

A FAITHFUL WORD

S E R I E S F O U R

“Who concerning the truth have misaimed.”

**PROPERLY
DISCERNING
SPIRITUAL
AUTHORITY
TO RIGHTLY
FOLLOW
THE LORD**

**Book
7**

DEFENSE & CONFIRMATION PROJECT

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Phil. 1:7 – Even as it is right for me to think this concerning you all because you have me in your heart, since both in my bonds and in the defense and confirmation of the gospel you are all fellow partakers with me of grace.

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PREFACE

2 Tim. 2:18a – Who concerning the truth have misaimed...

A few dissenting brothers have published criticisms of the teachings of the ministry in the Lord's recovery on crucial matters related to the preservation of the proper oneness in the Body of Christ. This series of books contains extensive responses from the Bible and the ministry of Watchman Nee and Witness Lee to the issues raised in those criticisms. The dissenting ones have misaimed concerning the truth (2 Tim. 2:18a), as the divisive fruit of their misaimings increasingly manifests. We commit these articles to the saints' prayerful consideration before the Lord in the hope that they can instruct, heal, and inoculate them and equip them to inoculate others (1 Tim. 1:3-4; 6:3-4; 2 Tim. 2:1-3, 14-15, 23-26; 3:16-17).

The books in this series address the following issues:

1. The practicality of the Body.
2. Authority in the Body of Christ and in the local churches.
3. The local church life for the Body of Christ.
4. The direction and leadership of the Lord's recovery.
5. Regions of the work and companies of workers.
6. Using worldly means to gain increase.
7. Properly discerning spiritual authority to rightly follow the Lord.

This book about *Properly Discerning Spiritual Authority to Rightly Follow the Lord* contains an extended article which examines some principles of spiritual authority that are often underemphasized, particularly by those who seek to assert their authority over others. It presents our responsibility to properly discern spiritual authority, to not follow those who have deviated from the truth, and to cooperate with the Lord in dealing with problems in the church.

- 1 Tim. 1:3-4 – [3] Even as I exhorted you, when I was going into Macedonia, to remain in Ephesus in order that you might charge certain ones not to teach different things [4] nor to give heed to myths and unending genealogies, which produce questionings rather than God’s economy, which is in faith.
- 1 Tim. 6:3-4 – [3] If anyone teaches different things and does not consent to healthy words, those of our Lord Jesus Christ, and the teaching which is according to godliness, [4] he is blinded with pride, understanding nothing, but is diseased with questionings and contentions of words, out of which come envy, strife, slanders, evil suspicions.
- 2 Tim. 2:1-3 – [1] You therefore, my child, be empowered in the grace which is in Christ Jesus; [2] and the things which you have heard from me through many witnesses, these commit to faithful men, who will be competent to teach others also. [3] Suffer evil with me as a good soldier of Christ Jesus.
- 2 Tim. 2:14-15 – [14] Remind them of these things, solemnly charging them before God not to have contentions of words, which is useful for nothing, to the ruin of those who hear. [15] Be diligent to present yourself approved to God, an unashamed workman, cutting straight the word of the truth.
- 2 Tim. 2:23-26 – [23] But foolish questionings and those arising from an untrained mind refuse, knowing that they beget contentions. [24] But a slave of the Lord ought not to contend but be gentle toward all, apt to teach, bearing with wrong; [25] in meekness correcting those who oppose, if perhaps God may give them repentance unto the full knowledge of the truth, [26] and they may return to soberness out of the snare of the devil, having been caught alive by him, unto His will.
- 2 Tim. 3:16-17 – [16] All Scripture is God-breathed and profitable for teaching, for conviction, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, [17] that the man of God may be complete, fully equipped for every good work.

PROPERLY DISCERNING SPIRITUAL AUTHORITY TO RIGHTLY FOLLOW THE LORD

INTRODUCTION

The matter of authority is a great subject in the Bible. The universe itself is upheld by the word of God's authority (Heb. 1:3). God's work in this age is to establish His kingdom as the realm in which God is expressed and His authority is upheld (Matt. 6:13). Thus, the kingdom is a crucial part of the fulfillment of God's purpose in His creation of man (Gen. 1:26).

The church today is the kingdom of God (Rom. 14:17; Matt. 16:18-19). It takes the lead to be headed up by Christ (Eph. 1:10). In a proper church life, the establishment of God's authority is a vital concern. Because the subject of spiritual authority has been misused by some within the Lord's recovery as well as by many outside, a proper understanding of spiritual authority is greatly needed. This document makes no attempt to deal exhaustively with the topic of spiritual authority and submission. Instead, it seeks to address some of the ways in which "authority" has been abused. For a broader understanding of the subject of authority, please refer to the Recommended Reading at the end of this article. In this article we will examine:

- Some basic understandings concerning authority and its importance;
- How to discern who has spiritual authority and who does not; and
- What to do when official authority deviates from the truth.

Recently some brothers have used their "position" as workers or elders to demand obedience from the saints. These brothers have presumed to assert their personal authority, making it an issue, and in so doing have demonstrated their lack of genuine spiritual authority. Authority in the Body of Christ is not positional or organizational but spiritual. Its application must likewise be spiritual.

Spiritual authority is the unique possession of the Head, Christ (Matt. 28:18; Eph. 1:22-23). This authority is transmitted into

and through the Body in its organic union in life with the Head. Human beings—whether apostles, prophets, elders, or deacons—have no spiritual authority in themselves. Men can only act as Christ’s deputy authority to the degree that they are in the organic union with Christ in the mingled spirit and are rightly related to the Body. Furthermore, this delegated authority must be exercised within the constraints of the apostles’ teaching. The teaching of the apostles is the unique leadership in the New Testament. The authority of the gifted ones is not exercised directly through their giving orders or controlling the actions of the saints and the churches; rather, it is exercised indirectly through the ministering of life by teaching according to God’s New Testament economy. In fact, we do not follow persons as much as we follow the vision of God’s New Testament economy.

Some have said that the saints in the churches should obey their authority without being concerned whether or not that authority itself is proper. This is an incorrect and dangerous teaching, as we will demonstrate from numerous examples from the Bible. It is vital that the saints have a proper understanding of authority according to the truth of the Bible and a proper discernment of authority—what is genuine and what is presumptively claimed.

Genuine spiritual authority can be discerned by observing both the person and the way in which that person exercises authority. Authority is produced by the resurrection life of Christ. It issues forth as revelation, that is, the unveiling of God’s New Testament economy. Thus, when we touch a person with spiritual authority, we should receive life and revelation that matches the apostles’ teaching of God’s New Testament economy. Also, when we touch a person with spiritual authority, we are brought into light, and the issue is joy and the blossoming forth of the fruit of the divine life for feeding others.

Furthermore, a person who exercises authority must himself be a person under authority. In the New Testament authority is a Body matter. No one can set himself above the authority of the Body and claim to represent God’s authority. If a brother is unwilling to have his work blended with others and is unwilling to bring his work into the common prayer and fellowship of the co-workers, that one’s work is not under the authority of the Head. The authority of the throne is with those who have a clear

sky (Ezek. 1:26). When a person with spiritual authority contacts people, he does not need to vindicate himself or to assert his own authority, because the presence and witness of the Spirit are there. Because the Spirit Himself is there, the authority of the Spirit also is there.

We can also discern genuine spiritual authority by seeing how a person exercises authority. Spiritual authority is not exercised in a natural, human way. It is not organizational or administrative. It actually does not look like authority at all. Rather, spiritual authority is a matter of serving the Lord's people as a slave, supplying them in love by flowing out the resurrection life to them in shepherding, feeding, and protecting the flock. Those who demand obedience, for themselves or for others, are in the wrong realm and are violating what God has measured to them (2 Cor. 10:13).

Just as there are signs that a person has spiritual authority, there are also signs that a person's claimed spiritual authority is not genuine. For example, if a person asserts his own authority, either directly himself or indirectly through his supporters, he is disqualified from representing God's authority. If he practices self-vindication, his authority is not genuine. If he depreciates the truth or emphasizes "success" in work rather than God's economy, he has deviated from the teaching of the apostles, which is the actual leadership in the New Testament age. If he carries out or directs others to carry out work in rivalry, he is violating the principle of the Body and thus is in rebellion against the Head. If he seeks to establish or to expand a domain or region for his own personal work within the Lord's recovery, he is serving self interest and not the Lord's interest.

Furthermore, if a person exercises authority in a wrong way, it indicates that that person's authority is not genuine. If a person behaves as if he is the authority, if he attempts to exercise control over others, if he "beats" his fellow slaves through domination or criticism, if he leads the saints astray by teaching differently, or if he makes his own "authority" the basis of receiving others in fellowship, these are signs that he does not have real spiritual authority. A person can never be an authority if he himself is in rebellion against authority. Sure signs that a person is in rebellion are reviling words, reasonings, and rebellious thoughts. Such

things are characteristic of the type of factious, divisive person the apostle Paul charges us to turn away from and refuse (Rom. 16:17; Titus 3:10).

Because spiritual authority is based on a person's moment-by-moment relationship with Christ, spiritual authority can not only be increased through growth in life, but it can also be lost by not staying up-to-date with the Lord in His move, by not being faithful to the present truth, and by touching God's authority in an improper way.

When a person in a position of authority deviates from the truth, we must not follow him, but neither should we revile him. When we observe such a deviation, we have a responsibility to cooperate with the Lord to seek to remedy the situation by seeking to restore our fellow believers to a proper condition. We cannot do this by our own ability. We should pray to the Lord that He might infuse us with life so that we can be a factor of life to the saints. In some cases, we need to care for the Lord's interest by seeking out His representatives to make the situation known to them in the principle of informing the priest of an outbreak of leprosy (Lev. 14:35). The household of Chloe did this in the New Testament when they informed the apostle Paul of the situation in Corinth (1 Cor. 1:11). In some cases where the deviation is severe, we may need to separate ourselves from vessels of dishonor in order to preserve the Lord's testimony (2 Tim. 2:20-21). We should not be deterred from expressing genuine concern for the condition of the church or its deviation from the truth by those who claim that such expression of concern is rebellion. Actually, the proper opening of such concern to the Lord and to His representatives is our duty as a service to the Lord, to the saints, and to the church.

Finally, we should all put aside ambition for position. In the book of Revelation, there is no mention of the position of being an elder, but there is the mention of those who are "shining stars," messengers who are one with the Lord's speaking in and to the churches. This should be an aspiration in all of us. The rest of this short book examines and develops the points that have just been outlined in brief by presenting both their scriptural basis and much enlightening fellowship from the ministry of Watchman Nee and Witness Lee.

BASIC UNDERSTANDINGS CONCERNING AUTHORITY AND ITS IMPORTANCE

To understand the issues related to authority that we are facing in the Lord's recovery today, we need some basic understandings concerning:

- Authority in God's governmental administration;
- Two crucial distinctions concerning authority; and
- The importance of being right in following others.

AUTHORITY IN GOD'S GOVERNMENTAL ADMINISTRATION

There are several crucial points we need to understand if we are to know God's authority in His governmental administration. Among these points are:

- Christ, the Head—the unique source of authority;
- The authority of the Head in the Body;
- The role of delegated authority in the Body of Christ; and
- The teaching of the apostles.

If we understand these points properly, we can easily perceive that Brother Nee's fellowship in *Authority and Submission* has been misused by some both within and outside the Lord's recovery.

The Unique Source of Authority

Any consideration of authority must begin with an affirmation of the absolute headship of Christ (Eph. 1:22; 4:15; 5:23; Col. 1:18; 2:10; 1 Cor. 11:3). All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to the resurrected Christ (Matt. 28:18). He is Lord of all (Acts 2:36; 10:36), and He is the One anointed by God as the Christ to carry out God's economy (Acts 2:36 and note 1).

Col. 1:18 – And He is the Head of the Body, the church; He is the beginning, the Firstborn from the dead, that He Himself might have the first place in all things.

Matt. 28:18 – And Jesus came and spoke to them, saying, All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth.

Acts 2:36 – Therefore let all the house of Israel know assuredly that God has made Him both Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom you have crucified.

A member by himself does not have any authority; the authority is with the Head. It is wrong for any member to say that he has authority. A member does not have direct authority; he can only derive authority from the Head. (*The Collected Works of Watchman Nee*, vol. 38, p. 487)

God's authority can never be exercised independently of Him. Apart from Him, no one has any authority in the Body, and aside from Him, no one has any rank. All authority is derived from His headship. All the believers are simply brothers in life (Matt. 23:8; Rev. 1:9) and fellow slaves in their service to the Lord (Matt. 20:27; 2 Cor. 4:5).

Matt. 23:8 – But you, do not be called Rabbi, for One is your Teacher, and you are all brothers.

Matt. 20:27 – And whoever wants to be first among you shall be your slave.

Satan's fall was a result of his rebellion against God's authority (Isa. 14:12-15). Likewise, the fall of man was a result of man joining Satan in rebellion against God's authority (Gen. 3:1-6). When Christ came, the kingdom came, because in His humanity He lived a life of absolute submission and obedience to the Father's authority and will (Matt. 26:39; John 8:29; Phil. 2:6-8). He was exalted in His humanity with His divinity to the throne of God based on this lifelong submission and obedience to God (Phil. 2:9).

John 8:29b – ... for I always do the things that are pleasing to Him.

Phil. 2:8-9 – [8] And being found in fashion as a man, He humbled Himself, becoming obedient even unto death, and that the death of a cross. [9] Therefore also God highly exalted Him and bestowed on Him the name which is above every name.

Authority in the Body

God is working in this age to restore order in the universe by heading up all things in Christ (Eph. 1:10). His way to do this is first to gain a group of people and to constitute them with the divine life and make them members of the Body of Christ joined to Christ, the Head (Eph. 1:22-23; 5:23; Col. 1:18). The authority of the Head over the Body is a matter of life union. The Head is the life of the Body, and in being the life of the Body, the Head exercises authority in, over, and through the Body. Furthermore, because the Body is joined to the Head, the Body becomes the authority that governs the living and working of the members of Christ.

After we believe in the Lord, the first spiritual principle we should bear in mind is that the Body is God's ordained authority on earth. The Body is the authority. God's law is in the Body, and we cannot violate it. We cannot act carelessly according to our own will. When we act according to our own will, we will become unchecked malignant cells in the Body, doing our own things and completely damaging the oneness of the Body. (*The Collected Works of Watchman Nee*, vol. 50, p. 896)

All authority exercised in the church must bear this testimony—it represents the life and the authority of the Head in the principle of the Body. Thus, there can be no authority, local or regional, apart from the Body. No brother can be an authority representing God if he is not right with the Body. Practically speaking, this means that no brother among us can be an authority representing God if he is not right with the practical manifestations of the Body of Christ, the local churches.

The Head exercises authority over and through the members of the Body in and as life (Eph. 4:15-16; Col. 2:19).

