

Interpretational Differences – Watchman Nee & Witness Lee vs. “the Blended Co-workers” -- Who’s not holding the Head?

Christians frequently differ in their understanding of the Scriptures. Parables, types and prophecies are often interpreted differently by genuine believers. Despite these disparities we are charged to receive other believers because the Lord has accepted them (Rom. 14:1). Based upon this, Brother Lee urged us to practice “generality” towards other believers. He writes¹, “*In order to have the Body life, we must receive the believers according to God’s receiving of them in a general way, **not according to our doctrinal concepts in a particular way.***” Moreover, he adds², “***No doctrinal concept should be our ground in receiving the believers. The only ground for us to receive the believers is God’s receiving.***” Thus we should not demand uniformity in doctrinal concepts nor Scriptural interpretation, beyond adherence to the common faith. This stand – “*we receive all believers even as the Lord received us*”³—has been the local churches’ declaration and practice for over 30 years. However, recent statements made from the podium and published in *The Ministry* magazine, appear to contradict this inclusive position. Let us examine some of these statements.

Different Interpretations of Scripture – Someone isn’t holding the Head

Consider the “blended co-workers” exposition of Colossians at the 2004 LSM Summer Training⁴. “*When Christ is the Head practically in our experience, it is **impossible for there to be different interpretations of the Scriptures. The Head is very clear. Interpretational differences prove that some members have problems with the Head and are not under the Head.***” This striking, dogmatic statement appears without qualification in *The Ministry* magazine. In the spoken message the brother explained that⁵, Christ our Head is not schizophrenic, having a dual personality. If you and I both contact Him, we will receive the same answer. Hence, we will have the same interpretation of Scripture. Therefore, “***interpretational differences prove that some members have problems with the Head and are not under the Head.***” Taken seriously, this rules out all “*interpretational differences*” since it implies absolute concord in Scriptural interpretation among those under Christ’s headship.

This principle was also applied to the issue of publications. The same “blended brother” continued⁶, “***Many are governed by Brother Lee’s word, ...of having one publication work. Others may honestly have a different view. What should we do? We are not here to fight, to argue, or to debate. Let us identify the real issue behind all the differences that arise – somebody is not holding the Head.***” Hence, this teaching is applied by the “blended co-workers,” not just to Scriptural interpretation, but also to practical matters, such as “one publication work.”

Zero Tolerance for Minor Differences?

This is not the only instance when the “blended brothers” appear to rule out all divergence in views. Concerning one accord, the “blended co-workers” say⁷, “*As long as we have different views on a minor point, we cannot have one accord (Phil. 3:15) ... If one brother has a **different view, even if it is on a minor point, we cannot have the one accord.***” This declaration implies that to achieve of “one accord” we need absolute conformity on all points, both major and minor. Conversely, it advocates “zero tolerance” for differences, even in minor points, since any disparity jeopardizes the “one accord.” How can such proclamations against

diversity in Scriptural interpretation and practices be reconciled with receiving all believers with generality⁸?

Watchman Nee & Witness Lee on the “Two Witnesses”– Who is not holding the Head?

Suppose we take this statement seriously – *“Interpretational differences prove that some members have problems with the Head and are not under the Head”*-- what are the implications? Brother Nee and Brother Lee were in agreement on most matters of Scriptural interpretation. Yet, even between these two brothers, some disparity exists. Brothers Nee and Lee differed in the identity of the “two witnesses” in Revelation 11. Brother Lee says⁹, *“Why do we say the two witnesses are Moses and Elijah? We say this because this claim is strongly based upon the facts of the Bible. The Bible reveals that Moses and Elijah are the two witnesses of God. ...According to their ministry, the two witnesses must be Moses and Elijah.”* Brother Lee also explains an alternative view¹⁰, *“All Bible students agree that one of the two witnesses is Elijah. But there is some disagreement over the identity of the other, whether he is Enoch or Moses. Some argue in favor of Enoch because, besides Elijah, he is the only one who never died. ... Those who hold this view say that since Enoch and Elijah never died, they must be the two witnesses...”*

Enoch Or Moses – Who is the Second Witness?

