

OUR CHURCH LIFE IN THE FACE OF COVID-19 (6) UNIVERSAL SERVICE TO PREACH THE GOSPEL AND SHEPHERD THE SAINTS

(February 15, 2021)

The year 2020 will be considered by many a tragic year in our history as many painful events took place, with the global pandemic of the coronavirus as the highlight that affected the lives of millions plunging the global economy into recession. However, as He always does, the Lord uses the outward environment to take a further step in His move. As governments have implemented movement restrictions in every place, mass gatherings were banned or discouraged, forcing the churches to meet through various online platforms. Because of the convenience online meetings afford us, a believer who meets in a small group in his area before, can now have fellowship with another small group in a far locality. International conferences are now online, making it possible for the saints to join in these gatherings. This afforded the rich truths we have in the recovery to reach our beloved brothers and sisters for nourishing and perfecting.

We thank the Lord that, just as in Genesis 41:56, so many these days are enjoying the food in “Joseph’s storehouse.” But for us merely to be receivers falls short of God’s goal and desire. From Matthew 25, we see that believers have two statuses before the Lord. On the one hand, we are virgins filling up our vessels with oil for the growth in life; on the other hand, we are slaves serving the Lord. *To merely be content with our personal growth and enjoyment is not enough, because the riches that we receive from God are meant to be shared.* Matthew 24:45 says, “Who then is the faithful and prudent slave, whom the master has set over his household to give them food at the proper time?” This is the same sentiment the Apostle Paul shared in Ephesians: that grace was given to him by God to announce the unsearchable riches of Christ as the gospel (Eph. 3:8). *As believers we should not just be watchful in life, but we also must be faithful in service, dispensing food at the proper time.*

The Whole Body Serving Being the Greatest Recovery Today

Throughout the years, the Lord through His faithful servants has accomplished much work of recovery to bring His church to where she is today. Yet one aspect which God longs to still recover is the matter of everyone serving. Brother Watchman Nee said:

"We have to see that if the one-talented ones do not rise up to serve, there is no way for the church to go on. The priesthood is a universal priesthood. This is the greatest recovery of this century. Many people think that the matter of service is the work of a few people, but true service is that in which the whole Body is involved. As long as this matter is not fully recovered, we have to go on speaking." (Messages Given During the Resumption of Brother Watchman Nee's Ministry, chapter 47)

The Loss and the Recovery of the Priesthood

The matter of everyone serving has been in the Lord's heart even from the beginning. When Jehovah called the children of Israel out of Egypt, His intention was that they may be to Him a kingdom of priests and a holy nation (Exo. 19:6). One who has experienced the Passover and has crossed the Red Sea into the wilderness must be a priest serving God. This is the very reason why God wanted His people to be released from the slavery of Egypt: "Let my people go, that they may serve me" (Exo. 8:1; 9:1). *We have all been saved to serve God. We may be the busiest people on earth due to the affairs of life, but if we are not serving God as we should, in His eyes we are just standing idle.*

After the Israelites made their exodus out of Egypt, a tragic event happened as they were stationed in the wilderness. As Moses was spending time with God on top of the mountain, the children of Israel fell and worshipped the golden calf at the foot of the mountain. When Moses came down and saw this, he commanded to slay those who worshipped the idol. Only the Levites followed Moses' and killed over three thousand (Exo. 32:27-28). Because of their obedience, God appointed the tribe of Levi to serve Him as priests (Deut. 10:8). Originally, everyone was called out of Egypt to serve God; but from that time only the tribe of Levi could fulfil this duty, and apart from them, none of the eleven tribes were to be priests. Even if one were rich, he could not be a priest directly; he needed to invite the Levites to do the priestly service on his behalf. In the Old Testament, King Uzziah made himself priest and was smitten with leprosy (2 Chron. 26:16-20). Anyone who tried to serve God presumptuously would be smitten with leprosy. By this we learn that serving God is both a privilege and a right

But now in the New Testament, what the Israelites had lost due to the fall has been restored to the church. Peter said that we are being built up as a spiritual house into a royal priesthood (1 Peter 2:5). In Revelation the Apostle John mentioned that we are all priests to our God (Rev.1:6). From this, we see that

God desires to recover His people back to His original intention— that all would serve Him as priests.

