Defense and Confirmation of the Gospel

A DEFENSE OF THE GOSPEL

Responses to an Open Letter from "Christian Scholars and Ministry Leaders" (1)

DCP PRESS

Living Stream Ministry holds the copyright for both "A Brief Response to 'An Open Letter'" and "A Longer Response to 'An Open Letter'." These articles are reproduced here by permission. This book is:

© 2009 DCP Press. All rights reserved.

No part of this work may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means—graphic, electronic, or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or information storage and retrieval systems—without permission from the copyright holders.

1st printing, December 2009

DCP Press is an imprint of:

Defense and Confirmation Project (DCP)
P. O. Box 3217
Fullerton, CA 92834

DCP is a project to defend and confirm the New Testament ministry of Watchman Nee and Witness Lee and the practice of the local churches.

> Phil. 1:7 – Even as it is right for me to think this concerning you all because you have me in your heart, since both in my bonds and in the defense and confirmation of the gospel you are all fellow partakers with me of grace.

Editors' note: *The gospel*, as used in the title of this book (*A Defense of the Gospel: Responses to an Open Letter from "Christian Scholars and Ministry Leaders (1)"*), has a broader meaning than may be familiar to some readers. The fullness of the good news announced in the New Testament encompasses the entire operation of God to accomplish His purpose. The complete gospel therefore includes all of the truths unveiled in the apostles' teaching through "the word of the truth of the gospel" (Col. 1:5; Eph. 1:13; Acts 2:42; Titus 1:9).

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Preface 5

A BRIEF RESPONSE TO "AN OPEN LETTER TO THE LEADERSHIP OF LIVING STREAM MINISTRY AND THE 'LOCAL CHURCHES'" 7

"On Lawsuits with Evangelical Christians" 7

What We Believe 10

"On the Nature of God" 13

"On the Nature of Humanity" 16

"On the Legitimacy of Evangelical Churches and Denominations" 17

Conclusion 18

A LONGER RESPONSE TO "AN OPEN LETTER TO THE LEADERSHIP OF LIVING STREAM MINISTRY AND THE 'LOCAL CHURCHES'" 21

On the Triune God 23

On God's Complete Salvation 33

On the Church as the Body of Christ and Its Practical Expression 46

In Response to a Call "to Disavow and Cease to Publish" 59

PREFACE

In early 2007 an open letter[1] from "Christian scholars and ministry leaders" appeared without prior notice on the Internet, calling on the leadership of Living Stream Ministry (LSM)[2] and the local churches to "disavow and cease to publish" certain statements made by Witness Lee. To our knowledge only a small handful of the signers of the open letter had ever had contact with LSM or the local churches. Prior to the posting of the open letter, none of the signers sought dialogue with us about their concerns. Moreover, the letter was not sent to anyone in LSM or the local churches but instead was posted on the Internet for a worldwide audience.

In February 2007 representatives of LSM and the local churches published a brief response to the demands made in the open letter.[3] That brief response, which is reprinted in this book, addresses the main concerns raised in the open letter in a clear and concise manner. It includes a straightforward affirmation of the faith common to all believers in Christ. It further sets forth in a simple way what we believe concerning the three issues raised by the open letter's out-of-context quotation of Witness Lee's ministry. These three issues are the nature of God, the nature of humanity, and the legitimacy of evangelical churches and denominations. The brief response also answers the signers' objections to our appeal to the courts for relief from libelous accusations.

When the brief response was made available, two things were promised: a longer response treating the broad theological issues raised by the open letter and a response dealing with the specific quotations it presented out of context. The longer

---

[1] "An Open Letter to the Leadership of Living Stream Ministry and the 'Local Churches'," available at www.open-letter.org.

[2] LSM publishes the ministry of Watchman Nee and Witness Lee.

[3] Available at http://www.lctestimony.org/ResponseToOpenLetter.html.

response occupies the largest part of this book; the response dealing with the out-of-context quotations will be published in the forthcoming second volume of this series.

The longer response was posted on the Internet[4] on December 7, 2008. It contains a more detailed presentation of Witness Lee's teachings on the Triune God, on God's complete salvation, and on the church as the Body of Christ and its practical expression. To date none of the signers of the open letter has addressed any of our responses in a substantive manner or expressed willingness to dialogue with us. The absence of their response is disconcerting, for we believe that the issues treated so cavalierly in the open letter are important ones that merit further attention and consideration by the signers of the open letter and by Christians generally.

In publishing the present volume we reiterate our offer to engage serious scholars and other fair-minded believers in open dialogue. May the Lord use the articles offered here to bring further clarity to the Christian public concerning the faith for which we stand and to foster new opportunities for fruitful fellowship.

Benson Phillips Andrew Yu Chris Wilde

December 2009

[4] Available at http://www.lctestimony.org/LongerResponse.html.

A BRIEF RESPONSE TO "AN OPEN LETTER TO THE LEADERSHIP OF LIVING STREAM MINISTRY AND THE 'LOCAL CHURCHES'"

© 2007 by Living Stream Ministry

Recently a number of evangelicals posted an open letter on the Internet calling on Living Stream Ministry (LSM) and the local churches to disavow certain teachings of Witness Lee and their appeals to "litigation and threatened litigation" to resolve disputes with other Christians. We always welcome the opportunity to clarify our standing, to present our faith, and to examine the great truths in the Bible. It has long been our observation that most of the criticism of our standing and of our beliefs stems from failure to investigate thoroughly and failure to have open dialogue. We believe that most of the signers of the open letter may have had little exposure to our beliefs other than the isolated quotes in the statement they were asked to sign. For this reason, we would like to take this opportunity to respectfully respond to their open letter with our initial thoughts. A more thorough response dealing with the specific quotes included in the open letter will be forthcoming.

"On Lawsuits with Evangelical Christians"

The open letter implies that LSM and the local churches repeatedly resort to litigation to silence critics of their doctrines and teachings. This simply is not true. In our 45-year history in this country, we have appealed to the courts for relief from accusations that were false and defamatory three times. In each case, our appeal had nothing to do with answering criticism concerning doctrinal issues; in each case, at issue were false charges of immoral, illegal, or anti-social behaviors. In each case, we made repeated attempts to deal with matters directly with the other party based on the principles in Matthew 18. And in each case, the other party rebuffed those attempts. Only when all other alternatives were exhausted did we appeal to the secular

authorities, as Paul did three times in Acts (22:25; 24:10; 25:11) to preserve his ministry for the Lord. The two previous cases resulted in a settlement with a retraction and a default judgment in our favor.

Regarding the present litigation with Harvest House and its authors John Ankerberg and John Weldon, it is important to understand the events that preceded legal action. After becoming aware of the publication of the *Encyclopedia of Cults and New Religions* (ECNR), representatives of LSM and the local churches tried repeatedly, over the course of an entire year, to meet with them for face-to-face dialogue, appealing to them each time on the basis of Matthew 18. Ultimately, while we were still seeking to resolve the conflict through dialogue, Harvest House took the initiative to sue one of the local churches—thrusting the matter into the courts. Our suit was filed after Harvest House had already sued us and was our protective response to their taking us to court. Did this publisher and its authors not have a biblical obligation according to Matthew 18 to meet with us to resolve this dispute before taking us to court? Their persistent refusal to meet with us and their adversarial legal action against us left us with no alternative but to appeal to the secular authorities of our day to protect our right to express what we believe the Lord has delivered to us for His Body.

Some critics of our appeal to the courts apparently have applied a double standard. From the context of 1 Corinthians 6, it is difficult to know with certainty every kind of legal dispute that Paul was addressing. However, it is clear that suing fellow believers for purely financial gain, rather than suffering the loss, is one to which Paul seems to be at least in part referring. At a minimum, he condemns a type of lawsuit that many Christian entities routinely file to recover financial losses from business dealings with other believers. Harvest House has filed several such lawsuits to recover money from the owners of Christian bookstores. From another angle, there are a number of lawsuits

on record, filed on behalf of some of the institutions with which the signers of the open letter are associated, that take legal issue with Christian brothers or sisters or other Christian entities. These are typically over personnel or business-related issues, and we assume that these institutions did not view these to be cases akin to those of 1 Corinthians 6.

We agree that 1 Corinthians 6 is an important passage, but it is not the only passage in Scripture that governs conduct between believers. We have been subject to relentless criticism because of our appeals for relief from the courts, while there have been virtually no similar protests lodged against those Christians who have borne false witness against us (Matt 19:18) and yet remain unwilling to correct their misrepresentations concerning us, even after these errors were pointed out. Many fellow believers join us in fearing that absent legal restraint, some so-called "defenders of the faith" pose a grave threat to genuine believers because of the narrowness of their understanding of the truth and the recklessness of the accusations they make toward those they oppose. (We are not suggesting that the signers of the open letter fit into this category.) If 1 Corinthians 6 condemns the use of civil courts to settle disputes between individual believers, Romans 13 establishes the legitimate role that civil authority plays in protecting society as a whole against irresponsible and dangerous behavior that can impact that society. Reckless allegations of criminal and immoral conduct, made against the groups mentioned in ECNR, likewise pose a societal threat, especially if they are given immunity from the normal protections of law. Like Paul, we have felt compelled to invoke our right under civil law to protect our standing in society, especially in these days when genuinely dangerous immoral, illegal, and anti-social behavior exists among some religious groups. Again, we remind our readers that our legal actions have never been attempts to resolve disagreements over theological or doctrinal issues but have always been our final recourse—after genuine pleadings with our critics according to

Matthew 18—to protect the brothers and sisters in the local churches from accusations of heinous social conduct—accusations which in many, many documented instances caused actual damage to families and individuals among us. We suspect that the signers of the open letter have not been made aware of this side of the issue. Far from being a spat over material possessions, as the suits in 1 Corinthians 6 seem to be, our issue is over the circulation of false accusations made in open society against our members, who suffer real harm in their communities from these accusations. This is certainly not akin to Paul's "brother goes to court with brother, and this before unbelievers" (1 Cor. 6:6); this is more an issue of Paul's "I was compelled to appeal to Caesar" (Acts 28:19). When our critics refuse to take the way that our Lord outlined in Matthew 18 for dealing with issues among us in the church, we are left with no other recourse but to follow our Lord's directive to treat them, according to their own attitude, as those who are outside the realm of the people of God (v. 17).

We respectfully ask the signers of the open letter to consider the actions of all parties in light of all the applicable biblical passages and employ the same standard to all.

What We Believe

It grieves us to see passages from the ministry of Witness Lee wrenched from context. Harvest House and its authors did this repeatedly in spite of our protests, and now it seems the authors of the open letter have followed them in this practice. This falls far short of the scholarly standards that many of the signers and their institutions espouse. Even the Lord's own words can be misunderstood and misrepresented when wrenched from context (e.g., Luke 14:26). In fact, Christ's crucifixion was justified largely based on taking His words out of context (John 2:19; Matt. 26:61). It is impossible in this short space to clarify each of the quotes cited in the open letter. As mentioned, we will undertake to do that separately. In this space, we will simply

present what we believe, which is the common faith delivered to all believers (Jude 3).

The Bible

Our belief is based on the Holy Bible, which is the word of God written under His inspiration word by word (2 Tim. 3:16) and which contains the complete divine revelation. The Scriptures are fully sufficient to lead people to salvation and to guide them into glory according to the good pleasure of God's will. All that we believe, proclaim, and teach must be based on and limited to what is in the Bible.

