

IS THE RECOVERY ON THE ROAD TO ROME?

The Lord's recovery began with Martin Luther's stand against the Roman Catholic Church. After 500 years of recovery, the question arises: **Are we returning¹ to the city from which we departed? Is the recovery on the road which leads to Rome?** Are there incipient tendencies reproducing traits of the Roman Catholic Church within the Lord's recovery? This suggestion might seem far-fetched at first. However, there have been subtle alterations in teaching and practice which may be harbingers of this trend. Here we highlight these changes by contrasting the "blended co-workers"² current teaching with Watchman Nee's ministry which initiated the recent recovery.

One Global Company of Co-Workers?

Watchman Nee's teaching was clear² – "*the churches are local, and the work is regional.*" In his exposition of Acts, Brother Nee viewed Jerusalem and Antioch as work centers. Peter and his company labored out of the former, Paul and his companions out of the latter. The fact that,³ "*It was the Holy Spirit who initiated another beginning at Antioch, established another group of apostles, and sent two out to work,*" set an important precedent. Based on this, Brother Nee concluded,⁴ "*You have to know that before God there was, ...not only one region, but two regions. Therefore, when it pleases the Holy Spirit, He can establish a 3rd region, a 10th region, a 1,000th region, or a 10,000th region on the earth.*" Thus, in Brother Nee's view, multiple companies of workers could labor in diverse regions, yet all engaged in the Lord's one work. He was assured that⁵ "*Even though there is no central control, provided all the workers follow the leading of the Spirit, everything will run smoothly...and there will be coordination of a body.*"

"The Mortal Wound for Roman Catholicism"

Watchman Nee called Acts chapter 13 "*the mortal wound for Roman Catholicism.*" Why? He answers,⁶ "*If the Holy Spirit had not initiated a beginning at Antioch, we would have to say that ... God's work on the earth had Jerusalem as its one center. This center might be moved somewhere else, [e.g., Rome] but still there would only be one center...then the principle of Rome would be correct.*" The fact that Acts records a second work-center (in Antioch,) with a second company of workers, establishes a crucial principle. Brother Nee says,⁷ "*Without Acts 13, the concept of the pope would be entirely correct. The concept of Rome, ...that there is a capital of Christianity, would be completely correct.*"

Multiple companies of workers – Scriptural; One global company of workers – "Romish"

Watchman Nee rejected one global company of co-workers as unscriptural and "Romish." He says,⁸ "*Scripture... does not imply that all the apostles formed themselves into one company and placed everything under one central control...[O]ne company is not shown in the Word of God.*" He points out that⁹ "*in the Scriptures...[t]here is a company of apostles, but it is not great enough to include all the apostles. That is Romish, not scriptural.*" Witness Lee also warned against producing hierarchy, saying¹⁰, "*Regions of the work exist today.... If we organize these regions into one unit, it will lead to hierarchy with an official leadership. This would insult Christ's headship.* The scriptural pattern shows various companies of workers, laboring in diverse regions, extending to each other the "right hand of fellowship," (Gal. 2:9) yet all working for the one Body.

"NO ONE is saying ...form all the co-workers... into one company"—"Blended Co-worker"

As recently as Spring 2005, the "blended co-workers" appeared to espouse Brother Nee's view. One said,¹¹ "*no one is saying that we should form all the co-workers on the earth into one company under a central control. That would not be one work.* Moreover, he echoed Brother Nee's view,¹² "*Let there be groups of co-workers in all the continents in so many languages following the Spirit in the harmony of the Body, doing one work. That is what we need to see.*" Where then is the "turn towards Rome"?

“More than one company of apostles -- not satisfactory”

An LSM-brother's recent article, suggests the *Acts*-pattern is seriously flawed. Specifically, the precedent of multiple worker-companies is called into question. The brother writes,¹³ ***“In the first century, ...there was more than one company of apostles ... We may think that it was satisfactory according to God's ordination.”*** Certainly based upon Brother Nee's writing, one would think so! However, the LSM-brother declares, ***“the situation in the first century was not satisfactory.”*** It is “unsatisfactory,” not because of minor incidents involving Barnabas or Apollos. According to the LSM-brothers, multiple worker-companies were a serious problem. The Acts record is flawed because, ***“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.”***¹⁴ What is this? One global company of workers, under one leader – Paul!