The Body is under the authority of the Head; it cannot propose anything on its own. The power to direct the Body rests with the Head. Where life is, there is authority. In fact, true authority is life. (*The Collected Works of Watchman Nee*, vol. 38, p. 414)

Strictly speaking, there is no authority in the Body; all authority lies in the Head. The weakness of the so-called church today is that authority has become a matter of position, not of

life. In the Body of Christ authority is a matter of life, not of position. (*The Collected Works of Watchman Nee*, vol. 44, p. 825)

Delegated Authority

In addition to Christ's direct authority, the Bible further shows that in carrying out His purpose, God exercises His authority through men. The Bible is full of examples of such delegated authorities. For example, in the Old Testament there are Joseph, Moses, Samuel, and David, among many others. In the New Testament there are the apostles in the universal church (Eph. 4:11; 1 Cor. 12:28 and footnote 2) and the elders in the local churches (Acts 14:23; Titus 1:5). In the New Testament age, however, this authority is not a ruling authority (1 Pet. 5:3) but the authority to preach the gospel to save sinners (Matt. 28:19; Acts 1:8) and beget them as children of God (1 Cor. 4:15), to nourish the believers (John 21:15; 1 Thes. 2:7; 1 Cor. 3:2), to teach the truth (Matt. 28:20; 1 Tim. 2:7; 1 Cor. 4:17), to shepherd the sheep (John 21:16; 1 Pet. 5:2; 1 Thes. 2:11), and to perfect the saints unto the building up of the Body of Christ (Eph. 4:11-16).¹ All these functions are based on the ministry of the life supply through the organic function of the gifted members. None imply any kind of controlling authority or dominating organizational hierarchy.

The Teaching of the Apostles

The apostles' teaching, which conveys their revelation of Christ to the believers, is the authority in the church today (Acts 2:42; 1 Tim. 1:3-4; Titus 2:15; cf. 1 Tim. 2:12). The first item in Paul's

¹ In all these things the apostles and elders present themselves as a pattern to the believers (1 Cor. 11:1; Phil. 3:17; 1 Thes. 1:6-7; 1 Tim. 1:16; Phil. 4:9; 1 Pet. 5:3; Acts 20:18-21) for their perfecting (Eph. 4:11-12; Col. 1:28-29) and building up (1 Cor. 3:10; 2 Cor. 10:8; 13:10). In their shepherding and teaching function the apostles have authority to appoint and remove elders (Acts 14:23; Titus 1:5; 1 Tim. 5:19-20); to regulate, adjust, and even exercise discipline in the churches (1 Cor. 6:1-8; 7:1-40; 11:2-34; 14:40; 4:21); and to warn and direct the churches (2 Cor. 11:2-4; Gal. 1:9; 3:1-5; Eph. 4:14-15; Col. 2:1-2, 8, 18; 3 John 9-10; 1 Cor. 16:1, 10-11; Col. 4:7-9; 2 Tim. 4:9; Titus 3:12).

Epistle to Titus, the subject of which is the maintenance of order in the church, is “holding to the faithful word, which is according to the teachings of the apostles” (Titus 1:9). The maintenance of order is a matter of authority, and this authority rests in the apostles’ teaching.

The New Testament leadership in the Gospels was a person. That person was the Lord Jesus Himself. But from Acts to Revelation, the unique New Testament leadership became the teaching of the apostles. Thus, neither Peter nor Paul controlled any church, but their teaching controlled. We can see this in 1 Timothy where Paul exhorted Timothy to remain in Ephesus in order that he might charge certain ones not to teach different things other than the economy of God (1:3-4). Different teachings are teachings which are different from the apostles’ teaching concerning God’s economy. This teaching is the unique leadership.

The apostles’ teaching is our constitution which governs us. Peter and Paul did not govern the churches. It is the teaching of the apostles, the teaching concerning God’s economy, which governs. (*Elders’ Training, Book 9: The Eldership and the God-ordained Way (1)*, p. 80)

The apostles’ leadership in the New Testament was exercised through their teaching, not by any kind of control.

But the leadership in the New Testament ministry is not the leadership in the worldly sense to control others. In the Lord’s recovery we do not have board members with a chairman or president.

Furthermore, this leadership is not the leadership in the ministers’ acts, but in their teaching to restrict them from being divisive... 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*, p. 17)

Misuse of Brother Nee’s Authority and Submission

Brother Nee expounded these matters thoroughly in his classic book *Authority and Submission*. Taken as a whole, Brother Nee’s fellowship is quite balanced. However, a number of people have

misused selected portions of his book to assert authority over and demand obedience from others.

I am sorry that some Christians utilize Brother Nee's book, *Spiritual Authority*,^[2] to make themselves an authority over others. This kind of authority is self-assumed. (*Life-study of Revelation*, p. 742)

Brother Lee pointed out specifically the misapplication of Brother Nee's fellowship by some both outside and within the Lord's recovery to exercise human authority in the way of organization and hierarchy.

If we receive any teaching carelessly, this can always cause some subsidiary mistake. Many outsiders use Brother Nee's teaching on spiritual authority as their ground to exercise, not their spiritual authority, but their human authority. They do not exercise the authority in life but the authority by organization. There has also been a by-product among us of such a subsidiary mistake. This by-product is the thought that a certain brother is the first among the co-workers or that another brother is the first among the elders. (*Elders' Training, Book 4: Other Crucial Matters Concerning the Practice of the Lord's Recovery*, p. 106)

A Deceitful Charge

Some have charged those under their "authority" to read only the first half of Brother Nee's book, which covers submission, and not to read the second half of his book, which is on the subject of authority, claiming that the second half of the book, which is on authority, does not apply to them. This is misleading because the second half of the book shows how to recognize genuine spiritual authority and also sets forth the limits of obedience to authority.

The real reason for this deceitful charge is that reading Brother Nee's fellowship on what it means to have spiritual authority would expose the self-exalting ones' lack of the genuine authority. Actually, a proper knowledge of the nature of spiritual authority and how it is manifested is crucial to discerning who really has such authority and who merely claims to have it.

² An earlier translation of *Authority and Submission* by a different publisher.

TWO CRUCIAL DISTINCTIONS

A proper understanding of authority requires us to make two basic distinctions—the distinction between official authority and spiritual authority and the distinction between obedience and submission.

The Distinction Between Official Authority and Spiritual Authority

In considering authority it is crucial to distinguish between official authority and spiritual authority. Official authority is based on one's officially recognized position in an organization. In human society, judges and policemen have a certain authority based on their position. In the church, however, genuine authority is not based on position. Rather, the authority in the church is spiritual in origin and in application. There is no official authority in the church or the work.

Eph. 4:15-16 – [15] But holding to truth in love, we may grow up into Him in all things, who is the Head, Christ, [16] Out from whom all the Body, being joined together and being knit together through every joint of the rich supply and through the operation in the measure of each one part, causes the growth of the Body unto the building up of itself in love.

Col. 2:19 – And not holding the Head, out from whom all the Body, being richly supplied and knit together by means of the joints and sinews, grows with the growth of God.

...What is the meaning of official authority? It means that because a man holds office, therefore, he exercises authority. The authority is exercised solely on account of the office he holds. As long as the office-bearer retains his position, just so long can he exert his authority; as soon as he resigns office, his authority ceases. Such authority is altogether objective; it is not inherent in the man himself...

But in divinely constituted companies of workers there is no organization. Authority is exercised among them, but such authority is spiritual, not official. It is an authority based upon spirituality, an authority which is the outcome of a deep knowledge of the Lord, and intimate fellowship with Him. Spiritual life is the source of such authority. The reason Paul

could direct others was not because of his superior position, but because of his greater spirituality. If he had lost his spirituality, he would have lost his authority. (*The Collected Works of Watchman Nee*, vol. 30, p. 124)

Ephesians 4:15-16 shows that the Head exercises authority over the Body through the life supply dispensed into and through the members. The Body is joined to the Head. As the members grow up into Christ the Head, the supply of life from the Head flows through the members to build up the Body. This flow of life is God's administration to head up all things in Christ. The authority of the Head is carried to all the members of the Body by the fellowship of life. Thus, authority in the New Testament is not an objective matter, requiring mere outward obedience to someone who holds a certain position in the church.

In the past authority has been too objective to many, and submission also has been objective. We have tried to apply outward submission to a subjective body. Today authority has become a matter of life. In other words, it has become an inward matter. In the Body of Christ, authority and submission meet in one Body, and both have become subjective, living, and united. This is the highest expression of God's authority. (*The Collected Works of Watchman Nee*, vol. 47, p. 176)

The way to go on today is to live the Body life, where authority is complemented by mutual love and coordination. Once this problem is settled, all other problems are settled. In the past the truth of authority and submission was objective and impersonal. Authority was objective, and so was submission. Authority was impersonal, and so was submission. We submitted to outward things in an outward way. Today authority and submission have to become organic; they have to become inward and subjective. In the Body of Christ, that is, in the church, authority and submission meet in the same place. The two become a subjective and living whole. Authority and submission become one living entity, a oneness in life. (*The Collected Works of Watchman Nee*, vol. 59, pp. 176-177)

Brother Lee strongly taught that no one should be looked upon as the leader of the Lord's recovery.

I was with Brother Nee for years. We never considered him the official leader, and he never regarded himself in this way. Whenever someone thought of Brother Nee as the leader and came to him for instructions, Brother Nee would never say a word. Only when a person came to him for fellowship would he open himself to share something. He never assumed that he was the official leader. Likewise, I do not consider myself as the official leader in the Lord's recovery today. (*Truth Messages*, p. 32)

Leadership is related to the condition of a member's relationship to Christ the Head, which means that it is also not permanent.

Acts 13:2 – And as they were ministering to the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, Set apart for Me now Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.

Acts 13:9 – But Saul, who is also Paul, filled with the Holy Spirit, looked intently at him.

In God's New Testament economy the leadership among His children is not official, permanent, or organizational. Rather, leadership depends upon spiritual capacity. The one with the greatest capacity is the leader. At one time that capacity may be with a certain brother, but at another time it may be with a different brother. On the day of Pentecost the greatest capacity was with Peter, but in Acts 15 it was with James.

The relationship between Barnabas and Paul further illustrates this principle. Acts 13:2 says, "As they were ministering to the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, Set apart for Me now Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them." Here we see that Barnabas is named before Paul (Saul). But when they were on their mission, Paul spontaneously took the lead (Acts 13:9) because he had the greater spiritual capacity. (*Leadership in the New Testament*, p. 9)

Just as spiritual authority can be gained by an increase in one's spiritual stature, so it can also be lost by a decrease in one's spiritual capacity.

Acts 15:13 – And when they finished speaking, James answered, saying, Men, brothers, listen to me.

Gal. 2:9a – And perceiving the grace given to me, James and Cephas and John, who were reputed to be pillars...

At the beginning of the church life, the leading one was Peter. He took the lead to preach the gospel. Later, Peter and John went down to Samaria (8:14). Peter also went to the house of Cornelius. After the house of Cornelius, seemingly Peter gradually lost his leading position in the church. In Acts 12 the church experienced great persecution. One of the twelve apostles, another James, was killed. Peter was imprisoned. It was at that juncture that James rose up, and Peter lost his leading position. (*The Collected Works of Watchman Nee*, vol. 62, p. 398)

When Peter stood up with the eleven on the day of Pentecost, he was as strong as a lion. However, in Galatians 2 he was cowardly, for when the brothers came from James, Peter refused to eat with the Gentiles... When Paul saw that Peter and the others did not walk uprightly according to the truth of the gospel, he rebuked Peter before all (Gal. 2:14). Through his weakness, Peter was damaging the truth of the gospel, the truth that both Gentile believers and Jewish believers are the same. This indicates that in Galatians 2 Peter's spiritual capacity had diminished. (*Truth Messages*, p. 29)

Authority in the Body of Christ is not organizational. There is no organization chart with God at the top, then Christ, then "the apostle," then the elders, and at the bottom the saints. This is man's natural, human, fallen and organizational concept and practice. When brought into the church or the work, such a concept is heretical.

The Distinction between Submission and Obedience

If we are to properly understand spiritual authority and its application in the Body of Christ, we must also distinguish between submission and obedience. Submission and obedience are two distinct matters. Submission is a matter of attitude, whereas obedience is a matter of behavior.

What does it mean to submit? Submission is a matter of attitude, a matter of the spirit. What does it mean to obey? Obedience is a matter of the conscience, a matter of outward

behavior. Submission is inward, whereas obedience is outward. (*The Collected Works of Watchman Nee*, vol. 38, p. 526)

When a “leader” asks us to do something that is against the truth, we cannot obey, but we should still maintain a submissive attitude.

We have to differentiate between submission and obedience. Submission is a matter of inward motive and attitude, while obedience is a matter of outward act and move. According to God’s Word, we should be absolute and unconditional in our submission, but relative and conditional in our obedience. In Acts 5:29 Peter said, “It is necessary to obey God rather than men.” If someone in authority wants us to sin, we have to be submissive in attitude but we should not obey. (*The Collected Works of Watchman Nee*, vol. 59, p. 231)

At times obedience to the deputy authority may clash with God’s direct authority. When it does, we must obey God rather than man, yet we must maintain an attitude of submission. As Brother Nee says:

When the deputy authority (the one representing God’s authority) clashes with the direct authority (God), one must be submissive to the deputy authority but must not be obedient to it. We will summarize the matter in three points:

- (1) Obedience is a matter of conduct; it is relative. Submission is a matter of attitude; it is absolute.
- (2) Only God is the object of unlimited submission. Man, who is less than God, should only receive limited submission.
- (3) If the deputy authority gives an order that is obviously contrary to God’s order, we can only submit; we cannot obey. We must submit only to the authority of God. We do not obey the orders that are contrary to God.

(*The Collected Works of Watchman Nee*, vol. 47, p. 200)

THE IMPORTANCE OF BEING RIGHT IN FOLLOWING OTHERS

It is a serious matter before the Lord who we follow and how we follow them. This is why Brother Lee made a strong plea to the saints to be right in following others.

If you follow the wrong person, you will damage yourself, and you will damage that person. Your following of a person wrongly is a destruction to the one whom you follow. (*A Word of Love to the Co-workers, Elders, Lovers, and Seekers of the Lord*, p. 57)

You must never try to get people to follow you. That is the serpent. It does not help you; it damages you. This also means that you should never follow any person; simply follow the Lord according to His Word and follow the heavenly vision. (*A Word of Love to the Co-workers, Elders, Lovers, and Seekers of the Lord*, p. 65)

Scriptural Examples

The Bible is replete with examples that show that whether the one whom we follow is proper before the Lord or not plays a significant role in our future with the Lord. Whom we follow is our responsibility. It is not true that only the delegated authority is held responsible for his error. Here are some notable examples from the Old Testament:

- When Korah stood up to revile Moses, he did not do so alone. He set himself up as the spokesman, the leader, for any who would follow him. The 250 leaders who followed him were destroyed just as Korah was (Num. 16:32-35).

Num. 16:35 – And fire came forth from Jehovah and consumed the two hundred fifty men who presented the incense.