God

What the Bible mainly reveals to us is our wonderful God. This God is uniquely one (Deut. 6:4; 1 Cor. 8:4b; Isa. 45:5a) yet triune—the Father, the Son, and the Spirit, who coexist simultaneously, from eternity to eternity, and are each fully God. Yet there are not three Gods, but one God in three persons. The Father, the Son, and the Spirit are not three temporal manifestations of the one God; rather, They exist eternally, distinct but not separate from one another (Matt. 3:16-17; 28:19; 2 Cor. 13:14; Eph. 2:18; 3:14-17; Rev. 1:4-5; see also the discussion of coinherence in "On the Nature of God" below). How God can be both one and three is a mystery, but the mystery is not beyond our ability to believe and to enjoy as the apostle Paul encourages us: "The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all" (2 Cor. 13:14).

Christ

As Christians, our faith is centered on the person and work of Christ. Eternally Christ is the only begotten Son in the Godhead (John 1:1, 18). In time He became a genuine human being through incarnation (John 1:14). He is like us in all respects, yet He is without sin (Heb. 4:15; 1 John 3:5; 2 Cor. 5:21; 1 Pet. 2:22). Christ is complete God and perfect man, possessing both the

divine nature and the human nature. We believe that the two natures in Christ are preserved distinct and that each nature maintains its distinct qualities without confusion or change and without forming a third, new nature.

The Work of Christ

In His perfect wisdom God sent the Son in the likeness of the flesh of sin to condemn sin in the flesh (Rom. 8:3), and in dying on the cross for our sins, Christ accomplished an eternal redemption for us (Rom. 3:24; Eph. 1:7; Heb. 9:12) and brought us back to God (1 Pet. 3:18).

Jubilantly we declare that Christ was raised from the dead, both spiritually and bodily, and as the resurrected Christ He is our Savior, who saves us not only from our sins judicially but "much more...in His life" organically (Rom. 5:10). We believe that after His resurrection He ascended bodily to the Father, who exalted Him to His right hand as Lord of all (Acts 5:31; 10:36). Today He is in glory as the ascended Lord and as the Son of Man (7:56), still human and always God.

In ascension Christ today is Lord of all, and we eagerly await His return when He will come back as the Bridegroom for His bride, the church (John 3:29; Rev. 19:7), and as the King of kings to rule over all the nations (Rev. 11:15; 19:16). With all believers we share the blessed hope of being glorified by God (Rom. 5:2; Col. 1:27) and of dwelling with Him eternally, having Him as our full enjoyment while He has us as His eternal expression (Rev. 21:1—22:5).

Salvation

The hope of being glorified by God is the portion of all who have entered into salvation through faith by the grace of God (Eph. 2:8). Every human being is constituted a sinner by birth and by action (Rom. 5:19, 12). To be saved from the righteous judgment of God, a person must repent to God and believe in

the Lord Jesus Christ (Acts 2:38; 16:31; 26:20; John 3:15-16) to be forgiven of his or her sins and to be redeemed, justified, and regenerated (Acts 10:43; Rom. 3:24; Acts 13:39; John 3:6). Through regeneration we become the children of God (John 1:12) and members of Christ (1 Cor. 12:27). It is our great privilege as co-laborers with God to preach this gospel to all humankind.

The Church

Finally, we believe that for the accomplishment of His purpose and to make known His multifarious wisdom, God produced the church (Eph. 3:10), which is the Body of Christ (Eph. 1:22-23; Col. 1:24), composed of all persons irrespective of time and space who are believers in Christ. It is God's intent that this mystical, universal Body be practically manifested on the earth in time and space as local churches, each of which encompasses all of the believers in a given city (Acts 2:44; 8:1; 1 Thes. 1:1).

We take these to be essential items of the common faith. Beyond these, many teachings and doctrines on other items are matters of interpretation where there has historically been room for disagreement among Christians. We should not contend for things other than the common faith of all believers (cf. Jude 3). With this simple presentation of the foundation of our common faith made, we would like to briefly comment on each of the areas of complaint raised in the open letter:

"On the Nature of God"

Concerning the Divine Trinity, we hold to the eternal distinctiveness of the three of the Godhead, but at the same time we maintain steadfastly that all the relevant declarations of the Bible should shape our understanding of the divine truth concerning the mystery of the Trinity. Thus, when Isaiah 9:6 says that a child shall be called Mighty God and a Son shall be called Eternal Father, we take this to refer prophetically to

Christ Jesus our Lord, and we expect that the text means that the Son can in some sense be called the Father. Likewise, when the Bible says, "The last Adam became a life-giving Spirit" (1 Cor. 15:45b) and "the Lord is the Spirit" (2 Cor. 3:17), we receive the Bible's clear testimony concerning the identification of Christ ("the last Adam," "the Lord") with the Spirit. We do not wish to dissolve the difficulties in the text by an appeal to a theological system that will not admit the difficulties; rather, we hope to broaden our understanding of the capital truth of our Christian faith to account for the difficulties in the text. To this end, we recognize that in every manifest and distinct action of each, all three operate inseparably (yet still distinctly). The reality in the Godhead that accounts for this is what theologians have termed coinherence. On the one hand, the Father, the Son, and the Spirit coexist "simultaneously" from eternity to eternity (Isa. 9:6b; Heb. 1:12; 7:3; 9:14) and are each fully God (1 Pet. 1:2a; Heb. 1:8; John 1:1; Acts 5:3-4). On the other hand, as three yet one, They coinhere; that is, They mutually indwell one another (John 10:38; 14:10, 20; 17:21, 23); and by virtue of that coinherence each operates distinctly in the manifest action of any one of Them to some identifiable degree. While we adamantly maintain that the three persons of the Divine Trinity exist eternally and are eternally distinct, we also recognize that a properly biblical view of the relationships among the three must account for the fact that *in the Bible* the Son is somehow called the Eternal Father, that *in the Bible* He is somehow said to have become a life-giving Spirit, and that *in the Bible* the Lord Christ is somehow said to be the Spirit.

We fully realize that it is precisely on this point that Witness Lee's teaching suffers much attack; however, his interpretation of these complex passages is not without both biblical credence and significant precedent. Consider the comment of A. H. Strong concerning "intercommunion" and the role it plays in his understanding of these same passages:

> 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 others, and the manifestation of one to be recognized in the manifestation of another...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"...
>
> [Charles] Gore, *Incarnation [of the Son of God]*, 218—"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], 332-333)

In 1 Corinthians 15:45b Paul says clearly, "The last Adam [Christ] became a life-giving Spirit." Paul's word, far from negating the bodily resurrection of the Lord Jesus, presents a crucial truth for our apprehension and experience of Christ. In the New Testament the Spirit is called the Spirit of Christ (Rom. 8:9), the Spirit of Jesus (Acts 16:7), the Spirit of Jesus Christ (Phil. 1:19), and the Spirit of the Son (Gal. 4:6). The Spirit in us (Rom. 8:9) is, therefore, in some sense, according to the language of the Bible, Christ in us (Rom. 8:10). Thus, both the New Testament and our teaching proclaims, "Now the Lord is the Spirit" (2 Cor. 3:17). Without this great reality, all that Christ is as God and as man and all that He accomplished through His incarnation, human living, death, resurrection, and ascension would be merely objective to us, but because of this truth, all that the Son is and has can be applied to us and made subjectively real to us by the Spirit (John 16:13-15).

(For further reading on this subject, we recommend "A Biblical Overview of the Triune God" in *Affirmation & Critique*, 1.1 [1996], 23-31, among many other articles in that journal which address this subject.)

"On the Nature of Humanity"

Concerning humanity, we believe that God's intention is that man would express Him and represent Him in the created universe. For this reason He created man in His image and according to His likeness and gave him dominion over all things on the earth (Gen. 1:26). However, the man created in God's image was merely an empty vessel. He could not express and represent God because he did not possess God's divine life. Furthermore, after man's fall, he became alienated from the life of God (Eph. 4:18).

When Christ came, He boldly declared, "I am...the life" (John 11:25; 14:6) and "I have come that they may have life and may have it abundantly" (John 10:10). The divine life is embodied in the God-man, Jesus Christ (John 1:4; 1 John 5:11-12). When a person believes in and receives Christ, he is born of God and receives the divine life through the Spirit's regeneration (John 1:12-13; 3:6). Christ is in the believers (2 Cor. 13:5) to live in them (Gal. 2:20) and be their life (Col. 3:4). Through the new birth with the divine life, a believer also becomes a partaker of the divine nature (2 Pet. 1:4). Henceforth, God carries out His salvation within the believers in the life of Christ (Rom. 5:10) who indwells them. This salvation transforms the believers metabolically with the life and nature of God, consummating in the believers' being conformed to the image of Christ, the first-born Son of God (Rom. 12:2; 8:29).

Centuries ago Athanasius summed up the operation of God in His salvation by stating, "He was made man that we might be made God" (*On the Incarnation*, 54.3). When Witness Lee repeated Athanasius's aphorism, he added the qualifier "in life and nature but not in the Godhead" (see, for example, *The Christian Life*, 133-34; *Life-study of 1 and 2 Samuel*, 166-67; *The Conclusion of the New Testament*, 66-67). This qualification is crucial, because it recognizes that we as believers do not partake of the incommunicable attributes of God. Such attributes as

self-existence, omniscience, omnipresence, and omnipotence are His alone (1 Tim. 6:16). Furthermore, Christ is still the only begotten Son in the Godhead (John 3:16). We will never become objects of worship or have the position of God. We will never participate in the Godhead or become a fourth person in the Trinity, but we will be like Christ (1 John 3:2) by His transforming us into the same image (2 Cor. 3:18). We will, as Paul boldly declared, "be conformed to the image of His Son" (Rom. 8:29).

(More thorough treatments of this subject can be found in several issues of *Affirmation & Critique*, particularly 7.2 [2002] and 1.3 [1996], 21-31, 62.)

"On the Legitimacy of Evangelical Churches and Denominations"

We believe, as do most Christians, that the Body of Christ is uniquely and universally one (1 Cor. 1:12-13; Eph. 4:4; Col. 3:15). We also believe that the Lord's desire is for the practical local expression of His Body to be locally one. In fact, the divine oneness of His believers practically is among the things He died to accomplish (John 17:21; Eph. 2:14-15). The implication of this basic understanding is far reaching. It means that we must receive all genuine believers in the common fellowship of the Body of Christ (Rom. 15:7; 1 Cor. 1:9). It also means that we must strive to keep the oneness of the Spirit (Eph. 4:3) and avoid division (1 Cor. 1:10-13; 12:24-25). To maintain and testify of the oneness of the church as Christ's Body, we cannot in good conscience participate in organizations that contribute to division in the Body of Christ. We believe that the present divided condition of the Body of Christ is a cause of grieving to our Lord and Savior. For that reason, in order to be pleasing to the Lord, we cannot agree with the present denominational system. But we hope that everyone will be absolutely clear that our disagreement with denominationalism does not in any way constitute a rejection of the believers within that system, nor does it call into question the validity of their salvation or their

full participation in the eternal destiny of all God's redeemed—the hope of glory in Christ. This represents the clear teaching of Watchman Nee and Witness Lee on these points, and we believe that this is in complete harmony with Scripture. It is our aspiration to keep the oneness of the Spirit in the uniting bond of peace, and whenever we fall short, we look to the Lord for mercy and grace that He may bring us into a walk that is well-pleasing to Him.