One “Wise Master-builder,” One Global Company of Workers

What's behind this drastic change? Why are multiple worker-companies “not satisfactory”? It follows from the teaching of “one wise Master Builder.” An LSM-brother writes,¹⁵ ***“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.¹⁶ According to this view God wants “one wise master builder” supervising God's work on the entire globe and leading one company of co-workers. Due to this, the LSM-brothers depreciate the biblical record of **two ministries** (Paul & Co. to the Gentiles and Peter & Co. to the Jews), **two regions**¹⁷ of the work 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 the “one wise master builder” paradigm today. They claim, ***“This is a strong principle that holds in every age, including today.”***¹⁸ Hence they exhort, ***“we must serve in one company...”*** Based on this view, the “blended co-workers” have written a senior co-worker directing,¹⁹ ***“...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.”***

Paul's Foundation & “Others' Foundation”-- Was Paul the Only Master-builder?

Yet what does the Scripture say? The New Testament acknowledges an apostolic division of labor. Paul was entrusted with the gospel **to the Gentiles** and Peter **to the Jews** (Gal. 2:7). Peter's apostleship was **to the circumcision (Jews)** and Paul's **for the Gentiles** (Gal. 2:8). Neither Paul nor Peter was given a global mandate for their practical apostolic labor. The written legacy of Paul's completing ministry benefits the whole Church. Yet his practical apostleship was to announce **to the Gentiles** Christ's unsearchable riches (Eph. 3:8). Scripture does **not** present the division of labor into Jewish and Gentile “fields” in a negative light (Gal. 2:9). Nor does the New Testament depict distinct worker-companies as negative *per se*. Isn't that “negative light” due to *eisegesis* – imposing the “one wise Master Builder” perspective upon the biblical record? But is that view-point biblical? Would Brother Nee agree?

Watchman Nee points out that the apostle Paul was not the only one who laid a foundation. Yes, to the Corinthians, Paul proclaimed he laid a foundation for others to build upon (1 Cor. 3:10). Yet elsewhere, Paul declared he wouldn't build upon “others' foundation” (Rom. 15:20). Brother Nee relates this “others' foundation” to Jerusalem. He says,²⁰ ***“In the Bible there are not that many people who have been raised up 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. ...[H]e was a master builder set up by God.”*** Further, Watchman Nee writes,²⁰ ***“When Paul said that he did not want to build upon others' foundation, he was specifically referring to the work of the brothers in the region of Jerusalem. Paul did not want to build upon their foundation....”*** Moreover, he adds²¹ ***“whoever lays a foundation is a wise master builder.”*** Notice Watchman Nee doesn't assert that Paul was **the** unique wise master-builder. He acknowledges both

Paul and “*some brothers in Jerusalem*” were “*raised up by God to lay a foundation.*” Moreover, Brother Nee does **not** disparage the foundation laid by “*the work of the brothers in ...Jerusalem.*” Paul laid a foundation, and so did they. Paul was a “wise master builder” and so were they, since (in Brother Nee’s words) “***whoever lays a foundation is a wise master builder.***” This is consistent with his inclusive view of multiple ministries, regions and worker-companies.

