

A Brief Response to “An Open Letter to the Leadership of Living Stream Ministry and the ‘Local Churches’”

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 three times for relief from accusations that were false and defamatory. 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.

Regarding our affiliation with evangelical organizations, 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
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