

ACTS: Flawed Pattern OR Highest Divine Standard?

“We are for the Lord’s recovery of the local church” (*Hymns* #1255). This was our joyful declaration during the early days of the church-life in North America. The motto—“Christ and the Church”—encapsulated our mission: to recover the experience of Christ and the Church as His expression. In this context,¹ “‘recovery’ means the restoration...to a normal condition after a damage or a loss has been incurred.”² “[B]ecause **the church** has become degraded through the many centuries of its history, it **needs to be restored according to God’s original intention.**” An obvious question arises—How do we know God’s original intention concerning the Church? Our unequivocal answer was,³ “[B]y God’s...**unchanging standard as revealed in His Word. We regard the New Testament revelation of the church...as the norm for church practice in the present day.**” This includes both the teachings and the examples in Scripture. The Church portrayed therein, especially in Acts, provided both the **standard** for evaluating the current situation and **the norm**, which was to be restored. Although not alone in adopting this view, we were among the most radical and committed in its application.

The New Testament Norm & the Standard for the Church

This stance placed us firmly in the center of a long line of believers. “Ever since the Reformation...reformers...have turned to the Bible in general and the New Testament in particular, **on the presumption that the earliest was the purest form of the church, and have attempted to revive its radiant faith,**” says⁴ one writer. It was the early Plymouth Brethren, led by John N. Darby, who first “applied the issues of **scriptural sufficiency and authority to [church] order.**”⁵ They held that “Christianity in the days of the apostles must function **as the norm** for [the Church today]...and that any evaluation of the church must be measured against **this standard.**”⁶ Hence, the early Church, described in Acts, provided both the norm and the standard from which the Church had subsequently degraded.

Acts – the “Divine Standard for All time,” the “Highest Expression of God’s Will”

Watchman Nee championed this view, expressed in his famous maxim,⁷ “**The Bible is our only standard.**” He applied this criterion to both the normal Christian life and the normal Church life. Concerning the Church, W. Nee’s axiom was,⁸ “**what God has set forth as our example in the beginning is the eternal will of God. It is the divine standard for all time.**” He regarded the *Acts* record as the normative standard concerning the churches, the ministry and the work. It was not merely the earliest phase of Church history; it provided a “blueprint” for today. He wrote,⁹ “**God cannot lead a man one way in Acts and another today....[I]n principle the will and ways of God are just the same today as they were in the days of Acts.**” Based on this premise, Brother Nee issued the challenge of recovery:¹⁰ “**we must return to the beginning, to the ‘genesis’ of the Church,....[I]t is there we find the highest expression of His will. Acts is the ‘genesis’ of the Church’s history.**” If Acts represents the “**divine standard**” and the “**highest expression of [God’s] will,**” it cannot be improved upon. Any divergence from that pattern is not an advance but a deviation and degradation. W. Nee applied this “divine standard” unflinchingly to topics¹¹ such as the apostles and their labors, ministers and their ministries, the local churches, the work and the churches, etc. From the New Testament record he derived such principles as one church, one city; the church is local and the work regional; ministry is for the church; elders (not apostles) administrate the local church; apostles labor together in various worker-companies. Concerning the last point, for example, Brother Nee says,¹² “**It is a scriptural fact that God’s servants are formed into companies, but they are not formed into one single company.**”

“More than one company of apostles — not satisfactory”

Recently, however, the LSM-brothers declared the pattern in *Acts* to be seriously flawed. The precedent of multiple worker-companies, led by different apostles, is called into question. An LSM-brother writes,¹³ “**In the first century, ...there was more than one company of apostles...If we view that**

situation in a natural way according to the letter of the Bible, **we may think that it was satisfactory according to God's ordination.**" Certainly based on Brother Nee's writings, one would think this was indeed "satisfactory." The derogatory terms, "view in a natural way" and "according to the letter," suggest, however, this writer holds a different view. The LSM-brother continues,¹⁴ "if we are governed by the revelation of the Bible under the light of the ministry of the age, we will realize that **the situation in the first century was not satisfactory.**" The *Acts*-record is "unsatisfactory," not simply due to minor incidents involving Barnabas or Apollos. According to the LSM-brothers, multiple worker-companies, led by different apostles, were **the** problem. *Acts* is flawed because¹⁵ "**Peter and James should have joined themselves to Paul's company and worked together with Paul under the vision the Lord had given him. ...All the workers, ...should have served together with Paul in God's move at that time.**" In their view, what did God really want? One global company of workers, under one leader—Paul! The LSM-brothers' phrase—"all the workers,"—includes more than those recorded in *Acts*. W. Nee says,¹⁶ "I believe that all the history in *Acts*... many people were omitted.... History shows us that a group of apostles went to Africa.... Thomas went to India." Theirs is truly a grandiose global scheme!

