

Repeating False Witness Concerning Litigation over the *Encyclopedia of Cults and New Religions*

A Response to Norman Geisler and Ron Rhodes' Defense of the "Open Letter" and Critique of the Christian Research Journal's Reassessment of the Local Churches

In "A Response to the *Christian Research Journal's* Recent Defense of the 'Local Church Movement,'" ¹ Norman Geisler and Ron Rhodes make many false and misleading statements regarding the recent litigation over John Ankerberg and John Weldon's *Encyclopedia of Cults and New Religions* (ECNR). They misrepresent:

- The subject and scope of the litigation,
- The content of the book,
- The actions taken by courts and what those actions mean, and
- An "open letter" signed by both Geisler and Rhodes, which itself misrepresents the teachings of the local churches and Living Stream Ministry.²

Taken together, all these misrepresentations seem to be an attempt by Geisler and Rhodes to mislead their fellow signers of the open letter and, even the more, to deceive the Christian public at large.

An Egregious Misrepresentation of the Subject and Scope of the Litigation

The litigation at issue was over false and defamatory accusations of aberrant behaviors made in the *Encyclopedia of Cults and New Religions*, published by Harvest House Publishers and written by John Ankerberg and John Weldon.³ Theological issues were never a part of that litigation. Nevertheless, Geisler and Rhodes wrote:

In truth, the Supreme Court decision was a great victory for all orthodox, conservative, and evangelical Christians. For, as we pointed out in our amicus brief to the court (with which the court agreed), this would be a violation of free speech since it would deny us the freedom to define the limits of our own orthodox beliefs by distinguishing them from unorthodox beliefs. The LC rightly but reluctantly had to acknowledge that "it is nothing more than an expression of religious opinion that the Local Church is a 'cult' in a theological sense. *It is a type of religious opinion that is undisputedly protected by the Establishment Clause...*" (p. 9) [emphasis in original article]

Almost every point of fact in this paragraph is deliberately and craftily distorted.⁴ The most egregious of these distortions is the impression Geisler and Rhodes give through their partial quotation from a motion filed by the local churches with the Texas Supreme Court.⁵ In Geisler and Rhodes' quotation of the churches' brief,⁶ the words "it is nothing more than an expression of religious opinion" seems to be the local churches' assessment of ECNR. That is not true. What the churches' brief identified as religious opinion was a statement made by Geisler in his amicus brief, which had been submitted at an earlier date to the Texas Supreme Court.

Prior to the quotation excised by Geisler and Rhodes, the churches' motion filed with the court states:

Given that the Local Church's lawsuit complains only about allegations of secular cultism, it is curious that Harvest House's "consulting expert," Dr. Geisler, made a focal point of his amicus brief to assert that the Local Church is a "cult" in a theological sense.

After citing an excerpt from Geisler's brief, the churches' motion says:

This statement by Dr. Geisler in no way suggests that the Local Church is a "cult" in a secular sense. It is nothing more than an expression of *religious opinion* that the Local Church is a "cult" in a *theological* sense. It is the type of religious opinion that is undisputedly protected by the Establishment clause, **but it is also an opinion that has nothing to do with any issue before the Court in this case.** [boldface type added]

From these excerpts, it is evident that Geisler and Rhodes' misrepresentation is deliberate. They ignored the clear statement that preceded what they quoted from Geisler's brief and ***cut off the last half of a sentence that was in complete contradiction to their misrepresentation.*** Their dishonesty is unconscionable. They knew they were twisting words, yet they did it anyway. If Geisler and Rhodes deliberately dissembled with such facility on this point, what does that suggest concerning the integrity of their other works and the caution readers should exercise in relying on them?

The churches' motion cited Geisler's brief to throw light upon the consistent effort by the defendants and their supporters to misconstrue the issues in the case. The case had nothing to do with theological issues,⁷ yet Harvest House and its supporters, including Geisler, sought to convince the courts that the book should be protected as religious speech. That Geisler and Rhodes would selectively quote the Motion and misrepresent its subject only illustrates the extent to which these defenders of *ECNR* have gone to distort the real issues in the case. If the book's defenders succeeded in influencing the courts through such attempts at deception, as it appears they may have, they should be ashamed rather than self-aggrandizing as if by such a work of deceit they could be doing the work of the Lord.

Since Geisler and Rhodes were critiquing Elliot Miller's reassessment of the teaching and practice of the local churches in the *Christian Research Journal*, they were surely aware of Miller's statement printed in large type on page 40 of the *Journal*:

Contrary to what is commonly repeated in the countercult community, the LC's complaint in this lawsuit was never that they were called a cult on theological grounds.

