

A BALANCED VIEW OF THE ELDERS' AUTHORITY

Every truth in the Bible has two sides that must be held in balance. This fact reflects the natural law in God's creation, as Brother Witness Lee explained:

According to the natural law in God's creation, there is the law of balance. Nothing can exist without having two sides. For example, the earth exists because of two forces: centrifugal force thrusts the earth away, and centripetal force holds it back. This is the balance of power. All the truths in the Bible also have two sides. In order to hold a biblical truth properly, we must hold both sides of it. (*Young People's Training*, 74-75)

Therefore, it is crucial that those who minister the Word be those who are "cutting straight the word of the truth" (2 Tim. 2:15). To take any truth in the Bible in an unbalanced fashion leads to extremism and error, issuing in spiritual ruin.

After the Lord fasted for forty days and nights before initiating His earthly ministry, Satan came to tempt Him. When the Lord answered his first temptation by quoting Deuteronomy, Satan tempted Him with a passage from Scripture. In response "Jesus said to him, Again, it is written, You shall not test the Lord your God" (Matt. 4:7). Brother Lee pointed out that in interpreting the Bible we should pay attention to the principle of "Again, it is written":

All those who love and fear the Lord want to walk according to the Bible. The devil cannot stop us from following the Bible or walking according to the Bible. He can only use other ways, one of which is to cause us to follow the Bible in an isolated way. In this way we are driven to the extreme and forget the words that say "again it is written."

This word "again" is too big a word. We should put a circle around it. This shows us that when we follow the Bible, we should not do so in an isolated way. We should consider both sides and even all sides. No single portion of the Bible can represent the whole truth, in the same way that no one face of a house can represent the whole house completely. (*The Collected Works of Witness Lee [CWWL]*, 1959, vol. 3, 393)

We need to exercise particular care to have a balanced understanding of the Bible's teaching on authority. On the one hand, the Lord Jesus has all authority in heaven and on earth (Matt. 28:18). On the other hand, in His Body He raises up men to work together with Him among the churches, and He places men as overseers in the local churches to shepherd His flock (Acts 20:28; 1 Pet. 5:2). Though he does not cede any of His authority to them, they do express and represent His authority in the church universally and in the local churches respectively. This is what is meant by the term *delegated authority*. This does not mean that anyone has authority in himself. If any brother appropriates the Lord's authority to himself personally, he is essentially making the error of Diotrephes (3 John 9). In general, proper authority is carried out through ministry, although occasionally it is exercised administratively.

In the practice of the local church life for the building up of the Body of Christ, we must maintain a proper balance. On the one hand, the Body of Christ is expressed practically in many local churches, each with its own administration before the Lord. On the other hand, no local church can be absolutely autonomous or independent from the others, and the elders in the church are particularly responsible before the Lord to care for the fellowship of the Body and the sense of the Body as a whole. Furthermore, although the elders represent and express the Lord's authority in a local church, their exercise of authority is not without bounds.

In a sense, a local church may be considered as a family. In a proper family, the parents express and represent the Lord's authority. This enables the children to grow properly. However, the exercise of discipline should be carried out in love with a desire for all the children's benefit. Furthermore, the parents' exercise of authority is not without limit. If the parents become abusive or the children's needs are neglected, it is necessary and right for the appropriate authorities to step in. The decision to do so is always a difficult one and should be the exception rather than the rule.

Elders are appointed by the apostles in collaboration with the Holy Spirit to express and represent the Lord's authority in a local church (Acts 14:23; 20:28; Titus 1:5), but this authority must be exercised in love toward all the saints. The elders should avoid taking sides in personal disputes. Rather, they must maintain their standing as shepherds of the entire flock in order to minister Christ as life to all the members (1 Pet. 5:3). If a brother asserts that the elders in a local

church have unbounded, absolute authority in matters pertaining to the church in their locality, even using selected excerpts from the ministry to buttress his claim, we must be clear that balanced and fair readings of both the Bible and the ministry of Brother Nee and Brother Lee contradict this claim.

In a family the parents must exercise a measure of discipline. It is the same in the church. However, the elders should exercise discipline as little as possible. Furthermore, there is provision in the apostles' teaching, particularly in two portions of the Word, if an elder fails in exercising authority properly. The first portion is in 1 Corinthians. When disorder engulfed the church in Corinth, those of the household of Chloe informed the apostle Paul (1 Cor. 1:11). They realized that they did not have the measure or standing to address the situation, but that Paul did. First Corinthians is Paul's response to this and other reports (5:1) that he received. In his Epistle Paul gave several charges to the Corinthian believers, including charging the brothers in responsibility to discipline a sinning member (5:13b). Later, he told them, "And the rest I will set in order when I come" (11:34). This shows that the apostles still had the right and responsibility to intervene in a situation of disorder.

The second portion is 1 Timothy 5:19. There Paul told his younger co-worker Timothy, "Against an elder do not receive an accusation, except based upon two or three witnesses." Implicit in this charge is an indication that the apostles who appoint elders also have the right and responsibility to deal with disorderly elders, including the removal of an elder if necessary. In neither of these cases is there any indication that the apostles should take over the administration of the local church. Rather, they address the problems that trouble and stumble the saints in the church but leave the administration of the church in the hands of the elders.

Knowing that intervention may temporarily disturb a situation further, the co-workers who function as apostles take such actions infrequently and only after extensive efforts to help the offending ones to be adjusted in their treatment of saints and handling of affairs. Nevertheless, intervention is sometimes necessary, as Paul indicates in his Epistles and Watchman Nee and Witness Lee pointed out throughout their ministry. In Brother Nee's first extensive talks on the practice of the church life, he said of 1 Timothy 5:19, "The apostles and those whom they have specifically assigned should be responsible for handling such accusations." He added, "Since they are responsible for appointing elders, they are also responsible for dealing with elders" (*The Collected Works of Watchman Nee, Vol. 22: The Assembly Life & The Prayer Ministry of the Church*, 30). In his later ministry he said, "The authority for the appointment of the elders is with the apostles, and the authority for the removal of the elders is also with the apostles. A local church cannot expel an elder; rather, the apostles need to bear the responsibility of removing elders. This is the reason why the letter of accusation by two or three was sent to Timothy" (*The Collected Works of Watchman Nee, Vol. 51: Church Affairs*, 143).

Brother Lee spoke of these matters over twenty times during the course of his ministry, particularly when faced with problems in the Far East in 1965 and in the United States and elsewhere in the late 1980s. In 1965 he said:

When a local church acts in a proper manner, there is no need for the apostles to intervene, but this is not to say that the apostles cannot intervene. Although a local church is under the leading of the elders, if the elders or the church do not act according to proper principles under the leading of the apostles, the apostles still have the right to intervene. (*CWWL, 1965, Vol. 4, 186*)

In 1988 he said:

To whom should an accusation against an elder be made? The answer is clearly that it should be made to the apostles. This is another strong proof that after an apostle has appointed elders, the elders are still under the apostle's authority and management. After they have appointed men as elders, the apostles still have the authority to deal with the elders, even to judge, condemn, and reprove the elders. This is the clear word of the Bible. (*CWWL, 1988, Vol. 3, 281*)

These matters are not part of the central line of the Bible. Hence, they are not focal points in the ministry of Watchman Nee and Witness Lee. However, knowing the truth in a balanced way will help us navigate troubles that come upon the churches from time to time.