- The case of Saul and David is another case in point. Saul had been anointed by God to be the king of Israel, but he was improper in his conduct before the Lord, and the Lord forsook him. While it is true that David did not revile Saul and refused to fight against him, it is also true that those who followed Saul, including Jonathan his son, who followed him out of personal loyalty and affection, suffered great loss.

1 Sam. 31:6 – So Saul and his three sons and his armor bearer, as well as all his men, died that day together.

Jonathan, Saul's son, knew that God was with David, but because of his natural relationship with and affection for Saul, in the end he stayed with Saul and shared in his fate.

- Jeroboam forsook the Lord's commandment of having Jerusalem as the unique place for the children of Israel to gather to worship the Lord and feast to Him (Deut. 16:16; 1 Kings 12:25-33). This commandment had been given to keep the oneness of God's people, but Jeroboam divided the nation of Israel to make a kingdom for himself. Those who followed Jeroboam joined him in forsaking the proper standing as the nation of Israel and became a division among God's people. This brought in a great degradation among Jeroboam's followers.

Likewise, the New Testament provides sober examples of the outcome of following a person wrongly:

- At one time John the Baptist's ministry was the up-to-date move of God, but when the Lord Jesus began his ministry, John's ministry should have been over. John continued his ministry in rivalry with the Lord's. Not only was John himself executed, but his followers were seriously deficient in knowing God's New Testament economy (Acts 19:2-3).
- The tens of thousands in the church in Jerusalem who followed James to be zealous for the law (Acts 21:20) damaged the testimony of the church, troubled the Gentile churches (Acts 15:24; Gal. 2:12), and eventually suffered tremendously in the siege and destruction of Jerusalem (Acts 21:26, footnote 1).
- The churches in Asia that followed the perverted ones (Acts 20:30) who taught things other than God's economy (1 Tim. 1:3-4) and deviated from Paul's ministry (2 Tim. 1:15) fell into serious degradation and came under the Lord's rebuke (Rev. 2—3).

Acts 20:30 – And from among you yourselves men will rise up, speaking perverted things to draw away the disciples after them.

1 Tim. 1:3-4 – [3] Even as I exhorted you, when I was going into Macedonia, to remain in Ephesus in order that you might charge certain ones not to teach different things [4] nor to give heed to myths and unending genealogies, which produce questionings rather than God's economy, which is in faith.

2 Tim. 1:15a – This you know, that all who are in Asia turned away from me.

Rev. 2:5 – Remember therefore where you have fallen from and repent and do the first works; but if not, I am coming to you and will remove your lampstand out of its place, unless you repent.

A Leader's Mistakes Not Being as Serious as Deviation

A number of brothers, including some in the churches in the Lord's recovery, have misused Brother Nee's statement concerning Moses:

We should be confident in submitting to the authority which God is confident in establishing. If there is a mistake, it is not our mistake. It is the mistake of the authority. (*The Collected Works of Watchman Nee*, vol. 47, p. 163)

Those who assert authority often abused this statement to override the consciences of the believers or their inner sense of the anointing. What Watchman Nee said is true. Moses made a mistake, but this mistake did not affect his standing as God's deputy authority. In his mistake Moses did not deviate from the truth, and he did not rebel against God. If he had done either of these, he would have lost his standing as God's representative. As the examples in the preceding section show, the Bible is more than clear that if we follow someone who deviates from the truth, we will be damaged and suffer loss.

Consider the story of God's enemy, Satan. He was given authority by God, but he rebelled. This rebellion caused him to lose his standing as the one representing God's authority in the universe (Ezek. 28:14, 17). The Bible shows us clearly that those who follow him will share in his destiny (Matt. 25:41; Rev. 20:10, 15).

Matt. 25:41 – Then He will say also to those on the left, Go away from Me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire² prepared for the devil and his angels.

fn. 25:41² – The lake of fire was prepared for the devil and his angels, not for man. However, if any man follows the devil in opposing the Lord, he will share the lake of fire with the devil and the fallen angels.

To follow those who rebel by seeking to establish their own authority is a great loss. If the demand for obedience is followed to an extreme (as it has been in some places), no one would ever feel free to leave a sect, because the ones in “authority” in the sect would prohibit it. In leaving the sects, we followed Christ and not man. In departing from the sectarianism of those among us who have departed from the truth, we should follow the same principle.

Following According to the Vision

Brother Lee frequently referred to a conversation he had with Watchman Nee in a time of turmoil. This conversation presents a pattern of how we should follow the ministry:

In 1934 there was a turmoil in the church in Shanghai, mainly directed against Brother Nee. At that time I assured him that I completely followed him, not because of who he was, but because of the teaching and revelation he brought into the Lord’s recovery. Brother Nee and I had not known each other formerly; we had no personal affection. He took the lead, and I followed him because he had the revelation in his teaching and he kept the revelation. I also told him that if one day he would deviate from the revelation he had passed on to us, I would still follow the revelation, but I would no longer follow him. (*Leadership in the New Testament*, p. 47)

The proper following, according to the New Testament, is not to follow a man, but to follow the teaching of the apostles, which is the revelation of the entire New Testament. This is to follow the heavenly vision (Acts 26:19).

Acts 26:19 – Therefore, King Agrippa, I was not disobedient to the heavenly vision.

DISCERNING SPIRITUAL AUTHORITY

If we want to follow the Lord according to the heavenly vision, we must be able to discern what persons properly represent God in their person and in their exercise of authority. This requires that we understand:

- The nature of spiritual authority;
- The signs of spiritual authority and the proper way to be an authority;
- The signs of lack of spiritual authority and of the improper exercise of authority;
- Manifestations of rebellion; and
- How spiritual authority can be lost.

THE NATURE OF SPIRITUAL AUTHORITY

To understand the nature of spiritual authority, we should understand the following four principles:

- The source of authority is the resurrection life of Christ;
- The basis of authority is revelation;
- The evidence of authority is light; and
- The issue of authority is joy and “blossoming”.

The Source of Authority—Resurrection Life

The source of spiritual authority is life. In the first mention of man in Genesis 1:26, man’s being created in God’s image is first, and man’s being given dominion follows. God’s image is a matter of life, while God’s dominion is a matter of authority. Life is first, then authority. First, we have God’s life. This life enables us to express God and to represent God with His authority.

Gen. 1:26 – 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.

What is authority? Superficially speaking, authority is based on position; whoever has position has authority. According to

the Bible, this also appears to be the case, but actually, this is not the case. Authority is not mainly a matter of position; it is primarily a matter of life. When the people of Israel saw the budding rod of Aaron, they acknowledged his authority. Without resurrection life, authority is useless. Authority in the church is not mainly a matter of position but a matter of life. You do not become an authority by others' election, and no one can claim authority based solely on his position in the church. (*The Collected Works of Watchman Nee*, vol. 38, p. 429)

The manifestation of authority in life is resurrection. Following His judgment on the rebellion of Korah, God instructed the leader of each of the tribes to bring a rod to be placed overnight in the tabernacle, saying "And the rod of the man whom I choose shall bud." (Num. 17:5a). The manifestation that Aaron was the one who was chosen by God was that his rod, a dead stick like all the other rods, budded. Thus, the authority is not in the rod, but in its budding with resurrection life.

Everyone who is an authority should know this; he should not be mistaken in any way. There must be no misunderstanding with authority. Authority is of God and not of us; we are only those who keep custody of authority. Only those who have seen this are qualified to be a deputy authority. Brothers and sisters, when you set out for your work, I hope that none of you would be foolish enough to think that you have any authority in yourself. As soon as you offend the principle of resurrection, you lose authority, and as soon as you try to exhibit your authority, you instantly lose authority. 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. (*The Collected Works of Watchman Nee*, vol. 47, p. 250-251)

This relationship between life and authority will still apply in the New Jerusalem.

Revelation 20:4 says that it is the overcoming resurrection life which brings believers into the reign with Christ during the millennium. Resurrection life brings us into the kingship with Christ because it proceeds out of the throne of God. The throne of God signifies authority. We see a picture of this in Revelation

22:1 where the water of life issues out of the throne of God. Therefore, authority and life are mutually related. The river of life is related to the throne of God. If we have the throne of God as our source, we will be in the water of life. If we are in the water of life, it will bring us to the throne of God, giving us the authority that proceeds from His throne. Life brings authority. We all must see that representing God requires God's life. (*Life-study of Genesis*, pp. 120-121)

The Basis of Authority—Revelation

Whereas the resurrection life is the source of authority, the basis of authority is revelation.

Rom. 16:25 – Now to Him who is able to establish you according to my gospel, that is, the proclamation of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery, which has been kept in silence in the times of the ages.

Eph. 3:3 – That by revelation the mystery was made known to me, as I have written previously in brief.

... A man's worth before the Lord is not based on others' evaluation of him nor his own evaluation of himself. A man's worth before the Lord is based on revelation. Revelation is the standard of God's measure and valuation. The establishment of authority is based on God's revelation, and God evaluates a person based on revelation. (*The Collected Works of Watchman Nee*, vol. 47, p. 228)

Revelation is the basis of authority. We must learn to not fight for ourselves or speak for ourselves. We should not be like Aaron or Miriam, clamoring for authority. If after you leave here you fight for authority, it will prove that you are in the flesh and in darkness. It will also prove that you have not seen anything here on the mountain. (*The Collected Works of Watchman Nee*, vol. 47, p. 229)

The Lord's own authority was evidenced by His teaching (Mark 1:22). The apostles' revelation of God's economy was the source of their authority (Rom. 16:25; Eph. 3:3). Workers in the New Testament have authority only as they unveil the revelation of God's New Testament economy according to the teaching of the apostles.

The Evidence of Authority—Bringing in Light

The evidence that we have touched authority in a person is that we are brought into light. This is because when we touch a person who is under God's authority, we touch a person living in God's presence, and God Himself is light (1 John 1:5).

1 John 1:5 – And this is the message which we have heard from Him and announce to you, that God is light and in Him is no darkness at all.

Wherever God is in authority, there is also light. On the other hand, wherever there is confusion, there is darkness. When God's authority is exercised in a local church, that church will be full of the divine light. If God is not on the throne, if He is not in authority, He cannot shine, and there will be no light. If we all give place to God in Christ that He may exercise His authority, if we all are willing to subject ourselves to Him, everything in our midst will be full of light. (*The Vision of God's Building*, p. 196)

The apostle Paul was such a person. He was commissioned by the Lord to turn people from darkness to light and from the authority of Satan to God (Acts 26:18).

Acts 26:18 – To open their eyes, to turn them from darkness to light and from the authority of Satan to God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins and an inheritance among those who have been sanctified by faith in Me.

The apostles conducted themselves to shine out the gospel by the manifestation of the truth in their living (2 Cor. 4:2). Because they themselves were in the light, they could bring others into fellowship with God (1 John 1:3, 5; 2 Cor. 4:6) and bring to light the economy of the mystery (Eph. 3:9).

2 Cor. 4:2 – But we have renounced the hidden things of shame, not walking in craftiness nor adulterating the word of God, but by the manifestation of the truth commending ourselves to every conscience of men before God.

2 Cor. 4:6 – Because the God who said, Out of darkness light shall shine, is the One who shined in our hearts to illuminate the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.

1 John 1:3 – That which we have seen and heard we report also to you that you also may have fellowship with us, and indeed our fellowship is with the Father and with His Son Jesus Christ.

1 John 1:5 – And this is the message which we have heard from Him and announce to you, that God is light and in Him is no darkness at all.

Eph. 3:9 – And to enlighten all that they may see what the economy of the mystery is, which throughout the ages has been hidden in God, who created all things.

Authority in the New Testament is not a matter of ruling over others, but of shining forth God as light. Even in the New Jerusalem God reigns by shining forth as light.

Rev. 21:23-24 – [23] And the city has no need of the sun or of the moon that they should shine in it, for the glory of God illumined it, and its lamp is the Lamb. [24] And the nations will walk by its light; and the kings of the earth bring their glory into it.

Rev. 22:1 – And he showed me a river of water of life, bright as crystal, proceeding out of the throne of God and of the Lamb in the middle of its street.

Rev. 22:5 – And night will be no more; and they have no need of the light of a lamp and of the light of the sun, for the Lord God will shine upon them; and they will reign forever and ever.

God in Christ is the center of the New Jerusalem as the divine vessel. We may also say that Christ as the expression of God is the center of this divine corporate vessel. In the picture of the New Jerusalem, the invisible God is likened to light that shines with glory (21:11, 23; 22:5). When light shines, it does a work. Light is a ruling power; it rules when it shines. (*The Central Thought of God*, p. 115)

This picture is very meaningful. God as light is in Christ as the redeeming One, and the throne of God in Christ is the exercise of His authority. Out of these three—light, redemption, and authority—come all things. If we have God as light in the redeeming Christ to exercise His authority among us today in the church, then we have everything. We have the tree of life,

we have the river flowing with the living water, we have the street of life, and we have the golden city, the pearls as the gates, and the precious stones as the foundations. We have everything. All the aspects of the church and all the riches of the church come out of God as light in the redeeming Christ exercising His authority. (*The Central Thought of God*, pp. 117-118)

Genuine spiritual authority brings us into the light of God's presence. A person with spiritual authority does not regulate people directly by telling them what to do. The ruling authority comes from the inward shining of the very God into whose presence we have been brought.

The Issue of Authority—Joy and Blossoming

Genuine authority produces a particular kind of fruit—joy and blossoming. In 2 Cor. 1:24 Paul says that the apostles' authority over the church was not a matter of lording it over the faith of the believers, but of being fellow workers with them for their joy. This shows that the proper issue of the exercise of authority is not control, but the believers' joy in their faith.

2 Cor. 1:24 – Not that we lord it over your faith, but we are fellow workers with you for your joy; for by faith you stand.

Furthermore, the account of Aaron's rod shows that the expression of his authority was in his dead stick budding, blossoming, and bearing almonds.

Num. 17:8 – And on the next day Moses went into the Tent of the Testimony, and there was the rod of Aaron for the house of Levi: it had budded; it even put forth buds and produced blossoms and bore ripe almonds.

The leadership among God's people is different from that found among the Gentiles. All the Gentile kings use their rods for ruling. No rod among the Gentile leaders is useful for feeding, because none of their rods is living. Every rod is just a piece of dead wood. Only with the proper leadership among God's people is there a rod budding with resurrection life and yielding fruit to nourish others.

The almond tree is the first tree in the year to blossom, blossoming in either January or February. The first fruit which

comes out of a tree is the almond. This signifies resurrection. Hence, the budding, blossoming, fruit-yielding rod signifies the resurrection life of Christ. The leadership among God's children must be Christ Himself as the resurrection life which buds, blossoms, and bears almonds to feed God's people. (*Life-study of Hebrews*, p. 681)

Having authority is not a matter of what we can do; it is a matter of how much we bud. You may do a great deal, but there is no blossoming. Instead of budding, you die; instead of blossoming, you kill others; and instead of bearing fruit, you deaden everyone who contacts you. This proves that you do not have the authority. However, if you have the budding rod and a dead one contacts you, he will be revived and become living. This proves that you have the authority. The authority is not in our capability or skill. The real vindication is in our budding, not in our doing. Doing means nothing, but budding means everything. In our church life and in the church service, we all must bud, blossom, and yield almonds. This is our need today. (*Life-study of Hebrews*, p. 696)

Authority in the world makes demands. It puts people under heavy burdens and obligations. Spiritual authority brings us into contact with the God who is life and light. This contact brings forth the fruit of joy and blossoming.