By choosing to miscast the statement from the Motion for Rehearing and to ignore Miller's clear statement, Geisler and Rhodes demonstrate a preoccupation with vindicating their countercult friends rather than a care for the truth or for fairness in the treatment of others' words. This is consistent with the out-of-context quoting practiced in the open letter's treatment of Witness Lee's ministry, a practice that has been characteristic of much of the countercult's treatment of Witness Lee and the local churches generally. Geisler and Rhodes' article is, in fact, a further demonstration of what Dr. J. Gordon Melton observed twenty-five years ago and both CRI and Fuller Theological Seminary more recently confirmed—that the critics of the local churches wrench statements from their proper context to mislead the uninformed.⁸

Even when addressing details of the *ECNR* litigation in a rather off-handed way, Geisler and Rhodes err. They stated:

In their Appeal to the Texas Supreme Court to reconsider their case, the LC ironically included an appendix containing Chapter Three from a book by Witness Lee titled, *The God-Ordained Way to Practice the New Testament Economy*...

This claim is misleading. The third chapter of the book in question was not submitted by the local churches to the Texas Supreme Court in the *ECNR* litigation. However, it was referenced by an out-of-context quote in an Amicus Brief filed with that Court in support of the authors and publisher of *ECNR*. Because of this out-of-context quote, the subject chapter, in its entirety, was submitted for reference as an appendix to the local churches' appeal to the U. S. Supreme Court. Geisler and Rhodes' characterization of this as ironic is, at best, uninformed, if not purposely misleading. What should be considered ironic is that the same, somewhat obscure, portion quoted out of context in the referenced Amicus Brief is also similarly abused by Geisler and Rhodes in "Response." To add to the irony, the same chapter of the same book, selected out of thousands of chapters and hundreds of books by Witness Lee, was criticized in a strikingly similar manner on the corporate website of Harvest House Publishers. While this could be coincidental, it is suggestive of at least some degree of collusion between Harvest House and its authors, Geisler and Rhodes.

Misrepresenting the Content of *ECNR*

Geisler and Rhodes' defense of *ECNR* also misrepresents the book's contents. In this they mirror the tactic of Harvest House, Ankerberg, and Weldon, who repeatedly tried to convince the courts that the definition of "cult" used in the book was purely theological. They may have succeeded in convincing the Texas Court of Appeals that this was true, but in fact it is not true. Even the defendants' own counsel, in a pre-trial conference, had to admit to the court that *ECNR* was not just about theological teachings but also about the heinous conduct the book attributes to the groups it profiles:

Judge: But the book is a book about teachings **and conduct**. Correct? [emphasis added]

Shelby Sharpe: Yes, it is.⁹

Elliot Miller's cogent analysis in the *Christian Research Journal* documents many flaws in the Appeals Court's reasoning. Geisler and Rhodes address none of the points Miller raised, but merely proclaim the court's decision "a great victory for the countercult movement." This "great victory" is at the expense of the truth. While Miller's treatment is more thorough, it is worth pointing out some of the key flaws in the Court's reasoning for those whose interest is truth and not partisanship.

Although the Court ruled that the treatment of "cults" in *ECNR* was in a theological context, the definition of a cult used in *ECNR* includes aberrant practices and sub-biblical ethical standards:

For our purposes, and from a Christian perspective, a cult may be briefly defined as "a separate religious group generally claiming compatibility with Christianity but whose doctrines contradict those of historic Christianity and whose **practices and ethical standards** violate those of biblical Christianity." [*ECNR*, p. XXII]¹⁰ [emphasis added]

According to the Introduction, these practices and ethical standards are aberrant criminal, immoral, and anti-social behaviors. For example, Ankerberg and Weldon portrayed the groups discussed in the book with such broad-brush statements as:

These groups cannot, in all frankness, be seen as something neutral, biblical, divine or benign. Consciously or not, intentional or not, their agenda is often anti-moral, anti-social and anti-Christian, and they pursue their agenda. [*ECNR*, p. XXI]¹¹

ECNR's Introduction speaks of many things that fall outside the bounds of theological considerations. It was the association of the local churches with these things—including fraud, deceptive fundraising and financial management, drug smuggling, murder, refusing blood transfusions and medical access, encouraging prostitution, raping women, molesting children, and beating disciples—that was the subject of the litigation. Some of these things were included in a list of “characteristics of cults,” which sets up an expectation in the book’s readers that the groups identified in the book share such traits. Historically, such reckless and incendiary accusations have caused believers in the local churches to suffer imprisonment and worse at the hands of repressive regimes. Based on *ECNR*’s accusations, public officials in one part of communist China threatened persecution against the local churches there.