The local churches do not participate in any "associations of evangelical churches and ministries," as the open letter charges. Further, Living Stream Ministry is a member of a few evangelical trade organizations, such as the Evangelical Christian Publishers Association (ECPA), which is in a different category of organizations from what the open letter describes. According to their website, ECPA is a trade organization, serving an industry; it is not an association of churches and ministries. Before joining ECPA, Living Stream Ministry evaluated the Statement of Faith to which it was asked to subscribe and found no conflict with the teachings of the local churches, the ministry of Watchman Nee and Witness Lee, or most importantly, the Bible. Furthermore, ECPA conducted an extensive review of the theology of the books published by Living Stream Ministry, found no conflict with their Statement of Faith, and elected to accept Living Stream Ministry into membership of the association. ECPA was also fully apprised of our litigation against Harvest House. In fact, several of the leaders of ECPA attempted to bring the two parties together, in accordance with Matthew 18, to try to resolve the conflict. Consistent with their posture from the outset, Harvest House steadfastly refused such a meeting.

Conclusion

The open letter of evangelical leaders presents Witness Lee's statements without the biblical texts on which they are based, without his exposition of those texts, and without any balancing

context found in his writings. Therefore, they do not fairly present his teaching on these important points of truth. We commend the signers of the open letter for their concern for the truth of the gospel, and we invite them or any others to join us in genuine and substantive dialogue concerning the great truths of the faith and particularly our understanding thereof. However, we would hope that in such dialogue their treatment of us would be according to how they themselves would like others to treat them, which is, by our Lord's teaching, the second great commandment (Matt. 7:12; 22:39). Unless our understanding of Scripture can be demonstrated to be in error, we would consider ourselves unfaithful to disavow any point of truth that the Lord has shown us from His Word.

Respectfully submitted
by various brothers representing the local churches
and by the editorial section of Living Stream Ministry
Lord's Day, February 11, 2007

A LONGER RESPONSE TO "AN OPEN LETTER TO THE LEADERSHIP OF LIVING STREAM MINISTRY AND THE 'LOCAL CHURCHES'"

© 2008 by Living Stream Ministry

On January 9, 2007, a group of evangelicals published an open letter on the Internet calling on Living Stream Ministry (LSM) and the local churches to disavow certain teachings of Witness Lee and their appeals to "litigation and threatened litigation" to resolve disputes with other Christians. The bulk of their letter was a series of 17 individual quotations from the ministry of Witness Lee, which, we suppose, were intended to speak for themselves and justify the signers' call for the local churches and LSM to disavow some particular teachings of Witness Lee. On February 11, 2007, we offered online a brief response to the open letter, in which we succinctly stated our position on the "essential doctrines of the Christian faith" (LCTestimony.org). Further, we responded to the charge that we in the local churches routinely resort to "litigation and threatened litigation to answer criticisms or settle disputes with Christian organizations and individuals." In that brief response we offered only a succinct presentation of our understanding of the crucial truths of the faith at issue; we did not attempt to defend Witness Lee's proper understanding of these truths as represented in his writings. We also did not try to show how the 17 quotations from Witness Lee's writings, each of which stands in isolation and lacks the benefit of its original context, accord with either a proper understanding of the essential items of the Christian faith or with an accepted historical position in the Christian church. But we did promise a longer response to the open letter, and here we wish to offer one, giving what we feel is a very necessary elaboration and defense of our understanding of the truths at issue and of Witness Lee's teachings thereon. In another article we will examine the 17 quotations in their full context and against the backdrop of Witness Lee's broader

teaching on their subject matter to see if the signers were justified in isolating these quotations and holding them up apart from their original contexts.

As we mentioned in our brief response, we welcome this opportunity to present our understanding of these crucial truths as well as Witness Lee's teaching on them. Our long experience in responding to our critics has taught us that open and extensive dialogue allays most of the concerns that motivate the criticisms against us. Evidence of this can be seen in the recent positive evaluations of our positions on the fundamental points of the Christian faith by Fuller Theological Seminary, Christian Research Institute (CRI), and Answers in Action (AIA). Some of the positive testimony of these Christian institutions can be found on this website (LCTestimony.org). Of course, we realize that not all our positions on Christian truth bear the approval of even those who have thoroughly examined our teachings. We accept this and do not wish to obscure this fact. But differences in opinion on the non-essential matters of the faith have long been the situation in the Christian church, and we hope and expect that we too would benefit from the toleration that all Christians have come to expect in this regard. In presenting this longer response, we wish to address those points of truth which we have been accused of contradicting or compromising. Our hope is that in presenting our positions on these matters, we will convince all that we are indeed fellow believers in Christ and equal members of the household of the faith. We do not expect to persuade the implacable. But we trust that most believers are fair and reasonable and that they will hear, respect, and respond to a sincere and genuine presentation of the truth. We expect that persons such as these will be persuaded of our orthodoxy in the essentials of the faith even if they may question our stand on some of the non-essentials. We further hope that by our presentation here many of the signers of the open letter will be motivated to do what is right and quietly remove their signatures from the letter as well as withdraw their

public opposition to us until they have thoroughly and fairly investigated what we hold as essential truth.

The signers of the open letter take exception to Witness Lee's teaching on three matters: "the nature of God," "the nature of humanity," and "the legitimacy of evangelical churches and denominations." The labels they use are a bit elusive, and the isolated quotations they present, without explication, require some guessing as to the complaints they intend, but it seems that the signers intend to take exception to our understanding concerning the doctrine of the Trinity, the truth concerning God's complete salvation, and the practice of denominationalism. The first two of these are essential matters of the faith; the third is not, and we hope that the signers do not intend it to be. In the sections that follow we will present our understanding on the first two of these matters as well as various quotations that better represent Witness Lee's teaching on them. For the third topic we will present our broader understanding of the truth concerning the Body of Christ and how this understanding relates to the common denominational situation in Christianity today. We should also note that in the open letter a fourth issue was raised, related to "lawsuits with evangelical Christians." Since we feel that we have adequately responded to this matter in our brief response, we will not address this issue again here in our longer response. We invite all our readers to see our response to this fourth point on our website LCTestimony.org.

On the Triune God

We humbly acknowledge that the mystery of the Divine Trinity is and will forever be beyond the full grasp of human understanding. Yet we joyfully recognize that God has presented the mystery of His trinity in the holy word of the Bible. This divine act of self-disclosure persuades us that while God cannot be fully known, He intends to be apprehended and experienced as He truly is, that is, as the unique, eternal God, who is indivisibly

one and yet distinctly three. In our study of the Bible, we find that the Old Testament sometimes intimates that there is plurality in God (e.g., Gen. 1:1-3, 26-27; Exo. 3:14-15; Num. 6:22-27; Isa. 6:8), and in the New Testament we clearly find the revelation of the trinity of God in unmistakable language, such as in Christ's declaration concerning "the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit" (Matt. 28:19). The Christian belief in the three-one God is unique and marks believers in Christ as distinct heirs of the unfathomable mystery. We respectfully submit, however, that although the basic tenets of the Christian doctrine of the oneness and threeness of God were settled for the most part by the end of the fourth century A.D., the delicate balance found in that early settlement appears, in our estimation, to be compromised by many in the modern era who hold to a tritheistic notion of the Trinity, often in actual confession. In our effort to preserve a balanced view in an era of imbalance, we have often been unfairly portrayed as holding the view of the Trinity that stands at the opposite extreme and have thus been undeservedly labeled by some as modalist in our teaching. Here we are very pleased to offer what we believe concerning the Triune God according to our study of the Word of God, with the hope that our presentation will confirm the orthodoxy of our teaching and dispel any doubts as to the legitimacy of our views. We begin with a concise overview of our understanding of what we believe is affirmed by the Scriptures and by the long history of teaching in the church on this capital truth of the Christian faith.

The Divine Trinity: A Concise Biblical Overview

We affirm that the most fundamental declaration in the Bible concerning God's being is that He is one God (Deut. 6:4; Isa. 45:5; Psa. 86:10; 1 Cor. 8:4; Eph. 4:6; 1 Tim. 2:5). Yet He is also revealed to have the aspect of three: in the Old Testament He refers to Himself in both singular and plural terms (Gen. 1:26; 3:22; 11:7; Isa. 6:8), and in the New Testament the explicit

designations of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are used (e.g., Matt. 28:19; Gal. 4:6; cf. 2 Cor. 13:14). Contrary to the commonly held notion that the three are separate and individual persons, thus implying three Gods, we hold that the Father, the Son, and the Spirit are three hypostases, or persons, distinct though not separate, of the one indivisible God. We affirm that the three are each equally God: the Father is God (1 Pet. 1:2; Eph. 1:17), the Son is God (Heb. 1:8; John 1:1; Rom. 9:5; Titus 2:13; John 20:28), and the Spirit is God (Acts 5:3-4). We also believe the scriptural testimony that each of the three is equally eternal: the Father is eternal (Isa. 9:6), the Son is eternal (Heb. 1:12; 7:3), and the Spirit is eternal (9:14). Hence, we understand the three to coexist eternally. We do not hold to the notion that the three distinctions in God are temporal or economic modes of His existence which successively begin and end as He accomplishes the successive steps of His economy in time. In witnessing to Their coexistence, the New Testament often portrays the three as operating together simultaneously in the harmony of one manifest action (Matt. 3:16-17; John 14:16-17; 2 Cor. 13:14; Eph. 3:14-17; Rev. 1:4-5). The biblical data convince us, therefore, that the three of the Divine Trinity coexist from eternity to eternity and are each fully God without being three separate and independent persons. Mysteriously, the one God is three.

Coinherence and Incorporation

But the relationship among the three of the Trinity is defined by more than mere coexistence, for the testimony of Scripture is that the three mutually indwell one another in a dynamic interrelation that some theologians have termed *coinherence*. By the term we understand that the three of the Trinity mutually exist and mutually indwell one another. In this eternal relationship of coinherence, the Father, the Son, and the Spirit have never been, nor ever can be, separated. The Lord Jesus' own testimony of His coinherence with the Father and of the Father's with Him is quite clear: "the Father is in Me and I am in the

Father" (John 10:38; cf. 14:10-11, 20; 17:21), and the coinherence of the Spirit with the Father and of the Spirit with the Son is quite clear from the many titles of the Spirit in the New Testament: "the Spirit of God" (Rom. 8:9; 1 John 4:2); "the Spirit of your Father" (Matt. 10:20); "the Spirit of the Lord" (Acts 5:9; 2 Cor. 3:17); "the Spirit of His Son" (Gal. 4:6); "the Spirit of Christ" (Rom. 8:9; 1 Pet. 1:11); "the Spirit of Jesus" (Acts 16:7); "the Spirit of Jesus Christ" (Phil. 1:19) ; and "the Lord Spirit" (2 Cor. 3:18).

