

THE RECOVERY OF THE PRIESTHOOD FOR GOD'S BUILDING

(Lord's Day—Second Morning Session)

Message Eight

The Recovery of the Priesthood for God's Building

Scripture Reading: Rev. 1:5-6; 5:9-10; 1 Pet. 2:5, 9; Eph. 2:21-22; 3:16-17a

- I. The Lord's recovery is realized by the priesthood; actually, the Lord's recovery is the recovery of the priesthood—Zech. 3:1-5; 6:12-13; Hag. 1:8, 12:**
 - A. With the priesthood there has always been failure on the human side and continual recovery on the divine side:
 1. The Lord Jesus, the Priest, has brought us into His priesthood through His redemption—Rev. 1:5-6; 5:9-10.
 2. The whole church should be the priesthood; however, this priesthood has been lost and replaced by the clergy-laity system—2:6, 15.
 3. The recovery of the church life is the recovery of the real priesthood; we must be recovered into this priesthood, which means that we need to be brought back into the genuine fellowship with the Lord—1 Cor. 14:26; 1:9; 1 John 1:3.
 4. The Lord's recovery is a matter of the priesthood, not a matter of a work, a movement, or of doing things for the Lord.
 5. Our responsibility is not to care for any kind of work; our responsibility is simply to take care of the priesthood by learning to be possessed and occupied by the Lord until we are filled, saturated, and permeated with Him—Eph. 3:16-17a, 19.
 - B. What the Lord needs today is a group of people who are brought into His presence and even into the Lord Himself until they are one with Him—Heb. 10:19; 2 Cor. 3:18; John 17:22, 24.
 - C. When the Lord has such a priesthood—a kingdom of priests—He will have the freedom to flow out and work out His will for the fulfillment of His eternal purpose—Exo. 19:6a; Rev. 1:5-6; 5:9-10; 4:11; Eph. 1:5, 9, 11; Phil. 2:13.
- II. The building of God's house is related to the priesthood and depends on the priesthood—Exo. 19:6a; 25:8-9; Zech. 6:12-13; 1 Pet. 2:5:**
 - A. The building of the church depends on whether or not the saints will bear the priesthood before God—Rev. 1:5-6; 5:9-10; Heb. 3:6; 6:20; 7:26; 8:1; 10:19.
 - B. The priesthood upholds the building of the church; without the priesthood it is impossible to build up the church.
 - C. If we are willing to come forward to God, fellowship with God, live before God, and allow God to flow through us, we will enjoy the riches of Christ and express the glory of Christ in a full way; in this way we will bear the testimony of the church, and the building of the church will be realized among us—11:6; 1 John 1:3; Eph. 3:8; 2:21-22.
 - D. In order to recover the building of God, God must first recover the priesthood—Ezra 1:1-4; 7:1-5.

III. The building of God's house as the dwelling place of God is the priesthood; the holy priesthood is the spiritual house—Eph. 2:21-22; 1 Pet. 2:5:

- A. *Spiritual* denotes the capacity of the divine life to love and grow; *holy*, the capacity of the divine nature to separate and sanctify—v. 5:
 - 1. The house of God subsists mainly by the divine life; hence, it is spiritual.
 - 2. The priesthood subsists mainly by the divine nature; hence, it is holy.
- B. The Greek word for *priesthood* in verses 5 and 9, *hierateuma*, refers not to the priestly office but to the assembly of priests, a body of priests, a priesthood.
- C. The coordinated body of priests is the built-up spiritual house.
- D. In verse 5 Peter uses the terms *spiritual house* and *holy priesthood* to indicate the church life:
 - 1. It is not the spiritual life lived in an individualistic way, but the spiritual life lived in a corporate way, that can fulfill God's purpose and satisfy His desire—Eph. 1:5, 9, 11; 3:11; Gen. 1:26.
 - 2. God wants a spiritual house for His dwelling, a priestly body, a priesthood, for His service.