Interestingly, Brother Watchman Nee held this alternate view, identifying the second witness as Enoch, rather than Moses. He says¹¹ *“The whole Bible mentions only two persons who did not die; they are Enoch and Elijah. These two alone stand before the Lord.... ‘two witnesses’.”* Clearly Brother Nee and Brother Lee had an “interpretational difference.” According to the “blended co-workers,” such differences *“prove that some members have problems with the Head and are not under the Head.”* May we ask the “blended co-workers,” based upon their teaching, which one – Brother Nee or Brother Lee-- had *“problems with the Head and [was] not under the Head”*?

Watchman Nee & Witness Lee on the “Region of the Work”– Who is not holding the Head?

Many think that Brother Lee differed from Watchman Nee only on this one minor point. However, closer examination reveals other apparent differences which are not easily reconciled. Consider the question of the “region of the work.” Brother Lee acknowledges that¹² *“Brother Nee taught about the regions of the work in his book, Further Talks on the Church Life.”* He continues¹³, *“We have to realize that in the New Testament, for the apostles’ work, there were only two regions. One was the Jewish world, and the other was the Gentile world. In these two regions, there were no sub-regions. Peter was working in the Jewish region, ...The Gentile world in which Paul worked was vast with different countries... In the Gentile world, there was only one region with one group of co-workers.”* This word clearly asserts that in the biblical record of the apostles’ work, *“there were only two regions,”* one Jewish, the other Gentile. Moreover, *“In these two regions, there were no sub-regions.”*¹⁴

The “blended co-workers” further expound this teaching saying¹⁵ *“Strictly speaking, the only two regions mentioned in the Bible are those of the Jews and the Gentiles.... There is no Texas region, British region, or Taiwan region. There are only the Jews and the Gentiles. (Gal. 2:7).”* Let us ask, however, what did Watchman Nee teach concerning this?

“The Holy Spirit... can establish a 3rd Region, a 10th Region, a 1,000th Region”

In the late 1940s Watchman Nee began to teach that¹⁶ *“the churches are local, and the work is regional.”* Brother Nee emphasizes the importance of the work initiated out of Antioch

(Acts 13) as “another beginning,” subsequent to that begun from Jerusalem. He says¹⁷, “*It was the Holy Spirit who initiated another beginning at Antioch, established another group of apostles, and sent two out to work. Therefore, it is clear that on the earth there was **not only one but two regions of work.***” Up to this point, Watchman Nee’s exposition corresponds to Brother Lee – there were “*two regions of work.*” However, Brother Nee continues¹⁸, “*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 **third region, a tenth region, a thousandth region, or a ten-thousandth region** on the earth. This is according to the intention of the Holy Spirit regarding His work on the earth and not according to man’s intention.*”

“Only 2 Regions” OR “a 3rd, a 10th, a 1,000th Region”?

Here then is a stark contrast. Brother Lee and the “blended co-workers” conclude from the Acts record that there can only be two regions – Jewish and Gentile—with their respective centers. Apart from the work among the Jews, the principle derived is that “*in the Gentile world, there was only one region with one group of co-workers.*” The application of this view today, sees the whole globe (apart from the Jews) as “one world-wide Gentile region,” which should have only one group of co-workers¹⁹.

However, Watchman Nee drew a different implication from the Acts record. He inferred that, since the Holy Spirit could establish as “second region” out of Antioch, “*the Holy Spirit, ... can establish a 3rd region, a 10th region, a 1,000th region,*” Obviously Brother Nee’s conclusion differs from Brother Lee’s. Moreover, this was more than just a theoretical possibility. In China during his era, Brother Nee viewed²⁰ Shanghai as the center of one region and “*Fukien and the Island of Taiwan as [another] region for the work, [of which]... Foochow may be taken as a center.*” By the time of the communist takeover, mainland China was divided into 13 regions for purposes of the work²¹. Here is an important difference -- **the concept of “one world-wide Gentile region” is foreign to Brother Nee’s view.** He envisioned the possibility of “*a 1,000th region, or a 10,000th region on the earth.*” Nevertheless, despite the diversity of regions and co-worker groups, there could be oneness. Watchman Nee writes²², “*If thousands of local churches, with thousands of prophets and teachers, each sent out thousands of different workers, there would be a vast outward diversity, but there could still be perfect inward unity if all were sent out under the direction of the one Head and on the ground of the one Body.*”

