

COVERING, NOT COVERING UP

By misrepresenting Witness Lee's teaching concerning Noah and his three sons, some have falsely claimed that he justified covering up gross sins, particularly if the sinning one occupies a position of authority. Any who appeal to his teaching on Noah and his sons to justify covering up gross sins are abusing his ministry.

In Genesis 9, immediately after the flood, Noah, as the father of surviving mankind, was commissioned with God's governmental authority. He then planted a vineyard, which produced grapes from which he made wine. After such a success, Noah became loose, drank to excess, and "uncovered himself inside his tent" (v. 21). In his *Life-study of Genesis*, Brother Lee spoke of Christ being our covering based on verses such as Luke 15:22 and Psalm 45:13. He explained, "To be naked spiritually speaking means to lose your covering in the presence of God, that is, to lose Christ as your covering," and added, "If I do anything without the covering of Christ, it means that I am loose, careless, drunken, and naked" (pp. 441, 442). The examples he used of being uncovered included becoming overly excited by success and then talking, even about spiritual things, in a loose and careless way. Thus, in his speaking on Genesis 9 Brother Lee applied being uncovered to acting outside of Christ; he did not speak at all of gross sins.

Verses 22 and 23 say, "And Ham, the father of Canaan, saw the nakedness of his father and told his two brothers outside. And Shem and Japheth took a garment and laid it upon both their shoulders, and they walked backward and covered the nakedness of their father. And their faces were turned backward, so that they did not see their father's nakedness." When Noah learned what had happened, he cursed the descendants of Ham and blessed those of Shem and Japheth (vv. 24-27). As Brother Lee explained, Ham received the curse because in exposing Noah's failure he touched God's government in a negative way (pp. 444-447). It is a trait of fallen men that they revel in accusing others, especially persons in authority, of failures and shortcomings. A person who habitually faults the conduct of others, particularly of those to whom the Lord has committed responsibility in the church, cannot expect to be under God's blessing.

Covering others' shortcomings is the explicit teaching of the Bible. Proverbs 10:12 says, "Hatred stirs up strife, but love covers all transgressions." Speaking of love in 1 Corinthians 13:7, Paul wrote, "It covers all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things" (see also 1 Pet. 4:8 and James 5:20). Uncovering others' real or perceived failures recklessly and openly can damage those who might otherwise be restored (Gal. 6:1) as well as potentially shatter their families and pollute those who hear. Those who are eager to uncover others' shortcomings may be trampling the work of God in forgiving and covering a man's sins (Psa. 32:1; Rom. 4:7). They are surely forgetting the Lord's word to the self-righteous Pharisees in John 8:7 and His word in Matthew 7:3-5.

This does not mean that a saint who becomes aware of a serious failure on the part of a brother who bears responsibility should ignore it. As is so often the case in both the Bible and in our brother's ministry, there are balancing words. For example, Paul told his younger co-worker Timothy, who was himself an apostle (1 Thes. 1:1; 2:6), "Against an elder do not receive an accusation, except based upon two or three witnesses" (1 Tim. 5:19). The elders are the representatives of God's authority in a local church, yet the saints are allowed to appeal to the apostles when an elder is seriously wrong. Brother Lee spoke on this verse at least thirty-one times in his ministry. In his *Life-study of First Timothy* he said, "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" (85). According to the Greek, such an accusation should be made in writing (85; see also Watchman Nee, *The Assembly Life*, 30).

The principle of appealing to the apostles is illustrated in 1 Corinthians. In 1:11 Paul wrote, "For it has been made clear to me concerning you, my brothers, by those of the household of Chloe, that there are strifes among you." In Corinth the problem was not with a sinning elder, as in 1 Timothy, but with an inadequate eldership that allowed all manner of disorder to persist in the church. The restoration of the church in Corinth was the outcome of the faithful saints of the household of Chloe, a sister, and other saints making the situation known to the apostle Paul.

