

## THE CRUCIAL ROLE OF THE SISTERS IN THE CHURCH LIFE

The sisters have a crucial role in the church life that is most highly valued. According to God's arrangement, the sisters stand in a unique position to uphold God's government as an anti-testimony to the rebellious disorder of the world. The sisters also have an irreplaceable role in bringing forth the church life in their locality.

In addressing the crucial role of the sisters in the church life, Brother Lee identified three leading functions. The first of these is what he called the "greatest lesson for Christians to learn," the lesson of being submissive (*The Collected Works of Witness Lee [CWWL], 1968, vol. 1, 83*). This lesson applies to all Christians, both brothers and sisters, so the idea that females submit and males do not submit is a fallen concept that must be repudiated. The Bible charges us to submit to one another (Eph. 5:21) as a way to be filled in spirit and as an issue of being filled (v. 18). Brother Lee identified four requirements to practice genuine submission: being supplied with the divine life, enjoying grace, being under the working of the cross, and denying the self. By taking care of the matter of submission "the church will be strengthened, enriched, and renewed" (84).

While a brother's submission may not be readily perceived, a sister's submission is recognized even by unbelievers and testifies to the evil powers that the divine government is upheld in the church (1 Cor. 11:10). As the old creation has become rebellious to God's order and authority, God must gain an anti-testimony to the disorder by maintaining the God-created distinction in function between the brothers and the sisters (cf. 1 Cor. 11:3; 12:13; 14:34). In Galatians 3:28 Paul reveals that there is no longer any distinction between male and female as constituents of the new creation in Christ, yet in 1 Corinthians 11 and 14 Paul also shows that in the church the distinction between male and female according to the old creation must still be observed. The church is the unique place on earth where the order of God's governmental authority is upheld and maintained. The church being an anti-testimony to the rebellious disorder of the world depends largely upon the sisters' willingness to submit to God's governmental arrangement.

The second leading function of the sisters in the church is to pray (Acts 12:12). Prayer is crucial for the Lord's move and for the building up of the church (2 Thes. 3:1). The sisters' prayer in particular is a great factor in the health of a church. Genuine prayer depends much on submission. For example, if a sister is not submissive, she will not be able to pray properly for the elders but instead may criticize them even in her so-called prayers. However, by practicing submission a sister will be supplied to pray for the elders and many matters related to the Lord's interests (85).

The third leading function of the sisters is to care for the church services. Every saint, including the sisters, should serve the Lord both in practical matters and in preaching the gospel and shepherding others. Properly speaking, even our dealing with practical matters should be a priestly service in which there is the dispensing of Christ as life to others. The sisters' proper care for the services of the church depends on the first two functions of submission and prayer. Some sisters may not know how they should function in the church. However, if they will take care of submission and prayer, spontaneously, they will realize how to function in serving the church (86).

According to the divine arrangement, oversight of the administration and services of the church has been placed in the hands of the responsible brothers who serve as overseers (Acts 20:28; 1 Tim. 3:2; Titus 1:6-7). However, Romans 16 stands out in the New Testament because of Paul's lengthy commendation of the importance of the sisters' service. Paul points out that while taking the lead in bearing the services, the sisters also kept the order in God's arrangement. Verse 3 mentions Prisca before Aquila, indicating that she took the lead in rendering practical and necessary service to the church in Rome, but the mention of her husband Aquila shows that Prisca still maintained the proper order in God's arrangement.

The sisters' function in the church is indispensable in at least two ways. First, the services in the church life cannot be carried out apart from the sisters' function. In fact, Brother Lee told us that the sisters should carry out most of the service in the church (*CWWL, 1967, vol. 1, 269-270, 304*). Second, the sisters' function manifests the order in God's governmental arrangement as an anti-testimony to the fallen world. We should be rescued from discounting the importance of the sisters' function simply because they are not also charged with the oversight and administration of the church. Such a tendency to discount the sisters' function may result from excessively exalting the brothers' standing in the church or from the influence of fallen contemporary fashions in the world regarding gender roles. Much rather, the sisters' service constitutes "the crucial factor" in carrying out the practical church life (*CWWL, 1975-1976, vol. 1, 130*).