SIGNS OF SPIRITUAL AUTHORITY

We should not assume that those in positional authority in the church are the ones with spiritual authority, although this would be normal and it is surely our hope and desire that this would be the case. It is important to know how to properly discern spiritual authority if we are going to follow the Lord. For that reason we should consider some indicators of whether a person has spiritual authority or not. These indicators include:

- Obedience to authority;
- Being under a clear sky; and
- The presence and witness of the Spirit.

Obedience Being a Prerequisite to Authority

A basic requirement to be a deputy authority is obedience to authority.

Everything about a deputy authority hinges on the kind of obedience he renders to other authorities above him. We must not have any craving to be a deputy authority or any expectation of others obeying us. We should only expect to obey others; obedience should be our very nature. (*The Collected Works of Watchman Nee*, vol. 59, p. 205)

Today if someone says he is answerable to no one but God directly, that one is not under authority. In the New Testament age, authority is a Body matter.

No child of God should violate the law of the Body of Christ and act individualistically. All independent acts are expressions of rebellion. Another word for rebellion is independent action. To act individualistically is to act against authority. It means to not submit to the authority of the Head, to not submit to the principle of oneness which God ordained in the Body, and to not submit to the law of oneness which God ordained in the Bible. Individualism is rebellion not only against the Body but also against the Lord. (*The Collected Works of Watchman Nee*, vol. 50, p. 893)

We are wary of those who act individualistically, those who are not bound by the Body, who act according to their own will, and who have never learned to come under the authority of the Head. After we believe in the Lord, the first spiritual principle we should bear in mind is that the Body is God's ordained authority on earth. The Body is the authority. (*The Collected Works of Watchman Nee*, vol. 50, p. 896)

If a brother rejects all fellowship from others and sets himself up as "the authority," either in a local church or in a "region of the work" or in the universal church, that brother is not under the headship of Christ in His Body. If a brother is uplifted as "the apostle" in such a way that he has the freedom to carry out an independent work outside the common fellowship of the co-workers, his work is actually in rebellion against the headship of Christ.

The reason I mention this matter now is that during the past few years someone presumed to be the leader of the Lord's recovery not only in this country, but throughout the world. If the saints had been clear about the truth concerning leadership and had practiced the truth, no one would have accepted such a claim. If we are clear about the truth and practice the truth, from now on no one will dare say that he is the leader. (*Truth Messages*, p. 31)

A Clear Sky

A second sign that a group of leading ones have spiritual authority is that they are under a clear sky. This means that they themselves have a conscience that is pure and void of offense and are living under the ruling of the Lord's throne.

Ezek. 1:22 – And over the heads of the living creature there was the likeness of an expanse, like the sight of awesome crystal, stretched forth over their heads above.

Ezek. 1:26 – And above the expanse that was over their heads was the likeness of a throne, like the appearance of a sapphire stone; and upon the likeness of the throne was One in appearance like a man, above it.

We should not talk about authority in a human, natural way. In the church there is no human authority. The authority in the church is the throne above the clear sky.

Suppose the leading brothers or the elders in a local church are not under a clear sky, yet they exercise authority based on their position. This kind of exercise of authority does not work because it has no weight and no ruling; there is no throne in a clear sky. However, suppose the leading ones and the elders are continually under a clear sky, having a conscience that is pure and void of offense. If this is their situation, they will be under the heavenly throne, and with them there will be something weighty and something of authority. Thus, there will be no need for them to claim authority over the saints.

To claim authority over the saints indicates that one does not have any authority. As long as we are under a clear sky with a throne above it, there is no need for us to claim to have authority—the authority is simply there. We should never try to

bring others under our authority. Such a thing is a hierarchy; it is something of organization. We should not try to rule over the saints. Instead, we should humble ourselves and remain under the throne in the clear sky.

It is shameful for anyone to claim to be the authority in a local church. There is no such thing! In the church there is no human authority. The Lord Jesus said, “You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and the great exercise authority over them. It shall not be 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 your slave” (Matt. 20:25-27). In Matthew 23:11 He said, “The greatest among you shall be your servant.” This is the way to have authority. The authority is not mine nor yours nor others’. The only authority is the throne above a clear sky. (*Life-study of Ezekiel*, pp. 116-117)

The Presence and Witness of the Spirit

In the Body of Christ, only the Lord as the Spirit is authority. The authority of Christ the Head is transmitted into and through the Body by the Spirit. Only a person who is one with the Lord in the mingled spirit has authority, because only such a person can convey the presence of the Spirit, and the Spirit will witness only with such a person.

Matt. 12:28 – But if I, by the Spirit of God, cast out the demons, then the kingdom of God has come upon you.

In the church there is no human authority; there is only the authority of the Holy Spirit. The church has been here on earth for a long time, but God has never entrusted its service to any human individuals. In the church not even the elders are the authority. You are not the authority. (*The Collected Works of Watchman Nee*, vol. 62, p. 285)

However, the Head rules the Body through the Holy Spirit. Today the practical outworking of authority lies in the Holy Spirit. The Lord is directing His Body through the Holy Spirit. Authority is not a thing; the Lord did not give Peter a bundle of authority and ask him to come back for more when he used up that bundle. Authority is the Lord Himself. The authority that was manifested in Paul, John, and Peter was something given by the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit coordinated these men together

in different places. Authority is a matter of being one with the Lord. The principle underlying authority is oneness with the Lord. (*The Collected Works of Watchman Nee*, vol. 57, p. 126)

...In other words, the only authority in the church is that of the Holy Spirit. There is no authority that comes out from individuals. The elders do not have authority, the elderly brothers do not have authority, and the spiritual ones also do not have authority. Only the Holy Spirit has authority. This is called the Body of Christ. (*The Collected Works of Watchman Nee*, vol. 55, p. 151)

I would say a word to the elders concerning their authority: We have to have the basic understanding that there is no authority within ourselves. The authority in the Body of Christ is Christ, the Head. It is the Holy Spirit who is operating in the Body. Therefore, only the Holy Spirit is the authority. The Holy Spirit is the authority of Christ in His Body. From where do the responsible brothers derive their authority? Do not think that as long as a person is an elder he has authority. We have to know and understand authority. Only those who understand authority have authority. If the elders do not understand authority, they are not qualified to be elders, and they are not fit to be an authority. We do not have any authority in ourselves. (*The Collected Works of Watchman Nee*, vol. 61, p. 215)

To be in spirit is to be in God's presence. It is to allow God to rule within us. Once we are in spirit, there is no need to be an authority any longer; we become an authority automatically. Where there is God's presence, there is authority. Never forget that authority is simply God Himself. Without God's presence, we will lose this authority. Hence, all the time we have to learn to live in the spirit, to touch the sense of the spirit, to act in the spirit, and to speak in the spirit. (*The Elders' Management of the Church*, p. 93)

When a person touches us, they should not touch authority as a thing. Rather, there should be the presence of the Lord as the Spirit witnessing with us that we are one with Him. Any assertion of authority apart from oneness with the Lord as the Spirit is false and should be rejected.

THE PROPER WAY TO BE AN AUTHORITY

Just as the nature of spiritual authority and the signs of authority are not according to man's natural concept, so the way to be an authority is utterly different from the way authority is exercised in human society. The way to be an authority in the Body of Christ and in its practical manifestation as the local churches is not to exercise authority, but to serve the saints as a slave in love in the flowing out of life by shepherding, by feeding, and by protecting the flock.

Not to Exercise Authority

In a remarkable portion of *The Elders' Management of the Church*, Brother Lee explains that the proper way to be an authority is not to exercise authority:

It is a regrettable thing as well as a shameful one that in some local churches there are elders who are apparently not the authority. Yet in reality they exercise authority very much. Outwardly they act very democratic, yet in fact they hold the authority in their own hands. This is a very shameful thing. If you and I are to be the elders and are to oversee the church, we have to learn on the one hand to submit to authority, and on the other hand to be God's delegated authority. At the same time, we should not exercise authority. You should not say that since you are an elder, what you say has to count and what you decide must be done. If you do not exercise your authority, you are in reality being the authority there. This seems to be a contradicting word. How can someone be an authority without exercising authority? And how can a person not exercise his authority while at the same time he is the authority? Nevertheless, I believe the brothers and sisters know what this means in their practical experience. There is nothing contradicting about it. If you are not clear about this matter, consider the story of Moses again. He was a delegated authority. He submitted to authority, and he was acting also as the authority. However, many times when difficulty came, he submitted to God, and he did not exercise his authority. His not exercising the authority was his most dignified way of exercising authority. It is only when one submits to the authority in the church, and only when he is being an authority

as well, that he can apply his authority by refraining from exercising authority. I believe that the brothers and sisters understand what I mean. This is the proper condition of an elder. (*The Elders' Management of the Church*, pp. 84-85)

Brother Lee repeated this strongly in his messages on Ezekiel:

I would remind all the dear ones who bear responsibility in the local churches never to exercise their authority. We need to realize that none of us has any authority. (*Life-study of Ezekiel*, p. 118)

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)

It is obedience on our part that gives the Lord the ground to establish His authority (2 Cor. 10:6).

As a Slave

The status of one in authority in the Body of Christ is not one of being elevated, but of being a slave.

Matt. 20:25-27 – [25] But Jesus called them to Him and said, You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and the great exercise authority over them. [26] It shall not be so among you; but whoever wants to become great among you shall be your servant, [27] And whoever wants to be first among you shall be your slave.

Rom. 1:1 – Paul, a slave of Christ Jesus, a called apostle, separated unto the gospel of God.

Some of the elders have been rather proud of their position and have expected the saints to give place to them. Other brothers have been ambitious to become elders. There is no room for such ambition in the church life. If we know the Bible, we shall realize that an elder is a slave. The thought of rank must be purged away. The apostles and elders are not high officials. On the contrary, they are those who serve Christ to the churches and to the saints. (*Life-study of Ephesians*, pp. 356-357)

To control, to rebuke, to condemn, and to criticize are altogether organizational. I still remember what I shared in

1976 when we were on the life-study of Matthew. When we were covering Matthew 20 and 23, I exhorted the elders not to control the churches. The Lord Jesus told us that we are all brothers on the same level (23:8). He is the unique Lord and Instructor among us (v. 10). Once a brother becomes an elder, he is a slave to the saints in a church, and his wife becomes the wife of a slave. The eldership is not a matter of a position in a hierarchical sense. That is altogether organizational. (*Elders' Training, Book 9: The Eldership and the God-ordained Way (1)*, p. 73)

The elders in the churches need to realize that if they are not willing to be slaves, they cannot be proper elders. Every elder must be a slave. This was the reason the Lord Jesus taught His disciples not to seek to be above others, but instead to place themselves lower than others and be their slaves. In the church life there is no rank. We are all brothers, and we all must serve as slaves. (*Life-study of Exodus*, p. 811)

In Love

Eph. 5:25 – Husbands, love your wives even as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself up for her.

Col. 1:24 – I now rejoice in my sufferings on your behalf and fill up on my part that which is lacking of the afflictions of Christ in my flesh for His Body, which is the church.

In Ephesians 5 Paul tells the wives to submit to their husbands and the husbands to love their wives. Nowhere does Paul tell the husbands to assert authority over their wives. Rather, in telling the husbands to love their wives, Paul refers to the example of Christ loving the church and giving Himself up for her. Christ became the Head of the church not by asserting His authority over her, but by loving the church and giving Himself up for her. Likewise, genuine spiritual authority belongs to those who follow Christ by participating in the afflictions of Christ in loving the church and giving themselves up for the saints (Col. 1:24).

Ephesians 5 tells the wives to submit to their husbands, but it tells the husbands to love their wives, not to rule over them. The elders should care for the saints in the same principle. In 1934 I was very young, but since Brother Watchman Nee was

absent for a long time, the Lord put the responsibility of the church and the work in Shanghai into my hand. One day the elders came to me and told me about some problems related to the brothers and sisters. I realized that these elders were trying to exercise their authority as elders and were neglecting to show love to the saints. I brought this matter to the Lord. While I was before the Lord one day, the Lord revealed to me in His Word that the husband is the head, but the husband is told not to rule the wife but to love her. The elders have the authority, but they should not exercise their authority. Rather, they should exercise love toward all and extend love to others. This is simply to submit themselves under the headship of the Lord. (*Basic Principles for the Practice of the Church Life*, p. 36)

It never works for an elder to try to assume authority in the church by force. Not only will this not be pleasing in the eyes of men, but it will have no confirmation from the Holy Spirit. You can assume your authority, but the Holy Spirit will not be there. You can only be an authority on one basis, and that is in love. If you genuinely love the brothers and sisters, the love itself will become the control, and it will become your authority over others. (*The Elders' Management of the Church*, p. 89)

Hence, the elders should realize that, while there is the need of proper authority in the management of the church, and without it there cannot be a proper management of the church, yet in being the authority, the elders must turn their authority into love. It should appear to others that authority is completely gone, and that everything is love. Love is authority transformed, in much the same way that the body of the Lord Jesus was God transformed. He never caused others to feel that He was God. On the contrary, He caused others to feel that He was fully a man. In the same principle, those who are the authority should not cause others to feel that they are the authority. On the contrary, they should cause others to feel that everything is absolutely a matter of love. If the brothers and sisters cannot sense love in you, you have no position, no ground, and no standing to be an authority. To be an authority, one must have love. (*The Elders' Management of the Church*, p. 91)

In the Flowing Out of Life

Authority in the church is not carried out primarily in administration but in the flowing out of life.

Rev. 22:1 – And he showed me a river of water of life, bright as crystal, proceeding out of the throne of God and of the Lamb in the middle of its street.

The throne of God and of the Lamb in the center of New Jerusalem symbolizes the divine authority of God's headship in Christ. The life supply flows out of this authority, and the enjoyment of the life supply brings us under this authority. The flow of the water of life not only affords us the life supply, but also brings to us the divine authority. In the flow of the water of life there are the life supply and the divine authority with the fellowship in life. When we participate in the life supply, we are brought under God's authority in the fellowship of life. (*Life-study of Revelation*, p. 742)

We should never separate authority from grace or grace from authority. Grace and authority are one. If we have grace, we are under authority, and if we are under authority, we are surely partaking of grace. Although it is true that, as Christians, we need to reign, we should not reign by authority. Rather, we should reign through the flow of life. 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*, pp. 760-761)

By Shepherding

Authority is exercised in the church, not by ruling over others, but by shepherding the flock.

