

THE RECOVERY OF THE CHURCH

(Thursday—Second Morning Session)

Message Two

The Original Condition of the Church, the Degradation of the Church, and the Recovery of the Church

Scripture Reading: Matt. 16:18; Rev. 1:11; Acts 14:23; Titus 1:5; Col. 1:18; 2:19

- I. Our history in the Lord's recovery is not that of an organization or of a movement; it is a history of recovery—John 1:1; 1 John 1:1:**
- A. In Matthew 19:8 we see the principle of recovery: "From the beginning it has not been so":
 - 1. Recovery means to go back to the beginning; we need to go back to the beginning, receiving the Lord's grace to go back to God's original intention, to what God ordained in the beginning.
 - 2. The word *recovery* means that something was there originally and then was degraded, damaged, or lost; thus, there is a need to bring that thing back to its original state and to its normal condition—Dan. 1:1-2; Ezra 1:5; 6:5.
 - B. When we speak of the recovery of the church, we mean that the church was there originally, that it became degraded, and that there is the need to bring the church back to its original state.
 - C. The Lord's recovery of the church brings us back to the beginning for the fulfillment of God's eternal purpose and original intention regarding the church—Eph. 1:4-5, 22-23; 3:9-11.
- II. We need to understand the recovery of the church in relation to God's intention and accomplishment and Satan's work of destruction—v. 11:**
- A. The New Testament reveals that regarding the church, God has a definite intention, purpose, and goal; first, God purposed, and then He came in to accomplish His purpose—Rev. 4:11; Eph. 1:4-5, 9, 11, 22-23.
 - B. The New Testament also gives us a clear record of how God's enemy came in to destroy what God had accomplished—Matt. 16:18; 13:24-32:
 - 1. The satanic way to destroy God's accomplishment has an inward aspect and an outward aspect:
 - a. The inward aspect is to damage and corrupt God's people—Acts 5:3.
 - b. The outward aspect is to destroy God's accomplishment—Matt. 13:32.
 - 2. Satan produced many substitutes for Christ, divided the Body of Christ, and killed the function of the members of the Body by the clergy-laity system—Col. 2:8; Rev. 2:6, 14-15.
 - C. Because God is a purposeful God with an eternal purpose and because once He has determined to do something, nothing can change His mind or stop Him; after Satan's destruction God comes in to redo the things that He had done before—Ezra 1:3-11; 6:3-5.

D. God's redoing of what He has accomplished is His recovery; this is to bring back whatever has been lost and destroyed by Satan and to recover the church according to His eternal purpose and original intention—Matt. 19:8; 16:18.

III. In order to recognize the need for the recovery of the church, we need to know the original condition of the church and the degradation of the church:

A. The original condition of the church had the following characteristics:

1. In the original church there was no hierarchy among the believers—Rom. 12:4-5:
 - a. The believers were all brothers without distinction in rank—Matt. 23:8.
 - b. As members of the Body, the believers coordinated with one another on an equal level, and each one fulfilled his particular function—Rom. 12:4-5.
 - c. The believers were all priests to God, without an intermediary class or the distinctions between clergy and laity—1 Pet. 2:5, 9.
2. The early church was completely separated from the world; it was in the world but not of the world—Rom. 12:2; 1 John 2:15; 2 Cor. 6:14-17.
3. The original church forsook idols and fully allowed God to speak—1 John 5:21.
4. There was only one church, one expression of the Body of Christ, in a locality—1 Cor. 12:27; 1:2; Rev. 1:11.
5. The churches were one in fellowship, but each one was independent in administration, and there was no head church or federation—1 Cor. 10:16.
6. The churches honored Christ as the Head and allowed the Holy Spirit to have authority—Col. 1:18; 2:19; Acts 13:1-2; 10:19-20; 11:12.

B. The degradation of the church involved hierarchy, union with the world, idols, divisions, not allowing God to speak, having organization for unification, and usurping the headship of Christ and encroaching on the authority of the Holy Spirit.

IV. The recovery of the church has been gradual and progressive:

A. Before the end of the first century, the Lord's recovery began, and century by century the recovery has continued on—2 Tim. 2:19-26.

