

DEFENSE AND CONFIRMATION OF THE GOSPEL

A
CONFIRMATION
OF THE GOSPEL

*Concerning
the Teaching
of the Local Churches
and Living Stream
Ministry*

DCP PRESS

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

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

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

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PREFACE

In late 2004, a panel of three distinguished faculty members representing Fuller Theological Seminary (Pasadena, CA, USA)—President Richard Mouw, Dean of Theology Howard Loewen, and Professor of Systematic Theology Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen—initiated a dialogue with representatives of the local churches and Living Stream Ministry (LSM), publisher of the ministry of Watchman Nee and Witness Lee. From the outset it was clear that these scholars intended to perform their own direct research. Although they reviewed earlier, less thorough studies of the local churches, they did not depend on those studies alone in drawing their conclusions. Throughout the following year, the Fuller panel asked for and received voluminous documentation of our beliefs and practices. As a result of their study they issued a statement in which they said:

It is the conclusion of Fuller Theological Seminary that the teachings and practices of the local churches and its members represent the genuine, historical, biblical Christian faith in every essential aspect.

The full text of this statement is included as an appendix at the end of this book. The main body of this book is a document that was prepared by representatives of the local churches and the editorial section of LSM. It addresses some key issues that were points of emphasis in our earlier dialogues with the Fuller professors, including:

- Our affirmation of the common faith;
- Our particular understanding of certain truths, including:
 - The Trinity;
 - The Person of Christ;
 - The identification of Christ with the life-giving Spirit;
 - God’s full salvation; and
 - The genuine ground of oneness; and
- The way we meet together and seek to serve the Lord.

The Fuller scholars are not alone in their assessment. Those who have been willing to thoroughly examine our published ministry and to dialogue with us have consistently reached the same conclusion. For example, two prominent Christian apologists—Hank Hanegraaff, president of the Christian Research Institute, the largest Christian apologetics ministry in the world; and Gretchen Passantino, president of the apologetics ministry Answers in Action—revised their earlier assessments of us based on newer and more thorough research. Their statements have been published in the book *The Local Churches: “Genuine Believers and Fellow Members of the Body of Christ,”* available online at <http://www.contendingforthefaith.org/dialogues/index.html> and from DCP Press.

In publishing this book we seek to further dispel the false impressions created by what the Fuller scholars called “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.” We believe that the readers of this small book should be able to apprehend that the teachings of the local churches and Living Stream Ministry are thoroughly biblical and orthodox. We hope that the Lord would use this book to open more doors of fellowship with our brothers in the Body of Christ.

Abraham Ho

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February 2009

**A STATEMENT CONCERNING THE TEACHINGS
OF THE LOCAL CHURCHES
AND LIVING STREAM MINISTRY
IN RESPONSE TO DIALOGUE
WITH FULLER THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY**

During the last two years, representatives of the local churches (sometimes called by others “The Local Church”) and of our publishing service, Living Stream Ministry, have been privileged to meet and have dialogue with some of the leading members of Fuller Theological Seminary’s academic community. In these times of genuine fellowship, our brothers at Fuller warmly welcomed us and invited us to share with them some of our views on Christian truth and practice, including those we hold on the Bible, the Triune God, His salvation, and the church and church life. We appreciated very much the warm hospitality that our brothers gave us and the respect that they afforded us as they listened with interest to our points of view. Certainly there were differences in how we and they viewed things, but we must testify that at all times they received us in the most genuine of Christian ways—in the way that Christ also receives every believer to the glory of God (Rom. 15:7). Some mention of these times of fellowship is made in its publication *Fuller Focus* (forthcoming).¹

We understand that in opening to us, Fuller has also opened itself to criticism by some who take ardent exception to many of the things that we in the local churches believe. We are pained that our brothers at Fuller would suffer at all on our behalf but are again warmly cherished by their stand to receive all the believers in the light of the judgment seat of God (Rom. 14:10). For our part we hope that we can help alleviate the concern over

¹ This statement has since been published as “Fuller and Living Stream Ministries in Conversation,” in *Fuller Focus*, vol. 15, no. 1, Winter 2007, p. 22. It is also available on the Fuller Web site at http://documents.fuller.edu/news/html/fuller_lsm.asp.

Fuller's proper Christian act of receiving us by offering to this larger audience an explanation of our views on Christian truth and practice, which in many ways will be similar to what we offered our brothers at Fuller during the last two years. We honestly trust that most of those who read our explanation here will be like our brothers at Fuller, finding us to be fellow believers, withholding judgment on matters that are not central to the Christian faith, and maintaining righteousness, peace, and joy in the Holy Spirit, who knits us all together in the Body of Christ. What follows should be understood as only a statement of what we in the local churches believe and not as a representation of how Fuller Theological Seminary stands on any of the matters we present below (even if they may agree with us on any of the points). To protect the Seminary from any unfair accusations, we wish to state emphatically that what follows is not in any way some sort of "joint statement" of the local churches (with Living Stream Ministry) and Fuller Theological Seminary.

