

GOD'S ECONOMY, DIFFERENT TEACHINGS, AND THE CENTRAL LINE OF THE BIBLE

In 1 Timothy 1:3-4 the apostle Paul wrote to his young co-worker Timothy, saying, "Even as I exhorted you, when I was going into Macedonia, to remain in Ephesus in order that you might charge certain ones not to teach different things, nor to give heed to myths and unending genealogies, which produce questionings rather than God's economy, which is in faith." These two verses contain two key expressions—*God's economy* and *not to teach different things*. One unique characteristic of the ministry in the Lord's recovery is its unremitting stress on both the biblical revelation and the working out of God's economy. Some have rejected this stress, insisting on teaching their own interpretations and emphases. However, we need to be clear concerning the seriousness of teaching differently.

In 1996 Brother Witness Lee spoke with the trainers in the Full-Time Training in Anaheim concerning the different lines in the Scriptures. He was particularly burdened that in all the teaching carried out by the serving ones, the central line of God's economy would stand out and secondary matters would neither be neglected nor emphasized to the point that they became distractions from the central line. Rather, these secondary matters would be used to strengthen and enrich the saints' apprehension of and entrance into the central line, which is the central revelation of the Bible. This fellowship may seem simple, but its significance is profound.

First, we need to see what the central line is. The central line begins from the Bible, the written Word of God, which contains God's speaking to man. The Bible reveals the self-existing and ever-existing Triune God, who is eternally one and eternally three, all three of the Godhead coexisting and coinhering from eternity to eternity. Such a wonderful God has a heart's desire and a plan to fulfill that heart's desire. In the Bible that plan is called God's economy. At the center of God's economy is the all-inclusive Christ, who is both God and man and who has passed through incarnation, human living, crucifixion, and resurrection. Today He is both the ascended, glorified God-man and the life-giving Spirit. As the Spirit He regenerates those who believe into Him to make them the members of His Body and to lead them into the reality of all that God is and has accomplished and all that Christ is, has accomplished, and has attained. The building up of the Body of Christ, which has this Spirit as its essence, secret, and reality, will consummate in the New Jerusalem as the goal of God's economy.

In addition to the central line there are many supplemental points of truth in the Bible, including the types and the prophecies, and many outworkings of God's economy in terms of practices, all of which should be understood and applied in light of the central line. Concerning these secondary matters there are divergent interpretations among believers. We receive all believers according to the standard of the central line, not according to the standard of the line of supplemental points. If, for example, someone denies that the Bible is God's speaking, His self-revelation, or that Christ is God who came in the flesh to accomplish redemption, that one is outside the faith, and we have no basis for receiving him as a fellow believer in the true God and His Son, Jesus Christ. However, if someone is sound in the faith but holds a different view of the interpretation of a type or a prophecy or practices differently concerning, for example, baptism, we must receive that one as God has received him (Rom. 15:7; 14:3).

While we receive those who believe differently concerning many supplemental points and practices, at the same time we uphold Paul's exhortation not to allow different teachings (1 Tim. 1:3-4), and it is worthwhile to consider why. A few have chosen to nitpick statements about teaching differently, but in doing so they lose sight of the principles involved.

First, consider what it is that God is doing in the universe. He is building up the Body of Christ to express Him and represent Him in His creation. This work will consummate in the New Jerusalem as the ultimate expression and representation of God in the new heaven and new earth. To accomplish God's work, it is crucial for us to have a clear vision of the central line of the divine revelation, which includes the Bible, the Triune God, the economy of God, the all-inclusive Christ, the life-giving Spirit, the Body of Christ, and the New Jerusalem. One reason we call the ministry in the Lord's recovery the ministry of the age is that it has brought to light this central line as no other ministry has done and is laboring unceasingly to work it out among the churches.

Second, consider why someone would intentionally teach differently. Paul warned the elders in Ephesus, the same church concerning which he charged Timothy, that "from among you yourselves men will rise up, speaking

perverted things to draw away the disciples after them” (Acts 20:30). For one to hold a private interpretation is one thing. The goal of teaching differently, however, is to gain a following, to draw men to oneself.

Third, consider what effect teaching differently has. It creates camps where some contend for one understanding and some for another (1 Cor. 11:18-19; 2 Pet. 2:1, note 3). In doing so, it distracts people from the central line of God’s New Testament economy. Thus, it fosters confusion and ultimately division.

The apostles’ practice was not like this. Paul told the Corinthians that he taught the same thing “everywhere in every church” (1 Cor. 4:17). When a serious issue arose that concerned the truth of the gospel, Paul and Barnabas recognized the danger posed by teaching contrary to God’s New Testament economy. They knew that the Judaizers’ teaching that circumcision was necessary for salvation threatened the oneness between the churches in the Jewish and Gentile worlds. Their concern for the Lord’s interest compelled them to go to Jerusalem to meet with the apostles and elders there (Acts 15) to ensure that the teaching of all of the apostles would be the same.

The pattern that the Lord gave us in Witness Lee is very instructive. He testified that he did not agree with Watchman Nee’s interpretation that the two witnesses in Revelation 11:3 were Enoch and Elijah, but he never taught differently while Brother Nee was alive, because he realized that Brother Nee was taking the lead in the Lord’s ministry and that to teach differently would cause confusion. What would have happened if he had taught others his own views? What difference would it have made regarding the accomplishment of God’s eternal economy? Would it have been worth the confusion and damage that it would have caused?

It is noteworthy that the brother who took this way eventually was entrusted by the Lord with the leadership in the ministry for nearly half a century. There are many negative examples throughout our history of brothers who did not take this way but who taught differently. After gaining a following, they left the common fellowship of the churches and set up sectarian meetings. In some cases it has been necessary to warn the saints in the principle of Paul’s exhortation in Romans 16:17: “Now I exhort you, brothers, mark those who make divisions and causes of stumbling contrary to the teaching which you have learned, and turn away from them.”

In the early 1980s Brother Lee called a series of urgent elders’ trainings because he observed a tendency among some to teach differently. He gave a series of messages, published in *Elders’ Training, Book 2: The Vision of the Lord’s Recovery* that strongly emphasized the central line of God’s economy. He then gave a word in *Book 3* concerning Paul’s charge in 1 Timothy 1:3-4:

It kills people to teach differently. To teach differently tears down God's building and annuls God's entire economy. We all must realize that even a small amount of teaching in a different way destroys the recovery.

The only way that can preserve us in the recovery is the unique ministry. If we say that we are in the recovery, yet we teach something so lightly, even in a concealed way, that is different from God's economy, we sow the seed that will grow up in division. Therefore, the only way that we can be preserved in the eternal oneness is to teach the same thing in God's economy. This kind of teaching is called the New Testament ministry, the ministry of the new covenant. The ministry of the new covenant is only to minister the Triune God, processed, to be dispensed into His chosen people as life and life supply to produce members of Christ to form the Body to express the Triune God. This is the New Testament economy. To teach anything, even good things and scriptural things, which is even a little bit apart from God's New Testament economy will still issue in division and that will be very much used by the subtle one, the evil one. We must, therefore, be on the alert. (*Elders’ Training, Book 3: The Way to Carry Out the Vision*, pp. 41-46, 48-49)

Those brothers who received Brother Lee’s word were preserved from the rebellions that followed. Those who did not eventually caused divisions, including the divisions that occurred in the late 1980s and in the first decade of this century in the Great Lakes area and South America. May the Lord preserve all the saints in the local churches in the central line of God’s economy, and may we learn from Paul’s exhortation, the ministry of our Brother Lee, and our own history not to receive nor to speak teachings that differ from God’s economy.