

LESSONS FOR THE SISTERS

Lesson 17

The Function of the Sisters in the Church Life (1) Preserving and Maintaining Life and “Conceiving” and “Giving Birth” to Everything in the Church Life

Scripture Reading: Eph. 2:19; 1 Tim. 3:15; Rev. 2:4; 1 Pet. 3:1, 4; Luke 2:36-37; Col. 4:6

I. We need to see the importance of the sisters' function in the church life:

- A. God uses physical things as shadows of spiritual things; a human family is a shadow, a picture, of the church life; in the church the brothers can be compared to the husband and father in a family, and the sisters can be compared to the wife and mother—Eph. 2:19; 1 Tim. 3:15.
- B. In order to have a proper family life, the mother is more important than the father; the principle is the same regarding the church life; in this sense, we may say that the sisters are more important than the brothers in the church life—cf. John 12:1-3.
- C. In a family the responsibility is mainly on the side of the wife; in order to have a proper family life with a proper home life, the wife must bear the majority of the responsibility—Prov. 31:10-31.
- D. In order to have a proper church life, the sisters must bear a particular responsibility and carry out a particular function—John 12:1-3; Rom. 16:1-2, 6, 12-13.

II. The main function of the sisters both in the church and in the family is to preserve and maintain life—Rom. 16:1-2:

- A. In a family it is the wife, not primarily the husband, who maintains life; if a father is not at home, the children are not affected as much as when the mother is away from home—Prov. 31:10-31.
- B. The condition of a church depends on the sisters; when the sisters are healthy, living, and going on, the church is healthy, living, and going on—Phil. 4:2-3; 2:1-4, 12-16.

III. The sisters need to bear responsibility and “give birth” to everything in the church life—Matt. 1:18; Luke 1:26-35:

- A. In a family the husband cannot conceive and give birth to anything; only the wife can bear a child; this is an illustration of the situation in the church life.
- B. No matter what the church endeavors to work out, if the sisters do not bear the responsibility, it is very difficult to bring forth anything; the brothers may initiate something and may make many decisions, but whether or not anything can be “conceived” and worked out depends more on the sisters:
 - 1. If the sisters are silent and dormant in relation to anything in the church life, that thing will not have a good outcome.
 - 2. All the things of life related to the local church must be “conceived” and brought forth by the sisters.
- C. How can the sisters conceive and give birth to something in the church life?
 - 1. First, the sisters need to love the Lord with the first love—Rev. 2:4; Mark 12:30:
 - a. All the problems we have with the Lord are due to a lack of love toward Him; as long as we have the best love, the first love, toward the Lord, all the problems are gone—Eph. 6:24; 1 Cor. 16:22; Rev. 2:4.

- b. The sisters especially need to have the best love toward the Lord—Matt. 26:6-13; Mark 14:3-9; Luke 7:36-50; John 12:3; 20:1-18.
- 2. Second, the sisters need to be broken—John 11:20-22, 24, 27-28, 32, 39; Phil. 4:2-3; Matt. 16:24-26; cf. *Hymns* #622, #279, #280, #415, #482:
 - a. Based on the pattern in family life, in order for the sisters to give birth to anything in the church life, the sisters need to sacrifice; this means that they need to be broken—cf. *Hymns* #377.
 - b. In the church life, first the sisters need the best love toward the Lord; then they need brokenness, which includes submission, sacrifice, suffering, giving up many things, never craving something for themselves, never vindicating themselves, and never saying anything for themselves; the sisters need to be ready to lose themselves for the church—Rev. 12:11b; cf. Phil. 2:1-11:
 - 1) The Bible tells us that the sisters are put in a position of submission, a position of sacrifice, and a position of humility—1 Cor. 11:3-16; Eph. 5:22; 1 Pet. 3:1, 4.
 - 2) The real meaning of humility is to be broken; no one can be truly humble if he is not broken—1 Pet. 5:6; cf. Matt. 26:33-35, 69-75; John 21:15-17.
 - c. If the sisters quarrel among themselves, this is proof that they are not willing to be broken—Phil. 2:2-3.
 - d. Even if we have been treated wrongly, if we are willing to be wronged, this shows that we are broken; this means that we are under the working of the cross—Matt. 5:38-39; Luke 6:27-29; Rom. 12:19-21; 1 Pet. 2:21-24; Luke 9:23.
 - e. If the sisters are willing to be broken, this will be the greatest help to the birth of things in the church—cf. John 12:24.
- 3. Third, the sisters need to pray for the church:
 - a. The sisters must be praying persons—Luke 2:36-37; Acts 12:12.
 - b. In order to give birth to the things in the church, the sisters need to pray for the whole church in a detailed way.
- 4. Fourth, the sisters need to “season” the church life by adding “salt”:
 - a. The function of the sisters in the church can be compared to adding salt to food to season it and improve the flavor—cf. Col. 4:6:
 - 1) In the church life the brothers are sometimes rough and not careful in making decisions.
 - 2) Many times the sisters need to add something to make up the brothers’ lack; what the sisters add can be compared to salt added to improve the flavor of food.
 - 3) The sisters are needed to add salt to all that the brothers say and do in the church; if the sisters add the proper amount of salt, whatever the brothers say and do will be wonderful in the church.
 - b. In the church, people of many different dispositions are brought together by the Lord; with such a mixture of people coming together to practice the church life, a great deal of salt is needed—Mark 9:50.
 - c. The brothers do not have the position to provide the necessary salt; this portion belongs to the sisters.
 - d. Whether the church will be corrupted or purified, purged, and cleansed depends on the sisters—cf. Gen. 19:26; Matt. 5:13.