IV. In our ministry as priests, we need to be one with the building and build God to build God into man and man into God—Eph. 3:16-17a; John 14:2, 23:

- A. "Building God and man in one / Is their [the priests'] work before the Lord"—*Hymns*, #849.
- B. God's New Testament economy is for the processed and consummated Triune God to be wrought into us to become our life and our being—1 Tim. 1:4; 2 Cor. 13:14; Eph. 3:16-17a; Rom. 8:9-10, 6, 11:
 - 1. God's economy and goal according to His heart's desire are to build Himself into man and to build man into Him—2 Sam. 7:12-14a; Eph. 3:17a.
 - 2. God's intention in His economy is to build Himself in Christ into our being—2 Sam. 7:12-14a; Eph. 3:17a; John 14:20.
 - 3. God in Christ is within us to build Himself into our being and to build us into His being—2 Sam. 7:12-14a; Matt. 16:18; John 14:23; Eph. 3:17a.
- C. The Christ who is built, constituted, into us is both God's house and our house; this house is a mutual abode, where God and we, we and God, are mingled together as one entity—John 14:2, 23; 15:4a.
- D. In every aspect of our work—preaching the gospel, feeding the believers, establishing churches, perfecting the saints—the intrinsic element must be that we minister the building and build God into others—Matt. 16:18; Eph. 3:17a:
 - 1. If we realize that God desires to work Himself into His chosen people, then the goal of our work will be to minister the building and build God into others so that the Triune God may build Himself into their being—v. 17a.
 - 2. We should reconsider the work we are doing for the Lord and ask how much of Christ as the embodiment of the Triune God has been wrought into those whom we have brought to the Lord—Gal. 4:19; Col. 1:28.
 - 3. We need to practice one thing—to minister the processed and consummated Triune God into others so that He may build Himself into their inner man; we need to pray that the Lord will teach us to work in this way—2 Cor. 13:14; 1 Cor. 3:9a, 10, 12.

4. When we build the church with the processed and consummated Triune God, it is not actually we who are building; rather, God is building through us, using us as priests to dispense Himself into others—Acts 9:15.
- E. As we work for God today, we should participate in God’s building—the constitution of the divine element into the human element and of the human element into the divine element—John 14:20; 15:4a; 1 John 4:15.
- F. As we endeavor to carry out the God-ordained way in the four steps of begetting, nourishing, perfecting, and building, our work must be based upon the processed and consummated Triune God, who is building Himself into His chosen people and building them into Him—2 Cor. 13:14; Eph. 3:16-17a; 4:4-6.
- G. If we minister the building and builded God to others for their growth in the divine life, we are building up the Body of Christ, which will consummate the New Jerusalem—Col. 2:19; Eph. 4:15-16; Rev. 21:10.

Excerpts from the Ministry:

**THE LORD’S RECOVERY BEING REALIZED
BY THE PRIESTHOOD**

In the priesthood there has always been failure on the human side and continual recovery on the divine side. Following the restored creation, Adam was put into the real position of the priesthood. When Adam failed, God came in to recover the priesthood by His redemption. Abel was brought back by redemption into the priesthood. He became a redeemed priest to enjoy and contact God, to function with God and partake of God.

Eventually, even this priesthood under redemption was lost by man. Then God came in to select Abraham out of the fallen race and bring him into the priesthood. He became a priest interceding for others. Genesis 18 reveals that God came to the tent of Abraham. That tent was the Holy of Holies. Abraham was in the Holy of Holies being one with the Lord. Therefore, he received the vision about Sodom and the Lord’s plan.

Gradually, Abraham’s descendants, the children of Israel, fell into Egypt. Thus, they lost the priesthood again. But the Lord redeemed them through the passover and told them that He intended to make them a kingdom of priests, or a priestly kingdom (Exo. 19). There would not be just one priest but a kingdom of priests. However, it was not long until the whole nation of Israel fell by worshipping the golden calf. Then the priesthood was turned from the whole nation to the one tribe of Levi. Later, during the time of Eli, the situation with the priests of the tribe of Levi was very poor. They were so fallen that they lost everything of the priesthood. But God raised up the kings and the prophets to restore the priesthood. All the kings and prophets who were with God were brought into the real priesthood.

Now we come to the New Testament. As we have seen, the Lord Jesus, who is the Priest of all priests, brought us into the priesthood through His redemption. The whole church must now be the priesthood. However, this priesthood has also been lost. Therefore, the recovery of the church life is the recovery of the real priesthood. It is not a matter of service, work, or activity. It is solely a matter of the

priesthood. We must be recovered into this priesthood, which means that we must be brought back into the real fellowship with the Lord.