Our Common Faith

First, we would like to state clearly what we hold as the common faith delivered to us all (Jude 3). The base of our belief is the Holy Bible, which we view as the word of God and inspired by God in its every word (2 Tim. 3:16). We hold that every word in the Scriptures comes to us through the action of the Holy Spirit to bear the word of God through human writers (2 Pet. 1:21). We firmly believe that the Holy Scriptures, in their two Testaments, the Old and New, are complete and sufficient for leading people to salvation and for guiding them into glory according to the good pleasure of God's will. As believers, we need no further teaching or revelation beyond what is in the Bible, because all that is in the Bible is profitable and fit for our equipping and perfecting for all that God wishes for us (2 Tim. 3:17). All that we believe, proclaim, and teach must be based on and limited to what is in the Bible.

What the Bible mainly reveals to us is our wonderful God, and the God of the Bible is uniquely one (Deut. 6:4; 1 Cor. 8:4). Besides Him there is no other God (Isa. 45:5); He alone is God (Psa. 86:10). This is the glad confession of both ancient Jew and present-day Christian. However, we as Christians also hold that God is triune—the Father, the Son, and the Spirit (Matt. 3:16-17; 28:19; 2 Cor. 13:14; Eph. 2:18; 3:14-17; Rev. 1:4-5)—and this is the capital truth of Christian faith. We firmly believe that in the Godhead the Father and the Son and the Spirit are eternally distinct but inseparable. The three of the Godhead coexist “simultaneously” from eternity to eternity (Isa. 9:6; 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). Yet there are not three Gods, but one God in three hypostases or 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. Further, while the Father is the eternal source in the Godhead, the Son and the Spirit are not to be understood as later assumed or adopted into the Godhead through the power of God but are equally God eternally. How God can be both one and three is indeed a mystery to humankind, but it is not beyond our ability to believe and to enjoy; in fact, we believe that the Trinity of God is not merely for our acknowledgment and belief but more so for our experience and enjoyment, 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).

As Christians, our faith is centered on Christ as the incarnate God, and our first confession concerning Jesus Christ is that He is the true God. Of course, in declaring this item of our faith, we imply that God is triune and are again pointed to the Triune God as the capital truth of Christian faith. Christ is complete God and perfect man, possessing both the divine and the human natures. We believe that the two natures in Christ are preserved distinct and that each nature maintains its distinct qualities

without confusion or change and yet without separation. As God, He is God's only begotten Son and the Word of God (John 1:1, 14, 18); He is distinctly the image of the invisible God (Col. 1:15) and the effulgence of His glory and impress of His substance (Heb. 1:3), existing in the form of God and being equal with God (Phil. 2:6; John 5:18). In Him dwells all the fullness of the Godhead (Col. 2:9; 1:19). Through incarnation Christ became a genuine human being. So genuine is Christ's humanity that the Bible boldly declares that He "became flesh" (John 1:14). We believe that He is like us in all respects, yet He is without sin (Heb. 4:15). 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 has become our Redeemer, who has brought us back to God. Jubilantly we declare that Christ was raised from the dead, both spiritually and bodily, on the third day, and as the resurrected Christ He is our Savior, who saves us not only from our sins judicially but more importantly in His life organically (Rom. 5:10 "much more we will be saved in His life"). 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, still human and always God.

While we hold that it was the Son, and not the Father or the Spirit, who became a man, lived a human life, died a genuine human death on the cross for our redemption, rose from the dead for our salvation, and ascended to be Lord of all for the accomplishment of God's eternal economy, we equally hold that His actions as the incarnate God fully involve the operations of the Father and the Spirit, as He is inseparable from the Father and the Spirit and cannot act independently of them. Intrinsically, He was conceived of the Holy Spirit (Matt. 1:20; Luke 1:35), and as in the eternal Godhead, so also in His human existence, the Father is always with Him (John 8:29, 16); all that He does, He does with the Father (John 5:19; 14:10) and by the

Spirit (Matt 12:28, 18; Acts 10:38; Heb. 9:14). In incarnation, as in His eternal existence, He is in the Father and the Father is in Him (John 14:10-11, 20; 10:38; 17:21). We firmly resist the notion that the Son was incarnated as a man separably from the Father and the Spirit, as this does not accord with the revelation in the Scriptures. For that matter, it is not the testimony of the saints in the long history of the Christian church, even if it may be the uninformed notion of many a common believer today.

In ascension Christ today is Lord of all, and we eagerly await His return when He will come back as the Bridegroom for His church (John 3:29; Rev. 19:7). We look forward to the day when He will reign manifestly as King of kings to all the nations (Rev. 19:16). With all our fellow believers we share the blessed hope of being glorified by God 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).

