

LEADERSHIP IN THE LORD'S RECOVERY, PART 3: APPLYING THE BIBLICAL PATTERN OF LEADERSHIP

As we have seen, God's intention is that He, the unique source of authority, would lead His people directly. No person, organization, or system should usurp God's leadership over His people, which is practically carried out by God's speaking through those who faithfully bring His speaking to His people. In the New Testament this speaking is the teaching of the apostles, the entire content of the New Testament. Witness Lee explained:

The apostles' teaching comprises the twenty-seven books of the New Testament in four main parts. The first part of the New Testament was spoken by the Lord when He was in the flesh on the earth. The second part was spoken by the apostle Peter as a continuation of the Lord's word in the four Gospels. The third part was spoken by the apostle Paul in portions of the Acts and in his fourteen Epistles. The fourth and final part of the speaking in the New Testament was given through the apostle John. Besides these four main parts of the New Testament, there are also James and Jude, but these dear saints did not have as important a role as the three apostles mentioned above in the composing of the New Testament. (*The Scriptural Way to Meet and to Serve for the Building Up of the Body of Christ*, 95-96)

The apostles' teaching as God's New Testament speaking is the actual and practical leadership among the local churches. This has been the case since the Lord's present recovery began in China in 1922 with Watchman Nee. Brother Lee recounted Brother Nee's pattern of not assuming any kind of official position:

I was with Brother Nee for years. We never considered him the official leader, and he never regarded himself in this way. Whenever someone thought of Brother Nee as the leader and came to him for instructions, Brother Nee would never say a word. Only when a person came to him for fellowship would he open himself to share something. He never assumed that he was the official leader. (*Leadership in the New Testament*, 11)

Certainly, Brother Nee took the lead, but not in an official way or in the way of controlling or directing others. Actually, it was Brother Nee's pattern of living according to the Bible and His faithful teaching of the Bible that were the real leadership:

In 1934 there was a turmoil in the church in Shanghai, mainly directed against Brother Nee. At that time I assured him that I completely followed him, not because of who he was but because of the teaching and revelation he brought into the Lord's recovery. Brother Nee and I had not known each other formerly; we had no personal affection. He took the lead, and I followed him because he had the revelation in his teaching and he kept the revelation. I also told him that if one day he would deviate from the revelation he had passed on to us, I would still follow the revelation, but I would no longer follow him. (*The Apostles' Teaching and the New Testament Leadership*, 47)

Brother Nee was greatly encouraged by these words from Brother Lee. When Brother Nee's public ministry was terminated by his imprisonment in 1952, the revelation that Brother Nee had imparted through his ministry, which so richly opened the New Testament, was faithfully carried forward by Brother Lee. This assured that the Lord's recovery on the earth would continue to flourish in mainland China and beyond. In the matter of leadership, as in all matters in Brother Nee's ministry, Brother Lee was faithful not only to his senior co-worker's speaking but also to his pattern:

According to God's economy, there is just one leader among His people—the Lord Jesus Christ: "And do not be called leaders; for One is your Leader, that is, Christ" (Matt. 23:10, NASB). Anyone who considers me the leader in the Lord's recovery is not practicing the truth. If anyone asks you who the leader in the church is, you need to say that the leader is Christ. To answer in this way indicates that we know the truth and practice the truth. If someone claims that Witness Lee is the leader, you need to tell him, "Witness Lee is our slave." (*Truth Messages*, 8)

Brother Lee considered himself a slave who served the churches through the ministry in the Lord's recovery. Less than three months before his passing in 1997, he wrote a letter to the churches expressing his assurance that there were some among his co-workers who were following his pattern. *Leadership in the New Testament* reproduces the following part of his letter: "The Lord has shown me that He has prepared many brothers who will serve as fellow slaves with me in a blended way. I feel that this is the Lord's sovereign provision for His Body, and the up-to-date way to fulfill His ministry" (*Leadership in the New Testament*, 6).

It has been over 25 years since Brother Lee spoke these words. Today those who function to take the lead through the ministry of the apostles' teaching still endeavor to take the way of blending (1 Cor. 12:24). Blending requires one to be harmonized and coordinated with others to serve in the principle of the Body (Ezek. 1:10-14 and footnotes). It requires that all the leading ones be limited and balanced by one another so that each experiences the putting to death of the cross in order that the life of Christ can be imparted to others (2 Cor. 4:11-12). Blending also ensures that the personality of one strong or capable "leader" is not imprinted onto the churches in the recovery, but rather the Lord's headship is preserved

(cf. 3 John 9; 1 Cor 1:12). Blending necessitates that all who take the lead in the ministry in the recovery seek the will of the Spirit together (Acts 13:1-4) and are coordinated together to follow the Spirit's leading to release the Lord's up-to-date speaking concerning the revelation of the New Testament, the apostles' teaching, the central and primary item of which is God's New Testament economy to build up the Body of Christ, consummating in the New Jerusalem as God's eternal goal (Eph. 3:9; Rev. 21:2). As should be the case with the eldership in a local church, the service of the co-workers who function to take the lead in the ministry and the work is a corporate, blended service.