B. In the sixteenth century Martin Luther rose up to begin the Reformation, and the sealed Bible was unlocked; based upon the Bible, he recovered justification by faith, but the proper church life was not recovered—Rom. 1:17:

1. The Protestant churches were not separated from the world, and they did not eliminate the intermediary class.
2. Among the Protestant churches there were more divisions, and the various denominations did not put away organization for unification.
3. The denominations did not allow Christ to have the absolute position and did not allow the Holy Spirit to have absolute authority.

C. In the eighteenth century Zinzendorf was raised up by the Lord to lead the Moravian brothers to a recovery of the church life; they were separated from the world, removed distinctions of rank, emphasized fellowship and coordination, endeavored to keep the oneness, removed formal organization for unification, and allowed Christ to be the Head and the Holy Spirit to rule among them.

- D. In the nineteenth century the Lord raised up a group of brothers in England, who went further in the recovery of the church life—Rev. 3:7-13:
 - 1. In the hands of the Brethren, the Bible was truly an opened book, a shining book, for they absolutely obeyed the Lord’s word; many important truths were released through them—1 Tim. 2:4.
 - 2. They absolutely eliminated hierarchy and were brothers together and members one of another with an emphasis on mutual love and fellowship.
 - 3. They eliminated sectarianism and maintained the testimony of oneness.
 - 4. However, in certain aspects they were a failure, and because of this the Lord could not go on at that time anywhere in the Western world.
- E. We need to see the crucial points of the recovery of the church in the Far East:
 - 1. In 1933 and 1934 we clearly saw a crucial matter—the principle of the church taking a locality as its boundary—Acts 14:23; Titus 1:5; Rev. 1:11:
 - a. On the one hand, this prevents division and confusion; on the other hand, it also prevents “extra-local” unions.
 - b. According to the teaching of the Bible, the church in each locality should live directly before the Lord and be responsible to the Head, Christ—Col. 1:18; 2:19; Acts 13:1-2.
 - 2. We kept the principle of the administration of the church being local and the fellowship of the church being universal—14:23; 2:42; 1 Cor. 10:16-17:
 - a. The church in each locality has its own administration, and the administration of the church cannot go beyond the local boundary.
 - b. The fellowship of the church should not only be local; rather, it should be universal because it is the fellowship of the Body of Christ.
 - 3. We clearly saw that churches in different localities should not have an organization for unification, for all churches should be directly under the ruling of Christ, the Head, and should directly obey the authority of the Holy Spirit—Col. 1:18; Acts 13:1-2.
 - 4. We emphasized the universal priesthood; that is, we stressed the fact that every believer is a priest—1 Pet. 2:5, 9.
 - 5. We also emphasized the Body’s coordination in service, exhorting all the saints to keep the principle of the Body by serving together in coordination—Rom. 12:4-5; 1 Cor. 12:12-27.
 - 6. We emphasized the practical service in the church—Rom. 12:5-11.
- V. The Lord’s recovery is different from today’s Christianity; it is impossible for there to be reconciliation between the recovery and Christianity—Matt. 13:31-33, 44-46; Rev. 18:4; 19:1-3, 7-9:**
 - A. The recovery of the church is for bringing us out of the unscriptural system of clergy-laity back to the beginning for the pure practice of the church life according to the divine revelation—2:6, 15; Matt. 16:18; Eph. 2:20-22.
 - B. The history among us has been one of coming completely out of Christianity without compromise—Ezra 1:3-11; 6:3-5; Rev. 18:4.
 - C. There should be no bridge between the local churches and Christianity; we should be what we are without compromise or pretense, maintaining the gap between us and Christianity—1:11; Gal. 1:4.

Excerpts from the Ministry:

GOD'S GOAL—THE CHURCH

God's goal is the church, and the church is a corporate matter. The book of Ephesians reveals the church in seven major aspects: the Body (1:22-23), the new man (2:15), the kingdom (v. 19), the household (v. 19), the dwelling place of God (vv. 21-22), the bride, the wife, of Christ (5:23-32), and the warrior (6:10-20). These aspects of the church are all corporate matters. Throughout the centuries of church history, the problems, the confusion, and the divisions took place due to the saints not seeing the corporate church of God. In the past the saints saw something concerning such items as God's salvation, sanctification, and the need of being spiritual, keeping the holy Word, not loving the world, and being for the Lord's interest and work on this earth. They also saw that we need to labor to win souls and that we need to be enthusiastic for evangelism to the extent that we would go to other lands for the spread of the gospel. However, all these items are not God's goal but are the means to reach His goal. God has only one goal. God's goal is unique. God's ultimate goal is the church.