During the course of the litigation, the book’s two authors—Ankerberg and Weldon—admitted that they had no evidence that the local churches practiced any of these things. The court’s decision that the use of the term “cult” is in itself non-actionable as a “theological” term is incomprehensible given the secular use of the term and the associations given to it by the book’s authors. In fact, the authors stated:

Used properly, the term "cult" also has particular value for secularists who are unconcerned about theological matters yet very concerned about the ethical, psychological and social consequences of cults... [*ECNR*, p. XXI]¹²

In the same passage they explain that they chose not to use the term “heretical” because it is “irrelevant to many people,” and opted instead for “cult” for its “contemporary force” [*ECNR*, p. XXI]¹³ a force which the authors themselves associated with aberrant behaviors. Geisler’s amicus brief to the Texas Supreme Court appears to be an effort to confuse the courts as to the nature of the litigation and the content of the book. This being the case, the success of Harvest House, Ankerberg, and Weldon in misleading the courts should be no cause for celebration among Christians of conscience.

Misrepresenting the Actions of the Courts

Geisler and Rhodes’ article also contains misleading statements regarding the actions of the courts, including:¹⁴

In truth, the Supreme Court decision was a great victory for all orthodox, conservative, and evangelical Christians.

...the Supreme Court of Texas disagreed with their charges against Ankerberg and Harvest House.

...in spite of the final decision of the High Court against the LC...

The fact is that there was no Texas or U.S. Supreme Court decision on the case. The U. S. Supreme Court merely chose (as they do with 99% of the cases that are appealed to them) not to review the case. The Texas Supreme Court also declined (as they do with 89% of the cases that are appealed to them¹⁵) to review the case, meaning that they did not review the facts of the case either. Despite the repeated claims by Geisler and Rhodes, no court higher than the Texas First Circuit Court of Appeals ruled on the case. As a U. S. District Court in Wisconsin noted in a

separate case, the Texas Court of Appeals decision concerning *ECNR* and the use of the word “cult” set no precedent to be followed by other jurisdictions.¹⁶

Geisler and Rhodes perpetrate an especially egregious falsehood when they claim:

CRI rejects the Supreme Court decision regarding the constitutionality of calling the LC a cult both in a theological sense and in a social sense.¹⁷

The only true part of this sentence is that after a six year study involving primary research and extensive dialogue, CRI concluded that the local churches are not a cult in either a theological or social sense.¹⁸ Everything else in the sentence is completely false. According to Geisler and Rhodes, the Supreme Court (which never heard the case) decided that without violating the Constitution, the LC could be called a cult in both a theological and a social sense. This is an irresponsible and pernicious twisting of the facts. Harvest House, Ankerberg, and Weldon with Geisler’s collusion convinced the Texas Appeals Court that the book should be immune from litigation because, they said, it did not accuse the local churches of being a cult in a social sense. Furthermore, the defendants admitted under oath that they had no proof of any socially aberrant behaviors. Geisler’s amicus brief never mentions anything about practices; it defends *ECNR* by claiming it was a purely theological work. For Geisler *now* to falsely assert that “the Supreme Court’s decision” (there was no such decision) gives countercultists the constitutional right to call the local churches a cult in a social or sociological sense is to be double-tongued (Matt. 5:37; 1 Tim. 3:8).

Misrepresenting the Open Letter

Geisler and Rhodes even distort the contents of the open letter co-signed with them by a number of “evangelical scholars and ministry leaders,” saying:

In addition, they [the open letter signers] requested that the LC desist their litigious activities against evangelical groups that do not believe that their doctrines and practices measure up to the standards of evangelical beliefs and practices.

The clause that Geisler and Rhodes say represents the position of the open letter signers—“evangelical groups that do not believe that their doctrines and practices measure up to the standards of evangelical beliefs and practices”—is virtually the same as the definition of cults from *ECNR* that the authors and publisher of *ECNR* along with Geisler sought to mitigate in the courts’ view—“whose doctrines contradict those of historic Christianity and whose practices and ethical standards violate those of biblical Christianity.” In *ECNR* these practices are criminal and socially aberrant behaviors reflecting a lack of ethical standards. In fact, the open letter says nothing about any of the deviant practices or ethical violations that *ECNR* attributes to cults. By adopting this language, Geisler and Rhodes unilaterally extend the scope of the open letter to embrace the type of false and sensationalistic accusations *ECNR* makes.

