

News Article: JAL076

LOCAL CHURCHES WIN SOME ALLIES AMONG FORMER CRITICS

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The four-decade relationship between American evangelicals and Witness Lee's local churches/Living Stream Ministry¹ has not been one of abundant harmony or trust. Considering the local churches' belief that the Christian church ought to be one body in every city, rather than a plethora of denominations, the past four decades were marked by moving away from, rather than toward, that ideal.

Because of a lawsuit filed in November 1980 against the Spiritual Counterfeits Project, and another filed against Thomas Nelson Publishers in the same year, the local churches must contend to this day—at least among their strongest critics—with an image of being litigious. The lawsuits challenged the contents of two books that left lasting impressions among evangelicals: *The God-Men: An Inquiry Into Witness Lee and the Local Church* by Neil T. Duddy and the Spiritual Counterfeits Project (InterVarsity Press, 1981) and *The Mindbenders: A Look at Current Cults* by Jack T. Sparks (Thomas Nelson, 1977). The local churches prevailed in both cases. Thomas Nelson agreed to a settlement and published a retraction in 18 major newspapers in April 1983. In the suit against Duddy, Judge Leon Seyranian of the California Superior Court issued a withering opinion in June 1985. He awarded \$3.4 million in punitive damages to Witness Lee, the Church in Anaheim, and William T. Freeman, a local churches leader who has since left the movement. The Spiritual Counterfeits Project declared bankruptcy just before the ruling but survived as an institution. Witness Lee died in 1997.

In the past two years, the local churches have made a few significant strides toward changing their reputation from "See you in court" to "To know us is to love us." Since January 2006, three evangelical institutions—Fuller Theological Seminary, Answers in Action, and the Christian Research Institute (publisher of CHRISTIAN RESEARCH JOURNAL)—have expressed trust in the local churches' orthodoxy. Fuller Seminary expressed that trust first, in a two-page statement released on January 5, 2006.

"In regard to their teaching and testimony concerning God, the Trinity, the person and work of Christ, the Bible, salvation, and the oneness and unity of the Church, the Body of Christ, we found them to be unequivocally orthodox," the Fuller statement said. "Furthermore, we found their profession of faith to be consistent with the major creeds, even though their profession is not creedal in format. Moreover, we can also say with certainty that no evidence of cultic or cult-like attributes [has] been found by us among the leaders of the ministry or the members of the local churches who adhere to the teachings represented in the publications of Living Stream Ministry. Consequently, we are easily and comfortably able to receive them as genuine believers and fellow members of the Body of Christ, and we unreservedly recommend that all Christian believers likewise extend to them the right hand of fellowship."

CRI and Answers in Action—the apologetics ministry founded by Bob and Gretchen Passantino—expressed their trust in the form of legal briefs supporting the local churches in another lawsuit involving another book: *The Encyclopedia of Cults and New Religions* by John Ankerberg and John Weldon (Harvest House, 1999). The local churches filed suit in December 2001, in response to Harvest House's request for a declaratory judgment that the encyclopedia was not defamatory. A flood of attorneys' letters from both sides of the case preceded Harvest House's request.

Hank Hanegraaff, CRI's president and chairman of the board, filed an *amicus curiae* brief on August 7, 2006. "From my own direct study of and extensive interaction with the Local Church and Living Stream Ministry,

I have concluded that the word ‘cult’ does not apply to the Local Church either sociologically or theologically,” Hanegraaff said in his brief. “While I disagree with Local Church leaders, as well as many other Christian leaders, on secondary theological issues such as eschatology and ecclesiology, these are issues Christians can and do debate vigorously without dividing over them.” In a brief filed 11 days later, Gretchen Passantino wrote that she fully supported the concerns and conclusions expressed in Hanegraaff’s brief. (Both briefs are asking the supreme court of Texas to revisit its ruling that threw out a judgment in favor of the local churches. Both the local churches and Harvest House have indicated a willingness to appeal the case as high as the U.S. Supreme Court, so it could easily drag on for another year or more.)

The two briefs represented a considerable change from a CRI position paper that the Passantinos and Gretchen Passantino’s brother, theologian E. Calvin Beisner, prepared in 1978 and updated in 1996. In that paper, the authors referred to the teachings of Lee and the local churches as heretical and dangerous, linking Lee’s teaching on the Trinity with the ancient heresy of Sabellianistic modalism. Modalists teach that the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are three temporal manifestations, or “modes,” of the one God, rather than three distinct persons of the one God. The local churches have argued vigorously and at length that Lee was not a modalist, and that only a selective reading of his many published sermons could lead to a different conclusion. The local churches say that Lee’s teachings represented an effort to avoid the extremes of modalism, on one hand, and tritheism on the other.

In a brief entry on tritheism for the *New Dictionary of Theology* (InterVarsity Press, 1988), Gerald L. Bray writes, “Tritheism has never been the official teaching of any church. It is at best an error which some Christians may have fallen into in their attempts to explain the Trinity....Christians today are sometimes accused of tritheism by Jews, and particularly by Muslims, and also by such sects as Jehovah’s Witnesses, though the accusation has always been strenuously denied and does not in fact reflect any major strand in Christian theology.”

