

The Error of Insisting on Three “Persons” as a Litmus Test of Orthodoxy

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

The statement of faith in *Affirmation & Critique: A Journal of Christian Thought (A&C)* states:

Holding the Bible as the complete and only divine revelation, we strongly believe that God is eternally one and also eternally the Father, the Son, and the Spirit, the three being distinct but not separate... We confess that the third of the Trinity, the Spirit, is equally God.¹

Norman Geisler, in a letter to Ron Kangas, A&C’s Editor-in-Chief, called these statements concerning the Trinity unorthodox, stating:

First, if you desired to be considered orthodox in your “Statement of Faith,” then why did you leave out the word “person” of the three members of the Trinity. To be orthodox you should have said “three [persons] being distinct” and “we confess the third [person] of the Trinity.”²

Thus, to Geisler any statement speaking of the three of the Divine Trinity that does not use the word *persons* is unorthodox. Furthermore, Geisler, in an article co-signed by Ron Rhodes, denounced the teaching of Witness Lee and the local churches as heresy based on the following statement made by Witness Lee:

The Father, the Son, and the Spirit are not three separate persons or three Gods; they are one God, one reality, one person.³

They present this statement completely apart from its original context as proof positive of heresy and claim that to speak of God as “one person” and as “three persons” is impossibly contradictory:

Once one gives up on the law of non-contradiction, there is no basis for intelligible affirmations or denials, orthodox or unorthodox. It is simply not possible for God to be both only *one Person* and also *three Persons* at the *same time* and in the *same sense*. But Lee does not distinguish any different sense in which God is both only *one Person* and *three Persons* in the ontological Trinity. Nor do LC leaders distinguish any real difference between claiming God is three Persons and yet only one Person in His essential Being.⁴

The criticism of Geisler and Rhodes is faulty on numerous points:

1. The term *person* in reference to the Father, the Son, and the Spirit is not a biblical one, but was invented to try to explain the biblical revelation.
2. Many theologians recognize the problem of using the word *persons* to speak of the Father, the Son, and the Spirit.
3. Part of the problem with the term *person* is that as it entered into the vernacular, the common understanding of what it means changed.
4. The modern understanding of *person* tends to lead towards tritheism.
5. Norman Geisler’s insistence that the one God cannot be spoken of as a person in the singular sense contradicts the biblical record.

6. In the context that Geisler and Rhodes omitted, Witness Lee did clearly state the “sense” in which he used the term *one person*.
7. Geisler and Rhodes apply a different standard of truth to the quote excised from Witness Lee’s ministry than the standard they apply to the statements of Cornelius Van Til.
8. If Geisler and Rhodes were consistent in their condemnation of using *person* in a singular sense to refer to God, they would also have to condemn many other respected teachers and servants of the Lord who have spoken of God as “a person.”
9. The criticism by Geisler and Rhodes is inconsistent with Geisler’s own definition of *personhood* and their own references to God as a singular person without any explanation of the “sense” in which they made those references.
10. Geisler and Rhodes refuse to fairly evaluate all of the evidence available in the published writings of Witness Lee concerning the nature of God.

Person Not a Biblical Term

In spite of the insistence of Norman Geisler and Ron Rhodes on the formulation of “one essence, three Persons,” this is not a biblical expression. As Thomas F. Torrance, Professor of Christian Dogmatics at the University of Edinburgh, noted:

However, in the biblical tradition itself, in the Old and New Testaments, there is no explicit concept of ‘person’...⁵

Augustus H. Strong, whom Geisler and Rhodes referred to as “the noted Baptist theologian,” said:

The term ‘person’ only approximately represents the truth. Although this word, more nearly than any other single word, expressed the conception which the Scriptures give us of the relation between the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, it is not itself used in this connection in Scriptures, and we employ it in a qualified sense, not in the ordinary sense in which we apply the word ‘person’ to Peter, Paul, and John.⁶

J. Scott Horrell, Professor of Theological Studies at Dallas Theological Seminary, notes:

If the term *nature* is difficult when we speak of God, the term *person* is all the more complex. Theologians such as Tertullian, the Cappadocians, Augustine, and Aquinas differ in their concept of *person*, even if modern and postmodern conceptions vary considerably more.⁷

According to a recent book by Thomas Weinandy, a Catholic theologian and lecturer in History and Doctrine at the University of Oxford:

A good deal of discussion is taking place among contemporary theologians on the suitability of designating as ‘persons’ the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.⁸

The problem with the term *person* is not a new one. In a sermon in 1775, John Wesley commented:

I dare not insist upon anyone’s using the word “Trinity” or “Person.” I use them myself without any scruple, because I know of none better: But if any man has scruple concerning them, who shall constrain him to use them? I cannot.⁹

Norman Geisler exercises no such restraint. By contesting the A&C statement of faith because it does not use the word *person*, Geisler applies a non-biblical litmus test as his standard of

orthodoxy. To him, no statement concerning the distinctions among the three of the Godhead can be orthodox if it does not explicitly use the term *person*. Based on Geisler's standard, the Bible, the Apostles' Creed, and the Nicene Creed must all be condemned as unorthodox as none of them uses the word *person* to refer to any of the three of the Divine Trinity.

