

CONCERNING THE ONGOING RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE APOSTLES AND THE LOCAL CHURCHES

To say that once a church is established the apostles, that is, the leading co-workers, should never “interfere” in that church’s affairs is inconsistent with the Bible and with the whole body of the ministry of Watchman Nee and Witness Lee. This crucial matter relates to God’s administration and therefore to the headship of Christ, so it is important to read both the Bible and the ministry carefully and thoroughly without bias, self-interest, or any other impure motive.

Some brothers have pointed to Brother Nee’s book *The Normal Christian Church Life*, which was based on messages he gave in Hangkow in 1937. In that book he said that once a church has been established in a place and elders have been appointed, the administration of that church resides in the hands of the elders before God. If an experienced worker later comes to that locality, he may function according to his gifts for the building up of the church, but the responsibility for the administration of the church is unchanged—it remains in the hands of the local elders. This remains the common practice of the churches, the ministry, and the work in the Lord’s recovery to the present day. However, in his 1948 training for elders and co-workers at Kuling, Brother Nee gave a clarifying word, published in the book *Church Affairs*. There he said:

After the meeting in Hangkow, some brothers misunderstood. They thought that though the elders are appointed by the apostles, they did not have to listen to the apostles. This is impossible. When there were brothers who did not respect the elders and problems occurred, the letter of accusation by two or three was sent to Timothy. In other words, the authority for the appointment of the elders is with the apostles, and the authority for the removal of the elders is also with the apostles. (*The Collected Works of Watchman Nee, vol. 51: Church Affairs, 143*)

Some may also point to passages in Brother Lee’s *Truth Messages* in which he cautions against hierarchy and organization brought in by brothers who assert extra-local authority to give orders to churches. These messages were given in 1978 to educate the saints regarding the principles that were violated in a turmoil that had come to a head that year. During that turmoil a brother, Max Rapoport, often acting with a number of supporters, repeatedly claimed authority to overthrow the established eldership in various churches, to appoint his own followers as elders, and to issue directives in Brother Lee’s name that Brother Lee knew nothing about. Brother Lee referred to this as an act of “thieves.” In this context, he said:

Suppose a number of brothers come from other places to a certain locality to deal with the situation in the church there. Any saint who knows the truth and who practices the truth should rise up and say, “Stop! This is a hierarchy. What right do you brothers have to come here and carry on like this? Who gave you this authority? This is human organization.” (*Truth Messages, 5*)

Brother Lee went on to say that if even he were to do such a thing contrary to the truth, the saints should not receive it but rather should rise up to condemn him.

However, to take such a passage out of context and use it as a blank check to assert the absolute autonomy of a local eldership over the affairs of a church is itself a hierarchical and organizational concept. A little over ten years later a group of brothers incited a major rebellion, the main thrust of which was to turn the saints away from the ministry of Brother Lee. They said, among other things, that after a church is raised up, the apostles should keep their hands off. At that time Brother Lee pointed out many examples from the Scriptures, particularly from Paul’s Epistles, that contradict this claim.¹

¹ Many of these examples are included in the document [“Selected Ministry on the Apostles’ a Ongoing Role in Established Churches.”](#) Most of Paul’s Epistles, including Romans, 1 and 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, and 1 and 2 Thessalonians, were written to churches, and most of these Epistles addressed errors in truth and practice among the churches. – CWWL, 1988, vol. 3, 140, 165-166, 213, 254, 282-283, 292-293, 439; CWWL, 1988, vol. 4, 95, 209-210; CWWL, 1989, vol. 1, 109; CWWL, 1989, vol. 3, 406-407; CWWL, 1993, vol. 1, 317.