Conclusion

On the one hand, Geisler and Rhodes misrepresent the nature and scope of the litigation over *ECNR* and the content of the book itself. They claim that the goal of the litigation was to silence theological criticism, but this was not at all the goal. However distorted the book’s presentation of the beliefs of the local churches was, that was not the subject of the litigation. What were at issue were false and libelous accusations of evil behaviors. They also claim that *ECNR* was immune from charges of libel because it dealt only with theological issues, yet the book’s

portrayal of its subject included deviant behaviors by its own definition and attributed many despicable practices as being characteristics of the groups discussed.

On the other hand, Geisler and Rhodes misrepresent the courts' actions and the scope of what the open letter signers agreed to put their names to. Geisler and Rhodes trumpet the Supreme Court's refusal to review the case (which Geisler and Rhodes misrepresent as a confirmation of the Texas Court of Appeals decision concerning *ECNR*) as a "great victory for all orthodox, conservative, and evangelical Christians." If Christians knew the facts of the case and the conduct of the defendants in seeking to obscure the issues before the courts, an effort in which Geisler was complicit, they would feel otherwise. As the articles on this web site attest, the local churches have no fear of defending their teachings in the marketplace of ideas. If winning a court case by intentional distortion of the issues and attempts to prejudice the courts is a "great victory" for evangelicalism, then the state of evangelical Christianity as espoused by Geisler and Rhodes is lamentable indeed. It was because of this that Elliot Miller's *Journal* article concluded its analysis of the *ECNR* case as follows:

Members of the countercult community who take comfort in, or feel vindicated by, the Texas Appellate Court's decision can only rightfully do so if they were equally discomfited, and engaged in commensurate soul searching and examining of their own methods, after the *Mind Benders* retraction and the *God-Men* ruling. Two out of three court cases vindicated the LC of the charges against them, and the one that didn't based its ruling on a dubious interpretation of the law, not on the basis that the allegations made against the LC were actually true. In other words, even in the *ECNR* case the defendants admitted under oath that they had no basis for associating the LC with *any* of the contemptible and criminal behaviors they included in their definition of *cult*. In effect, they simply succeeded at arguing that they should be free to bear false witness (i.e., to break the Ninth Commandment) as long as they do so in the context of defining a group as a cult. In light of Jesus' mandate that His followers be the light of the world, it is hardly a cause for celebration when they convince a worldly court to hold them to a lower standard than it holds the world.¹⁹

¹ This article addresses the version of Geisler and Rhodes' article that was published on Geisler's own Web site and subsequently on the Web site of Veritas Seminary, which Geisler co-founded and which employs both Geisler and Rhodes. A subsequent version of this article was published on the open letter Web site with some corrections, but as of the date of this article's posting, the original version, which is still publicly available, remains uncorrected.

² See www.lctestimony.org/OpenLetterDialogue.html. The responses to the open letter that are posted on this site are also available in book form at [www.contendingforthefaith.org/eBooks/OpenLetterResponse\(1\).pdf](http://www.contendingforthefaith.org/eBooks/OpenLetterResponse(1).pdf).

³ Both Geisler and Rhodes have been published by Harvest House Publishers. Rhodes has 38 titles listed under his name on Harvest House's Web site. In addition, Geisler has approximately 100 articles published on the Web site of John Ankerberg, one of the authors of *ECNR*. None of these relationships are disclosed to the readers of their article.

⁴ The following is an enumeration of some of the distortions in this passage (see also note 1):

1. Neither the U. S. nor the Texas Supreme Court wrote a decision on the case; they merely chose not to review it. Both courts accept only a small fraction of the cases appealed to them, and those are not reviewed based on the merits of the case but in order to resolve a constitutional issue or one that involves a significant conflict in lower courts' interpretation of law.
2. There is no evidence that the court agreed with or even read Geisler's brief. It is never referenced in the Court of Appeals decision.
3. Geisler and Rhodes imply that the issues in the case involved delineating orthodox and unorthodox beliefs. That is an intentional misrepresentation of the issues in the case, which did not concern any theological

issues (to see what the original complaint was about go to www.contendingforthefaith.org/libel-litigations/harvest-house-et-al/PublicDocs/pd12.pdf).

4. Geisler and Rhodes' statement that "the LC rightly but reluctantly had to acknowledge" that religious opinion is constitutionally protected speech is false. The churches' statement from which they quote was a reiteration of what has always been our standing regarding the proscription on secular courts passing judgment on theological issues.
5. The statement that Geisler and Rhodes quote from is not on page 9 of the *Journal* as the reader would expect; that page is a full page picture. Rather it is from page 9 of a Motion for Rehearing before the Texas Supreme Court. The manner in which Geisler and Rhodes cite the Motion makes it extremely difficult for any reader to discover their twisting of it.