Witness Lee was very explicit on these points, as these sample excerpts from his ministry attest:

> The persons should not be confounded and the essence should not be divided; the Father, the Son, and the Spirit are three in person, but They are one in essence. (*The Revelation and Vision of God*, 19)

> We can say that the Father and the Son are one because the Lord Jesus said, "I and the Father are one" (John 10:30). However, 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. Modalism advocates that God, who is one, has three manifestations in three different periods and that the three manifestations do not exist within each other at the same time. The Scriptures show us, however, that the three—the Father, the Son, and the Spirit—not only exist at the same time but also exist in one another. Therefore, the three—the Father, the Son, and the Spirit—are one; They are one God. However, this one God is also three; He is the Father, the Son and the Spirit. (Ibid., 34-35)

> Among the three of the Divine Trinity, there is distinction but no separation. The Father is distinct from the Son, the Son is distinct from the Spirit, and the Spirit is distinct from the Son and the Father. But we cannot say that They are separate, because They coinhere, that is, They live within one another. In Their coexistence the three of the Godhead are distinct, but Their coinherence makes them one. They coexist in Their

> coinherence, so They are distinct but not separate. (*The Crucial Points of the Major Items of the Lord's Recovery*, 10)

Because the three of the Trinity dwell in one another, They cannot act apart from one another, even though the operation of each one is certainly distinct from that of the other two. When one acts, the other two distinctly operate in and with Him. Thus, in every action to carry out the economy of God's salvation, the three operate distinctly yet inseparably. Witness Lee has referred to this mutuality in being and operation among the three of the Divine Trinity as an "incorporation":

> The three of the Divine Trinity are an incorporation by coinhering mutually and by working together as one. This means that the three of the Divine Trinity are an incorporation by what They are and by what They do. (*The Issue of Christ Being Glorified by the Father with the Divine Glory*, 26)

By this term, we understand that each of the three of the Trinity, when acting distinctly to carry out God's economy, incorporates the operations of the other two. The Gospel of John plainly reveals this marvelous truth concerning the incorporation among the three of the Trinity and does so in great detail. Here it may be sufficient to present only a few verses from John's Gospel that illustrate this point:

> 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. Believe Me that I am in the Father and the Father is in Me; but if not, believe because of the works themselves. (14:10-11)

> But when He, the Spirit of reality, comes, He will guide you into all the reality; for He will not speak from Himself, but what He hears He will speak; and He will declare to you the things that are coming. He will glorify Me, for He will receive of Mine and will declare it to you. All that the Father has is Mine; for this reason I have said that He receives of Mine and will declare it to you. (16:13-15)

While it was manifestly the Son who ministered on the earth as a man and spoke the words of eternal life to people (John 6:63, 68), the Father was in Him, doing His works, that is, operating to give the Son's words their full effect among the hearers (cf. 8:26, 28; 12:49). In this sense, we understand the Son to be incorporating the Father and manifesting in His action a speaking that is not from Himself but from the Father who abides in Him. Likewise, the Spirit, we are told, when He comes, does not speak from Himself, but what He receives from the Son He declares to the believers, glorifying the Son and guiding the believers into all the reality of the Son (cf. John 14:6), who Himself receives all that the Father has as His own. In this sense, we understand the Spirit to be incorporating the Son to make the Son as the embodiment of the Father real to the believers.

Biblical Identifications among the Three of the Divine Trinity

We believe that because the three of the Divine Trinity incorporate the operations of each other, the Bible sometimes identifies one of the three with another of the three. But far from confusing the distinctions among the three, these biblical identifications of the distinct hypostases of the Divine Trinity serve to reinforce the inseparability of the three in Their existence and operation. Further, these identifications rely on the oneness of essence in the Divine Trinity and on the coinherence and incorporation among the three of the Divine Trinity. The Bible unabashedly recognizes that when one acts, the others are identified with Him in operation, and it sometimes equates one of the three with another of the three.

Witness Lee recognized that the Scriptures sometimes make these identifications, and contrary to what others have tried to do to avoid the apparent confusion of the distinctions in the Trinity, he attempted to let the text stand on its own and looked for greater meaning in the identifications. There are three verses

that he frequently commented on in this regard and for which he is most commonly criticized:

> For a child is born to us,
> A Son is given to us;
> And the government
> Is upon His shoulder;
> And His name will be called
> Wonderful Counselor,
> Mighty God,
> Eternal Father,
> Prince of Peace. (Isa. 9:6)

> So also it is written, "The first man, Adam, became a living soul"; the last Adam became a life-giving Spirit. (1 Cor. 15:45)

> And the Lord is the Spirit; and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. (2 Cor. 3:17)

Those familiar with the theological difficulties associated with these verses will no doubt be able to recall the various linguistic and exegetical arguments that have been routinely offered to dispel the Trinitarian issues here. But the simple fact remains that the Bible says that the Son is called the Father, that the last Adam became the life-giving Spirit, and that the Lord is the Spirit. Witness Lee did not see the need to explain away the difficulties in the text via linguistic and exegetical devices, because he recognized that there is indeed a very valid sense in which the Son can be called the Father, in which Christ can be said to have become the life-giving Spirit, and in which Christ can be said to be the Spirit, all without denying the eternal distinctions between the Father, the Son, and the Spirit. The very valid sense is that of coinherence and incorporation, whereby each indwells the others and each incorporates the operations of the others in His own distinct actions to such an extent that the Bible at times says of one that He is the other. Such biblical statements are made with respect to God's

economical operation without, of course, jeopardizing the distinctions between the persons of the Trinity in His economy or in His immanent existence. Thus, when Isaiah 9:6 prophesies that the Son will be given to us and that His name will be called Eternal Father, we understand that though the Son is distinct from the Father, He nevertheless incorporates the Father in His being, living, and doing, and thus, in the carrying out of the divine economy, He can be called Eternal Father, in accordance with the Scripture here. Similarly, when Paul speaks of the last Adam becoming a life-giving Spirit, we need not posit some life-giving spirit other than the unique divine Spirit who gives life (John 6:63; 2 Cor. 3:6) or some post-resurrectional state of Christ's being, so as to avoid confusing the distinctions in the Divine Trinity. We suspect that Paul would find such maneuvers foreign to his thought and that of the other New Testament writers. Rather, we should recognize Paul's utterance here as a direct reference to the Holy Spirit who gives life and should try to see how Christ could be said to have become the life-giving Spirit in resurrection. Again, the notion of incorporation based on the coinherence of the three of the Trinity provides a deep and sophisticated view that both respects the distinctions among and admits the identification of the three. In incarnation, before His death and resurrection, Christ was "of the Holy Spirit" (Matt. 1:20) and worked "by the Spirit" (Matt. 12:28). When He went to the cross, He offered Himself as our sacrifice "through the eternal Spirit" (Heb. 9:14). Thus, in life and death Christ incorporated the operations of the Spirit; although the Spirit was and always is distinct from Christ the Son, the Spirit was not separate from the Son in the Gospels, and the operation of the Spirit was manifested in the actions of the Son. In resurrection, a change of manifest action occurs, so that now the life-giving Spirit, who acts in the believers in the church, incorporates the operations of Christ, the last Adam. Certainly Christ and the Spirit are distinct, but in the Epistles Christ's operation is incorporated in the Spirit's actions, and in this

sense Paul's words in 1 Corinthians 15:45 can be taken at face value. After His resurrection Christ, though still distinct from the Spirit, has become the life-giving Spirit, particularly in the life and living of the New Testament believers. The incorporation of the Son in the actions of the Spirit also allows us to accept Paul's word in 2 Corinthians 3:17 at face value: "the Lord is the Spirit." The preceding context identifies the Lord, to whom the heart should be turned so that the veil can be taken away, with Christ, in whom the veil is being done away with (vv. 16, 14). Thus, attempts to refer the title *Lord* in verse 17 to God in general or to YHWH of the Old Testament, simply to avoid confusing the Son and the Spirit, seem unnatural and unnecessary as well as inconsistent with the context (cf. 2:12, 14-15, 17; 3:3-4, 14, 16; 4:5). Here we understand Paul to be saying that if we want to enjoy the experience of the veil being done away in Christ, we must turn our hearts, in a practical way, to the Spirit, because Christ the Lord is the Spirit, in that the Spirit incorporates Christ and makes Him real and practical to us in our experience. Paul seems to have no problem with the identification, and we do not believe that he is confusing the distinctions in the Godhead; rather, we believe that Paul recognized the mutual existence and mutual operation of Christ and the Spirit and therefore sometimes identified Christ with the Spirit (cf. Rom. 8:9-11). In fact, in the next verse (2 Cor. 3:18) he plainly incorporates the two in one unique title, *Lord Spirit*.

Against the backdrop of such an understanding, the seemingly stark statements of Witness Lee on the biblical identifications of the divine hypostases do not warrant the criticism that they often receive. Here are a few excerpts where he recognizes the identifications of the hypostases while maintaining their distinctions:

> It is not too much to say that He [Christ the Son] is the Father because the Father is included in Him. And it is not wrong to say that He is the Spirit because the Spirit is implied

> in Him. However, we absolutely confess that the Father is the Father, the Son is the Son, and the Spirit is the Spirit and that the three are distinct but not separate...This is the mystery of the Divine Trinity. (*Revelation and Vision of God*, 71-72)
>
> The Spirit is identical to the Lord...However, do not think that when the Bible says the Lord is the Spirit it annuls the distinction between the Son and the Spirit. They are one, yet still two. They are one, yet still distinct. (*The Basic Revelation in the Holy Scriptures*, 40)
>
> Many writers agree that in Paul's Epistles the resurrected Christ is identical to the Spirit. However, this does not annul the distinction between Christ and the Spirit. There is always a twofoldness to truth. In 2 Corinthians 3:17 the Lord and the Spirit are one. In 2 Corinthians 13:14 we have the grace of Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit. Here it can be seen that Christ and the Spirit are distinct. (Ibid., 41)

The Responsibility for Finding Balance

It is impossible to know exactly why each individual signer of the open letter agreed to append his or her name, with evidences of academic standing, to the letter. While a few of the signers may have a vendetta to settle, we believe that most of the signers are reacting to statements which, taken out of context and presented in isolation, seem to be sufficiently outrageous so as to warrant public denunciation. Yet we are quite surprised, given the academic statuses of many of the signers, that quotations in isolation would be allowed to serve as the basis for public denunciation. Academic researchers of every kind know the perils of isolating quotations and are usually quick to dissociate themselves from such a practice. Further, academics generally afford those of contrary positions the courtesy of presenting balance where balance can be found, and because of their training they cannot, in good conscience, shirk the responsibility of finding balance if it can be found. We believe that in this section we have demonstrated that there is a balance to be found in the statements of Witness Lee on the

Divine Trinity, a balance which was not presented and, we believe, was not even sought. Our genuine hope is that many of the signers of the open letter would reconsider their support of the letter and request that their signatures be removed from it.

