

THE MINISTER OF THE AGE, NOT INFALLIBILITY

The term *the minister of the age* in reference to Brothers Watchman Nee and Witness Lee does not imply that we hold them to be infallible. Rather, it means that we acknowledge them as particular vessels used by the Lord to advance the recovery of the truths in the Bible. We should not be misled by some who, by wrongly associating our use of *minister of the age* with the doctrine of papal infallibility, accuse those in the local churches of being under authoritarian leadership.

The Vision of the Age, the Ministry of the Age, and the Minister of the Age

Our use of the terms *ministry of the age* and *minister of the age* is predicated upon the realization that, in the progressive nature of the revelation in the Bible and of God's move on the earth, there is a particular vision that God gives to His people in every age. This vision can be rightly called the vision of the age. God is purposeful. Throughout the centuries He has been working in and through man to obtain His heart's desire—the church as the Body of Christ in this age (Eph. 1:22-23; 3:10-11) and the New Jerusalem as the ultimate consummation of His eternal purpose (Rev. 21:2). God's work through man is not haphazard. In each age those who serve Him must work not according to their own preference but according to the vision of that age, the particular and unique vision that God gives to His servants that matches the work He desires to do and the goal He intends to attain in that age (Acts 26:19; 13:36). Witness Lee writes:

We have to see that in every age, God gives only one vision to man. In Adam is seen God's redemption. In Abel is seen God's way of redemption. In Enosh is seen man's need for God and man's calling upon Him to enjoy His riches. In Enoch is seen a redeemed one walking with God on the pathway of redemption. In Noah is seen one who walked with God and worked with God to build the ark to meet the need of that generation. (*The Vision of the Age*, 11)

As the revelation of the Bible is progressive, so too the recovery of that revelation is progressive. With Martin Luther there was the recovery of the truth of justification by faith. This was the vision that governed the work in the age of the Reformation. Since the work that God was doing at that time was to recover this truth, those who would serve Him needed to be governed by that vision. Similarly, God used Madame Guyon in the seventeenth century to recover something of the truth concerning the experience of Christ, and He used Zinzendorf and J. N. Darby in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries to recover truths concerning the church and the church life. Each of these recovered truths constituted the vision of that age and governed the work of those to whom the vision was given.

We believe that the present vision of the age is a complete vision that extends all the way from Genesis to Revelation, the entirety of the divine revelation. In this vision we see that God desires to dispense the unsearchable riches of Christ into His chosen and redeemed people to build up the Body of Christ, which will consummate in the New Jerusalem. Witness Lee writes:

What is our vision? Our vision is that God so loved the world that He gave His Son to die for us to redeem us, the sinners, in order that we can have the life of Christ and be regenerated by Him to be God's children, enjoying the riches of the Triune God to become the Body of Christ. In practice, the Body is expressed as the local churches in various localities, practicing the Body life in a practical and proper way. This Body, the church of God, is the focus of God's economy. (*The Vision of the Age*, 79)

What then is the ministry of the age? The ministry of the age is simply the work that is governed by and according to the vision of the age. Just as the ministry of the age at the time of Luther was the ministry of the truth of justification by faith, we hold that the ministry of the age today is that which is according to

the truth concerning the Lord's desire to build up the Body of Christ, expressed locally as local churches, through the experience of Christ and the growth in Christ's life by all the members of the Body.

The minister of the age is the one through whom the vision of the age is released. Both the Bible and church history show us that the Lord raises up someone to take the lead in speaking forth the vision of the age. Watchman Nee and Witness Lee were both such vessels. *Minister of the age* is not an honorific used to cede spiritual authority to a person. Rather, it is an acknowledgement of the Biblical principle that in every age there is one vision and one man who takes the lead to release that vision and to carry out the ministry that is according to the vision.

The Fallacy of Infallibility

To say that a certain man is the minister of the age does not mean that this man is infallible. Noah was a minister of the age, but he was clearly not without mistakes (Gen. 9:21). The same could be said for Abraham, Moses, Peter, and even the apostle Paul (Acts 21:26). However, those mistakes did not negate the fact that these men, having received a vision of what God wanted to accomplish in that age, were the ministers of their age. God still used them to release His up-to-date vision to His people and to lead them to do the work that matched that vision and carried out God's move in their age.

Similarly, to say that a man is the minister of the age does not mean that this man's words are infallible. For example, Witness Lee admitted that he differed from Watchman Nee on the identity of the two witnesses in Revelation 11. Nevertheless, Brother Lee acknowledged that during the years of his service Watchman Nee took the lead in the ministry and was the minister of the age. He realized that to contend over doctrinal points would damage Brother Nee's ministry, thus distracting saints from God's economy. Just as Witness Lee did not have the attitude that, because Watchman Nee was the minister of the age, his teaching concerning the Bible was infallible, so we also do not ascribe infallibility to Witness Lee's teaching. Nevertheless, we acknowledge that both he and Watchman Nee were the ministers of the age and that the vision they presented to us is absolutely according the divine revelation of the Bible.

The notion of infallibility is alien to the Lord's recovery. Neither Watchman Nee nor Witness Lee ever presented themselves as infallible. Brother Lee, speaking of his work for the Lord, said, "I admit that the church in Los Angeles has made certain mistakes, and I confess that I have made mistakes. The elders can testify of this. Everybody makes mistakes. No one can deny this. I have had to make mistakes in order to grow" (*Life-Study of Genesis*, 1139).

Any mistakes Brother Nee and Brother Lee may have made do not nullify the vision or the ministry according to that vision that we have received through these two brothers. Not since the time of the early apostles has the vision of God's New Testament economy been so clear, a vision that encompasses the entire Bible from Genesis to Revelation and that inherits all that the Lord has recovered through His servants throughout the centuries. In 1934 Brother Lee told Brother Nee, "Even if one day you do not take this way, I will still take this way. I am not taking this way because of you, and I will not leave this way because of you. I have seen that this is the Lord's way. I have seen the vision" (*The Vision of the Age*, 50). Even so, today we in the Lord's recovery are not following a man, much less an infallible man, for aside from the Lord Jesus Himself, no such person exists (Rom. 3:23). Today, we are following the vision we have seen, and in following this vision we are not ashamed to acknowledge those through whom the vision has come to us (2 Tim. 1:8).