1 Pet. 5:2a – Shepherd the flock of God among you, overseeing not under compulsion but willingly, according to God.

Acts 20:28 – Take heed to yourselves and to all the flock, among whom the Holy Spirit has placed you as overseers to shepherd the church of God, which He obtained through His own blood.

In Acts 20:28 Paul charges the elders of the church in Ephesus “to shepherd the church of God.” The main responsibility of the elders as overseers is not to rule over but to shepherd, to take all-inclusive tender care of the flock, the church of God...

According to 1 Peter 5:2, the elders are not rulers but shepherds. Shepherding is a proper care exercised over the flock. The flock needs to be cared for, protected, led in the right direction, and brought to a place where they can eat and drink. This is shepherding.

In 5:2 Peter does not tell the elders to shepherd their own flock; he charges them to shepherd the flock of God. The flock is not the elders’ possession but God’s possession. Therefore, the elders should not consider the church in which they are taking the lead as belonging to them. In the New Testament we are told that the church is of Christ, of God, and of the saints. The church is called the church of Christ, the church of God, and the church of the saints (Rom. 16:16; 1 Cor. 1:2; 14:33). But the church is not the church of the apostles or the church of the elders. Because the church is composed of the saints, it is the church of the saints. Because the church has been redeemed by Christ, it is the church of Christ. Because the church has been regenerated by God, it is the church of God. However, Peter makes it clear that the elders should not think that, because they are taking the lead in the church, the church is theirs. The elders are to shepherd the flock of God, not their own flock. (*The Conclusion of the New Testament, Messages 189-204*, pp. 2163-2164)

The elders’ shepherding of the church, the flock of God, is the best way to take care of the “fierce wolves” and those speaking perverted things among the churches (Acts 20:28-30). Often elders have asked me what they should do about those in the church who speak perverted things. The way for the elders

to deal with such a situation is to shepherd the church. Many years of history have proved that the elders' shepherding will keep the saints from the "fierce wolves" and from those who speak perverted things. (*The Secret of God's Organic Salvation: "The Spirit Himself with Our Spirit"*, p. 28)

By Feeding

The biblical concept of reigning is contrary to our natural, human concept. A person who is reigning in life does not rule over others with authority, but by supplying them with the unsearchable riches of Christ as food.

Eph. 3:8 – To me, less than the least of all saints, was this grace given to announce to the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ as the gospel.

Gen. 41:56-57 – [56] And when the famine was over all the face of the earth, Joseph opened all the storehouses of grain and sold grain to the Egyptians; and the famine became severe in the land of Egypt. [57] And all the earth came to Joseph in Egypt to buy grain, because the famine was severe in all the earth.

Matt. 24:45-46 – [45] Who then is the faithful and prudent slave, whom the master has set over his household to give them food at the proper time? [46] Blessed is that slave whom his master, when he comes, will find so doing.

The reigning aspect is firstly the shepherding aspect. If you do not have the burden to shepherd others and to feed them, you will never be able to reign. Reigning authority comes from the shepherding life. Eventually, Joseph reigned over his brothers. But he did not reign over them until he had already shepherded them. He was sent by his father to shepherd his brothers and to feed them. In like manner, Jesus came not as a King to rule others; He came as a Shepherd. (*Life-study of Genesis*, p. 1415)

By the wisdom and authority given by God, Joseph reigned in the maturity of life. He not only ruled over the whole land of Egypt but also blessed the whole earth by ministering food to people for their existence. Genesis 41:56-57 says, "And when the famine was over all the face of the earth, Joseph opened all

the storehouses....And all the earth came to Joseph in Egypt to buy grain.” This signifies that all those who have been chosen, called, redeemed, and transformed by the Triune God and have thus become mature will reign for God with the rich life supply of Christ to satisfy people’s need. (*Truth Lessons*, Level 3, Volume 1, pp. 111-112)

Joseph ruled the earth by being the source of food in the midst of famine. He dispensed the riches of food in the storehouses of Egypt to satisfy the people’s hunger.

By Protecting the Flock

The elders are also responsible to protect the flock from fierce wolves that come among the flock from the outside and those speaking perverted things who rise up within the church.

Acts 20:28-31a – [28] Take heed to yourselves and to all the flock, among whom the Holy Spirit has placed you as overseers to shepherd the church of God, which He obtained through His own blood. [29] I know that after my departure fierce wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock. [30] And from among you yourselves men will rise up, speaking perverted things to draw away the disciples after them. [31] Therefore watch...

The elders’ shepherding of the church, the flock of God, is the best way to take care of the “fierce wolves” and those speaking perverted things among the churches (Acts 20:28-30). Often elders have asked me what they should do about those in the church who speak perverted things. The way for the elders to deal with such a situation is to shepherd the church. Many years of history have proved that the elders’ shepherding will keep the saints from the “fierce wolves” and from those who speak perverted things. (*The Secret of God’s Organic Salvation: “The Spirit with Our Spirit”*, p. 28)

However, in exercising this responsibility, the elders must take care to remain under the authority of Christ, the Head, and not to deviate from the apostles’ teaching. They should not compromise the standing of the church in their locality as the testimony of the Body of Christ on the ground of oneness, but must care for

preserving the genuine oneness both locally and with all the churches in the Body of Christ.

SIGNS THAT A PERSON DOES NOT HAVE SPIRITUAL AUTHORITY

Just as there are signs that a person is an authority, there are signs that indicate that a person is not an authority. Among these are:

- Asserting one's own authority;
- Practicing self-vindication;
- Depreciating the truth;
- Emphasizing "success" instead of God's economy in faith;
- Carrying out work in rivalry; and
- Seeking to establish one's own kingdom.

Asserting One's Own Authority

Whenever someone asserts his own authority, that is a sign of a lack of genuine authority.

3 John 9 – I wrote something to the church; but Diotrephes, who loves to be first among them, does not receive us.

A deputy authority must not try to uphold his own authority. If you think that you can demand obedience, that your position, gift, or power justifies such a demand, you are not qualified to be an authority. If your disposition is such that you want others to obey you, you are not qualified to be an authority; you are not the type of person who can receive submission from others. (*The Collected Works of Watchman Nee*, vol. 59, p. 203)

Brother Nee was very strong that no one should assert his own authority.

It is a most ugly thing for anyone to speak for his authority in order to establish authority for himself. (*The Collected Works of Watchman Nee*, vol. 47, p. 220)

I dislike and abhor those who say, "I am God's appointed authority." (*The Collected Works of Watchman Nee*, vol. 47, p. 221)

I hope that no one would stand up to claim that he is the authority. (*The Collected Works of Watchman Nee*, vol. 47, p. 230)

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. (*The Collected Works of Watchman Nee*, vol. 47, p. 283)

Brother Lee spoke the same thing concerning the elders' exercise of authority in the church.

If the elders in the church have the attitude that they are the elders, that they have the authority, and that they are here to exercise their authority, that would be one of the ugliest things there is! (*The Elders' Management of the Church*, p. 83)

Everyone who exercises authority to claim that he is an elder, that he has the authority to deal with such-and-such a matter, and that he will exercise this authority, is using his authority in the wrong way! (*The Elders' Management of the Church*, p. 83)

In some local churches, I have seen brothers who act as elders by putting on a front. They say, "Oh, I am an elder!" They assume an elder's bearing and speak with an elder's tone. I must tell you that there is nothing more ugly in the church than to see such a thing. (*The Elders' Management of the Church*, p. 88)

It never works for an elder to try to assume authority in the church by force. Not only will this not be pleasing in the eyes of men, but it will have no confirmation from the Holy Spirit. You can assume your authority, but the Holy Spirit will not be there. (*The Elders' Management of the Church*, p. 89)

Practicing Self-Vindication

Whenever a person vindicates himself, that one demonstrates that he is not an authority.³

We must never speak one word to vindicate our own authority; rather, we should give others the full liberty. Others should come to us in as spontaneous a way as possible. If they do not want us to be their authority, or if they shy away from us, we do not have to force them to accept us. If there is authority in us, whoever desires the Lord will gladly come to us. It is a most ugly thing for anyone to speak for his authority in order to establish authority for himself. No one can establish his own authority. (*The Collected Works of Watchman Nee*, vol. 47, p. 220)

When Moses was reviled, he did not vindicate himself. All vindication, justification, and reaction should come from God, not from man. Those who seek to vindicate themselves do not know God. No one who has walked on this earth has had more authority than Christ. But when the Lord was on earth, He never vindicated Himself. He is the only person who never vindicated Himself. Authority and vindication are incompatible.... Those who vindicate themselves have no authority whatsoever. Whenever a person vindicates himself, he loses his authority. (*The Collected Works of Watchman Nee*, vol. 47, p. 225)

Depreciating the Truth

If a person depreciates the truth, that person does not know authority and is not an authority. In some places it has been said that the truth is just dead knowledge and that all that is needed is spirit and life. This is to court disaster. Some have said that others only care for dead knowledge, but they care for spirit and life. This kind of talk causes the saints to despise others and is

³ Paul's vindication of his apostolic ministry was not self-vindication. According to the truth Paul realized that the church in Corinth could not be restored to a proper situation as long as they were separated from his ministry. Therefore in 2 Cor. 12:19 he says, "All this time you have been thinking that we are defending ourselves to you. Before God in Christ we speak; but all things, beloved, are for your building up."

divisive. It is also a great deviation that can only lead to degradation.

Actually, the truth is a great matter in the New Testament. The Lord Himself said that the Father's word spoken by Him was not only spirit and life (John 6:63) but also truth (17:17). The truth is the unveiling of God's New Testament economy in the apostles' teaching (Acts 2:42; Titus 1:9). The healthy words of this teaching are "those of our Lord Jesus Christ" (1 Tim. 6:3)—no less than those spoken by the Lord while He was on the earth. It is through the healthy words of the apostles' teaching as the unique truth in the New Testament age that God supplies us today with spirit and life.

The truth is central to our experience of Christ in His salvation. The "word of the truth" is "the gospel of your salvation" (Eph. 1:13). God's complete salvation is carried out through the sanctification of the Spirit and belief of the truth (2 Thes. 2:13; cf. John 17:17). It is by holding to truth in love that we are able to grow up into Christ in all things so that He can build us together as His Body in the supply of life (Eph. 4:15-16).

The need for the truth is a particularly strong theme in First and Second Timothy, epistles written by Paul to equip his young co-worker Timothy to face the deviation of some of the churches from the truth. Paul's exhortation to Timothy that he charge some not to teach differently from God's economy is based on the apostles' revelation and understanding of God's economy as the unique truth to be taught in the New Testament ministry. Paul writes that God desires all men not only to be saved but also to come to the full knowledge of the truth (1 Tim. 2:3-4). In 2 Timothy 2:15 Paul charges Timothy to "be diligent to present yourself approved to God, an unashamed workman, cutting straight the word of the truth."

From the beginning of the Lord's recovery, there has been a dual stress on truth and life.

Thank the Lord that nearly all the saints in the Lord's recovery have been preserved by the truth. From the very beginning the recovery has been built upon the truth and life. (*The Ministry of the New Testament and the Teaching and Fellowship of the Apostles*, p. 17)

Knowledge of the truth is the greatest safeguard from deviation. Those who depreciate the truth are putting aside the authority of the Bible and of the teaching and fellowship of the apostles in order to establish their own authority. Historically, those who have replaced the headship of Christ have produced a hierarchical system of authority.

How important it is for us all to learn to go to the Lord and take orders directly from Him! God has ascribed the headship only to Him. This truth is a safeguard to the church life. Once a hierarchy was established in Christianity, all kinds of evil, devilish things were brought in. If we take Christ as the content of the church and the genuine oneness as its ground, and are careful to practice the truth, the church will be steady and kept from evil. (*Life Messages, #1-41, p. 148*)

Emphasizing “Success” Instead of God’s Economy in Faith

In some places, the stress on “success” in the work (raising up large numbers of churches and adding great numbers to the church) has replaced the teaching of God’s economy. “Success” in the work and seeking “increase” in the church can both become idols, replacing Christ Himself as the unique object of our pursuit. While we rejoice in the increase in the number of churches throughout the earth and in the number of saints in the Lord’s recovery, we must always remember that what we build up must be a corporate constitution of the divine life (1 Cor. 3:12-13). Mere numbers, whether of churches or of believers, cannot satisfy God’s heart’s desire. Furthermore, pursuing such goals may cause us to deviate from the constricted way of the cross. The way to serve the Lord in the way of His recovery is to be one spirit with Him to minister Christ as life through the cross for the building up of the Body of Christ (2 Cor. 4:11-12). Brother Nee recognized that for God to approve our work, we must take care that the way in which we work is spiritual and not just care for the result.

The wisdom of the world declares that “the end justifies the means,” but it is never so in the spiritual realm. Our end must be spiritual, but our means must be spiritual too. The cross is no mere symbol; it is a fact and a principle which must govern

all God's work. (*The Collected Works of Watchman Nee*, vol. 30, pp. 156-157)

He also saw early in his ministry that ambition for success is a trap that would lead workers away from taking the way of the cross.

We should not desire success and greatness; we should only observe whether or not our old creation—everything we have by birth—has passed through the cross. Without the flesh passing through death, the power which we have is *surely* not the power of the Holy Spirit. All believers with spiritual insight, who have arrived at the other side of the veil, know that such successes have no spiritual value. (*The Collected Works of Watchman Nee*, vol. 13, p. 254)

Thus the goal of his work was not success but to be one with the Lord to take His way.

Our eyes are not set on the opened door but on our Leader and the way we take. If success becomes the measurement of our work, we will be deceived. The greatest success can only be determined in the future, not the present. The standard is eternity and not the temporal age. If believers take success as the standard, they may not be able to hear the Lord's voice here. The temptation of success may be the biggest trap the enemy has set for the servants of Christ. Many times, success determines the direction of a person's work more than the word of God. This may continue until the direction actually becomes contrary to God's word. Even the success that comes through true obedience may result in excessive boasting, overthrowing one's spiritual serenity. (*The Collected Works of Watchman Nee*, vol. 5, p. 553)

The pursuit of success and increase has led some workers to abandon the constricted way of life and to bring in worldly means such as rock music and dramas to attract people.⁴

⁴ See "An Appeal to the Young People in the Lord's Recovery—Do Not Be Cheated From Your Inheritance!" and "The God-ordained Way to Gain the Increase for the Church vs. the Worldly Ways of Degraded Christianity" in *Using Worldly Means to Gain Increase*.

Other groups of Christians use natural and worldly ways to attract people. They use the ways of being social, of rock music, and of choirs with colorful robes. They use these ways to gain people, but we cannot use these ways. When people get saved and come into our meeting, they hear the pure word of God. (*The Christian Life*, p. 58)

We all are happy to be in the Lord's recovery and appreciate the recovery very much. But let me ask you this question: As one in the Lord's recovery, are you walking on the constricted way? We all must be able to say that we are not taking the way of Christianity, but the way of constriction. We are constricted on every side. Those in Christianity can use rock music or other worldly methods in their services, but we cannot, because our way is constricted. (*Life-study of Matthew*, p. 298)

The Lord cares for the purity of His recovery more than He cares for prevailing works as man measures them. To use worldly means to gain increase and to make success in the work the measure of one's spiritual authority are both signs of deviation from being one with and under the authority of the Head to take the constricted way of life. If we do not take the constricted way, the Lord will declare that even the works we have done in His name are actually works of lawlessness.