This hope is the portion of all who are saved by God, and we believe that human beings enter into salvation through faith by the grace of God (Eph. 2:8). Every human being is constituted a sinner by birth and by action, and in order to be saved from the righteous judgment of God, a person must repent to God (Acts 2:38; 26:20) 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). Having the life of God, 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.

Finally, we believe that for the accomplishment of His purpose and to make known His multifarious wisdom, God produced the church (Eph. 3:10; 2:15), which is most intrinsically the Body of Christ (Eph. 1:22-23; Col. 1:24), composed of all persons across the centuries and across the globe who are believers in Christ. In its universal aspect, the church is one (Eph. 4:4), and we believe that in its local expressions, as local churches, it should

be one as well (e.g., Rev. 1:11). Certainly there is much disagreement among Christians today concerning the matter of the church, as evidenced by the many denominations. Some even deny completely the necessity of the church as a basic provision for our Christian life. However, it is our understanding and belief that the one church as the Body of Christ is a necessary and significant operation in God's economy, even if it is something of the oneness of the faith at which we have yet to all arrive (Eph. 4:13).²

Our Particular Understanding of Various Christian Truths

We hope that the preceding presentation of our common faith will be accepted without controversy by all Christian believers. However, we understand that some who have read portions of our ministry materials feel that we are aberrant in our understanding, and some have gone so far as to accuse us of being heretical. It is our strong conviction that many of these negative evaluations are based on only limited exposure to our writings and that to some extent some of our writings have been taken out of their full contexts to find in them meanings that are not consistent with our actual understanding. Unfortunately, this is a sad practice of some "researchers" today, and we are not their only objects of abuse. We feel that it comes with the territory of our stand. But this is not to say that our particular understanding of some Christian truths is not without genuine controversy and does not differ from that of many Christian teachers, thinkers, and believers. We readily admit some genuine differences because we genuinely believe in our understanding of these matters, just as adherents of other schools of

² Much of what has been presented in this section appears in kernel form in Witness Lee, *The Speciality, Generality, and Practicality of the Church Life* (Anaheim, CA: Living Stream Ministry, 1983), 7-14. Unless otherwise indicated, all titles cited in this article are by Witness Lee and published by Living Stream Ministry, Anaheim, CA.

teachings genuinely do their own. On these issues we can only wish to have dialogue with respect and tolerance, both ours and that of others. We do not wish to make these issues matters of our common faith; i.e., they are not the basis for receiving or rejecting others into Christian fellowship. Likewise, we hope that, as our brothers at Fuller have done and as we ourselves do, all would view these issues as items which believers can disagree (or agree) on without damaging the oneness of the Spirit, who knits us all together in the one Body of Christ. Of course, it is our earnest and greater hope that all believers would come to the same understanding on these issues as we have—so fully do we believe in these matters—but these are not points to be contended for, and we properly leave this entire realm of understanding to the Spirit of truth and reality, who, we are promised, will guide us all into all the divine truth and reality (John 16:13).

In this section we wish to present some of the points of our particular understanding of various Christian truths which either define us more specifically in our distinctive standing or have generated some controversy about us among the Christian public. Our understanding of the Bible depends heavily on the writings of Watchman Nee and Witness Lee. The former teacher is fairly well known to the Christian public, and a number of his books are well respected throughout Christianity. Probably his best known work is *The Normal Christian Life*. But outside the local churches that we represent, our other major teacher, Witness Lee, either is not well known or is sometimes viewed quite suspiciously. We are deeply saddened by this, having received from him so much spiritual help, nourishing teaching, and godly example. Perhaps in a small way what we present here of his writings will help to dispel any misunderstandings concerning him. For those who are unacquainted with our brother, perhaps a short introduction would be in order.

Witness Lee was born in 1905 in northern China and was raised in a Christian family. At age 19 he was fully captured for Christ

and immediately consecrated himself to preach the gospel for the rest of his life. Early in his Christian service, Witness Lee met Watchman Nee, a renowned preacher, teacher, and writer. Witness Lee labored together with Watchman Nee under his direction. In 1934 Watchman Nee entrusted Witness Lee with the responsibility for his publication operation, called the Shanghai Gospel Book Room. In 1949 Witness Lee was sent by Watchman Nee and his other co-workers to Taiwan to ensure that the things delivered to them by the Lord would not be lost. Watchman Nee instructed Witness Lee to continue the former's publishing operation abroad as the Taiwan Gospel Book Room, which, along with Living Stream Ministry in the West, has been publicly recognized as the publisher of Watchman Nee's works outside China. Witness Lee's work in Taiwan manifested the Lord's abundant blessing. From a mere 350 believers, newly fled from the mainland, the churches in Taiwan grew to 20,000 in five years. In 1962 Witness Lee felt led of the Lord to come to the United States, settling in California. During his 35 years of service in the U.S., he ministered in weekly meetings and weekend conferences, delivering several thousand spoken messages. Much of his speaking has since been published as over 800 titles. Many of these have been translated into over 14 languages. He gave his last public conference in February 1997 at the age of 91. Witness Lee's ministry emphasizes the experience of Christ as life and the practical oneness of the believers as the Body of Christ. Stressing the importance of attending to both these matters, he led the churches under his care to grow in Christian life and function. He was unbending in his conviction that God's goal is not narrow sectarianism but the one Body of Christ.