Excerpts from the Ministry:

THE IMPORTANCE OF THE SISTERS' FUNCTION IN THE CHURCH LIFE

In the Bible the church is likened to a home. The church is the household, the family, of God, and this household is the house of God. The two terms household and house are both used in the New Testament in reference to the church. Ephesians 2:19 tells us that the church is the household of God, whereas 1 Timothy 3:15 says that the church is the house of the living God.

Many times God uses physical things as shadows of spiritual things. A human family is a shadow, a picture of the church life. The situation in a family is a shadow of the situation in God's household. In the church the brothers can be compared to the husband and father in a family, and the sisters can be compared to the wife and mother.

In a family the responsibility is mainly on the side of the wife. In order to have a proper family life with a proper home life, the wife must bear the majority of the responsibility. If parents want their children to behave properly and only the father takes the responsibility to instruct the children, the result will not be satisfactory. But if the mother bears the responsibility to instruct the children in how they should behave, even if the father is not adequate in doing his part, the result may still be good.

Based on my experience I have learned that in order to have a proper church life, the sisters must bear a particular responsibility and carry out a particular function. The brothers cannot replace the sisters' function. In a family the husband cannot conceive and give birth to anything. Only the wife can bear a child. This is an illustration of the situation in the church life. In order to have a proper family life, the mother is more important than the father. The principle is the same regarding the church life. In this sense, we may say that the sisters are more important than the brothers in the church life.

No matter what the church endeavors to work out, if the sisters do not bear the responsibility, it is very difficult to bring forth anything. The brothers may initiate something and may make many decisions, but whether or not anything can be "conceived" and worked out depends more on the sisters. If the sisters are silent and dormant in relation to anything in the church life, that thing will not have a good outcome. In the matter of gospel outreach, it seems that the responsibility should be mainly on the brothers' side, but if the sisters do not pick up this responsibility, it is difficult for the church to bring forth, or give birth to, the outreach of the gospel. In order to give birth to the outreach of the gospel, the sisters must bear the responsibility. Even with the ministry of the word, although it is the brothers who minister, if the sisters do not pick up the burden and bear the responsibility to pray for the ministry, it is very difficult to give a proper birth to the ministry. However, if the sisters bear the responsibility in the spirit to stand with the ministering one and pray against any kind of attack from the enemy, this will give a rich birth to the ministry. Therefore, all the things of life related to the local church must be "conceived" and brought forth by the sisters.

In the Gospels the gathering in a home in Bethany was a miniature of the church life (Matt. 26:6-13; Mark 14:3-9; John 12:1-8). While the Lord Jesus was on earth, Bethany was His resting place (Matt. 21:17). In the home of Mary, Martha, and Lazarus, one of the homes in Bethany, the responsibility was borne mainly by the sisters. In that home there were two sisters and one brother. This illustrates the principle that in order to have a strong church life, there should be more sisters than brothers.