Clearly, it is not a matter of doing something for the Lord, nor is it a movement. The Lord's recovery is entirely a matter of the priesthood. We have to be brought into the presence of the Lord. We must learn how to be possessed and occupied by the Lord until we are filled, saturated, and permeated with the Lord. Let us forget about any kind of work. That is not our responsibility—it is *His*. Our responsibility is simply to take care of the priesthood.

The record in the Bible clearly shows that none of the work of God was initiated by man's thought or activity. All His work has been initiated through the priesthood. We must forget about the work, activities, movements, methods, forms, and even the teachings and gifts. Our one unique need is the real priesthood.

We need some time to be on the "housetop," on the "island of Patmos," on the "side of the river," and in the "wilderness." This simply means that we need some time to be separated and shut up unto the Lord so that we may spend not just our time but have our very life and person in His presence. Then He will occupy us, and our whole concept will be changed to the heavenly view of the priesthood.

I must say again that the recovery of the Lord is the recovery of the priesthood. The recovery of the church life is not a movement, work, or activity, but only the recovery of the priesthood. What the Lord needs is a group of people who are brought into His presence and even into the Lord Himself until they are one with Him. Then He will have the freedom to flow out and work out His will for the fulfillment of His purpose. (*The Collected Works of Witness Lee, 1966*, vol. 1, "The Priesthood," pp. 440-441)

ALL SERVICE MUST BE PRIESTLY

All service for the Lord must be priestly, regardless of what kind of service it is. Our service to the Lord must be a kind of priestly service. The priests in the Old Testament were not only priests but also the army, so the army was a priestly army. Priests not only stand before God, ministering unto Him, but they also fight the battle. The army of the Lord is a priestly army. This means that if we are not priests, we can never fight the battle for the Lord. We must be a priesthood in order to fight the battle for God.

After the children of Israel went over the Jordan and entered the land of Canaan, the first warfare was a battle fought by the priests. It was not fought by any secular weapons, but by the Ark. The Ark was the prevailing weapon. In addition, the priests used rams' horns. They were a peculiar army, and they fought the battle in a peculiar way with a peculiar weapon. Everything was peculiar. That is not the way we would fight a battle. Later on, however, we will see that we must learn to fight the battle in this way. Basically speaking, this army was the priesthood. I do not mean the office of the priests, but an army of priests, a body of priests coordinated together under the leadership of the Ark.

As we come to the New Testament, we see that the apostles were priestly apostles. An apostle must be a priest. If we do not know how to be priests, we can never

be apostles. The apostle Paul tells us that he served as a priest in preaching the gospel. It was as a priest that he offered all the Gentile believers unto God as an offering. I believe that you have read Romans many times, but have you ever noticed that Romans 15:16 tells us that Paul preached the gospel as a priest? If we are evangelists, we must be such as priests. We must be priestly evangelists. If we are not priests, we can never preach the gospel in an adequate way. The gospel must be preached by priestly evangelists.

Then the apostle Peter tells us that he and others had to first continue steadfastly in prayer and then in the ministry of the word. This means that to minister the word, we must first be priests. As priests we must give ourselves to prayer and spend time in the presence of the Lord. This is the priestly ministry.

Before all kinds of service, we must first serve as priests in the Lord's presence. If we are elders, we must be priestly elders. If we are deacons or deaconesses, we must first be priests. Without being priests, we can never be good brothers or good sisters in the church. But even this is not all. We must be priestly husbands, priestly wives, and priestly parents. We have to be priestly in all things.

The army must be priestly; the apostle must be priestly; the evangelist must be priestly; the minister of the word must be priestly; the elder and deacon must be priestly; the brothers and sisters must be priestly; and the husbands, wives, parents, and children must be priestly. This simply means that in the Lord's service we must first open ourselves to the Lord and spend time in His presence. This will enable Him to fill, saturate, and even swallow us up so that we may be one with Him. Then He will be our content, and we will be His expression. He will be able to say something through us and to express something from within us, whether we are fighting the battle, preaching the gospel, teaching the word, or serving as elders or deacons. Whatever we are will be a channel for the Lord to flow out. This must be our way of living, our way of work, and our way of service.

