

# CHRISTIAN RESEARCH

Probing Today's Religious Movements — Promoting Doctrinal Discernment & Critical Thinking — Providing Reasons for Christian Faith & Ethics

# JOURNAL

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## We Were Wrong

A Reassessment of the "Local Church" Movement of  
Watchman Nee and Witness Lee

# CRI 2.0

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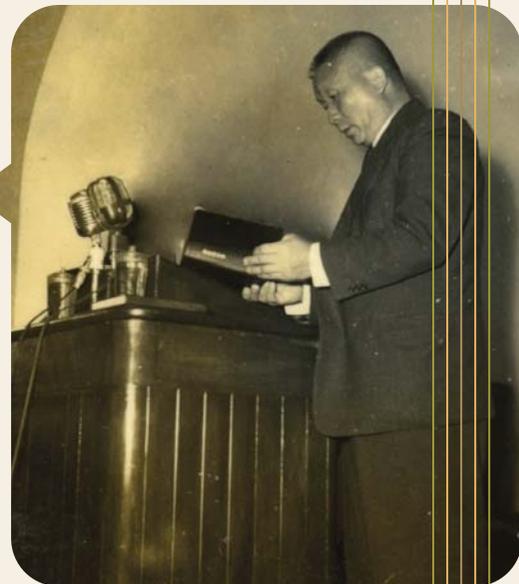
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# We Were Wrong!

FROM THE PRESIDENT

The JOURNAL you hold in your hand features the culmination of a six-year research project respecting a movement originally founded by a Chinese Christian named Watchman Nee. While Nee died for his Messiah in a Communist prison camp, his ministry did not die with him. Under the leadership of protégé Witness Lee, Nee's ministry and message spread from China throughout the Pacific Rim nations ranging from Singapore to Taiwan and eventually to the West. In 1962 Lee moved to Southern California and established the local churches and their publishing arm Living Stream Ministry.<sup>1</sup>

As President of the Christian Research Institute (CRI), I inherited a wealth of information on cults, the occult, and aberrant Christian theologies. My assumption was that as an organization committed to first-rate primary research the information in our files was substantially correct. Over the past twenty plus years this assumption has been validated time and time again. But not always. In the mid '70s the Christian Research Institute in collaboration with researchers Bob and Gretchen Passantino initiated an evaluation of the local churches that would become a fountainhead of misinformation.

This reality began to surface in 2003 when I asked Gretchen Passantino and Elliot Miller, editor-in-chief of the CHRISTIAN RESEARCH JOURNAL, to join me for a meeting with representatives of Living Stream Ministry. During the meeting I heard stirring affirmations of the very doctrines the local churches allegedly denied. One by one, and in their own words, representatives of the local churches testified to their belief in one God, revealed in three persons who are eternally distinct; to the reality that human beings can never ontologically attain Godhood; and to the fact that they were “only the church” as opposed to being “the only church.”

As a result, I initiated a research project culminating in the expanded cover story of this Special Edition of the CHRISTIAN RESEARCH JOURNAL. Primary research was conducted not only in the U.S. but in such faraway places as China, Taiwan, South Korea, and England. It involved careful evaluation of literally hundreds of books, papers, church documents, and audio and video recordings. Even court documents.<sup>2</sup> The result of our primary research is encapsulated in the following three words: “We were wrong!”

Gretchen Passantino uttered the words, “I was wrong,” to a believer in Shanghai who had been in prison from the time his daughter was born to the time she turned seventeen. Elliot Miller said, “I was wrong,” to a man in Fuqing who had suffered imprisonment for a total of twenty-four years. Their words were not merely uttered in the moment of emotion. No! They were uttered after years of painstaking primary research.

While we have significant doctrinal differences with the local churches on nonessentials such as aspects of eschatology (my book, *The Apocalypse Code*, testifies to that reality), when it comes to essential Christian doctrine—the very doctrines for

which the martyrs spilled their blood—we stand shoulder-to-shoulder.

The Christian Research Institute is no stranger to controversy. Y2K is a classic case in point. The cover story of a 1999 edition of the CHRISTIAN RESEARCH JOURNAL was titled “The Millennium Bug Debugged.” As a result, we were characterized as “blind to truth” or “downright uninformed,” like an ostrich with our head in the sand. When I suggested on the *Bible Answer Man* broadcast that Y2K would not even be a top-ten news story in the year 2000, I was accused of causing complacency in the body of Christ. One broadcaster went so far as to say that I would have the blood of millions of Christians on my hands because I was causing complacency in the body of Christ. I experienced the wrath of Christian gate-keepers, who were selling freeze-dried food and survival kits, and of people in the pews, who were absolutely certain that their leaders—particularly those politically connected—could not possibly be wrong on such a crucial matter.

Another significant controversy involved Herbert W. Armstrong's Worldwide Church of God. I still vividly recall the controversy that erupted in the '90s when I began meeting with church leaders. Yet, in 1994 the CHRISTIAN RESEARCH JOURNAL and the *Bible Answer Man* broadcast were privileged to be first to announce publicly that the Worldwide Church of God had embarked upon a course virtually uncharted in church history—a course that took them from the kingdom of the cults to the kingdom of Christ.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, I was blessed to be able to write the foreword to a book by Joseph Tkach, President of the Worldwide Church of God, titled *Transformed by Truth*. Today he is not only my dear friend, but my brother in Christ—one who has made the pilgrimage from cultism to Christ.

In those days our ministry was deeply grateful for the friendship and support extended to “The Church Reborn” by cult expert Dr. Ruth Tucker, *Christianity Today's* David Neff, Azusa Pacific University, Fuller Seminary, and Regent College. Together we believed that if God could redirect entire movements by changing the hearts of leaders, there was no telling what He might yet do through our continued faithfulness.

Joseph Tkach, by God's grace was able to utter the words, “We were wrong.” We now express those same words regarding our stance on Watchman Nee, Witness Lee, and the local churches.

The cost has been significant. Integrity has been questioned, motives challenged, and slander has ensued. As a result, support has been compromised. If I heard it once I heard it a thousand times. How can seventy Christian leaders who signed an open letter (see the cover story) calling the local churches to confess their false doctrines and practices be wrong? Surely, the integrity of CRI has been compromised.

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In the midst of the turmoil I have reminded staff that ministry is no place for a popularity contest. That it is not about the size of the platform. Or about political correctness. At the end of the day, we do what we do, *because Truth matters!*

Whatever the cost it pales by comparison to that borne by the persecuted church in China and around the world. That reality was memorialized in a moment forever emblazoned upon my mind. A Chinese woman with brilliant smile had just finished communicating the experience of incarceration due to reading unauthorized material in an unauthorized meeting. Not a hint of self-pity. Only the radiance of a follower of Christ who had experienced the reality of authentic New Testament Christianity. When she finished, she thanked me for standing for truth no matter the cost. Never have I felt more unworthy. Whatever I face pales by comparison to what she and multitudes like her have suffered.

Perhaps no three words are more likely to stick in our throats than the words, "I was wrong." Yet for a ministry committed to the maxim, "*because Truth matters,*" the willingness to utter these words is not an option, it's an essential.—*Hank Hanegraaff*



Hank Hanegraaff

- 1 Because Nee had no intention of starting a new church movement or denomination, and because he considered himself "just a brother" and not a pastor or leader, there was no formal transfer of "authority" from Nee to anyone else. Therefore, there have always been some who have denied legitimacy to Lee's leadership and who have, in fact, disagreed strongly with Lee's understanding of Nee's teachings. We have examined these alternative interpretations and developments of Nee's teachings and do not believe that there is significant difference between Nee and Lee, nor any compelling evidence that Nee and Lee represent different teachings or different expressions of the church.
- 2 Elliot Miller and Gretchen Passantino, who had participated in the original research in the 1970s, were in a unique position to evaluate deficiencies. Bob Passantino died in November 2003 and was therefore not able to contribute to the recent research. Before his death, however, he agreed with his wife and ministry partner, Gretchen, that a reevaluation was necessary and was likely to determine that the original research was at best incomplete and at worst grossly inaccurate.
- 3 Joseph Tkach, *Transformed by Truth* (Sisters, OR: Multnomah Books, 1997), 54.

As an organ of the Christian Research Institute (CRI), the CHRISTIAN RESEARCH JOURNAL's primary commitment is to "contend earnestly for the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints" (Jude 3). In keeping with this commitment, the JOURNAL's mission is both evangelistic and pastoral: evangelistic in that it is dedicated to furthering the proclamation and defense of the historic gospel of Jesus Christ; pastoral in that it is dedicated to helping His followers identify and distinguish between essential Christian doctrine and doctrine that is peripheral, aberrant, or heretical.

CRI's areas of research specialization include (1) non-Christian religions, sects, and cults; (2) the world of the occult (including practices, phenomena, and movements); and (3) issues of contemporary theological and apologetic concern (e.g., aberrant Christian teachings and practices; philosophical and historical speculations that challenge biblical reliability; relativistic ethics that compete with biblical ethics for influence on culture and public policy; and sensational conspiracy theories). In its approach to all of these themes, the JOURNAL strives to be at once scholarly and readable, uncompromising and charitable; offering analyses and critiques that are biblically, rationally, and factually sound.

Western culture is deeply embroiled in a spiritual crisis. In the face of many conflicting and confusing claims to human allegiance, may believers be prepared to give logically and historically sound reasons for faith in Jesus Christ. In an age of subjectivism and moral relativism, may Christians ground their faith and values in the objective, reliable testimony of Holy Scripture.

News clippings about cultic or occult activity around the world are welcome. Freelance writers: Please e-mail queries or manuscripts to [submissions@equip.org](mailto:submissions@equip.org). CHRISTIAN RESEARCH JOURNAL does not take responsibility for return or publication of unsolicited manuscripts. Manuscripts are evaluated on a quarterly basis. Please allow at least four months for a reply. Postmaster: Send changes of address to Christian Research Institute, P.O. Box 8500, Charlotte, NC 28271-8500 USA.

# Spiritual Boot Camp

The gospel is at the heart of the Christian faith. If Christians do not know how to share their faith, they have probably never been to “boot camp.” The gospel should be so much a part of you that presenting it becomes second nature. Here’s an easy way to do just that.

The first step involves developing a *relationship* with an unbeliever. This includes using your personal testimony as a bridge into sharing the good news of the gospel. This is the inverse of grabbing somebody by the lapels and shouting, “Brother, are you saved?”

After a relationship is established, you can move naturally into a presentation of the *gospel* using the alliterated words *realize*, *repent*, and *receive*.

First, according to Scripture, people need to *realize* that they are sinners. If we do not realize that we are sinners, we will not recognize our need for a savior. The Bible says we “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Rom. 3:23).

Furthermore, one must *repent* of their sins. Repentance is an old English word that describes a willingness to turn from sin toward Jesus Christ. It literally means a complete U-turn on the road of life—a change of heart and a change of mind. It means having a willingness to follow Jesus and receive Him as Savior and Lord. Jesus said, “Repent and believe the good news!” (Mark 1:15).

Finally, true belief means a willingness to *receive*. To truly receive is to trust in and depend on Jesus Christ alone to be the Lord of our lives here and now and our Savior for all eternity. It takes more than *knowledge* (the Devil knows about Jesus). It takes more than *agreement* that the knowledge we have is accurate (the Devil agrees that Jesus is Lord). What it takes is *trust* in Jesus Christ alone for eternal life. The requirements for eternal life are based not on what *we can do* but on what *Jesus Christ has done*. He stands ready to exchange His perfection for our imperfection.

According to Jesus Christ, those who *realize* they are sinners, *repent* of their sins, and *receive* Him as Savior and Lord are “born again” (John 3:3)—not physically, but spiritually. And with this spiritual birth must come growth.

Because we are called to make disciples, not converts, we also need to be equipped to lead those who receive Christ as Savior and Lord through the basic steps of discipleship and growth as new believers.

Consider what would happen if every evangelical Christian led just one person to faith in Christ each year. If we began with only twelve committed Christians and each of



them led one person to Christ and disciplined that person, next year there would be twenty-four believers. If each of them in turn led one person to Christ and disciplined that person, the third year there would be forty-eight believers. If this process continued, it would take less than thirty years to evangelize the six billion or more people alive today on planet Earth! If in the same time frame the population doubled, it would take only one additional year.<sup>1</sup>

Many people today run from church to church in search of the ultimate experience. No experience, however, can compare with that of the Holy Spirit working through you in the process of bringing someone to a saving knowledge of the Lord Jesus Christ.—*Hank Hanegraaff*

*Hank Hanegraaff* is president of the Christian Research Institute and host of the *Bible Answer Man* broadcast heard daily throughout the United States and Canada. For a list of stations airing the *Bible Answer Man*, or to listen online, log on to [www.equip.org](http://www.equip.org).

<sup>1</sup> I first heard a version of this illustration in 1980 while going through the Evangelism Explosion training process. The statistical illustration is pertinent even though it is not meant to convey that everyone who is evangelized will become a believer.

# Cultic, Aberrant, or (Unconventionally) Orthodox? A Reassessment of the “Local Church” Movement

by Elliot Miller

**D**uring 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 worshippers 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 séance.

This anecdote from an old friend of mine captures the awkward tension that has existed between Western evangelicals and the “local church” (LC)<sup>1</sup> 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,<sup>2</sup> 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.”<sup>3</sup>

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?

- 
- 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, NY: Christian Herald Books, 1979); Salem Kirban, *Satan’s Angels Exposed* (Huntingdon Valley, PA: Salem Kirban, 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).

**PART 1:**

# The “Local Church and Source of

# ch” as Movement of Controversy



# T

he LC as a movement can be traced to the conversion of a bright and promising seventeen-year-old, Nee To-sheng (1903–1972), in Fuzhou (or Foochow), Fujian Province, China. “Watchman” Nee (as he became known) wholeheartedly committed his life to the service of the Lord. What Nee lacked in formal training he made up for by voracious reading of as much Christian literature as he could get his hands on, and by hands-on experience in evangelism and church planting. Nee developed a reputation for profound insight into the inner Christian life and the New Testament church life, which he expressed through books and magazines he published after moving to Shanghai in 1927.

One of the earnest Chinese Christians who benefited from Nee’s publications was a young man named Lǐ Chángshòu (1905–1997), who came to be called Witness Lee. Lee had been raised as a Southern Baptist<sup>1</sup> and personally accepted Christ as his Savior in 1925. Lee arranged for Nee to come and speak in 1933 to a church he had planted in his home town of Chefoo, and, desiring his ministry to be fully coordinated or “one” with Nee’s, he moved to Shanghai later that year.

In the following years Nee wrote many books and held regular conferences and trainings for church workers. Nee, Lee, and other workers planted churches up and down China and in Southeast Asia that numbered at least six hundred by the time of the Communist Revolution in 1949. A truly indigenous Chinese movement that came to be known by outsiders as the “Little Flock” (because they sang from a Plymouth Brethren hymnal called *Hymns for the Little Flock*), they emphasized an experiential knowledge of Christ, the consecrated life, and the recovery of the New Testament pattern for the local church.

### Roots in the Plymouth Brethren

Many of the movement’s ideas, such as the plurality of elders as the collective “pastor” of the local church, the abolition of the clergy-laity distinction, and worship centered on the Lord’s Table, were derived from the Exclusive (Plymouth) Brethren, to which both Nee and Lee had ample exposure.

However, Nee considered the divisiveness he observed among the Brethren to be unbiblical, and so, seeking the New Testament ground for the unity of believers, he developed the concept that there should be only one church per city, autonomous from all other local churches, denominations, mission boards, and so forth. Although conceived for the purpose of unity, this has proved to be the most controversial element about the LC, for it is essentially anti-denominational and rejects the legitimacy of any church that meets on any other basis than locality—although the LC embraces all Christians as genuine children of God (see part 4).

When the Communists came into power, severe persecution was unleashed on the LC and Nee was imprisoned in 1952, where he died twenty years later. Nee sent Lee to Taiwan to help ensure that the movement, and the New Testament truths they had “recovered,” would survive.

In Taiwan the movement grew to sixty-five churches with twenty thousand participating “saints” (the LC’s preferred term for believers) by 1955.<sup>2</sup> Lee assumed the mantle of leadership, although certain leaders and churches that were part of Nee’s “Little Flock” movement never “became one” with Lee as Lee had become one with Nee, and it was from some of these people that the charge of heresy was first raised against Lee.<sup>3</sup>

### Lee Further Shapes the Movement

During this period Lee more fully developed several teachings that were present in Nee’s ministry, such as the mingling of God and man,<sup>4</sup> Christ as the life-giving Spirit (which brought on the charge of modalism—see part 2), and the understanding of the church as the New Jerusalem, as well as devotional practices such as pray-reading and calling on the name of the Lord. All of these were presented as new revelations, not in the sense of a new truth that goes beyond the Bible, but rather in the sense of a biblical truth that had been lost sight of but that the Spirit has *uncovered* and that the church has *recovered*.<sup>5</sup> Hence, the movement often refers to itself as “the Lord’s recovery,” since they see themselves as part of a continuing restoration of biblical truth to the people of God



that can be traced from the pre-Reformation period through the Protestant Reformation and all the way to the ministries of Watchman Nee and Witness Lee.<sup>6</sup>

### **East Meets West**

In 1958 Lee traveled to the United States and met with a group of believers in Los Angeles who were hungry to experience the New Testament church. Lee stayed in touch with them and in 1962 he moved to Los Angeles, believing that the Lord was directing him to spread the “recovery” into the United States.

By 1969 there were “local churches” in California, New York, and Texas, but most of the country was untouched by the movement. Lee began to teach that in the Book of Acts the church life was spread through migration, and so groups of LC members began moving to different parts of the country and establishing churches there. With the explosion of the Jesus movement in the 1970s many idealistic young people, as well as spiritually hungry older people, were seeking a greater experience of Christ and also of the New Testament church, and so the ranks of the LC swelled and they became a known quantity at least among Christians in many cities across the United States. Churches were also planted in Canada and on every continent.

Countercult ministry also came into its own in the 1970s, and, as previously noted, the LC did not escape its notice. Looking back on it as objectively as I can, I would have to say that people on both sides behaved badly. Countercult researchers did not make sufficient effort to understand the LC in their own cultural and theological contexts and so failed to assess properly the wide-ranging differences that would naturally exist between an indigenous Chinese Christian movement (even with many youthful American converts) and typical American evangelicalism. Add to this Lee’s penchant for making controversial statements without immediately offering qualifications, and the stage was set for profound misunderstanding. LC members, for their part, were nothing short of militant in their response to public criticisms. The tactics and rhetoric of their more immature members

reinforced the mistaken notion that they were cultic.

I remember how, after CRI founder Walter Martin had spoken publicly in Anaheim on the LC in October 1977 at a special meeting at Melodyland Christian Center (using research that had been provided him by young but talented cult researchers Bob and Gretchen Passantino, and relying heavily on their interpretation of the teachings of the LC), LC churches and members responded by taking out full-page ads in the *Orange County Register* contending for the orthodoxy of their beliefs and denouncing “The Bible Answer Man” (who at that time was Martin). I also remember how they overwhelmed the phone lines of the *Bible Answer Man* program, completely disrupting the show, in order to contend aggressively with Martin about their teachings.

### **Lee Meets Martin**

Things could have turned out very differently. I have in my possession the transcript of a February 21, 1977 meeting between Walter Martin and Witness Lee. Lee had invited Martin to have lunch with him and his wife at their home, and Martin accepted. They had a long and frank discussion in which they got to know one another, discussed their beliefs, recognized each other as brothers in Christ who loved the Lord, and ultimately had very warm Christian fellowship. They concluded that they would follow up with more dialogue about LC teachings. Lee expressed openness to correction and Martin expressed openness to finding there was nothing to correct. They agreed that during this time both sides would cease and desist with the provocative antics.