Problems with the Definition of the Term

The problem is that the full theological significance of the term *person* as it applies to the Trinity is not clearly defined or even definable. As Millard Erickson, Distinguished Professor of Theology at Western Seminary, has noted:

The formula was worked out quite definitely in the fourth century. God is one substance or essence, existing in three persons. The difficulty is that we do not know exactly what these terms mean. We know that the doctrine states that God is three in some respect and one in some other respect, but we do not know precisely what those two different respects are.¹⁰

The Scottish theologian H. R. Mackintosh wrote:

Words in such a realm are more or less arbitrary, and must be taken in a sense appropriate to their objects of denotation; and it is certain that *ὑπόστασις* in Greek theology, and *persona*, its Latin equivalent, do not mean now, and never have meant, what we usually intend by Personality.¹¹

In his exposition of "Threeness in Oneness" in his magnum opus *Church Dogmatics*, the Swiss theologian Karl Barth attempted to avoid the concept of "person":

In our opening sentence of our section we avoided the concept "Person." Neither was it on its introduction into ecclesiastical language made sufficiently clear, nor has the subsequent interpretation, imparted to it and enforced as a whole in mediæval and post-Reformation scholasticism, really issued in such a clearing up, nor has the introduction of the modern concept of personality into this debate produced anything else but fresh confusion.¹²

In his *Dogmatics in Outline* Barth further states:

But when we speak today of person, involuntarily and almost irresistibly the idea arises of something rather like the way in which we men are persons. And actually this idea is as ill-suited as possible to describe what God the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit is.¹³

Louis Berkhof, the late systematic theologian and President of Calvin Theological Seminary, wrote:

To denote these distinctions in the Godhead, Greek writers generally employed the term *hupostasis*, while Latin authors used the term *persona*, and sometimes *substantia*. Because the former was apt to be misleading and the latter was ambiguous, the Schoolmen coined the word *subsistentia*. The variety of the terms used points to the fact that their inadequacy was always felt. It is generally admitted that the word 'person' is but an imperfect expression of the idea.¹⁴

More recently, the Finnish theologian Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen has written:

Much has been written about this history of the term *persona* and its application to Trinitarian language. The contours of the term are both obscure and wide. In its original sense it has the meaning of "mask" as worn by an actor in a play, thus denoting something

that is not “real” for the human being behind the mask. The other extreme, the modern one, is to regard the *persona* as not only something “real” about the human being but also highly individualistic... Understandably, neither the etymology of the term nor its highly individualized modern meaning captures the principles of distinction-in-unity meant by those who first applied it to describe the Christian God.¹⁵

Problems with the Common Understanding of *Person*

Although the problem surrounding the term *person* has existed since its first usage, the difficulties have become more acute in modern times because of the adoption of the term into the vernacular to designate a discrete and separate conscious being.¹⁶ Walter Kasper, a Roman Catholic scholar, has commented:

But if we leave aside the historical arguments (exegetical and those from the history of religions and of dogma) and look at the arguments based directly on the content of the teaching, then one objection stands out as more important than the others: modern subjectivity and the modern concept of person which it has produced. In the modern period, person is no longer understood in ontological terms but is defined as a self-conscious free center of action and as individual personality.¹⁷

Thomas F. Torrance also noted:

It is important to note, however, that once the concept of ‘person’ was launched into the stream of human ideas and became a regular item in the furniture of our everyday thought it inevitably tended to have an independent history of its own and in spite of cultural variations to give rise in people’s minds to a general conception of what person denotes. It would be a serious mistake, however, to interpret what is meant by ‘Person’ in the doctrine of the Holy Trinity by reference to any general, and subsequent, notion of person, and not by reference to its aboriginal theological sense.¹⁸

Concerns That “Persons” Leads to Tritheism

Geisler and Rhodes completely ignore the context of Witness Lee’s teaching. As Elliot Miller noted in his article in the *Christian Research Journal*, Witness Lee was responding to the concept of “person” that has led Western believers in the direction of tritheism, that is, belief that the Father, the Son, and the Spirit are not only distinct but also separate, becoming in effect three Gods. This was the reason Witness Lee said, “The Father, the Son, and the Spirit are not three separate persons or three Gods.” Witness Lee’s concern has been shared by some very prominent Western theologians. For example, W. H. Griffith Thomas, who was instrumental in the founding of Dallas Theological Seminary, wrote:

The term “Person” is also sometimes objected to. Like all human language, it is liable to be accused of inadequacy and even positive error. It certainly must not be pressed too far, or it will lead to Tritheism. While we use the term to denote distinctions in the Godhead, we do not imply distinctions which amount to separateness, but distinctions which are associated with essential mutual co-inherence or inclusiveness....