After Paul, Everyone builds on Paul’s Foundation

Watchman Nee acknowledged both Paul and the brothers in Jerusalem as master builders. However, Brother Nee continues,²¹ “*The **brothers after Paul** should build upon the foundation laid by Paul.*” Again,²¹ “***All of the brothers and sisters after Paul** need to learn to **build upon this foundation.***” In Brother Nee’s view, the early apostles (especially Paul) laid the foundation. Thereafter every worker builds on this foundation. This is consistent with the New Testament’s completion by Paul and the other apostles. Thereafter, every Bible teacher and expositor builds upon their writings. No one lays “another foundation” by writing a “third testament.” Subsequently, there are no more “master builders,” contributing to the New Testament. The New Testament canon is closed. In Brother Nee’s statement, “***All of the brothers ...after Paul ...build upon this foundation,***” “*All*” includes Luther, Calvin, Zinzendorf, Wesley, Darby, Brother Nee himself, and Brother Lee. Doesn’t this imply Watchman Nee would reject the designation of “wise master builder”? It also suggests he wouldn’t embrace the “one wise Master Builder” teaching.

The Holy Spirit, the Unique Executor VS. One Human, “Wise Master Builder”

Brother Nee never taught there was a unique “wise master builder” in each era. Rather, he affirmed that the Holy Spirit was the “unique Executor” of God’s work. The Holy Spirit renders redundant any “director,” “manager,” or “supervisor.” Brother Nee wrote,²² “*Some... are tempted to attain the **position of director over all of God’s servants.** How good this seems from a human point of view... We would say, however, that... **the Holy Spirit is always the unique Executor. He never needs man to be His manager.... [W]e are never His assistants.***” Watchman Nee rejected the concept of a human manager (director or executor) of God’s work²³. Instead of a human “global supervisor of God’s work,” or “universal coordinator of the One New Man,” Brother Nee emphasized the role of the Spirit. Doesn’t this imply Brother Nee would reject the teaching of “one wise master builder” overseeing God’s global work as mere human organization, reminiscent of the Catholic Church?

NOW WHO’S saying – “form all the co-workers... into one company”? – The LSM-brothers!

One year ago a “blended co-worker” proclaimed,¹¹ “***no one is saying that we should form all the co-workers on the earth into one company under a central control.***” What about today? Now the question, “who is saying this?” must be answered: “**Who? -- the LSM-brothers!**” They have explicitly said,²⁴ “***we must serve in one company, even in one Body, under the proper leadership in the Lord’s move....***” How much things have changed in one year! Watchman Nee’s teaching about “one company of workers” has been turned on its head. He warned of the peril of one global co-worker company, calling this unscriptural and “Romish.” Now the LSM-brothers write of²⁵ “**The Peril of Having Different Companies of Workers.**” According to Brother Nee, one global group of co-workers under “one wise master builder” (or his successors) replicates the Roman Catholic model. In view of Brother Nee’s warning, are we remiss in asking – **Is the Recovery on the Road to Rome?**

No “Apostolic Succession” but “Continuation” of the “Wise Master Builder”

The one “wise Master builder” teaching undermines the recovery’s critique of Catholicism’s “apostolic succession.” Brother Lee used the fact that James is listed before Peter and John (Gal. 2:9) to establish that²⁶ “*James came to the forefront to take the lead among the apostles.*” He then asserted that (based upon James’ leadership) this²⁶ “*strongly refutes the assertion of Catholicism that **Peter was the only successor of Christ in the administration of the Church.***”

However, under the “wise Master Builder” teaching, both Peter and James’ leadership was illegitimate. In that case, isn’t the switch from Peter to James meaningless? It is now asserted that **Paul should have been the global leader!** Not only should James and Peter have learned²⁷ from Paul, they should also have submitted to him! So, where does this leave us? It looks to me like we’re virtually rehabilitating apostolic succession. Aren’t the LSM-brothers essentially saying, “*Peter was the only successor of Christ*” as the one wise Master-builder and Paul was Peter’s successor? Except the term employed is “continuation,” rather than “succession.” But isn’t that difference mere semantics? A “blended co-worker” recently said,²⁸ “*There is **no successor** to Brother Lee, but there is an open group of the ‘being-blended brothers’ who are **continuing** Brother Lee’s ministry.*” Can we say this “***strongly refutes the assertion of Catholicism***” concerning apostolic succession? Doesn’t this rehabilitate it under the guise of “one wise Master builder”? **Are we returning to Rome?**

The Recovery of the *Imprimatur*?