I remember Martin returning to CRI enthused about the fellowship he’d had with “brother Lee” and instructing us to withhold comment on the LC until the dialogue ran its course; but I also remember that the research staff was dismayed by this turn of events. We did not trust Lee and we feared that Martin might be taken in. Before long, people on both sides broke the conditions of the “truce” without the knowledge or consent of their respective leaders. Both Martin and Lee assumed the other was responsible for this breach of

good faith and so the dialogue collapsed and the “war” resumed, fiercer than ever.

### **The LC Resorts to Litigation**

The LC’s public battle with the countercult community in 1977 extended beyond CRI after two books were published. *The Mind Benders* was a Thomas Nelson book on cults that included one chapter on the LC. It was written by Jack Sparks, former leader of the Christian World Liberation Front in Berkeley, California, out of which the Spiritual Counterfeits Project (SCP) emerged. Having embraced a form of Eastern Orthodoxy and broken ties with SCP, Sparks was coming from a particular perspective and used the ancient creeds as well as the Bible to refute the cults. The book accused the LC of brainwashing and abusing their members. After a 1978 edition of the book inserted a chapter on Jim Jones’s People’s Temple immediately after the chapter on the LC, and all their attempts to resolve the matter apart from litigation were frustrated, the LC filed a lawsuit in 1981. A settlement agreement was reached in 1983 that resulted in a retraction being published in eighteen American newspapers. Nelson ceased distribution of the book and unsold copies were recalled.

The second book, *The God-Men*, written by the SCP staff, was not legally challenged by the LC in its 1977 version. But when a heavily revised 1979 German-language edition by Neil T. Duddy and the SCP was published by Schwengeler-Verlag (published in English in 1981 by InterVarsity Press), the LC sued Duddy, SCP, and Schwengeler-Verlag. During the nearly five years of pretrial litigation, Duddy left the country and Schwengeler-Verlag never showed up for any of the legal proceedings. On the first day of trial SCP (apparently expecting to lose) declared bankruptcy based on their inability to pay the anticipated judgment, and so they did not show up at trial either.

Although SCP claims that the LC deliberately dragged the trial out so that SCP would be forced into bankruptcy and thus unable to make a defense, the information that came out against SCP in depositions and expert testimony makes it hard to imagine what kind of defense they could have mounted (see part 5). On January 26, 1985, the court ruled that *The God-Men* was “in all major respects false, defamatory and unprivileged, and, therefore, libelous” and awarded the plaintiffs \$11,900,000 in damages, although due to the bankruptcy the plaintiffs only collected about \$34,000.

After *The God-Men* trial was over, the conflict between the LC and the countercult community simmered down and remained at a low boil for many years. The LC’s growth in the United States slowed down significantly, partly due to the persistence of the “cult” label. The movement was rocked in the 1980s by a couple of internal controversies and splits,<sup>7</sup> but there were enough committed members to weather these storms. In the meantime, growth picked up in the Far East, especially after the People’s Republic of China

became somewhat more tolerant of unregistered religions in the early 1980s. A successful work was launched in the former Soviet Union, and the LC established training centers for their young people in approximately ten different countries. Witness Lee spent the remaining years of his life completing his Life-Study of the Bible series, revising his *Recovery Version* of the Bible, and creating new materials that clarified the movement’s governing vision<sup>8</sup> and restructured their practice of the church life to conform it more closely to the New Testament pattern (e.g., as in 1 Cor. 14),<sup>9</sup> which has had dynamic effects on their meetings.

In 1997 Lee died. Observers in the countercult community wondered if the new generation of leadership would make any modifications or retractions in LC teachings.

### **A New Lawsuit and a Quest for Evangelical Understanding**

On December 14, 2001, the LC, its publishing arm, Living Stream Ministry (LSM), and ninety-seven individual local churches filed suit against Harvest House Publishers and authors John Ankerberg and John Weldon over their 1999 book, *Encyclopedia of Cults and New Religions (ECNR)*. Many members of the countercult community were surprised not only that the LC was litigating again after Lee’s death and seventeen years after the *God-Men* verdict, but also that they were doing so over a one-and-one-half-page entry in a 731-page encyclopedia. On January 5, 2006, the Texas Court of Appeals reversed a lower court’s decision that denied the defendants’ motion for summary judgment and ruled for the defendants, declaring that the Court had no business ruling on a “religious” dispute. The LC appealed this ruling to both the Texas Supreme Court in 2006 and the United States Supreme Court in 2007, but both courts decided not to review the case.

Simultaneous with the *ECNR* lawsuit, the LC was clearly making a concerted effort to build relationships with the larger evangelical community. In 2002 LSM was accepted into the Evangelical Christian Publishers Association (ECPA). They had already become members of the Christian Booksellers Association (CBA) and the Evangelical Christian Credit Union (ECCU). They reached out not only to CRI but also to Fuller Theological Seminary, requesting dialogue and a thorough inquiry into the orthodoxy of their teachings. Fuller agreed to do so, with a favorable outcome for the LC.<sup>10</sup> The LC also sought to establish contact with numerous theologians and Christian leaders who they believed were fair minded and might possibly become allies. They developed contacts in the mainstream Christian press, and the coverage they received from those periodicals became more favorable.<sup>11</sup>

### **The “Open Letter” to the LC from Evangelical Leaders**

Despite such progress, the LC continued to experience cynicism, suspicion, and outright rejection from some



**Witness Lee**



**Watchman Nee**

quarters. This perception became tangible on January 9, 2007, when a press release announced that “more than 60 evangelical Christian scholars and ministry leaders from seven nations have signed an unprecedented open letter ([www.open-letter.org](http://www.open-letter.org)) asking the leadership of the ‘local churches’ and Living Stream Ministry to withdraw unorthodox statements by their founder, Witness Lee. The letter also calls on the movement’s leaders to renounce their decades-long practice of using lawsuits and threatened litigation to respond to criticism and settle disputes with Christian organizations and individuals.”<sup>12</sup> Among the prominent leaders and scholars who signed the letter were some former CRI staff and former and current CHRISTIAN RESEARCH JOURNAL contributors, including E. Calvin Beisner, James Bjornstad, Norman L. Geisler, H. Wayne House, Gordon R. Lewis, Ron Rhodes, and James R. White.

1 It is important to note that neither Lee nor Nee came from a Buddhist background. The mystical leanings in their writings are not traceable to Eastern religions, as has been alleged, but to Western Christian inner life teachers such as Jessie Penn-Lewis, Andrew Murray, and Madame Guyon.

2 The Lord’s Recovery of Experiencing Christ and Practicing the Church Life in Oneness, History, “The Present Recovery—One City, One Church (A.D. 1937–Present),” 2, <http://www.lordsrecovery.org/history/iv.html>.

3 The first theological critic of Lee was James Chen, who had been appointed by Nee as one of two elders in Hong Kong. Interestingly, his charge was one that we have never heard in

America, that Lee was teaching Arianism. He based this on the fact that Lee called the incarnate Christ a creature. Lee did indeed teach that Christ is a creature with respect to His humanity, but he also taught that, with respect to His deity, Christ is the Creator of the universe. This pattern, in which Lee makes radical statements and balances them elsewhere in his teaching, only to have his critics seize on his radical statements without factoring in the balancing statements, has continued to the present day. In fact, this theme pretty well sums up the balance of this article, insofar as it deals with theology.

4 The LC has been careful to define *mingling* in a way that does not suggest a change in the essential nature of God or man. See the sidebar, “‘Mingling’—Was There Ever a Better Word?” *Affirmation and Critique* 1, 3 (July 1996): 31, 62.

5 “The Present Recovery—One City, One Church (A.D. 1937–Present),” 19.

6 For a thorough explanation of their beliefs in this regard, see the entire History section at the Web site, The Lord’s Recovery of Experiencing Christ and Practicing the Church Life, <http://www.lordsrecovery.org/history/index.html>.

7 Critics cite these controversies as corroboration that the LC is cultic, but in looking into these matters we have found corroboration only for the biblical doctrine of sin’s ongoing presence among believers (e.g., James 3:2; 1 John 1:8). In other words, the movement has not been immune to the carnal behaviors that have plagued and divided Christian works throughout church history. Perhaps in some future issue we can address these matters, but they go beyond our scope here, which is focused on the allegations contained in the “open letter” to the LC and LSM (see below).

8 See, e.g., Witness Lee’s series of eleven Elders’ Training books, including Book 2, *The Vision of the Lord’s Recovery* (Anaheim: Living Stream Ministry, 1985).

9 See, e.g., Witness Lee, *The Ministry of the New Testament Priests of the Gospel* (Anaheim: Living Stream Ministry, 1998).

10 See Hank Hanegraaff, Gretchen Passantino, and Fuller Theological Seminary, *The Local Churches: “Genuine Believers and Fellow Members of the Body of Christ”* (Fullerton, CA: DCP Press, 2008), 29–32.

11 See, e.g., “Loose Cult Talk,” editorial, *Christianity Today*, March 2006, 27 (<http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2006/march/15.27.html>); Ken Walker, “Former Local Church Critics Change Stance,” *Charisma*, June 2009, 20 (<http://www.charismamag.com/index.php/news/20741-former-local-church-critics-change-stance>).

12 “Leading Evangelical Scholars Call on ‘Local Churches’ to Renounce Doctrines, Legal Attacks,” press release, January 9, 2007, [http://www.open-letter.org/pdf/OL\\_PressRelease.pdf](http://www.open-letter.org/pdf/OL_PressRelease.pdf).

# PART 2:

## Addressing the Open Letter's Concerns: On the Nature of God



# C

Concerns raised in the Open Letter besides the LC's history of initiating lawsuits with evangelical Christians include the LC's teachings on the nature of God, the nature of humanity, and the legitimacy of evangelical churches and denominations. Concerning such teachings the letter states, "Because the following statements by Witness Lee appear to contradict or compromise essential doctrines of the Christian faith, we respectfully call on the leadership of Living Stream Ministry and the 'local churches' to disavow and cease to publish these and similar declarations."

The Open Letter proceeds to provide excerpts from Witness Lee's allegedly unorthodox teachings while providing no explanation as to why such statements are unorthodox, perhaps assuming that any theologically literate reader could clearly see the heresy in the statements themselves. As we shall soon see, this was a serious mistake both on the part of those who drafted the letter and on the part of those who signed it, many of whom likely did little more research on the LC than to read the quotations the drafters provided them.

The Open Letter's brief and succinct format makes it easy to reproduce its full statement of concerns here. Rather than reproducing it all at once, I will reproduce it one section at a time and interact with the material in each section before reproducing the material in the next.

The Open Letter's first series of controversial quotations from LC materials begins with the heading "On the Nature of God" and contains the following statements by Witness Lee:

"The Son is called the Father; so the Son must be the Father. We must realize this fact. There are some who say that He is called the Father, but He is not really the Father. But how could He be called the Father and yet not be the Father?... In the place where no man can approach Him (I Tim. 6:16), God is the Father. When He comes forth to manifest Himself, He is the Son. So, a Son is given, yet His name is called 'The everlasting Father.' This very Son who has been given to us is the very Father."

Witness Lee, *The All-Inclusive Spirit of Christ* (Los Angeles: The Stream Publishers, 1969), pp. 4-5

"...the entire Godhead, the Triune God, became flesh."

Witness Lee, *God's New Testament Economy* (Anaheim: Living Stream Ministry, 1986), p. 230

"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...."

Witness Lee, *Life Messages* (Anaheim: Living Stream Ministry, 1979), p. 164

"THE SON IS THE FATHER, AND THE SON IS ALSO THE SPIRIT.... and the Lord Jesus who is the Son is also the Eternal Father. Our Lord is the Son, and He is also the Father. Hallelujah!"

Witness Lee, *Concerning the Triune God* (Anaheim: Living Stream Ministry, 1973), pp. 18-19

"Therefore, it is clear: The Lord Jesus is the Father, the Son, and the Spirit, and He is the very God. He is also the Lord. He is the Father, the Son, the Spirit, the Mighty God, and the Lord."

Witness Lee, *The Clear Scriptural Revelation Concerning the Triune God*  
[www.contendingforthefaith.org/responses/booklets/triune.html](http://www.contendingforthefaith.org/responses/booklets/triune.html)

"The Father, the Son, and the Spirit are not three separate persons or three Gods; they are one God, one reality, one person."

Witness Lee, *The Triune God to Be Life to the Tripartite Man* (Anaheim: Living Stream Ministry, 1970), p. 48

To twenty-first century Western Christians, these statements at face value are understandably disturbing. They seem clearly to be teaching modalism. No wonder some evangelical leaders with little background on the LC simply read them and then said, “Show me where to sign.” However, as equally disturbing as it may be to evangelicals familiar with CRI’s longstanding commitment to historic orthodoxy, I must nonetheless say that, taken in context, *there is nothing unorthodox about the above statements*. It is not that I am saying that modalism is orthodox. CRI considers modalism, such as is taught by the United Pentecostal Church, heretical just as much now as we ever did. No, what I am saying is that the above statements by Witness Lee are not teaching modalism. At one time we thought they did, but that was because we, like so many others in the countercult movement, *never carefully studied the entire body of LC teachings in order to understand the context of these teachings and what concerns were driving them*.

What, then, does Lee mean when he teaches that the Son is both the Father and the Spirit? How can such teaching be squared with orthodoxy? The biblical bases cited in LC literature for their identification of the persons of the Trinity with each other will be explained in detail shortly, but to state them succinctly, they are (1) the *activity* of the three persons in the *economic* Trinity and (2) the *coinherence* of the three persons in the *essential* Trinity. The *purpose* for their emphasis on this identification of the three persons is to provide a corrective to what they view as rampant tritheism in the West. Before further clarifying the LC’s frequent seemingly unorthodox affirmations on the Trinity, however, we must first establish that *they have frequently made soundly orthodox affirmations on the Trinity*.

### **The LC’s Orthodox Affirmations on the Trinity**

Even some LC critics will acknowledge that at many places in their writings they seem to be affirming the orthodox doctrine of the Trinity.<sup>1</sup> Consider, for example, these unambiguous Trinitarian formulations, made by Lee himself:

The three—the Father, the Son, and the Spirit—are all from eternity to eternity, being equally eternal, without beginning and without ending, and existing at the same time.<sup>2</sup>

We may say that the Triune God has three persons but only one essence; the persons should not be confused and the essence should not be divided; the Father, the Son, and the Spirit are three in person, but they are one in essence.<sup>3</sup>

We were aware at CRI that Lee made such statements and we therefore classified the LC’s theology as *aberrant* rather than *heretical*, according to the theological definition of aberrant that we have adhered to for decades. Aberrant theology will affirm orthodoxy but then will add to those

confessions of orthodoxy further affirmations that contradict, compromise, or undermine them. We simply concluded that the LC believed they lived in a world where two contradictory propositions could be true at the same time and in the same sense.

However, long before we entered into dialogue with the LC this manner of dismissing their clear affirmations of orthodox theology in the very area where we have charged them with being unorthodox did not sit comfortably with me. I for one knew of no other group classified as modalistic that made similar detailed confessions of Trinitarian orthodoxy. The thought crossed my mind more than once that perhaps we were missing something in the LC’s teachings that would clarify this seemingly blatant contradiction. Indeed, we at CRI *were* missing something, and so were virtually all of our colleagues in the countercult community!

### **“It’s the Economy, Stupid!”**

You may remember the catch phrase coined by Bill Clinton’s political strategist James Carville in the 1992 presidential race to keep the campaign on message: “It’s the economy, stupid.” In a different sense the same rebuke might well be addressed to those of us who missed a distinction frequently made in LC literature between the *essential* Trinity (also called the *ontological* Trinity or the *immanent* Trinity) and the *economic* Trinity. These terms refer to a distinction that is widely made in orthodox theology; one that we at CRI have always embraced and taught. It is a distinction between the eternal nature and interrelationship of the three divine persons and the temporal (i.e., time-related and situated) roles that they assume in their relationship with creation.<sup>4</sup>

Long before I ever considered that it might help explain the LC’s modalistic-sounding teachings, I recognized that when the economic Trinity is described in the Bible or by orthodox theology it often sounds like modalism; it isn’t, however, because behind it all lies belief in the eternal nature and unchanging relationship of the three persons in the ontological Trinity. Modalists, however, confuse the biblical distinction between the ontological Trinity and the economic Trinity, conflate the two concepts into one, and thus assign the characteristics of the economic Trinity to the ontological Trinity.

Lee could not have made it clearer where he stood on this issue, if only we critics had been thorough enough in our research of, and dialogue with, the LC to notice. He carefully explained the essential/economic distinction in many places and explicitly contrasted the LC’s view of the Trinity with modalism:

What is the error in Modalism? Modalism teaches that the Father, the Son, and the Spirit are not all eternal and do not all exist at the same time. Rather, modalism claims that the Father ended with the Son’s coming and that the Son ceased with the Spirit’s coming. The modalists say that the Three of the Godhead exist respectively

in three consecutive stages. They do not believe in the coexistence *and* coinherence of the Father, the Son, and the Spirit. Unlike them, we believe in the coexistence and coinherence of the Three of the Godhead; that is, we believe that the Father, the Son, and the Spirit all exist essentially at the same time and under the same conditions. However, in the divine economy, the Three work and are manifested respectively in three consecutive stages. Yet even in Their economical works and manifestations the Three still remain essentially in Their coexistence and coinherence.<sup>5</sup>

Lee here does not address the fact that there are two forms of modalism: *chronological* and *functional*, and the latter view does not deny that God can function in more than one of the three modes or roles at the same point in history. However, the distinction he does make between the essential Trinity and the economic Trinity would not be made by a functional modalist any more than it would be made by a chronological modalist.

Furthermore, it is clear from Lee's overall teaching on the Trinity that he viewed the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit as three distinct centers of consciousness and volition, or "I's," eternally involved in loving subject-object relationship. For example, commenting on John 10:30 ("I and the Father are one"), he wrote that "although the Father and the Son are one, between them there is still a distinction of *I* and *the Father*. We must not disregard this point, because if we do we would become modalists."<sup>6</sup> Elsewhere, when astutely writing about how eternity would have no existence independent of the Triune God, Lee writes,

In eternity past when the Father and Son were fellowshiping, when the Father loved the Son, and when the Son was foreordained by the Triune God, the Spirit was also there because He is the eternal Spirit, the Spirit of the ages.

Acts 2:23 says that Christ was delivered up by the determined counsel of [the Triune] God....Among the three of the Godhead, there was a council, and by this council a determined counsel was made....

