

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

In a special edition of the *Christian Research Journal* entitled "We Were Wrong,"¹ the Christian Research Institute (CRI) reassessed the teachings of Witness Lee and the local churches and found them to be faithful to the essentials of the orthodox Christian faith. These findings were particularly significant because CRI was one of the earliest apologetics ministries in the United States to criticize Witness Lee and the local churches. As CRI President Hank Hanegraaff noted, that criticism became a "fountainhead of misinformation" that was instrumental in producing the misunderstanding of the teachings and practices of the local churches that has existed in the apologetics community since the mid-1970s.

CRI's reassessment was the result of an extensive primary research project that spanned six years and involved direct dialogue with representatives of Living Stream Ministry (the publisher of the writings of Watchman Nee and Witness Lee) and the local churches. The main series of articles in the *Journal*, written by Editor-in-Chief Elliot Miller, examined the teachings of Witness Lee and the local churches in light of criticisms published on the Internet in an open letter in 2007.² The open letter consisted primarily of a call to Living Stream Ministry and those in the local churches to repent of teachings expressed in a series of isolated excerpts from the extensive ministry of Witness Lee. Elliot Miller's articles contextualized the quotes, explained the theological concepts behind them, and showed how the open letter created a distorted perception of Witness Lee's teaching.

Shortly after the release of the special issue of the *Journal*, Norman Geisler and Ron Rhodes, two signers of the open letter, published a response on the Internet criticizing CRI's new findings. Their article contains many theological, factual, and historical errors and inconsistencies. Geisler and Rhodes' article has been posted on the open letter site; thus, it appears as a defense for all of the signers of the open letter. In fact, the open letter signers should be concerned about the standard of scholarship exhibited in Geisler and Rhodes' article and the teachings of questionable orthodoxy it advances. The articles in this series point out some of the more significant problems with their response.³ These include:

- The Error of Making Creeds, Not the Bible, the Rule of Faith
- The Error of Insisting on the Use of the Word "Persons" as a Litmus Test of Orthodoxy
- A False Accusation of Patripassianism Based on Misleading Misconstruction of Quotes
- The Error of Denying the Involvement of the Father in the Son's Work
 - ▶ *Scholars Who Affirm the Working Together of the Three of the Divine Trinity*
- The Error of Denying That "the Son" Is "the Eternal Father" in Isaiah 9:6
- The Error of Denying That "the Lord Is the Spirit" in 2 Corinthians 3:17 Refers to Christ
 - ▶ *Scholars and Bible Teachers Who Affirm That the Lord Jesus Christ Is the Spirit*
- The Error of Denying That the Infinite God Became a Finite Man through Incarnation
 - ▶ *Scholars Who Affirm That the Infinite God Became a Finite Man*
- A Misplaced Criticism of "The Twofoldness of Divine Truth"

- ▶ *Reflections: The Twofoldness of Divine Truth* by Ron Kangas, published in *Affirmation & Critique*, Spring 2010
- ▶ *The Twofoldness of Divine Truth* by Robert Govett
- Misrepresenting Witness Lee's Critique of Christianity
- Misrepresenting Witness Lee and Defending the Roman Catholic Church
- Applying a Double Standard with Regard to Criticism of the Roman Catholic Church
 - ▶ *Biblical Critiques of Christianity – Selected Bibliography and Biographical Notes on Sources Cited*
- Repeating False Witness in Accusing the Local Churches of “Litigiousness”
- Repeating False Witness Concerning SCP Bankruptcy
- Repeating False Witness Concerning Litigation over the *Encyclopedia of Cults and New Religions*
 - ▶ Practicing the Lord’s Word in Matthew 18
 - ▶ Concerning Lawsuits Filed by Harvest House

An article by Douglas Groothuis in a book co-edited by Norman Geisler states:

Apologetics must be carried out with the utmost intellectual integrity (Titus 2:7-8; Jas. 3:1-2). All propaganda, cheap answers, caricatures of non-Christian views, hectoring, and fallacious reasoning must be avoided. Sadly, some apologetic materials are too cavalier for serious use. One should develop competent answers to searching questions about the truth and rationality of Christian faith. This demands excellence in scholarship at all intellectual levels, even the most popular.⁴

If these standards apply to apologetics materials addressing non-Christian views, how much more should they be followed when dealing with fellow Christians such as Witness Lee and the believers in the local churches? As these articles show, Norman Geisler and Ron Rhodes have not only failed to live up to this charge but have distorted biblical truth in their analysis of the teachings of Witness Lee and the local churches and in their critique of CRI’s research.

¹ *Christian Research Journal*, 32:6, December 2009.

² The signers of the open letter, including Geisler and Rhodes, ignored two responses to their letter that were published by representatives of Living Stream Ministry and the local churches. These responses are available at both www.lctestimony.org/OpenLetterDialogue.html and [www.contendingforthefait.org/eBooks/Open Letter Response \(1\).pdf](http://www.contendingforthefait.org/eBooks/Open%20Letter%20Response%20(1).pdf).

³ These articles cite many Christian teachers from a wide range of theological backgrounds. Quoting them does not mean that we in the local churches agree in full with or endorse all of their teachings or that they would agree with and endorse all of ours. What these quotations do show is that the teaching of Witness Lee and the local churches stands well within the bounds of orthodox Christian teaching.

⁴ Douglas Groothuis, “Postscript—A Manifesto for Christian Apologetics: Nineteen Theses to Shake the World with the Truth,” in *Reasons for Faith: Making a Case for the Christian Faith*, ed. by Norman L. Geisler and Chad V. Meister (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2007), p. 404. Somewhat ironically the book consists of essays in honor of Bob and Gretchen Passantino. Gretchen Passantino was a major participant in both the early research at CRI that became a basis for much of the countercult’s criticism of Witness Lee and the local churches and in the subsequent study that formed the basis of CRI reappraisal. It is this reappraisal that Geisler and Rhodes assail with scholarship and argumentation which fall substantially short of the standards articulated by Groothuis.