

FORGIVENESS AND THE BUILDING UP OF THE BODY OF CHRIST

The Bible says that we are to forgive one another as God in Christ forgave us (Eph. 4:32; Col. 3:13). This is a crucial factor in practicing the church life for the building up of the Body of Christ and thus merits our attention in these days.

Practicing Forgiveness in the Church Life

The word *church* is used in the Gospels only twice, both times in Matthew. In chapter 16 the Lord told His disciples, "I will build my church" (v.18). There the Lord was speaking of the universal church. In chapter 18 the Lord instructed His disciples that if an offense between brothers could not be resolved between themselves or with the help of a few others, it should be told to the local church in which these believers were meeting (v. 17). These two mentionings show that in the practice of the church life for the building up of the Body of Christ, dealing with offenses between believers is an important matter. Immediately after the Lord spoke about how to deal with offenses in Matthew 18, Peter asked Him, "How often shall my brother sin against me and I forgive him? Up to seven times?" (v. 21). The Lord answered, "I do not say to you, Up to seven times, but, Up to seventy times seven" (v. 22). Then the Lord told them a parable charging them to forgive one another from the heart as the Lord had forgiven them (vv. 23-35). Concerning this chapter Brother Lee told us:

We must realize that an overcomer is one who lives a crucified life, a life in resurrection, in the midst of the church, no matter what kind of situation may arise, in order to produce fruit for the Lord's testimony. Matthew 18 reveals that in the church life there will always be offenses that need to be forgiven. On the one hand, verses 6 through 10 reveal that we should not offend; that is, we should not be stumbling blocks. On the other hand, verses 21 through 35 indicate that we need to forgive others. According to verse 22, even if a brother offends us seventy times seven, we still need to forgive him. As long as we are in the church life, offenses will occur, and the only solution to offenses is forgiveness (Eph. 4:32; Col. 3:12-14). (*The Collected Works of Witness Lee [CWWL], 1978, vol. 1, 253-254*)

Such endless forgiveness from the heart is far beyond our natural human capacity, yet it is possible if we realize the extent of the Lord's heart of forgiveness toward us and take Him as our life and person (Col. 3:13, note 2).

Forgiving One Another in Love for the Building Up of the Body

Chapter four of Ephesians speaks of how we should live and the responsibility we bear for the building up of the Body of Christ. This chapter begins with Paul beseeching the Ephesians to "walk worthily of the calling with which you were called" (v. 1). That calling is to be the Body of Christ (cf. Col. 3:15). Ephesians 4:15 and 16 show us that the Body builds itself up by the growth in life through the mutual supply among the members; only by holding to truth in love can we grow, and only in love can the Body build itself up. It is quite significant that love is mentioned in each of these verses and is mentioned in the entire book of Ephesians seventeen times.

The beginning and ending of this chapter show us key aspects of this love. Verses 2 and 3 say that a walk worthy of our calling is one "with all lowliness and meekness, with long-suffering, bearing one another in love, being diligent to keep the oneness of the Spirit in the uniting bond of peace." The virtues mentioned here are not found in our natural humanity but are in the humanity of Jesus. Verse 29 says that we should speak only words that minister grace to one another for building up. Verses 31 and 32 say, "Let all bitterness and anger and wrath and clamor and evil speaking be removed from you, with all malice. And be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, even as God in Christ also forgave you." In its immediate context the grieving of the Holy Spirit in verse 30 is particularly related to our speaking. Bitterness, anger, wrath, clamor, evil speaking, and malice all damage the building up of the Body and stem from a lack of tenderheartedness and forgiveness. The building up of the Body of Christ depends on the virtues of Christ's humanity lived out by us in keeping the oneness by practicing forgiveness toward one another in love so that we can mutually supply one another with Christ as life.