....Thus in eternity past the Triune God was there fellowshiping, loving, foreordaining, working, and choosing.<sup>7</sup>

Chris Wilde, director of media and communications for LSM, makes an observation that our independent research has found to be entirely true: "Nearly all criticisms of Witness Lee's teachings related to the Trinity are the product of selectively excerpting portions of his writing that emphasize the economical operation of the Triune God, without bothering to even mention that he fully balances himself in other portions of his work, and often in the same passage."<sup>8</sup>

Lee does identify the Son with the Father and the Spirit, but not in the wholesale manner of the modalists:

In God's plan, God's administrative arrangement, God's economy, the Father takes the first step, the Son takes the second step, and the Spirit takes the third step. The Father purposed, the Son accomplished, and the Spirit applies what the Son accomplished according to the Father's purpose....After this [the Father's] plan was made, the Son came to accomplish this plan, but He did this with the Father and by the Spirit (Luke 1:35; Matt. 1:18, 20; 12:28). Now that the Son has accomplished all that the Father has planned, the Spirit comes in the third step to apply all that He accomplished, but He does this as the Son and with the Father (John 14:26; 15:26; 1 Cor. 15:45b; 2 Cor. 3:17). In this way, while the divine economy is being carried out, the divine existence of the Divine Trinity, His eternal coexistence and coinherence, remains intact and is not jeopardized.<sup>9</sup>

Lee further clarifies, contra the modalists (who were also called *Patripassionists* because of their implied belief that the Father [*patri*] suffered [*passion*] on the cross), that

in the second step of God's economy, the step of accomplishment, the Son did all the works. We cannot say the Father did the accomplishing work with the Son and by the Spirit. Neither can we say that the Spirit accomplished the Father's plan as the Son, with the Father. We can only say that the Son did all the works to accomplish the Father's plan with the Father and by the Spirit. Also, we cannot say that the Father became flesh and that the Father lived on this earth in the flesh. Furthermore, we cannot say that the Father went to the cross and died for our redemption, and we cannot say the blood shed on the cross is the blood of Jesus the Father. We must say that the blood was shed by Jesus the Son of God (1 John 1:7). We can neither say that the Father died on the cross nor can we say that the Father resurrected from the dead.<sup>10</sup>

It is therefore the case that much of the LC's identification of the Son with the Father and the Spirit is stated in the context of the operations of the economic Trinity, and is based on a similar identification that is made in Scripture. Examples are replete throughout the Gospels, particularly in the Gospel of John.

John chapter 14, for example, makes it clear that while each of the three persons in the Trinity has specific roles in the work of salvation, they never perform those functions apart from the active presence and involvement of the other two. To know Jesus is to know the Father (v.9). The Father was entirely involved in both the words Jesus spoke and the works He did (v. 10). After Jesus ascends to heaven both He and the Father will be active in answering the disciples' requests prayed in Jesus' name (vv. 13–14; cf. John 15:16). Likewise, when Jesus speaks of sending "another comforter" there is *both* the clear succession of

the Son by the Spirit in the role of teaching and leading the disciples and the clear active presence of the Son in the Spirit's work (v.18: "I will not leave you as orphans, I will come to you"), just as previously the Spirit was actively present in the work of the Son (v. 17: "you know Him because He [presently—in the ministry of Christ] abides with you").

Some interpret Jesus' promise to come to His disciples as referring to His resurrection appearances or to the Second Coming. Even if one of these interpretations was granted, it would not overthrow the argument I am making from John 14 for the close identification of the three persons, since such identification permeates the chapter. However, the context seems to suggest that Jesus is referring to the coming of the Holy Spirit. This is the topic in the verse immediately preceding this statement, and when in v. 22 Judas (not Iscariot) asks Jesus how He will disclose Himself to the disciples and not to the world (referencing Jesus' statement in v. 19 that "after a little while the world will no longer see Me, but you will see Me"), Jesus does not explain this in terms of His resurrection appearances but rather clarifies that He and the Father will come to whoever loves Him and keeps His word and "make our abode with him"—an indwelling that can only be understood as identical to the indwelling of the Holy Spirit.

We see then that while in the Gospels the work of the economic Trinity is identified with one person or the other, such identification is never meant to exclude the involvement of the other two in the same work, and sometimes one or both of the other two are specifically identified with that work (with the exception of such unique roles as the Father sending the Son, the Son dying for our sins, and the Spirit glorifying Christ).

In the epistles we also frequently see this identification of one divine person with the other's distinctive roles. The following quotation from a paper the LC prepared for Fuller Theological Seminary cites several of these Pauline texts, explains their importance in LC theology, and quotes extensively from both Witness Lee and respected theologians to explain the biblical warrant for such identification of the persons:

A key focus of our ministry is the believers' experience of Christ, and it is in this experiential sense that we interpret verses like 1 Corinthians 15:45 ["The last Adam became a life-giving Spirit"] and 2 Corinthians 3:17 ["And the Lord is the Spirit"]. We understand that in resurrection Christ comes to the believers and works out the full activity of God's complete salvation in and through the life-giving Spirit. Because of this, we find in the New Testament Epistles a strong identification of Christ with the Spirit, again not to the elimination of their distinctions in the Divine Trinity but according to their coinherent existence and

operation in the believers....

....Adept readers of historical theology know that Irenaeus, Tertullian, Augustine, and a list of other solidly orthodox teachers can be read aberrantly, but that in their writings there are also the balancing portions that validate their orthodoxy. Witness Lee too has his balancing portions, which are rarely seen in published "proofs" of his alleged heterodoxy. Here we wish to offer two exemplary portions that show something of his full view on Christ and the Spirit:

This very Christ is now the Lord in the heavens and at the same time the Spirit within us. "Now the Lord is the Spirit" (2 Cor. 3:17). As Lord, He is in the heavens. As the Spirit, He is within us. As the One in the heavens, He is exercising His rulership, headship, and priesthood....Whatever He carries out as Lord, He applies to us as the Spirit. (*The Heavenly Ministry of Christ*, 69-70)

Some who read this word concerning the Spirit as another Comforter and the Spirit as Christ's breath may ask, "Don't you believe that Christ and the Spirit are distinct? Don't you believe that Christ and the Spirit are two?" Yes, I believe that, as viewed from one aspect, the outward, objective aspect, Christ and the Spirit are two. However, as viewed from another aspect, the inward, subjective aspect, the Spirit, the second Comforter, is the breath of Christ, the first Comforter. Thus, from the perspective of the inward aspect, Christ and the Spirit are one. (*The Fulfillment of the Tabernacle and the Offerings in the Writings of John*, 588)

Without too much analysis, one can see that Witness Lee held to the notion that Christ and the Spirit are distinct; however, echoing the New Testament Epistles, he understood and taught that in our Christian experience, which, as opposed to theological systematization, was the great focus of his ministry, the resurrected Christ is often identified with the life-giving Spirit.

As this is one of the topics that has drawn the greatest amount of criticism concerning Witness Lee's teaching, we feel that it is important to add a few quotations from others on the subject. Witness Lee's teaching on this subject may be considered non-traditional or even controversial, but he is certainly not alone in the conclusions he has drawn. At least one notable contemporary scholar worth mention is James D. G. Dunn, who addresses some of the same scriptural passages that Witness Lee has given frequent attention to:

....Paul identifies the exalted Jesus with the Spirit—not with a spiritual being...or a spiritual dimension or sphere..., but with the Spirit, the Holy Spirit....



Immanent christology is for Paul pneumatology; in the believer's experience there is *no* distinction between Christ and Spirit. This does not mean of course that Paul makes no distinction between Christ and Spirit. (*The Christ and the Spirit*, vol. 1, *Christology* [Grand Rapids, MI: W. B. Eerdmans, 1998], 164-165)

W. H. Griffith Thomas, the noted theologian from a generation ago and one whom Witness Lee frequently quoted regarding the Trinity, also makes reference to the twofoldness of this divine truth, while offering a remarkably clear and succinct summary of the identification of Christ and the Spirit:

It is essential to preserve with care both sides of this truth. Christ and the Spirit are different yet the same, the same yet different. Perhaps the best expression we can give is that while their Personalities are never identical, their presence always is. (*The Holy Spirit* [Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 1986; reprint of *The Holy Spirit of God*, 4th ed., Grand Rapids: W. B. Eerdmans, 1913], 144)

It is clear from these quotations as well as from the entirety of the ministry of Witness Lee that it is in the realm of the believers' experience of Christ—and not in God's immanent existence—that the identification between Christ and the Spirit obtains. H. B. Swete confirms this same thought:

The Spirit in its working was found to be in effect the equivalent of Jesus Christ...where the possession of the Spirit of Christ is clearly regarded as tantamount to an indwelling of Christ Himself...“the Lord the Spirit,” (i.e. Christ in the power of His glorified life) are viewed as being in practice the same. (*The Holy Spirit in the New Testament* [London; New York: Macmillan, 1912], 306)<sup>11</sup>

We have seen that Scripture clearly identifies the three persons of the Trinity with each other in many manifestations of the economic Trinity. This biblical fact does not seem to be fully appreciated by many evangelical critics of the LC. Beyond this, in the doctrine of coinherence (more commonly termed *interpenetration* by theologians) there is an ontological grounding in the Trinity for such economic identification of the three persons that seems to be equally missed by many evangelicals. Once understood, this truth could go a long way toward correcting a problem that the LC has accurately noted in the Western church today. We will proceed to the doctrine of coinherence presently, but first more needs to be said about this problem.

### Turning the Trinitarian Tables: What Evangelicals Can Learn from Witness Lee

As we have seen among the quotations supplied in the Open Letter to the LC, Witness Lee has already stated the problem: “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

# Do the drafters and signers of the Open Letter really want to say that when the Spirit comes into believers the Father and Son are left on the throne?

Godhead into these separate Persons is not the revelation of the Bible....”

To be sure, Lee should have stated his concern more carefully. There is nothing wrong with believers being taught to pray to the Father in the name of the Son, something Jesus Himself encouraged (John 16:23), and Lee was not opposed to this, for he himself taught it.<sup>12</sup>

From even the limited material provided in the Open Letter it should be evident, however, that Lee’s real concern was tritheism, which makes it ironic that the Open Letter includes this quotation as evidence of Lee’s unorthodox teaching. Do the drafters and signers of the Open Letter really want to say that when the Spirit comes into believers the Father and Son are left on the throne? Do they really contend that splitting the Godhead into three *separate* persons is the revelation of the Bible? If so, then conscientious Christians should be concerned about *their* beliefs on the Trinity.

To better clarify the LC’s position it should be noted that they believe in a principle that theologian Robert Govett called “the twofoldness of Divine Truth,” in which God’s revelation characteristically has two sides to it, and it is important to embrace and teach both sides fully.<sup>13</sup> This explains why Lee often failed to follow radical and controversial statements with seemingly appropriate

qualifications: he did not want to diminish the fullness and force of one aspect of biblical truth (e.g., the oneness of God) by too quickly balancing it with the opposing aspect (e.g., the threeness of God), and so he would often do so at another time.

The LC certainly could have and should have taken greater care to explain the nuances of their controversial teachings to leery Westerners, but it can nonetheless be demonstrated that they have not contradicted themselves as their critics suppose. They have consistently affirmed that the three persons of the Godhead are eternally *distinct* from one another while consistently denying that they are ever *separate* from one another.

If this observation seems to be making a distinction without a difference, further thought should be given to the matter. Even if the English dictionary defined the two terms in an identical manner, the important question would remain: how do the “local churches” define the terms? However, the *American Heritage Dictionary* agrees with the LC that there are significant differences of meaning in the adjectival use of the two terms:

1. The first (and only applicable to this usage) definition that the AHD gives for *distinct* is, “Readily distinguishable from all others; discrete.”
2. For *separate* the AHD’s first two definitions are both

relevant: (a) “Set or kept apart; disunited”; (b) “Existing as an independent entity.”

A careful effort to understand LC writings on their own terms is bound to discover that the strong modalistic-sounding language often found therein is a reaction to, and an attempt to correct, the tritheistic tendencies that Lee and his compatriots believed they were encountering in the West. Indeed, some Western theologians have made the same observation about modern evangelicalism,<sup>14</sup> and the very fact that the distinction between *separate* and *distinct* is not recognized even by theologians and countercult apologists involved with the Open Letter would seem to corroborate this concern.

Of course, the vast majority of Western Christians are not full-blown tritheists (believing that the Trinity is composed of three separate gods). However, many of them do seem inconsistently to hold beliefs about God that imply tritheism.

In keeping with his belief in the twofoldness of Divine Truth, Lee taught that “in order to hold a biblical truth properly, we must hold both sides of it. The pure revelation of the Triune God in the Bible occupies a central position in between the extremes of modalism and tritheism.”<sup>15</sup> As far as Lee was concerned, the LC was maintaining that balance but much of evangelicalism was not. This, the LC would argue, is a factor in the outcry against their teaching: tritheists are more likely to construe sound Trinitarianism as modalism just as much as modalists are more likely to construe sound Trinitarianism as tritheism.

Now, at this point both the LC and their critics should step back and take a deep breath. Both sides need to recognize that *leaning toward* an extreme and *embracing* it are not the same thing. Orthodox Christians would surely agree with Lee that we need to find the proper balance between modalism and tritheism; it’s just a question of determining where that balance lies, and that has been a tricky proposition throughout church history. Within historic orthodoxy, Eastern Orthodoxy leans more toward tritheism and Roman Catholicism leans more toward modalism, but virtually no one accuses either camp of heresy on the Trinity. In the same sense, an argument could be made that the LC leans toward modalism, but an argument that they are modalists simply cannot be sustained.

What about Lee’s declarations that the Son is the Father and the Spirit? Many critics have taken this as a dead giveaway that he was a modalist. Because many people understandably respond this way, CRI has advised the LC against making such declarations. It is important for a group’s teachings to be clearly understood. But even if the LC ignores our advice, *truth still matters*, and when Lee affirmed the existence of three eternally distinct persons in the Godhead he was stating his true belief. Furthermore, when he affirmed that the Trinity is one person he was not engaging in boldfaced self-contradiction. He was rather attempting to safeguard LC theology from the implication of separateness of being

(tritheism) that the word *person* at least potentially carries.

As we’ve seen, Lee did explicitly teach that the Trinity consists of three distinct persons, but in other places he can be found expressing reservations about the use of that term.<sup>16</sup> For example:

Actually, to use the designation “three Persons” to explain the Father, Son, and Spirit is also not quite satisfactory because “three Persons” really means three persons. Therefore, Griffith Thomas (famous for his exposition on the book of Romans) in his book *The Principles of Theology* wrote in this wise concerning the Trinity of the Godhead: “The term ‘Person’ is also sometimes objected to. Like all human language, it is liable to be accused of inadequacy and even positive error. It certainly must not be pressed too far, or it will lead to Tritheism.”<sup>17</sup>

We dare not say that the Father, the Son, and the Spirit are three persons, nor do we dare say that they are not, because this is truly a mystery.<sup>18</sup>

It seems that we in the countercult community can learn something from Lee on this point. In our efforts to define the Trinity in a manner that could be easily assimilated by the masses and would quickly rule out the errors of Arianism (e.g., Jehovah’s Witnesses) and modalism (e.g., United Pentecostal Church), we have perhaps relied too heavily on succinct definitions of the Trinity such as “one God in three persons” or “three persons in one nature.”

To assume that this is all we need to say about the Trinity seems simplistic. Where else in the entire realm of human experience do we encounter persons who are not simultaneously separate entities from all other persons? If we supply lay Christians with nothing more than such simple formulas, should we be surprised if they become tritheistic in at least some of their thinking? Should we be greatly surprised if some of them move on to embrace the full-blown tritheism of such teachers as Finis Dake, Jimmy Swaggart, Kenneth Copeland, and Benny Hinn?

The Bible does not present the Trinity in such simplistic terms. There is an element of mystery in its depiction of the Godhead that can be as difficult to sort out as the Trinitarian teachings of Witness Lee! For example, evangelical countercult apologists will often correctly argue with Jehovah’s Witnesses that the Bible identifies Jesus with Jehovah, and Jehovah (or Yahweh) is the personal name of God. How many of them stop and wrestle with the fact that the Bible applies *one* personal name to all *three* persons of the Trinity?<sup>19</sup> Furthermore, the Bible (and we Christians, following the Bible) often uses the singular personal pronoun “He” to refer to the triune God and not merely to one person in the Trinity.<sup>20</sup>

There is clearly a sense biblically in which the three persons of the Trinity share a singular *personal* identity:

Yahweh, the covenant-keeping God, who we appropriately refer to as “He” or “Him.” To affirm this is not to confuse the eternal and economic distinctions that exist between Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. It is rather to safeguard the equally important biblical truth that they comprise one eternal Being, a truth that describing them as three *separate* persons compromises. Those of us who have used the word *separate* to distinguish the persons of the Trinity owe a debt of gratitude to Witness Lee for pointing this out.

Lee’s thinking was very close to that of the late Reformed theologian Cornelius Van Til on this point, and although Van Til has been criticized for his view, no one that I am aware of has charged him with heresy. Theology blogger Phil Gons writes:

Avoiding modalism and tritheism is as challenging as steering clear of legalism and antinomianism. Errors in formulating a biblical doctrine of the Trinity stem from the desire to say too much. Perhaps Van Til’s approach is best. He leaves the tension unresolved and maintains the full mystery of the Trinity by arguing that God is both one person and three persons, though in different senses. Van Til is combating the notion that “God” is some kind of attribute that the three persons of the Trinity share in common. [John] Frame’s defense of Van Til on this point is quite insightful. Van Til’s formulation helpfully preserves us from the tendency toward either modalism or tritheism. God is one and God is three, but in different senses (and thus not contradictorily). In precisely what ways He is one and three, we cannot and should not say.<sup>21</sup>

### **The Little-Known but Entirely Biblical Doctrine of Coinherence**

As previously suggested, the best antidote to a tritheistic tendency is to understand the important biblical doctrine of *coinherence*. The reason the three persons of the Trinity can never be separated is that their oneness of nature involves more than merely sharing the same attributes (as humans share attributes); it involves existing as one entity and therefore interpenetrating one another.

In their paper presented to Fuller the LC make their position on coinherence, and their justification for it, quite clear:

While we adamantly maintain that the three persons of the Divine Trinity exist eternally and are eternally distinct, we also recognize that in every manifest and distinct action of each all three operate inseparably (yet still distinctly)...Witness Lee relied heavily on the notion [of coinherence] to explain how the Bible sometimes identifies one distinct hypostasis [person] of the Trinity with another:

....The term *coinhere* applied to the Triune God means that the three—the Father, the Son, and the

Spirit—exist within one another. First of all, this is based upon the word spoken by the Lord Jesus in the Gospels....Besides John 14:10, the same utterance is found in 14:20; 10:38; and 17:21, 23. These five verses all refer to the fact that the Son and the Father exist within one another at the same time. These verses are crucial to our understanding of the mystery of the Divine Trinity’s being three and also one. (*The Revelation and Vision of God*, 33-35)

John 14:10 perhaps best captures the fine nuances of the manifest action and inseparable operations that we see in the Trinity: “Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in Me? The words that I say to you I do not speak from Myself, but the Father who abides in Me does His works.” Because the Son is in the Father and the Father is in the Son—that is, because the Father and the Son coinhere—what is manifestly and distinctly the Son’s action (“the words that I say to you”) is likewise the Father’s operation (“the Father who abides in Me does His works”). An allusion to the similar inseparable operations of the three in the distinct action of the Spirit can be found in John 16:13-15....