The church is not something merely for the future. Today is the dispensation, the age, of the church. The next age is the age of the kingdom of a thousand years. The church is for now; the church is for today. God's goal is to have a church today, a church in this dispensation, a church on this earth. Many dear saints throughout the centuries received light on many things in the Bible, but they missed the mark of God's divine economy and the goal of God's eternal purpose. The Lord desires to fulfill His purpose and to make His goal so clear to all His loving seekers.

THREE ITEMS THAT DAMAGE THE CHURCH

The enemy Satan has used three main items to damage the church: Jewish religion, Greek philosophy, and human organization. These are the major sources of the church's division, ruin, and corruption. Because these items invaded the church, some of the faithful, living members of the church were burdened to defend the church, to keep the church away from Judaism, Greek philosophy, and human organization. These defenders were devoted Christians who loved the Lord, but they were not so clear about God's goal to gain the church as the corporate Body, the new man, the kingdom, the household, the habitation of God, the bride, and the warrior. Thus, although their intention was good, they made big mistakes in their defending of the church. In their intention to defend the church, some of them actually brought more damage to the church.

HIERARCHY BROUGHT INTO THE CHURCH

We can see an instance of this in the second century with Ignatius, a strong leader and defender of the church. Ignatius wrongly taught that an overseer, or a bishop, is higher than an elder. In Acts 20, however, Paul called the elders in the church in Ephesus overseers, or bishops (vv. 17, 28). The Greek word *episkopos* can be translated "overseer" or "bishop." *Epi* means "over," and *skopos* means "seer." The term *elder* denotes a person of maturity, while the term *bishop*, or *overseer*, denotes the responsibility and function of an elder. The responsibility and function of an elder are to oversee the church. From the erroneous teaching of Ignatius that bishops are higher than elders came the mistaken concept that elders are for a local church and that bishops are for a region of churches. This led to the episcopal system of ecclesiastical government. This wrong teaching also became the source of the hierarchy of bishops, archbishops, cardinals, and the pope in today's Roman Catholic Church. Ignatius was able to make such a big mistake because he was not clear about the Body, the one new

man. His erroneous teaching gave the ground to rank within the church and brought hierarchy into the church.

THE DEFENDING OF THE TRUTH CONCERNING CHRIST AND THE DIVINE TRINITY

In the early days of the church, some great teachers stood up to defend the truth that Christ is both God and man. This was because Greek philosophy had entered into the church. When this philosophy became mingled with Christian teachings, it became known as Gnosticism, which taught that all matter is essentially evil. Those who held to the teaching of Gnosticism could not believe that Christ could have had the defilement of human flesh. Hence, they denied the incarnation, redemption, and resurrection of Christ. This is why the apostle John wrote that any spirit that does not confess that Jesus Christ came in the flesh is not of God (1 John 4:2-3).

The defenders of the truth attempted to clear up the different opinions concerning the person of Christ. This resulted in Christology, which is the study of who Christ is, the study of Christ's Person. Arius was a heretical teacher who said that Christ was a creature but that He was not the Creator. The council assembled at Nicaea in A.D. 325 declared Arianism a heresy and rejected it. The Nicene Creed stresses that God is triune, that the Godhead has three persons—the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Many, however, unconsciously and subconsciously believe that there are three separate Gods. They do not understand that God is triune, not for doctrinal study or debate but for the dispensing of Himself into His chosen and redeemed people.

Our God is the Triune God, and He has been processed so that He can be dispensed into us. For a watermelon to be dispensed into us, it must first be cut into slices. As we chew these slices, they become juice. The whole watermelon, the slices, and the juice may be considered as the "trinity of the watermelon." When the watermelon has been processed into juice, it can easily be taken into us to become our very element. The Triune God has been processed in the Son and has been consummated the Spirit. The Spirit today is like the juice of the watermelon available for us to drink. We all have been given to drink one Spirit (1 Cor. 12:13). The Bible does not tell us that we have been given to drink one Father or one Son. We cannot drink the whole watermelon or the slices of watermelon, but we can drink its juice. Likewise, we can drink the Spirit, who is the ultimate consummation of the processed Triune God. Our God today is the "juice God." God has been processed.