The Distinctiveness of the Son in the Divine Trinity

Probably the one theological item that has generated the most controversy about us is our understanding concerning the relationships among the three hypostases (persons) in the Divine Trinity. Put briefly, our understanding is based, in part, on three

critical verses, which one can find often quoted in the writings of Witness Lee:

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

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

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

In the first verse above, the Son is called the Father, in the second He is said to have become a life-giving Spirit, and in the third He is said to be the Spirit. For some, this is maddeningly simplistic, but for us, the utterance of the Bible should not casually be set aside to conform to external theological constructs. While we certainly do not feel it necessary to reject theological constructs completely, all our constructs must respect the data of the Bible, and our point here is that a properly biblical view of the relationships among the three hypostases in the Divine Trinity 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* He is somehow said to be the Spirit. There are, of course, easy ways to dissolve the problems associated with these verses, and various interpreters have been quick to offer “solutions.” Without exhausting the possibilities, we acknowledge the existence of some of these interpretations: Christ, the son given to Israel, is a metaphorical father to them, and thus this is not a reference to the hypostases in the Trinity; in His resurrection Christ has taken on a spiritual existence and can be said to be a

spirit now, and thus this is not a reference to the hypostases in the Trinity; the Lord referred to in 2 Corinthians 3:17 is not specifically the Lord Jesus, the second of the Divine Trinity, but the Lord God generally, and thus this is not a reference to the hypostases in the Trinity. These and similar interpretations may sweep the difficulties away for some, but for us they obscure what we believe are biblical facts concerning a deep reality that exists in the Godhead, a reality which, though beyond our capacity to fully fathom, we can nevertheless reach for in our understanding and appreciation. Unfortunately, some have viewed our reaching as aberrant, and this we feel is without proper cause.

To set the record straight, we would like to first present some statements from the ministry of Witness Lee which make clear what we *do not* understand concerning the relationships among the three hypostases in the Divine Trinity. Because of our emphases on the verses above, we have been accused of modalistic monarchianism, or more simply modalism, the teaching that the three hypostases of the Divine Trinity are temporal (and temporary) modes of the one eternal, indistinguishable Godhead; hence, the distinctions of Father, Son, and Spirit are not eternal, but the *monarchia* (unity) of God is. We have soundly rejected this notion in our teaching, as the following sample portions, a few from the scores of similar ones, indicate:

The Spirit's descending was the anointing of Christ, whereas the Father's speaking was a testimony to Him as the beloved Son. This is a picture of the Divine Trinity: the Son rose up from the water, the Spirit descended upon the Son, and the Father spoke concerning the Son. This proves that the Father, the Son, and the Spirit exist simultaneously. This is for the accomplishing of God's economy. (New Testament Recovery Version, note 1 on Matt. 3:17)

We want to declare to all that, in accordance with the Bible, we believe that the Father is eternal, the Son is eternal, and the Spirit also is eternal....

The Father, Son, and Spirit all exist at the same time. Notice John 14:16-17: "And I will ask the Father, and He will give you

another Comforter, that He may be with you forever, even the Spirit of reality.” In these two verses we have the Son praying to the Father that the Father would send the Spirit. Hence, the Father, the Son, and the Spirit are all present at the same time. (*The Truth concerning the Trinity*, 10-11)

The three of the Divine Trinity—the Father, the Son, and the Spirit—exist at the same time; and Their coexistence is from eternity to eternity, being equally without beginning and without ending. The Father is eternal; this can be proven by Isaiah 9:6, which refers to the Father as the “Eternal Father.” The Son is also eternal. Concerning the Son, Hebrews 1:12 says, “You are the same, and Your years will not fail”; Hebrews 7:3 also says that He had “neither beginning of days nor end of life,” indicating that He is eternal. Moreover, the Spirit is eternal; Hebrews 9:14 mentions “the eternal Spirit.” Hence, the three—the Father, the Son, and the Spirit—all are eternal...

In summary, the three—the Father, the Son, and the Spirit—all are from eternity to eternity, being equally eternal, without beginning and without ending, and existing at the same time. (*The Revelation and Vision of God*, 29-30, 32-33)

While we adamantly maintain that the three persons of the Divine Trinity exist eternally and are eternally distinct, we also 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, and Witness Lee relied heavily on the notion to explain how the Bible sometimes identifies one distinct hypostasis of the Trinity with another:

The three—the Father, the Son, and the Spirit—not only coexist but also coinhere. The term *coinhere* applied to the Triune God means that the three—the Father, the Son, and the Spirit—exist within one another.