The Way Today Being for the Whole Body to Serve

Though this is God's heart for His church, we have to admit that we are still short in practice. Yes, we have had many messages about the matter of each one serving, but mere talk about service is not service. Moreover, we may have a handful of brothers and sisters serving, but that is not the service of the whole church. Although God has given everyone the privilege to serve, ironically, our current situation may be similar to that of the Israelites in the Old Testament with only one tribe serving, the Levites, and the rest relying on their service. *Oh, may we ask mercy from the Lord to open our eyes and to draw out from us the proper response to His longing! We are now in the age where every brother and sister can and must do the priestly service. It is not about the method or how much we serve. The question at hand is whether or not everyone is serving. It has to be everyone working, everyone preaching the gospel, everyone shepherding.*

THE PRACTICE OF PREACHING THE GOSPEL

What does it mean for the church to be priests to God? How can we serve as priests? Romans 15:16 says, *“That I might be a minister of Christ Jesus to the Gentiles, a laboring priest of the gospel of God, in order that the offering of the Gentiles might be acceptable, having been sanctified in the Holy Spirit.”* Being a priest is related to the gospel. In fact, this is our occupation. Everyone must be a priest offering sinners to God! This should not only be a service of a few, but of everyone.

Since the lockdown, which forced many to socially interact online, was implemented, many churches have been conducting weekly online gospel meetings. For this, we do not need big advertisements to invite people; all the brothers and sisters just need to invite people individually. There is a difference between the two; with the saints individually inviting their friends, the whole church will be able to rise up to serve. Furthermore, some saints and churches produced short gospel videos and digital tracts. *If every brother and sister will read, watch, and share these with their friends consistently, the Lord will have a chance to speak to the many individuals who are in need of the glad tidings. We can also invite our gospel contacts to our small groupings where we can share the gospel to them and lead them to a clear salvation.* During these troubled times, many have become unsettled and their minds are clouded with

questions on life. As the Lord richly feeds us, we need to help others; this is the proper time to give them spiritual food.

SERVING BY SHEPHERDING

Another way to serve God is by shepherding the flock of God. *A person who loves the Lord must shepherd His sheep.* This is the principle seen in John 21 when the Lord Jesus commissioned Peter, as one who loves Him, to feed and shepherd His sheep.

There are many saints who are dormant and have not been active in the church life. Some have backslid into the world. Others are weighed down with so many anxieties or the affairs of life. These dear brothers and sisters do not have a proper church life. Such dormant saints and new believers desperately need our shepherding.

We often look up to the Apostle Paul whom God personally appeared to and who greatly taught the truth not only concerning Christ, but also the church, His Body. Yet a great minister like Paul needed an Ananias to usher him into the church, to the brothers and sisters who were present at that time. Many of us may see ourselves nowhere close to Paul's gift and capacity, but we all can be an Ananias to someone. Every dormant family member and new believer needs an Ananias to usher them into the church life.

THE SPIRIT AND HEART OF A SHEPHERD

What does it mean to shepherd? It is to take all-inclusive care of the flock; that is, to care for the needs of the sheep, whether it be food, water, or shelter. Just like a mother who provides all the needs of her child, we also need to be nursing mothers to the weak or lost saints in the Lord. A baby grows not by teaching but by proper feeding. Looking at our situation, the Lord has given us wonderful truths that are both high and deep. However, these are not just for us to know, but even more for us to apply. We should not become complacent and passive with the truths that we have, but instead be moved into action to render care toward the younger and weaker believers.

For us to shepherd, *we first need to have the loving and forgiving heart of our Father God and the shepherding and seeking spirit of our Savior Christ.* We may have lost this spirit. Oftentimes, we classify people based on who we think are the promising ones and those who are not. To the latter, we may not have a loving spirit as compared to the former. Having a judgmental spirit disqualifies and hinders us from being proper shepherds. No wonder many saints remain

barren for many years. There was a story of a brother who visited a couple no more than ten times. Because the situation seemed disappointing, he concluded that it is useless to visit them further and gave up on them. What is this? This is a case of a brother not having the shepherding and seeking spirit of our Savior Christ.

But what can we learn from the Lord Jesus in John 8? The Lord said to the crowd when the scribes and Pharisees brought an adulterous woman to Him, "He who is without sin among you, let him be the first to throw a stone at her" (John 8:7). One by one, from the oldest to the youngest, they went away, for they were with sin. Afterward, the Lord asked the sinful woman, "Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?" She said, "No one, Lord." Then Jesus said, "Neither do I condemn you" (vv. 10-11). *Oftentimes it is difficult for us to restore the dormant saints because we lack the loving and forgiving heart necessary to win them back. This attitude is wrong. This is not love.*

The church is not a police station to arrest people nor is it a court of law to judge. Rather, *the church should be a home to raise up believers, a hospital to heal and recover the sick ones, and a school to teach and edify the unlearned ones.* However, we have to admit that at times we may act like a police station, arresting the ones who are sinful. This is contrary to Paul's attitude when he said, "Who is weak, and I am not weak?" (2 Cor. 11:29a). He also said, "To the weak I became weak that I might gain the weak" (1 Cor. 9:22). This is love.