The Divine Trinity was not fully revealed until the Lord Jesus was resurrected. After the Lord's resurrection He came back to charge the disciples to go and disciple the nations, baptizing them into the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit (Matt. 28:19). The Divine Trinity was never so clearly revealed as it was after the Lord's resurrection, because after His resurrection God was fully processed. The "watermelon" has been fully processed to become the "juice." Because God has been processed, He is drinkable. The book of Revelation concludes with a call to take the water of life (22:17). The water of life is the processed God, the life-giving Spirit. Those defenders of the truth who wrote the Nicene Creed were not clear that the Triune God had been processed for the divine dispensing of Himself into His elect.

THE DIVISIONS OF CHRISTIANITY

As we have seen, due to the defending of the truth, different opinions were brought in among the so-called Christians. Then these opinions created great divisions. Eventually, Western Christianity became the Roman Catholic Church, and Eastern Christianity became the Greek Orthodox Church. Besides these two great branches of Christianity, there were

the Nestorians in Persia. These were the three great divisions of so-called Christianity by the sixth century. Besides these three great divisions, there were many free groups. Because many free groups were breaking off from the general church, some designated the general church as the Catholic Church. *Catholic* means “universal as one.” Small free groups were formed because some Christians saw that the so-called general church had become worldly. They attempted to stay in the general church, but eventually, they saw that there was no way to help it, so they began to meet by themselves. This happened again and again throughout the church’s history. Again and again free groups were formed. The problem with all these groups, however, was that they did not see the corporate goal of God.

THE LORD’S RECOVERY

Some of us may feel that the Lord’s recovery started with Martin Luther, but we need to realize that the Lord’s recovery with His overcomers began in the second century. Within a short time after the completion of the divine revelation, the church fell into degradation, so there was the need of a recovery. The Lord’s recovery began immediately after the degradation of the church came in. The line of the Lord’s recovery started in the second century and has continued throughout the centuries.

Throughout the centuries those who loved the Lord would not go along with worldly Christianity. They desired to keep the Lord’s word as much as they could. They desired to live with a pure conscience and worship God according to what they saw from the Scriptures. But I have to stress again and again that they were not clear about God’s corporate goal. This is why the Lord’s coming has been delayed even to this day. Regardless of how many groups of Christians there are on this earth, as long as there is no proper church life, the Lord does not yet have His goal.

We need to have the realization that we are the “church people.” Day by day we are “churching.” Churching is our work. We are the church. We are not denominational, interdenominational, or nondenominational. We are the church people. We are in the recovery of the Lord’s goal. This recovery is not the recovery of justification by faith, salvation, or sanctification. We are in the recovery of the church, which includes the recovery of all the foregoing items.

THE FORMATION OF STATE CHURCHES

The Lord’s recovery took a definite form with Martin Luther’s stand for the truth concerning justification by faith. Luther was a great defender of salvation, of justification by faith, but he also made some big mistakes. On the one hand, he defended the truth. On the other hand, he made the mistake of becoming affiliated with the German government. This affiliation with the government was the source of the so-called state churches, or national churches. Do not think that I am criticizing Luther. I realize that we all are human. On the one hand, we can be used by God to a great degree. On the other hand, we can be weak in other areas. Luther was strong for justification by faith even at the cost of his life. In his stand for justification by faith, he stood against the pope, the greatest power on earth at that time, but when he came to the question of the church, he was weak. This is according to the historical record. The first state church was the state church of Germany. Then many other European nations followed Germany, such as Denmark, Norway, and Sweden. Eventually, the state church of England, the Anglican church, was formed. The Church of England is mingled with the government of England. Even today the queen of England is the head of the Church of England. The king of Denmark is the head of the Lutheran state church of Denmark, and the king of Sweden is the head of the Church of Sweden today. This came from Luther’s mistake. Even Luther himself admitted that he was weak in this point. All

the defenders of the truth made some mistakes. There is hardly one exception to this. All these mistakes were due to one great lack—the vision, the proper unveiling, of God’s goal. God’s goal is the church. By the Lord’s mercy, the vision of the church, the revelation concerning God’s corporate goal, is so clear today. We all need to be clear about God’s unique goal—the church.

