

A SPECIOUS CLAIM OF RACISM

On a couple of occasions spurious and egregious allegations surfaced tarring Witness Lee by associating him with racist justifications of slavery based on his interpretation of Noah's cursing of the descendants of Ham (Gen. 9:25). There are at least three problems with this criticism:

1. Witness Lee's interpretation of this prophecy is descriptive, not prescriptive, that is, it is an attempt to explain historical facts, not a justification of racism or of slavery.
2. Witness Lee explicitly criticized racism and slavery.
3. Witness Lee strongly affirmed that in the church there are no distinctions of race or class.

Interpreting history through biblical prophecy does not mean that one endorses any historical player, either individual or corporate, or any ideology. For example, the great image in Daniel 2 represents the history of human government in four empires—the Babylonian Empire, the Medo-Persian Empire, the Macedonian-Grecian Empire, and the Roman Empire. Each of these was raised up at a point in time under God's sovereignty, but none of them represents what God is seeking. Only Christ with His overcomers as the stone cut out without hands and becoming a great mountain that filled the earth, which mountain represents the eternal kingdom of God (Dan. 2:34-35, 44-45), is God's goal. The four horses—representing the gospel, war, famine, and death—in Revelation 6 likewise represent world history from the time of Christ, but it would be a mistake to say that all four represent God's desire. Similarly, the history of the sufferings of the Jewish people are generally considered to be a fulfillment of prophecies in the Bible, but this consideration is far removed from being a justification of the atrocities perpetrated against Jews throughout the centuries. In the same way, those who hold the same view as Brother Lee concerning Genesis 9—including other reputable Bible interpreters such as Matthew Henry and Robert Jamieson—should not be labeled racist for seeking to interpret history through the lens of the Bible. It is unfair to tar a person by associating a historical interpretation of prophecy with a racist ideology.

Moreover, Brother Lee condoned neither the system of slavery nor racism. Of the Roman system of slavery he said, "What a dreadful system! To be sure, God was utterly opposed to such a social system, for it was altogether contrary to the place of man in His creation." Nevertheless, he noted, "Paul certainly did not approve of this evil social system. But instead of trying to reform it, he charged the slaves to behave well in it, to live in it according to the standard of the humanity of the Lord Jesus. Even in the midst of such an unjust social system, Christians could live out a life with the highest standard of humanity. What a testimony this is!" (*Life-study of Titus*, 31). This is not to justify an evil system. Rather, it is to affirm that in any circumstance believers can live and magnify Christ, as Paul himself did when he was unjustly imprisoned (Phil. 1:20-21) and as Christians under repressive regimes do today.

Even more to the point, in the paragraph following his speaking on Noah and Ham, Brother Lee taught that racial and social distinctions are done away with in Christ and in His Body, using the church in Antioch as an example:

But turn to Acts 13:1. "Now there were in Antioch, in the church that was there, prophets and teachers: Barnabas and Simeon who was called Niger, and Lucius the Cyrenian, and Manaen, foster brother of Herod the tetrarch, and Saul." In this verse we see that different peoples had become one church. Here we see certain prophets and teachers listed among the prominent, functioning members of the church. Barnabas and Saul were Jews. Simeon was called Niger (which means black). From this designation, he might have been a Negro. Lucius of Cyrene was from Africa. Cyrene was a city in northern Africa, where Libya is today. Manaen was brought up with Herod. Herod, though

a descendant of an Idumaeen (an Edomite), was governmentally related to the Romans (Europeans). So, though Manaen's origin is unknown, he, as a foster brother of Herod, must have been Europeanized. Thus, we see that the five great functioning members of the church in Antioch were composed of two Jews, descendants of Shem, one from Africa and one who might have been a black person, both of whom might have been descendants of Ham, and one who was at least culturally related to the descendants of Japheth. They all became one church. Regardless of whose descendant you are, do not feel disappointed. Since we have been regenerated, we are all the church people. We were born of different origins, but now we are all in the same church. We all were born in the fulfillment of God's prophecy concerning mankind spoken through Noah. But our natural status has been changed by the salvation of God in Christ. (*Life-study of Genesis*, 450)

When he came to Acts 13 in his *Life-study of Acts*, Brother Lee said:

The five prophets and teachers recorded here were composed of Jewish and Gentile peoples with different backgrounds, education, and status. This indicates that the church is composed of all races and classes of people regardless of their background, and that the spiritual gifts and functions given to the members of the Body of Christ are not based upon their natural status.

Here in 13:1 the Lord set up a pattern. From Antioch the Lord's move turned to reach the Gentile world, and in the Gentile world there are many different kinds of people, people of different cultures, races, and status. Therefore, at the very beginning of this turn the pattern was established to indicate that the churches are composed of all races and classes of people. (*Life-study of Acts*, 299)

The apostles' teaching in the New Testament is clear that all racial, social, and cultural distinctions have been abolished in Christ. Ephesians 2:15 says that Christ abolished in His flesh the law of the commandments in ordinances so that he could create the Jews and the Gentiles—the two categories of people separated by the strongest racial/social/cultural wall—in Himself into one new man. Colossians 3:10-11 says, "And have put on the new man, which is being renewed unto full knowledge according to the image of Him who created him, where there cannot be Greek and Jew, circumcision and uncircumcision, barbarian, Scythian, slave, free man, but Christ is all and in all." Concerning this verse Brother Lee said, "The very content, the constituent, of the church is Christ (Col. 3:10-11). In the new man there is no Greek and no Jew, no social rank, no racial distinctions, no national differences; Christ is all and in all (v. 11)" (*The Basic Revelation in the Holy Scriptures*, 27). Brother Lee decried the state of modern Christendom, saying that it had been leavened with national, racial, and class distinctions, using as an example the separation of blacks and whites in America into separate congregations. He concluded, "This is Satan's corruption, so in the recovery we cannot allow anything like this to exist" (*The Constitution and the Building Up of the Body of Christ*, 33).

Visitors to the churches in the Lord's recovery have been struck by the intermixing of races in oneness. If some individuals in the churches have not relinquished national, racial, and class prejudices, that is not the fault of the ministry or of the churches as a whole. That would simply reflect a lack of transformation on those individuals' part. It is clear that the same was true in the apostles' time; otherwise, Paul's words in Ephesians, Colossians, and elsewhere would have been unnecessary. Such attitudes did not match the status of the church as one new man, nor did they represent the New Testament ministry. The same is true today. In 1983 Brother Lee gave a message titled, "The Practice of the Church Life—Grace Swallowing Up Race" (*The Collected Works of Witness Lee, 1983: Volume 1*, 111-119). May the enjoyment of God's grace that swallows up racial distinctions increasingly be the testimony of the churches in the Lord's recovery.