

A CHRISTIAN'S ATTITUDE TOWARD REFORMING SOCIETY

In 1950, in a time of great social upheaval in China, Watchman Nee, in a series of messages for new believers, said, "Today the world is full of all kinds of problems. How will these problems be solved? What should be our attitude towards these problems?" (*Messages for Building Up New Believers: Volume Three* [hereafter, *Messages (3)*], 914). These questions and Brother Nee's answers to them are as pertinent to believers today, a time when the world is beset with intractable problems, as it was then.

In an earlier work Brother Nee said of all the problems in the world, "We have to see that God has already prepared the solution to all these problems. He has also set the schedule for the fulfillment of the solution" (*The Normal Christian Faith*, 175). This solution is carried out in two stages, which are based on the first and second comings of Christ. In the first stage, Christ came through incarnation to establish the model of living as a God-man, He accomplished redemption, and He became the life-giving Spirit in resurrection (Matt. 1:23; 1 Pet. 2:21; Eph. 1:7; 1 Cor. 15:45b). He is now working to bring men to salvation (Matt. 1:21), to cause them to grow in the divine life, which they receive through their rebirth (1 Pet. 2:2), and to build them up as God's house and His kingdom (1 Tim. 3:15; Eph. 2:21-22; Col. 1:13; Rev. 12:10). Thus, as Brother Nee noted, "When Christ came the first time, He saved us individually. He did not deal with the world or its systems. He did not touch any social problems. His first coming was to settle the spiritual issues, not the material ones" (*The Normal Christian Faith*, 175).

This does not mean that the Lord is indifferent to the evils of human social systems and institutions. He will solve all the problems of human society—when He comes again to establish His kingdom (Rev. 11:15). Thus, Brother Nee said, "All social problems will be settled when the Lord comes back again. When He comes back, all social ills will be removed" (*Messages (3)*, 914). He added, "When Christ comes the second time, He will change all social systems and institutions" (917). Actually, the work Christ is doing in this age to perfect His believers to reign with Him is with a view to establishing His kingdom on earth to resolve all the problems caused by man's rebellion against God.

This does not mean that Christians should not care for those who suffer in the present age. The local churches and the believers who meet in them have actively participated in numerous relief efforts and care for the needy, though in the principle of the Lord's word in Matthew 6:3-4, these matters have not been widely publicized. However, some Christians have replaced the emphasis of the Bible on the accomplishment of God's purpose with their own pursuit of social justice. Some have gone so far as to adopt and advocate acceptance of unbiblical standards of morality that belong to the present evil age but have no place in the church. The false dichotomy between a personal and social gospel comes from a lack of understanding of the significance of the first and second comings of Christ. When Brother Nee gave his Kuling training, many who were at least nominal Christians in China were engaged in social activism and were critical of those who were not. In that context he said:

Because of their ignorance of the Lord's work in His second coming, some people have formed wrong concepts about Christianity. They think that Christians are only interested in a gospel for individuals, that they are not interested in a gospel for society as a whole. Actually we believe in an individual gospel, and we also believe in a social gospel. The time for the social gospel will be when the Lord comes again. (*The Collected Works of Watchman Nee, Volume 60: Miscellaneous Records of the Kuling Training (2)*, 444)

What, then, should be our attitude and practice today? Brother Nee counseled the saints to render help to others but not to get swept up in social action movements. These movements, no matter what their orientation, are like tides that carry people away from God's purpose. Involvement in them compromises

the testimony of the church's heavenly calling (Heb. 3:1; see Messages (3), 916-917). This is consistent with the pattern of the Lord Jesus and of the New Testament apostles, especially Paul. Just as the Lord Jesus never sought to reform the corrupt social system of the Roman Empire, neither did the apostles. Of the apostle Paul, Brother Nee commented, "Never once did he try to change the social order. He came only to solve man's spiritual needs and settle the spiritual problems of the church" (179-180). Thus, Paul charged the Philippians to "be blameless and guileless, children of God without blemish in the midst of a crooked and perverted generation, among whom you shine as luminaries in the world" (Phil. 2:15).

Paul's treatment of the inhuman Roman system of slavery is instructive. In his Epistles, he consistently exhorted slaves who were believers to obey their masters (Eph. 6:5-8; Col. 3:22; 1 Tim. 6:11; Titus 2:9). At the same time, he clearly indicated that the status of slave and master had been annulled in Christ (Gal. 3:28; Col. 3:11; Philem. 16). Paul was a herald of the New Testament jubilee of grace, a teacher of God's New Testament economy. As such, he did not touch the existing social system. In his *Life-study of Titus*, Witness Lee said:

If Paul had advocated the annulment of the system of slavery, he would have been regarded as a social reformer by those who read his Epistles. That would have obscured Paul's teaching concerning the living out of Christ's divine life in our human living in the midst of any kind of social system. In order to guarantee that the light would shine without hindrance, Paul did not say a word about the social system in the way of correcting it or reforming it. (*Life-study of Titus*, 30)

Of course, neither Paul nor the God He served approved of the evil system of slavery. Brother Lee said further:

When the Epistle of Titus was written, a number of slaves had become believers in Christ. According to civil law, a slave had no rights. A master could brand a slave as if he were a horse or a mule. Furthermore, a master could legally put a slave to death. What a dreadful system! To be sure, God was utterly opposed to such a social system, for it was altogether contrary to the place of man in His creation. Paul certainly did not approve of this evil social system. But instead of trying to reform it, he charged the slaves to behave well in it, to live in it according to the standard of the humanity of the Lord Jesus. Even in the midst of such an unjust social system, Christians could live out a life with the highest standard of humanity. What a testimony this is! (30-31)

Though he did not try to reform the Roman social system, Paul declared that all social, racial, and national distinctions were abolished through the death of Christ and have no place in the church as the new man (Eph. 2:14-16; Col. 3:10-11). This is illustrated in his Epistle to Philemon, in which he urged Philemon, who had been Onesimus's master, to receive the runaway Onesimus back not as a slave but as a brother (Philemon 13-16). Concerning this Brother Lee commented, "In the practice of the economy of God, it is crucial that all social ranks and differences among races and nations are swallowed up" (*Life-study of Philemon*, 13).

The problems of human society will never be solved until Christ comes to establish His kingdom. Thus, a Christian's responsibility is not to try to solve today's social ills directly, an endeavor that is bound to fail, but to cooperate fully with the Lord's present work. In this age that work is to propagate Christ by preaching the gospel to gain men, to grow in life and minister Christ as life to others, and to live a crucified life under the reigning of the divine life in the reality of the Body of Christ so that the Lord can return to bring in the manifestation of His kingdom (Matt. 24:14; 1 Pet. 2:2; 1 Tim. 4:6; Gal. 2:20; Rom. 5:17; Eph. 4:15-16; Matt. 25:31-34). Then the Lord will set all human affairs in order and will reign in righteousness over the whole earth unto eternity (Zech. 14:9; Isa. 32:1; Psa. 72:1-2; 2 Pet. 3:13).