On God's Complete Salvation

Our view of God's economy—the endeavor of God to fulfill His heart's desire—rests upon our understanding that God's work of complete salvation among humankind embraces two aspects: judicial redemption and organic salvation. According to this view, God's full salvation is much more than the mere rescue of humankind from the negative situation of the fall; even more, it is the leading of humankind into the positive realm of the divine life and glory (Heb. 2:10). The Christian salvation includes not only judicial redemption, which saves us from God's wrath and punishment, but also organic salvation, which saves us into the participation in His divine life and nature. These two aspects of God's full salvation are clearly expressed in the apostle Paul's words in Romans 5:10: "If we, being enemies, were reconciled to God through the death of His Son, much more we will be saved in His life, having been reconciled." We treasure and extol Christ's efficacious redemptive work as the sole and sufficient basis for our justification before God and for our deliverance from God's condemnation, but we do not believe that this judicial aspect of Christ's work is the full extent of our salvation; rather, the redemption accomplished by Christ, as Witness Lee points out, "lays the foundation and paves the way for salvation in God's life" (*God's Salvation in Life*, 17). Witness Lee's comments on Romans 5:10 further explain the distinction between these two aspects of God's full salvation:

> Verse 10 of this chapter points out that God's full salvation revealed in this book consists of two sections: one section is the redemption accomplished for us by Christ's death, and the other section is the saving afforded us by Christ's life. The first four chapters of this book discourse comprehensively

> regarding the redemption accomplished by Christ's death, whereas the last twelve chapters speak in detail concerning the saving afforded by Christ's life. Before 5:11, Paul shows us that we are saved because we have been redeemed, justified, and reconciled to God. However, we have not yet been saved to the extent of being sanctified, transformed, and conformed to the image of God's Son. Redemption, justification, and reconciliation, which are accomplished outside of us by the death of Christ, redeem us objectively; sanctification, transformation, and conformation, which are accomplished within us by the working of Christ's life, save us subjectively. Objective redemption redeems us positionally from condemnation and eternal punishment; subjective salvation saves us dispositionally from our old man, our self, and our natural life. (Recovery Version, note 2 on Rom. 5:10)
>
> Such a complete salvation is composed of God's judicial redemption and His organic salvation. God's judicial redemption is the procedure of God's complete salvation for the believers to participate in God's organic salvation as the purpose of God's complete salvation. The procedure is judicial, and the purpose is organic. (*Crystallization-study of the Complete Salvation of God in Romans*, 9-10)

God's complete salvation not only rescues perishing humankind from eternal perdition through the vicarious death of His Son but also enlivens and transforms human beings into His glorious image through the working of His divine life within them. It is our view that God operates in His economy to accomplish the complete salvation of His believers by making them the same as He is in life, nature, and expression but not in His Godhead. God's economy of salvation commences with the incarnation, whereby God in Christ became what we are in life, nature, and expression without altering His divine essence and nature or abandoning His unique Godhead; and this economy consummates in the full salvation of His believers, whereby they become what He is in life, nature, and expression without participating in any way in His Godhead. Our teaching concerning human beings becoming God in His full salvation respects

the distinction between God in His incommunicability and God in His communicability, which corresponds to the distinction between the immanent, or essential, Trinity (the Trinity in His inner self-existence) and the economic Trinity (the Trinity in His economic operation). Recognizing that God eternally dwells in unapproachable light and remains unseen and invisible (1 Tim. 6:16), we understand that there is in God a mode of existence that makes Him completely transcendent above and incommunicable to His creation. At the same time, acknowledging that God was mysteriously manifested in the flesh through incarnation (John 1:1, 14; 1 Tim. 3:16), we also understand that there is in God a mode of existence that allows Him to communicate Himself to and participate in His creation. God's economy of salvation not only preserves His eternal uniqueness, otherness, and inaccessibility but also admits His participation in humanity and ultimately the participation of His elect in His divinity. A key difference between Him and us is that He is God by virtue of His own being and divine self-existence, whereas we become God by virtue of our union and communion with Him and by our continual dependence on Him and on what He is in Himself. God self-exists as God; we are made God by our participation in what He is as God. In the language of the early church, He is God by nature, and we become God by grace; that is, He is God by virtue of His own self-possessed divine nature, while we become God only by virtue of our partaking of His nature (2 Pet. 1:4), which we receive from Him through grace.

Because of the eternally inviolable aspect of God's existence, human beings will never attain to the Godhead. Because God is triune immanently, what He is in Himself (His triuneness) apart from His economical move is eternally preserved; hence, we will not be and there never will be an additional person or persons in the Trinity. Because the unique Triune God alone is worthy of worship (Matt. 4:10), we will never be worshipped as God. He alone is the self-existing and ever-existing God, owing His

existence to no one and nothing (Exo. 3:14). We will never become such independent beings; rather, we will eternally remain dependent beings, relying on Him not only for our being made God but even for our very existence (cf. John 6:57; 14:19). The process of our becoming God neither alters our status as creatures nor effaces our humanity. We will forever remain creatures and humans; hence, we will never be the Creator and will never assume His incommunicable attributes—such as omnipotence, omniscience, and omnipresence—which belong solely to God in the Godhead. God is God who can both transcend all creation and come within creation; we human beings can at best be joined to God and thereby become God within the confines of creation. Since Witness Lee recognized the distinction between the eternal incommunicability of God and His economic operation to join Himself to humankind, in presenting the notion of our becoming God in God's salvation, he sought not only to set forth the full extent of our participation in God's divinity but also to establish the limits of that participation:

> God does intend to make the believers God in life and in nature but not in the Godhead...On the one hand, the New Testament reveals that the Godhead is unique and that only God, who alone has the Godhead, should be worshipped. 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. (*Life-study of 1 and 2 Samuel*, 166-167)

> 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. (*The Christian Life*, 134)

> The Bible tells us that the believers in Christ are God's children (John 1:12-13; 1 John 3:1-2). The children of a man are also men. Because we are children of God, we are God in nature and in life, but not in the Godhead, that is, not in God's position or rank. (*The Organic Union in God's Relationship with Man*, 27)

> We have been "deified," not in person but in life and in nature. We are one with God in His life and nature, but not in His person. (*The Experience and Growth in Life*, 210)

This view of God's salvation is known as the Christian notion of deification. This notion has been largely neglected in the last few centuries among Christian teachers in Western—particularly Protestant—theology, and it has virtually disappeared from the mainstream theological understanding of modern believers in the West. In fact, the majority of Protestant Christians assume that deification is simply without scriptural credence and has been rejected among fellow believers. This, however, is not the case. The doctrine of deification was universally accepted throughout the Christian church in its early centuries; especially in the fourth and fifth centuries, the term *deification* (*theosis*) was synonymous with *salvation* (Pelikan, 216, 344). Although the notion of deification did not hold its sway throughout the Christian church beyond the first five or six centuries and was only marginally respected within the broader sphere of Western Christianity after that, in the Eastern branch of Christianity the doctrine of deification forms a central component of their understanding of salvation to this day. Thankfully, there has recently been a growing appreciation of deification among Christian scholars in the West (including evangelical scholars). In our own understanding of deification, unlike that of Eastern Orthodoxy, whose doctrine of deification is dependent upon a theology of sacraments, we do not believe that sacraments, liturgy, icons, relics, and rituals provide the principal mechanisms for deification. Rather, we hold that we are made God through the operation of the divine life dispensed into us through our contact with God in prayer, through our prayerful reading of the Bible, and through our fellowship in spirit with the believers in the many meetings of the church (Jude 20-21; Eph. 5:26; 6:17-18). We become God by partaking of the divine nature, enjoying the bountiful supply of the Spirit, and living Christ for His magnification through our normal daily

living in the church life (2 Pet. 1:4; Phil. 1:19-21; Col. 3:16; 4:6; Eph. 5:18-19; 4:29; 1 John 5:16).

The intrinsic significance of deification in the New Testament is the sonship that the believers enter into and participate in. We understand that God's heart's desire from eternity past is to obtain a multitude of sons conformed to the image of His Son through the operation of the divine life in them. The apostle Paul tells us that, before the foundation of the world, God, according to the good pleasure of His will, chose us in Christ the Son to be holy, predestinating us unto sonship (Eph. 1:4-5), that is, unto conformity to the image of His Son, that He might be the Firstborn among many brothers (1 Cor. 2:7; Rom. 8:28-29). We acknowledge that, in His eternal existence, God finds perfect delight in the *only* begotten Son, who in the Godhead *alone* embodies and expresses God as the image of God and the Logos of God (John 1:1, 14, 18; 2 Cor. 4:4; cf. Matt. 3:17). At the same time we maintain that in the divine economy to manifest Himself through creation, God desires to make His beloved Son the *Firstborn* and His Son's believers His *many* sons for an enlarged corporate expression of Himself (John 12:24; Heb. 1:5-6; 2:10).

Incarnation can be understood as the initiation of the divine economy in that it brings God into humankind for the expression of God in humanity. In His incarnation Christ, the only begotten Son of God, became the Son of Man, the God-man, bringing divinity into humanity in order to manifest God in the flesh (John 1:14; Matt. 12:8; Heb. 2:14; 1 Tim. 3:16). In His own words, Christ, who embodies life and even is life itself (John 1:4; 14:6; 1 John 5:11-12), indicated that the purpose of His incarnation is the impartation of the divine life into the believers: "I have come that they may have life and may have it abundantly" (John 10:10). In light of this declared purpose of Christ's coming, we view His death on the cross not only as redemptive but also as generative. This latter aspect is

suggested by the Lord's words in John 12:24, which speak of the issue of His death in terms of the organic increase of Himself: "Unless the grain of wheat falls into the ground and dies, it abides alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit." Hence, we see His death not only as a judicial procedure to accomplish the forgiveness of our sins and our eternal redemption (Heb. 9:12) but more significantly as an organic process to release the divine life for the dispensing of it into the believers for their full salvation (John 12:24; 3:16).

In keeping with this organic view of Christ's death, we understand that His resurrection does more than vindicate the efficacy of His redemptive death, proving our justification before God (Rom. 4:25); more intrinsically, it regenerates the believers to be the many sons of God, thereby uplifting humanity into the divine sonship. We recall that on the morning of His resurrection Christ declared that His disciples were now His brothers and that His Father was now their Father (John 20:17; cf. Matt. 28:10); this declaration indicates that through Christ's resurrection the believers are deified to be His brothers, the sons of God. The apostle Peter also speaks of Christ's resurrection from the viewpoint of its organic impact on the believers: "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who according to His great mercy has regenerated us unto a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead" (1 Pet. 1:3). In God's view, when Christ was resurrected, we, His believers, were resurrected with Him (Eph. 2:6), and through Christ's resurrection we were regenerated; that is, we were begotten as sons of God and were thereby made God in life and nature.

From this perspective, we emphasize that Christ is "the Firstborn among many brothers" (Rom. 8:29), not only "the only Begotten from the Father" (John 1:14). Our view is that from eternity to eternity Christ is, as to His deity, the only begotten Son of God; in incarnation the eternal, only begotten Son of God became the Son of Man to bring divinity into

humanity; and in resurrection this God-man became the firstborn Son of God to bring humanity into divinity. While we certainly hold that, as to His status as the second of the Trinity, as to His unique identity in the Godhead (John 1:18; 3:16, 18; 1 John 4:9), Christ eternally remains the only begotten Son of God and can never have brothers, we equally hold that, as to His status as the incarnate God-man, Christ became the firstborn Son through His resurrection and made the believers His many brothers, the many sons of God. Further, we recognize that even in incarnation, there exists a genuine distinction between Christ and the believers. Christ alone is God by virtue of His being God in Himself, whereas the believers become God only by virtue of their union with Christ (1 Cor. 6:17), who is God (Rom. 9:5). While Christ is not ashamed to call us His brothers (Heb. 2:11), He alone owns both the status of the only begotten Son of God in the eternal Trinity and the status of the firstborn Son of God, who has the preeminence among His many brothers (cf. Col. 1:18). While we are the members of His Body (1 Cor. 12:27), He alone is the Head of the Body (cf. Col. 1:18); while we are joined to Him through faith (1 Cor. 6:17), He alone is the Redeemer of humankind, Lord of all, and God over all and blessed forever (Col. 1:13-14; Acts 10:36; Rom. 9:5). Thus, even in the mystery of His communicable existence as the God-man, Christ is unique and quite distinct from us, who wholly depend on Him for our deification in Him.