First of all, this is based upon the word spoken by the Lord Jesus in the Gospels. In John 14:7-10 the Lord said to the disciples, “If you had known Me, you would have known My Father also; and henceforth you know Him and have seen Him.” Then Philip requested, saying, “Lord, show us the Father and it is sufficient for us.” The Lord answered him,

“Have I been so long a time with you, and you have not known Me, Philip? He who has seen Me has seen the Father; how is it that you say, Show us the Father? Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in Me?”...

Besides John 14:10, the same utterance is found in 14:20; 10:38; and 17:21, 23. These five verses all refer to the fact that the Son and the Father exist within one another at the same time. These verses are crucial to our understanding of the mystery of the Divine Trinity’s being three and also one. (*The Revelation and Vision of God*, 33)

John 14:10 perhaps best captures the fine nuances of the manifest action and inseparable operations that we see in the Trinity: “Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in Me? The words that I say to you I do not speak from Myself, but the Father who abides in Me does His works.” Because the Son is in the Father and the Father is in the Son—that is, because the Father and the Son coinhere—what is manifestly and distinctly the Son’s action (“the words that I say to you”) is likewise the Father’s operation (“the Father who abides in Me does His works”). An allusion to the similar inseparable operations of the three in the distinct action of the Spirit can be found in John 16:13-15:

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

Because of this marvelous reality of the coinherence of the three in the Trinity, we believe that frequently the Bible identifies the hypostases with one another, sometimes to the chagrin of less-nuanced systematic theologies. But not all systematians have been dull to this reality in God:

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. The Scripture representations of this intercommunion prevent us from conceiving of the distinctions called Father, Son, and Holy Spirit as involving separation between them....

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: A Compendium* [Old Tappan, NJ: Revell, 1960, c1907], 332-333)

Similarly, we understand that because of coinherence in the Trinity the Son given to us comes to us bearing in His every action the inseparable operation of the Eternal Father and thus can be called, as Isaiah predicts, the Eternal Father. We do not need to relegate Isaiah’s prophecy to an Old Testament metaphor, nor should we neuter the passage of its full Christian significance, for as Christians we hold this verse as an inspired prophecy of the incarnate Christ. Rather, we wish to afford the passage its full textual force, understanding that the Son who came to us in incarnation was in the Father and that His works were as well the operations of the Eternal Father.

This is not to say that we should at all ignore the distinctions of the three hypostases of the Trinity, and neither does Witness Lee, as some may charge. Speaking of the work of the Trinity in the first stage of God’s plan, he says,

In the work of the Father’s plan we can say that the Father did the works in the Son and with the Spirit, but we cannot

say that the Son did that work with the Father and by the Spirit. Neither can we say that the Spirit did the works of the plan as the Son, with the Father. (*Elders' Training, Book 3: The Way to Carry out the Vision*, 69)

Then, speaking of the work of the Triune God in the second stage, that of accomplishing, or carrying out, what the Father planned, the distinction is clearly preserved:

Also, in the second step of God's economy, the step of accomplishment, the Son did all the works. We cannot say the Father did the accomplishing work with the Son and by the Spirit. Neither can we say that the Spirit accomplished the Father's plan as the Son, with the Father. We can only say that the Son did all the works to accomplish the Father's plan with the Father and by the Spirit. Also, we cannot say that the Father became flesh and that the Father lived on this earth in the flesh. Furthermore, we cannot say that the Father went to the cross and died for our redemption, and we cannot say the blood shed on the cross is the blood of Jesus the Father. We must say that the blood was shed by Jesus the Son of God (1 John 1:7). We can neither say that the Father died on the cross nor can we say that the Father resurrected from the dead. (*Elders' Training, Book 3: The Way to Carry out the Vision*, 69)

What we wish to hold steadfastly in our teaching is that the three of the Trinity are inseparable and that where one acts, all three operate. For this reason, the Bible, while respecting the distinct agencies in the actions of God's economy, also frequently identifies one divine hypostasis with the others. It is an identification which we feel should be adopted by all Christians in their understanding and hopefully in their Christian experience.

The Identification of the Resurrected Christ with the Life-giving Spirit

A key focus of our ministry is the believers' experience of Christ, and it is in this experiential sense that we interpret verses like 1 Corinthians 15:45 and 2 Corinthians 3:17. We understand that in resurrection Christ comes to the believers

and works out the full activity of God's complete salvation in and through the life-giving Spirit. Because of this, we find in the New Testament Epistles a strong identification of Christ with the Spirit, again not to the elimination of their distinctions in the Divine Trinity but according to their coinherent existence and operation in the believers. Witness Lee spoke much concerning the identification of Christ with the Spirit in resurrection. The following are representative examples of his teaching on this subject:

First Corinthians 15:45 states: "The last Adam became a life-giving Spirit." Who is the last Adam? Jesus. Who is the life-giving Spirit? The Holy Spirit. Besides the Holy Spirit, there is no other spirit that gives life. This verse clearly tells us that Jesus, who is called in the Bible the last Adam, became the life-giving Spirit....