“[Lee] was thoroughly Trinitarian—I mean thoroughly,” said Chris Wilde of Living Stream Ministry, in an interview with the JOURNAL. “The way that these things are sometimes clipped together, yes, you could make him look like a modalist.”

Wilde says the local churches’ previously icy relationship with CRI and Answers in Action began thawing after attorney and literary agent Sealy Yates—a friend to both the local churches and CRI—arranged a meeting a few years ago at CRI’s headquarters. The meeting included Hanegraaff, Gretchen Passantino of Answers in Action, and Elliot Miller, editor of the JOURNAL, along with several local churches leaders.

Wilde compares the meeting with the changes made by the Worldwide Church of God through dialogue with CRI. The difference, Wilde says, is that the local churches did not have to repudiate any teaching of Lee’s to persuade CRI that they affirmed the essential doctrines of orthodox Christianity.

“We believe what the Lord has given us is accurate. That doesn’t mean our application of it is flawless,” Wilde said. “I’m just grateful for how the relationship has been healed.” The dialogue has progressed with several intensive theological discussions between Wilde, other local churches leaders, Miller, and Passantino, with the intention that Miller will eventually write an in-depth evaluation of the local churches for the JOURNAL, similar in approach to his previous evaluation of Theophostic Prayer Ministries (see vol. 29, nos. 2 and 3).

Wilde grew up in a nominal Mormon home and went through a phase as a student radical during the 1970s. “I was a nonbeliever in every sense of the word,” he said. He came to faith through a local church in Spokane, Washington, and says that the first book he read by a Christian was *The Normal Christian Life* by Lee’s mentor, Watchman Nee, who died in 1972, while imprisoned by the communist rulers of China. “I had a very deep sense of the Lord’s infilling,” Wilde says.

Wilde, a veteran of radio broadcasting, joined Living Streams’ new broadcast division in 1996. He is the director of the organization’s broadcast operation and an elder of the Church in Mission Viejo, California.

Gretchen Passantino told the JOURNAL that the first meeting with local churches leaders left her “absolutely confident that they were our brothers in Christ and we believed the same thing.” She was less certain that they had always believed this way, and it took about 18 months of more research—and interviews with

leaders and members of the local churches—to convince her of that. “The theology they are clarifying is what they have always believed,” she said. “What they’re having to distance themselves from is theology they never believed.”

Passantino says that local church leaders, like the early church father Irenaeus, did not have the luxury of theological precision when speculating about the persons of the Trinity and their relation to one another. The Christian church in China was robbed of two generations of mature leadership by persecution and martyrdom at the hands of Chinese Communists, she said.

Gretchen Passantino’s brother, E. Calvin Beisner, is not persuaded that the local churches have been misunderstood or that they should be declared part of the evangelical mainstream without repudiating any of Lee’s remarks. Beisner, an associate professor of historical theology and social ethics at Knox Seminary in Ft. Lauderdale, Florida, is one of more than 60 theologians who signed a Web-based “Open Letter to the Leadership of Living Stream Ministry and the ‘Local Churches’” (www.open-letter.org).

The open letter includes some passages from Lee’s works that suggest why some critics of the local churches have suspicions about Lee’s understanding of the Trinity. Here’s a passage from Lee’s *Life Messages* (Living Stream Ministry, 1979):

The traditional explanation of the Trinity is grossly inadequate and borders on tritheism. When the Spirit of God is joined with us, God is not left behind, nor does Christ remain on the throne. This is the impression Christianity gives. They think of the Father as one Person, sending the Son, another Person, to accomplish redemption, after which the Son sends the Spirit, yet another Person. The Spirit, in traditional thinking, comes into the believers, while the Father and Son are left on the throne. When believers pray, they are taught to bow before the Father and pray in the name of the Son. To split the Godhead into these separate Persons is not the revelation of the Bible.

“I would not be able to say the local church has changed until it is willing to publicly renounce the sort of things Witness Lee said that we quoted in our open letter,” Beisner told the JOURNAL. “It’s going to have to clearly reject some of the things that Witness Lee himself said.”

Beisner said he has read many essays in Living Stream Ministry’s journal, *Affirmation & Critique*, that offer thorough explanations of Lee’s teachings. Those essays have not convinced him that Lee’s teachings have been taken out of context or that Lee was a thoroughgoing Trinitarian.

“They can make all the orthodox-sounding statements that they want, but if they don’t deny the truth of contrary statements, we don’t know what they believe,” Beisner said. He hopes the leaders of the local churches will take a lesson from the leaders of the Worldwide Church of God. “Its leaders had the courage and the integrity to say that Herbert W. Armstrong was, frankly, wrong.”