Given our view of deification as the organic issue of Christ's resurrection, we believe that, based on Christ's judicial redemption, God in Christ deifies us by administering His organic salvation into us. This is salvation in His divine life by which He progressively dispenses Himself as eternal life into us through the indwelling, life-giving Spirit (Rom. 8:6, 9-11; 1 Cor. 15:45), who is the Spirit of life (Rom. 8:2). In our view, this inner working of the divine life within us commences with regeneration, continues with transformation, and consummates in

glorification (John 1:12-13; 2 Cor. 3:18; Col. 3:4; Rom. 8:17). By *regeneration* we refer to the organic process by which God makes us His children not simply by adopting us through the declaration of His sovereign decree but more intrinsically by begetting us through the impartation of His eternal life (John 1:12-13; 3:5-6; 1 John 3:9). We believe that, through regeneration, God becomes our genuine Father (Rom. 8:15; Gal. 4:6), and we become His sons genuinely, organically, and intrinsically, possessing His life and nature (1 John 5:11; 2 Pet. 1:4). Witness Lee understands deification as the full import of biblical sonship:

> Man cannot be God in His Godhead, but he can be God in His life and nature. We are what we are born of. Anything born of a dog is a dog. Likewise, if we were born of a monkey, we would surely be a monkey. God created man not according to a monkey's kind or a dog's kind, but according to His kind, in His image and according to His likeness. Furthermore, the Bible tells us that the believers in Christ are God's children (John 1:12-13; 1 John 3:1-2). The children of a man are also men. Because we are children of God, we are God in nature and in life, but not in the Godhead, that is, not in God's position or rank. (*The Organic Union in God's Relationship with Man*, 27).

> When we say that we are one with God, we do not mean that we become the person of God. This is to make ourselves an object of worship and should be condemned as blasphemy. To be one with God is to be one with Him in His divine life and nature. Every life produces offspring after its own kind (Gen. 1:11, 21, 24). As children of our physical father we have our father's life and nature, but we are not the same person as he is. A grandfather, a father, and a son all have the same life and nature, but they are different persons. In life and nature they are the same, but in person they are different. As the children of God (Rom. 8:16; 1 John 3:1) we have been "deified," not in person but in life and in nature. We are one with God in His life and nature, but not in His person. (*The Experience and Growth in Life*, 209-210)

> In God's new covenant (Jer. 31:33-34), we have been made God in His nature and in His life, but not in His Godhead. This is because we have been begotten of God (John 1:13). Dogs beget dogs; lions beget lions; and man begets man. Since your father is a man, and you are born of him, are you not a man? As believers in Christ, we have been born of God; we have been regenerated by God. God is our Father, and we are His sons. Since our Father is God, what are we, the sons? The sons must be the same as their Father in life and in nature. We have been born of God to be the children of God (1 John 3:1). Eventually, when Christ comes, He will make us fully the same as God in life and in nature (v. 2). However, none of us are or can be God in His Godhead as an object of worship. In a family, only the father has the fatherhood. The children of the father do not have his fatherhood. There is only one father with many children. The father is human, and the children also are human, but there is only one father. In the same way, God is our unique Father; only He has the divine fatherhood. But we as His children are the same as He is in life and in nature. (*The Christian Life*, 133-134)

The goal of God's salvation in the divine life is to build up the believers into the Body of Christ, the corporate and organic expression of Christ. We maintain that the Body of Christ is not simply some apt metaphor for the unity of the believers in the church but the spiritual and intrinsic reality of the church (Eph. 1:22-23)—a divine-human organism that encompasses Christ, the firstborn Son, as the Head and the many believers, the many sons of God, as the members of the Body (Rom. 12:4-5; 1 Cor. 12:12, 27). We understand the Body of Christ to be constituted with the many members who have been regenerated with the divine life and transformed into the image of the Son for the glorification of God; in this sense, the Body of Christ can be said to be the organism of the Triune God (Eph. 4:4-6; cf. John 15:1-8). Because the saving life of God is simply Christ our life (Col. 3:4), as the life of God progressively pervades us, we forsake our natural isolation from one another, instead seeking the fellowship of the Body of Christ, and become joined, knit, and built together in love with fellow members of the Body who are

undergoing the same organic salvation (1 Cor. 10:16; 1 John 1:3, 7; Eph. 4:16; Col. 2:19). While we admit that the full realization of the Body of Christ among the believers has not yet been completely manifested in the Christian church, we firmly believe that, by ministering His organic salvation into His believers, Christ as the Head will build up His Body practically as His genuine corporate expression (Matt. 16:18; Eph. 4:12-13). Ultimately, Christ's great endeavor to produce and build up His Body will consummate in the New Jerusalem, the eternal mutual abode of God and redeemed, regenerated, transformed, and glorified humankind, and the eternal corporate manifestation of God in humankind (Rev. 21:2-3, 11, 22). The New Jerusalem, an extended symbol of the Body of Christ in its ultimate expression for eternity, will stand as a testimony to the fulfillment of God's deep desire from eternity past to have many sons conformed to the image of His beloved Son for an enlarged expression of Himself (v. 7). Witness Lee provides this concise summary of our organic view of God's work among humankind:

> We need to see the eternal economy of God, which is God's eternal intention with His heart's desire to dispense Himself in His Divine Trinity as the Father in the Son by the Spirit into His chosen people to be their life and nature that they may be the same as He is for His fullness, His expression.
>
> The word *economy* is an anglicized form of the Greek word *oikonomia*, which means "house law, household management, or administration," and derivatively, "administrative dispensation (arrangement), plan, economy." This Greek word implies the notion of dispensing...The word *dispensing* denotes an imparting of something...
>
> An economy is an arrangement to carry out a plan for dispensing. God's economy is God's plan, God's arrangement, for God to dispense Himself in His element, life, nature, and attributes, and all that He has achieved and attained into His chosen people that they may be rebuilt by being constituted with the divine essence in the divine element of the divine source to be something divine. (*Life-study of Job*, 57-59)

God's economy is to dispense Himself into our being that our being may be constituted with His being to be one constitution with His being. This can be accomplished only by God putting Himself into us as the divine life.

...This divine life is the centrality and universality of our Christian life. This life is nothing less than Christ Himself, and Christ is the very God. Since we have God within us as life, we can know Him, apprehend Him, live Him, and be constituted with Him. Furthermore, by dispensing Himself into us as life, God is accomplishing His economy, that He may have a corporate expression of Himself for eternity.

...Because we know the divine life, we can experience the divine dispensing—God's dispensing Himself into us that we may become His increase, His enlargement, for His expression. This is God's intention, God's goal, God's purpose, God's economy with His dear dispensing. (*Life-study of Jeremiah,* 179, 181-182)

God's eternal economy is to gain a group of people that He may dispense Himself into them to be their life and everything so that they may be joined to Him as one, be filled and occupied with Him, and be one entity with Him on the earth to be the Body of Christ, the church, for His expression. (*Being Up-to-date for the Rebuilding of the Temple,* 144)

According to His heart's desire, God made His eternal economy (1 Tim. 1:4b; Eph. 1:10; 3:9) to make man the same as He is in life and nature but not in His Godhead and to make Himself one with man and man one with Him, thus to be enlarged and expanded in His expression, that all His divine attributes may be expressed in human virtues.

God carries out His eternal economy through a number of steps. First, He created man in His image and after His likeness (Gen. 1:26-27). Then God became a man in His image and after His likeness. He became a man in His incarnation to partake of the human nature (Heb. 2:14a). He lived a human life to express His attributes through man's virtues. He died an all-inclusive death and resurrected to produce the firstborn Son of God and become the life-giving Spirit (Rom. 8:29; Acts 13:33; 1 Cor. 15:45). This was all for Him to dispense Himself into His chosen people to regenerate them with Himself as

> their life for producing many sons—many God-men (1 Pet. 1:3)—for the forming of the churches with His many sons and for the building up of the Body of Christ with His brothers as the members to be the organism of the processed and consummated Triune God, consummating in the New Jerusalem as His eternal enlargement and expression. (*The Ten Great Critical "Ones" for the Building Up of the Body of Christ*, 14)

> God's economy is that God became man so that man may become God in life and in nature but not in the Godhead to produce the organism of the Triune God, the Body of Christ, which consummates the New Jerusalem. (*Life-study of Proverbs*, 54)

While some Christians may fear that the notion of deification may deprive God of the glory which He alone merits, we believe that by making human beings God in life, nature, and expression, God can fulfill His desire to fully glorify Himself in humanity. Through God's organic salvation we are gradually transformed from glory to glory into the image of His Son (2 Cor. 3:18) until eventually we will fully possess His glory and be manifested with Him in glory (4:17; Rev. 21:11; Col. 3:4). In glory we will not express ourselves but God. Because it is God's glory that will be manifested through us, what we will manifest is not ourselves but Him; hence, through us God will not at all be deprived of glory but will, in reality, have the glory He desires and deserves. For this reason, Paul declares that we, the believers, will be to the praise of *His* glory (Eph. 1:12, 14). We will never be an object of worship, but we will nevertheless become a cause of universal praise to God, motivating praise to God from all the positive things in the universe, for they will see in us the very expression, glorification, of God Himself. At that time God will be glorified not solely in His only begotten Son, who is the eternal expression of God in the Godhead (Heb. 1:3), but also in the church as the organic Body of Christ through His firstborn Son with the many sons of God (Heb. 2:10). Because of God's magnificent economy to glorify and deify humanity,

there will be glory *to Him* in the church and in Christ Jesus unto all the generations forever and ever (Eph. 3:21).

On the Church as the Body of Christ and Its Practical Expression

Our review of the truth concerning the Divine Trinity and God's complete salvation has prepared us for, and now brings us to, the final topic that we wish to address in response to the open letter: the church.

Our Vision

As one contemporary theologian has commented, "[t]he doctrine of the church can never be isolated from other theological loci; ecclesiology is kind of a *summa* of any given theological tradition" (Kärkkäinen, 18). Accordingly, we regard the church as the manifest outcome of the Trinity's operation in His economy and of the individual's experience of salvation. This is revealed with particular clarity in Paul's Epistles. His letter to the Ephesians presents the church as the sublime outworking of God's eternal purpose within His redeemed believers:

> And to enlighten all that they may see what the economy of the mystery is, which throughout the ages has been hidden in God, who created all things, in order that now to the rulers and the authorities in the heavenlies the multifarious wisdom of God might be made known through the church, according to the eternal purpose which He made in Christ Jesus our Lord. (3:9-11)

The economy of the mystery refers to God's plan, or His administration, to carry out the mysterious intention hidden in God (v. 9). While the origin of this economy is God's eternal purpose (v. 11), the culmination of this mystery is the church (v. 10). The church, then, is no mere by-product of God's redemptive plan; it is the very *product* itself of His plan. Neither is the church simply an afterthought in the divine economy;

rather, the very *a priori thought* of God Himself is to have the church. Based on this passage, we may say that God's eternal purpose is to have the church emerge as an eternal exhibition of His infinite wisdom.