Paul's dealings with the Corinthians and his instructions to Timothy merit particular scrutiny in this regard. On his first visit Paul remained in Corinth for a year and a half to teach the word of God (Acts 18:11).² Later, while he was staying in Ephesus, Paul received a report from those of the household of Chloe and others regarding the disorderly situation in Corinth (1 Cor. 1:11; 5:1). In response to this report Paul wrote a letter in which he instructed and charged the Corinthians regarding division (1 Cor. 1:10-12), lawsuits (6:1-11), the Lord's supper (11:17-22), and other matters.³ Paul asked the disorderly Corinthians, "What do you want? Should I come to you with a rod or in love and a spirit of meekness?" (1 Cor. 4:21). This shows that Paul was prepared to directly administer discipline to the Corinthian believers.⁴ Concerning a man engaged in serious sin, Paul charged the Corinthians, "Remove the evil man from among yourselves" (1 Cor. 5:13). Such removal is an administrative matter to be carried out by the elders of the church, yet Paul charged them to do it.⁵ After rebuking their disorderly conduct in the Lord's supper, Paul told the Corinthians, "And the rest I will set in order when I come" (1 Cor. 11:34).⁶ Another key verse is 1 Timothy 5:19: "Against an elder do not receive an accusation, except based upon two or three witnesses." This verse is Paul's instruction to Timothy, an apostle and Paul's younger co-worker. This verse shows that the elders in a local church are still under the authority of the apostles.

Brother Lee spoke much on these verses on two occasions—first in the last quarter of 1965 in the wake of a turmoil in Taiwan and again in 1988, as previously mentioned. In 1965, speaking concerning 1 Corinthians 5 and 11, he said, "From this we can see that although the apostles commit the local administration to the elders, they still bear a responsibility toward the church and have authority concerning it" (*The Collected Works of Witness Lee [CWWL], 1965, vol. 4, 185*). Concerning 1 Timothy 5:19 he said, "Here we can see that problems with elders in a church should be presented to the apostles and decided by them. By this we can see that the local churches cannot declare independence from the apostles" (185). Later in the same passage Brother Lee added:

When a local church acts in a proper manner, there is no need for the apostles to intervene, but this is not to say that the apostles cannot intervene. Although a local church is under the leading of the elders, if the elders or the church do not act according to proper principles under the leading of the apostles, the apostles still have the right to intervene. (186)

In 1988 he said, "The apostles can not only contact the churches and the elders, but can even charge them, command them, and in some matters come personally to set things in order. There is no such thing as an end to the apostles' involvement with the churches" (*CWWL, 1988, vol. 3, 283*). In the same year Brother Lee also said, "After giving explicit instructions to the church, in 11:34 he [Paul] says, 'The rest I will set in order when I come,' showing that when he came to Corinth in person, he would continue to intervene in the church's affairs" (439).

Conclusion

Under normal conditions, a local church is entirely under the administration of local elders; the workers should not interfere. Of course, the church, especially the leading ones, should always maintain a harmonious fellowship with other churches and with the Lord's servants. However, if a church is in serious disorder or if an accusation is made against an elder, the apostles, the leading co-workers,⁷ have the biblical ground to intervene.

² *CWWL, 1988, vol. 4, 95.*

³ *CWWL, 1965, vol. 4, 185-186; CWWL, 1986, vol. 3, 63-64; CWWL, 1988, vol. 3, 292-293.*

⁴ *CWWL, 1988, vol. 3, 165-166, 283.*

⁵ *CWWL, 1965, vol. 4, 185, 186; CWWL, 1988, vol. 3, 165, 254, 292.*

⁶ *CWWL, 1965, vol. 4, 185; CWWL, 1986, vol. 3, 63-64; 1988, vol. 3, 166, 213, 254, 292-293, 439; CWWL, 1988, vol. 4, 95, 209.*

⁷ On the question of who is qualified to touch the eldership in a local church as an apostle, Brother Lee said:

Whether a full-time co-worker can be an apostle depends solely on whether or not he has the ability to lead the churches. If he is not capable of leading the churches in an overall manner, he is only a full-timer who participates in the work; he is not qualified to stand in the position of an apostle. This kind of full-timer has a share in the work, but he should not intervene to touch the elders in the affairs of a local church, as an apostle does. (*CWWL, 1965, vol. 4, 190*).

Timothy did not presume to have such authority but exercised it only based on Paul's direction.