

RECEIVING ALL BELIEVERS BUT NOT DIFFERENT TEACHINGS

Concerning the practice of the church, certain basic principles need to be understood and kept in balance. Fundamentally, the church as the unique Body of Christ is one universally and includes every believer irrespective of time and space. Practically, this one universal Body of Christ is manifested in time and space in various cities as local churches. These local churches include every believer in that city at that time and also maintain a fellowship with all the other local churches on earth, thus expressing the one Body of Christ in a practical way.

To maintain this oneness, two crucial matters are needed. On the one hand, a local church must receive all those whom Christ has received (Rom. 15:7). On the other hand, a local church should not receive any teaching other than the apostles' teaching in the New Testament (Acts 2:42; 1 Tim. 1:3-4). Practically, this means that the local churches should not receive a ministry that teaches things that are different from the apostles' teaching, including teaching the New Testament revelation selectively. The reason, as this article will show, is that receiving different teachings inevitably damages the oneness of the Body of Christ and leads to division. These two principles—receiving all believers and refusing different teachings—must both be upheld to preserve the local churches in the proper oneness.

Receiving All Believers

In the book of Romans, Paul charged us to receive the believers as God in Christ has received them (Rom. 14:1, 3; 15:7). Our Brother Witness Lee spoke on this matter many times (several passages from his ministry have been compiled in the book *Fellowship Concerning Keeping the Oneness with Fellow Believers*). In his *Life-study of Romans* he said, "We must receive the saints according to God's receiving of them. Whomever God has received, we are compelled to receive. We have no choice." He added, "Our heavenly Father has brought forth many children, many Christians, and He has received them all. Therefore, we also must receive them, not according to our tastes or preferences, but according to God's receiving" (Witness Lee, *Life-study of Romans*, 331). Later in the same series he said:

In the church life we must be general, able to receive all genuine believers. However, it is not easy to learn this lesson, because we all want others to be the same as we are. Let us not make demands of others or require that they change their way for our sake. Rather, let us have unity in variety and variety without conformity. Even though there may be such variety, we still are one in Christ. (Witness Lee, *Life-study of Romans*, 622)

If a person professes belief in Christ and in His saving work, we must receive him, even if we disagree on matters that lie outside the common faith, as long as that person is not practicing immorality or idolatry, not causing division, and not teaching heresy concerning Christ's person (1 Cor. 5:11; Titus 3:10; 2 John 7-11).

Not Receiving Different Teachings

Some, however, abuse this receiving of other believers to demand that we receive different ministries with different teachings. Here it is important to embrace all of the apostles' teaching, not just those parts that may fit our temperament or may advance the agenda of those who aggressively promote their own ministry and teaching. The same author who charged the believers, "Therefore, receive one another, as Christ also received you to the glory of God" (Rom. 15:7), exhorted his younger co-worker Timothy to "charge certain ones not to teach different things," that is, things other than God's economy (1 Tim. 1:3-4). Moreover, one chapter after charging the believers to receive one another, Paul exhorted the believers in Rome "to mark those who make divisions and causes of stumbling contrary to the teaching which you have learned, and turn away from them" (Rom. 16:17).

We must see that the Lord's recovery among us today issues from the recovery of the fullness of the apostles' teaching in the New Testament. This teaching produces local churches as expressions of the one universal Body of Christ. It also brings the believers back to the normal experience of Christ as their life and to the functioning of all the members

in harmony for the building up of the Body of Christ (Eph. 4:16). In God's economy, all the crucial items speak forth God's oneness in both His person and His work. There is one Bible, one God, one Christ, one Spirit, one eternal life, one salvation, one living, one testimony, one Body, and one New Jerusalem (see *The Ten Great Critical "Ones" for the Building Up of the Body of Christ*). These are crucial constituents of the one New Testament ministry. This ministry cooperates with Christ in His heavenly ministry to produce and build up local churches as practical expressions of the Body of Christ. In these local churches the believers experience and enjoy the all-inclusive Christ as the embodiment of the Triune God and function together in harmony for the building up of the Body.

As 1 Timothy 1:3-4 shows, what different teachings produce differs from what the teaching of the unique New Testament ministry of God's economy produces. The New Testament ministry produces faith (Rom. 10:17), which links the believers to God in Christ to receive all His riches (Gal. 3:2, 14) and to one another for the accomplishment of God's purpose, the building up of the Body of Christ. Different teachings produce questionings: "Who is right? Who is wrong?" These questionings beget contentions (2 Tim. 2:23). Eventually, a person who teaches different things becomes "blinded with pride, understanding nothing, but is diseased with questionings and contentions of words, out of which come envy, strife, slanders, evil suspicions" (1 Tim. 6:3-4).

Furthermore, teaching produces fellowship. The apostles' teaching brings the believers into the apostles' fellowship, which is the unique fellowship of God's Son (Acts 2:42; 1 John 1:3; 1 Cor. 1:9). Any private teaching brings believers into a private fellowship:

Fellowship comes from the teaching. There should be only one unique teaching—the teaching of the apostles. Furthermore, there should be one unique fellowship that is produced by the apostles' teaching. What we teach will produce a kind of fellowship. If we teach wrongly and differently from the apostles' teaching, our teaching will produce a sectarian, divisive fellowship. (*The God-ordained Way to Practice the New Testament Economy*, 153)

It was for such reasons that Brother Lee warned us, "We all must realize that even a small amount of teaching in a different way destroys the recovery" (*Elders' Training, Book 3: The Way to Carry Out the Vision*, 43).

In these matters the story of the believers in Ephesus is instructive. Paul's visits to Ephesus are recorded in Acts 18:19-21 and in chapter 19. On his second visit Paul remained in Ephesus for three years (Acts 20:31). During a stopover in Miletus on his way to Jerusalem, Paul called for the Ephesian elders to come to him, at which time he warned them that "from among you yourselves men will rise up, speaking perverted things to draw away the disciples after them" (v. 30). The last phrase in this sentence shows that the impure motive of those who teach differently is to gain a personal following. It was after this that Paul charged Timothy to remain in Ephesus to charge certain ones not to teach differently (1 Tim. 1:3-4). Nevertheless, later Paul wrote that "all who are in Asia turned away from me" (2 Tim. 1:15). The last mention of Ephesus is in the book of Revelation, where the Lord Himself says, "But I have one thing against you, that you have left your first love. Remember therefore where you have fallen from and repent and do the first works; but if not, I am coming to you and will remove your lampstand out of its place, unless you repent" (Rev. 2:4-5).

The progression here should be a sobering word to us, especially because we have observed the same thing in our own history. The New Testament ministry is a betrothing ministry (2 Cor. 11:2), causing us to love the Lord and to care for His heart's desire above all. Whenever someone promotes a different teaching, a teaching other than the apostles' teaching for the building up of the Body of Christ in local churches in one common harmonious fellowship, the result is the same—questionings, contentions, and ultimately division. The same is true when someone uses selected portions of the Bible or of the ministry to advance his own private views. May the Lord preserve us in His recovery.