Because of this marvelous reality of the coinherence of the three in the Trinity, we believe that frequently the Bible identifies the hypostases with one another, sometimes to the chagrin of less-nuanced systematic theologies. But not all systematians have been dull to this reality in God:

This oneness of essence explains the fact that, while Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, as respects their personality, are distinct subsistences, there is an intercommunion of persons and an immanence of one divine person in another which permits the peculiar work of one to be ascribed ...to either of the other, and the manifestation of one to be recognized in the manifestation of the other. The Scripture representations of this intercommunion prevent us from conceiving of the distinctions called Father, Son, and Holy Spirit as involving separation between them. This intercommunion also explains the designation of Christ as “the Spirit,” and of the Spirit as “the Spirit of Christ,” as 1 Corinthians 15:45: “The last Adam became a life-giving Spirit,” 2 Corinthians 3:17, “Now the Lord is the Spirit....” The persons of the Holy Trinity are not separable individuals. Each involves the others; the coming of each is the coming of the others. Thus, the coming of the Spirit must have involved the coming of the Son. (A. H. Strong, *Systematic Theology*, [Old Tappan, N.J.: Revell, 1960, c1907], 332-33)

Similarly, we understand that because of coinherence in the Trinity the Son given to us comes to us bearing in His every action the inseparable operation of the Eternal Father and thus can be called, as Isaiah predicts, the Eternal Father. We do not need to relegate Isaiah's prophecy to an Old Testament metaphor, nor should we neuter the passage of its full Christian significance, for as Christians we hold this verse as an inspired prophecy of the incarnate Christ. Rather, we wish to afford the passage its full textual force, understanding that the Son who came to us in incarnation was in the Father and that His works were as well the operations of the Eternal Father.<sup>22</sup>

At this point Lee's statement, quoted in the Open Letter, that "...the entire Godhead, the Triune God, became flesh" can be better understood. The drafters of the Open Letter apparently would have us believe that Lee was teaching an expanded, Triune version of Patripassionism and denying that the Son was uniquely incarnate, despite his express teaching, reproduced above, that only the Son became flesh, did the works of the "second step" of God's economy, died on the cross, and rose from the dead. Notice, however, that the quotation the Open Letter provides is not even a complete sentence. This fact is significant because by only reproducing eight words out of a 240-word paragraph the drafters deprive the reader of the point Lee was actually making. The context of the paragraph is clearly and exclusively the coinherence of the Trinity, and it is in this sense and this sense only that Lee wrote those eight words: because of their unity of being, no person of the Trinity goes anywhere or does anything apart from the presence and involvement of the other two persons. When an author is indicted on the basis of an incomplete sentence it should raise a red flag for any discerning reader; in this case, further research bears out that the author was indeed taken out of context.

I believe that sufficient evidence has been provided to exonerate the LC from charges of heresy, aberration, duplicity, and self-contradiction as regards the Trinity. Just as we at CRI admitted that we had wrongly charged the LC with modalism, I am confident that other evangelical critics of the LC who are fair minded and open to correction will reach a similar conclusion. Because truth matters irrespective of personal histories, the fact that the LC has at times responded contentiously to such egregiously false charges does not make the charges themselves any less egregious and false and should not affect the conclusions evangelicals reach on this matter.<sup>23</sup> As we shall shortly see, a careful contextual reading of LC literature forces the exact same conclusions on the other alleged theological errors identified in the Open Letter.

- 1 For example, see abuGian, "The Teachings of Witness Lee of the 'Local Church' (Church of Recovery)," The Bereans Apologetics Research Ministry, <http://www.thebereans.net/arm-lee.shtml>; "To All Zealous 'Witness Lee-Teaching' Followers regarding the 'Triune God' Doctrine," Biblocality, <http://www.3.telus.net/trbrooks/TeachingsofLC3.htm>; also note the comments of Calvin Beisner in Colin Hansen, "Cult Watchers Reconsider: Former Detractors of Nee and Lee Now Endorse 'Local Churches,'" Bold Bible Teaching, <http://www.boldbibleteaching.net/watchmanneeanandwitness.html>.
- 2 Witness Lee, *The Revelation and Vision of God* (Anaheim: Living Stream Ministry, 2000), 32–33.
- 3 Ibid., 19.
- 4 By *relationship* I refer to every aspect of the Triune God's activity as creator, preserver, judge, and redeemer of the world.
- 5 Witness Lee, *The Conclusion of the New Testament, Messages 1–20* (Anaheim: Living Stream Ministry, 1997), 20.
- 6 Lee, *Revelation and Vision*, 34.
- 7 Witness Lee, *Living in and with the Divine Trinity* (Anaheim: Living Stream Ministry, 1990), 9–10.
- 8 Chris Wilde, "Presentation of Some of the Teachings of Witness Lee concerning Several Key Doctrinal Issues" (draft of a paper prepared for Fuller Seminary, October 2005), 2.
- 9 Witness Lee, *The Crucial Points of the Major Items of the Lord's Recovery Today* (Anaheim: Living Stream Ministry, 1993), 10.
- 10 Witness Lee, *Elders' Training, Book 3: The Way to Carry Out the Vision* (Anaheim: Living Stream Ministry, 1985), 69.
- 11 *A Statement concerning the Teachings of Living Stream Ministry Prepared for Fuller Theological Seminary*, January 20, 2007, 12–14. (This document is posted at <http://www.lctestimony.org/StatementOfTeachings.pdf>.)
- 12 Witness Lee, *Lessons on Prayer* (Anaheim: Living Stream Ministry, 1981), 239–47.
- 13 Wilde, 1. See Robert Govett, *The Twofoldness of Divine Truth*, 5th ed. (Haysville, NC: Schoettle Publishing Company, 2003).
- 14 See, e.g., Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1995), 248; Phil Gons, "Are You a Practical Modalist?" [PhilGons.com](http://philgons.com), Thoughts on Theology and Technology, January 19, 2009, <http://philgons.com/2008/01/are-you-a-practical-modalist/>; and Rev. James Hastings, M.A., ed., *The Expository Times*, vol. 7: October 1895–September 1896 (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, n.d.), 153.
- 15 Lee, *The Conclusion of the New Testament, Messages 1–20*, 29.
- 16 It is noteworthy that Karl Barth, whose theology was centered in the Trinity and who rejected modalism, nonetheless had a similar concern about the use of the term person as that expressed by Lee. On this see Carl F. H. Henry, *God, Revelation, and Authority Volume 5: God Who Stands and Stays Part One* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1982), 184.
- 17 Witness Lee, *The Truth concerning the Trinity* (Anaheim: Living Stream Ministry, 1976, 1994), 32.
- 18 Lee, *Revelation and Vision*, 21.
- 19 Proof texts abound, but compare Isaiah 44:24 with John 1:3 and Genesis 1:2. If Yahweh alone created the universe, then the Son and the Holy Spirit, who with the Father were agents in creation, must also be Yahweh.
- 20 See, among a Bible full of examples, Deuteronomy 4:35–39.
- 21 Gons, previously cited.
- 22 *A Statement Concerning the Teachings of Living Stream Ministry*, 9–11.
- 23 Indeed, the LC's more aggressive response to charges of heresy and aberration than most groups may very well be explained by the fact that the charges are false. True heretics seem to live more comfortably with charges of heresy, perhaps because on some level they know the charge is true or, in any case, they don't deeply care about being biblical and their concerns about such charges arise more from a public relations standpoint. Imagine, however, if your soundly orthodox church was being widely charged with heresy and cultism. The charge would be especially grievous because it is false and because you would be responding to it with evangelical sensibilities. Evangelicals therefore are well advised to view the LC's past contentiousness in a different, more sympathetic light.

# **PART 3:**

## **Addressing the Open Letter's Concerns:**

## **On the Nature of Humanity**



**T**

he next section of the Open Letter begins with the heading “On the Nature of Humanity” and reproduces the following quotations from Witness Lee:

“Christ is of two natures, the human and the divine, and we are the same: we are of the human nature, but covered with the divine. He is the God-man, and we are the God-men. He is the ark made of wood covered with gold, and we are the boards made of wood covered with gold. In number we are different, but in nature we are exactly the same.”

Witness Lee, *The All-Inclusive Christ*  
(Anaheim: Living Stream Ministry, 5th ed., 1989), p. 103

“God can say to His believers, ‘I am divine and human,’ and His believers can reply, ‘Praise You, Lord. You are divine and human, and we are human and divine.’”

Witness Lee, *The Triune God to Be Life to the Tripartite Man*  
(Anaheim: Living Stream Ministry, 1990), pp. 51–52

“My burden is to show you clearly that God’s economy and plan is to make Himself man and to make us, His created beings, ‘God,’ so that He is ‘man-ized’ and we are ‘God-ized.’ In the end, He and we, we and He, all become God-men.”

Witness Lee, *A Deeper Study of the Divine Dispensing*  
(Anaheim: Living Stream Ministry, 1990), p. 54

“We the believers are begotten of God. What is begotten of man is man, and what is begotten of God must be God. We are born of God; hence, in this sense, we are God.”

*Ibid.*, p. 53

“Because the Father, the Son, and the Spirit are all one with the Body of Christ, we may say that the Triune God is now the ‘four-in-one’ God. These four are the Father, the Son, the Spirit, and the Body. The Three of the Divine Trinity cannot be confused or separated, and

the four-in-one also cannot be separated or confused.”

*Ibid.*, pp. 203–204

As with the previous section, the present section of the Open Letter consists of nothing but a series of seemingly unorthodox quotations from Witness Lee, without providing any commentary or explanatory context for Lee’s teaching. I found it easier to sympathize with the drafters of the Open Letter in the previous section where, prior to doing thorough research, one could reasonably surmise that Lee was affirming modalism. This second round of quotations from Lee, however, does not unmistakably resemble any one false teaching and therefore is inadequate on the face of it to prove anything.

Such language could be used by New Age or Hindu gurus and then would be non-Christian and idolatrous. It could be used by Mormons or Armstrongists and then would be pseudo-Christian and heretical. It could be used by Word of Faith or Latter Rain teachers and then would be at best aberrant. But it could also be used by ancient Greek church fathers and Eastern Orthodox theologians and then would be accepted within the pale of orthodoxy. To publish these quotations as proof of unorthodoxy without providing context and definition of terms was therefore unscholarly, sensational, irresponsible, and indefensible, and this indictment holds irrespective of what the LC teaching on the nature of humanity actually is.

The drafters of the letter might reply that this document was merely an open letter to the LC and therefore did not call for any attempt to provide context to Lee’s statements. This would be valid, however, only if it were a private letter rather than an open letter. Not only was the latter the case, but the drafters announced its existence with a press release, put it up on the Web, aggressively circulated it among evangelicals, and clearly put it to use—and allowed others to put it to use—as a polemic piece against the LC.

Once we do make the effort to understand the LC teaching on human nature in context we find a situation strikingly parallel to what we encountered in the previous

section, where we saw that their teachings on the nature of God have been both misunderstood and misrepresented. Once again, a key distinction between the ontological Trinity and the economic Trinity that Lee made repeatedly when he taught on this subject is completely missed or ignored. Furthermore, it turns out that the LC's teaching on human deification is similar to that of Eastern Orthodoxy but not remotely similar to any of the other examples cited above. Both of these factors, then—the ontological/economic distinction and the similarity to Eastern Orthodoxy—decisively place Lee's affirmations far from the realm of heresy and firmly in the realm of orthodoxy, whether or not one agrees with them or thinks they are biblically correct.

### **The Essential-Economic Distinction—Missed Again!**

Countercult/discernment ministry provides a vital service to the body of Christ, but those of us involved with this work have always had to contend with the charge of “heresy hunting” by Christians who fail to appreciate the importance of apologetics and discernment. However, countercult research truly becomes “heresy hunting” of the worst kind when the researchers make a practice of digging up seemingly heretical or scandalous statements by a teacher, without concern for context, in order to employ the shock value of such statements to turn the public against the teacher and his group. As much as I respect many of the people involved with the Open Letter and do not consider their past work “heresy hunting,” it is hard to defend them against this charge when it comes to how Lee's teachings on deification were handled.

Of the three works cited by the Open Letter, two of them make only passing reference to deification and thus neither work is quoted more than once. However, the book *A Deeper Study of the Divine Dispensing*, quoted three times, presents the LC's full-orbed teaching on the subject, as do several other publications the drafters could and should have consulted.

In the following quotation, which includes one of the three quotations the Open Letter reproduces from *Deeper Study*, please note that they stopped quoting Lee *immediately* before he made it clear that he was not teaching heresy. I am adding boldface to the part they chose to quote and italics to the part they chose to leave out:

*We the believers are begotten of God. What is begotten of man is man, and what is begotten of God must be God. We are born of God; hence, in this sense, we are God. Nevertheless, we must know that we do not share God's Person and cannot be worshiped by others. Only God Himself has the Person of God and can be worshiped by man.*<sup>1</sup>

Unfortunately for evangelicals who have lent their names or support to the Open Letter, it gets worse. In the paragraph *immediately* preceding the paragraph the Open Letter quotes

from, the following important qualifications (italics added) were ignored by the drafters:

The ultimate purpose of God is to work Himself into us that He may be our life and everything to us so that one day we may become Him. *But this does not mean that we can become part of the Godhead and be the same as the unique God. We have to know that although we are born of God and have God's life to become God's children, His house, and His household, we do not have a share in His sovereignty or His Person and cannot be worshiped as God.*<sup>2</sup>

If the drafters had proceeded to research the entire body of Lee's teaching on human deification, they would have found the same kind of qualifications made again and again. Just a few further examples (italics added to Lee's qualifications):

The early church fathers used the term *deification* to describe the believers' participation in the divine life and nature of God, *but not in the Godhead*. We human beings need to be deified, to be made like God in life and in nature, *but it is a great heresy to say that we are made like God in his Godhead. We are God not in His Godhead, but in His life, nature, element, essence, and image.* (first emphasis in original)<sup>3</sup>

In our spiritual breathing by the exercise of our spirit, we enjoy, receive, and absorb the divine substance with the divine essence, the divine element, and the divine expression. This will cause us to be deified, that is to be constituted with the processed Triune God to be made God in life and in nature *but not in the Godhead*. In this sense we may speak of the deification of the believers, a process that will consummate in the New Jerusalem.<sup>4</sup>

*On the one hand, the New Testament reveals that the Godhead is unique and that only God, who alone has the Godhead, should be worshiped.* On the other hand, the New Testament reveals that we, the believers in Christ, have God's life and nature and that we are becoming *God in life and in nature but will never have His Godhead.*<sup>5</sup>

On first blush a skeptic might legitimately ask, “How could believers *not* partake in the Godhead if they partake in God's life and nature?” The answer, however, becomes clear when Lee is read in his own context and allowed to define his own terms. When Lee refers to the “processed God,” he is clearly speaking about the economic Trinity. It is this Trinity that becomes in a sense “four-in-one.” There is no change in the essential or ontological Trinity (what Lee is here calling the Godhead) with the deification of believers any more than there was a change in the ontological Trinity with the incarnation of

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Christ. According to the LC, in the outworking of God's economy or plan of salvation, there is a process that includes progressive steps in which God the Father is embodied in the Son in incarnation, Christ is realized as the Spirit in resurrection, and ultimately the Triune God is expressed in the glorified church; but in His essential nature or Godhead, the Lord remains forever unchanged.

Not only does this logically follow from Lee's teachings, but he explicitly states it in many places. For example: "The process through which the Triune God passed to become the life-giving Spirit is an economical, not essential, matter. Change with God can only be economical; it can never be essential. Essentially, our God cannot change. From eternity to eternity He remains the same in His essence. But in His economy the Triune God has changed in the sense of being processed."<sup>6</sup> It would be somewhat easier to understand if these clearly stated theological distinctions and qualifications were missed by the lay countercult apologists who signed the open letter than it would be if they were missed by the highly qualified theologians who also signed it, but presumably some of the latter group would have been involved in its drafting. Until the drafters are identified, therefore, these slanted citations leave a cloud over the entire group of scholars.

**A Protestant Counterpart  
to Eastern Orthodox Deification**

Ultimately, the LC doctrine of deification is merely a more mystical view of the sanctification and glorification of believers than evangelical Protestants are used to hearing, but

it has much precedent in church history and has much more in common with mainstream evangelical beliefs on the subjects than the LC's unconventional choice of terms might first suggest. It is certainly more "Protestant friendly" than the Eastern Orthodox view of deification.

This union with God or deification is based on Christ's judicial redemption. It involves justification by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone and reception of the Holy Spirit. Through the indwelling Spirit, believers are infused with the life of God, by which they are organically united to Christ and to the members of His mystical body, the church. This organic union progresses through a "process involving regeneration, sanctification, renewing, transformation, conformation, and glorification."<sup>7</sup>

While the LC view of the outworking of salvation in Christ unto the ultimate glorification of believers may include elements or emphases that evangelicals are unfamiliar or uncomfortable with (much as would be the case with the Eastern Orthodox view), it also has much in common with standard theological works on the subject. In no respect is it incompatible with a soundly Christian theology (i.e., doctrine of God proper), Christology, pneumatology, soteriology, and eschatology.

In their paper prepared for Fuller the LC further explain both the nature and limits of human deification and put it into historical perspective:

Again, this respects the distinction in the Godhead between what He is immanently and what He does

economically. He alone is God by virtue of His own being and existence; we *are made* God by virtue of our union with and participation in Him who is uniquely God. Because of God's incommunicability, human beings will never take part in the Godhead; we will never be a fourth person in the Trinity; we will never be worshipped as God. Because human beings will never lose their attributes as creatures, we will never be the Creator. We will forever possess the human form and the human nature; thus, we will never be omnipresent. We will forever be endowed with limited mental faculties as given in our creation; hence, we will never be omniscient. God is God both outside of creation and within creation; we human beings can at best be joined to God and thereby become God within the confines of creation....

Of course, this is the classical Christian notion of deification, which was generally accepted throughout the Christian church in its early centuries. It was most elegantly expressed by Athanasius (d. 373) in his famous aphorism: "For He was made man that we might be made God" (*de Incarn.* 54.3)...The notion of deification has generally been ignored in Western Christianity, and for this reason it is usually viewed with suspicion by Protestant Christians and only mildly acknowledged by Roman Catholics. Christians in the Eastern tradition, however, never abandoned the notion that deification is in fact the full significance and effect of God's salvation. However, unlike the Eastern Orthodox, we in the local churches do not understand deification to be the issue of sacraments, liturgy, and other ritual. Rather, we believe that we become God through the operation of grace partaken of through our daily enjoyment of the Word of God, through prayer, and through fellowship with the believers in the many gatherings of the church. We are made God through our partaking of Christ and our living Christ by grace in our daily lives in the church. While some have voiced concern about our view of salvation as deification, most educated readers of our ministry realize that we hold to the altogether orthodox view of this precious truth, even if it is not currently in the mainstream of Protestant thought...<sup>8</sup>

### **An Unrealistic and Unreasonable Call**

What becomes clear on reading contemporary theological works published by the LC is that their current leadership is just as committed to the movement's doctrinal distinctives as was Witness Lee. Therefore, the Open Letter's "call on the leadership of Living Stream Ministry and the 'local churches' to disavow and cease to publish these and similar declarations" of Witness Lee is both unrealistic and unreasonable. They are not going to disavow doctrinal distinctives they firmly believe are not only biblical but also enriching to their own congregations and potentially enriching to the rest of the body of Christ. And why should they? As we've seen, there is nothing heretical about their

teachings on the natures of God and man, and who is to say that they do not have contributions to make to the rest of the body of Christ in these very areas?

While I personally am uncomfortable with the use of terms such as deification and God-men for believers, it is evident to me that the LC has studied, thought, and prayed a lot more deeply on the nature of glorification and God's ultimate plan for humanity than most Christian traditions. They have just as much right to believe that they have a deeper grasp on this aspect of God's revelation as Baptists do about believer's baptism, Presbyterians do about the place of covenant in the church today, Episcopalians do about apostolic succession, Pentecostals do about the baptism in the Holy Spirit, Wesleyans do about the importance of holiness, dispensationalists do about a literal hermeneutic, house churches do about body life, and so on.

