of the progressive nature of their ministry. To quote them selectively, especially to quote their earlier ministry and ignore their later ministry, according to one's own biases, does not faithfully represent their teaching and can lead to error, as events in the late 1980s and in recent years illustrate. In both cases brothers trumpeted a few words from a series of messages that Brother Nee gave in Hankow in 1937 that were the source of *The Normal Christian Church Life (NCCL)*. In one of these messages he said, "Once a church was established, all responsibility was handed over to the local elders, and from that day the apostles exercised no control whatever in its affairs" (*The Collected Works of Watchman Nee [CWWN], Vol. 30: The Normal Christian Church Life, 44*). Based on these words some have claimed that once a local church is established, the apostles have no ground to touch it or its administration in any way.

However, eleven years later, in 1948 at Kuling, Brother Nee gave the messages that became the book *Church Affairs*. In those messages he revisited his earlier speaking to correct a misunderstanding that had arisen. He said:

After the meeting in Hankow, some brothers misunderstood. They thought that though the elders are appointed by the apostles, they did not have to listen to the apostles. This is impossible. When there were brothers who did not respect the elders and problems occurred, the letter of accusation by two or three was sent to Timothy. In other words, the authority for the appointment of the elders is with the apostles, and the authority for the removal of the elders is also with the apostles. (*CWWN, vol. 51: Church Affairs [Church Affairs], 143*)

Yet some today quote Brother Nee's early ministry from 1937 and disregard his later speaking that it is "impossible" for the elders not to have to listen to the apostles. In other words, they claim that Brother Nee taught that the apostles cannot correct a local church's elders, the very thing that he labeled as a misunderstanding of his meaning. Another portion from *The Normal Christian Church Life* shows how quoting selectively and divorcing words from their context can create an impression other than the author's intent. In the following example the words in italics have been quoted, omitting the text that immediately precedes them:

Since there is a spiritual relatedness between the various local churches, no one church may strike out on an individualistic line, and taking advantage of its independence, decide things after its own good pleasure. Each must rather cultivate a relationship with the other churches, seeking their sympathy and working with their spiritual good in view. On the other hand, *since each [local church] is totally independent of the other, the decision of a church in any locality is absolutely final. There is no higher court of appeal; the local court is the supreme court. There is no organization to whose control it must submit, nor is there any organization over which it exercises control. It has neither superiors nor subordinates.* (*NCCL, 64*)

It is evident from the context that Brother Nee was speaking concerning the relationship between local churches, not between the churches and the apostles. Moreover, the broader context of the quote charges a local church not to take the excuse of administrative independence to act in an individualistic manner, yet this is the very thing those who quote selectively seek to justify. Later in the same series of messages Brother Nee said:

A local church is the highest Christian institution on earth. There is none above it to whom appeal can be made. A local church is the lowest scriptural unit, but it is also the highest scriptural organization. Scripture

warrants no centralization in Rome which could give Rome authority over other local churches. This is God's safeguard against any infringement of the rights of His Son. Christ is the Head of the Church, and there is no other head in heaven or on earth. (65)

This statement warrants a hearty "Amen!" A local church cannot be subservient to any central organization, such as a denominational headquarters, a mission board, or a "mother" church. Those who seek local autonomy without accountability misuse this quote to condemn any "outside" touching of the administration of a local church as infringing upon the headship of Christ. That misrepresents Brother Nee's teaching. Although Brother Nee condemned any controlling organization ruling over the local churches, he did not consider that the apostles, whom those leading the churches must listen to, constitute an "outside" organization or infringed on the headship of Christ. The same one who proclaimed that there is no organization over the local churches also taught both before and after the Hankow meetings that the biblical function of apostles includes not only appointing but also removing elders if necessary (Acts 14:23; Titus 1:5; 1 Tim. 5:19; *CWWN*, vol. 22: *The Assembly Life & The Prayer Ministry of the Church*, 30; *Church Affairs*, 143). To argue based on *The Normal Christian Church Life* that any intervention by the apostles in the affairs of a local church constitutes organizational control or a centralization of authority over the churches is not faithful to the teaching of either Brother Nee or the New Testament.

Brother Lee frequently referred to Brother Nee's correction of the misunderstanding of his words in Hankow (*CWWL*, 1967, vol. 1, 203; 1986, vol. 3, 62, 85; 1987, vol. 3, 187; 1988, vol. 3, 126, 140, 173, 255, 275, 294, 445, 544; 1988, vol. 4, 13, 209; 1991-1992, vol. 2, 121, 533; vol. 4, 308; 1993, vol. 1, 154; vol. 2, 98; 1994-1997, vol. 1, 127). For example, in *Life-study of First Timothy* Brother Lee said:

Some have had the concept from reading Brother Nee's book *The Normal Christian Church Life* that once apostles have appointed elders in a particular local church, the apostles do not under any circumstances have the right to interfere with the affairs of that church. This, however, is a misunderstanding of Brother Nee's word. In another book, *Church Affairs*, Brother Nee points out that after the elders have been appointed by the apostles, they should take the lead in the church according to the apostles' teaching. If the elders lead others astray or if they are wrong in some way, accusation against them can be made by the saints to the apostles. (84-85)

Later, commenting on what Brother Nee actually said in 1937, Brother Lee said:

In this quotation from Brother Nee's book, we should notice the phrase *in its affairs*. Some quote Brother Nee's words without realizing the significance of this phrase. (Brother Nee in his book entitled *Church Affairs*, chapters 1 and 9, corrected this misuse of his word.) 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)

Thus, Brother Lee affirmed Brother Nee's view that the business affairs of a local church are in the hands of the elders, not in the hands of the apostles. However, this does not negate the apostles' responsibility and obligation to teach, instruct, and charge those in the local churches in order to help them continue "steadfastly in the teaching and the fellowship of the apostles" (Acts 2:42). This is demonstrated in the New Testament by Paul's charge to the confused and disorderly church in Corinth to "remove the evil man from among yourselves" (1 Cor. 5:13) and his stated intention to "set in order" the things not addressed by his letter when he returned to Corinth (11:34b).

In order to faithfully represent the ministry of Watchman Nee on the relationship between the apostles and the local churches, one must take into consideration the length and breadth of his entire ministry. Those who misunderstood Brother Nee in 1937 did not have the advantage of his correction of their misunderstanding until 1948. Those who repeat this error today do not have the same excuse. To misrepresent Brother Nee's teaching by presenting isolated excerpts from his early ministry and ignoring the context of these excerpts, their plain meaning, his later correction of others' misunderstanding, and Brother Lee's affirmation and development is to be unfaithful to Brother Nee's ministry and to the reader.