In 2 Corinthians 3:17 we read: "And the Lord is the Spirit." Who is the Lord here? No doubt it is Jesus. And who is the Spirit? It is of course the Holy Spirit. The Lord here is Jesus and the Spirit here is the Holy Spirit. So here the Bible says, "And the Lord is the Spirit." To say that the Lord Jesus is the Spirit is absolutely scriptural!

In his book *The Spirit of Christ*, the twenty-fifth chapter, Andrew Murray says: "It was when our Lord Jesus was exalted into the life of the Spirit that He became *the Lord the Spirit*." (*The Truth concerning the Trinity*, 14-15)

The Christ who breathed Himself into the disciples is the life-giving Spirit. The resurrected Christ as the life-giving Spirit is the breath. Some theologians use the term "the pneumatic Christ" to refer to the Christ who is the Spirit, the breath. After the Lord Jesus accomplished all of His processes, He became the life-giving Spirit, and the life-giving Spirit is the pneumatic Christ. Such a One, the pneumatic Christ as the Spirit, came to His disciples and breathed Himself as the Spirit into them...In John 20:22 the resurrected Christ, the pneumatic Christ, Christ as the Spirit, entered into His believers to be the divine essence of their spiritual life and being. (*The Conclusion of the New Testament*, 916)

Portions from Witness Lee's ministry such as these, improperly understood as the full compass of his teaching on the relationship between the resurrected Christ and the life-giving Spirit, can be taken as "proof" that he was blatantly modalistic. A similar misreading can be done for almost all Christian teachers who attempt to comment at depth on the Trinity. Adept readers of historical theology know that Irenaeus, Tertullian, Augustine, and a list of other solidly orthodox teachers can be read aberrantly, but that in their writings there are also the balancing portions that validate their orthodoxy. Witness Lee too has his balancing portions, which are rarely seen in published "proofs" of his alleged heterodoxy. Here we wish to offer two exemplary portions that show something of his full view on Christ and the Spirit:

This very Christ is now the Lord in the heavens and at the same time the Spirit within us. "Now the Lord is the Spirit" (2 Cor. 3:17). As Lord, He is in the heavens. As the Spirit, He is within us. As the One in the heavens, He is exercising His rulership, headship, and priesthood....

Whatever He carries out as Lord, He applies to us as the Spirit. (*The Heavenly Ministry of Christ*, 69-70)

Some who read this word concerning the Spirit as another Comforter and the Spirit as Christ's breath may ask, "Don't you believe that Christ and the Spirit are distinct? Don't you believe that Christ and the Spirit are two?" Yes, I believe that, as viewed from one aspect, the outward, objective aspect, Christ and the Spirit are two. However, as viewed from another aspect, the inward, subjective aspect, the Spirit, the second Comforter, is the breath of Christ, the first Comforter. Thus, from the perspective of the inward aspect, Christ and the Spirit are one. (*The Fulfillment of the Tabernacle and the Offerings in the Writings of John*, 588)

Without too much analysis, one can see that Witness Lee held to the notion that Christ and the Spirit are distinct; however, echoing the New Testament Epistles, he understood and taught that in our Christian experience, which, as opposed to theological systematization, was the great focus of his ministry, the resurrected Christ is often identified with the life-giving Spirit.

As this is one of the topics that has drawn the greatest amount of criticism concerning Witness Lee's teaching, we feel that it is important to add a few quotations from others on the subject. Witness Lee's teaching on this subject may be considered non-traditional or even controversial, but he is certainly not alone in the conclusions he has drawn. At least one notable contemporary scholar worth mention is James D. G. Dunn, who addresses some of the same scriptural passages that Witness Lee has given frequent attention to:

If Adam is the type of psychic existence, then Christ, the risen Christ, is the type of pneumatic existence....In short, verse 45b constitutes proof because Paul's experience of the [life-giving Spirit] convinces him that the exalted Jesus has a spiritual, somatic existence and that in that mode of existence he is the pattern and forerunner of a new humanity.

...the life-giving Spirit they all experience is the *risen* Jesus, the *last* Adam...