### **The Flagrant Use of a Double Standard**

Can you imagine how arrogant and divisive it would seem if "more than 60 evangelical Christian scholars and ministry leaders from seven nations" signed an open letter calling on the administration and faculty of Dallas Theological Seminary to "disavow the unorthodox statements of their founder"? After all, some evangelicals believe that classical dispensationalism such as was taught by Lewis Sperry Chafer compromises orthodoxy just as seriously as other evangelicals believe the LC's teachings on deification compromise orthodoxy. Or why not go after the Episcopalians for their doctrine of baptismal regeneration, or the Lutherans for their belief in the "real presence" of the body and blood of Christ "in, with, and under" the Eucharist, or the Nazarenes for their belief in a "Second Blessing"? If evangelicals generally are willing to tolerate doctrinal distinctives of groups such as these even if they believe that such distinctives are unbiblical and can negatively impact essential doctrine, then why is the LC not treated with the same consideration?

I submit that the answer is twofold:

1. The LC are perceived as having a history of litigiousness and contentiousness in response to evangelicals who have labeled them a cult or cultic and this has created a general animus among many evangelicals toward the LC that leads them to treat the LC differently (more critically, less charitably, and less carefully) than they would other Christian groups.
2. Even more fundamentally, the LC are treated differently because they *are* different.

Watchman Nee and Witness Lee did not, and many of the contemporary leaders of the LC do not, share the Western heritage that has dominated church history and has strongly influenced the approach not only of Westerners but of those whom they've converted and disciplined to all things Christian today. English was and is not the first language of such leaders. In China they suffered and continue to suffer severe

persecutions and have had limited exposure to Christian literature and training. When LC members brushed up against Western Christianity after many of them relocated here, neither side was fully prepared for the encounter. For Westerners, the LC's distinctively Chinese approach to Christianity, even when represented by Western followers, was so unfamiliar as to suggest cultism, whether or not it existed. For the LC, any suggestion that they were a cult and their venerable teacher was a cult leader was profoundly offensive. They fought back to defend their own legitimate Christian standing and the distinctive contributions they believed they could make to the larger body of Christ.

In attempts at dialogue, the language and cultural differences often impeded progress. Witness Lee and other Chinese leaders, as well as their many Western converts who lacked an evangelical background, may not have understood the effect the use of certain words and phrasing would have on cult-literate Western evangelicals, who were not about to affirm the legitimacy of terminology that had previously encountered only in cultic contexts. The LC, meanwhile, were not about to back away from teachings they believed were given to them by God. They refused to change any of their terminology and usually did not go out of their way to provide the balancing context of their teachings. This recalcitrance was wrongly taken by evangelical apologists as a refusal to embrace orthodoxy. Hence, the LC at times almost seemed to go out of their way to appear cultic and, with countercult researchers failing to be thorough and evenhanded in their approach to the LC, a general feeling of bad will developed on both sides and the situation deteriorated to what it is today.

### **The Other Side to the LC**

There is another side to the LC, however, that many Western Christians don't see. After responding affirmatively to their overture for dialogue, Hank Hanegraaff, Gretchen Passantino (director of Answers in Action and one of CRI's past researchers and authors on the LC), and I have had the privilege of seeing that more favorable side close-up both in the West and in the East, including many cities and provinces in China.

After one devotes sufficient time to studying LC materials in context, dialoguing with its leaders and members, and observing them as they live out their individual Christian lives and collective church life, an irresistible conclusion is reached: *this group is not only Christian but it is in many ways an exemplary group of Christians.* They are a fellowship of believers with a level of commitment to Christ and discipleship that puts to shame most Western Christian groups. They have been tested by the fires of persecution, have persevered, and, as a result, have been forged into the image of Christ to an inspiring degree. Their love for Jesus is compelling. Their sacrificial living is convicting.

In a nine-day excursion up and down China's east coast in October 2008, Hank and I were deeply moved by the

spirits and testimonies of radiant saints who spoke of how the Lord sustained them through years (in one case, twenty-four years) of imprisonment for such offenses as confessing the name of Jesus, preaching the gospel, or holding meetings. Even while we were there more than four hundred people, including college students and adult workers holding a youth outreach in Beijing and church members attending a Lord's Day gathering in Hangzhou, were arrested and interrogated. The students were soon released but some church leaders in Hangzhou were sent to labor camps for one to one-and-a-half years of "reeducation."

In addition to the unwavering commitment to Christ in word and deed that is common among LC congregations, they typically are very much concerned about sound doctrine, are aware of the cults, and seek to counter them in their own way. This is why it especially grieved them to be called a cult.

In my considered opinion, after thirty-seven years of evaluating such things (thirty-three of those years in full-time ministry), the LC are authentically Christian and are pursuing the will of God in a critical region of the world where they represent one of the largest Christian fellowships (roughly one million members in China; perhaps two million worldwide, mostly in other Asian countries).

From what Hank and I saw, God is using the LC mightily in a revival that is currently sweeping China. For example, at a Sunday morning service we attended that lasted from 9:00 A.M. until after 2:00 P.M., the church in Nanjing (located in Jiangsu Province, which allows the LC exceptional freedom to meet and worship) was filled to capacity on two floors. After the main service college-age young people, mostly from the local university, filled up the second floor, divided into several groups. Hank sat in on one of these groups with a translator and I another. By a show of hands it became clear that nobody in my group had been a Christian for longer than six years and some of them had not yet converted but they were drawn by the spiritual vitality and purpose they could sense in the LC Christians they had encountered in one-on-one contacts. (Evangelistic meetings outside of the church building's walls are still forbidden even in Jiangsu Province.) These young adults spoke of the spiritual void they experienced living under Communism and the pressure they felt as only children with two parents and four grandparents pinning all their hopes on them—especially since the percentage of students who actually find jobs after graduating is around forty percent. By the end of the day's meeting over forty of these students were in line to be baptized, including one who was not a Christian prior to Hank's witnessing to him.

Hank and I are both convinced that virtually anyone of good will—no matter how skeptical of the LC at the outset—who has comparable exposure to them as we have had will come away convinced of their authentic and orthodox Christian faith. The LC simply pursues Christianity from a decidedly different background than many do in the West, and this can make them appear idiosyncratic

and suspicious to us.

No culture is originally Christian. Christianity originally flourished in pagan Greco-Roman culture and this resulted in both advantages and disadvantages for the development of Christian thought and tradition. Because of common grace, Greco-Roman civilization offered intellectual tools for doing theology that have greatly benefited the church, but there must also be blind spots that developed in the church's perspective because of the effects of human sin on those preexisting cultures. China too for millennia has had a highly sophisticated culture and civilization, but it is about as far from a Western worldview and influences as any advanced civilization that could be imagined. It too has elements of common grace but also bears the effects of sin.

It is my observation after having read histories on China and the advance of the gospel there, as well as having read many years ago the works of Watchman Nee, and now after having actually been there and interacted with dozens of Chinese Christians, that the Chinese display an exceptional earnestness and hunger for truth and spiritual reality. In other words, even as it was a "true testimony," according to the apostle Paul, that ancient Crete produced "liars, evil beasts, lazy gluttons" and therefore the Cretan Christians needed to be reprov'd severely (Titus 1:12–13), so it seems legitimate to say that China produces more than its share of serious, devout, and fully dedicated disciples of Jesus Christ.

The LC movement is a prime example of this. As limited as the LC in China may be in advanced theological training, their hunger to discern what it is to be the New Testament church and then live that out is palpable and has sustained them through severe persecutions over a period of many decades.

### **The Role of Western Counterculture Literature in the Suppression of Religious Sects**

The movement was persecuted severely from the beginning of the Communist Revolution and even more severely during the Cultural Revolution, but in more recent decades much of the continuing persecution they have suffered has been fueled by criticisms published in Western evangelical counterculture literature. This is not just a claim made by the LC but it has been verified to CRI by high-ranking Chinese authorities who met with us on our visits there.

The Chinese government is not ignorant of Western evangelical literature. Anyone with even a cursory knowledge of events in China knows the Communist government has grave concerns about social instability and the role cults can play in fomenting it. (Hence, the severe crackdowns on members of Falun Gong and Tibetan Buddhists after they staged unsanctioned public demonstrations.) While in some Chinese provinces registered religions, which include some Christian groups, enjoy greater freedom of expression than they have known in six decades, unregistered religions,

especially those perceived as cults, continue to be treated harshly. As long as the authorities view the LC movement as a cult, its people will continue to suffer.

The Chinese government is not opposed to religion per se and in fact is increasingly recognizing that religion, including Christianity, can play a constructive role in society. The government is concerned, however, about any religious group that originated and continues to be directed from outside of China. It stipulates that any sanctioned expression of a religion must be wholly indigenous.

Perhaps no better example of a successful indigenous Chinese Christian movement can be cited than the LC. As we've seen, it was founded in China by Watchman Nee and carried on by Chinese workers, most notably Witness Lee. They developed an approach to theology and church life that, while orthodox, is distinctively Chinese<sup>9</sup> and unlike anything found in the West. As we've seen and will see further below, their model of ecclesiology is intensely local and it therefore rejects any ecclesiastical control from outside the local church's city, let alone the country. Furthermore, the LC are apolitical—they have no revolutionary or seditious ambitions. They teach their members to obey governmental authority and to be exemplary and productive citizens.<sup>10</sup> In other words, it seems that, almost to a tee, the LC fits the criteria of what the Chinese government would hope to see in a Christian group.

There is therefore great and tragic irony in this: the LC's distinctively Chinese approach to the universal truths of Christianity has contributed significantly to their being misunderstood and mislabeled a cult in the West. Yet, instead of supporting this indigenous Chinese expression of Christianity in the face of a prejudicial reaction to them in the West, many Chinese officials have instead reacted to the inflammatory word "cult" used in Western literature and continued to clamp down on the group at a time when they might otherwise have relaxed restrictions.

### **The Role of the Deification Doctrine in Ongoing Oppression of the LC**

It would be inaccurate to imply that only Westerners have influenced Chinese authorities against the LC. The LC has experienced a mixed reaction from other Chinese Christians and some have strongly opposed them, including certain individuals who have influence with the government. I was informed by a high-ranking Chinese official who is an expert on the LC that probably the most controversial issue for these Christians is this very doctrine of deification.

It is past time that non-LC Christians come to terms with the LC's doctrine of deification for what it is, rather than persistently assigning features to it that actually characterize non-Christian doctrines of deification. Just because the hot button words are there does not mean that heresy or idolatry are.

As we've seen, the union with God that the LC speaks of essentially involves becoming one with God in His

communicable attributes (e.g., moral nature) and intimately “mingled” with Him through His indwelling. It involves a closer union with God than most Protestants are taught to anticipate, but not one that violates the biblical distinctions between Creator and creation.

Any Christian who thinks deeply and biblically about what the future holds for believers will have to conclude that our future conformity to the image of Christ (Rom. 8:29) will be greater than anything of which we currently can conceive (1 John 3:2). It is also quite evident biblically that Christ humbled Himself by becoming man and a servant of men so that ultimately He could exalt us and make us partakers in His own glorified human nature (Phil. 3:20–21; cf. Eph. 1:18–19; Heb. 2:10–12). It can even be stated that Scripture foresees a unity between the Father, Son, Spirit, and church that will be as intimate as possible without blurring the ontological distinctions between Creator and creation (or, as Lee and the LC put it, without our partaking in the Godhead) (John 17:11, 20–23; Eph. 5:31–32). It is hard ultimately to identify any substantial differences between the LC’s and general evangelicalism’s soteriology and eschatology.

The only real difference I can isolate is the LC’s emphasis on believers partaking in the life of God. This seems to be a similar concept to Eastern Orthodoxy’s doctrine that believers become deified by partaking in the “energies” of God. These are more mystical concepts than evangelicals are generally used to (although Nee and Lee learned them from Western Protestant inner life teachers<sup>11</sup>), but in both Eastern Orthodoxy and the LC such teaching does not mean partaking in God’s essential nature or becoming an object of worship. In the final analysis, then, the LC’s deification doctrine is fully compatible with orthodoxy.

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1 Witness Lee, *A Deeper Study of the Divine Dispensing* (Anaheim: Living Stream Ministry, 1990), 53.

2 Ibid.

3 Witness Lee, *The Christian Life* (Anaheim: Living Stream Ministry, 1994), 134.

4 Witness Lee, *Life-study of Job* (Anaheim: Living Stream Ministry, 1993), 122.

5 Witness Lee, *Life-study of 1 and 2 Samuel* (Anaheim: Living Stream Ministry, 1994), 167.

6 Witness Lee, *The Conclusion of the New Testament, Messages 79–98* (Anaheim: Living Stream Ministry, 1997), 914. See also Lee, *Divine Dispensing*, 50; Witness Lee, *The Spirit and the Body* (Anaheim: Living Stream Ministry, 1976), 83–84.

7 The Editors, “The Crystallization: Union with the Triune God,” *Affirmation and Critique* 1, 3 (July 1996): 64.

8 *A Statement concerning the Teachings of Living Stream Ministry Prepared for Fuller Theological Seminary*, January 20, 2007, 25–26. (This document is posted at <http://www.lctestimony.org/StatementOfTeachings.pdf>.)

9 It is their goal to transcend cultural divides such as East-West in order to embody the New Testament church and the “new man” spoken of in Ephesians 2:15. To a remarkable degree they succeed, but even this quest for transcendent spiritual reality is distinctively, if not uniquely, Chinese.

10 See “The Beliefs and Practices of the Local Churches,” *Contending for the Faith*, <http://www.contendingforthefaith.com/responses/booklets/beliefs.html>.

11 These influences included earlier editions of the following books: Henry Scougal, *The Life of God in the Soul of Man* (Fearn, Ross-shire, Scotland: Christian Focus Publications, 1996); Ruth Paxson, *Life on the Highest Plane* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1996); Mary E. McDonough, *God’s Plan of Redemption* (Anaheim: Living Stream Books, 1999); and T. Austin-Sparks, *What Is Man?* (Cloverdale, IN: Ministry of Life, 1939).

# **PART 4:**

## **Addressing the Open Letter's Concerns: On the Legitimacy of Evangelical Churches and Denominations**



**T**

he third concern raised in the Open Letter pertains to Witness Lee's statements concerning evangelical churches and denominations. Unlike the previous two sections, it opens and closes with brief commentary by the drafters:

We decry as inconsistent and unjustifiable the attempts by Living Stream and the "local churches" to gain membership in associations of evangelical churches and ministries while continuing to promote Witness Lee's denigrating characterizations of such churches and ministries as follows:

"The Lord is not building His church in Christendom, which is composed of the apostate Roman Catholic Church and the Protestant denominations. This prophecy is being fulfilled through the Lord's recovery, in which the building of the genuine church is being accomplished."

Witness Lee in *The New Testament Recovery Version*, note 18<sup>4</sup> (Matthew 16:18)  
(Anaheim: Living Stream Ministry, 1991), p. 99  
<http://online.recoveryversion.org/FootNotes.asp?FNtsID=639>

"The apostate church has deviated from the Lord's word and become heretical. The reformed church, though recovered to the Lord's word to some extent, has denied the Lord's name by denominating herself, taking many other names, such as Lutherans, Wesleyan, Anglican, Presbyterian, Baptist, etc. ... To deviate from the Lord's word is apostasy, and to denominate the church by taking any name other than the Lord's is spiritual fornication."

Witness Lee in *The New Testament Recovery Version*, note 8<sup>3</sup> (Revelation 3:8)  
(Anaheim: Living Stream Ministry, 1991), p. 1256  
<http://online.recoveryversion.org/FootNotes.asp?FNtsID=8759>

"I am afraid that a number of us are still under the

negative influence of Christendom. We all have to realize that today the Lord is going on and on to fully recover us and bring us fully out of Christendom."

Witness Lee, *The History of the Church and the Local Churches* (Anaheim: Living Stream Ministry, 1991), p. 132

"In every denomination, including the Roman Catholic Church, there are real, saved Christians. They are God's people belonging to the Lord. But the organization of the denominations in which they are is not of God. The denominational organizations have been utilized by Satan to set up his satanic system to destroy God's economy of the proper church life."

Witness Lee, "Message Thirty-Four" in *The Life-Study of Genesis* (Anaheim: Living Stream Ministry, 1987), Vol. 1, p. 464

"We do not care for Christianity, we do not care for Christendom, we do not care for the Roman Catholic church, and we do not care for all the denominations, because in the Bible it says that the great Babylon is fallen. This is a declaration. Christianity is fallen, Christendom is fallen, Catholicism is fallen, and all the denominations are fallen. Hallelujah!"

Witness Lee, *The Seven Spirits for the Local Churches* (Anaheim: Living Stream Ministry, 1989), p. 97

"To know God is not adequate. To know Christ is also not adequate. Even to know the church is not adequate. We must go on to know the churches which are local. If we are up-to-date in following the Lord, we will realize that today is the day of the local churches."

Ibid., p. 23

We respectfully call on the leadership of Living Stream Ministry and the "local churches" to disavow and cease to publish these and similar declarations.

As a researcher of cults for nearly forty years I certainly can appreciate the response many Christians

would have to Lee's references to "Babylon" and "Christendom," and to his even naming "Christianity" as though it is an entity separate from the LC. However, it would be a mistake with a group such as the LC—which even most critics acknowledge is composed of genuine Christians, and which affirms orthodox theology—to read into such statements all of the meanings those terms have within the kingdom of the cults. Bearing in mind the pattern we've already seen of Lee's using certain hot button words associated in our minds with heresy or cultism, but employing them in nonheretical ways, we should all the more diligently seek a contextual understanding of the LC's use of these terms. As one of the LSM leaders told me, "We are not out to proclaim that the denominations are Babylon." They state that when Lee did make use of these terms the emphasis was more often on an inward application. In other words, denominationalism and sectarianism were not supposed to be condemned *out of* elitism, judgmentalism, and divisiveness, but rather because they were understood to *produce* elitism, judgmentalism, and divisiveness, and these were attitudes LC members needed to avoid.

### Understanding Lee in His Context

In seeking such a contextual understanding of the above quotations, it first of all needs to be observed that none of them amount to heresy. Lee even allows that there are "real, saved Christians" not only within the Protestant denominations but also within the Roman Catholic Church. His statements regarding Roman Catholicism reflect the views of a great many evangelicals today.<sup>1</sup> Lee also differentiates between Roman Catholicism and Protestant denominations and reserves his harshest words for the former. He also is far from the first leader of a Protestant group to question the legitimacy of other Protestant groups, since such polemics have been virtually a Protestant tradition going back to the infancy of the Reformation, when Lutheran and Reformed leaders excoriated not only the Arminians and Anabaptists but often each other. How many Presbyterians, Lutherans, Baptists, and Reformed church members, not to mention members of more recently formed denominations, have been called on to renounce the divisive statements of their founders?

The question remains, however: do the quotations in the Open Letter provide the full picture of where the LC stands regarding other Christian traditions besides their own? To understand these statements in the larger context of LC teaching is to understand that *what Lee was denouncing was denominationalism per se*, and he did this because he believed that all the Christians in a given locality are members of the same church and should organize and meet accordingly. He believed this as a general principle, regardless of whether his movement was represented in that locality.

Please note (as this point is typically missed by

evangelicals who come across Lee's teachings on this subject): *it was not the Christians within the denominations that Lee spoke against, nor was it everything they believed, preached, and did in the name of Christ.* Indeed, Lee often commended other Christian leaders and groups for their teaching, evangelism, and good works,<sup>2</sup> and nothing he taught would preclude LC members from making common cause with other Christians in areas unrelated to the furtherance of denominationalism. Hence, it certainly presents no conflict with their basic beliefs for LSM to seek membership in various evangelical trade groups, as they have done.