While, therefore, we are compelled to use terms like “substance” and “Person,” we are not to think of them as identical with what we understand as human substance or personality. The terms are not explanatory, but only approximately correct, as must necessarily be the case with any attempt to define the Nature of God.¹⁹

In the article by Geisler and Rhodes, part of this passage is quoted without attribution and then criticized by them as though it were Witness Lee's words:

But Lee elsewhere contradicts this by saying, "Actually, to use the designation 'three persons' to explain the Father, Son, and Spirit is also not quite satisfactory because 'three Persons' really means three persons.... Like all human language, it is liable to be accused of inadequacy and even positive error. It certainly must not be pressed too far, or it will lead to Tritheism"

Nowhere do Geisler and Rhodes tell their readers that the last half of this excerpt is actually Witness Lee quoting W. H. Griffith Thomas.

Griffith Thomas' concern was echoed by Thomas Weinandy:

There is the Trinitarian concern that the term 'person', when applied to the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, either is inadequate or, worse still, imparts an erroneous connotation. Without our post-Lockean and post-Kantian milieu, does not three 'persons' imply three subjective individual consciousnesses and thus lead to tritheism when applied to God?²⁰

It should be noted that Witness Lee spoke of God in three persons on many occasions, but that he was careful to explain the issues surrounding the term in a balanced way, something that Geisler and Rhodes do not do.²¹

Norman Geisler's Position Contradicts the Bible

According to Geisler's published writings, it is improper to speak of God as "one person," as "a person," or even as "personal" in any kind of singular sense.²² This position attempts to enforce an external standard of "orthodoxy" on the truth revealed in the Bible. Thus, when Geisler cites the formula "one essence, three Persons" or "one nature, three Persons," he imposes on those words a narrow and exclusive meaning that attempts to codify the mystery of the nature of the Triune God:

By saying God has one essence and three persons it is meant that he has one "What" and three "Whos." The three Whos (persons) each share the same What (essence). So God is a unity of essence with a plurality of persons. Each person is different, yet they share a common nature.²³

Geisler's explanation is itself a contradiction. Immediately after he says God has "one essence and three persons," he refers to God with the singular personal pronoun "he."

The problem, as the theologians cited in this article attest, is that Geisler's definition does not answer the fundamental question of what the oneness among the three Persons is. It is not the expressions "one nature, three Persons" or "one essence, three Persons" that are objectionable; in fact, as noted above, Witness Lee used these terms often. Rather, what is not acceptable is the dogmatic insistence upon these terms as a formula that is adequate to fully express the mystery of the Triune God without any of the qualifiers which theologians throughout the centuries have recognized as necessary because of the limitations of human language. Both *essence* and *nature* are commonly understood as something abstract and impersonal, yet that does not describe what our God is. Millard Erickson rightly pointed out the same error that is evident in Geisler's statement:

God is a unitary being. Sometimes one gets the conception that the nature of God is a bundle of attributes, somewhat loosely tied together. God, however, is not an attribute or a predicate. He is a living person, a subject.²⁴

While Geisler's distinction between "what" and "who" makes for a tidy formula, it does not match the revelation in the Bible. The Bible repeatedly refers to God as "I," "Me," "He," and "Him." These are personal pronouns and it would be inappropriate to apply them to some abstract essence or nature or to a "what." Genesis 1:26-27 says, "And God said, Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of heaven and over the cattle and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth. And God created man in His own image; in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them." Here the pronoun referring to God switches from the plural "Us" and "Our" to the singular "He" and "His," but it is always used in the sense of a person speaking and acting.

In Exodus God referred to Himself as the "I AM": "And God said to Moses, I AM WHO I AM. And He said, Thus you shall say to the children of Israel, I AM has sent me to you." In Exodus 20:2-3 Jehovah instructed the children of Israel, "I am Jehovah your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the slave house; you shall have no other gods before Me." Here God refers to Himself with a singular personal pronoun. In fact, as the I AM, God is not only a person; He is the Person. The inescapable conclusion is that either the Bible is wrong in referring to God as a person or Geisler is wrong.