Forgiving Others' Offenses Being the Discerning of the Body

Paul warned the Corinthians that those who partake of the Lord's table without properly discerning the Body eat and drink judgment to themselves (1 Cor. 11:29). Brother Lee linked the unlimited forgiveness of offenses in Matthew 18—the "seventy times seven"—with discerning the Body:

What does this four hundred ninety mean? It means that you forgive endlessly. To forgive endlessly means to forget. You may be absolutely right and he absolutely wrong, but if you do not forget, the Lord will hold you

accountable in the next age. Forgiving, forgetting, others' offenses is the discerning of the Body. I forgive regardless of how much I am offended, because he is a member of the Body. If I condemn him while I partake of the Lord's table, in eating the bread, I eat to my own judgment. (CWWL, 1978, vol. 1, 159)

Our forgiveness should not be conditioned on others' repentance and apology. Brother Lee pointed out, "It is altogether wrong to require others who have wronged us to repent. The Bible does not teach us to demand that others repent; instead, it teaches us only to forgive others" (CWWL, 1984, vol. 5, 8).

Forgiveness and the Exercise of Discipline

A heart of forgiveness refers to our inward feeling and does not annul the requirements of either the secular or divine governments. As pointed out elsewhere on this site, some matters must be referred to secular authorities. Moreover, the elders in a local church may have to exercise discipline toward sinning, unruly, and divisive members (1 Cor. 5:1-5, 11; Rom. 16:17; 2 Thes. 3:6). However, even in cases where some form of discipline is necessary, our heart should be one of love and forgiveness (2 Cor. 2:7-11), not that we release an erring one from the consequences of his actions but that our heart still hopes for and seeks that member's restoration to the fellowship of the Body to the fullest extent possible.

Joseph is an excellent pattern of exercising forgiveness together with governmental discipline in his dealing with his brothers in Genesis 42 through 44 (see *Life-study of Genesis*, messages 116 and 118). They had sold Joseph into slavery, after which he suffered grievously for at least twenty years, yet he harbored no enmity toward them. Rather, his heart was full of love concerning them. However, Joseph temporarily hid that love (42:24; 43:30) so that he could discipline them, not according to his own feeling but according to their need. Similarly, any discipline the elders exercise toward a fellow member should be motivated by love and be measured in order to, if possible, properly restore that member's fellowship with the Lord and with His Body. Brother Lee commented, "Finally, we also must have love for the brothers, even for those who require discipline. This is the life of Joseph" (*Life-study of Genesis*, 1487).

Brother Lee was a model of this kind of conduct. In January 1977 he said that if those religious leaders who were then defaming him would come to him in the next age to apologize, "I will tell them that I forgave them already in the dispensation of grace" (*Life-study of Revelation*, 733). Then, in early 1978 he was informed that some leading ones among the local churches were seeking to undermine his ministry and incite a rebellion among the young people. Rather than reacting according to any natural feeling, he went to the Lord in prayer. In doing so, he became clear that the Lord did not want him to touch the situation directly but to seek to rescue the ones causing the turmoil. A talk he gave to the serving ones in the Living Stream Ministry office during that time exhibited his attitude:

Suppose a member offends you. You should go to him, not to ask him to apologize but to rescue him, to bring him back from his wrong situation. This is discerning the Body. This is not our natural way. If someone offends me, I do not want to have anything more to do with him. I tell you, if we hold such an attitude, we do not discern the Body. Regardless of how grievous the offense, he is a member of the Body, and because you are the one he has offended, you are blessed, burdened, charged, to rescue him. (CWWL, 1978, vol. 1, 158-159)

This is exactly what Brother Lee sought to do. Some of those caught up in the turmoil were rescued; others were not. Just as how others respond to the gospel is not up to us (2 Cor. 2:14-16), so the way others respond to our rescue attempts is in the Lord's hands. Our responsibility is to live Christ for His magnification by the bountiful supply of the Spirit (Phil. 1:19-21). The vindication of the way Brother Lee took was the clear sky that continued to characterize his ministry.

In 1988, faced with an even larger turmoil, Brother Lee told the saints:

Forgiving others keeps us in the proper church life. In any church that has existed for more than a few years, there will be some offenses. However, our forgiveness is a great "shovel" to clear away those offenses. We should have no memory of a brother's offending us. If we do remember the offense, we will not be happy to see him or sit by him when we come to the meetings. This is a poor kind of church life, and in this condition, we cannot build up the Body of Christ. If we forgive, every word out of our mouth will give grace to the hearers (v. 29). This is the practical living in the church life. (CWWL, 1988, vol. 1, 470-471)

Dear saints, may we learn from the Lord's Word and from our brother's ministry and pattern to forgive one another, as God in Christ has forgiven us, for the sake of the building up of the Body of Christ.