

PROPERLY REPRESENTING THE LORD IN THE EXERCISE OF DISCIPLINE

From time to time those who bear responsibility in the administration of a church must exercise a measure of discipline toward unruly members. The exercise of discipline takes as its goals restoring the erring members and protecting both the Lord's testimony and the members of His Body. As with anything done in the Lord's service, the elders must first deal with the Lord so that their person is right and then exercise to be one with Him in the way that they handle matters (2 Cor. 2:10). When Paul wrote to Timothy regarding the qualifications of elders, he wrote concerning their person (1 Tim. 3:1-7). Similarly, in *The Elders' Management of the Church*, after discussing what an elder has to know concerning God's plan, His government, and His authority both in Himself and in the church, the first thing Brother Lee touched was the person of an elder. He said, "Whoever tries to consider the management of the church from the standpoint of methods is wrong. The matter must begin from the person of the elders. It is useless to change the method; the only way is to change the person" (26).

Concerning the Person of One Who Represents the Lord's Authority

Any exercise of discipline towards saints demands much of the leading ones, both in purity and in the restraint of their own flesh (Gal. 6:1). Brother Lee likened any kind of rebuking or exposing to performing surgery. He said:

At such times, the one who does the rebuking must be sure that he himself is very clean. He is like a surgeon who must cleanse himself of all germs before performing surgery. If you have not been purified, you are not qualified to operate on someone by rebuking or exposing him, for the germs in you will cause the other to be contaminated. (*Life-study of Ephesians*, 428-429)

One particular germ that elders must deal with is temper. The elders' primary responsibility is to shepherd all the saints without preference by ministering life to them. Once an elder loses his temper, he loses his ground to shepherd the saints and take the church on in life. Brother Lee told us:

The elders bear the responsibility in the church. They must deal with many chaotic things, which can easily provoke them to anger. Every situation is an opportunity for the elders to lose their temper. No one has as many opportunities to lose his temper as the elders. But the elders must not lose their temper. Once an elder loses his temper, his position, weightiness, function, and value are finished. (*Serving According to Revelation*, 35; see also page 65-66)

Just as a father must love his children even when he is disciplining them (Eph. 6:4; Col. 3:21), the elders, who are charged to care for the Lord's children, must love those to whom they are administering discipline. Any kind of display of temper, such as railing against saints, whether at them or to others, disqualifies a brother from the eldership.

The New Testament presents Paul as a pattern to all the believers, both in his living and as a servant of the Lord (1 Cor. 4:16; 11:1; Phil. 3:17). He had a tender and intimate care for the saints as a nursing mother and an exhorting father (2 Thes. 3:7, 9). He poured himself out for the saints, giving himself to them night and day (2 Cor. 12:15a; Acts 20:18-20, 31). Because he allowed the cross to deal with him, Paul became a person who could supply the believers with the resurrection life (2 Cor. 4:10-12). Only such persons—pure, with their temper dealt with by the cross, and full of tender care to minister life in resurrection—will be able to properly administer discipline.

Some brothers who dispositionally like to "lord it over" others may point to Paul's strong rebuke of the Corinthians and his charge to them to deal with a publicly known case of immorality (1 Pet. 5:3; 1 Cor. 5:13). Such brothers need to consider Paul's words in his Second Epistle to the Corinthians. There he said of his First Epistle, "For out of much affliction and anguish of heart I wrote to you through many tears, not that you would be made sorrowful but that you would know the love which I have more abundantly toward you" (2:4). Brother Nee said of this verse:

All those who do not shed tears when they see their brothers falling and failing are not worthy to do the Lord's work, and they are not qualified to rebuke or exhort others. If you want to rebuke a brother, or if you want to tell him about something that he has done wrong, you must first feel the pain and the sharpness of the words before you are qualified to rebuke. It is easy to point out others' shortcomings, but it is difficult to

say it with tears. However, only those who have tears are qualified to speak. (*The Collected Works of Watchman Nee, Volume 19: Notes on Scriptural Messages (3)*, 496-497)

Paul's heart for all the saints, even the weak, sinning ones, is further evidenced in 2 Corinthians 11:29: "Who is weak, and I am not weak? Who is stumbled, and I myself do not burn?" Brother Lee commented, "This is to burn in sorrow and indignation over the cause of the stumbling of all the fallen ones. This shows the pattern of Paul as a good shepherd, taking care of God's flock" (*The Vital Groups*, 61). Sadly, too many may think that they are strong but others are weak and may condemn and despise members who stumble. Paul did not consider himself as strong and others as weak. Rather, he said that he would boast in the things of his weakness that the power of Christ might tabernacle over him (v. 30; 12:5, 9). Brother Lee described Paul's deep sense of identification with the weak ones and burning at their stumbling as an expression of the consciousness of the Body (*The Church as the Body of Christ*, 196). Those who belittle other saints do not know themselves and are not qualified to touch the Lord's administration.

Being Proper in the Administration of Discipline

Once their person has been dealt with by the Lord, the elders still need to learn to handle matters related to disciplining sinning ones in a way that properly represents the Lord and cares for His interest. In chapters 6 and 7 of *Elders' Training Book 4: Other Crucial Matters Concerning the Practice of the Lord's Recovery (ET 4)*, Brother Lee spoke at length about discipline that could lead to a saint losing the fellowship of the church. All the leading ones should study the principles our brother presented in these chapters. These principles include not acting in haste; exercising love toward the one being disciplined; not acting without assurance and clarity; not needing to make a public announcement; not overpunishing; considering the feeling of and effect on other churches; laboring much in life; and acting by wisdom, with patience, and in love. He spoke at length concerning the care that elders must exercise to not damage the reputation of families or individuals and to not expose the church to the risk of legal action.

Those who bear responsibility in the church should represent God according to what He is in His divine attributes. The Old Testament shows Him to be a God who is longsuffering (Exo. 34:6) and full of love (Jer. 31:3), mercy (Psa. 78:38), compassion (Neh. 9:31; Zech. 1:16), and lovingkindness (Lam. 3:22; Micah 7:18) toward His people, even though they may be unfaithful to Him, turning away from Him to idols and all kinds of degradation. Still, His heart was to restore them. The discipline He exercises toward those who are His is an expression of His love for them (Heb. 12:6). The elders should be the same. Their hope is to restore the sinning ones (Matt. 18:15). Even if the disciplined ones reject their correction, the elders should still pray for them (vv. 18-20).

The elders have no freedom to act according to their own will and disposition. Rather, they must desperately seek the Lord to know His mind and be one with Him. As Brother Lee explained, the elders must balance care for the Lord's testimony with care for the saints: "For God's holiness, God's righteousness, and even the church's testimony, we must deal with the sinful member, yet our dealing should be by wisdom, with patience, and in love" (*ET 4*, 89). He added:

The principle is "with wisdom in love." This must be the atmosphere in the church. We love not only the good ones but also the sinful ones. This, however, does not mean that we are light or loose. We are very strict, yet we carry out such dealings with patience, with much wisdom, and in love. We must receive the saints properly in our locality so that all the local churches can go along with us. (*ET 4*, 89)

Conclusion

The elders bear a tremendous responsibility in the church. They must be patterns to the saints in their person, their conduct, and their handling of church affairs (1 Pet. 5:3; Heb. 13:7). They must exercise to be pure, to be dealt with by the Lord, and to minister life to the saints through tender, shepherding care, bearing the saints, even the sinning ones, in love. They must protect the Lord's testimony yet carry out any discipline toward the saints with patience, with much wisdom, and in love. In this way they can be factors to maintain the churches in peace and oneness under the Lord's blessing.