A brother may speak the higher truths well, yet remain barren. The reason may be the lack of love and shepherding. In 1 Corinthians 12 Paul revealed that love is the most excellent way (v. 31b). How do we shepherd people? Love is the most excellent way. He defined what love is in the following chapter. It is not jealous, not provoked, does not take account of evil; it covers all things, endures all things, and never falls away. Brothers and sisters, we need to cover others' sins, not broadcasting them. We do not take account of others' evils. Without the Lord's mercy, we would be no different than sinners. Therefore, we must love them. "Love covers all transgressions" (Prov. 10:12).

PRACTICAL WAYS TO CARRY OUT THE SHEPHERDING WORK

Practically speaking, we may start shepherding by visiting the saints who are seldom seen in the meetings. A key practice to recover them is to bring these names to other brothers and sisters in our small groups so that they also might receive the burden for them. Brother Witness Lee said that every believer must be willing to contact eight to nine saints on average. Eight to nine names is a

good number to be burdened for.

We also need to be ready to dispense food at a proper time. The dormant saints and new believers are experiencing spiritual hunger. We need to enjoy and digest the riches we have in the Father's house so that we may have something to share with them.

As we are about to contact a saint, we need to desperately pray. This affords the Lord the way to recover many saints in ways we do not expect.

Lastly, as we are conversing with the saints, we need to be continually joined to the Spirit, relying on His enlightening work in the heart of the saints we are shepherding, looking to the Lord's shepherding work through our shepherding.

PREACHING AND SHEPHERDING IN OUR SMALL GROUPS

Every one of us needs to preach the gospel and shepherd the saints; but the success rate for the friends and new believers to be ushered into the church and become remaining fruits depends much on how they live the church life in a balanced way, by attending both the big meetings and the small meetings. Acts 5:42 also says, "And every day, in the temple and from house to house, they did not cease teaching and announcing the gospel of Jesus as the Christ."

Eighty percent of our church life is in the small groupings. The small groups are the lifeline of the God-ordained way. Although gatherings are still restricted today, the principles of home meetings can be applied. The small group is not just another meeting for us to attend; it is not just making the big meeting into a small meeting. Rather, it is the venue for us to flow out the divine love through mutual care and intercession, shine forth the divine light for equipping and perfecting in the truth through asking and answering in mutuality, and carrying out the divine will through the organic assigning where every member moves and serves in the Body. We need to lead our new ones and dormant saints into our group-based church life, so that each one is cherished, nourished and perfected.

Brothers and sisters, now is the best time, the golden opportunity for us to preach the gospel and usher the new ones and dormant saints into the church life. The Lord has stirred up the environment to shake the settled and occupied hearts of so many people around us. We have no excuse not to reach out to them. Visiting people may seem to be inconvenient but it has now been made so much easier through telephone calls, online messaging platforms and video calls.

Brother Witness Lee once said that even if just 20 percent of the church will go out for two hours every week to contact people in a definite way, the church will have a revival. Isaiah 6:8 says, "Then I heard the voice of the Lord, saying, Whom shall I send? Who shall go for us? And I said, Here am I; send me." In many cases, our attitude is, "Send him, Lord". That is a poor attitude. Upon hearing the Lord's call, we do not have to look around; rather, we need to act on the Lord's call. Do we want a new and lasting revival in the churches? Then delay no further! We must rise up to consecrate ourselves to contact people for a few hours each week for the gospel and for shepherding.

As seen in the Old Testament, serving God is a privilege, and as New Testament believers, the Lord has recovered us all to take part in the universal priesthood. What grace we received from the Lord! Like the Apostle Paul, may we not receive the grace of God in vain (1 Cor. 15:10). Like him, may we labor more abundantly in preaching the gospel and in shepherding the saints. The Lord has paved the way through the environment, with the hearts of people softer toward the gospel and toward the Lord during the pandemic. May we rise up to coordinate with Him in the carrying out of the divine economy by serving faithfully, practically and diligently in the churches where we are serving.

(From the Co-workers in the Philippines)