Details of the divine economy are shown in the first chapter of Ephesians, which presents the divine administration with a view toward Christ's universal headship in and through the church (vv. 9-12). Paul reveals the purposeful steps taken by the Divine Trinity in the direction of the church: the Father's choosing and predestinating the future constituents of the church (vv. 4-5); the redemption by the Beloved Son being generously lavished upon its foreordained recipients (vv. 6-8); and the Holy Spirit's sealing the believers and becoming the guarantee of their inheritance in anticipation of the coming full redemption (vv. 13-14). Chapter 1 ends with the climactic accomplishment, the church as the summation of the successive steps of the divine economy:

> And He subjected all things under His feet and gave Him to be Head over all things to the church, which is His Body, the fullness of the One who fills all in all. (vv. 22-23)

The church, since it is the Body of Christ, is uniquely one and inclusive of all believers in Christ regardless of time, place, or practice. The church as the Body of Christ must be one because there is only one Spirit, one Lord, and one God and Father (Eph. 4:4-6; cf. John 17:21). Of such an incorporated, universal entity as the church, no community of believers, no matter how spiritual or sizable, can claim total ownership. We hold the foregoing points regarding the church to be axiomatic and trust that our readers do as well, yet we offer this unequivocal assurance for the sake of those unfamiliar with our vision and stand: all genuine believers in Christ, from the first century to the twenty-first, from Jerusalem unto the uttermost parts of the earth, and from every tribe and tongue and people and nation, compose and complete the organic membership of the church,

the Body of Christ, regardless of their practical affiliation with particular Christian groups, both ours and others. Contrary to the false reports about us, we unequivocally maintain that salvation is by God's grace through faith in Christ alone and not by membership in our congregations.

Our Practice

Ecclesiastical differences between Christians exist not in the mystical realm of the universal church as the Body of Christ but in the practical manifestations of the visible church. Hopefully, we all agree that the church is universally one, but we and our readers may differ on how (and whether) this oneness can be meaningfully realized in a visible and practical way. We in the local churches believe that the New Testament provides the practical pattern for manifesting as well as preserving the oneness of the Body of Christ, and we gather in local churches according to that pattern. In this section we would like to explain our practice of assembling as local churches.

We note at the outset some principles that govern our practice. First, just as oneness is a basic attribute of the Body of Christ (Eph. 4:4), we believe any proper expression of the Body of Christ must exhibit this inherent attribute of oneness (Eph. 4:3). Further, we take seriously our Lord's possessive interest in the church as evidenced in His introduction of her in the Gospels: "I will build My church" (Matt. 16:18). This means that the church is *His*; it is the Body *of Christ*, and therefore, it is our view that personal opinions, traditions, and preferences regarding ecclesiastical structure are nugatory. Finally, we believe that the descriptive patterns of the church consistently revealed from Acts through Revelation are instructive as to the proper basis for the establishment of churches. Rather than dismissing such patterns as accidental or historical happenstance, we highly regard such biblically revealed patterns as scriptural blueprints for us to follow even in the modern era. As we endeavor to build the church as the New Testament house of

God (1 Tim. 3:15), we are constrained by the same warning given to Moses when he received the divine instructions for building the Old Testament house of God: "See...that you make all things according to the pattern that was shown to you in the mountain" (Heb. 8:5; Exo. 25:40).

What, then, is the New Testament pattern with regard to the churches? Simply stated, we believe that the New Testament shows us local churches in the purest sense of the term—congregations of Christ's believers who meet only on the basis of the locality in which they live, for the purpose of preserving and displaying the oneness of the Body of Christ. In the New Testament we read of "the church which was in Jerusalem" (Acts 8:1), the local church in Antioch (Acts 13:1, Gk.), "the church which is in Cenchrea" (Rom. 16:1), and the "church of God which is in Corinth" (1 Cor. 1:2). Furthermore, in Revelation 1:11 the identification between a church and the city in which it is located is apparent:

> What you see write in a scroll and send it to the seven churches: to Ephesus and to Smyrna and to Pergamos and to Thyatira and to Sardis and to Philadelphia and to Laodicea.

Commenting on this verse, Witness Lee writes,

> This book's being sent to the seven churches equals its being sent to the seven cities. This shows clearly that the practice of the church life in the early days was the practice of having one church for one city, one city with only one church. In no city was there more than one church. This is the local church, with the city, not the street or the area, as the unit. The jurisdiction of a local church should cover the whole city in which the church is located; it should not be greater or lesser than the boundary of the city. All the believers within that boundary should constitute the one unique local church within that city. (Recovery Version, note 1 on Rev. 1:11)

When the New Testament refers to the church in the plural number, for example, "the churches of Judea" (Gal. 1:22;

1 Thes. 2:14), the churches of Syria and Cilicia (Acts 15:41), "the churches of Asia" (1 Cor. 16:19), "the churches of Galatia" (Gal. 1:2; 1 Cor. 16:1) and "the churches of Macedonia" (2 Cor. 8:1), it is apparent that the references are to the churches in a particular region or province. The New Testament also records four instances of a local church meeting in a home (see Rom. 16:5, 14-15; 1 Cor. 16:19; Acts 18:18-19; Col. 4:15-16; Philem. 1-2). Careful study of these portions in their respective contexts indicates that the homes were not gatherings of separate *churches* within that particular city; rather, the churches in those localities simply met in the homes mentioned by Paul. Nowhere in the New Testament is there any indication or suggestion that there were multiple *churches* within a particular city. Moreover, when we compare Paul's practice in Acts 14:23 ("appointed elders...in every church") with his charge in Titus 1:5 ("appoint elders in every city"), we see a further indication that the church and the city were coterminous.

Our understanding of New Testament churches is not arbitrary or unique. Williston Walker's well-regarded *A History of the Christian Church* notes the following:

> Even by the beginning of the [second] century, however, a regular pattern of ministry and governance was in the process of being established. The unit of the church—as one might expect, given the social and political organization of the Roman world—was the body of Christians in a particular *polis* [Gk. "city"].
>
> Whatever the uncertainties and crises of Christian existence in the third century, the fact remains that during the greater part of that period the churches enjoyed relative peace...
>
> The word "church" continued to denote primarily the assembly of Christians in a particular place—that is, in practice, a particular *polis* with its urban center and rural hinterland. Such "cities," however, varied greatly in size, from cosmopolitan centers like Rome, Alexandria, or Antioch, to what were by modern standards no more than small towns,

> and the size and complexity of Christian congregations varied accordingly.
>
> As in the second and third centuries, the normal basic unit of the church continued, after the recognition of the church by Constantine, to be the assembly of Christians in a particular *polis*—that is, a particular "city" with its rural hinterland. (49, 98, 183)

Our practice of meeting as local churches is explained at length in Watchman Nee's classic work *The Normal Christian Church Life*, first published in 1939. In the portion below, Watchman Nee identifies the principle that governs the oneness of the universal church and those that should define the oneness of the local church:

> In any place where the gospel has been proclaimed and people have believed on the Lord, they are the church in that place, and they are our brethren.
>
> How are we going to determine who are our brothers and our fellow members in the Church of God? Not by inquiring if they hold the same doctrinal views that we hold, or have had the same spiritual experiences; nor by seeing if their customs, manner of living, interests, and preferences tally with ours. We merely inquire, Are they indwelt by the Spirit of God or not? We cannot insist on oneness of opinions, or oneness of experience, or any other oneness among believers, except the oneness of the Spirit. That oneness there can be, and always must be, among the children of God. All who have this oneness are in the Church.
>
> Now what is true of the universal Church is also true of a local church. The universal Church comprises all those who have the oneness of the Spirit. The local church comprises all those who, in a given locality, have the oneness of the Spirit. The Church of God and the churches of God do not differ in nature, but only in extent. The former consists of all throughout the universe who are indwelt by the Spirit of God; the latter consists of all in one locality who are indwelt by the Spirit.

> Anyone wishing to belong to a church in a given locality must answer two requirements—he must be a child of God, and he must live in that particular locality. Membership in *the Church of God* is conditioned only by being a child of God, but membership in a *church of God* is conditioned, firstly, by being a child of God and, secondly, by living in a given locality. (75, 77, 81)

While almost elementary in form, the practice of meeting simply on the basis of locality is exceedingly elegant in function. Every inclination of self-choice and every opportunity for self-preference are preempted. The heavenly, universal, and invisible church is no longer abstract but becomes actualized in the practical, local, and visible church. Moreover, the basic attribute of the church—oneness—is preserved as a testimony of the one Body of Christ. Such an expression of oneness is still needed to fulfill our Lord's prayer on the eve of His crucifixion for a visible oneness that would compel the world to believe (John 17:21).

Our Attitude

Although we are constrained by the scriptural blueprint of the New Testament, we recognize that we are in the minority among Christians in our practice. These differences have engendered misunderstanding among those not meeting with us. We hope that this final section will dispel those misunderstandings, which frustrate the fellowship we seek and treasure among all the members of the Body of Christ.

Toward the Believers

Our sincere posture toward other believers can be summarized by Paul's exhortation to the Roman believers: "Therefore receive one another, as Christ also received you to the glory of God" (Rom. 15:7). All who have saving faith in the Lord Jesus are welcome to our meetings and to commune with us at the Lord's table, where we testify of the oneness of the Body of Christ. Beyond the confession of Christ as Savior, no yoke of creed, catechism, custom, or culture is necessary for full fellowship

with us. While many accuse us of being exclusive in our fellowship, one need only visit any of the local churches to test for himself or herself whether or not we in the local churches accept the believers on any other basis than this.

Throughout his ministry, Witness Lee consistently taught and practiced such inclusiveness. Consider the following comments:

> We must receive the saints according to God's receiving of them. Whomever God has received, we are compelled to receive. We have no choice...Our heavenly Father has brought forth many children, many Christians, and He has received them all. Therefore, we also must receive them, not according to our tastes or preferences, but according to God's receiving. (*Life-study of Romans*, 331)

> In the church life we must be general, able to receive all genuine believers. However, it is not easy to learn this lesson, because we all want others to be the same as we are. Let us not make demands of others or require that they change their way for our sake. Rather, let us have unity in variety and variety without conformity. Even though there may be such variety, we still are one in Christ. (*Life-study of Romans*, 622)

> God receives people according to His Son. As long as a person receives His Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, as his personal Savior, regardless of the concepts he holds regarding all other things, God receives him immediately. Since God receives people in this way, we too must receive people in the same way...
>
> God's receiving is based upon Christ's receiving, and Christ's receiving is in accordance with our faith in Him. Whoever believes in Him, He will receive. Whoever receives Him, He will never reject. He said, "Him that cometh to me I will in no wise cast out" (John 6:37). Since coming to Him, believing in Him, receiving Him, is the only condition for Christ's receiving, so we must receive people upon the same basis with nothing added. As long as anyone believes in Christ our Lord, as long as he receives Him as his personal Savior, we must receive him with nothing else required. (*The Practical Expression of the Church*, 63-64)

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)

Toward the Denominations

Our deference for a believer's right to meet according to conscience does not, however, allow us to relinquish our faithfulness to the vision of the oneness of the Body of Christ.