Matthew 28:19 is one of the clearest revelations of the Trinity. It says, "Go therefore and disciple all the nations, baptizing them into the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit." Here the Father, the Son, and the Spirit have one name. The word for *name* in this verse is the singular form of the same word that is used in Acts 1:15 in the plural form for *persons*.²⁵ According to Matthew 28:19, baptizing people into "the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit" is not merely a formula to be recited at baptisms but an act of immersing those who have believed into and received Christ into the reality of the divine Person of the Triune God. This is why in his footnote on *name* in Matthew 28:19 in the Recovery Version of the New Testament, Witness Lee commented:

There is one name for the Divine Trinity. The name is the sum total of the Divine Being, equivalent to His person. To baptize someone into the name of the Triune God is to immerse him into all that the Triune God is.

The Context of Witness Lee's Statement That Geisler and Rhodes Omitted

Geisler and Rhodes and the other signers of the open letter with them pluck one sentence from the voluminous ministry of Witness Lee as proof that he teaches God is one person in purported contradiction of the "orthodox" teaching of the Trinity. Read in context, this sentence is part of an exposition of Matthew 28:19, which clearly identifies God as triune, a three-one person with one name:

The revelation of the Triune God can be found throughout the New Testament. In Matthew 28:19, the Lord Jesus charged the disciples to baptize the nations "into the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit." In this verse, *name* is singular in number, yet the one name refers to three persons. This shows that there is one name for the Divine Trinity (see

notes 5 and 6 on Matthew 28:19 in the Recovery Version). The word *person* is often used to describe the three of the Divine Trinity, yet we must be careful in using such a term...

The Father, the Son, and the Spirit are not three separate persons or three Gods; they are one God, one reality, one person. Hence, the Father, the Son, and the Spirit are denoted by one name. The name denotes the person, and the person is the reality of the name. The name of the Divine Trinity is the sum total of the divine Being, equivalent to His person. God is triune; that is, He is three-one. In some theological writings, the preposition *in* is added between *three* and *one* to make *three-in-one*. However, it is more accurate to say that God is *three-one*.²⁶

In this passage Witness Lee said both “the one name refers to three persons” (which Geisler and Rhodes do not quote) and “the Father, the Son, and the Spirit are not three separate persons” (which they do quote out of context). Geisler and Rhodes claim that Witness Lee did not identify the sense in which his speaking about God being “one person” differed from the sense of Him being “three persons,” which to them is an intolerable contradiction. In fact, Witness Lee did say that “the name of the Divine Trinity”—the Father, the Son, and the Spirit—“is the sum total of the divine Being, equivalent to His person.” Would Geisler and Rhodes claim that “the Father, the Son, and the Spirit” is not “the sum total of the divine Being,” that is, His person? Would they claim that the use of “name” in the singular does not indicate that the entire God is a person in the sense “name” is used in the Bible?

An Inconsistent Standard of Truth

Proverbs 20:23 tells us, “Differing weights are an abomination to Jehovah, and false scales are not good.” To have an inconsistent standard of appraisal in evaluating the teachings of different persons is to have differing weights. This is precisely what Geisler and Rhodes do when they condemn Witness Lee, but not Cornelius Van Til, the late professor of apologetics and systematic theology at Westminster Theological Seminary, for saying that God is one person. Van Til said:

Yet this is not the whole truth of the matter. We do assert that God, that is, the whole Godhead, is one person.... Over against all other beings, that is, over against created beings, we must therefore hold that God’s being presents an absolute numerical identity. And even within the ontological Trinity we must maintain that God is numerically one. He is one person. When we say that we believe in a personal God we do not merely mean that we believe in a God to whom the adjective “personality” may be attached. God is not an essence that has personality...²⁷

Geisler and Rhodes write:

To give Van Til the benefit of the doubt, either his insistence on God as a Person should be taken to refer to the Godhead overall as a tri-personal being, or else we must understand that the term “Person” does not mean exactly the same thing when speaking of God *as one* as it does when speaking of God *as three*.

Geisler and Rhodes give no “benefit of the doubt” to Witness Lee. Nevertheless, their allowance that Van Til might be speaking of “the Godhead overall as a tri-personal being” is unwarranted as Van Til specifically said he was speaking of “the whole Godhead.” The real questions are:

- How does Van Til’s mention of “the whole Godhead” differ from Witness Lee’s explicit statement that “the name of the Divine Trinity is the sum total of the divine Being, equivalent to His person”?
- What is the difference between “the Godhead overall” (which Geisler and Rhodes approve of) and “the sum total of the divine Being”?
- How can Geisler and Rhodes justify Van Til on the supposition that he is speaking of “the Godhead overall as a tri-personal being” and condemn Witness Lee who speaks of “the sum total of the divine Being,” whom he then explicitly describes as three-one?