Beisner is familiar with the local churches’ call for firsthand conversation with their leaders, but he’s skeptical that it would achieve anything. “I don’t think face-to-face conversation would be fruitful until they are prepared to say that, on the sort of things we quoted in the open letter, Lee was wrong.”

R. Philip Roberts, president of Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Kansas City, Missouri, showed openness to meeting with members of local churches, provided that signers of the open letter “aren’t eventually going to be dragged into a lawsuit,” he told the JOURNAL. “Our concern is to express our theological differences openly and clearly.”

Members of the local churches and Living Stream Ministry provided what they called a brief initial response—at nearly 4,300 words—to the open letter, and promised to address its concerns at greater length. Addressing the concern raised by Roberts, the reply states:

The open letter implies that LSM and the local churches repeatedly resort to litigation to silence critics of their doctrines and teachings. This simply is not true. In our 45-year history in this country, we have appealed to the courts for relief from accusations that were false and defamatory three times. In each case, our appeal had nothing to do with answering criticism concerning doctrinal issues; in each case, at issue were false charges of immoral, illegal, or anti-social behaviors. In each case, we made repeated attempts to deal with matters directly with the other

party based on the principles in Matthew 18. And in each case, the other party rebuffed those attempts. Only when all other alternatives were exhausted did we appeal to the secular authorities, as Paul did three times in Acts (22:25; 24:10; 25:11) to preserve his ministry for the Lord. The two previous cases resulted in a settlement with a retraction and a default judgment in our favor.

Regarding the present litigation with Harvest House and its authors John Ankerberg and John Weldon, it is important to understand the events that preceded legal action. After becoming aware of the publication of the Encyclopedia of Cults and New Religions (ECNR), representatives of LSM and the local churches tried repeatedly, over the course of an entire year, to meet with them for face-to-face dialogue, appealing to them each time on the basis of Matthew 18. Ultimately, while we were still seeking to resolve the conflict through dialogue, Harvest House took the initiative to sue one of the local churches—thrusting the matter into the courts. Our suit was filed after Harvest House had already sued us and was our protective response to their taking us to court.

On another of the open letter's chief concerns, the local churches wrote:

Concerning the Divine Trinity, we hold to the eternal distinctiveness of the three of the Godhead, but...in every manifest and distinct action of each, all three operate inseparably (yet still distinctly). The reality in the Godhead that accounts for this is what theologians have termed coinherence. On the one hand, the Father, the Son, and the Spirit coexist "simultaneously" from eternity to eternity (Isa. 9:6b; Heb. 1:12; 7:3; 9:14) and are each fully God (1 Pet. 1:2a; Heb. 1:8; John 1:1; Acts 5:3-4). On the other hand, as three yet one, They coinhere; that is, They mutually indwell one another (John 10:38; 14:10, 20; 17:21, 23); and by virtue of that coinherence each operates distinctly in the manifest action of any one of Them to some identifiable degree. While we adamantly maintain that the three persons of the Divine Trinity exist eternally and are eternally distinct, we also recognize that a proper biblical view of the relationships among the three must account for the fact that in the Bible the Son is somehow called the Eternal Father, that in the Bible He is somehow said to have become a life-giving Spirit, and that in the Bible the Lord Christ is somehow said to be the Spirit.

As for renouncing any teachings by Lee that the open letter cites as objectionable, the local churches remain committed to Lee:

The open letter of evangelical leaders presents Witness Lee's statements without the biblical texts on which they are based, without his exposition of those texts, and without any balancing context found in his writings. Therefore, they do not fairly present his teaching on these important points of truth. We commend the signers of the open letter for their concern for the truth of the gospel, and we invite them or any others to join us in genuine and substantive dialogue concerning the great truths of the faith and particularly our understanding thereof. However, we would hope that in such dialogue their treatment of us would be according to how they themselves would like others to treat them, which is, by our Lord's teaching, the second great commandment (Matt. 7:12; 22:39). Unless our understanding of Scripture can be demonstrated to be in error, we would consider ourselves unfaithful to disavow any point of truth that the Lord has shown us from His Word.

For her part, Passantino worries that evangelicals may be setting up an impossible standard, considering that local churches leaders are convinced that they have never believed what they are accused of believing.

She hopes that both sides' willingness to forgive each other, and to ask forgiveness of each other, is a path more evangelicals will consider. "I hope our colleagues will join us for the investigation," she told the JOURNAL. "They may not join us in the conclusions, but if they join us in the investigation, we'll all be better for it."

— Douglas LeBlanc

NOTES

1. Although many evangelical critiques refer to the Local Church, this article uses the movement's preferred designation of "local churches," or refers to its publishing arm, Living Stream Ministry, except in direct quotations. Here is how one movement Web site explains the preference: "The term 'local church' is not a name; it is a description of the local nature and expression of the church, that is, the church in a locality. To print the words 'local church' with capital letters is a serious mistake, for this gives the impression that our name is 'local church.' Just as the moon is simply the moon regardless of the locality over which it is seen, so the church is simply the church regardless of the locality in which it is established"; <http://localchurches.org/beliefs/faq.html>.