### The Surprising Inclusivism of the LC

As previously noted, this stand against denominationalism may seem divisive, elitist, and exclusivistic, but its purpose is actually quite the opposite. Throughout the teachings of both Watchman Nee and Witness Lee an attitude of unity with, humility toward, and acceptance of other Christians is encouraged, and this is the attitude one normally will encounter in the "local churches." For example, Lee wrote:

Today there are many different backgrounds of the saints. Some have a Presbyterian background, some a Baptist background, and some have other kinds of background. But regardless of the background, if they are saved, they all have the same faith, for they all believe in the same Lord Jesus Christ. They all have been redeemed by the same blood; therefore, they all have the same life within. We all are one in this all-comprehensive faith.

Fellowship is based upon this oneness. We have fellowship with one another because we all have the same divine life, we all have the same Lord, and we all have the same redemption. Do not ask what kind of baptism others have had. Do not talk about all those doctrines. As long as they are saints who are not sinful according to 1 Corinthians 5, we must recognize all of them as dear brothers and sisters....

We may be quite different from other Christians in background and in many other things. They may not believe in partial rapture, and we may be for it. But regardless in which kind of rapture we believe, as long as we believe in Jesus Christ as the Son of God, who was incarnated as a man, died on the cross for our sins, and resurrected from the dead, we are all redeemed, justified, regenerated and saved. And we all have the divine life within us. Therefore, we are all of one Body. It is based upon this that we have fellowship with one another. We may speak somewhat regarding certain things, but we must not go too far, and we must not argue. We must base our fellowship only on the Lord Himself.<sup>3</sup>

In their paper prepared for Fuller Seminary the LC

makes their position quite clear:

We acknowledge that our understanding of the scriptural teaching on the practical oneness calls into question the standing of every other Christian congregation. But this view of the local church as the proper expression of the church does not in any way question or minimize the intrinsic aspect of the universal church as the Body of Christ, which encompasses all Christ's believers throughout time and throughout the world at any time. While the gathering of the believers according to the principle of "one church, one city" is the proper expression of the church, this principle in no way annuls the membership of all the believers in the one church of God in the Body of Christ; it does not define Christian salvation or determine who is or is not a genuine believer. When we declare that the local church, so defined, is the only genuine and proper expression of the one universal church, some have leapt to the conclusion that we also teach that our local churches are the only true church and, by extension, that we are the only true Christians, everyone else in Christianity being unsaved and doomed to eternal perdition. This is simply not true and not what we believe. We hold every person who confesses Christ as a genuine believer and as our genuine brother or sister regardless of how they choose to meet with other Christians. It would be counter to our own convictions concerning the practical oneness of the church if we denied that all the believers in the Christian denominations are God's genuinely redeemed people. Our stand is that Christianity today is divided, wrongly, but not that the Christians themselves are anything less than God's precious redeemed people. Further, our practice in all the local churches is to receive all the believers into fellowship with us simply because they believe in Christ. We boldly invite everyone to test us on this one matter and see if it is not so: attend any meeting of any of the local churches anywhere and see if you are refused fellowship, see if you are refused participation in our Lord's table there, see if you are not welcomed based only on your faith in Christ. We have no catechism that you must learn, no creed that you must declare, no practice that you must adopt, no natural characteristic that you must possess. You must only be able to declare that Christ is God come in the flesh and is the very God who saved you from your sins through His death on the cross and through His resurrection from the dead. That alone makes you a member of the church in the city where you live and qualifies you to participate fully in the fellowship of the local church in that city. Contrary to what others have said about us, in vision and in practice we are not exclusive at all but include all Christ's believers in our estimation of who they are in Christ and in how we practically receive them.<sup>4</sup>

In their own response to the Open Letter, the LC frankly acknowledge that their members have sometimes not behaved consistently with these principles, but they stress that such behavior was not condoned by Lee. Indeed, in our

dialogue LC leaders assured us that Lee often scolded and corrected them when members of the "local churches" behaved in a sectarian manner toward Christians outside their movement—"for about six months one time"!

While our doors and hearts are open to all genuine believers, we understand that many Christians are content and satisfied in their denominational congregations. Such choices belong in the realm of individual conscience. As Paul writes in Romans 14, in these matters we feel to "let each be fully persuaded in his own mind" (v. 5). Notwithstanding our earnest efforts at orthopraxy, we recognize the tendency of some immature ones, even among us, to overstep in their zeal and to try to bring others into their experiences. Perhaps in an effort to preempt this tendency, Witness Lee made the following emphatic points in a series of messages on having a proper attitude toward other Christians:

We stand before the Lord whom we serve, and we have no intention of drawing anyone to be with us...I have said, "You can meet wherever you choose as long as it is beneficial to you"...I especially beseech the brothers never to say to anyone, "It is best that you come here to meet with us." (*Three Aspects of the Church: The Course of the Church*, 81)

We should not reject Christians from other Christian groups, but we do not need to seek them out. I do not believe that the Lord wants us to seek out believers from other Christian groups. I believe that the Lord wants us to take the gospel to every place and to minister life to His many children. The Lord wants a situation among us that can influence His children.

Where people meet and how they serve the Lord are entirely between them and the Lord; we cannot intervene in these things. In this age we must minister life to others. When people contact us, they should touch something in us that is unforgettable. The way they take or where they meet does not matter; we should not consider that our meetings are better than those in Christianity or that our meetings have the greatest number of people. (*Ibid.*, 217-218)<sup>5</sup>

### **Return of the Double Standard**

It's true that the LC's view has negative implications for all of us who are members of denominational churches; indeed, for anyone who is not meeting on the local ground. But so what? Many evangelical traditions hold beliefs that are unflattering to those outside their tradition. Classical Pentecostals believe that those who do not speak in tongues have not been baptized in the Holy Spirit. On the other hand, cessationists deny that Pentecostals and charismatics are genuinely receiving the gifts of the Holy Spirit and speculate that they are rather experiencing phenomena generated by their own minds or even by demons. Some Calvinists do not consider the gospel preached by

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name of Christ.**

Arminians to be the true gospel and some Arminians do not consider the God believed in by Calvinists to be the true God. Dispensationalists believe that covenant theologians misunderstand much of the Old Testament and therefore deny a central aspect of God's redemption plan: His covenant with the physical nation of Israel. Covenant Christians likewise believe that dispensationalists misunderstand much of the Old Testament and therefore are holding on to the Old Covenant in ways that compromise the New.

No doubt many of the drafters and signers of the Open Letter are on one or the other side of these and other divides in the body of Christ and take a dim view of some of the beliefs of some of the other signers. Yet in all of these cases these individuals are able to take a mature view of their differences, are not offended by the rejection of some of their beliefs and practices by other Christians, and are still able to come together with such Christians, accentuate the essential doctrines they hold in common, and join common cause for the Kingdom of God wherever they can, whether it is through membership in the Evangelical Theological Society, Evangelical Ministries to New Religions, or some other transdenominational association of believers.

How then, does the situation differ with Living Stream Ministry? As we've seen, LSM accepts the members of associations such as the ECPA and the CBA as Christians

and does not deny that they do legitimate works for Christ. Note that *it is LSM, a publishing entity, and not the "local churches," that has joined Christian associations.* Contrary to what the Open Letter stresses as one of its main points, the "local churches" are *not* members of any "associations of evangelical churches." They recognize that such membership would present a conflict both for them and for the association members.

It seems to me that it is the signers of the Open Letter who have adamantly rejected the legitimacy of the LC and LSM's profession of orthodox Christian faith on issues such as the Trinity and the deification of believers. It is not the LC and LSM who have rejected the legitimacy of the signers' orthodox profession. All that the LC and the LSM have rejected is the organizational basis and structure of denominationalism. And this rejection goes hand in hand with what the LC believes to be perhaps the greatest contribution their movement has to make to the larger body of Christ: the recovery of the "local ground" as the biblical basis for organizing a church.

Were the words Lee used to reject denominationalism harsh? Yes, and I would add regrettable. By employing such loaded terminology as "Babylon," "spiritual fornication," and "satanic system," he made it easier for people wrongly to conclude that he was rejecting everything about their Christian experience, and he repelled people he might other-

wise have drawn to his teachings on the New Testament church. Nonetheless, the LC could not renounce Lee's statements as the Open Letter requests without also implying that they have changed their underlying belief in the local ground, and such a change in belief has not occurred. It is therefore, once again, both unreasonable and unrealistic to call on them to renounce these statements by their late leader.

- 
- 1 We know this from experience at CRI. Any time we publish what we consider to be a nuanced article, which does not at every point condemn Catholicism in the strongest possible terms, we hear from them!
  - 2 Examples are numerous, including commendations of Martin Luther, John and Charles Wesley, George Whitefield, Jonathan Edwards, the Plymouth Brethren, Charles Spurgeon, G. Campbell Morgan, A. J. Gordon, Andrew Murray, D. L. Moody, and special praise for Hudson Taylor and the China Inland Mission and also for Billy Graham. (See Witness Lee, *Elder's Training, Book 4: Other Crucial Matters concerning the Practice of the Lord's Recovery* [Anaheim: Living Stream Ministry, 1985], 22–23; Witness Lee, *Elder's Training, Book 5: Fellowship concerning the Lord's Up-to-Date Move* [Anaheim: Living Stream Ministry, 1985], 19–20; and Witness Lee, *Elder's Training, Book 7: One Accord for the Lord's Move* [Anaheim: Living Stream Ministry, 1986], 29.)
  - 3 Witness Lee, *The Practical Expression of the Church* (Anaheim: Living Stream Ministry, 1970), 97–98.
  - 4 *A Statement Concerning the Teachings of Living Stream Ministry Prepared for Fuller Theological Seminary*, January 20, 2007, 25. (This document is posted at <http://www.lctestimony.org/StatementOfTeachings.pdf>.)
  - 5 Living Stream Ministry, "A Longer Response to 'An Open Letter to the Leadership of Living Stream Ministry and the 'Local Churches,'" 27, <http://lctestimony.org/LongerResponse.html>.

# **PART 5:**

## **Addressing the Open Letter's Concerns: On Lawsuits with Evangelical Christians**



**T**

he Open Letter's final request of the LC and LSM leadership pertains to their history of resorting to litigation to clear themselves of charges made against them in evangelical countercult books. The following three paragraphs include the entire text of this request and bring the Open Letter to a close:

If the leadership of Living Stream Ministry and the "local churches" regard evangelical Christians as fellow believers, we request that they publicly renounce the use of lawsuits and the threat of lawsuits against evangelical Christians to answer criticisms or resolve conflicts. The New Testament strongly discourages the use of lawsuits to settle disputes among Christians (see 1 Corinthians 6:1-8).

If the leadership of Living Stream Ministry and the "local churches" do not regard evangelical Christian churches, organizations, and ministries as legitimate Christian entities, we ask that they publicly resign their membership in all associations of evangelical churches and ministries.

In either case, we respectfully request that the leadership of Living Stream Ministry and the "local churches" discontinue their practice of using litigation and threatened litigation to answer criticisms or settle disputes with Christian organizations and individuals.

The importance of this final section needs to be clearly understood. As I stated previously, I believe that, in addition to the mere fact that they are different, the LC's initially contentious and ultimately litigious response to their critics has generated such animus that it helps explain the lack of fairness and careful scholarship that an otherwise able group of scholars and researchers have demonstrated in the three preceding sections of the Open Letter. Since I have been an active member of the countercult community during this entire period, have interacted broadly with other members regarding this matter, and for decades was of one mind with those members about the LC, I believe I know whereof I speak.

We who are members of the evangelical countercult and apologetics communities have responded with righteous indignation to the LC's attempts to "muzzle our constitutional rights to freedom of religion and speech," but we have been shamefully slow to respond to documentable instances of defamation committed in our own ranks. Again, I know this from experience, and it is not something I am proud of.

### ***The God-Men***

In 1985, J. Gordon Melton, founder of the Institute for the Study of American Religion, published *An Open Letter concerning the Local Church, Witness Lee and The God-Men Controversy*. Melton, who previously had been an advocate of the Spiritual Counterfeits Project and was still not ready to write it off, began the open letter portion of his booklet by reporting:

During the past year, I, like many of you have become concerned about the lawsuit between the Local Church led by Witness Lee and the Spiritual Counterfeits Project (SCP), Neil T. Duddy and the publisher of their book, *The God-Men*. I was at first concerned that a Christian body, i.e., the Local Church, would take fellow Christians to court, until I discovered that the leaders in the Church had exhausted all less severe means to have the book withdrawn and its errors acknowledged.

Recently, I was asked by the Local Church to begin a more rigorous investigation of its life and belief than I had been able to in previous years while working on my *Encyclopedia of American Religions*. I commenced that investigation in 1984, and some of the findings are embodied in the enclosed paper which I offer for your consideration.

Part of my study of the Local Church involved the reading of most of the published writings of Witness Lee and the lengthy depositions of Neil T. Duddy and Brooks Alexander (of SCP). The experience proved among the more painful of my Christian life. As I began to check the quotes of Witness Lee used in Duddy's book, I found

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that *The God-Men* had consistently taken sentences from Lee's writings and, by placing them in a foreign context, made them to say just the opposite of what Lee intended. This was done while ignoring the plain teachings and affirmations concerning the great truths of the Christian faith found throughout Lee's writings. I also took note of the ludicrous attempt to equate the Local Church's practice of pray-reading with the use of mantras in Eastern religions. They bear no resemblance whatsoever.

As I read the depositions, especially that of Duddy, I was appalled to discover the number of substantive and libelous charges made against Lee in *The God-Men* which were based entirely upon the unconfirmed account of but a single hostile ex-member. Time and again, taking the word of a former member, Duddy did not seek any independent verification of alleged incidents before making serious charges of financial mismanagement, psychological disturbances among Local Church members, and illegal acts by the Local Church attempting to harass former members.

Having been a supporter of SCP, especially of its attempt to provide the Christian community with quality material on alternative religions, I was genuinely shaken as my research proceeded. I was concerned that such a parody on the life of a group of fellow Christians had

been written, that it had been sponsored by such an organization as SCP, and then published by such a reputable publisher as InterVarsity Press. I was more shaken, however, by the obvious implications of the ethics involved in the production of such a book. The mistakes and misrepresentations in the book are so frequent and so consistent that it strains credulity to suggest that *The God-Men* is merely the product of poor scholarship.

It was my unhappy task to have to present these findings to the court in Oakland, California, on May 28 during the trial against Duddy and the German publisher.<sup>1</sup>

These were staggering claims. SCP was a highly respected countercult organization at the time, considered by many of us to be a model of careful research and thoughtful critique of new religious movements. If Melton could document his allegations it should have sent shock waves through the entire countercult community and compelled us to reexamine our methods. It would have been even more devastating in this case than subsequent biased treatments of the LC in the evangelical press, because up to the publishing of *The God-Men* (as well as *The Mind Benders*) the LC had not sued anyone. It would not have been their litigiousness that fueled the bad will against them. It would have had to come down

merely to the fact that they were different and disagreeable. (Disagreeable, that is, when it came to criticisms of their movement—i.e., they didn't respond graciously enough to suit us when we misrepresented their theology, maligned their characters, and falsely accused them of being a cult or aberrant Christian group! Herein lies most visibly the moral inconsistency of the countercult movement's longstanding complaint against the LC.)

In fact, Melton did document his claims; not exhaustively, but sufficiently to establish their veracity. He convincingly exonerated Lee of the following charges made against him in *The God-Men*: "(1) denying propositional revelation, (2) disdaining any necessity in the keeping of the moral law (specifically the Ten Commandments) and, in effect, leading people away from biblical ethics, and (3) depreciating thinking, study, and the role of the mind in reading the Bible. And [sic] (4) in the place of biblical authority, Lee has placed himself as a [sic] oracle of new revelation."<sup>2</sup> The reader can access Melton's booklet online and see if this is not so.<sup>3</sup>

How much affect did Melton's booklet have on the countercult community's perception of SCP and the LC? I was not aware of it making any difference at all. I recall that I looked at it briefly when I received it, but because Melton had come to the defense of cults in the past, because SCP had such a respectable track record, and because CRI by this time had a long and contentious history with the LC, I found it hard to believe the evidence that was before my eyes and so I mentally filed it conveniently away under the category "J. Gordon Melton—Cult Apologist." "Surely, Melton has it wrong," I thought. "If only I had the time to follow up on this myself."

My decision not to look further into the matter constituted willful ignorance. Furthermore, since I was in a position to influence CRI's position on the LC and to decide what we would or would not publish on them, I shared in the culpability of other countercult ministries and publishers.

Had I been more conscientious I could have read Judge Leo G. Seyranian's statement of decision in the *God-Men* case. I have read it more recently, and you can read it too, since it is accessible online.<sup>4</sup> It is so completely damning to SCP that it boggles the mind that anyone could read it and still support the veracity of *The God-Men*. Reading this decision in and of itself should be sufficient to cause a paradigm shift for anyone in the countercult community who has naively believed SCP's account of the trial, which is routinely repeated in countercult circles.<sup>5</sup> In evaluating the evidence, Judge Seyranian wrote:

The plaintiffs indicated at the outset of this trial and hearing that they intended to establish "actual malice" and the Court is satisfied that they have done so. The evidence indicated that in almost all instances where the defendants purported to quote from Witness Lee's

statements they did in fact distort and take out of context such statements by Witness Lee in order to arrive at a predetermined result or conclusion....In addition, the evidence has established that the defendants also distorted the sociological model of religious conversion by Lofland and Stark in order to attempt to fabricate a theory of deceptive recruitment by Local Church leaders and members allegedly based upon the plaintiff Witness Lee's teachings. The testimony of Dr. Rodney Stark, one of the model's authors, convinces the Court that the distortion was deliberate and intentional....Furthermore, the deposition testimony of Duddy, Alexander, Buckley and Sire confirm that the defamatory statements were published in some instances knowing they were false and in other instances with a reckless disregard of the truth or falsity thereof.

....

The Court agrees with the statement of the witness Dr. Rodney Stark when he stated:

"If all that the defendants were to do was write a book even though real nasty to Witness Lee's theology, we wouldn't be here today because that is fair in our American Society. You can do that. But the second you start talking...naming names and events, discrediting events, sexual hanky-panky, financial hanky-panky, or indeed getting to a certain point of quoting a man's theological statements diametrically opposed to what the man is saying, then I think we have...We are not talking about religion, we are talking about truth, we are talking about libel, we are talking about fairness, we are talking about a whole constellation of things." (Tr. pp. 171-172)

The court summed up the damaging allegations made against the LC in *The God-Men* as follows:

All of the false statements set forth above were defamatory in that they convey to the readers that the plaintiffs Witness Lee and William Freeman are leaders of a "cult," and the Church in Anaheim is such a "cult". The false statements also convey to the readers that plaintiffs are engaged in a program of deceptive recruiting practices that prey upon weak and vulnerable people in order to bring them under the plaintiffs' total subjugation; that plaintiffs control every area of Local Church members' lives through the use of fear and other various techniques of mental manipulation and social isolation.