Paul identifies the exalted Jesus with the Spirit – not with a spiritual being...or a spiritual dimension or sphere..., but with the Spirit, the Holy Spirit....Immanent christology is for Paul pneumatology; in the believer's experience there is *no* distinction between Christ and Spirit. This does not mean of course that Paul makes no distinction between Christ and Spirit. (*The Christ and the Spirit*, vol. 1, *Christology* [Grand Rapids, MI: W. B. Eerdmans, 1998], 164-165)

W. H. Griffith Thomas, the noted theologian from a generation ago and one whom Witness Lee frequently quoted regarding the Trinity, also makes reference to the twofoldness of this divine truth, while offering a remarkably clear and succinct summary of the identification of Christ and the Spirit:

It is essential to preserve with care both sides of this truth. Christ and the Spirit are different yet the same, the same yet different. Perhaps the best expression we can give is that while their Personalities are never identical, their presence always is. (*The Holy Spirit* [Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 1986; reprint of *The Holy Spirit of God*, 4th ed., Grand Rapids, MI: W. B. Eerdmans, 1913], 144)

It is clear from these quotations as well as from the entirety of the ministry of Witness Lee that it is in the realm of the believers' experience of Christ—and not in God's immanent existence—that the identification between Christ and the Spirit obtains. H. B. Swete confirms this same thought:

The Spirit in its working was found to be in effect the equivalent of Jesus Christ...where the possession of the Spirit of Christ is clearly regarded as tantamount to an indwelling of Christ Himself...“the Lord the Spirit,” (i.e. Christ in the power of His glorified life) are viewed as being in practice the same. (*The Holy Spirit in the New Testament*, [London; New York: Macmillan, 1912], 306)

Finally, before leaving this crucial topic, one additional quotation from Witness Lee's study note on 2 Corinthians 3:17 shows his reliance on notable expositors who also recognized this identification of the resurrected Christ with the life-giving Spirit—Marvin Vincent, Henry Alford, and Williston Walker:

According to the context of this section, which begins at [2 Cor.] 2:12, *the Lord* here must refer to Christ the Lord (2:12, 14-15, 17; 3:3-4, 14, 16; 4:5). This then is a strong word in the Bible, telling us emphatically that Christ is the Spirit. “The Lord Christ of v. 16 is the Spirit who pervades and animates the new covenant of which we are ministers (v. 6), and the ministration of which is with glory (v. 8). Compare Rom. 8:9-11; John 14:16, 18” (Vincent). “The Lord of v. 16, is the Spirit...which giveth life, v. 6: meaning, ‘the Lord,’ as here spoken of, ‘Christ,’ ‘is the Spirit,’ is identical with the Holy Spirit...Christ, here, is the Spirit of Christ” (Alford). “All that transforming and indwelling Spirit is Christ Himself. ‘The Lord is the Spirit’” (Williston Walker). (New Testament Recovery Version, note 2 on 2 Cor. 3:17)

The Distinctiveness of the Two Natures in the One Person of Christ

Another point in our teaching, which has gendered some controversy, is our use of the term *mingling* in reference to the two natures in Christ. Without much attention to what we actually

have to say on the two natures, our detractors have seized on our use of this term simply because in their own minds it seems to carry heretical notions. However, we have always been very careful to state clearly our belief that the two natures—the divine and the human—remain preserved and distinct in the mingling. In one of many similar explanations in his ministry, Witness Lee teaches,

He [Christ] was born of these two essences through the Holy Spirit and through the chaste virgin....Through the Holy Spirit He received the divine essence, and through the human virgin He received the human essence.

Mingling means that two elements are joined and mingled together, but the two elements do not lose their particular natures. Their two natures retain their distinction, and they are not joined together to produce a third nature. Therefore, such a One was born to be a God-man who is both the complete God and the perfect man, possessing two natures and two lives, the divine nature and the divine life, and the human nature and the human life, mingled together as one but without any confusion, without any loss of their distinctive natures, and without anything produced to be a third nature or a third element. (*Elders' Training, Book 2: The Vision of the Lord's Recovery*, 11-12)

For the moment we will pass over the validity of Witness Lee's definition of the word *mingling*. Here we wish to focus on the clarity with which he states the truth concerning the two natures in Christ. Those familiar with the history of Christian doctrine will note the very strong echoes of Chalcedonian theology and of the Symbol of Chalcedon (A.D. 451) itself. He states that "two natures retain their distinction," adhering to the affirmation of the orthodox teaching. He asserts that the two natures "are not joined together to produce a third nature," flatly rejecting Eutychianism, which he is often accused of teaching in saying that the two natures are mingled. Finally, he all but repeats the language of the Symbol to affirm our view on the two natures: "without any confusion, without any loss of their distinctive natures, and without anything produced to be a third

nature or a third element.” Numerous similar passages can be found in the writings of Witness Lee, but these are rarely presented to the Christian public by those who take exception with our use of the term *mingling*.