⁵ This motion was a Motion for Rehearing submitted to the Texas Supreme Court asking them to reconsider reviewing the case.

⁶ The brief was actually filed by The Local Church, Living Stream Ministry and a group of over 90 local churches. For simplicity we refer to it as "the churches' brief."

⁷ See point 3 in note 4.

⁸ J. Gordon Melton, *An Open Letter Concerning the Local Church, Witness Lee and The God-Men Controversy* (Santa Barbara, CA: The Institute for the Study of America Religion, 1985), pp. 1-2:

Part of my study of the Local Church involved the reading of most of the published writings of Witness Lee and the lengthy depositions of Neil T. Duddy and Brooks Alexander (of SCP). The experience proved among the more painful of my Christian life. As I began to check the quotes of Witness Lee used in Duddy's book, I found that *The God-Men* had consistently taken sentences from Lee's writings and, by placing them in a foreign context, made them to say just the opposite of what Lee intended. This was done while ignoring the plain teachings and affirmations concerning the great truths of the Christian faith found throughout Lee's writings.

Elliot Miller, "Part 3: Addressing the Open Letter's Concerns: On the Nature of Humanity," *Christian Research Journal*, 32:6, December 2009, p. 26:

However, countercult research truly becomes "heresy hunting" of the worst kind when the researchers make a practice of digging up seemingly heretical or scandalous statements by a teacher, without concern for context, in order to employ the shock value of such statements to turn the public against the teacher and his group.

"Statement from Fuller Theological Seminary," printed in *The Local Churches: "Genuine Believers and Fellow Members of the Body of Christ,"* (Anaheim, CA: DCP Press, 2008), p. 30:

One of the initial tasks facing Fuller was to determine if the portrayal of the ministry typically presented by its critics accurately reflects the teachings of the ministry. On this point we have found a great disparity between the perceptions that have been generated in some circles concerning the teachings of Watchman Nee and Witness Lee and the actual teachings found in their writings. Particularly, the teachings of Witness Lee have been grossly misrepresented and therefore most frequently misunderstood in the general Christian community, especially among those who classify themselves as evangelicals. We consistently discovered that when examined fairly in the light of scripture and church history, the actual teachings in question have significant biblical and historical credence. Therefore, we believe that they deserve the attention and consideration of the entire Body of Christ.

⁹ Pretrial Conference, Local Church et al v. Harvest House et al, February 26, 2004.

¹⁰ John Ankerberg and John Weldon, *Encyclopedia of Cults and New Religions* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House Publishers, 1999), p. XXII. In their Appellant Brief to the Texas Court of Appeals, the defendants misquoted this definition, giving the court the impression that the book's definition was purely theological:

The authors explain in the Introduction that the term "cult," as used in the *Encyclopedia*, is "used as a religious term," and they define a cult as "a separate religious group generally claiming compatibility with Christianity but that adheres to select teachings that are theologically incompatible with teachings of the Bible" ^{3rd} Sup. CR 72.

¹¹ Ibid., p. XXI.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Some of these misstatements have been corrected in the version of the article posted on the “Open Letter” site; however, as of the date of this posting they are still being made in the article on Geisler’s site and on the site of his seminary.

¹⁵ “Pay to Play: How Big Money Buys Access to the Texas Supreme Court” (<http://info.tpj.org/docs/2001/04/reports/paytoplay/paytoplay.pdf>). This report is published by Texans for Public Justice (TPJ), a watchdog group that documents the correlation between campaign contributions and the conduct of government in the State of Texas. While TPJ may have its own political motivations, their reports appear to be based on factual data. Their “Pay to Play” report states that the Supreme Court justices “were 10 times more likely to accept petitions filed by contributors of more than \$250,000 than petitions filed by non-contributors.” According to TPJ’s statistics, Haynes & Boone, the law firm representing Harvest House in the appeals process, has consistently ranked at the top of the list of contributors to Supreme Court justices, including making significant contributions even when the justices had no financed opposition.

¹⁶ Dr. R. C. Samanta Roy et al v. Journal Broadcast Group, United States District Court for the Eastern District of Wisconsin, Case Nos. 05-C-422 and 05-C-423, August 2, 2006.

¹⁷ See note 1.

¹⁸ See *The Local Churches: “Genuine Believers and Fellow Members of the Body of Christ”* (Anaheim, CA: DCP Press, 2008), pp. 9-12; *Christian Research Journal*, 32:6, 2009.

¹⁹ Elliot Miller, “Addressing the Open Letter’s Concerns: On Lawsuits with Evangelical Christians,” *Christian Research Journal*, 32:6, 2009, p. 44.