

THE ELDERS AVOIDING ENTANGLEMENT IN RIGHT AND WRONG

The elders in a local church must deal with all kinds of issues, including complicated situations involving the saints. A great temptation the elders face is becoming entangled in determinations of right and wrong in disputes between saints. The proper function of the elders is to shepherd all the saints and minister Christ as life to them (1 Pet. 5:2; 1 Tim. 4:6). When a problem arises between saints, the elders run a great risk of losing their ground to perform this function if they become entangled in assessing who is right and who is wrong.¹ Brother Lee counseled the elders to minister life to the saints to deliver them from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil:

Immediately after the creation of man, God placed man in front of two trees (Gen. 2:8-9). The first tree was the tree of life, and the second tree was the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. If we are to serve the Lord in a deeper way, we must know that both good and evil are versus life. In our contact with people, we should not help them merely to distinguish between good and evil. Rather, we should minister life to them to save them out of the realm of the knowledge of good and evil. (*Elders' Training, Book 11: The Eldership and the God-ordained Way* (3), 29)

Brother Lee then illustrated by describing a case in which a dispute involving two parties comes to the elders and what the effect is of addressing such a problem in the realm of right and wrong:

In such a case the elders often measure and weigh the case to see who is right and who is wrong. This is a temptation. If the elders determine that one of the parties is wrong, they may condemn him inwardly, and in their talk with him they may not be able to avoid criticizing and judging him. This spoils the situation. The elders may then ask the other party to exercise his patience while they do their best to help the first person to have a change and be adjusted. Such a way of speaking with the two parties is in the realm of good and evil. No life is ministered to either person under the cross. Rather, the negative situation may be intensified. (30-31)

Brother Lee then reminded the elders that their responsibility is to address the saints' real need, which is to come to the Lord to gain Him:

Regardless of who comes to us, we should wait for a chance to minister Christ to them. Whether they are right or wrong, they are short of Christ. In the elders' contact with people, they must have the full realization that what the people need is the Lord and what can solve the people's problem is to meet with the Lord. (31)

Brother Lee warned against making judgments in a dispute based on right and wrong. There is a real danger if the elders are drawn into taking sides in a dispute. To do so is to usurp the headship of Christ and to rob the Lord of an opportunity to address a deeper, spiritual need.

If you do this, you will have joined the battle and will be drawn into the dispute of right and wrong. If you really love the Lord and love the brothers, you will surely take their problem as your own pressing problem and will try to solve it before God. You will say to the Lord, "Lord, what shall we do? I do not know how to help these brothers. How should I help them without hurting them? How can they be perfected? How can they know themselves? And how can they have a more desperate pursuit after You?" Right away you can see that the matter is not so simple. This is more complicated than a doctor diagnosing an illness. You cannot base your judgment on right and wrong. (*The Elders' Management of the Church*, 104)

It is important to realize that making judgments based on right and wrong damages the saints, including those with whom the elders side.

I would like the brothers and sisters to know that if we in the church try to take care of such disharmony, disputes, and arguments, and we make judgments based on right and wrong, we will be damaging the brothers and sisters. You will surely say that the brother who has all the reasons is right, but this judgment will damage him. (105)

¹ This does not override the responsibility of leading ones to refer cases involving accusations of abuse or other criminal behavior to the appropriate secular authorities (see "Handling Allegations of Abuse").

The elders' taking sides in a dispute may damage much more than just the parties directly involved; it may lead to the entire church being embroiled in the issue and being divided into factions.

Suppose a brother and his wife have a fight one day. Because both are believers, they cannot divorce each other. Nevertheless, the sister may come to the elders, recount everything, and ask if her husband was right. Normally, when we hear about arguments, we ask who initiated the argument, and if this sister is asked, she would probably say that her husband initiated everything. Some of the elders may agree with her according to the saying: "A fight between two eventually becomes a fight among three." At first one fights against one, and then two fight against one. Not only so, if some other elders do not agree with her, they may be dragged into the argument as well, so that the argument becomes two against two. Soon, the argument will spread to other brothers and sisters, and they will all become involved in the argument. (*The Collected Works of Witness Lee, 1950-1951, vol. 1, 156-157*)

In *Serving according to Revelation* Brother Lee explained that those who serve the Lord should avoid being drawn into the realm of right and wrong but instead should help the saints to come back to life and the light of life:

When we encounter matters that are related to right and wrong among the saints, we should not try to solve these matters by being in the realm of right and wrong. Instead of paying attention to matters according to right and wrong, we should bring the saints into the light of life in order that they would accept the dealing of life. Right and wrong always cause us to touch death. Even if problems related to right and wrong are seemingly resolved, the issue will always be death. We can touch life only by being in the light of life and by accepting the dealing of life. Life always swallows up death. If we touch life, life will swallow up any death related to right and wrong. This is a clear principle. (32)

The light of life will help the saints resolve disputes not according to right and wrong but according to the inner sense of the Lord. In this way the problem is solved, and the saints gain the Lord and grow in life.

If we understand that both right and wrong are the opposite of life, we will not attempt to solve problems that are related to the realm of right and wrong. Instead, we will bring people to the Lord so that they may see whether the Lord within them approves of their dispute. Then it will be easy to lead them to accept the dealings of life in the light of life. When the light of life shines on the saints and when they are dealt with in life, they drop their arguments, their problems are solved, they gain life, and they grow in life. (32)

Brother Lee then gave an extended example of how he helped a sister who came to him with a complaint against her husband (32-34). He said that although he sympathized with her, the Lord would not allow him to take her side in the dispute. Rather, he asked her whether she had taken the issue to the Lord in prayer and what His feeling was. Brother Lee then led her to pray. In her prayer she admitted to the Lord that she felt wrong before Him. She touched Him in a fresh way and death was swallowed up by life. Her husband was then "moved to go to the Lord in prayer, to confess his sins, to meet Him, to touch life, and to admit his wrongdoing to his wife" (34). In this way the problem between them was resolved by life and they were filled with the Lord. Brother Lee concluded, "When a person meets God, he can recognize right and wrong, transcend right and wrong, conquer right and wrong, and experience life swallowing up right and wrong. The Lord does not want to solve problems in the realm of right and wrong. He wants to swallow up right and wrong with His transcending life" (34).

The elders need to see that to entangle the church in disputes over right and wrong is to bring the church into death, resulting in strife and ultimately division. Unchecked, such death and its byproducts will spread to other local churches as well. In the Lord's earthly ministry, He never answered questions according to right and wrong; He always turned questions to the tree of life. May we learn of Him. Only life and the light of life can produce an inward change and preserve us in oneness in fellowship with the Lord and with one another (John 1:4; 8:12; 17:11; 1 John 1:7).

Further reading: Watchman Nee, *Two Principles of Living*