The statements also convey to the readers that plaintiffs are teaching principles that allow, encourage, or condone immoral conduct; also, that plaintiffs are

exploiting these people financially for plaintiffs' own gain and further that those who leave are persecuted and threatened with disaster.<sup>6</sup>

It has been commonly repeated in the countercult community that the LC maliciously dealt SCP a blow that SCP never fully recovered from. No, to be fair to the LC, SCP dealt a debilitating blow to itself by publishing a defamatory book. Not every countercult ministry or apologist that shared SCP's theological conclusions regarding the LC was completely supportive of *The God-Men*. For example, Walter Martin, the Passantinos, and I were unaware of any support for the psychological, sociological, and criminal charges made against the LC in *The God-Men* and we were uncomfortable generally with nontheological approaches to the cults (hence the strictly theological approach to the LC we took in our own publications<sup>7</sup>). But because we held *theological* conclusions close to those of SCP, we suspended our disbelief regarding their other charges and supported them in the matter of the lawsuit, suppressing truth for the sake of a common cause and camaraderie among colleagues, and thus partaking in their sin against the LC. Furthermore, we were no less guilty of falsely labeling as heretics true brothers and sisters in Christ.

### ***The Encyclopedia of Cults and New Religions (ECNR)***

When I first heard about the LC lawsuit of Harvest House, Ankerberg, and Weldon, the LC had not yet approached us for dialogue and I, like virtually everyone else in the countercult community, thought: "Here we go again after all these years. It looks like Witness Lee's death hasn't changed anything. The LC are still trying to silence their critics."

I read the disputed sections in *ECNR*—the introduction, appendix, and the chapter on the LC—expecting to find some vindication for my longtime friend and colleague John Weldon. However, neither the loyalty generated by our many years of collaboration, nor the deep respect I held for him as a Christian and researcher, nor the antipathy I felt just as strongly at that moment as I ever had for the LC, could blind me to the fact that the LC had a legitimate grievance with the book. Perhaps no one who has read these sections of *ECNR* has more experience than I in evaluating the worthiness of manuscripts on cults and new religions for publication, and this manuscript would have never made it into the pages of the CHRISTIAN RESEARCH JOURNAL without a thorough rewrite.

I noted throughout the introduction a lack of care in the definition of terms and the categorization of groups that was at the least imprecise, inconsistent, and unfair, and that could very well be construed as libelous. The authors wander all over the theological and sociological landscapes in search of a definition of "cult," never finding one they are completely happy with but never entirely rejecting one either. They wind up with an extremely broad definition based on disparate classification models (biblical, religious, behavioral, and sociological) that

changes somewhat from one time they employ it to the next. In such a wide and elastic definitional net one is bound to catch groups that do not fit all of the descriptions, and they will predictably and understandably resent being associated with groups that they themselves abhor.

The authors acknowledge that some groups should be classified as aberrational Christian groups rather than as cults because they do not espouse full-blown heresy, and they mention Oneness Pentecostalism as a possible example of this (something we at CRI would not agree to).<sup>8</sup> Nonetheless, they could not find it within their criteria to classify the LC—which even critics generally recognize do not embrace the full-blown modalism that Oneness groups hold—in this less-malignant category. Their classifications are therefore shown to be at best arbitrary and at worst malicious, arising out of something other than the demands of their own defined criteria.

Contrary to what is commonly repeated in the countercult community,<sup>9</sup> the LC's complaint in this lawsuit—and this was also true with the two previous ones—was never that they were called a cult on theological grounds. Their complaint was rather that the book (1) identifies the LC as a cult, (2) defines a cult as a religious group claiming compatibility with Christianity "whose doctrines contradict those of historic Christianity and whose practices and ethical standards violate those of biblical Christianity" (emphasis added),<sup>10</sup> and (3) includes abhorrent and even criminal behavior as examples of what those ethical violations might be.

A section in the book particularly grievous to the LC is the introduction's twelve-point description of the common characteristics of a cult.<sup>11</sup> In addition to rank heresy, "systematic misinterpretation of the Bible," occultism, a rejection of reason, and other theological and spiritual offenses, the list of cult characteristics includes:

- 1 "a destructive authoritarianism and sanctions-oriented mentality";
- 1 "members are often subject to psychological, physical and spiritual harm through cult dynamics that reject biblical, ethical and pastoral standards. Related to this, there is often distortion of the biblical view of human sexuality or the degradation or perversion of sexuality";
- 1 "paranoid or persecution conscious, and they may be oppositional or alienated from the culture, having beliefs, values and practices opposed to those in the dominant culture"; and
- 1 intimidation or deception of both members and outsiders, often including fraud.

The defense that Harvest House, Ankerberg, and Weldon maintained, which was ultimately accepted by the Texas Appellate Court, was first that nowhere in the book are the specific immoral and criminal behaviors that the LC find so offensive explicitly attributed to the LC. The chapter on them is very brief and doesn't go into those areas. Second, certain

qualifications and clarifications are made in the book that allow for the fact that these reprehensible traits are not equally and universally shared by cults. For example, when they introduce their twelve characteristics of cults, Ankerberg and Weldon state: “Not all groups have all the characteristics and not all groups have every characteristic in equal measure...”<sup>12</sup> Finally and most importantly, the defense was made by the defendants and granted by the court that, at bottom, the LC was objecting to being called a cult, but since ECNR “centers on doctrinal and apologetic issues of theology and apologetics” and primarily uses the term *cult* in that sense, the court has no business ruling on theological matters.

Whether a court agreed to it or not, this reasoning is simply false. Every definition that ECNR offers for “cult” includes practices as well as beliefs. As we’ve seen, those practices are said to violate biblical standards of ethics, and the specific examples that the book provides to illustrate what it means by this include all the despicable and criminal behaviors the LC objected to being associated with. The implication of this ruling is that normally actionable defamation can be committed with impunity as long as the defamation is packed into the use of a religious term.

As the LC was appealing their case to the Texas Supreme Court, CRI and Answers in Action issued a joint statement that said in part:

The *Encyclopedia of Cults and New Religions (ECNR)* has gone *outside* the bounds of both responsible theological analysis and responsible public accusation by using the term cult as a *pretext* for otherwise legally libelous language. If you look at the “LIBEL” section of the filing, you will see that the objectionable characteristics included “physical harm,” “fraud or deception concerning fundraising and financial costs,” “drug smuggling and other criminal activity, including murder,” “denied their followers medical access,” “encouraged prostitution,” “sometimes raped women,” “molested children,” “beaten their disciples,” “human sacrifice,” and “child sacrifice”—*none* of these criminal and abhorrent acts are tied inexorably by ECNR to religious or theological contexts....<sup>13</sup>

What about the previously mentioned qualifications and clarifications that Ankerberg and Weldon made? First, people who believe these qualifications allow that the LC may be innocent of *all* the criminal and contemptible behaviors mentioned in the book simply have not looked at the wording carefully enough: “*Not all* groups have *all* the characteristics and *not all* groups have *every* characteristic in *equal measure*...” (emphases added). It is not enough to reply that the book does not explicitly lay any one abhorrent behavior at the door of the LC if it does in fact clearly indicate that an unspecified percentage of specified bad behaviors do belong

there. We may not know that the LC for a fact is guilty of pedophilia, kidnapping, destroying families, and so forth, but we do know from the book that they may be guilty of any one of them and are guilty of some such behaviors. Imprecise allegations can still result in character assassination and should therefore still be considered defamatory. The Christian public may look at you and not know whether you’re guilty of homicide, rape, or theft, but if a reputable Christian publisher assures them that you’re guilty of at least one of these crimes, then your reputation is still injured.

Furthermore, the half-hearted qualification that “not all cults are *equally* culpable when it comes to unsavory teachings and practices but enough are” (emphasis added)<sup>14</sup> does not exonerate any of the groups in the encyclopedia of being culpable for unsavory practices. It only allows that an *unspecified* number of them are not *equally* culpable with the more extreme offenders. Such vague qualifications not only do not protect some groups so labeled, they thoroughly slander all labeled groups. For example, if someone were to tell you that one of the twelve elders in your church was a pedophile who had escaped conviction and incarceration on a technicality, it might actually be the case that your child would be safe with eleven of the twelve elders. But you, as a parent who does not know which one is guilty, would be irresponsible if you left your child in the care of *any* of the twelve elders. Eleven elders have been slandered while only one elder is guilty. This is what ECNR has done to the LC.

Finally, it seems worth noting that the authors excluded “criminal cults” from their twelve-point definition of a cult.<sup>15</sup> This means that their “kinder, gentler” definition of a cult is the one they give in the book; that is, this is as far as they were really willing to go in the way of concession and qualification.

Members of the countercult community who take comfort in, or feel vindicated by, the Texas Appellate Court’s decision can only rightfully do so if they were equally discomfited, and engaged in commensurate soul searching and examining of their own methods, after the *Mind Benders* retraction and the *God-Men* ruling. Two out of three court cases vindicated the LC of the charges against them, and the one that didn’t based its ruling on a dubious interpretation of the law, not on the basis that the allegations made against the LC were actually true. In other words, even in the ECNR case the defendants admitted under oath that they had no basis for associating the LC with *any* of the contemptible and criminal behaviors they included in their definition of *cult*. In effect, they simply succeeded at arguing that they should be free to bear false witness (i.e., to break the Ninth Commandment) as long as they do so in the context of defining a group as a cult. In light of Jesus’ mandate that His followers be the light of the world, it is hardly a cause for celebration when they convince a worldly court to hold them to a lower standard than it holds the world.

### Why Is the LC So “Touchy”?

The question should still be addressed: why is the LC so “touchy” about being the subject of a one-and-one-half-page chapter in a book, especially when the chapter does not specifically accuse them of the detestable behaviors and practices that are only spoken of more generally elsewhere in the book? Why go to the trouble and expense of a lawsuit, especially when Scripture exhorts Christians not to take each other to court (1 Cor. 6:1–8)? That is a reasonable question, one that I was still asking myself well after we entered into dialogue with the LC.

After my tour of China, however, I understood. I shared meals with Christian brothers who served prison terms after authorities were emboldened to take action against them by *ECNR* and the Appeals Court’s ruling. For Christians in America, being labeled a cult member may only result in humiliation; for Christians in Asia, it can result in persecution to an extent we never have to worry about here.

The LC’s ability to carry on their mission in their home country is radically affected by whether the government considers them a socially disruptive cult or a socially responsible religion. The status of the LC is still very much in the air and they have both advocates and detractors in high places. And, as previously mentioned, Hank and I were assured by some of these government officials that when the Western press publishes on any sect operating in China, the government pays close attention and it definitely can affect their policy. The LC simply cannot afford to sit back passively and allow themselves to be labeled a sociological cult in the Western press.

None of this—including Hank’s filing an amicus brief on behalf of the LC<sup>16</sup>—should be taken to mean that CRI supported the LC’s lawsuit against Harvest House, Ankerberg, and Weldon. The truth is that we thought it was a mistake, we sought to facilitate understanding and dialogue between the parties, and we consistently advised the LC against it. What all of this *should* be taken to mean, however, is that we believe there are mitigating circumstances behind the LC’s legal actions that should evoke greater understanding and willingness to extend grace than the countercult community has thus far demonstrated.

Not only is there the situation in Asia to consider, but also the fact that the LC always took legal action as a last resort when the parties absolutely refused to meet with them as Christian brothers. Indeed, Harvest House actually sued the LC first and accused the LC of “harassing” them with their continued appeals to meet and discuss their differences. This is not just the LC’s version of what happened: the entire communication between the two parties is documented in correspondence, and we possess copies of all of it.

### A Long History of Litigious Behavior?

The LC therefore has only brought suit against Christians three times, and in each case the circumstances were such that

some appreciation for the dilemma the LC faced is warranted. I know, however, that if I stop here many people in the countercult community will feel that I have not fully addressed the issue. After the *CHRISTIAN RESEARCH JOURNAL* ran a news piece on the LC in 2007,<sup>17</sup> my old friend and colleague Eric Pement wrote a letter to the editor in which he raised the following concern:

The article suggests that the “local churches” gained an undeserved reputation for litigation due to just two or three lawsuits over a 40-year span. It is common knowledge among countercult ministries—including CRI and Answers in Action—that the “local churches” often threatened litigation against Christians who criticized them. Since many nonprofit ministries run with limited budgets, these ministries usually backed down, issued retractions, or replaced the offending materials without a court action technically being filed. In a few cases, the critics ignored the threats or prevailed in hearings.

Legal action was threatened against Christian Literature Crusade in 1973 over the book *The Ecclesiology of Watchman Nee and Witness Lee*; against CRI in 1977; against Christian Herald Books in 1979 over *The Lure of the Cults*; against Regal Books in 1979; against Moody Bible Institute, against Salem Kirban, and against *Eternity* magazine, all in 1980; against InterVarsity Press in 1983; against Tyndale Press in 1985; against Moody Press in 1991; against [the late] Jim Moran and Light of Truth Ministries in 1995, 2000, and 2001; against Bereans Apologetics Research Ministry in 2002; and against Daniel Azuma in 2003.

Most of the information above comes from an article published by the Spiritual Counterfeits Project in 1983 (driven into bankruptcy by litigation expenses from the “local churches” from 1980 to 1985) and an article published by Jim Moran in 2003. Moran’s copyrights are now owned by The Church in Fullerton, which forbids reprinting his article.

I doubt that the Mormons and the Jehovah’s Witnesses *combined* have issued as many lawsuits and threats of lawsuits against evangelical Christian publishers.

In response to Pement, I know for a fact that he is wrong about the LC threatening legal action against CRI in 1977 (or in any other year for that matter). I also am familiar with several of the other situations he recounts, and my recollection does not agree with the information he is using. However, I was unable to address all of the situations he referenced and so I turned to the LC for their account of this history. They submitted to me a twenty-four page (plus enclosures) detailed and documented response to Pement’s allegations that fully satisfied me in the matter. They have not yet decided whether to make their reply public and, if they do, they would want to do further work on it, but they did give me permission to reproduce the following portions. I believe

the following excerpts helpfully sum up the more detailed information contained in the document and put the allegation of “a history of litigiousness” into perspective:

We want to emphasize that the controlling principles of all our responses to adverse criticism over the last thirty years have been the same in every case:

1. We always first tried to take the way of going to our Christian brothers to reconcile our differences through peaceful fellowship as the Bible instructs in Matthew 18:15-20 and 2 Timothy 2:25-26. In some cases we vainly sought such Christian fellowship for a year or more before any other action was taken.
2. If only doctrinal differences were expressed, writing and fellowship, not litigation, were the only appropriate options.
3. The accusation of being a “cult” or of possessing the horrendous practices or the despicable sociological attributes that became the hallmark of cults as they were defined post 1970 is clearly outside the realm of doctrinal disputes. This type of accusation creates such fear that it is impossible to erase its effect through writing or speaking. The strong prejudice engendered by the “cult” label caused fellow believers to turn away from us and deny us a fair hearing. In the three extreme situations when we were forced to take the way of litigation to address such charges, many evangelicals assailed us for unchristian behavior, yet they defended those who deliberately gave false witness in an effort to destroy their fellow believers. It is ironic that as we were rejected as being outside the faith, we were castigated for not dealing with these matters within the household of faith. The fact is that when such accusations are made with deliberate falsity, they are properly the subject of legal recourse. Seeing no other alternative, we sought redress from secular authorities with the hope of receiving more righteous consideration than we received from the Christian publishers and authors who rebuffed our attempts at Christian fellowship.
4. We did go to talk with authors and publishers who had republished (sometimes verbatim) the original falsehoods of the earlier publications. Our intention was to appeal to their conscience, not to threaten litigation. This is overwhelmingly borne out in the cases in this present study. The fact that the local churches had been successful in proving the falsehood in both of the original books that many of them relied upon may have raised a fear of litigation in their mind.

We do not claim to be perfect, but our principle was not to threaten but to correct a wrong understanding. As this documented study demonstrates, for others to report those conversations as outright threats by us is simply false. Pement, who raised this issue, should recall that when his organization, JPUSA, published a demeaning and false tract about the local churches,<sup>18</sup> two members

(including one of the authors of this work) representing the local churches traveled to Chicago and attempted to dialogue with them. In that dialogue, no conclusion was reached, no threat of litigation was made, and their tract was not withdrawn. How does Pement account for omitting this incident in his account of our dealings with our critics? How did Pement reconcile his own experience with us with the accusations he has repeated without any personal knowledge?

When we finally did appeal to the courts for relief concerning the two earlier books, we did not do so lightly or without cause. In this country, the ministry, the churches and many individual members suffered greatly because of the false accusations contained in *God-Men* and *Mindbenders*, accusations that were repeated in at least three hundred other books, articles and broadcasts (*God-Men* was even translated into Chinese and circulated in China). The growth of the churches was stopped and the acceptance of Brother Lee’s ministry was severely damaged. Families suffered estrangement, divorces were caused, jobs were lost, some members were physically assaulted, our children were confronted with the “cult” charge, and many members were exposed to embarrassment and humiliation because of those two books. But the suffering in the United States pales in comparison to what the local churches and individuals suffered because of the “cult” accusation in countries where freedom of religion was not protected. In those places, members suffered arrest, imprisonment and worse. How could we not act? Because of these factors we were forced [to] file lawsuits in the United States when no other avenue was open to us. This tragic history was also before us when the decision was made to pursue the more recent litigation against Harvest House and its authors. Some of the same things were beginning to happen again as a result of their book. We could not tolerate the damage that would come to the churches and individuals in the countries alluded to above without acting to prevent it.

....

Rather than promoting these unfounded comparisons, it might be more appropriate for Pement and others making such accusations to ask how many lawsuits Christian publishers have filed against other Christians. The answer is that many major Evangelical publishers have filed numerous lawsuits to recover financial losses from other Christian and secular parties. This information is publicly available to those who would look for it. Publishers’ lawsuits have been mostly over collecting bad debts from believers, matters that fall clearly under the proscription of 1 Corinthians 6. Certainly there must have been many threats of litigation that preceded the actual filing of these suits. Does no one see the hypocrisy in condemning the three lawsuits of one Christian group while turning a blind eye to the more numerous actions of mainline Christian publishers? Harvest House has in fact

engaged in more litigation against fellow Christians than we have. Has anyone ever criticized Harvest House for suing Christian bookstore owners? Furthermore, Harvest House sued us while we were asking them to meet with us. Has anyone ever publicly criticized them for initiating the use of litigation in our dispute?<sup>19</sup>

To sum up: what the countercult community perceives to be litigious behavior on the part of the LC can in most cases be documented to be merely an effort to meet with and appeal to countercult writers and publishers to correct false allegations that they have published against a Christian group. The countercult community also needs to look long and hard at the inconsistency of its strong condemnation and bitter resentment of the LC for taking legal action against Christians to protect the freedom, ministries, and reputations of its people vis-à-vis the countercult communities' seeming indifference about some of its own publishers taking legal action against Christians to protect their financial interests, for these latter cases more closely parallel the kinds of situations Paul addressed in 1 Corinthians 6:1–8 (see, e.g., v. 7).

To preserve his freedom, ministry, and reputation, Paul “appealed to Caesar.” This is how the LC view and justify their last-resort decisions to take legal action three times over the past thirty years. Even if we don’t agree with them, we need the humility to recognize that we have never had to make such hard decisions—with so many consequences for devout Christians’ lives—as these brothers in Christ have had to face.

18 [The following footnote belongs to the LC response to Pement and appears in their document at the point noted in my quotation here.] “Cult of the Month: The Local Church” published in 1975 by JPUSA both as a “Cornerstone Magazine” article by Eric Pement and as a pamphlet. It has been republished by others on the Internet from time to time. Pamphlet is on file in our office.

19 Defense and Confirmation Project, “The Facts That Belie Charges of ‘Litigiousness by the Local Churches to Silence and Control What Is Written about Them,’” unpublished manuscript, 2008, 2–3, 23.