Matt. 7:14 – Because narrow is the gate and constricted is the way that leads to life, and few are those who find it.

Matt. 7:22-23 – [22] Many will say to Me in that day, Lord, Lord, was it not in Your name that we prophesied, and in Your name cast out demons, and in Your name did many works of power? [23] And then I will declare to them: I never knew you. Depart from Me, you workers of lawlessness.

Carrying Out Work in Rivalry

Carrying out work in rivalry with others is a strong sign that someone is out from under the headship of Christ. In the Body of Christ, there should be no rivalry. Rivalry is a sign that someone is soulish and self-seeking.

Phil. 1:17 – But the others announce Christ out of ¹selfish ambition, not purely, thinking to raise up affliction in my bonds.

fn. 1:17¹ – Self-seeking, rivalry, faction.

Phil. 2:3 – Doing nothing by way of selfish ambition nor by way of vainglory, but in lowliness of mind considering one another more excellent than yourselves.

Soulish believers are very ambitious, always desiring to stand out among men. They have a strong sense of vainglory in the Lord's work. They aspire to be powerful workers, greatly used by the Lord. What is the reason? They want to gain some position for themselves, that is some glory. (*The Collected Works of Watchman Nee*, vol. 12, pp. 163-164)

The gospel service should be carried out in fellowship. To be in rivalry in the Lord's work is a sign that a person is not in the Spirit of Jesus. To be outside the Spirit of Jesus is to not be under the authority of Christ; this disqualifies a person from being an authority in the Body of Christ.

Phil. 1:5 – For your ¹fellowship unto the furtherance of the gospel from the first day until now.

fn. 1:5¹ – ... The Christ-experiencing and -enjoying life is a life in the furtherance of the gospel, a gospel-preaching life, not individualistic but corporate. Hence, there is the fellowship unto the furtherance of the gospel. The more fellowship we have in the furtherance of the gospel, the more Christ we experience and enjoy. This kills our self, ambition, preference, and choice.

But as long as there is the slightest bit of rivalry, we cannot be in the Spirit of Jesus. Moreover, if we are not in the Spirit of Jesus, we are not in the fellowship of the gospel, and we are through with the experience of Christ. To experience Christ we need the fellowship in the gospel by the Spirit of Jesus without envy, strife, or rivalry. (*The Experience of Christ*, p. 16)

Some today are sending workers to raise up churches in order to stake out their own territory in rivalry with the one work of the ministry in the Lord's recovery. This is in the principle of Korah's rebellion. Korah's rebellion was motivated by rivalry in the Lord's service.

These two signs, one negative and the other positive, were produced through the rebellion of Korah and his company. The

negative sign is the cover of the altar made of the censers belonging to the two hundred fifty men who had been judged (16:36-40). This altar, on which the sacrifices were offered, is a type of the cross of Christ. God's judgment of these two hundred fifty men signifies the judgment of the cross on all of man's service to God which is according to man's opinions, by his flesh, and in rivalry with others. The two hundred fifty men were burning incense in the service of God, which was according to their own way. Their service was judged by God, and the result of that judgment was a negative sign, the covering on the altar. The positive sign is Aaron's budding rod, which signifies Christ in resurrection, the budding Christ.

These two signs, signifying Christ in resurrection and His judging cross, are with us today as a reminder and a warning to us regarding our service to God. The negative sign warns us not to serve God according to our opinion, by our flesh, or in rivalry with others, for that kind of service, we should remember, was judged thirty-five hundred years ago. On the positive side, the budding rod—the budding Christ in His resurrection, who not only buds but also blossoms and bears fruit to maturity—is with anyone who truly stands with God and is one with Him. (*Life-study of Numbers*, p. 187)

Seeking to Establish One's Own Kingdom

Some brothers have fallen into the error of Saul, seeking to establish their own monarchy within the kingdom of God. This also is a sign that one is out from under the headship of Christ.

The Lord's recovery today is the kingdom of God. Some have attempted to build up their work and to establish a monarchy for themselves within the recovery. Brother Nee strongly stressed this same matter when he said that some so-called co-workers were building up for themselves something separate from the recovery while they remained in the recovery. These co-workers built up their own little empires. Recently, a monarchy was built up in a certain area of this country, but the saints there refused to go along with such a monarchy. They wrote to me saying that the churches in that area were not raised up by the one who wanted to build up a monarchy, but were established and nourished by the essence of the Lord's

recovery. These saints said that they wanted the recovery, the kingdom of God today.

The recovery around the globe is uniquely one. The intrinsic essence of the kingdom of God is the Body of Christ, the church of God. Through the past several decades, some brothers have worked and labored very well, and we appreciate what they have done. Yet certain of the workers carried out a work in the recovery by usurping the recovery. Today in some places there is still a tendency, under the name of the recovery, to build up something within the ministry of the recovery, usurping the advantages of the recovery and using the materials of the ministry of the recovery. There are signs that the work in these places is not a pure work—a work purely for the building up of the Body of Christ, the kingdom of God. Rather, it is a work built up for the interest of certain ones. (*Life Study of 1 and 2 Samuel*, p. 64)

Some have claimed certain regions as their territory and have aggressively promoted the spread of their kind of work and church life in order to increase the scope of their influence. This is divisive.

Another hidden divisive factor is the tendency to keep separate territories. The Lord's work and move for the accomplishment of God's eternal economy is uniquely one. If we consider any region in which we are participating in the Lord's unique work as our particular territory, this will be a cause or a factor of division. Even the tendency to keep a separate territory should be uprooted. We should work for the Lord within His measure (2 Cor. 10:13-16), but we should not consider what the Lord has measured to us as our particular territory. Our local work in our region should be for the Lord's universal Body. In the New Testament we cannot see such a thing as jurisdiction in the Lord's work. (*Elders' Training, Book 10: The Eldership and the God-ordained Way* (2), p. 19)

A person who engages in such activities does not know the Body or the authority of the Head.

THE IMPROPER EXERCISE OF AUTHORITY

The improper exercise of authority damages others. Examples of the improper exercise of authority include:

- Behaving as the “authority”;
- Exercising control;
- Beating one’s fellow slaves;
- Leading the believers astray by teaching differently; and
- Making one’s authority the basis of receiving others in fellowship.

Behaving as the “Authority”

A person with spiritual authority neither asserts authority nor behaves as if he is an authority.

An elder must be the authority, but he must never exercise authority. Whenever you exercise your authority as an elder, you are already disqualified from being an elder. Let me again relate the story of Moses. Moses was indeed the authority among God’s people, yet he never exercised authority. Every time that problems, difficulties, or business affairs arose, he had only one place to go, which was to bow before God. No one ever heard him say that he was God’s established authority, or that he was going to deal with matters or take care of affairs with authority. He never said anything like this. But yet all the while, he was being the authority there. He was acting as an authority in love, in patience, and with discernment. His being the authority in this way was his exercising of his authority.

In the same way, you and I must learn to be the authority in love, in spirit, in resurrection, in patience, in discernment, and in coordination. At the same time, we must not exercise our authority. Always bear in mind that we should never exercise our authority as an elder. Never say, “I am an elder, and I sit in the seat of an elder. I am doing such-and-such a thing in the position of an elder.” This is wrong. May the title of an elder and the position of an elder be reduced to zero among us. Among us we should only have the person, the ministry, the responsibility, and the burden of an elder. (*The Elders’ Management of the Church*, pp. 99-100)

Exercising Control

Exercising control is a sign that a person lacks genuine spiritual authority. A person with spiritual authority does not exercise control over others.

1 Pet. 5:3 – Nor as lording it over your allotments but by becoming patterns of the flock.

Also, according to the Lord's word in the Gospels and to Peter's words in his Epistle, the holy Word does not allow the elder to control at all. The Lord Jesus stressed this point very strongly. The leading ones should not be rulers, but slaves, servants, who serve and who do not control. Then Peter tells the elders not to lord it over the believers. The church does not belong to the elders, but the church is God's flock. An elder is a shepherd and a servant to take care of the owner's flock, and the owner is God Himself. In 1 Peter 5:3, Peter tells the elders not to lord it over the "allotments." This Greek word means lots or portions. The churches are God's possession, allotted to the elders as their allotments, their portions, entrusted to them by God for their care. God is the Owner and the Master and the elders are His servants to serve Him and take care of His assignment. The Master has assigned the local church to the elders who should take care of the flock, not by ruling but by serving as a slave, setting themselves up as living examples.

According to the New Testament teaching, there is no rank and no position for the elders. There is also no controlling for the elders because they do not have any rank or any position. They do not have any right to control. The clear word of the New Testament does not allow or give any ground for the elders to take rank, position, or controlling power. (*Elders' Training, Book 4: Other Crucial Matters Concerning the Practice of the Lord's Recovery*, pp. 93-94)

Elders, therefore, are not appointed to be rulers exercising authority over others. Ruling over others is ugly and base. The elders should never rule anyone. In the Gospel of Matthew the Lord Jesus said that He is the only Lord and Master and we all are brothers (23:8, 10). This means that the elders, the overseers, are also no more than brothers. (*The Conclusion of the New Testament, Messages 189-204*, p. 2161)

Lording it over the members of your church under your shepherding is a strong sign of your pride. The elders often have the problem of feeling that “I am an elder, and you all ought to listen to me.” For this reason Peter spoke a strong word, “...the elders among you...nor as lording it over your allotments but by becoming patterns of the flock” (1 Pet. 5:1-3). (*How to Be a Co-worker and an Elder and How to Fulfill Their Obligations*, pp. 68-69)

Even to make decisions for others is an insult to the headship of Christ.

... If an elder makes a decision for a new believer, regardless of whether the elder does it with a good heart or with a critical attitude, he insults Christ’s headship. Many brothers unconsciously insult the headship of Christ. It is a serious thing for an elder to become the lord by telling a saint what to do. We must properly conduct ourselves in the house of God by helping our fellow believers in a way that honors the headship of Christ and by encouraging the dear younger ones to learn how to contact the Lord. This will make a great difference. (*Crucial Principles for the Christian Life and the Church Life*, p. 91)

Beating One’s Fellow Slaves

The Lord warned his disciples not to beat their fellow slaves. People who think they are higher than others are often harsh in their treatment of others. Because a person with spiritual authority does not view himself as higher than others, he does not mistreat others.

Matt. 24:48-49a – [48] But if that evil slave says in his heart, My master delays, [49] And begins to beat his fellow slaves...

Matthew 24 speaks of the evil slave who “says in his heart, My master delays, and begins to beat his fellow slaves...” (vv. 48-49a). When we mistreat a fellow believer by criticizing, opposing, or despising him, that is to beat him in the eyes of the Lord. We have to say a strong word here. We can easily fall into this danger without any kind of realization. We can fall into criticizing the brothers and sisters. Sometimes we may oppose or despise some of the saints. Perhaps we would even fight against them. This is to beat the Lord’s slaves, who are our fellow slaves. (*Basic Lessons on Service*, p. 109)

Some brothers have beaten the saints by subjecting them to harsh public criticism, justifying their displays of temper in the name of “perfecting” the saints.

Leading Astray by Teaching Differently

It is a serious misuse of authority to lead the believers astray by teaching differently.

Acts 20:30 – And from among you yourselves men will rise up, speaking perverted things to draw away the disciples after them.

1 Tim. 1:3 – Even as I exhorted you, when I was going into Macedonia, to remain in Ephesus in order that you might charge certain ones not to teach different things.

The New Testament shows us that the building up of the Body of Christ, including all the local churches, involves the gifted persons—the apostles, prophets, evangelists, and shepherds and teachers (Eph. 4:11-12). These are the ones who give the apostles’ teaching. The building up of the Body of Christ also involves the elders. It is the elders who put the apostles’ teaching into practice. The apostles teach not only the saints in the churches but also the elders of the churches. Then the elders put the apostles’ teaching into practice. The elders should never separate themselves from the apostles’ teaching. For the building up of the church, we need the apostles’ teaching and the eldership to practice it. (*Elders’ Training, Book 10: The Eldership and the God-ordained Way* (2), p. 156-157)

We should not be naïve to think that the things the apostle Paul warned the Ephesians elders of and charged Timothy to deal with could not be problems in the church today.

Making One’s Authority the Basis of Receiving Others in Fellowship

Some transmute the basis of the oneness of the believers by their assertion of their own authority to the point that the actual ground of oneness becomes acceptance of and obedience to their authority. In other words, by making their authority an issue, being one with their claims of authority becomes a prerequisite for participation in the church.

What is the cause of division? It is mainly because of the rivalry for the leadership. “I want to be the head. I will not be under you. If I am not number one, I will set up another group so that I can be in charge.” No one, of course, will openly make such a declaration. He will wear a beautiful cloak and hide behind it if accused of causing division. But as a church, full of life, we can see through his outward pretense. Thus, we reject both antichrist and Diotrephes. If we refuse to follow self-appointed leaders, there will not be any division. Christ is our only Head. (*Seven Mysteries in the First Epistle of John*, p. 79)

“Diotrephes, who loves to be first among them, does not receive us” (v. 9). The local brothers were not clear concerning Diotrephes, and thought that he was indeed a person of authority. He loved “to be first among them.” He was not willing to receive people, nor was he willing for others to do so. Therefore, John said, “If I come, I will bring to remembrance his works which he does” (v. 10). (*The Collected Works of Watchman Nee*, vol. 51, p. 219)

Such ones have abandoned the ground of oneness, which is the oneness of the universal Body of Christ manifested in time and space as the church in a locality. They have made their personal, assumed authority the litmus test for receiving other believers, and they excommunicate those who will not obey them.

We must carry out everything we do in love. To love is always right. However, if you put out people to keep your position and rank as an elder, this is altogether not in love. You are just putting out people as a cloak of protecting your position and your rank. This is wrong. We must practice the church life according to justice in love. (*Elders’ Training, Book 4: Other Crucial Matters Concerning the Practice of the Lord’s Recovery*, p. 79)

While it is true that elders must occasionally quarantine divisive members to protect the saints, we must have clear discernment to recognize whether such authority is being exercised to care for the church or for the elders’ self-interest. For sure, when a mass excommunication is exercised through a rancorous public denunciation, rather than with gravity and sorrow, that is not a proper representation of the authority of Christ in His care for all the members of His Body.

MANIFESTATIONS OF REBELLION

Men often exercise their own authority in the name of God yet in rebellion against Him. This can be true even in the church. Therefore, it is important for us to know the manifestations of rebellion. These include reviling words, reasonings, and rebellious thoughts.