Last year the “blended co-workers” issued the “One Publication” document decreeing that²⁹ “***All the saints and all the churches everywhere should ...be restricted to one publication in the Lord’s recovery.***” Some responded, **Isn’t this the Roman Catholic practice concerning publications – the *Imprimatur*³⁰—the official stamp of approval?**

A recent contributor³¹ to an LSM-sponsored web-site disagrees, claiming any resemblance to the Roman Catholic practice is superficial. He contends that ‘one publication’ differs from the *imprimatur*, because³² “***the Roman Catholic practice of Imprimatur is a doctrinal test, [while] the one publication surpasses mere orthodoxy.***” He says, “***whereas an Imprimatur settles for the lowest common denominator of acceptable teaching, the one publication practice***” enforces a standard according to the “high peak truths.” To qualify for LSM’s one publication, writings “***must match the all-inheriting vision of God’s economy unveiled in the Lord’s recovery.***” Evidently the method is the same, but the qualifying standard differs. Far from demonstrating the difference, the writer has shown the similitude of LSM’s “one publication” practice to the Catholic *imprimatur*. In the area of publications **isn’t the recovery on the “Road to Rome”?**

“We do not keep a following, they do not believe us.”

Few fundamental Christian groups restrict their members to approved literature. Those who do are perceived to be fencing their congregations from outside influences in order to retain a following. Brother Nee called this “*working along popish [Roman Catholic] lines.*” He said,³³ “***We should never cherish the hope that only “our” teaching will be accepted by any church.... There is no need to build a wall of protection around “our” particular “flock” to secure them against the teachings of others. If we do so, we are working along popish lines.***” W. Lee talked about retaining a following. He said,³⁴ “***If all of today’s Christian preachers and leaders would say, ‘Lord, let my following be Yours that You may increase and that I may decrease [John 3:30],’ there would be no problem. ... This is the problem today: every preacher has his own following. Many think that we are the same as they are.... When we say that we do not keep a following, they do not believe us.***” This word was spoken 30 years ago, before the promulgation of “one publication” in the recovery. May we ask, in the light of that policy, is Brother Lee’s declaration -- “***we do not keep a following***” -- more credible today or less plausible? Hasn’t LSM’s “one publication” policy dramatically increased the skepticism reflected in the phrase -- “***they do not believe us***”?

Conclusion -- Replicating Roman Catholicism?

We posed the question, “**Is the recovery on the Road to Rome?**” We are not suggesting the recovery is in danger of returning to the Roman Catholic “fold,” led by the Pope and headquartered in Rome. Rather, the issue is whether the recovery has begun to adopt teachings and practices which **resemble** those of Catholicism. Examples include recent teachings about “one global company of workers,” “one wise

Master Builder,” and “one publication.” Other examples could be cited, but perhaps these are sufficient to justify the query: **“Is the recovery replicating Roman Catholicism?”**

