

SPIRITUAL AUTHORITY AND ITS MISUSE

Spiritual Authority, a book translated and published by Stephen Kaung, became popular among Western believers in the early 1970s. Since then it has been misused by some to assert themselves as authorities and criticized by others who blame it for such abuse. Both the misuse and the criticism miss the mark. The book consists of messages given by Watchman Nee. Its original title in Chinese is more accurately rendered *Authority and Submission*, the title under which it was translated and published in English by Living Stream Ministry. That title reflects the book's dual emphasis. Authority is first in the title because the book begins from a consideration of God's absolute sovereignty. Submission is second because through her submission to Christ's headship, the church testifies His authority among men and is able to represent His authority on the earth.

At the time of Christ's incarnation, the entire earth was in rebellion against God. From the Gospels Watchman Nee saw that as a man, Christ established the kingdom of God on the earth by living a life of submission to God.

How did the Lord establish God's kingdom? He did it through submission. Whatever the Lord did on earth was entirely based on submission. He did nothing that opposed God's authority. Everything was in submission, in perfect cooperation with the authority of God. In this realm the Lord set up the kingdom of God and executed His authority. (148)

Just as Christ's authority was established due to His submission to the Father's will (Phil. 2:5-11; cf. Matt. 26:39; John 6:38), so the authority of God is expressed through His servants and through the church to the degree that they are in submission to God's government. In *Authority and Submission* Watchman Nee shows that God's desire is to have a realm in which He can rule, that is, His kingdom. In the present age God's kingdom is in the church (Rom. 14:17), and the church, through its submission to the headship of Christ, will provide God with a means through which to establish His kingdom on the earth. Thus, Brother Nee said, "God's purpose is not only for us to become the church, but also for the church to become the kingdom of God. She is to be the sphere of God's kingdom, the place where God executes His authority" (150).

God uses certain ones in the church to represent His authority. This does not mean that God cedes His authority to others. The Father gave all authority to the Son (Matt. 28:18). As Watchman Nee said, "There is no inherent authority in a person, and no one can appoint himself to be an authority. Our personal opinions cannot become others' law, and our ideas, views, and proposals do not deserve others' esteem" (209). What qualifies a person to represent God is his knowledge of God. Thus, Watchman Nee said:

A person becomes an authority because of his knowledge of God's will, God's mind, and God's thoughts. One does not become an authority based on his own ideas or opinions, but through an apprehension of God's will and desire. One cannot expect others to submit to his own will or opinion. The extent one represents authority depends on the extent of one's knowledge of God's will and thoughts. (210)

Authority and Submission contains two chapters which further define the basis of authority—Chapter 13, "The Basis of God's Deputy Authority: Revelation," and Chapter 15, "The Basis of God's Deputy Authority: Resurrection." In Watchman Nee's usage, *revelation* referred to seeing the reality of the great truths in the Bible, particularly concerning God and His eternal plan. Spiritual authority is thus based on the revelation a person has received from God through His Word and his experience of the resurrection life

of Christ. Watchman Nee drew on the Old Testament examples of Moses and Aaron to show these principles. Moses became God's representative to Pharaoh and to His people Israel only after Jehovah appeared to him in the burning bush (Exo. 3:2, 6, 10). That revelation of Jehovah became the basis of Moses' authority. When the sons of Korah rebelled, God instructed Moses to put a rod from each of the twelve tribes of Israel before the Ark in the tabernacle (Num. 17:1-5). The next day when Moses went into the tabernacle, Aaron's rod had budded, blossomed, and borne ripe almonds (v. 8). A rod is a symbol of authority (cf. Rev. 2:26-27; 19:15). Aaron's rod had been like all the others—a dead stick. Yet overnight it brought forth life. This was a sign that authority is a matter of resurrection.

Based on these principles Watchman Nee charged his co-workers not to think that they possessed any authority in themselves. He said to them, "A dry rod can exhibit nothing but death. But when you have resurrection, you have authority, because authority rests with resurrection, not with the natural life. Everything that we have is natural. Hence authority does not rest in us but in the Lord" (250-251).

Furthermore, consistent with the biblical record, in Watchman Nee's view the outworking of spiritual authority is not ruling over others but ministry to others (2 Cor. 1:24; 10:8; cf. 1 Pet. 5:3; Mark 10:42-44). He said, "No one can acquire an authority that goes beyond his ministry" (260). When one ministers the Word of God, whether through preaching the gospel or speaking an edifying word, the one ministering is representing God (2 Cor. 5:20; Titus 2:15). The degree to which a word spoken ministers Christ as life to others is dependent upon the degree to which the speaker represents God's authority, which in turn is derived from the degree to which the speaker is one with the Lord (1 Pet. 4:11). In other words, it is not merely what is said but whether the person who is saying it is one who truly knows the Lord (cf. Acts 19:14-16).

In Mark 10:42b-45 the Lord Jesus presented Himself as a pattern to His disciples in serving others:

You know that those who are esteemed as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them. But it is not so among you; but whoever wants to become great among you shall be your servant, and whoever wants to be first among you shall be the slave of all. For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve and to give His life as a ransom for many.

Based on this passage, in a section subtitled "An Authority Does Not Dominate or Control, but Humbles Himself to Serve," Watchman Nee told his co-workers:

There should not be any striving for supremacy among God's children. There should not be any thought of struggle for power or any intention of controlling others. If we do, we will fall into the same condition as that of the Gentiles. Nothing is more unsightly than a person who struggles to be an authority. It is the most ugly thing for a person to try to control others in an outward way. Ambition for authority or to be a great one is something that belongs to the Gentiles. We should drive this kind of spirit from the church. (283)

Thus, in Watchman Nee's teaching, spiritual authority is not positional but is based on a person's seeing of the spiritual realities in the Bible concerning God and His purpose together with the working of the Holy Spirit to bring him into the same subjective experience of the death and resurrection of Christ seen in the pattern of the apostle Paul (2 Cor. 4:10-12). Furthermore, a person manifests spiritual authority not by telling others what to do but by ministering life to others. Any kind of domination or control exercised in the name of authority is antithetical to Watchman Nee's teaching in *Authority and Submission*.