

**LEADERSHIP IN THE NEW TESTAMENT (1):
THE PROPER LEADERSHIP ACCORDING TO GOD'S WORD**

Of late, there has been a teaching circulating among saints and churches that misuses and perverts the matter of authority and deputy authorities. Some workers are promoting a hierarchical authority structure in which God is the authority, the co-workers are the deputy authorities under God, the elders of the churches are the delegated authorities under the co-workers, and the saints in the churches are under the elders. Is this teaching of hierarchical leadership a healthy teaching or a wind of teaching?

To answer this question we need to examine the biblical concept of leadership among God's people and the way in which such leadership is to be exercised in the church. We need to read both the Bible and the ministry of our Brothers Watchman Nee and Witness Lee carefully, thoroughly, and without bias. We need to be pure and put aside pride and ambition. Only then will we be able to cut straight the word of the truth (2 Tim. 2:15).

Authority Being of God in Christ as Life

The Scriptures declare that God is the supreme authority, and He has all authority in the universe (Rom. 9:21-22). In His resurrection and ascension, the Lord Jesus received all authority from God. Matthew 28:18 says, "And Jesus came and spoke to them, saying, All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth." Therefore, it is without question that in the entire universe, only the Lord Jesus has all authority. Our unique Leader is the Lord Jesus Christ (Acts 5:31). Brother Lee told us that anyone who considered him the leader in the Lord's recovery was not practicing the truth. Who is the leader? We should say, "Christ!" No one should exercise any control over the work for the Lord or over others.

Our Lord Jesus Christ is the Head of the Body, the church (Eph. 1:22b-23; Col. 1:18, 24). Because the church is the Body of Christ, everything related to the church, including its administration and the exercise of authority, must be organic, that is, of life and in life. This means that the authority anyone would exercise in the church is not that person's possession as a result of

occupying any kind of position. Rather, authority is manifested through a person who is themselves right with the Head and in the flow of the Spirit. Only such a person can express and represent the Lord's authority. Why? Because when life flows from such a one, that life is God in Christ, in whom is all authority.

The unique headship of Christ is also reflected in the relationship between the church, the ministry, and the work. The churches should support the ministry and the work, but we must be clear that it is the church that is the Lord's Body. He is Head over all things to the church (Eph. 1:22b-23). Therefore, both the ministry and the work are for the church, the Body. Moreover, the church, the ministry, and the work all operate according to the principle of the Body, which includes both direct accountability to Christ, the Head, and plurality among those exercising leadership. Concerning the relationship the ministry and the work have with the church, Brother Lee taught us:

“The ministry, the work, has much to do with the churches and is one hundred percent for the churches, yet it is not of the church. It is not under the control or direction of the church but is directly under the control of the Head, the Lord Jesus. The principle is the same with the churches. All the churches have much to do with the ministry and the apostles, but they are not under the hand or control of the apostles; they are directly under the headship of the Lord Jesus. The ministry does not control the local churches, and the churches do not control the ministry. Both the church and the ministry are directly under the control of the Head.” (*Basic Principles for the Service in the Church Life*, Ch. 4)

Because Christ is the Head of the Body, any work or ministry must be for the benefit of the Body as a whole. Building up a private work violates this principle, resulting in forfeiting the headship of Christ, as Brother Nee explained in *The Normal Christian Church Life*:

“That Christ is the Head of the Church is a recognized fact, but that fact needs emphasis in relation to the ministry as well as to the life of the Church. Christian ministry is the ministry of the whole Church, not merely of one section of it. We must see to it that our work is on no lesser basis than the Body of Christ. Otherwise, we lose the headship of Christ.” (Ch. 2)

Overstepping the headship of Christ is a serious matter. It nullifies the value of one's work or ministry in the building up of the Body of Christ and leads the Lord's people astray.

The Apostles' Teaching Being the Constitution of the Church

Another crucial principle regarding leadership in the church is that the teaching of the apostles, which is the entire speaking of God in the New Testament, is the constitution of the church. As the law was the written constitution of God's people in the Old Testament, so the teaching of the apostles is the law for God's administration among His people in the New Testament. In an orderly nation, the country's constitution is higher than the executive, legislative, and judicial branches. In the same way, the teaching of the apostles, as the constitution of God's New Testament kingdom, is higher than any worker or elder. It was for this reason that Paul told his younger co-worker Titus that an elder must be one who is "holding to the faithful word, which is according to the teaching of the apostles, that he may be able both to exhort by the healthy teaching and to convict those who oppose" (Titus 1:9).