Where is man's rebellion practically manifested? First, it is manifested in words. Second, it is manifested in reasons. Third, it is manifested in the thoughts. In order to be delivered from rebellion, we must first deal with these three things. Otherwise, rebellion cannot be truly dealt with. (*The Collected Works of Watchman Nee*, vol. 47, p. 179)

To discern whether or not a man has met authority, we need to see if such a one has been dealt with in speaking, in reasons, and in opinions. Once a man has confronted authority, his tongue will not be that careless, his reasonings will not be that bold, and deeper still, his opinions will not be exercised. An ordinary man has many opinions, and he uses many outward reasons to fortify his opinions. A day must come when God's authority comes in to remove the strongholds that Satan has set up through reasons and to capture the thoughts of man, making him a willing slave of God who subjects himself to Christ without any opinion. Only then will there be a thorough salvation. (*The Collected Works of Watchman Nee*, vol. 47, p. 193)

Reviling Words

Reviling words are always a sign of rebellion.

...The greatest sign of rebellion is reviling words that issue from the mouth. It is impossible for a spring to gush forth sweet and bitter water together (James 3:11). Once we gush forth bitter water, the sweet water is gone. The same mouth cannot speak reviling words and words of love at the same time. (*The Collected Works of Watchman Nee*, vol. 59, p. 158)

... Peter said that some are not submissive, that they despise lordship. The outward manifestation of this inward state is a reviling in the mouth. When reviling is expressed in words, it becomes an evil speaking. The first mark of rebellion is in

speaking, that is, in one's evil speaking. The tongue is the hardest member to tame. It is the smallest of all members, yet it can boast great things and is set on fire by Gehenna (James 3:5-6). The quickest outward sign of defiance of authority is the exercise of the tongue. (*The Collected Works of Watchman Nee*, vol. 59, pp. 155-156)

The consciousness of sin comes from knowing God. In the same way, the consciousness of reviling words comes from the knowledge of the Body. Reviling words are opposed to the testimony of the Body. (*The Collected Works of Watchman Nee*, vol. 57, p. 240)

It is no wonder that these children of Israel were not permitted to enter the promised land. In their rebellion, they had gone too far. Some of the rebels had said to Moses and Aaron, "You have gone too far!" (16:3). Moses said the same thing to them: "You have gone too far, sons of Levi!" (16:7). Actually, the rebellious ones had gone too far, yet they accused Moses and Aaron of going too far. They condemned Moses and Aaron for doing what they themselves were doing. Similar things have happened through the generations, with the ambitious ones falsely accusing others of being ambitious. In Numbers 16 and 17 God's judgment and vindication clearly indicated that the rebels, not Moses and Aaron, had gone too far. (*Life-study of Numbers*, pp. 184-185)

Reviling words are a strong characteristic of the speaking and writing of those who oppose the leadership in the ministry in the Lord's recovery today. Such words clearly show that those from whom they originate have deviated from a proper standing under the headship of Christ and in the Body of Christ.

Reasonings and Rebellious Thoughts

Reviling words are based on man's reasonings and rebellious thoughts.

2 Cor. 10:4-5 – [4] For the weapons of our warfare are not fleshly but powerful before God for the overthrowing of strongholds, [5] As we overthrow reasonings and *every high thing* rising up against the knowledge of God, and take captive every thought unto the obedience of Christ.

Phil. 2:14 – Do all things without murmurings and reasonings.

In the Bible God never reasons with man. Where reasoning abounds, authority is absent. God's decisions are beyond the consent or dissent of human mentality or reasoning. (*The Collected Works of Watchman Nee*, vol. 59, p. 213)

Man's rebellion against authority is manifested in his speaking as well as in his reasons. Those who do not know authority revile, and this reviling comes from reasoning. Man reviles because he reasons within himself. For example, Aaron and Miriam reviled Moses because Moses married a Cushite. They said, "Has Jehovah indeed spoken only through Moses? Has he not spoken through us also?" (Num. 12:2). Our words always follow our reasons. Aaron and Miriam first reasoned in their mind. Perhaps they thought, "All three of us are servants of God, and God has spoken to all of us. Miriam is the first prophetess, and Aaron is the high priest. All of us are appointed by God. Does God speak to Moses only and not to us as well?" Apparently, nothing was wrong with such a thought; it seemed reasonable enough. Reasons are hidden in the heart, and words are uttered through the mouth. Words of rebellion occur because there are reasons within one's heart. The first cause of rebellion is reasons within one's heart. Unless one deals thoroughly with his reasons, he cannot stop his speaking. (*The Collected Works of Watchman Nee*, vol. 59, p. 213)

Second Corinthians 10:4-5 tells us that reasoning is a kind of stronghold. In order to obey Christ, a man must take captive his every thought and overthrow the stronghold of reasonings. Verse 5 says, "As we overthrow reasonings and every high thing rising up against the knowledge of God, and take captive every thought unto the obedience of Christ." Every high thing refers to everything that hinders a man from the knowledge of God. The greatest of these things is reasonings. Once a man reasons with God, this reasoning becomes a high thing in the eyes of God. Paul said that these strongholds must be overthrown. They are erected by Satan, and they are related to reasons. (*The Collected Works of Watchman Nee*, vol. 59, p. 219)

The writings of the dissenting ones convey a rebellious spirit and are full of reasonings and revilings.

HOW SPIRITUAL AUTHORITY CAN BE LOST

Spiritual authority in the New Testament is conditional. As it is gained through growth in life and increase in vision, so it can be lost by:

- Not staying in the Lord's up-to-date revelation and move;
- Not being faithful to the truth; and
- Touching God's authority in an improper way.

Not Staying in the Lord's Up-to-date Revelation and Move

The ministry of John the Baptist was used by God to inaugurate the New Testament age and usher in the ministry of the Lord Jesus. However, when the greater ministry of Jesus was manifested, John continued to have disciples of his own and to carry on his own work separate from the Lord Jesus. At that point, John's ministry was no longer the up-to-date move of the Lord, and those who followed him suffered a significant delay in entering into the reality of God's New Testament economy.

John 3:26 – And they came to John and said to him, Rabbi, He who was with you across the Jordan, of whom you have testified, behold, He is baptizing and all are coming to Him.

Acts 19:2-3 [2] And he said to them, Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed? And they said to him, On the contrary, we did not even hear whether there is a Holy Spirit. [3] And he said, Into what then were you baptized? And they said, Into John's baptism.

John the Baptist was the forerunner of the Lord Jesus, the voice of one crying in the wilderness (John 1:23). After Christ came out to minister, John should have stopped his work and withdrawn himself from the scene so that Christ might be the only One on the scene, and all those who followed him should have gone to Christ. But because John did not withdraw right away, when his disciples saw that all the people were going to the Lord Jesus to be baptized (John 3:26), they wanted to do justice for their teacher, thus causing John's work to compete with Christ. If John would no longer have baptized people and would have told all his disciples that they should follow Jesus,

not allowing people to follow him, there would have been no difficulty.

At the end John the Baptist was put into prison by Herod the tetrarch and was beheaded. This ending speaks forth, on the one hand, the evil, the corruption, and the darkness of Roman politics; on the other hand, it also shows the result of John the Baptist's not stopping his work. He once testified strongly saying that He was not the Christ but a messenger sent before Christ. He also aggressively announced that Christ was the Bridegroom coming to marry the bride (the church composed of all the believers in Christ), that he was only a friend of the Bridegroom, and that Christ must increase and he must decrease (John 3:28-30). Since this was the case, he should have withdrawn and no longer baptized people, because the One of whom he testified was already baptizing people. But he was still there baptizing people, causing his disciples to be in rivalry with Christ. Therefore, God had to raise up the environment to remove him and terminate his ministry. Yet the baptism of repentance left by him was still being received by people, though it had become the out-of-date truth, thus becoming a hindrance to God's New Testament economy (Acts 18:25; 19:1-5). (*Truth Lessons, Level 1, Volume 2, pp. 77-78*)

Brother Nee applied the same principle to Jonathan, Saul's son. Jonathan was faced with a choice of following one of two ministries—that of Saul or that of David.

Jonathan stood between Saul and David. He was one man standing between two ministries. He should have followed the second ministry. However, because Jonathan's relationship with the first ministry was too deep, he could not disentangle himself. In order to catch up with the ministry of the age, there is the need for us to see the vision. (*The Collected Works of Watchman Nee, vol. 57, p. 261*)

This is also the principle underlying Brother Nee's speaking in his early ministry concerning "the present truth" in 2 Peter 1:12:

2 Pet. 1:12 – Therefore I will be ready always to remind you concerning these things, even though you know them and have been established in the present truth.

Second Peter 1:12 mentions the words “established in the present truth.” The “present truth” can also be rendered the “up-to-date truth.” What is the up-to-date truth? Actually, all the truths are in the Bible; there is not one truth that is not in the Bible. Although they are all in the Bible, through man’s foolishness, unfaithfulness, negligence, and disobedience many of the truths were lost and hidden from man. The truths were there, but man did not see them or touch them. Not until the fullness of time did God release certain truths during particular periods of time and cause them to be revealed once more.

These freshly revealed truths are not God’s new inventions. Rather, they are man’s new discoveries. There is no need for invention, but there is the need for discovery. In past generations God revealed different truths. During certain periods of time, He caused men to discover these specific truths. (*The Collected Works of Watchman Nee*, vol. 11, pp. 843-844)

Brother Nee spoke later in his ministry about needing to stay in the up-to-date flow of the Spirit.

The church moves because the Holy Spirit moves first. As soon as the Holy Spirit moves, all will say “Amen” to His move. The Holy Spirit has moved on ahead of us, and we are following Him in this flow. Our words and our spiritual senses should all be up-to-date with the flow of the Spirit. (*The Collected Works of Watchman Nee*, vol. 55, p. 249)

One of the major sources of problems in the New Testament was the failure of some to remain in the up-to-date move of the Lord through the vision of the age that He imparted to the apostle Paul.

In the end Barnabas left. This shows that even Barnabas could not catch up with the vision of that age, the vision which Paul saw. Although he was the one who ushered Paul into the service, when Paul saw the up-to-date vision of the age, Barnabas was left behind.

Not only were men like Gamaliel and Barnabas falling behind in the vision; even apostles such as Peter and James were in danger of missing out on the vision. They were of the same

general group as Paul, but they were not co-working together. (*The Vision of the Age*, pp. 44-45)

During the time Brother Lee was laboring to bring the churches into the God-ordained way to meet and to serve in the Body of Christ, he told the elders:

We must pick up the view of the Lord's present recovery. Otherwise, we will make ourselves dropouts. We will remain contented in our oldness. Whether or not we will go on with the Lord in His present recovery is up to us. But we have to realize that when the age turns it will not wait for us. Once the age changes, we can be passed by and become dropouts as far as the Lord's move is concerned. We must see the vision of the Lord's present recovery and practice it. (*Elders' Training, Book 9: The Eldership and the God-ordained Way*, pp. 131-132)

Every time the Lord has advanced in His recovery of the truth and the practice of the church life, some have become dropouts, dissenting from the Lord's up-to-date move. The ones dissenting today have criticized the high peak truths and even the concept that the Lord's move is progressive. This is a strong sign that they are out of the up-to-date flow of the Spirit and are therefore cut off from the source of genuine authority in the Body.

Not Being Faithful to the Truth

A second cause of loss of authority is not being faithful to the truth. On the day of Pentecost, Peter took the lead among the disciples to proclaim the gospel (Acts 2:14). He had been personally commissioned by the Lord to use the keys of the kingdom to open the gate for both the Jewish and Gentile believers (Matt. 16:19). However, due to his unfaithfulness to God's New Testament economy in certain matters, his leadership in the ministry waned. This is why he is not mentioned in the book of Acts after chapter 15, and the account there turns to the ministry of Paul, who was faithful to the heavenly vision.

Gal. 2:11-14a – [11] But when Cephas came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face because he stood condemned. [12] For before some came from James, he continually ate with the Gentiles; but when they came, he began to shrink back and separate himself, fearing those of the circumcision.

[13] And the rest of the Jews also joined him in this hypocrisy, so that even Barnabas was carried away in their hypocrisy. [14] But when I saw that they were not walking in a straightforward way in relation to the truth of the gospel...

Acts 26:19 – Therefore, King Agrippa, I was not disobedient to the heavenly vision.

When Paul saw that Peter and the others did not walk uprightly according to the truth of the gospel, he rebuked Peter before all (Gal. 2:14). Through his weakness, Peter was damaging the truth of the gospel, the truth that both Gentile believers and Jewish believers are the same. This indicates that in Galatians 2 Peter's spiritual capacity had diminished. Peter was not backslidden, but his spiritual capacity was less than that of James. For this reason, in Galatians 2:9 the name of James is mentioned before the name of Peter. Furthermore, the fact that brothers came "from James" indicates that James represented the church in Jerusalem. (*Leadership in the New Testament*, p. 8)

As one who had an abundance of the divine revelation stored up in his being, Paul faced the situation among the Jews, the Roman politicians, and the church people. Among the Jewish religionists he saw hypocrisy, and among the Roman politicians he saw corruption. Furthermore, in the church life he saw weakness, compromise, and the lack of light and revelation. It seems that no one in the church was bold enough to stand for the revelation they had received and the vision they had seen. In the midst of that situation Peter should have stood boldly for the revelation he had received of the Lord, but he failed to do this.

In chapters two through five of Acts Peter and John were very strong and bold. As a result of their boldness, they were brought before the Sanhedrin in chapter four, and they were placed by the Sanhedrin in public custody in chapter five. There was no sign of weakness or compromise in Peter and John in these early chapters. There is no hint that they were afraid of the Jewish religionists or compromised with them. However, as we read from Acts 15 onward and also read Galatians 2, we see that Peter eventually was exposed in his weakness and even in his hypocrisy. (*Life-study of Acts*, pp. 567-568)

Some who have been bold to stand for the truth in the Lord's recovery in years past have lost their standing due to a willingness to compromise the truth regarding separation from the world, all prophesying, denominations, oneness, etc.

Touching God's Authority in an Improper Way

One with a measure of spiritual authority can lose it by touching God's government in an improper way. Brother Lee told the following story concerning Brother T. Austin-Sparks:

The dear brother who was the leader in that place had touched God's government. To be governmentally wrong with God is a serious thing...

The dear one who invited me to England had firstly been invited by us to come to Taiwan. He came in 1955 and again in 1957. During his first visit he did not touch the church matter, but in his second visit he purposely touched it [in a negative way]...When I visited him in England sixteen months later, in August, 1958, he told me that when the plane took off from Taipei for Hong Kong, the flow within him was cut off and that it had not been recovered. On the very day he told me this, he said that he had cried to the Lord early in the morning, asking Him why the flow had been cut off. (*Life-study of Hebrews*, pp. 171-172)

WHEN AN “AUTHORITY” DEVIATES FROM THE TRUTH

At times the Lord sovereignly allows turmoils in and among the churches. These turmoils serve to purify the churches and to manifest those who are approved.