It is not our purpose to reconcile Watchman Nee’s and Witness Lee’s interpretations of Scripture. We merely point out that **there are significant differences.** Concerning regions of the work portrayed in Acts, Brother Lee asserted that “*there were only two regions*”—the Jewish and the Gentile regions—and “*no sub-regions.*” In contrast, Watchman Nee inferred that “*the Holy Spirit... can establish a 3rd region, a 10th region, a 1,000th region.*” This is a definite “*interpretational difference,*” one which is not easily dismissed. In view of this difference, may we ask the “blended co-workers,” based upon their teaching, which one – Brother Nee or Brother Lee-- had “*problems with the Head and [was] not under the Head*”?

The “Blended Co-workers” vs. Brother Lee – Uniformity vs. Unity with Variety

Perhaps the basic problem is with the “blended co-workers” teaching that Christ’s practical headship means “*it is impossible for there to be different interpretations of the Scriptures.*” This notion leads to the unrealistic expectation of uniformity in Scriptural interpretation. It overlooks the fact that today the believers “*see in a mirror obscurely*” (1 Cor. 13:12) and have not yet arrived “*at the oneness of the faith and of the full-knowledge*” of Christ (Eph. 4:13). Hence, differences will occur²³. Yet, there can still be oneness. Brother Lee recognized this, saying²⁴, “*In the practicality of the church life, as in the family life, ... it is*

impossible to have uniformity.” He declares²⁵, “*Uniformity and oneness are not the same thing,*” illustrating this in terms of a large family²⁶: “*Although the members of a family can never be the same age, they can still be one. Likewise, in the church we do not practice uniformity because in the household of God, a large household, there are many degrees of maturity among the children. To eliminate the degrees of maturity would be absolutely wrong and would be impossible.*” Surely a believer’s understanding of God’s Word depends on his maturity; hence the uniformity in biblical interpretation which the “blended brothers” expect is unattainable as long as growth is needed. Moreover, Brother Lee clearly taught that eliminating of all disparities is not a prerequisite for “one accord.” He said²⁷, “*The church life must be of unity with variety. To be in one accord does not mean to get rid of all the differences. If this were the case, we would never have the one accord in this age.*” Brother Lee’s tolerance of diversity contrasts with the “blended co-workers” expectation of uniformity. The “blended co-workers” are on record saying: “***If one brother has a different view, even if it is on a minor point, we cannot have the one accord.***” Compare this with Brother Lee’s words, “***To be in one accord does not mean to get rid of all the differences.***” Here, yet again, we have an “***interpretational difference,***” this time between the “blended brothers” and Brother Lee, concerning the prerequisites for “one accord.” May we ask, in this matter – diversity vs. uniformity – who has “***problems with the Head and are not under the Head***”—Brother Lee or the “blended co-workers”?

Nigel Tomes,
April 2006

NOTES:

1. W. Lee, *Life-study of Romans*, p. 333
2. W. Lee, *Life-study of Romans*, p. 334
3. See *The Beliefs and Practices of the local churches*, (1978, LSM) p. 20
4. *The Ministry*, vol. 8, no. 7 July/August 2004, p. 183
5. What follows is based upon the writer’s notes and recollections of the spoken message. Note that the “***different interpretations of the Scriptures***” referred to by the “blended co-workers” are **not** confined to the fundamentals of the faith. The statement (which appears without qualification) seems to apply to **all items of Scriptural interpretation**, including the interpretation of types, shadows, symbols, figures, parables, prophecies etc.
6. *The Ministry*, vol. 8, no. 7 July/August 2004, p. 183
7. The context of these statements is: “*As long as we have different views on a minor point, we cannot have one accord (Phil. 3:15). In a particular aspect of the work, some brothers may have diametrically opposed views, and it may seem that no one can lay aside his view. We may wonder what to do in such a situation. We cannot argue and fight, nor can we refuse to speak—we are brothers. Yet in this matter there is no one accord. However, Brother Nee had a certain view in this particular matter and Brother Lee had the same view. We should simply take Brother Nee and Brother Lee’s view on the matter. If one brother has a different view, even if it is on a minor point, we cannot have the one accord...*” *The Ministry*, vol. 9, No. 2, Feb. 2005 p. 64. The quote in the text focuses on the main point of this passage, as shown by the heading in *The Ministry* magazine: “***As long as we have different views on a minor point, our not being able to have the one accord.***”
8. Consider the practical implications. If we in the local churches “***receive the believers according to God’s receiving of them in a general way, not according to our [or their] doctrinal concepts,***” this would imply their differing interpretations of Scripture are irrelevant to our receiving. After initially receiving them, **when do we inform them** that, due to their different interpretation of Scripture, they have “***problems with the Head and are not under the Head***” and are jeopardizing the “one accord”? Is the “grace period” six-months, one year, or a longer period? In this case, aren’t we open to the charge of hypocrisy – initially welcoming believers on one basis and then subsequently insisting on uniformity of interpretation and practice? Isn’t this akin to a “bait and switch” strategy? What kind of ethical standard is embodied in this strategy?
9. W. Lee, *Life-study of Revelation*, p. 318
10. W. Lee, *Life-study of Revelation*, pp. 317-8

11. W. Nee, "*Study of Revelation*" in *Collected Works*, vol. 16, p. 94
12. W. Lee, *Further Consideration of the Eldership, the Region of the Work...*LSM, 1991, p. 16
13. W. Lee, *Further Consideration ...*, p. 16
14. Brother Lee emphasized the "one work," saying "...all the co-workers in all the regions should do the same one work universally for the unique Body . . . Even Paul and Peter did not carry our two works. Even though they worked in different regions, they had only one work to build up the Body of Christ." W. Lee, *Further Consideration ...*, pp. 18-9. Our focus in the text is not on the question of "one work," but, rather on the "region or regions of the work"
15. *The Ministry*, vol. 9, no. 6, June 2005, pp. 169-70
16. Watchman Nee, *Further Talks on the Church Life*, p. 156.
17. Watchman Nee, *Church Affairs*, p. 143
18. Watchman Nee, *Church Affairs*, p. 144
19. Consider, for example the following: "[Paul] was clear that there are only two regions of the work...the work among the Jews and the work among the Gentiles. The Gentile region was quite extensive, but there were no sub-regions. ...[Paul] was the wise master builder overseeing **the work in the Gentile world, which was most of the inhabited earth**.... 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, (Jan./Feb. 2006) p. 213
20. In this context the spoken message contained words to the effect that, "In every generation God only has one wise master-builder who oversees (supervises) God's building work over the entire globe. That's just the way it is. In our generation it was Brother Lee. **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.**"
21. Watchman Nee, *Further Talks on the Church Life*, pp. 162-3.
22. "For the purpose of effective management, the Little Flock leaders divided China into **thirteen ecclesiastical districts** (jiaoqu), indicating that the Movement was widespread across the country." Joseph Tse-Hei Lee, "*Watchman Nee and the Little Flock Movement in Maoist China*" in *Church History*. Chicago: March 2005, Vol.74, pg. 68, 29 pgs
23. Brother Lee says, "**The more we grow in life, the more we will cleave to the faith and to the apprehension of Christ and the more we will drop all the minor and meaner doctrinal concepts that cause divisions.**" Footnote 2 on Ephesians 4:13 Rcv.
24. Watchman Nee, *The Normal Christian Church Life*, in *Collected Works*... vol. 30, p. 30
25. Witness Lee. *The Intrinsic Problem in the Lord's Recovery Today*, p. 27.
26. Witness Lee. *The Intrinsic Problem in the Lord's Recovery Today*, p. 26
27. Witness Lee. *The Intrinsic Problem in the Lord's Recovery Today*, p. 27.
28. W. Lee, *The Practice of the Church Life according to the God-ordained Way*, p. 39