Clearly Geisler and Rhode apply “different weights” in evaluating the statements of Cornelius Van Til, a well-known Reformed theologian from a respected seminary, than they do in criticizing the similar statements of Witness Lee, whom they seek to portray as unorthodox and outside the common faith.

Is God a Person?—What Others Say

If Geisler condemns the teaching that the entire Triune God is a person, he must also condemn many other well-known teachers who have spoken of God as a person in the singular sense:

Lewis Sperry Chafer, founder of Dallas Theological Seminary:

...the Scriptures proceed in the presentation of the nature and character of God. He is a Person with those faculties and constituent elements which belong to personality.²⁸

Karl Barth:

The definition of a person—that is, a knowing, willing, acting I—can have the meaning only of a confession of the person of God declared in His revelation, of the One who loves and who as such (living in His own way) is *the* person.²⁹

Alvin Plantinga, a respected Protestant philosopher and Professor of Philosophy at the University of Notre Dame:

If God is a living, conscious being who knows, wills, and acts—if, in a word, God is a person—then God is not a property or state of affairs or set or proposition or any other abstract object.³⁰

Martyn Lloyd-Jones, a respected evangelical scholar and minister at Westminster Chapel in London for almost thirty years:

The Bible says that God is a person and this is absolutely vital to any true sense of worship, and to our having a feeling of confidence about ourselves and about the world....

But there is a great deal of direct evidence for saying that God is a person. Have you noticed how the presence of God is always described in a personal way? Take the name of God that we have considered: ‘I am’, that is a personal statement, it is a person who can say, ‘I am,’ and God says that He speaks of Himself in this manner. Every single representative of God has declared that God is a person and not simply an unconscious force.³¹

Billy Graham under a section entitled “God Is a Person”:

*Not only is God a spirit, but He also is a person—that is, He has personality, just as we do. Every trait we attribute to ourselves can be attributed to God. A person feels, thinks, desires, and decides—and so does God. A person enters into relationships—and so does God. A person acts—and so does God. God feels; God thinks; God sympathizes; God forgives; God hopes; God decides; God acts; God judges—all because He is a person. If He weren't why pray to Him or worship Him? God is not an impersonal force or power; He is a *person*—the most perfect person imaginable.³²*

Geisler and Rhodes Contradict Themselves

The criticism by Geisler and Rhodes is inconsistent with Geisler's own definition of *personhood*. In his *Systematic Theology* Geisler says:

Personhood is traditionally understood as one who has intellect, feelings, and will.... Essentially, personhood refers to an "I," a "who," or a subject... Personhood itself is its I-ness or who-ness.³³

Based on their own definition, how can Geisler and Rhodes claim that God is not presented as an "I" or a "who" in the Bible?

Furthermore, their criticism is even more incomprehensible when one looks at the following excerpt from Geisler's own apologetics encyclopedia:

Yahweh, however, only refers to the one true God. No other person or thing was to be worshiped or served (Exod. 20:5), and his name and glory were not to be given to another.³⁴

What does Geisler mean by "no other person or thing"? Is this not an acknowledgement that Jehovah as the one true God is a person? Even more tellingly, Geisler and Rhodes made the following statement in a jointly authored book:

Indeed, there is no other person but God to whom anyone anywhere in the Holy Scriptures ever turned in prayer.³⁵

Furthermore, under the heading "The Only True God Is a Person" Rhodes wrote:

A person is a conscious being—someone who thinks, feels, and purposes, and carries those purposes into action. A person engages in active relationships with other people. You can talk to a person and get a response. You can share feelings and ideas with him. You can argue with him, love him, and even hate him.

Surely by this definition God must be understood as a person.³⁶

How can Geisler and Rhodes refer to God as a person in a singular sense and then condemn others for doing so? In these cases, they themselves did not differentiate in what sense they spoke of God as one person and in what sense they spoke of Him as three.

Geisler and Rhodes Refuse to Address All the Evidence

The Triune God is a major theme in the ministry of Witness Lee. His writings contain many thorough and balanced expositions on the subjects of God being one yet having the aspect of three, of all Three being eternal and being God, of all Three coexisting and coinhering eternally, and of the errors of both modalism and tritheism.³⁷ Moreover, on many occasions Witness Lee did use the term *persons* in relation to the three of the Divine Trinity.³⁸ Geisler and Rhodes and those who signed the "Open Letter" with them address none of these.