The LSM-brothers also apply their view to today's situation. They say,¹⁷ "We may think, ...that today it should be acceptable to have **a number of leading co-workers, each with his own company of workers laboring under his leadership in a certain region of the earth.**" Again, according to Watchman Nee, this would indeed be "acceptable."¹² "Not so," say the LSM-brothers,¹⁸ "**we must serve in one company, even in one Body, under the proper leadership in the Lord's move....**"

The New Paradigm – One "Wise Master Builder," One Global Company of Workers

What's behind this drastic change? Why are multiple worker-companies not satisfactory? It is an implication of the "one wise master builder" teaching. Under this new paradigm, God's "one wise master builder" supervises God's work on the entire globe and leads one global company of co-workers. One LSM-brother explains,¹⁹ "**God does not give His vision, ...to two men; He gives it to only one man. ...the wise master builder; he is the minister of the age. In God's unique work of building...only the word of the master builder counts.**" Hence, "**the situation in the first century was not satisfactory**" because "**God's way is to have all His people serving Him ...under the supervision of one master builder**"—Paul.²⁰ Based upon this, the LSM-brothers depreciate the *Acts*-record of **two ministries** (Paul & Co. to the Gentiles and Peter & Co. to the Jews), **two regions**²¹ and **two companies** of workers. Multiple ministries, regions and companies are "flies in the ointment," flaws in the *Acts*-record.

The LSM-brothers also apply their new paradigm today. They claim, "**This is a strong principle that holds in every age, including today.**"²² Based on this view, the "blended co-workers" wrote a senior co-worker directing,²³ "...you would join yourself and those co-workers loyal to you to the blending co-workers, with the continuation of your previous work left to their coordinated oversight."

A Paradigm Shift – The "One Wise Master Builder" Teaching

The change from W. Nee's perspective to the LSM-brothers' view is a paradigm shift, adopting a drastically different perception of *Acts*. No longer is the scriptural record of the early Church the "divine standard for all time," and "the highest expression of [God's] will," the norm governing our present practice. Rather, under the new paradigm, *Acts* records a blemished history, short of the divine ideal. This difference is not trivial. According to the LSM-brothers, the apostles' failure to form one company under God's unique master builder had serious consequences. As a result, history records a "second-best" outcome, compared to what might have been. An LSM-brother engages in counter-factual conjecture:²⁴ "**If all the workers had served under Paul's vision and had taken Paul's leadership, the churches in the Jewish and Gentile worlds might have been brought fully into God's New Testament economy and rescued from the influence of Judaism.... Furthermore, **the church in Jerusalem might have been spared the destruction**...in A.D. 70."** Evidently the whole course of Church history and Jewish history would have changed if only the apostles had applied the "one wise master builder" teaching!

Who Switched the “Blueprint”?

These two perspectives—expounded by W. Nee and the “blended co-workers,”—are mutually exclusive. **They are two different “blueprints.”** Either *Acts* records “*the highest expression of [God’s] will,*” the “*divine standard for all time*” OR it does not. Either the New Testament account represents²⁵ “**God’s unchanging standard as revealed in His Word,**” and “**the norm for church practice in the present day,**” OR it does not. This affirmation was the stand of the early Brethren, Brother Nee and the local churches in the Lord’s recovery (see *Beliefs & Practices...*). Instead, the LSM-brothers now teach that *Acts* is a “blemished account,” a second-best outcome, short of God’s best. In their eyes, it is an inadequate “blueprint,” adherence to which produces an “impaired building.” We cannot have it both ways! The “blended co-workers’ new paradigm” directly contradicts W. Nee’s foundational axiom. It is contrary to the basic principle of recovery—“**to return to the beginning**” as recorded in Scripture. Previously our goal was to “**return to the beginning,**” to recover the early church-life recorded in *Acts*. Now we are urged to pursue the hypothetical “will o’ the wisp” of an “idealized utopian state,” never seen in Church history, nor attained even by the early church in *Acts*!

Do the LSM-brothers really take “Brother Nee as the unique master builder”?

