

THE ONE UNIQUE NEW TESTAMENT MINISTRY

Based on the New Testament, Witness Lee taught that there is only one unique ministry. Some have twisted his teaching to slanderously claim that Witness Lee was referring to his own ministry. This is a gross mischaracterization.

The One Ministry of the New Testament

The word *ministry* means “service.” Properly speaking, the Bible contains only two ministries, each of which is based on God’s covenants with His people—the old covenant ministry and the new covenant ministry. In each case the ministry is man’s cooperation with God to carry out His covenant. In 2 Corinthians 3:8-9 the ministry of the new covenant, as well as the ministry of the old covenant, are mentioned as being singular—uniquely one (vv. 8-9). As there is one new covenant, so also there is only one new covenant ministry, and all those who serve the Lord should participate in this one ministry. From God’s side, this ministry is to carry out what God has covenanted with His people; from man’s side, the ministry is the service that we render to God to carry out God’s covenant. Thus, based upon the new covenant, which became the new testament, there is the ministry of the new covenant, which is uniquely one (Jer. 31:31-34; Matt. 26:28; 2 Cor. 3:6; 4:1; Acts 1:17).

The record of the apostles in the New Testament illustrates this truth. In Acts 1 the apostles were faced with the question of what to do concerning Judas’ portion in the ministry after he took his own life, for he was numbered with the other eleven apostles and “was allotted his portion of this ministry” (v. 17). The apostles subsequently prayed that the Lord would show them who had been chosen to replace Judas’ portion and “take the place of this ministry and apostleship” (vv. 24-25). Second Corinthians 4:1 states, “Therefore having this ministry as we have been shown mercy, we do not lose heart.” “Having *this* ministry...*we*” the apostle writes. These portions of the Word show clearly that the ministry of the new covenant constitutes the one unique New Testament ministry, and it is a corporate ministry.

From the beginning the apostles realized that each had his portion in “this ministry,” the corporate ministry of the new covenant initiated by the Lord and entered into by the apostles. Each apostle did not have a separate ministry, and neither was this corporate ministry of the new covenant limited to the initial twelve apostles. The apostle Paul, among others, was included in this ministry. Hence, the apostle Paul could exult in God, who “has also made us sufficient as ministers of a new covenant” (2 Cor. 3:6).

In the New Testament God has only one work with one goal—the work of the ministry unto, or for, the building up of the Body of Christ (Eph. 4:12). Accordingly, He has one ministry, one corporate service, to carry out this one work. The old covenant was a ministry of condemnation (2 Cor. 3:9), while the new covenant is a ministry of the Spirit and of righteousness (vv. 8-9). The new covenant ministry ministers Christ as the life-giving Spirit inwardly and as the living righteousness outwardly with the unique goal of “perfecting the saints unto the work of the ministry, unto the building up of the Body of Christ” (Eph. 4:12). The building up of the Body of Christ is the work of the ministry. The gifted ones (v. 11) minister Christ for the perfecting of the saints. The perfected saints then build up the Body of Christ directly (v. 12) through their participation in the one unique ministry.

The Many Ministers of the One Ministry

While the ministry is singular, the ministers are plural. The one new covenant ministry is carried out by many new covenant ministers (2 Cor. 3:6). It is upon this basis that the apostle Paul could declare that God had appointed him “to the ministry” (1 Tim. 1:12; Acts 20:24; 21:19), and he could charge his co-worker Timothy to “fully accomplish your ministry” (2 Tim. 4:5). “All this indicates,” Brother Lee writes, “that there is one new covenant ministry of many new covenant ministers” (*The Ministry of the New Testament and the Teaching and Fellowship of the Apostles*, 10). Timothy, Tychicus, and Archippus, among others (Col. 4:7, 17), indeed had a personal ministry; however, their personal ministries were not separate ministries but were part of the corporate, new covenant ministry of the apostles.

To illustrate the relationship between many ministers and the one ministry, Brother Lee pointed his listeners to the Body of Christ, the building up of which is the goal of the unique New Testament ministry, saying, "In considering the verses that speak of personal ministry, we need to realize that all the believers are members of one Body. As a whole, the Body has one corporate ministry, not many ministries. Although there are many functions in the Body, the ministry in the Body is one" (*Truth Messages*, 39). Brother Lee further elaborated on this point:

The New Testament ministry is uniquely one and corporate. But because this ministry is the service of the Body of Christ and because the Body has many members, every member has its own ministry. Thus, according to the members, there are many ministries; however, according to the Body as a whole, there is just one ministry. Your ministry should not be separate from the corporate ministry. The Body has a corporate ministry, and all the members of the Body have their individual ministries. As we have seen, all the ministries of the members added together equal the corporate ministry (*Truth Messages*, 39).

The Body as a whole has its unique ministry, yet the one ministry of the Body is carried out by the various ministries of its members. However, the ministries of the various members do not constitute separate ministries; otherwise, the Body would be divided.

Ministers and Distinctions of Ministries

Along with there being many ministers, there are also "distinctions of ministries" (1 Cor. 12:5). These refer to the many services in the church, such as caring for the children, young people, and college age, or shepherding new believers in their homes. "These different services, however, all carry out the unique ministry, the unique service," which is "to minister Christ into God's chosen people" (*Life-study of 2 Corinthians*, 227). The many ministries are for the one New Testament ministry:

For the carrying out of God's New Testament economy, the ministry is uniquely one. But for the accomplishing of this unique ministry, especially in the church life, there is the need of many services, the need of diverse ministries. But again I would emphasize the fact that these different ministries and services are all for the carrying out of the unique ministry, which is the ministry of the new covenant. (*Life-study of 2 Corinthians*, 227)

The ministry of the apostles, which is the unique corporate New Testament ministry (2 Cor. 4:1), is carried out by many ministers (2 Cor. 3:6) with distinctions of ministries (1 Cor. 12:5) unto the one goal (Eph. 4:12).

Refutation

In affirming the clear teaching of the New Testament, Brother Lee addressed the accusation made against him that he taught that his ministry was the sole ministry in the Lord's recovery:

When we say that the new covenant ministry is unique, we do not mean that it is the ministry of only one person. For example, it is slanderous to accuse me of saying that the unique ministry today is the ministry of Witness Lee. We do not say this, and we do not mean this. By the unique ministry, the new covenant ministry, we mean the ministry of the Spirit and of righteousness. (*Life-study of 2 Corinthians*, 235)

The ministry in the Lord's recovery is the unique ministry of the apostles, the ministry of the new covenant.

The Scriptures are clear, and Witness Lee's teaching is clear. There is one unique ministry of the New Testament, and this unique ministry is carried out by many ministers of the new covenant to perfect the saints to do the same one work of the unique new covenant ministry to build up the Body of Christ. Together the many individual ministries of the apostles and all the saints form the one corporate ministry of the new covenant. To claim, as some slanderously allege, that Witness Lee taught that his personal ministry is anything more than a part of the unique ministry today is false. Rather, his ministry and the teaching and practice in the Lord's recovery match both the content and pattern of the New Testament ministry in the Scriptures.