Furthermore, over thirty years ago, in response to distortions of his teaching by certain members in the Christian countercult community, Witness Lee published three booklets correcting their errors and presenting the scriptural truth concerning the Trinity.³⁹ In one of them Witness Lee provides the following exposition of Matthew 28:19:

The Lord says in Matthew 28:19, “Baptizing them into the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.” Here the Lord speaks clearly of the three persons—the Father, Son, and Spirit. But when He speaks here of the name of the Father, Son, and Spirit, the name which is used is in the singular number in the original text. This means that though the Father, the Son, and the Spirit are three, yet the name is one. It is really mysterious—one name for three persons. This, of course, is what is meant by the expression three-in-one, or triune.⁴⁰

The critics of Witness Lee have never responded to any of the publications in which he speaks of all Three being God, all Three being eternal, Their eternal coexistence, and Their eternal coinherence. Instead, they have merely continued the same pattern of presenting single statements isolated from both their immediate context and the larger context of his extensive ministry on the subject of the Triune God. This pattern is evident both in the drafting of the “Open Letter” and in the article written by Geisler and Rhodes.

It is significant that the critique of Geisler and Rhodes does not even address the main theme of the book from which the quote in question is excised—*The Triune God to Be Life to the Tripartite Man*. The quote that Geisler and Rhodes criticize is in chapter 5 of that book. The first four chapters present an overview of the entire Bible from the perspective of God’s desire to enter into man as life and how He accomplishes that purpose. As Witness Lee shows convincingly, this concept lies at the center of the divine revelation. His goal throughout the book is to lead his audience not only into the objective understanding of this truth, but also into the subjective experience of Christ living in them (Gal. 2:20) and saving them in His life (Rom. 5:10) through the subjective experience of the cross (2 Cor. 4:10-12) and the fellowship of the divine life (1 John 1:2-3; 2 Cor. 13:14). This type of speaking is in the character of the New Testament ministry (2 Cor. 3:6; 4:1), not the vain contentions of words (1 Tim. 6:4; 2 Tim. 2:14) in which Geisler and Rhodes engage.

Conclusion

Geisler and Rhodes’ criticism of Witness Lee’s statement is deeply flawed. They insist on an unbiblical standard as a litmus test of orthodoxy. In doing so, they neglect the concerns of many Christian teachers that the term *persons* carries connotations that tend to lead to tritheism. Their criticism of referring to God as “one person” is contrary to the Bible and ignores the surrounding context that clearly defined the biblical basis of the expression and its meaning. Their criticism applies an uneven standard of truth and is contradicted by many respected teachers and ministers of the Lord, as well as their own writings. It also ignores the many thorough and balanced expositions concerning the Triune God in Witness Lee’s ministry and ignores the real nature and thrust of that ministry, which is to bring believers into the subjective experience of Christ.

¹ “A Statement of Faith,” *Affirmation & Critique*, XIII:1, April 2008, p. 2. The full statement of faith can also be read at http://www.affcrit.com/st_faith.html.

² Norman Geisler, Letter to Ron Kangas, June 1, 2008. Although Geisler claims to have sent such a letter, there is no evidence that Ron Kangas ever received it.