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May, 2006

NOTES

1. This reminds us of A. N. Groves’ “prophetic” letter to John N. Darby (March 10, 1836) in which he wrote, *“I feel you have departed from those principles by which you once hoped to have effected them, and are in principle returning to the city from whence you departed.”* *Memoir of the late Anthony Norris Groves*, p. 404 (original 1856)
2. Watchman Nee, *Further Talks on the Church Life*, p. 156.
3. Watchman Nee, *Church Affairs*, p. 143
4. Watchman Nee, *Church Affairs*, p. 144
5. Watchman Nee, *Normal Christian Church Life, Collected Works*, vol. 30, p. 129
6. Watchman Nee, *Church Affairs*, pp. 142-4
7. Watchman Nee, *Church Affairs* p. 144
8. Watchman Nee, *Normal Christian Church Life, Collected Works*, vol. 30, p. 128
9. Watchman Nee, *Normal Christian Church Life, Collected Works*, vol. 30, p. 128
10. Witness Lee, *Life Messages*, p.148
11. *The Ministry*, v. 9, no. 6, June 2005, pp. 21-2
12. *The Ministry*, v. 9, no. 6, June 2005, p. 22
13. Bob Danker **“On the Minister of the Age and the Wise Master Builder”** In “Contributions” on the LSM-sponsored web-site: **AFaithfulWord.com**. Quotes in this paragraph and the following two paragraphs are from this source. 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. 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 **nothing which is not recorded in Acts is of any value before God**. These are strong assumptions.
15. 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.”*
16. 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
17. Recent ministry by the “blended co-workers” still acknowledged 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.”
18. “In principle, in the Lord’s recovery our Brother Lee was the wise master builder. If we want to do the work of building, we need to also be one with him.” *The Ministry*, vol. 10, no. 1, p. 213. It was in this context that the spoken message referred to Witness Lee as “the acting God.”
19. 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
20. Watchman Nee, *Church Affairs*, p. 164
 21. Watchman Nee, *Church Affairs*, p. 165
 22. Watchman Nee, “*A Reply to a Meeting in London*” in *Collected Works* vol. 26, p. 425
 23. “*We must allow the Holy Spirit to exercise His lordship in everything. No matter how we have sought after His mind, we are never His assistants.*” Watchman Nee, “*A Reply ...*” in *Collected Works* vol. 26, p. 425
 24. Bob Danker “*On the Minister of the Age and the Wise Master Builder*” This quote appears in the section entitled: “*Serving Under the Vision in the Lord’s Recovery Today*”
 25. Bob Danker “*On the Minister of the Age and the Wise Master Builder*”
 26. Witness Lee, *Life-study of Galatians* p. 57. Brother Lee also uses this to show that “*leadership in the church is not organizational and perpetual, but it fluctuates according to the spiritual condition of the leading ones.*” We do not address this matter here.
 27. Brother Lee points out that “*Peter, John and James did not have anything to teach Paul. Rather, Paul had much to teach them.... Paul certainly had a great deal to teach those in Jerusalem. But the atmosphere was not right for him to do so.*” *Life-study of Galatians* pp. 55-56
 28. Or words to this effect, spoken during message #9 of the 2005 LSM Winter Training on the Building of God. These words do not appear in the printed message, see *The Ministry*, v. 10, no. 1, pp. 121-3.
 29. “The blended co-workers” *Publication Work in the Lord’s Recovery* (LSM, June 30, 2005) p. 8
 30. **Imprimatur:** Literature approved for use by Roman Catholics is given the **Imprimatur**, an official stamp of approval. The following quote explains the Roman Catholic practice: “*Imprimatur* is Latin for “let it be printed.” When a Roman Catholic bishop grants his imprimatur to a printed work, he assures the reader that nothing therein is contrary to Catholic faith or morals. This imprimatur is not given lightly; only after a thorough review process...to be sure the text contains only accurate, reliable Catholic teaching.” “One of the obligations of someone publishing a book that deals with Catholic teachings is to request ecclesiastical approval. This was reiterated by the [Roman Catholic] Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith in 1975.”
 31. David Ho, “*Thoughts on the One Publication Work in the Lord’s Recovery*” (March, 2006) in the “Contributions” section of **AFaithfulWord.com**. The introduction to AFaithfulWord.com says, “*The saints who contributed these articles do not serve at DCP* [Defense & Confirmation Project of LSM].” I assume that this item (and all the others posted on this LSM-sponsored web-site) has passed through LSM’s “*discerning check*,” and thus qualifies as part of LSM’s “one publication” (in its internet version) and is also endorsed and approved by the “blended co-workers.”
 32. David Ho, “*Thoughts on the One Publication Work in the Lord’s Recovery*” (March, 2006) All the quotes in this paragraph are from this source.
 33. Watchman Nee, *Normal Christian Church Life, Collected Works*, vol. 30, p. 115
 34. Witness Lee, *Life-study of John*, Anaheim, CA., Living Stream Ministry, 1986, p. 124