How can the apparent contradiction between the story of Noah and Paul's charge in 1 Timothy 5:19 be reconciled? Both involve failures committed by appointed authorities in God's government. Noah's failure did not damage God's government or diminish Noah's standing as God's deputy authority in His government over mankind after

the flood. After learning of his sons' reactions to his failure, Noah still spoke governmentally as God's representative in dealing with his sons (Gen. 9:25-27). In this case Ham should have cared for God's government by covering his father's nakedness rather than speaking about it loosely to his brothers. In order to keep ourselves in the position to enjoy God's blessing, we should not repeat Ham's failure but should properly care for God's government.

The failures of elders that are reported to the apostles according to 1 Timothy 5:19 should be serious failures that damage God's government or inflict harm on the local church or the saints among whom the elders have been appointed as overseers by the apostles (Acts 14:23; Titus 1:5). Such reporting is itself a caring for God's government in the church. Because making an accusation against an elder is a very serious matter, for the sake of accuracy, the accusation should present verifiable facts in writing and not merely be spoken. Furthermore, it should not be received except on the word of two or three witnesses.

The motive of the person who makes an accusation or exposes another's failure is very important. There is a sense that Ham took some delight in exposing his father's nakedness. Matthew 18:15 shows that in dealing with offenses, the sole motive should be to restore the offending one to a proper condition (cf. Gal. 6:1). Watchman Nee explained:

The reason for telling your brother is not to receive any compensation. There is only one reason for telling: "If he hears you, you have gained your brother." Therefore, the issue is not how much loss you have sustained. If your brother has offended you, and the matter is not cleared up, he will not be able to get through to God; there will be obstacles in his fellowship and prayer. This is why you have to admonish him. It is not a matter of venting your hurt feelings, but a matter of your responsibility. (*Messages for Building Up New Believers, Volume 2, 355*)

Our desire to "gain the brother" is motivated by love. Likewise, our loving care may include protecting victims or potential victims and seeking help concerning how to address consequences that result from a sinful behavior.

Another key point is the way in which the matter is addressed. Ham broadcast Noah's failure with no consideration for his father or other members of the family. There is no justification in Scripture for unrestrained broadcasting of others' failures. If the problem cannot be resolved by one-on-one personal contact (Matt. 18:15), the proper way is to make the matter known privately to someone who can render shepherding help (v. 16) or, if the matter requires governmental dealing, to God's appointed authorities. If the matter is local, it should go to the elders as the representatives of the church (v. 17). As Brother Nee explained, "Telling the church does not mean that we publicize the matter when the whole church is gathered together. It means telling the responsible elders in the church" (*Messages for Building Up New Believers, Volume 2, 359*). If the matter involves an elder or if the elders do not properly address the situation, it can be referred to the apostles.

In the New Testament only the apostles publicly mentioned names, and they did so as God's governmental representatives for the protection of God's flock (1 Tim. 1:19-20; 5:20; 2 Tim. 2:17-18; 4:14-15; 3 John 9-10). There is no example in the New Testament of saints exposing others' failures publicly apart from action taken by God's governmental representatives, that is, the apostles and the elders. Chapters 6 and 7 of *Elders' Training, Book 4: Other Crucial Matters Concerning the Practice of the Lord's Recovery* contain Brother Lee's excellent fellowship concerning the seriousness of removing someone from the fellowship of the church and the need for the leading ones to take a deliberate and measured approach.

Many errors occur when people misuse the Bible, interpreting and applying it in an unbalanced way. For example, In Romans 5:20 Paul said, "Where sin abounded, grace has super-abounded." Some twisted similar words to say that he was encouraging people to sin so that grace could abound. Thus, in Romans 3:8 he wrote, "And why not say (as we are slanderously charged and as some affirm that we say), Let us do evil that good may come? whose judgment is just." That some twisted and misapplied Paul's words did not nullify his speaking of the truth of the Lord's gospel. Similarly, if some have twisted Brother Lee's teaching on the subject of Noah to say that he endorsed covering up gross sins, this does not negate the truth of what he actually said.