The leadership in the New Testament ministry is in the New Testament teaching more than in the leading ones of the New Testament ministry. For this reason Brother Lee told us, "The leadership which is shown in the New Testament is mainly in the teachings of the ministers, not in the acts of co-workers" (*Leadership in the New Testament*, Ch. 2). If Peter or Paul would have turned from their teaching, the saints would not have followed them. The churches followed the apostles' teaching, and they followed the apostles because the apostles had the New Testament teaching. If there are any problems in the church under the administration of the elders, as it was necessary to study the law in the Old Testament, we have to study the apostles' teaching, our New Testament constitution.

"...We should not say we are for or against something until we go to the New Testament constitution to see what it has to say. When any problem arises, we must learn to be silent and go to the written Word of God, the New Testament constitution, without any opinion..." (Ch. 3)

We should not acknowledge as leaders any whose teaching is contrary to or does not embrace the entirety of the apostles' teaching. In other words, we

must discern whether the words of those who claim to be leaders match the New Testament revelation.

If there is no solution written in the New Testament, without contradicting the New Testament, we need to seek the mind of our Head. The time and way to carry out the written constitution still needs the Lord's instant leading, which comes from direct fellowship with the Lord along with fellowship with other members of the Body. However, we must be clear that the teaching of the apostles and the Lord's instant leading will not be contradictory, but will complement each other.

God Having Deputy Authorities

Although God is the supreme authority, He has always intended for His authority to be delegated and represented here on earth. Genesis 1:26 says,

“And God said, Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness; *and let them have dominion* over the fish of the sea and over the birds of heaven and over the cattle and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth.” (emphasis added)

God's giving man dominion over the earth sets a principle that He desires His authority to be exercised through those who express Him. Throughout history, God used men in the Old Testament to represent His authority on earth. These include Noah (9:1-6), Joseph (41:40-44), Moses (Exo. 3:10-18a; 4:16; 7:1), and David (1 Sam. 16:12-13). In the New Testament, the Father gave the Lord Jesus all authority in heaven and on earth (Matt. 28:18). In His ascension, the Lord sent out His disciples as apostles to be His ambassadors (2 Cor. 5:20; Eph. 6:20; 2 Cor. 10:8; 13:10) and through them establish elders as overseers in the churches to represent Him (Acts 14:23; Titus 1:5; Acts 20:17, 28; 1 Pet. 5:5).

Men Only Representing Authority, Not Possessing Authority

Although the Lord Jesus delegates His authority to men, one thing that must be made clear is that men only represent God's authority. God delegating His authority to men does not cede His authority to others. This is like an ambassador representing his country's leader in a foreign land. His authority is only delegated and is rescinded once he is recalled back to the country.

Matthew 28:18 holds fast to the fact that only the Lord Jesus has all authority. If the Lord has all, then men do not possess anything at all. As Brother Watchman Nee said,

“There is no inherent authority in a person, and no one can appoint himself to be an authority. Our personal opinions cannot become others’ law, and our ideas, views, and proposals do not deserve others’ esteem. What qualifies a person to represent God is his knowledge of God. A person becomes an authority because of his knowledge of God’s will, God’s mind, and God’s thoughts. One does not become an authority based on his own ideas or opinions, but through an apprehension of God’s will and desire. One cannot expect others to submit to his own will or opinion. The extent one represents authority depends on the extent of one’s knowledge of God’s will and thoughts.” (*Authority and Submission*, Ch. 12)

The Bases of Spiritual Authority

How then can one be an authority? Who do we consider men of authority? In the book *Authority and Submission*, Brother Watchman Nee shares two bases of spiritual authority: revelation and resurrection.

Revelation refers to the direct experiential knowing of God and His eternal plan as revealed in the Bible. Spiritual authority is based on a person’s receiving revelation from God’s word. Moses represented God to Pharaoh after Jehovah appeared to him in them in the burning bush (Exo. 3:2, 6, 10). Moses’ authority was sourced from the revelation of Jehovah on Mount Horeb. In the New Testament, the basis of the apostles’ authority was their teaching, which is according to the revelation of God’s economy (Rom. 16:25; Gal. 1:11-12, 15-16; Eph. 3:3). Authority comes from the word of God! Therefore, in the church, one’s authority only goes as far as their teaching matches the apostles’ teaching concerning God’s New Testament economy (Acts 2:42; 1 Tim. 1:3-4; Titus 1:9).

Resurrection is another crucial basis of authority. In Genesis 1:26, image and likeness, which are related to expressing God, precede dominion. This principle portrays that authority comes from expressing the divine life. The account of Aaron’s budding rod in Numbers 17 is an excellent illustration of resurrection being the basis of authority. When the sons of Korah rebelled and challenged Moses’ and Aaron’s leadership, God told Moses to take a rod

(symbolizing authority) from each of the twelve tribes and put it before the Ark in the tabernacle (Num. 17:1-5). The following day, Moses saw that Aaron's rod had budded, blossomed, and borne ripe almonds, which signifies resurrection. All twelve sticks were dead sticks. Yet Aaron's rod brought forth life. This is resurrection.