Accordingly, while we receive all believers, in our conscience we cannot condone the denominational system that characterizes modern Christianity. We simply find no biblical basis to support, and an overwhelming tide of biblical bases to oppose, the endless partitioning of the Body of Christ into countless subsets. As we consider the bewildering taxonomy of Christian churches today, we do not believe it is pleasing to God that many of His people could be so aptly described by the characterization of degraded Israel in the period of the judges: "Everyone did what was right in his own eyes" (Judg. 21:25).

With all due and sincere respect for the historical contributions of those who have served in the denominations, the reasons offered in support of the proliferation of denominations strike us as strained and after-the-fact justifications. Proponents of denominationalism commonly assert that denominations allow the "diversity" of spiritual gifts, ministries, and even cultural expressions within the Body of Christ to be manifested. This seems noble, but it is completely incompatible with the New Testament depiction of the church. In chapter 12 of 1 Corinthians, Paul presents an array of distinctive gifts, ministries, and operations of the Spirit, but not for the purpose of emphasizing diversity and certainly not to justify new congregations built upon these differences. Rather, his overarching point is that the Body of Christ, as expressed in the realm of the local church in Corinth, remains one even amidst such variety (v. 12). Furthermore, those who cherish their cultural or ethnic distinctions must learn to cherish even more their newfound heritage in Christ, in whom there is neither Greek nor Jew (v. 13; Col. 3:10-11). It is probably safe to assume that most, if not all, of the signatories to the open letter are affiliated with various, mainline denominations. As such, perhaps we should consider the rationale for maintaining denominations as put forth by many of the denominations themselves. A well-articulated summary of the reasons most frequently tendered for maintaining

the denominational system is found on the official website of a prominent American denomination:

> Why belong to a denomination? Well, denominations give churches a way to collectively express their convictions and realize their vision. In such a free land as ours, it is natural that churches would take the opportunity to identify with like-minded churches. Denominations allow churches to be a part of a larger enterprise, pooling their resources to establish and advance Great Commission work. A denomination can have an impact larger than the sum of the impacts of the individual churches. (Southern Baptist Convention)

Before taking up the various points put forth in this statement, it is telling that such official explanations are deemed necessary at all. Apparently, denominational leaders sense the growing realization among Christians today that denominationalism cannot be completely right in the eyes of God if it does not seem right even in their own consciences before God (cf. 1 John 3:20). But beyond this, the apologia proffered on the website, though apparently sensible, is built on the false premise that a denominational alliance is the preferred (or only) way for individual churches to realize and have meaningful parts in corporate "Great Commission work." We agree that joining a denomination does allow individual churches to pool resources. But are not the resources within the Body of Christ as a whole much greater than those within any denominational subset (cf. Eph. 4:11-12)? We accept that denominations allow churches to be part of a larger enterprise. But should not churches be part of God's largest and unique enterprise—the building up of the church as the Body of Christ (cf. Eph. 4:15-16)? And we admit that a denomination can have a synergistic impact upon its members. But how great an impact would there be if all churches were truly one? Would not the world then believe, according to our one Lord's earnest desire and prayer (John 17:21)? In the final analysis, every supposed reason to be part of a denomination becomes an even more compelling reason *not* to be part of a denomination.

Finally, we hope that our readers can distinguish our church practice from modern ecumenical aspirations. We respect these efforts to seek dialogue and reach doctrinal consensus among historic traditions. But we do not believe our energies are best spent attempting to reconcile ancient rifts or rehabilitate religious camps. Rather, in faithfulness to the stewardship apportioned to us in the local churches and on behalf of all the children of God everywhere, our aspiration is to simply practice the New Testament church life according to the vision of the one Body of Christ as the goal of God's economy.

"On the Legitimacy of Evangelical Churches and Denominations"

The open letter contained a section titled "On the Legitimacy of Evangelical Churches and Denominations," in which was a protest against the local churches and LSM, and concluded with a request to the local churches and LSM:

> 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...
>
> 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. (Open Letter)

In line with what we have said above, we find the very notion of "evangelical churches" out of step with the testimony of Scripture regarding the truth of the church as the indivisible Body of Christ. Our Christian conscience, in response to the Scriptures, compels us to say that the church as the Body of Christ should not be divided into evangelical, Protestant, Catholic, Orthodox, western, eastern, national, ethnic, cultural, doctrinal, or other

"churches." We also believe that among many of Christ's believers today there is a growing apprehension in conscience about the one Body of Christ being segmented into denominations. The New Testament writers know only the locality in which the believers gather as a valid eponym of the church, and for this reason we meet as the local churches in the cities where we live. It is certainly accurate to speak of "evangelical denominations," as denominations characterize the practice in Christianity today of distinguishing the believers according to the things that divide them rather than make them one; but to speak of the Christian groups that distinguish themselves along evangelical lines as "evangelical churches" is against the truth of the Bible. Are "evangelical denominations," then, legitimate? Our reply to this is dual: as churches, no; as "Christian entities," yes. We recognize that believers can congregate among themselves for various purposes, such as Christian business associations, Christian networks of one sort or another, Christian clubs, etc. But we cannot, in good conscience, call any of these entities churches in the sense that the New Testament uses the term. While we cannot condone the practice of many Christians to denominate the church of God, we do not at all deny that these Christians are our genuine brothers and sisters in Christ and that the groups they meet in are Christian entities. But by the very act of denominating themselves, they take a stand to promote the particular matters that distinguish them from all other Christians in general, thereby undermining, rather than promoting, the oneness of the Body of Christ. As such, they can hardly be considered genuine churches, which, according to the New Testament, exist as the practical expression of the one Body of Christ and are not denominated at all. We understand that this may be an unpopular position, but we are committed to the New Testament in this matter and not to the situation that has devolved over the past centuries in Christianity. Further, we are not alone in questioning the legitimacy of denominations as genuine churches.

LSM, as a publisher of Christian ministry, is indeed a member of a number of evangelical and otherwise Christian organizations, but LSM is not a church, nor does it present itself as such. As a publisher, it enjoys membership in such Christian organizations as Evangelical Christian Publishers Association (ECPA), Christian Booksellers Association (CBA), a Christian credit union, etc., and these we hold as genuine and "legitimate Christian entities." We should make it clear that the local churches and LSM are not members of any association of "evangelical churches," not only because it would be against our own stand in the truth but also because it would probably be against the stand of any such association itself. Further, LSM's participation in any associations—and it is LSM and not the local churches that have any participation in these—is not based upon our membership in the one Body of Christ but upon our confraternity with other believers who have like interests in publishing, finances, and so on. These are not bases of the oneness of the church as the Body of Christ, just as the evangelical banner cannot be a basis of the oneness of the church as the Body of Christ.

We hope that these clarifications will help the signers of the open letter see that there is nothing "inconsistent and unjustifiable" in LSM's participation in evangelical associations. We hope also that they will respect and allow our feeling not to resign from any of these associations. We feel that our participation not only helps us to make our views concerning Christian truth available to all the Body of Christ but also gives us a practical way to fellowship and coordinate with other believers who may not be in complete agreement with our views concerning Christian truth.

In Response to a Call "to Disavow and Cease to Publish"

The signers of the open letter have respectfully called on us in the local churches and at LSM "to disavow and cease to publish"

certain statements by Witness Lee which they have isolated, because these statements "appear to contradict or compromise essential doctrines of the Christian faith." It may be that some of the statements, pulled from their original contexts and presented in isolation, indeed appear to be out of line with essential Christian truths. But we wish to respectfully suggest that perhaps the handling of Witness Lee's statements in the open letter may have instead created an appearance that does not truly exist in Witness Lee's ministry. In this article we have attempted to show that Witness Lee offered much balance in his ministry on the essential Christian doctrines that the signers have targeted in the open letter. In a corpus of writing as large as Witness Lee's, just as in corpuses as large as those of other prolific Christian writers in the past (Tertullian, Augustine, Aquinas, Luther, Calvin, etc.), it is always possible to isolate statements and say that they "appear to contradict or compromise essential doctrines of the Christian faith." The signers of the open letter may be aware of specific cases in scholarship where this has been done (e.g., Tertullian's supposed "economic trinitarianism"). Thus, proper scholarship should require a thorough study of Witness Lee's writings on the particular items of the Christian faith that arouse suspicion. Hence, we must respectfully ask of each and every signer of the open letter, Was such a thorough study personally done before you signed the open letter, or was your signing done simply in view of isolated quotations and in reliance on others' recommendations? We do not, of course, expect a public response to this question, but we do hope that there would be personal searchings of heart before the Lord (cf. Judg. 5:16), as we ourselves are reminded to have. Absent a thorough study of Witness Lee's ministry by the signers of the open letter, which matter we welcome, we feel that we should not be publicly pressured to disavow any statements of Witness Lee's ministry nor to cease to publish any of them.

Finally, we would like to make an appeal to all our readers regarding this call to disavow and cease to publish portions of Witness Lee's ministry. Witness Lee went to be with the Lord on June 9, 1997, and now belongs to the ages. He is no longer a living author whose views can be changed and whose writings may be amended. From henceforth Witness Lee's writings deserve the service of preservation and not amendment so that the current and future generations may be able to assess them for what they really are. No properly trained scholar today would advocate the disavowal and censorship of portions of the writings of Augustine or of Luther or even of the greatest heresiarchs. Hence, we find such a call for the disavowal and censorship of particular statements of Witness Lee quite peculiar and strangely at odds with academic integrity. However, our appeal in this matter is not to academics but to our reasonable readers, who, we believe, will soberly weigh it and rightly judge that Witness Lee's ministry should be kept for the ages as he presented it. We need not ask that anyone accept what Witness Lee taught, in whole or in part; but we need not be expected to change what is now part of history and what now properly belongs to the scrutiny of history.

With all these matters placed before the Christian public, we wish to offer our sincere prayer that the peace of Christ would arbitrate in all our hearts, to which also we were called in one Body (Col. 3:15). We are thankful to the Lord, to our readers, and to the signers of the open letter that we have been given this opportunity to present our views on these all-important matters of the Christian faith that we all cherish and love. May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit.

Respectfully submitted
by various brothers representing the local churches
and by the editorial section of Living Stream Ministry
Lord's Day, December 7, 2008

WORKS CITED

Note: All titles by Watchman Nee and Witness Lee referenced in this article are published by Living Stream Ministry, Anaheim, CA.

Kärkkäinen, V.-M. *An Introduction to Ecclesiology*. Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2002.

"An Open Letter to the Leadership of Living Stream Ministry and the 'Local Churches.'" http://www.open-letter.org, accessed 13 Sept. 2008.

Pelikan, J. *The Emergence of the Catholic Tradition (100-600). The Christian Tradition: A History of The Development of Doctrine*, Vol. I. Chicago and London: U of Chicago Press, 1971.

Southern Baptist Convention. "A Closer Look – Why a Denomination?" http://www.sbc.net/about us/clwhydenomination.asp, accessed 13 Sept. 2008.

Walker, W., Norris, R. A., Lotz, D. W., and Handy, R. T. *A History of the Christian Church*. 4th ed. New York: Scribner's, 1985.