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CULTIC, ABERRANT, OR (UNCONVENTIONALLY) ORTHODOX?

A Reassessment of the "Local Church" Movement

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During the height of the Jesus movement in the early 1970s, a young Northern California woman who had recently converted to Christ accepted an invitation to a meeting of Christians who identified themselves as "the church" in her city. When the members began to worship, this new Christian was unnerved by the group's practice of "pray reading" Scripture and "calling on the name of the Lord," in which worshipers were loudly reading and repeating Scripture verses and punctuating them with shouts such as "Amen!" "Hallelujah!" and "O Lord! Amen! Hallelujah!" After someone in the assembly proclaimed, "I can sense the human spirits mingling!" the young woman bolted for the door, fearful she had stumbled into a cult meeting, or perhaps even a spiritualist seance.

This anecdote from an old friend of mine captures the awkward tension that has existed between Western evangelicals and the "local church" (LC)¹ movement founded in China by Watchman Nee and brought to America in 1962 by Nee's coworker Witness Lee. Their unconventional form of worship, unfamiliar doctrines and terminology (e.g., "mingling"), intense devotion to the ministries of Nee and Lee, and the strong Chinese influence that is evident even in the Western outposts of the movement, all have contributed to the perception that this group is strange at best and cultic or heretical at worst. For many evangelicals these initial suspicions only seemed confirmed when they studied LC literature or dialogued with their members, since they seemingly embrace unorthodox doctrines such as modalism (God is one person in three modes rather than three persons in one being) even while denying that they hold them.

The Christian Research Institute (CRI), which publishes this magazine, is no stranger to this controversy. Along with the Spiritual Counterfeits Project (SCP) in Berkeley, California, in the mid to late 1970s we were among the first to research and publish on the LC. Although we refused to call them a cult,² our highly critical evaluation was consulted and cited by numerous later critics, many of whom did not have the same scruples about using the "c" word.³

In 2003, however, we accepted an invitation by LC leaders to engage in dialogue with them about their beliefs. Over the following few years we discovered that we had been profoundly mistaken about

some of their teachings. Furthermore, after several visits to the Far East we have come to believe that this movement represents a crucial work of God in that region that our literature, and that of other Western countercult ministries, has greatly hindered.

The purpose of this five-part article, then, is to offer a fresh critique of the LC movement. After briefly looking at their background as a movement and as a source of controversy, we will take a long, hard look at what can fairly be called the four major concerns evangelicals have expressed about the LC. These were all succinctly presented in a 2007 "open letter" to the LC signed by a long list of evangelical theologians, apologists, and leaders. We will then draw our conclusions together and reassess where the LC stands in relation to historic orthodoxy and to the wider Christian community. Finally, we will look at the larger picture: what is at stake in the decades-long controversy surrounding the LC and what might be gained from its resolution?

notes

1 The "local church" movement is frequently called The Local Church by outsiders, but although it is convenient to use this name for the group, it is not entirely accurate. The movement has adopted no formal name because of its desire to follow the New Testament pattern of simply identifying believers individually as Christians and collectively as the church (universal) or the church in a given city. Anything else is considered divisive. They often refer to their movement as "the Lord's recovery," but to keep things simple I will stick with the "local churches" or LC here. In addition to being known as The Local Church both in the East and in the West they have been called the "Little Flock" during the earlier years under Watchman Nee's leadership and the "Shouters" exclusively in China. The epithet Shouters was introduced in the early 1980s by the Three Self Patriotic Movement in Jeijing Province to suppress LC activity (as they sought to do with all Christian groups who refused to join their movement). Over time the name Shouters has morphed in its usage by many Chinese to refer to all members of unregistered house churches, while still others use it to identify a small renegade group of people who claim to be followers of Witness Lee but have broken fellowship with the LC and distort the Bible and Lee's teachings in numerous cultic ways. The misidentification of the LC with this latter group of "Shouters" has plagued the LC in its dealings with the authorities.

2 We did at first describe them as "cultic," meaning by this that we considered them a group composed of Christians that had cultlike traits. We ultimately settled on the classification "aberrant Christian group" for the LC.

3 See, e.g., Ronald Enroth, *The Lure of the Cults* (Chappaqua, N Y: Christian Herald Books, 1979); Salem Kirban, *Satan's Angels Exposed* (Huntingdon Valley, PA: Salem Kieban, Inc., 1980); Bob Larson, *Larson's Book of Cults* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 1983); Jerram Barrs, *Freedom and Discipleship* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1983).