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- ³ Witness Lee, *The Triune God to Be Life to the Tripartite Man* (Anaheim: Living Stream Ministry, 1996), p. 48.
- ⁴ Norman Geisler and Ron Rhodes, “A Response to the Christian Research Journal’s Recent Defense of the ‘Local Church’ Movement,” December 2009.
- ⁵ Thomas F. Torrance, *The Christian Doctrine of God, One Being Three Persons* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1996), p. 155. Although we quote a number of Christian writers in this article, we do not mean to imply that we agree with them on every point of truth or they with us. What the quotations included in this article show is that the teaching of the local churches is well within the bounds of accepted Christian teaching.
- ⁶ Augustus H. Strong, *Systematic Theology* (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 1907), p. 330.
- ⁷ J. Scott Horrell, “The Eternal Son of God in the Social Trinity,” *Jesus in Trinitarian Perspective*, Fred Sanders and Klaus Issler, eds. (Nashville, TN: B&H Academic, 2007), p. 52.
- ⁸ Thomas Weinandy, *The Father’s Spirit of Sonship: Reconceiving the Trinity* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1995), p. 111.
- ⁹ John Wesley, “On the Trinity” (1775), Sermon 55, in *The Works of John Wesley, vols. 5 and 6*, 3rd edition (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1872, 2002) pp. 200-201.
- ¹⁰ Millard J. Erickson, *God in Three Persons: A Contemporary Interpretation of the Trinity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1995), p. 19.
- ¹¹ H.R. Mackintosh, *The Doctrine of the Person of Jesus Christ* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1913), p. 524.
- ¹² Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics, I:1: The Doctrine of the Word of God* (Edinburgh, T&T Clark, 1936), p. 408.
- ¹³ Karl Barth, *Dogmatics in Outline* (New York: Harper & Row, 1959), pp. 42-43.
- ¹⁴ Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 4th ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans (1939, 1941), p. 87.
- ¹⁵ Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, *The Trinity: Global Perspectives* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007), p. 30.
- ¹⁶ As J. N. D. Kelly pointed out, the actual meaning of the word “Persons” as applied to the Trinity has undergone substantial change since it was introduced by Tertullian in “Against Praxeas” (see *The Ante-Nicene Fathers, vol. III*, Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, eds. (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1980), p. 598):
- Hence, when he [Tertullian] speaks of the Son as being ‘of one substance’ with the Father, he means that They share the same divine nature or essence, and in fact, since the Godhead is indivisible, are one identical being. On the one hand the terms *πρόσωπον* and *persona* were admirably suited to express the otherness, or independent subsistence, of the Three. After originally meaning ‘face’, and so ‘expression’ and the ‘role’, the former came to signify ‘individual’, the stress being usually on the external aspect or objective presentation. The primary sense of *persona* was ‘mask’, from which the transition was easy to the actor who wore it and the character he played. In legal usage it could stand for the holder of the title to a property, but as employed by Tertullian it connoted the concrete presentation of an individual as such. In neither case, it should be noted, was the idea of self-consciousness nowadays associated with ‘person’ and ‘personal’ at all prominent. (J. N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1817), p. 115)
- ¹⁷ Walter Kasper, *The God of Jesus Christ*, translated by Matthew J. O’Connell (New York: Crossroad, 1994), p. 285.
- ¹⁸ Thomas F. Torrance, *The Christian Doctrine of God, One Being Three Persons* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1996), pp. 159-160.
- ¹⁹ W. H. Griffith Thomas, *The Principles of Theology* (London: Church Book Room Press, 1956), p. 31.
- ²⁰ Thomas Weinandy, *The Father’s Spirit of Sonship: Reconceiving the Trinity* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1995), pp. 111-112.
- ²¹ The following are a few among many examples: *The Crucial Points of the Major Items of the Lord’s Recovery*, chapters 1-3 of *The Revelation and Vision of God*, chapter 4 of *Elders’ Training Book 1: The Ministry of the New Testament*, and chapter 7 of *Young People’s Training*. Some shorter examples are given in note 37.
- ²² Norman Geisler, *The Baker Encyclopedia of Christian Apologetics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1999), p. 757.

²³ Norman Geisler, *The Baker Encyclopedia of Christian Apologetics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1999), p. 732.

²⁴ Millard J. Erickson, *God the Father Almighty* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1998), p. 231.

²⁵ Concerning the Greek word (ὄνοματόν) used in Acts 1:15, W. E. Vine writes: “As standing, by metonymy, for persons, Acts 1:15; Rev. 3:4; 11:13 (R.V., ‘persons’)” (*Vine’s Exposition Dictionary of New Testament Words* (McLean, VA: Macdonald Publishing, 1985), p. 782).

²⁶ Witness Lee, *The Triune God to Be Life to the Tripartite Man* (Anaheim, CA: Living Stream Ministry, 1996), p. 48. The elided text is the passage from W. H. Griffith Thomas’s book *The Principles of Theology*, which was previously cited (see note 19).

²⁷ Cornelius Van Til, *An Introduction to Systematic Theology* (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Theological Seminary, 1961), p. 229.

²⁸ Lewis Sperry Chafer, *Systematic Theology* (Dallas, TX: Dallas Seminary Press, 1947), p. 180.

²⁹ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics, II:1: The Doctrine of God* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1957), p. 284.

³⁰ Alvin Plantinga, *The Analytic Theist*, James F. Sennett, ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1998), p. 239.

³¹ Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Great Doctrines of the Bible* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2003), pp. 55-56.

³² Billy Graham, *The Journey: How to Live by Faith in an Uncertain World* (Nashville, TN: W. Publishing Group, 2006), p. 20.

³³ Norman Geisler, *Systematic Theology, vol. 2: God, Creation* (Minneapolis: Bethany House, 2003), p. 279.

³⁴ Norman L. Geisler, *Baker Encyclopedia of Christian Apologetics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1999), p. 129. Nearly the exact same statement is made in Norman L. Geisler and A. Saleeb, *Answering Islam: The Crescent in Light of the Cross*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2002), p. 250; and Norman L. Geisler, *Systematic Theology, vol. 2: God, Creation* (Minneapolis: Bethany House, 2003), p. 280.