Let me give a testimony based on our past history. In the beginning of the church life in China, the raising up of the local churches was very much helped by the sisters. In the churches there were always more sisters than brothers. Furthermore, in the early days the financial help to the churches came mainly from the sisters. In those days we were very poor because we took the narrow way. We gave up the denominational way related to finances, and we lived by faith, trusting in the Lord for everything. The churches had more sisters than brothers, and most of the brothers did not have high-paying jobs. Nevertheless, from 1926 through 1936, both in Shanghai and in northern China, the Lord supplied the church, the work, and the co-workers mainly through the sisters who were nurses. These sisters were excellent in their profession and most of them were single. They were very strong in life. This illustrates the important position that the sisters occupy in the church life.

The sisters need to continually receive a burden from the Lord, bear responsibility, and “give birth” to everything in the church life. No matter what the brothers decide regarding the church, if the sisters do not enter into and bear the responsibility for that thing, it will be impossible to give birth to it.

THE SISTERS NEEDING TO LOVE THE LORD WITH THE FIRST LOVE

How can the sisters conceive and give birth to something in the church life? First, the sisters need to love the Lord more than anything else. The Lord is more lovable than the world, our self, our family, our future, and anything that we possess ([Matt.]10:37). He is more lovable than all things. According to Revelation 2:4, the degradation of the church was due to its leaving of the first love toward the Lord. The word first in Greek can also be translated “best.” We need to have the first love, the best love, toward the Lord. The sisters need to pray, “Lord, grant me to love You with the first love, the best love.”

When the Lord Jesus met Peter after His resurrection, He did not rebuke him. However, the Lord asked Peter three times if he loved Him (John 21:15-17) because Peter had denied the Lord three times (13:38; 18:12-27). All the problems we have with the Lord are due to a lack of love toward Him. As long as we have the best love, the first love, toward the Lord, all the problems are gone. The sisters especially need to have the best love toward the Lord.

THE SISTERS NEEDING TO BE BROKEN

Second, based on the pattern in the family life, in order for the sisters to give birth to anything in the church life, the sisters need to sacrifice. This means that they need to be broken. The matter of being broken includes being submissive, suffering, and giving up many things. In the church life, first the sisters need the best love toward the Lord. Then they need brokenness, which includes submission, sacrifice, suffering, giving up many things, never craving something for themselves, never vindicating themselves, and never saying anything for themselves. The sisters need to be willing to lose themselves for the church. If the sisters are not ready to sacrifice, to suffer loss, to submit, and to be broken, they can never conceive anything in the church.

The Bible tells us that the sisters are put in a position of submission, a position of sacrifice, and a position of humility (1 Cor. 11:3-16; Eph. 5:22; 1 Pet. 3:1, 4). The real meaning of humility is to be broken. No one can be truly humble if he is not broken. In order for the sisters to conceive and give birth to something in the church, they must be willing by the Lord's love to be broken. In their home with their husband and even with their children, the sisters need to be broken. Our spouse and our children are a test to our brokenness.

If the sisters quarrel among themselves, this is proof that they are not willing to be broken. Even if we have been treated wrongly, if we are willing to be wronged, this shows that we are broken. This means that we are under the working of the cross. If a sister is wronged by another sister and does not murmur or complain, this is a sign that she is willing to be broken. The brothers and the sisters all need to be willing to be broken. If we are such persons, it will be impossible for us to be offended. If the sisters become offended in anything, that will damage their function to conceive and give birth to something in the church life. The sisters should never excuse themselves. They should not blame or criticize the responsible brothers for their decisions. It may be true that the responsible brothers made a wrong decision, but if the sisters are willing to be broken, they will not say a word. Instead, they will bear the burden, go to the Lord, and pray, calling on the highest authority. They should let the Lord hear their voice concerning the situation, but no one else should hear anything from the sisters' mouth. If the sisters are willing to be broken, this will be the greatest help to the birth of things in the church. If the sisters are unwilling to be broken, nothing will be conceived and brought forth in the church. We have spoken much about life in the spirit, but the matter of brokenness is life in practicality, life in reality. If the sisters are willing to be broken, their spirit will be very strong, living, and rich.