OUR SAFEGUARD AND BALANCE BEING THE VISION OF THE CHURCH

According to my feeling, Brother Watchman Nee has been the greatest gift that the Head of the church has given to His Body, especially in this century. I can also testify to you for him, from my pure conscience, that he was also a great defender of the truth concerning the church. According to my knowledge, Brother Nee did not make mistakes, because he was so clear about God’s corporate goal—the church. As long as we have the vision of the church and are so clear about God’s corporate goal, we are safeguarded. The church, the Body, the new man, the corporate goal of God’s eternal purpose, is our safeguard. No matter how much we know the Bible, if we do not know the church, we will eventually make a serious mistake. If we are clear about the church, we are safeguarded. Nothing safeguards us so adequately as the knowing of the church, as the seeing of the Body. The Lord’s recovery is ultimately for the church life. All the foregoing items of the Lord’s recovery—such as the recovery of justification, sanctification, the inner life, and the proper understanding of prophecy—are for the present recovery of the church life. Today we are here for the church life. If we have really seen the vision of the church and that God cares only for the church, we will never be divided by any doctrine.

After the Reformation with Martin Luther stressing justification by faith, the state churches eventually became empty and dead. The reaction to the deadness of the reformed churches was among the mystics who were still in the Catholic Church. The Lord raised up a group of people that included Madame Guyon, Brother Lawrence, and Father Fenelon. They did not care for the outward practices or teachings but only for the reality of the inner life. These saints, who were known as the mystics, were the start of the recovery of the living reality of the inner life. Their experience of Christ as the inner life began as a reaction to the emptiness of the reformed churches. However, the mystics, whom the Lord used for the recovery of the inner life, also made some mistakes because they did not see the Body, the church. They did not have the safeguard of the Body and the balance of the Body.

We need to be impressed deeply that the church is the safeguard of our whole Christian walk and the balance of our Christian life. If we have seen the church, we will never be divided by anything. If we are clear concerning the vision of the church, we will never have hierarchy. For one to regard “bishops” as being above elders indicates that he has not seen the church as a living Body, an organism. The church cannot be controlled by human organization. Hierarchy is human organization.

Because the church is the organic Body of Christ, it can have nothing to do with organization. If something is wrong in our physical body, it is healed organically. The body is an organism. It cannot be touched or dealt with in an organizational way. The church is an organism. The church is not only the Body of Christ but also the new man. Just as the life within our physical body takes care of sicknesses, the life within the Body of Christ can take care of any problem. If there are some problems in a local church, it is best if we keep our hands off of these problems and leave them to Christ, the heavenly Doctor. He is the life in the Body. We need to let the life in the Body work within the Body. Our own doing apart from this life is organization, and this will not help the Body but damage the Body. When we see problems in the church, we need to learn to hold back our being and our doing.

Every problem and trouble in the church is a temptation to the leading ones. If the leading ones in the churches hold themselves back when there is a problem, that is a great victory. The biggest temptation to the leading ones in the churches is the troubles and problems in the churches. They may feel that they have to do something to solve these problems. While we are doing something, however, we can be in the realm of organization, which damages the Body. We need to restrain our doing and let the life in the Body take care of the troubles and the problems. If we do this, it means that we know that the church is not an organization but the organic Body of Christ. If a person cuts his finger, he may need to take care of it in a proper way. But if he takes care of it improperly, he will do more damage to it. Eventually, the cut on his finger will be healed by the life within his body. The church is not an organization but an organism. Church history has shown that organization has damaged the church.

We all need to see what the church is. If we see the church as the corporate goal of God, whatever we do will be profitable to the Body. Because the defenders of the truth in the past lacked the proper knowledge of the church, they made mistakes that damaged the church. Today in the Lord's recovery we need to see the church, to see the Body. Then whatever we do will be a profit and will never be a loss or a damage to the church. The vision of the church is our safeguard and balance. As long as we stand with the church, we are safe. If we stay away from the church, we are in danger of damaging the church. May the Lord be merciful to us that we may see that opinions, organization, rank, and different teachings damage the church life. This damage takes place because people do not have an adequate vision of the church. Today in the Lord's recovery the Lord desires to show us the ultimate goal of His purpose—the church life. (*The Collected Works of Witness Lee, 1973-1974*, vol. 1, "The History of the Church and the Local Churches," pp. 3-10)