If we are clear concerning the pattern of leadership in the Bible and the living out of this pattern through Brother Nee and Brother Lee, we will realize that we in the Lord's recovery today are not following a person or any kind of organization. Today we must be a people who follow a vision (Acts 26:19). This vision is the revelation of God's New Testament economy as the central item of the apostles' teaching, the extract of the New Testament and the whole Bible. This revelation was fully recovered through Brother Nee and Brother Lee's ministry and is the priceless heritage of the saints in the Lord's recovery today. This revelation, as the actual leadership in the Lord's recovery today, must become our vision.

Without question Christ is the unique Head of the Body (Col. 1:18a; Eph. 1:22b-23). Yet according to the New Testament, we should be those who are willing to be led by others and follow their pattern insofar as it corresponds to the kind of person and living the teaching of the New Testament requires of leading ones (2 Tim. 3:10; 1 Cor. 11:1; 2 Thes. 3:9b). For example, the saints should follow the faithful elders in their locality and emulate their pattern, and the elders should follow those who take the lead to faithfully minister the word that is according to the apostles' teaching (Heb. 13:17; Phil. 3:17). However, we should not follow others in a natural way. Apparently, Brother Lee followed Brother Nee, but in reality, according to Brother Lee's own testimony, he followed the revelation of the New Testament recovered through Brother Nee's ministry. In the same way, we should not merely follow a person, and we should not have the concept that the leadership in the recovery today is that of an officially designated person or group of people, for there is no such thing as an official leader apart from the Lord Himself. The leadership in the recovery is the apostles' teaching as the constitution of the church as God's New Testament people, which is God's speaking to unveil His eternal economy to carry out His will and fulfill the desire of His heart (Eph. 1:3, 10-11). The more a person's living, work, and ministry correspond to the apostles' teaching concerning God's economy, and the more a person serves the Lord, the churches, and the saints as a slave, the more that person can represent the Lord in taking the lead among the churches (Titus 1:1).

Whether we can rightly follow a person or his ministry or involve ourselves with his work depends entirely on the degree to which he properly holds to the teaching of the apostles concerning God's New Testament economy (Acts 2:42; Titus 1:9; 1 Tim. 1:3-4). This requires us to exercise discernment (Phil. 1:9-10a, note 9²). Today there are countless so-called "ministries" in Christianity. The value of a minister's work before the Lord is up to His sovereign evaluation (1 Cor. 3:11-15; Matt. 7:21-23), but the fact remains that the New Testament acknowledges only one ministry (Acts 1:17, 25; 6:4; 2 Cor. 4:1). We should follow a minister and his ministry only if his ministry is according to and part of this unique New Testament ministry and presents a vision of the completed revelation of the Holy Scriptures in a balanced way without any twisting or deforming and without stressing peripheral matters but holding to God's New Testament economy as the central line and emphasis of the apostles' teaching. Any ministry that we follow must also minister the unsearchable riches of Christ for the carrying out of the divine economy (Eph. 3:8-11). Furthermore, it must be according to an up-to-date vision of the present truth (2 Peter 1:12), matching what the Lord is presently doing on the earth. In this we affirm that today the Lord is working to recover the reality of the Body of Christ and the one new man to consummate this age and usher in the kingdom. This is the burden of the ministry in the Lord's recovery today. We should present ourselves to be perfected by the gifted members whom the Lord has given to His Body in order that we might participate in and carry out this same work (Eph. 4:11-12). Ultimately, what we must follow is neither the ministers nor their ministry per se but what the ministry imparts—the controlling vision of God's New Testament economy to build up the Body of Christ. It is this vision that leads us. May we all seek the Lord prayerfully in this matter, taking these words of Brother Lee to heart:

...[Y]ou are not following a man; rather, you are standing with the Lord's ministry. You are following a vision, a vision that matches the age, a vision that inherits all that was in the past and a vision that is all-inclusive. It is up to date, yet it builds on the past. If you remain in the book of Acts, you may have inherited everything prior to that time, but you are not up to date. Today as we stand here and ponder the revelations unveiled in the Lord's recovery, as we read the publications that are released among us, we can see that they cover everything from the church to God's economy to the New Jerusalem in the new heaven and new earth. This is a bountiful and all-sufficient vision. (*Crucial Words of Leading in the Lord's Recovery, Book 1: The Vision and Definite Steps for the Practice of the New Way, 49*)