Far from occupying a secondary standing in the church, the sisters' service is needed to perfect the brothers' service. While the elders may exercise oversight over the various aspects of the church life, the sisters possess insight to recognize needs in a particular service. With a proper spirit the sisters may help the elders to recognize particular needs in the church and become burdened for these needs in the carrying out of the elders' service. Accordingly, Brother Lee observed:

In a proper situation, the brothers should quickly receive the sisters' feelings, but the brothers should make the decisions. The sisters should come forward without hesitation to let the brothers know their feelings about a matter, and the more the brothers receive their feelings, the better it will be. The sense of the sisters is very fine; this is an innate quality of the sisters. (*CWWL, 1967, vol. 1, 345*)

However, Brother Lee also cautioned:

The sisters should not do anything that the brothers have not yet decided on and agreed upon. Everything should pass through the brothers. If the brothers are slow, the sisters can apply a little pressure so that the brothers will become burdened. However, if the brothers do not agree or do not reach a decision, the sisters should not do anything. If we realize this principle, there will not be any problems. If we do not maintain this principle, the more the sisters do, the greater the problem will become. In the end, the church in that locality will suffer great loss. (346)

The brothers who bear responsibility should receive the fellowship of the sisters concerning the needs in the church services. They should listen to the sisters, respecting them as those who have insight, and the sisters must be strengthened to come forward in a proper spirit to make the brothers aware of particular needs in the church. Once the feeling of the Lord becomes clear in a matter, however, the brothers who exercise oversight should make the needed decisions, and the sisters should not carry out any service apart from the brothers' decision (346).

Brother Lee mentioned five particular areas in which the sisters' shepherding function is vital: the work with the children (including young people), recovering dormant sisters, cooperating in the student work, learning to be spiritual nursing mothers, and giving hospitality (304-308). None of these services is trivial or menial. Rather, all are priestly services vital to the Lord's interests in the church. There is a desperate need in the church life for sisters who can function by ministering life to others according to their need and by prayer for their growth. In caring for younger ones, rather than speaking in a merely doctrinal way, the sisters should exercise discernment to minister particular truths that are needed for their growth in life (*CWWL, 1975-1976, vol. 1, 43-44*). Further, there may be saints who can be served by a sister's prayer and intercession for them, even though she may not interact with them directly (45).

In carrying out their irreplaceable functions, the sisters must also be aware of two matters that endanger the effectiveness of their function. The first matter is not thinking the same thing. Paul charged Euodias and Syntyche, two sisters in the church in Philippi, to "think the same thing in the Lord" (Phil. 4:2). The apostle made the same charge to the whole church, indicating that the dissension between these two sisters affected the church in Philippi generally (2:2). The dissension Paul addressed was related to the mind but affected the saints' love toward one another and damaged their oneness. Not thinking the same thing, which is related to lacking in and being distracted from the subjective knowledge and experience of Christ, greatly frustrates our function in the church life (3:7-10; *CWWL, 1975-1976, vol. 1, 133*).

The second matter that endangers the function of the sisters is gossip. Gossip kills our praying spirit, spreads death to the hearers, and annuls our ability to minister life to others. In the church life we may become aware of many affairs of the saints. If the saints' affairs do not involve us, in principle, they are not our business, and we do not need to talk about them. Instead, we should allow the Lord to take care of the saints' affairs. Nor should we inquire too much into the saints' affairs when only a little inquiry is needed (133). Only after prayerful consideration before the Lord should we bring a matter concerning others to a more mature saint out of care for those involved.

What is our protection against those matters that endanger our function? We must forget all negative things and all matters other than Christ Himself. A dissenting mind and a gossiping mouth are real tests that expose our condition and our need for further growth in the divine life. While gossip brings in death, prayer produces the genuine growth in life and the building up. "If anyone tells us something negative," Brother Lee observed, "we should have no heart for it. This is a basic lesson that we must learn" (135).

The sisters should neither be influenced by trends in contemporary society concerning the role of females nor be paralyzed by excessive fear of overstepping God's governmental arrangement. Brother Lee warned us, "The more we allow ourselves to be troubled by this matter, the more complicated we will become and the less we will function in the way of life." He encouraged the sisters to be simple and go to the Lord daily for fellowship and pursue growth in the divine life, saying, "If the sisters grow in the Lord, they will spontaneously keep the proper order in the Body and will be clear concerning their function in the church life" (*CWWL, 1964, vol. 3, 98*). May we all remain simple before the Lord, offering our service in the Body out of our enjoyment of the Lord and the riches of the divine life.