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1 J. Gordon Melton, *An Open Letter concerning the Local Church, Witness Lee and The God-Men Controversy* (Santa Barbara, CA: The Institute for the Study of American Religion, 1985), 1–3.

2 *Ibid.*, 14.

3 <http://www.contendingforthefaith.com/libel-litigations/god-men/OpenLtr/open.html>.

4 <http://www.contendingforthefaith.com/libel-litigations/god-men/decision/completeText.html>.

5 See, e.g., <http://www.apologeticsindex.org/363-spiritual-counterfeits-project>.

6 “Statement of Decision—Lee v. Duddy re: The God-Men by Neil Duddy and the SCP,” filed June 27, 1985, in the Superior Court of the State of California in and for the County of Alameda, Leon Seyranian, Judge of the Superior Court, 28, 31. (<http://www.contending-forthefaith.com/libel-litigations/god-men/decision/completeText.html>.)

7 See, e.g., Walter Martin, gen. ed., with Gretchen Passantino and the Research Staff of the Christian Research Institute, *The New Cults* (Santa Ana, CA: Vision House, 1980), appendix.

8 John Ankerberg and John Weldon, *Encyclopedia of Cults and New Religions* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House Publishers, 1999), XXII. In their entry on Oneness Pentecostalism (OP), the authors make a case for classifying OP as a cult, “if not always in every way in every church” (375). But this indecisiveness about the status of OP merely provides another example of their difficulty at settling on definitions for the descriptive categories they use and at consistently placing groups in those categories.

9 See, e.g., Ken Walker, “Former Local Church Critics Change Stance,” *Charisma*, June 2009, 20, where Kurt Van Gorden is quoted as saying, “John Weldon should be able to call any group a cult when it fits his theological definition.”

10 Ankerberg and Weldon, XXII.

11 *Ibid.*, XXIII–XXIV.

12 *Ibid.*, XXIII.

13 “Statement from Christian Research Institute and Answers in Action: Re: Our Amicus Filings on Behalf of the Local Churches,” Position Statement: PSL001, 1–2.

14 Ankerberg and Weldon, XXVI.

15 *Ibid.*, XXIII.

16 Hank filed this brief first, because people who had become friends asked him for his help; second, because he deeply believed what he stated in the brief, that they are not a cult; and third and most importantly, because filing the brief might possibly help curtail persecution of the LC in Asia.

17 Douglas LeBlanc, “Local Churches Win Some Allies among Former Critics,” *Christian Research Journal* 30, 3 (2007): 6–8, 44 (<http://www.equip.org/articles/local-church-wins-some-allies-among-former-critics>).

# The Conclusion of the Matter: We Were Wrong

**I**n this article I have addressed those aspects of the LC that a leading group of evangelical scholars and countercult workers considered the most egregious, and I have demonstrated that the LC has been grossly misunderstood.

Of course, there are other aspects of the LC's theology and practice that have been criticized in countercult literature besides those that were mentioned in the Open Letter. It would go beyond the scope and available space of this article to deal with those further areas, but to state our position: we would concur with some of our colleagues' additional criticisms concerning such areas as (1) the LC's trichotomous view of human nature, and how that contributes to a more mystical approach to the Christian life than we are comfortable with; and (2) their hermeneutical method, including dispensationalism and a more speculative approach to typology than we are comfortable with. However, none of these areas of LC teaching compromises orthodoxy. Furthermore, the pattern we have seen in this article of critics not probing far enough into LC literature to discern the balancing aspects of their teachings applies to many of these other doctrines as well.

I can easily envision many members of the countercult community responding to this article in the same manner that I responded to Melton's open letter so long ago: "Surely Miller has it wrong! If only I had time to follow up on this myself."

It is our prayer that there will rather be an awakening throughout the countercult community to the same issues we have confronted at CRI regarding the LC. These include:

1. How important is truth to us? Enough to admit that we were wrong?
2. How important is being right with God to us? Enough to ask forgiveness of people we have maligned for many years?
3. How important is the love of Christ to us? Enough to embrace in Christian fellowship people who we once

distrusted and resented—despite the fact that many cultural and nonessential theological differences still exist between us?

This seems like a critical crossroads for the countercult community. When animus drives ministry decisions and actions, everybody loses. Without an emphasis on restoration and reconciliation and a willingness to confess past sin and error, countercult ministry is not New Testament ministry. Can we rise above a rigidly parochial perspective, see the big picture of how best to extend the gospel and the Kingdom of God in today's world, and support a vital Christian work in a strategically important part of the globe? The world situation is rapidly changing, with Christianity losing its influence in the West but growing rapidly in parts of the Third World.<sup>1</sup> However, in many of those places where evangelical faith is flourishing, "word of faith" and other aberrant Western exports are flourishing right along with it, and Christianity is further compromised by the infusion of pagan folk elements. This is not happening nearly to the same degree in China, and especially not with the LC. They could play an important role in preserving orthodoxy and launching missions well into the twenty-first century and beyond.

Despite our remaining differences with the LC on certain nonessential issues of faith and practice, we are absolutely convinced that our previous assessment of them as an "aberrant Christian group" simply does not do them justice. Although different from what we are used to here in the West, this is a solidly orthodox group of believers.

**Elliot Miller** is editor-in-chief of the CHRISTIAN RESEARCH JOURNAL.

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<sup>1</sup> Some may question including China in the "Third World" since it is on its way to replacing Japan as the world's second largest economy, but as recently as October 2008 on CNN's Sunday program *Fareed Zakaria GPS*, Chinese president Hu Jintao declined Zakaria's characterization of China as a "superpower" and described it instead as a "developing nation."

# No Longer a Heretical Threat; Now Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ: Why, concerning the Local Churches, I No Longer Criticize, but Instead Commend

by Gretchen Passantino

**T**he teachings of Witness Lee were first criticized in publication in America in 1975 by me and my late husband, Bob Passantino. *Witness Lee and the Local Churches* (CARIS, 1975) represented our investigation into a movement that had been in America since 1962 that achieved public notoriety such that we (and our organization CARIS) and CRI founder Walter Martin believed analysis was needed. Over five years other publications followed: *The Teachings of Witness Lee and the Local Churches*, coauthored by my brother E. Calvin (Cal) Beisner, my husband Bob, and me (CRI, 1978), an audio teaching by Walter Martin, and an appendix contributed by Cal, Bob, and me to Walter Martin's book *The New Cults* (Vision House, 1980). CRI researcher Elliot Miller, as well, contributed research, editing, and discussion that helped determine CRI's position. CRI published only a short summary informational piece and a couple of news updates subsequent to 1980. Neither CARIS nor Bob's and

my later organization, Answers In Action (AIA), published anything else on the subject.

Although several organizations before and since published criticisms, CARIS and CRI provided the theological base for most of the negative public exposure. Some publications were not restricted to theological evaluations and some were inflammatory and derogatory, leading the local churches (LC) to defend themselves legally.

After the local churches prevailed in two lawsuits, little criticism was published until John Ankerberg and John Weldon's *Encyclopedia of Cults and New Religions (ECNR)* in 1999. By that time, Walter Martin and Bob Passantino died (1989 and 2003), E. Calvin Beisner left active cult apologetics to further his education and become a teacher of theology (1992–2007), Hank Hanegraaff assumed leadership of CRI (1989), Elliot Miller remained at CRI, being the editor-in-chief of this JOURNAL, and I continued directing AIA. The publication of *ECNR* drew Hank, Elliot, and me back into

the controversy because the misstatements of fact and defamatory nature of *ECNR* caused severe, unmerited harm to the local churches, particularly to members in China denied freedom of religion and other basic human rights, including being imprisoned.

While the local churches had represented a passing theological exercise early in Elliot's and my careers, and historical documents for Hank as CRI president, the subject now provoked a sense of urgency to reexamine that earlier work and determine if our biblical stance would now be to defend the local churches or merely to correct quietly our zealously irresponsible colleagues (Ankerberg and Weldon). When the local churches approached us for mediation over *ECNR*, we were eager to be used by God to bring any needed redemption, reconciliation, or correction. We had learned that direct interaction, compassionate charity, and contextual, comprehensive research were necessary for accurate analysis. Bob was still alive, and he was adamant that we had an obligation, as the ones who had first published on this movement in America, to revisit the issue and ensure the analysis was correct. Although he died before the research commenced, I know he would join Hank and Elliot and me today affirming that the local churches are orthodox in essential doctrine, our brethren in Christ, defamed by *ECNR*, and wronged by us, who contributed to the criticism that caused such destruction on the local churches' religious and personal freedom, especially in China.

Elliot's contribution is to reevaluate essential local church theology. My contribution is to summarize why we first made wrong conclusions, and to encourage my apologetics colleagues either to reexamine and include the greater evidence, as we have, or at least to refrain from condemning the local churches based on the original faulty research.

First, when we encountered LC teaching that was problematic, we assumed the problem stemmed from heresy or confusion on their part rather than misunderstanding on our part. We and Walter Martin always refrained from calling the local churches a cult. We preferred the term "aberrant," and affirmed they were brothers and sisters in Christ, although we were convinced some of their teachings on essential doctrines were at best contradictory, at worst heretical. But we misunderstood Lee's provocative habit of making stark, seemingly contradictory statements and then explaining and distinguishing them from heresy elsewhere in his text, sometimes far removed from the provocative statements. For Lee this alerted his students to pay careful attention and not presume. For us this signaled confusion and/or heresy. Our more recent research of a greater body of material coupled with direct interaction with local church leadership convinces us that those teachings are neither contradictory nor heretical, but still confusing to many, especially outsiders.

Second, the material we studied in the 1970s was deficient in depth and breadth for three main reasons: (1) There was much less in print in America then. (2) Much was

not easily accessible to us, especially when members became afraid that we would use anything written merely to criticize. (3) Most of what was available in print was neither defensive nor polemic, but was instead meant as teaching aids for members under the leadership of experienced brothers who clarified the confusing and restrained heretical misunderstandings. A further deficiency was more in our intellectual depth and breadth at this early point in our careers than in the materials themselves. Lee's heritage was Eastern, not Western, and consequently did not reflect the rational, didactic, Aristotelian exposition familiar to us, causing us to suspect theological error rather than mere cultural difference. This practice of using paradox and/or significantly postponing clarification—neither to be confused with irrationality, incoherence, or mere relativism—is common in Eastern thinking and in earlier periods of Western writing, but has been virtually erased in contemporary American writing.

Third, Nee and Lee's theological approach was different from the systematic theology of Western Christianity, especially Protestantism, more especially among evangelicals, particularly among cult apologists. Local church theology is more practically oriented; it enables a Christian to follow Christ day by day, especially under persecution or opposition, rather than describing a theoretical and rational paradigm. In this sense, local church theology is similar to Eastern Orthodoxy, even though local church teachers say they did not study nor derive their theology from Eastern Orthodoxy. This paradigm appeared not merely different, but wrong.

Fourth, we isolated the teachings of the local churches from their historical and cultural roots, mistaking some of their unique experiences as affirmations of heresy. The local churches came from China, not from Western Europe by way of America. Eastern ways of thinking, Asian cultural customs, and ancient roots had their own unique impacts on how Christianity developed in the local churches. For example, for American evangelicals who have never been enslaved or invaded, a uniquely "European" Christianity is virtually indiscernible. But for Chinese Christians who have been enslaved and invaded, European Christianity historically linked to the opium wars and being "Shanghaied" to America, slaving to build the railroads, is at best unappealing, at worst threatening. When a Chinese Christian sees the New Testament's practice of giving no name or distinction to a gathering of believers other than its locality ("the church in Rome"), this idea leaps out as a corrective to the Roman Catholicism of invaders or the Protestantism of Shanghaiers. When we properly placed the teachings of the local churches into their historical and cultural contexts, we realized they did not teach the exclusivism of "we are *the only* true church" but instead the inclusivism of "we are *only the* true church, just like all true believers." The differences between the local churches and most American churches is more like the differences between Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians of the New Testament, both groups true believers; it is not like the differences between the Gnostic heretics of the second

century and the orthodox true believers of the same period. (This is true even for American or European LC believers, since most of them have only experienced the Christian life in the local churches.)

Fifth, we misjudged the local churches because both we and they were immature, inexperienced, and sometimes insensitive. On our part, we only experienced evangelical American Protestantism; we studied primarily systematic theology; we developed our apologetics around rational, logical, and evidential paradigms; we judged issues more often as black or white, right or wrong rather than more carefully nuanced (not to be confused with relativism or subjectivism). For example, this meant we marginalized personal interaction as irrelevant to reading their materials. When written statements seemed to say that the local churches were the only true churches, we understood them as exclusivistic statements, whereas they were ambiguous and could have meant that, from God's perspective, there is only one church not delineated by any distinguishing name such as "Presbyterian." If we had engaged in personal interaction without presumed animosity, we would have discovered that the local churches' *behavior* was inclusive, not exclusive, as we did discover over the last five years. Our youth meant that *on both sides* we sometimes were quick to anger, slow to reconcile, quick to conclude deception, slow to encourage openness, and so on.

These and other reasons raised by Elliot in his theological review help explain how we misjudged the local churches. I conclude with an appeal to my colleagues, especially my brother, E. Calvin Beisner. Walter Martin and Bob Passantino are dead. Hank Hanegraaff came to CRI after our initial research. The bulk of the "evidence" in the Open Letter is the same as the evidence we first used to make our mistaken judgments before 1981. Elliot and I have reexamined that evidence. More importantly, we interacted with the local church leaders and now better understand the context of their teachings. Most importantly, we examined a *much larger* body of material and interviewed a significantly greater number of local church members. Cal may have reexamined the original material. He has said he has not interacted directly with local church members and leaders. He has refused to examine any further material unless or until the leadership repudiates statements they, Elliot, and I believe are not inherently heretical and therefore don't need repudiation. Among the three living apologists who are able to make this reexamination, two have done so and come to the conclusion that we were wrong and the local churches' teachings are not heretical; they are not cultic or a cult. The third has admittedly not done the due diligence we have, but he remains convinced that the local churches' teachings are heretical and cultic. Which conclusion appears to have the greatest credibility? Elliot and I have more to commend our reversal than Cal has to maintain his original position.

I know what kept me from reexamining this subject earlier. First, I've been preoccupied with other demands;

second, I've rarely been wrong in my apologetics research and couldn't statistically justify the commitment of time and effort for reexamination; third, it is easy to attribute the orthodox-sounding parts of local church teaching to counterfeiting, rather than genuine orthodoxy; fourth, it is incontrovertible that the local churches appear distinctive from common evangelical American Protestantism, and that can be a clue (but not a certainty) that the teaching is heretical; fifth, I've seen one cult (the Worldwide Church of God) recant its heresy and embrace orthodoxy, and it is more pleasurable to save a sinner than apologize to a wronged brother; sixth, it is embarrassing to admit I've been wrong; and seventh, a cult is at least as likely to protest its orthodoxy as is a mislabeled orthodox group.

The one factor that did not keep me from a new examination is one my brother Cal shares: we do not have to admit that our condemnation was based on what others had done rather than on our own research. Among the signers of the Open Letter are many apologists who did no more extensive research than what Bob, Walter, Elliot, Cal, and I did in the 1970s. Of the three of us who are still alive, two of us are telling the rest that we were wrong. Since we contend we were wrong then and right now, that should be sufficient for at least some signers to refrain from continuing to condemn the local churches, even if they don't have the time or energy to conduct better research than we did then, and as good research as we did now.

My previous research (developed with and shared by Bob, Walter, Elliot, and Cal) was inadequate to the extent that my conclusion was wrong. My current research (developed with and shared by Hank and Elliot) is far deeper and wider than the previous, and is adequate to the extent that it has overturned my previous conclusion. No matter how many people sign the Open Letter and how many times the same inadequate sources are cited, the conclusion supported in this issue of the JOURNAL prevails in the arena of truth. The local churches believe the essentials of orthodox Christian theology and should be embraced as brothers and sisters in Christ rather than opposed as believers in heresy. I pray other apologists will rescind their condemnation, if not reengage the issue to the same depth we have. We risk either being guilty of accusing a brother or of falsely embracing a heretic. What spiritual right do we have to refuse to revisit this issue?

**Gretchen Passantino Coburn** is the co-founder and director of Answers In Action (AIA) ([www.answers.org](http://www.answers.org)), a prolific author, and an adjunct seminary professor. She holds a B.A. in Comparative Literature from the University of California (Irvine) and an M.Div. from Faith Evangelical Lutheran Seminary (Tacoma, WA).

# Are the Local Churches a Cult?

ASK HANK

On the basis of a six-year primary research project represented in part in this Special Edition of the JOURNAL, the Christian Research Institute has concluded that the local churches are a genuine expression of authentic New Testament Christianity.

To begin with, the local churches are *not* a cult from a theological perspective. In this sense, a cult may be defined as a pseudo-Christian organization that claims to be Christian but outright denies essential Christian doctrine. While I personally have differences with the local churches when it comes to secondary issues, such as the timing of the tribulation or the meaning of the millennium, I stand shoulder to shoulder with the local churches when it comes to the essentials that define biblical orthodoxy. With respect to the Trinity, for example, we are united in the reality that there is one God revealed in three persons who are eternally distinct. Although we may disagree on the exegesis of particular passages, this premise is inviolate. Moreover, it is significant to note that in interacting with members of the local churches over a protracted period of time, I have witnessed in them a keen interest in doctrinal precision sadly missing in major segments of the evangelical community.

Furthermore, the local churches are *not* a cult from a sociological perspective. In this sense, a cult is a religious or semi-religious sect whose followers are controlled by strong leadership in virtually every dimension of their lives. Devotees characteristically manifest a displaced loyalty for the “guru” and the group and are galvanized together through physical and/or psychological intimidation tactics. It is unconscionable that the local churches have been uncharitably lumped together with sociological cults involved in the most heinous activities conceivable. Indeed, it is tragic that this classification has been used to persecute and imprison members of the local churches in various regions around the world.

Finally, the local churches *are* an authentic expression of New Testament Christianity. Moreover, as a group forged in the cauldron of persecution, it has much to offer Western Christianity. In this respect three things immediately come to mind.

First is their practice of prophesying—not in the sense of foretelling the future but in the 1 Corinthians 14 sense of exhorting, edifying, encouraging, educating, equipping, and explicating Scripture. As such, constituents are corporately involved in worship through the Word. Second is their practice of pray-reading as a meaningful link between the intake of Scripture and efficacious communion with God in prayer. And third is their fervent commitment to the Great Commission (Matt. 28:19).

If the early Christian church had one distinguishing characteristic, it was their passion to communicate the love, joy, and peace that only Jesus Christ can bring to the human heart. As we become entrenched in an age of esotericism, it is essential that genuine believers in all walks of life emulate this



passion—a passion I have personally witnessed as I shared fellowship with brothers and sisters in Christ from local churches in such faraway cities as Taipei, Seoul, and Nanjing.

In sum, along with Christians from a broad range of persuasions, the local churches are dedicated to both proper doctrine (orthodoxy) and proper practice (orthopraxy). As such, we march together by the maxim, “In essentials unity, in non-essentials liberty, and in all things charity.” While we will continue to debate secondary issues this side of the veil, I have no doubt that we will spend an eternity together growing in the knowledge of the One who saved us by grace alone, through faith alone, on account of Christ alone.

—Hank Hanegraaff

**Hank Hanegraaff** is president of the Christian Research Institute and host of the *Bible Answer Man* broadcast heard daily throughout the United States and Canada. For a list of stations airing the *Bible Answer Man*, or to listen online, log on to [www.equip.org](http://www.equip.org).

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