The LSM-brothers endorse the statement,²⁶ “**Brother Nee as the unique master builder...The design came from Brother Nee. He was the superintendent...**” But, if W. Nee was indeed “*the unique master builder,*” how can the LSM-brothers now teach contrary to him? Brother Nee said²⁷ “*Scripture... does not imply that all the apostles formed themselves into one company.... [O]ne company is not shown in the Word of God.*” Regarding one company of workers, W. Nee wrote,²⁷ “**That is Romish, not scriptural.**” Yet, the LSM-brothers say,²⁸ “**we must serve in one company, even in one Body, under the proper leadership in the Lord’s move.**” These differences are not minor, nor can they be finessed using semantics. The LSM-brothers pay lip-service to Brother Nee as “*the unique master builder,*” yet teach differently from him. If they indeed recognize W. Nee as the “unique master builder,” saying “*the design came from Brother Nee,*” they should implement his “blueprint.” If (on the other hand) the LSM-brothers reject Brother Nee’s “blueprint” and substitute another, it is hypocritical to call him the master builder who produced the design!

One Wise Master Builder – What Did Watchman Nee Teach?

Brother Nee recognized Paul as a wise master builder, saying,²⁹ “*he was indeed a wise master builder who had laid a foundation upon which others needed to build.*” However, Paul was not unique in this regard. W. Nee says,²⁹ “*whoever lays a foundation is a wise master builder.*” Peter and others in Jerusalem did this, as Brother Nee recognizes,³⁰ “*In the Bible there are not that many people who have been raised by God to lay a foundation. No doubt, there were some brothers in Jerusalem who were raised up by God. Paul was also raised up by God.*” Hence, according to W. Nee,³⁰ “*When Paul said that he did not want to build upon others’ foundation, [Rom. 15:10] he was specifically referring to the work of the brothers in the region of Jerusalem. Paul did not want to build upon their foundation.*” Thus in Brother Nee’s view, Paul was a master builder, but so were others (Peter & Co.). W. Nee did not deprecate their role as master builders. **Brother Nee’s “blueprint” did not entail one unique “wise master builder,” supervising one global company of workers.**

Who’s “Blueprint” – Watchman Nee’s OR the “Blended Co-workers”?

Today the saints in the Lord’s recovery face a choice: embrace the “blended co-workers’ new paradigm” based upon one unique “Minister of the Age”- “Master Builder” and seek the hypothetical goal it offers OR retain the “old paradigm,” embodied in Brother Nee’s “blueprint” for recovery³¹—“**we must return to the beginning, to the ‘genesis’ of the Church, ...[I]t is there we find the highest expression of [God’s] will. Acts is the ‘genesis’ of the Church’s history.**” For those who choose the latter, a good starting point is to prayerfully study *The Normal Christian Church Life* and to re-examine our current situation in light of its teaching.