³⁵ Norman Geisler and Ron Rhodes, *When Cultists Ask: A Popular Handbook on Cultic Misinterpretations* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1997), p. 118. The same sentence appears in Norman Geisler and R. E. MacKenzie, *Roman Catholics and Evangelicals: Agreements and Differences* (Grand Rapids, MI, Baker Books, 1995), p. 351.

³⁶ Ron Rhodes, *The Heart of Christianity* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House Publishers, 1996), p. 43.

³⁷ The following are a few short examples:

God is the Triune God. The one, unique God has the aspect of three—the Father, the Son, and the Spirit. The Father, the Son, and the Spirit are all God and are eternal, coexistent, coinherent, and inseparable. – Witness Lee, *Truth Lessons, Level 1, Volume 1* (Anaheim, CA: Living Stream Ministry, 1985), p. 23

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. – Witness Lee, *The Crucial Points of the Major Items of the Lord’s Recovery* (Anaheim, CA: Living Stream Ministry, 1993), pp. 10-11

Modalism stresses the side of God being one to a heretical extreme by denying the coexistence and coinherence of the three of the Godhead. Tritheism, on the other hand, stresses the side of God being three to a heretical extreme by teaching that the Father, the Son, and the Spirit are three Gods. The Bible is not at either of these extremes; it stands in the center, testifying of the twofoldness of the truth of the Divine Trinity. Regarding the truth of the Triune God, we also should be balanced and avoid the heretical extremes of both modalism and tritheism. – *Ibid.*, p. 14

We need to be very clear concerning the error in modalism. Modalism teaches that the Father, the Son, and the Spirit are not all eternal and do not all exist at the same time. Instead, modalism claims that the revelation of the Son ended with the ascension and that after the ascension the Son ceased to exist. Modalism has gone too far, not believing in the coinherence and coexistence of the Father, the Son, and the Spirit. Unlike the modalists, we believe in the coinherence and coexistence of the three of the Godhead; that is, we believe that the Father, the

Son, and the Spirit all exist at the same time and under the same conditions. We also believe that all three are eternal. Isaiah 9:6 says that the Father is eternal, Hebrews 1:12 and 7:3 indicate that the Son is eternal, and Hebrews 9:14 speaks of the eternal Spirit. The Father, the Son, and the Spirit are not temporary but eternal. – Witness Lee, *The Conclusion of the New Testament, Messages 221-239* (Anaheim, CA: Living Stream Ministry, 1988), p. 2467

There are many far more extensive expositions on the Divine Trinity, including the first four chapters of Witness Lee's book *The Revelation and Vision of God*, in which he surveys the biblical truth; the expressions used in Western, Eastern, and Chinese theology; and the early church creeds.

³⁸ The following are two relatively short examples:

The oneness of the church is the unity of the Spirit which is comprised of the Triune God. Here in Ephesians chapter four, the seven one's are divided into three groups, and every group has one of the three Persons of the Godhead. In the first group, we see the Spirit, in the second the Lord, and in the third God the Father. In group one, there is the Body, the Spirit and the hope. Then with the second group we see the Lord, the faith and the baptism. And the last group contains God the Father. With the Spirit is the Body and the hope. With the Lord is the faith and baptism. Then there is God the Father of all who is above all, through all, and in all. The Godhead in three Persons is our oneness which is realized in the Spirit. – Witness Lee, *The Practical Expression of the Church* (Los Angeles: The Stream Publishers, 1970), pp. 42-43

In His economy, God is three—the Father, the Son, and the Spirit. The great theologians of the fourth and fifth centuries referred to the Three of the Trinity as three hypostases. The primary sense of the Greek word for *hypostasis* is something which stands underneath, that is, a support or a foundation. To illustrate, one table has four legs supporting it, and the four legs of the table are its four hypostases. Likewise, there is one God, but He is the Father, the Son, and the Spirit. These three—the Father, the Son, and the Spirit—are the three divine hypostases. The word *hypostasis*, which was used in the theological writings that appeared in the Greek language, can also be translated *substance*. Later, when theology entered into the Latin language, the word *persona* was used. Then, in the English language, the term became *person*. Thus, it is said that the Father, Son, and Spirit are three persons. However, we should not understand this to mean that They are three separate persons according to the common understanding of the word *person*. – Witness Lee, *A Brief Presentation of the Lord's Recovery* (Anaheim, CA: Living Stream Ministry, 1990), p. 9

³⁹ *Concerning the Triune God—The Father, the Son, and the Spirit; The Revelation of the Triune God According to the Pure Word of the Bible; and What a Heresy—Two Divine Fathers, Two Life-giving Spirits, and Three Gods!*

⁴⁰ Witness Lee, *Concerning the Triune God—The Father, the Son, and the Spirit* (Los Angeles, CA: The Stream, 1973), pp. 6-7.

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