THE SISTERS NEEDING TO PRAY FOR THE CHURCH

Third, the sisters must be praying persons (Luke 2:36-37; Acts 12:12). They need to pray for all the matters related to the church. Sister Ruth Lee was the oldest among the co-workers in mainland China. In the early days she prayed in all the church meetings. Apparently, the meetings were under the direction of the brothers, but actually the meetings were carried on through her prayers. She told us that several times while the ministering brothers were speaking, at a certain point she realized that there was a crisis in the message. She realized that it was difficult for the speaking brothers to get through. Right away she prayed, "Lord, help the brothers to pass through this crisis." She testified that many times after only a minute the Lord answered her prayer. She told us that sometimes in the meetings, the brothers who did not live in the spirit had the desire to speak something. Immediately, she prayed, asking the Lord to exercise His authority over the meeting and especially over the troubling brothers. She testified that many times the Lord quickly answered her prayer. Many of the sisters in Shanghai learned from her. She helped many sisters to practice the same kind of prayer.

After I arrived in Shanghai in 1933, I was very impressed with the fact that in the meetings I rarely heard the sisters say anything. They did not speak, but they prayed very much. When the opportunity came for the saints to pray in the meetings, the sisters' prayers were weighty and living. In order to give birth to the things in the church, the sisters need to pray for the whole church in a detailed way. The church carries out a work among the children, the junior high and high school students, and the college students. It also conducts a new believers' meeting. In addition, there is a general church meeting on the Lord's Day morning, and there are also meetings in the evening during the week. The sisters need to bear the burden and pray much for all these matters. The brothers have their responsibility and their portion. The sisters' portion is to pray.

THE SISTERS NEEDING TO "SEASON" THE CHURCH LIFE BY ADDING "SALT"

Fourth, the function of the sisters in the church can be compared to adding salt to food to season it and improve the flavor (cf. Col. 4:6). Let us illustrate this function in the following

way. In a family the father may instruct the children concerning their behavior. However, the father maybe rough and not careful in giving the children instruction. Thus, after the father's instruction, the mother may need to come in to make up the lack. She may realize that her husband was not careful, but she should not speak to the children about their father's shortage. If she does, she will damage the situation. If she is wise, she will confirm what the father said, but she will add something to make up the father's lack. This kind of instruction will be effective. If only the mother instructs the children in their behavior, her instruction will not work out as well as when the father and she both give the instruction.

In- the church life the brothers are sometimes rough and not careful in making decisions. Many times the sisters need to add something to make up the brothers' lack. What the sisters add can be compared to salt added to improve the flavor of food. After the salt has been added, the flavor is right. The sisters are needed to add salt to all that the brothers say and do in the church. If the sisters add the proper amount of salt, whatever the brothers say and do will be wonderful in the church; otherwise, it will be poor, without the proper flavor.

If the sisters learn the lesson of adding salt to everything in the church life, even if something negative happens to one of the brothers, that thing will turn out to be a great blessing not only to him but also to the whole church. Whether it becomes a blessing or not depends on what kind of salt and how much salt the sisters add. If there is a problem between two brothers in the church, and one of the brothers comes to an older sister to tell her how poor the other brother is, that is the time for the sister to add some salt to the situation. If the sister has learned the spiritual lessons, she will help the brother to know the flesh and the self and to apply the cross. This does not mean that the sister will teach the brother or give him a message. It means that the sister knows how to add salt to the situation in order to help the two brothers be one. This will give birth to some edifying factors in the church and cause the church to be built up.

In the church, people of many different dispositions are brought together by the Lord. With such a mixture of people coming together to practice the church life, a great deal of salt is needed. The brothers do not have the position to provide the necessary salt. This portion belongs to the sisters. Whether the church will be corrupted or purified, purged, and cleansed depends on the sisters.

The above four things—loving the Lord with the first love, being broken, bearing the burden to pray, and learning how to add salt—are the main factors that help the sisters to give birth to many things in the church life. I hope that the Holy Spirit will speak to the sisters concerning these matters. (*CWWL, 1968*, vol. 1, "Various Messages in Los Angeles," ch. 15, pp. 89-95)

Study Questions:

1. What is the main function of the sisters both in the family and in the church life?
2. What does it mean for the sisters to "conceive" and "give birth" to everything in the church life?
3. What are the four means for the sisters to give birth to things in the church life?

References and Further Reading:

1. *The Collected Works of Witness Lee, 1968*, vol. 1, "Various Messages in Los Angeles," msg. 15.
2. *The Collected Works of Witness Lee, 1975-1976*, vol. 3, "Practical Points for the Sisters Concerning the Building Up of the Church."