NOTES

1. “The co-workers in the Lord’s recovery,” *The Beliefs and Practices of the local churches*, 1978, p. 5
2. *The Beliefs and Practices of the local churches*, pp. 5-6
3. *The Beliefs and Practices of the local churches*, p. 6
4. Horton Davies, *Worship and Theology in England*, vol. 4, p. 140 quoted in Callahan p. 68. Along the same lines Gordon Fee says concerning Acts, “It not only tells us the history of the early church, but it also serves as the normative model for the church of all times.” Gordon Fee, *How To Read The Bible For All It’s Worth*.
5. James P. Callahan, *Primitivistic Piety: The Ecclesiology of the Early Plymouth Brethren*, p. 42
6. James P. Callahan, *Primitivistic Piety*, p. 34
7. The quote in context says, “The Bible is our only standard. We are not afraid to preach the pure Word of the Bible, even if men oppose; but if it is not the Word of the Bible, we could never agree even if everyone approved of it.” Watchman Nee, *The Christian*, Issue No. 1, 1925, in *Collected Works*, vol. 11, p. 1231
8. Watchman Nee, *The Normal Christian Church Life*, in *Collected Works*, vol. 30, p. xvi
9. W. Nee, *The Normal Christian Church Life*, p. xv
10. W. Nee, *The Normal Christian Church Life*, p. xvi
11. See W. Nee’s *The Normal Christian Church Life, Church Affairs, Further Talks on the Church Life* etc.
12. W. Nee, *The Normal Christian Church Life*, p. 129. Similar statements include: “That all the apostles should combine into one company is not shown in the Word of God.” (p. 128). “There is a company of apostles, but it is not great enough to include all the apostles. That is Romish, nor scriptural.” (p. 128) “[T]he Word of God does not warrant the forming of one central company;” (p. 130). “Peter and his associates, and Paul and those with him, were appointed to different spheres.” (p. 131).
In his seminal *Life-study* messages, Brother Lee is **not** critical of multiple co-worker companies. W. Lee says, “In Acts there are two companies of ministry: Peter’s company and Paul’s company. ... Both companies carried out the propagation of the resurrected Christ in His ascension.” (*Life-study of Acts*, p. 43). Concerning Titus 3:13, W. Lee writes, “Artemas and Tychicus were intimate fellow-workers of Paul; Zenas and Apollos worked independently of him. Yet Paul still charged Titus to care for them, showing there was no jealousy between the two groups of co-workers.” (*Life-study of Titus*, p. 51)
13. Bob Danker “*On the Minister of the Age and the Wise Master Builder*” In “Contributions” on the LSM-sponsored web-site: AFaithfulWord.com. We assume that the opinions expressed reflect the views of the “blended co-workers.” Moreover, we assume all the items posted on this web-site have passed through LSM’s “discerning check” and qualify as part of the “one publication” in its internet version. For simplicity, we refer to all the contributors to AFaithfulWord.com as “LSM-brothers.”
14. Bob Danker “*On the Minister of the Age and the Wise Master Builder*”
15. Bob Danker “*On the Minister of the Age and the Wise Master Builder.*” Consider the repeated statement, “All the workers ...should have served together with Paul in God’s move at that time.” “All the workers,” presumably means **all the apostles, including the original 12 apostles**, Paul, James & others. In the text the author refers only to Peter, James, Barnabas, & Apollos. Yet, what about the others—**especially the original 12 apostles?** The writer implicitly assumes **that Acts records all the work done by all the workers** (apostles) in that era, at least all the work that counts with God. This implicitly assumes that (in that era) **anything not recorded in Acts has no value before God**. These are strong assumptions. W. Nee didn’t hold this view (see below).
16. Watchman Nee, *Church Affairs*, pp. 243-4
17. Bob Danker “*On the Minister of the Age and the Wise Master Builder*”
18. Bob Danker “*On the Minister of the Age and the Wise Master Builder*”
19. Bob Danker “*On the Minister of the Age and the Wise Master Builder*” A similar statement by the “blended co-workers” appears in *The Ministry*, v. 7, No. 6, Aug. 2003, p. 34, which says, “In every age there is a particular vision. This vision is released **not through many persons but through one person who is the minister of that age**. There is the vision of the age, and **the one who receives this vision becomes the minister of the age**. All the others who are with him are led through **this one**, ...they speak... according to the leading of **the one whom the Lord has chosen to give the vision of the age.**”

20. Bob Danker "***On the Minister of the Age and the Wise Master Builder***" Recent speaking by the "blended co-workers" emphasizes Paul as the one "wise master-builder," For example, "*If we would do the work of the divine building, we must be one with the wise master builder, who is the acting God...The apostle Paul...surely was the acting God.*" And "*...the architect, the wise master builder, was the apostle Paul.*" *The Ministry*, v. 10, no. 1, p. 213
21. Recent ministry by the "blended co-workers" still acknowledges the existence of multiple regions in the time of Paul. For example, "*Paul also had the capacity to oversee the work. He was clear that there were **only two regions of the work** ... the work among the Jews and the work among the Gentiles. He [Paul] was the wise master builder overseeing the work in the Gentile world, which was most of the inhabited earth.*" *The Ministry*, vol. 10, no. 1, p. 213. In brother Bob Danker's piece it is difficult to find any acknowledgment of "two regions."
22. Bob Danker "***On the Minister of the Age and the Wise Master Builder***"
23. This quote is from unpublished documents. Perhaps a precedent is provided by ***Publication Work in the Lord's Recovery*** which quotes from unpublished documents: For example, "*Brother Lee said, "...I am the continuation of Brother Nee; I would like to have a continuation of me, and this needs a corporation...The Living Stream corporation will continue this ministry."* (from unpublished notes...)" "Blended Co-workers," ***Publication Work in the Lord's Recovery***, LSM, 30 June, 2005, p. 5
24. Bob Danker "***On the Minister of the Age and the Wise Master Builder***"
25. ***The Beliefs and Practices of the local churches***, pp. 5-6
26. Bob Danker "***On the Minister of the Age and the Wise Master Builder***" quoting Witness Lee, ***Elders' Training, Book 7: One Accord for the Lord's Move***, p. 98
27. Watchman Nee, ***Normal Christian Church Life, Collected Works***, vol. 30, p. 128
28. Bob Danker "***On the Minister of the Age and the Wise Master Builder***"
29. Watchman Nee, ***Church Affairs***, p. 165
30. Watchman Nee, ***Church Affairs***, p. 164
31. W. Nee, ***The Normal Christian Church Life***, p. xvi