ONLY THE PRIESTLY MINISTRY CAN BUILD THE CHURCH

The church is built up basically by the priestly ministry, not by the teaching ministry. All the local churches must be local bodies of priests. We do not need much speaking, but we need the priestly ministry. A strong local church is one that is full of praying people. They may not be so strong in talking or in teaching, but they are very strong in praying. Their spirit is strong in prayer because they practice the priesthood in their daily walk. They have learned to open themselves to the Lord, to go to Him and spend time in His presence. They have learned to be filled and even swallowed up by the Lord. Therefore, their spirit is so living, so active, and so aggressive. When they come to the meetings, nothing can quench them. There is something burning within their spirit.

Do not think that I am encouraging you to pray by asking the Lord to do something. This is not my point. Real prayer is not to ask the Lord to do something for you or for the church. Real prayer is to open yourself to the Lord. Do not ask Him to do anything, but simply open yourself to Him, and let Him fill and saturate you with Himself. Then He will burden you to pray, and He will give you guidance to

pray. Your prayer will then be according to the inner feeling, not according to your mind.

Why do we need to pray? It is because we cannot do anything. We can never be elders, we can never be deacons, and we can never be evangelists. We just cannot do it. So we must pray, which means that we put our trust in the Lord. The second reason we need to pray is because we realize that God must do something through us. Without us, even God cannot do anything. This is quite remarkable. Without us, the Lord cannot preach the gospel. Without us, He can never save sinners. Although we need Him, He needs us even more. So we have to pray because we cannot do anything and because without us God cannot do anything. The third reason we must pray is because God wants to mingle Himself with man. Therefore, we pray to open ourselves to Him that He may mingle Himself with us. When God and man are mingled together through priestly praying, God will flow out through man to do His work.

So we see that if we are going to build up the church, we must first realize that we cannot do anything. We cannot build up the church, yet we must. This burdens us to pray. Even the Lord cannot build up the church unless we pray. The building up of the church can only be accomplished by the mingling of God with man. There must be certain ones who offer themselves to the Lord so that the Lord may mingle Himself with them. Then it will be possible for the church to be built up. This building is not by the ministry of the word, but by the ministry of the priesthood. We must simply learn to practice the priesthood; then we will see the result.

In reading the history of the church and the biographies of many spiritual persons, we found the same principle. It is not a matter of work or a matter of ministering. It is a matter of practicing the priesthood. We must have the priestly ministry. Of course, we do need people to work in the outer court, but we must know that all the activities in the outer court are under the direction of those who are in the Holy Place or the Holy of Holies. Without the priests in the Holy Place or the Holy of Holies, there is no direction for the people to work in the outer court. All the outward activities must be under the direction of the inward priesthood. We need this priestly ministry today. (*The Collected Works of Witness Lee, 1966*, vol. 1, "The Priesthood," pp. 468-469, 470-472)

MINISTERING THE BUILDING GOD AND THE BUILDED GOD

Our work in the recovery today is to minister God to people. Yes, we need to save sinners and to feed the saints and perfect them. The crucial matter, however, is that we minister God to others. The God whom we minister is not just the building God—He is also the builded God. If we fail to minister God in this way, our work will be wood, grass, and stubble (1 Cor. 3:12).

I would ask you to reconsider the work you are doing for the Lord. Perhaps you have opened up a region or have brought many people to God. But I ask you this question: How much of Christ as the embodiment of the Triune God has been wrought into those whom you have brought to God? If we are sincere and genuine, we will humble ourselves and confess that not very much of the Triune God has been

wrought into the ones we have brought to God. Therefore, we need to practice one thing—to minister the processed Triune God into others so that He may build Himself into their inner man. In every aspect of our work—preaching the gospel, feeding the believers, perfecting the saints—the intrinsic element must be that we minister the building and builded God to others. I would urge you to pray that the Lord would teach you to work in this way.

**THE PROCESSED TRIUNE GOD
BUILDING HIMSELF INTO HIS REDEEMED PEOPLE**

The processed Triune God is embodied in Christ and realized as the consummated Spirit. This is the God whom we worship, preach, and minister to others. Today He is building Himself into His redeemed people in order to produce a house with Himself as the element and also with something from their redeemed and uplifted humanity. This house is the church, the Body of Christ. This house is the enlargement, the expansion, of Christ, the embodiment of the Triune God realized as the Spirit. As we carry out the God-ordained way in the four steps of begetting, nourishing, perfecting, and building, our work must be based upon the processed Triune God, who is building Himself into His chosen people. (*Life-study of 1 & 2 Samuel*, pp. 200-201)