

THE SOURCE OF AUTHORITY—THE LORD'S PRESENCE

Acts 15 and Matthew 18 show us a crucial point concerning authority, namely that authority derives from the Lord's presence. This has great significance in our practice of fellowship and prayer. Acts 15 is the unique record of a gathering of elders and co-workers regarding a problem that was troubling the churches; Matthew 18:18-20 shows us how saints should pray in response to a specific problem within a local church.

In Acts 15:6 the apostles gathered with the elders in Jerusalem to address a matter that was troubling the Gentile churches, that is, the Judaizers' insistence that the Gentile believers must be circumcised in order to be saved. Verse 7 begins, "And when much discussion had taken place, Peter rose up..." This indicates that those present were free to discuss the matter openly. However, from the moment that Peter rose up, the atmosphere in the meeting changed. What is important in our consideration here is not what the issue was, what Peter said, or what the ultimate decision was but the way in which Peter, Barnabas, and Paul conducted themselves and what their speaking brought in. In speaking on this matter, Brother Nee observed:

The most important thing in reading the Bible is to touch the spirit of the Bible. When Peter stood up to speak at that time, he did not debate at all. Once you get involved with the debate, you are not qualified to be a leader, nor are you qualified to be one in authority. One in authority does not contend with people. Once you contend, you lose your position. (*CWWN, vol. 51: Church Affairs, 150*)

Peter simply reported how God had worked when he visited the household of Cornelius and spoke to those gathered there, saying that it was God Himself who had freely given the Holy Spirit to a group of Gentiles (vv. 7-8; Acts 10). After his speaking, 15:12 says, "All the multitude became silent." Brother Nee commented:

Brothers, the Bible has its spirit, and you must touch that spirit in order to grasp that book. Peter simply presented his points without being affected or losing his dignity. He was like a person in authority, simply speaking forth these things. I hope you would see that in a conference of the church, if you slip into arguments, you will become like the others and be disqualified from making decisions. (151)

The speaking of Barnabas and Paul is likewise striking. Brother Nee describes the scene and their speaking in this way:

Barnabas then stood up to speak, and Paul also stood up to speak. We need to pay special attention to the fact that when these two brothers stood up to testify, they had to be very serious before God. We must again try to touch their spirit. These two brothers definitely did not stand up to speak clamorously or lightly; they spoke with weight. We must understand the situation at that time. When Barnabas and Paul stood up to speak, their aim was to stop the contention, not to generate it. Contention is stopped by means of God's presence. In this kind of meeting, idle talk must be stopped. Idle talk is stopped not by our speaking but by bringing people before the Lord. If we are not this kind of person, such a conference will break down. It is useless to imitate. When Barnabas and Paul stood up to speak, everyone was silent. When these two brothers stood up to speak, they could bring others before God. The other brothers were their seniors, but due to these two brothers standing up to speak, everyone was brought before God, and God's presence was brought into the meeting. The noise of debate stopped, and everyone listened quietly to what God had done through their hands. (151-152)

After Peter, Barnabas, and Paul spoke, the presence of the Lord was brought in, the brothers' sense of the Lord's mind in this matter was made clear, and the discord was dispelled. Concerning the gathering Luke uses the expression "it seemed good" three times:

Verse 22: It then seemed good to the apostles and the elders with the whole church...

Verse 25: It seemed good to us, having become of one accord...

Verse 28: For it seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us...

What was the factor that brought in the one accord among the apostles and the elders? It was the presence of the Holy Spirit. What brought in the Holy Spirit's presence? It was the speaking of Peter, Paul, and Barnabas. There is no indication in the text of Acts 15 as to when the presence of the Lord came in; nevertheless, in their letter to the

churches the apostles, the elders, and the church in Jerusalem could say, “It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us.” This indicates that the Holy Spirit was present with those who were gathered and brought them under the Lord’s headship, resulting in their being attuned in the same mind and in the same opinion (cf. 1 Cor. 1:10). Thus, Brother Lee said emphatically, “This presence of the Holy Spirit is the authority for judgment in the church” (*CWWL*, 1960, vol. 2, 335).

Brother Lee was once asked, “What is the difference between having fellowship with one another and voicing our opinion?” The first sentence of Brother Lee’s response is very significant: “The purpose of fellowship is to gain the Lord’s presence” (*CWWL*, 1989, vol. 3, 141). Why is this the case? Because true fellowship in the Body always passes through Christ, the Head, whose headship is realized practically in the fellowship of the Holy Spirit bringing us the very presence of the Lord. Fellowship brings us into the presence of the Lord, and the presence of the Lord brings authority. This is why we have the experience that when we seek fellowship concerning a matter, we are often made clear even if we receive no direct answer to our question or concern. If that fellowship brings us into the presence of the Lord, His presence brings us under His heading up.

For this reason, when we come together to fellowship about a matter, what is crucial is that we seek to be in the presence of the Lord in order to represent Him.

The church is not a place where people express their opinion or where they debate. It is a place where God is feared, His lordship is honored, and His presence rests and is represented. Only when such is found is there the church.

To repeat, in the church there is God’s presence and the representation of this presence. This representation is the authority. (*CWWL*, 1960, vol. 2, 195)

This is why we should never argue or defend our opinion, even inwardly. To do so is to be in the self apart from the presence of the Lord. It is to insult the headship of Christ. Thus, Brother Lee said, “If we are a responsible one, we may fellowship regarding our feeling with the brothers and sisters. However, no matter what the brothers feel to do, we should not argue nor have any feeling whatsoever. This requires that our self, that is, our natural man, be dealt with” (*CWWL*, 1957, vol. 1, 595; see also *CWWL*, 1978, vol. 3, 437-438; 1981, vol. 1, 572).

The same principle is true in prayer, as Matthew 18:18-20 shows. Verse 18 speaks of saints exercising the kingdom authority to bind and loose through prayer. Verse 19 shows a precondition for such prayer to be answered—“if two of you are in harmony.” Verse 20 makes it clear that this is more than mere agreement. There it says, “Where there are two or three gathered into My name, there am I in their midst.” The requirement is to be gathered out of ourselves and into the Lord’s name, which is His person. Where that happens, the Lord’s presence is there—“there am I.” Concerning this passage, Brother Lee said:

When we are gathered into the Lord’s name, we are gathered into His person. Then surely we have Him with us. We have His presence, and His presence is the authority of the kingdom of the heavens for us to deal with a sinning brother. Actually, we do not deal with the brother but with the Devil and with the demons. If we attempt to exercise the kingdom authority without the Lord’s presence, it will not work. Exercising the authority of the kingdom of the heavens to bind and loose must be done in the Lord’s presence.

The context of Matthew 18 indicates that the reality of the church is the Lord’s presence. The church must be certain that it has the presence of the Lord as its reality; otherwise, it has no genuine authority. The real and practical authority of the church is the Lord’s presence. (*The Conclusion of the New Testament: The Church, the Kingdom, and the New Jerusalem, Messages 189-264, 2077-2078*)

All of this is very applicable to our practice of the church life. We should not presume, because we occupy a certain position, to exercise authority either in fellowship or in prayer. This is offensive to the Lord. Rather, we should exercise to be in His presence and to be one with Him to bring those around us and matters of concern into His presence. This will honor His headship and allow Him to work out many things in and through the church, according to His deep and multifarious wisdom (Rom. 11:33; Eph. 3:10).