

ON "INDEPENDENT" ADMINISTRATION

Words have power. On the one hand, they are the means by which God has chosen to communicate His self-revelation, the Bible, to man (Heb. 1:1, 3; 2 Pet. 1:21), the means by which the Lord imparts His life into us (John 6:63), and the means by which the Lord's servants open the Scriptures (Neh. 8:7-8; Psa. 119:130; Luke 24:45; Acts 8:30-35). On the other hand, words can be misused by Satan to create a system of error through winds of teaching in the sleight of men (Eph. 4:14). History shows that the words of the ministry and even the words of the Bible can be used to build up a system of error if they are used selectively or with meanings other than those intended.

The meanings we attach to words are critical to a proper understanding of what others say. Moreover, the words of others test our purity. Do we use terms as they were originally intended, or do we bend them to our own ends according to our own biases or agendas by enduing them with our own meanings? To handle the Bible or the ministry of our brothers Watchman Nee and Witness Lee in a proper way, we must care for the intended meanings and context of words and must avoid taking passages in isolation. Moreover, we must always keep in view the Lord's desire to build up His Body organically. Likewise, we should not receive the speaking of others if they do not follow these principles.

Some have misused fragments of the ministry of Brother Nee and Brother Lee to assert that their use of the word *independent* to describe the administration of a local church means that a church's elders are free to discount the concerns of other local churches or the fellowship of leading co-workers. To discern whether this is a fair reading of our brothers' ministry, we need to compare the meaning of the word *independent* with the word's usage in the context of their ministry and look at whether a complete and balanced reading of their ministry supports such an interpretation.

Dictionary definitions of the word *independent* fall into two general categories. The first describes an organizational principle in which one entity is not governed by another. The second describes an attitude of being self-reliant, free from the influence and guidance of others. Concerning the administration of a local church, the first meaning is proper with the caution that it does not preclude those who serve in an apostolic function from intervening, if necessary, in a local church's affairs (1 Tim. 5:9; 1 Cor. 11:34); the second definition is not proper under any circumstance.

When Brother Nee and Brother Lee used the word *independent* to describe the administration of a local church, they meant that a local church was not governed by some external organizational entity, such as a mission board or denominational headquarters. This has nothing to do with the apostles' God-ordained responsibility to correct an errant elder or an errant church. Such action is not organizational but part of their organic function in the Body of Christ (2 Cor. 13:10).

Furthermore, if the elders in a church take the word *independent* to mean "free from the influence of others" and use it as license to ignore the fellowship of other churches, they have gone too far and contradict the principle of the Body. Brother Nee explained that the independence of the local administration from any outward organization "does not imply that the different local churches have nothing to do with one another, and that each can simply do as it pleases without considering the rest, for the ground of a church is the ground of the Body." Rather, he said, "In organization the churches are totally independent of one another, but in life they are one, and consequently interdependent" (*The Collected Works of Watchman Nee [CWWN], Volume 30: The Normal Christian Church Life*, 62).

This has been the teaching and practice from the beginning of the Lord's recovery in China. In his very first extended speaking on the practice of the church in the New Testament, Brother Nee described the elders' administration of an assembly, that is, a local church, as independent, yet he said:

We cannot act independently. If you know that the thing you are about to do in your locality will be considered inappropriate in other localities, you must not take care of the views of the few in your locality and do it anyway. If you do it, you are not discerning the Body of Christ. (CWWN, Vol. 22: *The Assembly Life & The Prayer Ministry of the Church*, 58)

From this, we see that our meeting cannot act independently. Every assembly should care for the other assemblies. Before we do anything, we should consider how our actions will relate to the other assemblies. (65)

No assembly can act independently. Not only should individuals not act independently, but the whole assembly should not act independently. (65)

He further said that although the administration of an assembly is independent, “if this assembly is seeking after God’s will in a definite way, it will not act presumptuously, using the excuse that the administration of churches is local; instead, it will consult the other assemblies, hoping to walk scripturally and according to the Lord’s desire” (69). These words show a careful balance between the way in which a church’s affairs are administered and the attitude that the church’s elders should have.

In *The Normal Christian Church Life (NCCL)* Brother Nee reiterated this point, saying that though a local church’s administration is independent organizationally, it should not act independently:

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. (*CWWN, Vol. 30: NCCL, 64*)

Thus, Brother Nee’s word that the administration of a local church should be independent of any outside organization did not mean that the elders in a local church should neglect concerns of other churches or dismiss the fellowship of the leading co-workers as outside interference (see also “Being Faithful to Our Brothers’ Ministry Concerning the Practice of the Church (1)”).

Brother Lee also taught that although each local church has its own administration, its elders should not act in an independent manner. In 1965 he spoke at length concerning the relationship between the apostles and the local churches and among the local churches themselves. He said, “The Bible is not a book of organizational regulations. If the co-workers and elders in a locality neither fear God nor live in the spirit but instead maintain their independence in the administration of the church according to the outward letter of the Bible, not allowing others to intervene in their work, their service will be worthless” (*The Collected Works of Witness Lee [CWWL], 1965, Vol. 4, 194*).

In the late 1980s a small group of brothers promoted the idea that every local church should be independent. At that time Brother Lee stressed the organic nature of the Body of Christ. He said, “Likewise, all the local churches on the whole earth are one organism, the Body of Christ. It is impossible for any of the local churches to be autonomous, to be independent from the other churches” (*CWWL, 1988, Vol. 3, 284*). Overstressing local independence undermines the organic view of the Body in favor of an organizational view. Concerning the promotion of local administrative autonomy, Brother Lee commented, “Everyone likes this practice because everyone likes to be independent and equal. No one likes to be under anyone else. But we have to realize that the church of Christ is not a political institution. The church of Christ is an organism just like our body. The Bible says, ‘The church, which is His Body’ (Eph. 1:22-23)” (*CWWL, 1988, Vol. 4, 25*). In the last stage of his ministry, Brother Lee reflected on the use of the word *independent* to describe the administration of the local churches, saying, “I may have said that many years ago, but if you asked me to repeat such a saying today, I would not do it. We may think that the local churches are independent, but in the Bible I cannot find the thought of independence” (*CWWL, 1993, Vol. 2, 544*).

In practice, the administration of a church is local and is, therefore, in a limited sense independent, but the elders should reject any attitude of independence. They bear responsibility before the Lord for administering the business affairs of that church and for shepherding the saints allotted to their care (1 Pet. 5:2-3). This is part of the Lord’s arrangement for the practical expression of His Body. The elders must realize, however, that their oversight must be carried out in view of all the other local churches in the Body of Christ. They must see that they cannot carry out their service in isolation with an independent attitude, because their decisions and actions affect not only their own local church but also all the other local churches with which they are joined in the unique fellowship of the Body of Christ (1 Cor. 1:9; 1 John 1:3). The actions and decisions of a group of local elders can adversely affect other churches and damage the fellowship among them. If a local eldership persistently waves the flag of “independent” local administration as justification for insulating itself from receiving fellowship from co-workers or other churches in spite of the damage that the eldership’s decisions have caused, those who bear the responsibility to exercise an apostolic function among the churches may be required to intervene for the sake of the saints, the Body, and the Lord’s testimony. May the Lord preserve us from being carried about by any contrary winds of teaching, that we may instead grow up into Christ the Head in all things for His testimony and for the building up of His Body in oneness (Eph. 4:14-16).