In *Authority and Submission*, Watchman Nee reminded the co-workers that they do not possess any authority in themselves. He said, "A dry rod can exhibit nothing but death. But when you have resurrection, you have authority, because authority rests with resurrection, not with the natural life. Everything that we have is natural. Hence authority does not rest in us but in the Lord" (250-251). The Lord Himself said that He is the resurrection (John 11:25). Resurrection is a Person. Therefore, one's authority comes from touching the person of the Lord Jesus, who is resurrection. The proper leadership and exercise of spiritual authority is always in the realm of resurrection.

The Manifestation of Authority

How is spiritual authority manifested? The Bible says those who have spiritual authority do not lord it over God's people (1 Pet. 5:3a; Matt. 20:25-26a). Rather, they are patterns of the flock in their living to the Lord and by following His pattern to serve His people as slaves. Mark 10:42-45 says:

"You know that those who are esteemed as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them. But it is not so among you; but whoever wants to become great among you shall be your servant, and whoever wants to be first among you shall be the slave of all. For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve and to give His life as a ransom for many."

Based on this passage, in a section subtitled "An Authority Does Not Dominate or Control, but Humbles Himself to Serve," Brother Nee told his co-workers:

"There should not be any striving for supremacy among God's children. There should not be any thought of struggle for power or any intention of controlling others. If we do, we will fall into the same condition as that of the Gentiles. Nothing is more unsightly than a person who struggles to be

an authority. It is the most ugly thing for a person to try to control others in an outward way. Ambition for authority or to be a great one is something that belongs to the Gentiles. We should drive this kind of spirit from the church.” (*Authority and Submission*, Ch. 18)

The natural, human concept of a leader is a person who is higher than others. However, the Bible reveals otherwise, as seen in Matthew 20 and 23. Leaders are not people greater than others, but lower. Leaders are slaves. In the Bible, leadership means slavery. A leader must be willing to clean the restroom, vacuum the floor, arrange the chairs, and serve as an usher.

The thought of co-workers or elders exercising authority over the church is worldly and organizational. Fifty years ago Brother Lee told us, “It is a serious mistake to exercise authority over others in the church. Nothing is more shameful than this. To exercise authority over the saints is not glorious—it is shameful” (*Life-study of Ezekiel*, p. 119). From the sign of the New Jerusalem as the consummation of God’s work, Brother Lee commented on the elders’ exercise of authority in the church:

“The elders should not exercise their eldership by means of authority. The eldership, that is, the representation of the headship, must be exercised through the flow of life. Although the throne is the throne of authority, the throne of headship, out of the throne flows the river of water of life. When you look at the throne, you see authority and headship. But when you look at the river, you see the water of life and the tree of life. This indicates that proper eldership is not the exercise of authority over others; it is the flowing of life into them. We are reigning, but we do not reign by authority; we reign through the flowing of the inner life.” (*Life-study of Revelation*, Ch. 66)

We should remember the positive patterns of our Lord Jesus and His apostles and the negative example of Saul. In John 12:13 the Lord was greeted by a throng proclaiming Him “King of Israel.” That, however, was not the Lord’s commission. In the next chapter, He took the place of a servant, washing His disciples’ feet (13:1-11). When His disciples contended over which of them seemed to be greatest, He told them to “let the greatest among you become like the youngest, the one who leads like the one who serves” (Luke 22:26). Similarly, Paul told the Corinthians, “Not that we lord it over your faith, but we are fellow workers with you for your joy” (2 Cor.

1:24). He told the Philippians that he rejoiced in being “poured out as a drink offering upon the sacrifice and service of your faith” (Phil. 2:17). Saul, on the other hand, sought to build up his own monarchy from among God’s people, God’s kingdom. Because of his haughty disobedience, the kingship was taken from him and given to David, a man after God’s heart (1 Sam. 13:13-14). We have seen brothers from time to time try to build up personal kingdoms within the churches, by carrying out works in rivalry and seeking to build up private territories or followings for their own work. In the long run, as with Saul, God would never tolerate such a thing, which inevitably brings corruption to those who practice them (Phil. 2:3; James 3:14-16).

We thank the Lord for the gifts that He has placed in the Body. But every believer in the Body is only a member. Hence, we should discard any concept of rank like is practiced in the world. A co-worker should not esteem himself to be higher than the elders. An elder should not esteem himself higher than others, nor should a deacon esteem himself lower than the elders. Each one has a function in the Body and performs one’s duty in the way of fellowship, not hierarchy.