1 Cor. 11:19 – For there must even be parties among you, that those who are approved may become manifest among you.

During the desolation of the church, the different kinds of confusion, errors, and corruption function to manifest the ones approved by God. Whoever passes through the tests and is approved by God will be manifested through the desolation.

God does not desire the desolation, but in His hand it functions to manifest those who can pass the tests. Without desolation, confusion, errors, corruption, and darkness, we would not be able to see each individual’s condition... (*Three Aspects of the Church, Book 2: The Course of the Church*, p. 63)

In our history, such turmoils have often been caused by brothers of some prominence in the work. This should not surprise us. Remember that the 250 who followed Korah were “leaders of the assembly” (Num. 16:2). What then should we do when those who seem to be authorities deviate from the truth?

TWO BALANCING PRINCIPLES

When a person who seems to be an authority deviates from the truth, we must observe two balancing principles:

- We cannot follow those who deviate from the truth.
- We should not revile men.

We Cannot Follow Those Who Deviate from the Truth

First, we must be very clear that when a leader violates an essential truth either in teaching or in practice, we cannot follow him. If the path that leader is taking leads us into division from the Body of Christ or from the proper standing of a local church, we cannot go along with him. In some cases, the assertion of authority compromises the standing of a local church, making it instead a local sect. This is because the leaders’ claims to

authority become the basis of receiving believers into fellowship. Furthermore, if a church withdraws from the common fellowship of all the local churches in the Body of Christ, it is no longer a local church but a local sect.

Some may have the attitude that their local church is independent and autonomous and should not be interfered with. This is localism. An independent local church is actually a local sect. (*The Constitution and the Building Up of the Body of Christ*, p. 96)

The local churches should fellowship with all the genuine local churches on the whole earth to keep the universal fellowship of the Body of Christ. Any local church that does not keep this universal fellowship of the Body of Christ is divisive and becomes a local sect. Some so-called local churches are not genuine and have become divisions; we do not need to fellowship with such "churches." (*A Brief Presentation of the Lord's Recovery*, p. 44)

When people say, "Don't bother us—we are the local church in this locality," in God's sight they are a local sect, not a local church. (*Life-study of Genesis*, p. 456)

Similarly, if a group implements an unscriptural form of government, it becomes a sect.

The Bible has decreed all institutions of the church in a clear way already. We must never have any decrees, whether they are creeds, constitutions, rules, charters, or ordinances outside the Bible, no matter how scriptural they may appear. Otherwise, we will become a sect right away. (*The Collected Works of Watchman Nee*, vol. 7, pp. 1116-1117)

In order to preserve a proper standing, we must withdraw from anything that is sectarian.

For ourselves, we cannot join any sect or remain in one, for our church connection can only be on local ground, but in regard to others we must not make leaving a sect the condition of fellowship with those believers who are in a sect. (*The Collected Works of Watchman Nee*, vol. 30, p. 87)

Inevitably, those from whom we separate ourselves will call us divisive.

When some brothers or sisters want to return to the Body of Christ, these groups say that those who want to come out of them are being divisive. They do not realize that all those who are in the divisive groups and who refuse to depart from them are being divisive themselves. (*The Collected Works of Watchman Nee*, vol. 50, p. 822)

However, to separate oneself from a sect to return to the proper ground is not divisive.

They themselves are being divisive when they say, "I am of Paul, and I of Apollos, and I of Cephas, and I of Christ." They have already created many divisions. But as soon as someone wants to leave, they say, "You should keep the Christian oneness." But their oneness is not as large as the Body of Christ. (*The Collected Works of Watchman Nee*, vol. 50, p. 822)

If anyone thinks that he should not be divisive, he should first bear in mind what it means to be divisive. Being divisive means being divided from the Body. The division in 1 Corinthians 12 refers to a division from the Body (v. 25), not a separation from a group which is not according to the Body." (*The Collected Works of Watchman Nee*, vol. 50, p. 820)

Thus, to depart from a sect is not an act of rebellion.

A man can revolt only against a legitimate government; he cannot revolt against a government which is itself not legitimate. It is rebellion to separate oneself from a legitimate government, but it is not rebellion to separate oneself from a government that is not legitimate. (*The Collected Works of Watchman Nee*, vol. 50, p. 824)

On the one hand, we should not reject any believer who is not actively promoting anything divisive.

If any believer who is meeting with any of these sectarian divisions would attend the meetings of the local churches, or contact the believers meeting in the local churches, he should not be rejected, as long as he does not promote anything divisive. (*A Brief Presentation of the Lord's Recovery*, p. 49)

On the other hand, we should reject anyone who promotes sectarian divisions.

However, anyone who is aggressive for and promotes the sectarian divisions should be considered divisive and should be rejected after a first and second admonition (Titus 3:10). I believe that this is the fair and scriptural way to deal with the divisions that have separated themselves from the genuine local churches and have broken the unique fellowship of the Body of Christ. Anyhow, according to the apostles' teaching in the New Testament, anyone who makes the division, who is divisive and bears the "germs" of division, that is, who is factious, sectarian, we should refuse them (Titus 3:10) and turn away from them (Rom. 16:17). (*A Brief Presentation of the Lord's Recovery*, p. 49)

We Should Not Revile Others

While we cannot follow a leader or anyone else who departs from the truth, neither should we revile him:

Acts 23:4-5 – [4] And those standing by said, Do you revile the high priest of God? [5] And Paul said, I did not know, brothers, that he is the high priest; for it is written, "You shall not speak evilly of the ruler of your people."

Jude 8-10 – [8] Nevertheless in like manner these dreamers also defile the flesh and despise lordship and revile dignities. [9] But Michael the archangel, when he contended with the devil and disputed concerning the body of Moses, did not dare to bring a reviling judgment against him but said, The Lord rebuke you. [10] But these revile the things that they do not know; and the things that they understand naturally, like animals without reason, in these they are being corrupted.

Whenever there is a conflict between deputy authority and direct authority, we can choose to submit to the deputy authority but not to obey him. Any prohibition of God's commission, such as a ban on the preaching of the gospel, should be met with submission, not obedience. Any charge to commit God's forbidden acts, such as an enjoinder to sin, should likewise be met with submission, not obedience. We cannot revile the rulers of the state or our parents. We cannot stage revolutions or insurrections. In attitude and heart we should always be submissive. The preaching of the gospel,

however, is a direct injunction of the Lord; no matter how much men oppose us, we should still persevere in it. Nebuchadnezzar commanded all men to worship his image, but God's people could not obey him even though he was the king. In all other things we should submit and obey. (*The Collected Works of Watchman Nee*, vol. 59, p. 232)

We should respect the measure of authority that has been given to a person. We should not revile him, but neither should we obey if our conscience, bound by the Word of God, objects.⁵

OUR RESPONSIBILITY IN DEALING WITH PROBLEMS IN THE CHURCH

When problems arise in the church, we have a responsibility to cooperate with the Lord for His interest. Our motivation should be to seek to gain our brothers by restoring them to a proper condition in their fellowship with the Lord and with His Body. We should not be presumptuous to think that we are adequate to solve any problem, but we should seek the Lord in prayer that he might infuse us with Himself so that we could be one with Him to give life to the saints. In some cases, we need to care for the Lord's interest by seeking out His representatives to make the situation known to them.

⁵ In a recently published book, *Three Aspects of the Church, Book 2: The Course of the Church*, Brother Lee presents five points concerning how to face a situation of degradation in the church. They are: holding a good conscience (1 Tim. 1:5, 19; Acts 24:16; 1 Tim. 3:9; 1 Pet. 3:16); cleansing ourselves from vessels of dishonor (2 Tim. 2:21); praying out of a pure heart (2 Tim. 2:22); fellowshipping in life (1 John 1:3; Phil. 2:1-2); and caring for the anointing (1 John 2:27). All of these requirements are for us to be an overcomer in the midst of a degraded situation. To overcome is to recover the first love (Rev. 2:4-5), be faithful unto death (2:10), abandon the teachings and organizations that were not there at the beginning (2:14), abandon the teachings of Jezebel which bring in worldliness and worldly authority (2:20), reject spiritual weakness and death (3:1), keep love for the brothers (3:7), and not be self-satisfied (3:17). We commend this book to the saints' prayerful reading.

Seeking to Gain Our Brother

In dealing with problems in the church our heart should always be to gain our brother.

Matt. 18:15 – Moreover if your brother sins against you, go, reprove him between you and him alone. If he hears you, you have gained your brother.

When someone sins against you, the Lord’s charge to “go, reprove him between you and him alone” is, on the one hand, to avoid getting others unnecessarily involved and therefore possibly damaged and, on the other hand, to restore the offending brother to a proper condition before the Lord and in the fellowship of the Body. How sweet are the Lord’s words—“you have gained your brother.” This should be our heart.

Asking and Giving Life

When we see problems in the church, we should first go to the Lord in prayer. In this way we acknowledge His headship and our own insufficiency in ourselves.

1 John 5:16 – If anyone sees his brother sinning a sin not unto death, he shall ask and he will give life to him, to those sinning not unto death. There is a sin unto death; I do not say that he should make request concerning that.

As we pray in oneness with the Lord, the Lord causes us to be channels of life through which the life-giving Spirit can impart the divine life to the one for whom we ask.

The vital point here is that if we would pray for a brother according to what is described in verse 16, we need to be one with the Lord. We must abide in the Lord and ask in one spirit with Him. Because we are so one with the Lord, we can become the means, the channel, through which God’s life-giving Spirit can impart life to the one for whom we ask. This imparting of life takes place in the fellowship of the divine life. (*Life-study of 1 John*, p. 331)

Telling the Lord’s Representatives about Leprosy in the House

In the Old Testament if the owner of a house discovered leprosy in his house, he was to tell the priest. Leprosy indicates serious

sin as the issue of rebellion. Leprosy in a house indicates that there is rebellion in the church against God's authority and God's economy.

Lev. 14:35 – Then he to whom the house belongs shall come and tell the priest, saying, It seems to me that there is something like an infection in the house.

Sin is actually leprosy. The denotation of sin in the biblical sense is rebellion. Sin, therefore, is rebellion against God, against God's representative, or deputy, authority, and against God's plan, arrangement, government, and administration. As a whole, sin is rebellion against God's economy. (*Life-study of Leviticus*, p. 341)

“When you enter into the land of Canaan, which I give to you for a possession, and I put a leprous disease in a house of the land of your possession, then he who owns the house shall come and tell the priest, saying, Something like a leprous disease has appeared in my house” (vv. 34-35). The owner's coming and telling this to the priest signifies that the leading brothers or those who are concerned for the church approach the Lord or the apostle, the Lord's deputy, and tell the Lord or His deputy. This is what we need to do when the church is sick. (*Life-study of Leviticus*, p. 386)

As New Testament believers, our house is the church. When we see that there is leprosy in the church, that is, rebellion against God's authority and deviation from God's economy, we should bring the matter to the Lord and to brothers who possess a measure of spiritual authority.

“It Was Made Known to Me by the Household of Chloe”

In chapter one of 1 Corinthians there is a clear example of practicing the reality of Leviticus 14:35. There Paul tells us that the situation in Corinth was made known to him by the household of Chloe, a sister in the Lord.

1 Cor. 1:11 – For it has been made clear to me concerning you, my brothers, by those of the household of Chloe, that there are strifes among you.

The church in Corinth had many problems. Those of the household of Chloe were clear concerning a certain problem, but

they also realized that it was beyond their measure to address this problem. For that reason, they presented a clear picture of the situation to the apostle Paul, who did have the spiritual stature to deal with the problem. The household of Chloe performed a great service to the Lord and to the saints and the church in Corinth.

AUTHORITY IN THE AGE OF REVELATION

The book of Revelation does not speak about the elders in the local churches, but it does speak about shining stars as the messengers to the churches. This shows us that authority is not a matter of position (elders), but of nature (shining stars).

Rev. 1:20 – The mystery of the seven stars which you saw upon My right hand and the seven golden lampstands: The seven stars are the messengers of the seven churches, and the seven lampstands are the seven churches.

These shining stars are not necessarily elders. They may or may not be elders. They are the messengers of the churches, meaning that they are the ones who speak in oneness with the Spirit to convey what the Spirit is speaking to the churches.

Not only is Christ Himself the star, but also His followers, the shining ones in the churches. In the Acts and the Epistles the leading ones were called elders or bishops, but in the last book of the Bible they are the stars. Now it is not a matter of title or position, but a matter of shining. All the living ones of the local churches must be shining stars.

What does it mean to be a star? Daniel 12:3 gives the answer: “And they that be wise shall shine as the brightness of the firmament; and they that turn many to righteousness as the stars forever and ever.” The stars are those who shine in darkness and turn people from the wrong way to the right way. Now, during the church age, is the time of night; so we need the shining of the stars. All the leading ones in the local churches should never claim their position: they should never say, “I am one of the elders; you must recognize me.” If they say this, they are in darkness. We need the brothers and sisters who shine; we need the shining stars. (*Finding Christ by the Living Star*, pp. 24-25)

In the Acts and the Epistles the elders were the leading ones in the operation of the local churches (Acts 14:23; 20:17; Titus 1:5). The eldership is somewhat official, and at the time the book of Revelation was written the offices in the churches had deteriorated in the degradation of the church. Therefore, in this book the Lord calls our attention back to spiritual reality. For

this reason, Revelation emphasizes the stars, the messengers, of the churches rather than the elders. The office of the elders is easily perceived, but the believers need to see the importance of the spiritual and heavenly reality of the stars for the proper church life to bear the testimony of Jesus in the darkness of the church's degradation.

The stars may or may not be elders. It is certain that they are the faithful ones, the genuinely spiritual ones, the overcoming ones among the saints in the church. In the sight of God such ones are shining stars. (*The Conclusion of the New Testament, Messages 99-113*, pp. 1221-1222)

In the book of Revelation there are no elders in the churches; rather, there are messengers. At the time this book was written, the church had become degraded. Hence, in Revelation, the Lord repudiates all formalities. Being an elder may be somewhat legal or formal. Do not aspire to be an elder; desire to be a shining star. Do not be one with a mere position—be a shining star. Both the lampstand and the stars shine at night. Both the church and the leading ones in the churches must shine. All the leading ones must be stars. (*Life-study of Revelation*, p. 108)

Today what the Lord desires in the church are faithful ones, not those who assert their authority to control others. What the Lord needs are shining stars who speak in oneness with the Spirit. May we turn from every pursuit tinged with self-interest to be purified by the Lord that we may be luminaries through whom our God may shine that He may gain His expression and His representation through the church to usher in His kingdom.

Recommended Reading

- *The Collected Works of Watchman Nee*, vol. 47, pp. 103-302.
- *The Collected Works of Watchman Nee*, vol. 59, pp. 97-245.
- Andrew Yu, *An Affirmation of the Proper Authority in the Body of Christ*.
- *Leadership in the New Testament*.
- *The Elders' Management of the Church*, pp. 69-100.

