

QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS ABOUT APOSTLES AND CO-WORKERS

Who has the authority to appoint and remove elders? According to the New Testament, apostles, in cooperation with the Holy Spirit, have the authority to appoint elders in the churches (Acts 14:23; Titus 1:5; Acts 20:28) and to remove elders when the need arises. If an elder becomes a problem, an accusation against him can be presented to an apostle, if possible to the one who appointed him (1 Tim. 5:19-20). A local church cannot expel an elder; rather, the apostles bear the responsibility of removing an elder if necessary.

Are all co-workers apostles with the authority to appoint or remove elders? No. Brother Lee addressed this exact point in his last year of public ministry. He said, "It is neither fitting nor proper for one to attempt to appoint elders simply because he has become a co-worker. To appoint elders requires maturity in life and adequate equipping with the truth" (*How to Be a Co-worker and an Elder and How to Fulfill Their Obligations*, 63-64). Younger co-workers should follow the pattern of those in Paul's company in the New Testament. Paul charged Titus, saying, "For this cause I left you in Crete, that you might set in order the things which I have begun that remain and appoint elders in every city, as I directed you" (Titus 1:5). Titus was to appoint elders because Paul, the leading apostle, charged him to do so. Titus did not presume to appoint elders based on his own standing as Paul's co-worker. Similarly, Timothy did not take it upon himself to address accusations against elders but did so at Paul's instruction (1 Tim. 5:19-20). Brother Lee explained, "According to the record of the New Testament, Timothy and Titus were always under Paul's leadership and direction. They did not start another work; rather, they shared in the same work with Paul" (*A Timely Trumpeting and the Present Need*, 27). Brother Nee made a similar point concerning the record of the co-working of Titus, Artemas, Tychicus, and Apollos with Paul, observing that "among the workers of God dependence upon Him does not render us independent of one another" (*The Normal Christian Church Life*, 149). Those who act independently of the apostles, that is, of the mature co-workers who take the lead in the Lord's work throughout the earth, cannot represent the one work in the Lord's recovery and are practicing lawlessness if they appoint or remove elders.

What are the qualifications of an apostle? For a person to be an apostle, he must possess certain basic qualifications. First, he must receive the revelation of God's New Testament economy concerning Christ and the church (Matt. 16:16-18; Gal. 1:11-12). Second, he must be able to minister the unsearchably rich Christ as the gospel and betroth sinners to Christ for His satisfaction (1:16a; Eph. 3:8; 2 Cor. 11:2). Third, he must be able to raise up local churches and to raise up men from among the saints and appoint them as elders for leading, shepherding, teaching, and overseeing the church (Acts 14:23; Titus 1:5). Of course, an apostle himself must know how to lead, shepherd, teach, and oversee before he can teach others to do the same. Fourth, an apostle must be able to define doctrines, expound the truth, and perfect the saints for the building up of the Body of Christ (1 Tim. 2:7; Titus 1:1; 2 Tim. 2:15; Eph. 4:11-12; see *A Timely Trumpeting and the Present Need*, 10-13). Furthermore, all apostles are mature in life and have learned to labor together in one accord with God and with one another in the one work to accomplish God's New Testament economy.

Are all workers co-workers? No. The descriptor *co-worker* is not a title; it is an indicator that a person serves extra-locally in the unique work of God's New Testament ministry and labors in fellowship and oneness with the Lord and with the other co-workers who serve Him (2 Cor. 6:1; 1 Cor. 3:9). In 1948 Brother Lee spoke of four kinds of workers:

The first are the co-workers who match the need of the ministry of God in the present age. This is a small group of people who have been dealt with by the Lord and who are in one accord. The second

kind are the younger co-workers. They are willing to receive the direction and to come under the coordination of the older co-workers, and they are willing to follow and to learn in humility. The third kind are those who are unwilling to submit to the senior co-workers, who do not belong to the denominations, yet who are happy to remain in fellowship with us. The fourth kind are the preachers and free evangelists among the denominations. What we need today are the first and the second kind of co-workers. (Witness Lee, *Messages Given During the Resumption of Watchman Nee's Ministry*, 147)

Strictly speaking, only the first two kinds of workers described by Brother Lee should be called co-workers because they labor together in fellowship and oneness under a common vision toward a common aim. Simply because a person is in full-time Christian service, even if that service is in the local churches, does not constitute that person a co-worker. True co-workers serve extra-locally among the churches, putting aside any private interest and serving together in fellowship with God and with one another in the one work of the corporate New Testament ministry to build up the Body of Christ (Eph. 4:11-12). Any worker who is unwilling to receive direction from or come under the coordination of those who take the lead in the ministry and the work is by definition not a co-worker.

How can we discern whom to follow? Some have misguidedly demanded a list of apostles in the Lord's recovery. The notion is unbiblical and absurd. There is no precedent in the Bible, and it is clear from the New Testament that leadership in the church is not a fixed office, as it would be in a hierarchy. Rather, we should pray that our "love may abound yet more and more in full knowledge and all discernment" that we "may approve by testing the things which differ and are more excellent" (Phil. 1:9-10a). Based on such discernment, we should follow those who are faithful to the teaching of the apostles in the New Testament (Acts 2:42; Titus 1:9). This includes both those like Paul and Peter, who took the lead in the work and the ministry among the churches, and those who were perfected by them to walk in the same steps (2 Cor. 12:18). Because workers among the churches have from time to time cultivated personal followings among the saints, Brother Lee gave a strong word concerning how to "be right in following others" (*A Word of Love...*, 49-66). He described the characteristics of a person whom it is safe to follow:

1. He should be a person loving the Lord, living for the Lord, and renouncing his self, natural life, preference, and ambition.
2. He must hold the complete revelation of the entire holy Scriptures properly without any twisting or deforming.
3. He must be one who endeavors to keep the oneness of the Spirit, the oneness of the universal Body, by taking the unique ground of the local church. (*A Word of Love...*, 49)

There is a particular characteristic in Paul's recommendation of Timothy to the Philippians that should instruct us: "But you know his approvedness, that as a child with a father he has served with me unto the gospel" (Phil. 2:22). Timothy's approvedness was based on his faithful service under the leadership of the apostle Paul and his following of Paul's teaching and pattern (1 Tim. 4:6; 2 Tim. 3:10), matters in which he had been tested and proven worthy. Similarly, we should follow those who have a history of laboring purely for the Lord's interest in one accord with those who take the lead in the ministry and the work, who bring us the unalloyed teaching of the apostles, and who conduct themselves in a manner consistent with that teaching (2 Tim. 3:14; 2 Cor. 4:2; 1 Thes. 2:10; 1 Thes. 1:6; 1 Tim. 4:12; 1 Cor. 4:16; 11:1; Phil. 3:17).