The Impermanence of Leadership

The New Testament shows us that leadership in the church is not a matter of having a permanent position. The Roman Catholic Church teaches that Peter was appointed by Christ to be the unique leader of the entire church. This is because his name is first in the Gospels and Acts. But Galatians 2:9 says, “James and Cephas (Peter) and John... were reputed to be pillars.” Paul even rebuked Peter before all in Galatians 2:4 when he saw Peter not walking uprightly according to the truth of the gospel. Peter’s spiritual capacity at that time was simply less than that of James. This is why James was mentioned first. In fact, since brothers came “from James,” James was the representative of the church in Jerusalem at that time. This is also seen in Acts 21:17 and 18, “...Paul went in with us to James, and all the elders were present.” Paul and his fellow co-workers went not to Peter but to James. Lastly, in Acts 15, in a conference of apostles and elders, Peter spoke first and then Paul. The leading one does not speak first, but last. James, the representative of the church in Jerusalem, spoke last.

From this we learn that the leadership among God’s children is not official, permanent, or organizational. It depends upon spiritual capacity. He who

has the greatest capacity is the leader. And that capacity may be with a certain brother now, but at other times be with another. On the day of Pentecost, Peter had the greatest capacity; but in Acts 15, James had it. In fact, leadership is shaped by the growth in life and is an issue of the need. If there is no need, no leadership needs to be manifested. It is wonderful for God to also ordain it this way to set aside the human concept of leadership.

An Example of How Paul Practiced the Truth Concerning Leadership

First Corinthians 16:12 says, “And concerning our brother Apollos, I urged him many times to come to you with the brothers, yet it was not at all his desire to come now...” Here Paul did not charge but only urged Apollos, because he knew that he was not the true leader. Although Paul urged Apollos, Apollos still had the liberty, and Paul did not exercise any control over the work of the Lord.

Brother Lee never assumed that he was the leader in the Lord’s recovery. He never gave orders either to the churches or to the saints concerning what they should do. On the contrary, many times elders of various churches have begged him to tell them what to do, but he would always tell them to go to the Lord in prayer and to let Him lead them.

“...There is no organized leadership in the Lord’s recovery. When we left the denominations long ago, we mainly left the hierarchy, the organization....There is just one Head, not many subheads. There is one Head who gives orders to all the members directly, not through the subheads...” (*Leadership in the New Testament*, Ch. 1)

Sadly, according to church history, when men began to deviate from the word of God, a hierarchy began to creep in, and some assumed leadership. Because so many were in darkness and did not practice the truth, this was tolerated. May we all be under the shining of the light to see the truth concerning leadership.

Plurality in Leadership

Another important item regarding leadership is plurality. In the New Testament, there were initially twelve apostles, and a number of elders. The plurality indicates no fixed leadership in the church. However, although

there is plurality, there is one unique leadership since the ministry is one (Acts 1:17, 25). Also, since there is one God, one Lord, one Spirit (Eph. 4:4-6), how could there be more than one leadership? Today's Christianity is divided because there are too many leaderships.

All Submitting to One Another in Humility

After seeing the truth concerning leadership, now let us look at its other aspect. "Obey the ones leading you and submit to them, for they watch over your souls as those who will render and account, that they may do this with joy and not groaning; for this would be profitable to you." (Heb. 13:7) On the one hand, elders should not exercise authority over us. On the other hand, as those who are older and more experienced, they take the lead and we need to follow them. Obey here means to follow. Although Peter said elders should not lord it over God's flock but be patterns of the flock (1 Pet. 5:3), he also asked younger men to be subject to elders (v. 5).

There are also times when the older ones need to submit to the younger ones as well. Peter said, "And all of you gird yourself with humility toward one another" (v. 5b). Therefore, all should learn to submit to one another in humility. It is a beautiful structure, one that is very different from the fallen natural practice.

The Leadership in Actuality

Leadership among the local churches is not of one controlling person. It is also not positional in nature. There is no hierarchy of leaders in the Lord's recovery or in the churches. Who controls us then in the churches? Revelation should be what controls. Specifically, this revelation is what the apostles have taught. It is God's New Testament economy, which is to dispense God into His people to have the Body of Christ for His expression to consummate in His complete eternal expression in the New Jerusalem (Acts 2:42; 1 Tim. 1:3-4). How does this revelation control? It is through those who bring in the revelation, the ministers. The revelation controls, and it controls through those who bring in the revelation. This is how leadership in the New Testament ministry is. On March 24, 1997, Brother Lee said that the Lord has shown him that He has prepared many brothers who will serve as fellow slaves with him in a blended way. He felt that it is the up-to-date way to fulfill the ministry of building up the Body of Christ and

consummating the New Jerusalem. This is what the real leadership in the Lord's recovery is today.