And what of the term *mingling*? Witness Lee claims that in a mingling two elements are joined without the loss of their particular natures; that is, the two natures retain their distinction. But is that really what *mingling* means? Our critics have been quite vocal in saying that *mingling* denotes a confusion of elements and natures, contrary to what is properly held by the Christian church. Perhaps it does in their minds, but it certainly does not in the standard lexicons of the English language. From the unabridged *Webster’s Third New International Dictionary*, we find the following definition for *mingle*: “to bring or combine together or with something else so that the components remain distinguishable in the combination” (Springfield, MA: Merriam-Webster, 1993). From the online edition of *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*, 4th ed., we find a similar definition: “to mix or bring together in combination, usually without loss of individual characteristics” (<http://www.bartleby.com/61/31/M0313100.html>, accessed 19 January 2007). A finer nuance of the word, in contrast to its synonyms, is found under the entry for the synonyms for *mix*:

Mingle implies combination without loss of individual characteristics: “*Respect was mingled with surprise*” (Sir Walter Scott). “*His companions mingled freely and joyously with the natives*” (Washington Irving). (<http://www.bartleby.com/61/25/M0352500.html>, accessed 19 January 2007)

Some may wish to argue that while the lexicons offer these hermetic denotations of the word *mingle*, common understanding is otherwise, and for that reason *mingling* actually is an erroneous description of the relationship between the two natures in Christ. However, this also does not seem to be the case. We may be able to dismiss Sir Walter Scott and Washington Irving (among others) as overly literate, but it is difficult to dismiss

the actual commonplace uses of the notion of mingling found, let's say, on the Internet today:

Older people in suits and ties mingled with schoolchildren in T-shirts as they read quotations from Roosevelt's speeches... (Doug Struck, "Clinton Dedicates Memorial, Urges Americans to Emulate FDR," *Washington Post*, 3 May 1997, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/local/longterm/tours/fdr/history.htm>, accessed 19 January 2007)

Sometimes called the Paris of the South, Asheville's unique mingling of architecture and cultures offers a cosmopolitan feel with an Appalachian flavor. ("Community Tour," *Coldwell Banker Kasey and Associates* [Web site], http://www.coldwellbankerkasey.com/community_tour.htm, accessed 19 January 2007)

It is not possible to understand in these examples that the "older people in suits and ties" became indistinguishable from the "schoolchildren in T-shirts"; the distinctive attributes of each class were preserved in this commonplace mingling. Further, in the one city of Asheville, Paris of the South, the feel of the cosmopolitan is clearly distinguishable from the flavor of Appalachia; otherwise, how could this real estate agent perceive the two cultures and perceive them as distinctly as one would texture and taste? Thousands of similar examples can be found. Hence, the lexicons and common usage support the meaning we employ for the term *mingling* as it relates to the two natures in the one person of Christ.

However, some people are steadfast in their suspicion of us on this matter regardless of our attempts at persuasion, and we should try to make some sense of their inexorableness. We believe that what underlies this is simple idleness of contemplation on the two natures in Christ. Most of our critics are only mildly familiar with the historical issues related to the two natures, and when they hear the use of *any* word that describes the joining of the natures, red flags go up in their minds. They themselves would reject the use of the term *mingling* because it seems that in their

understanding the two natures are not merely distinct but separate. For this reason, they err at the opposite extreme of acceptability. In sounding an alarm against us, claiming that *mingling* implies confusion and change, they forget that in Christ the two natures are also “without division and without separation” (“Symbol of Chalcedon”).

Very often the question is asked why we do not just drop the use of the word *mingling*, since it is such a “red flag” for so many people and causes us such difficulty. The reason is simple. Although Witness Lee fully understood the historical problems associated with the term, he believed that *mingling* is simply the best term to describe the joining of the two natures, divine and human, in the one person of Christ. But more importantly, Witness Lee felt that this is the way the Bible describes the joining of the two natures in Christ. Interpreting allegorically the meal offering in Leviticus 2 as a type of the divine-human Christ, he picked up the word *mingled* to describe the relationship of the two natures in Christ. In this passage he offered his understanding of the biblical type and, again, demonstrates what should and should not be properly understood concerning the two natures:

The word *mingled* can be found in Leviticus 2, where it is used by the Holy Spirit to describe God’s desire in His relationship with man. Verse 5 says that in preparing the meal offering the oil had to be mingled with the fine flour. The oil signifies God Himself as the Holy Spirit (Luke 4:18; Heb. 1:9), and the fine flour signifies the Lord Jesus’ humanity. Thus, the oil being mingled with the fine flour signifies God being mingled with humanity. The oil and the fine flour signify divinity and humanity as two different natures being mingled together as one. However, this mingling does not produce a third nature; rather, the two natures remain distinguishable in their combination. (*Experiencing the Mingling of God with Man for the Oneness of the Body of Christ*, 32)

While some may reject Witness Lee's use of the allegorical method in finding an adequate term to describe the two natures, he is certainly within his rights to do so, and doing so hardly makes him (or us) heretical. We unreservedly teach that the term *mingling* is soundly scriptural within an allegorical interpretation of Leviticus 2, but we can stand as assuredly behind the term apart from its scriptural identity because we feel that it best describes the relationship of the two natures in Christ, as we have seen above. We find that the word *mingling* most perfectly gives us utterance to and understanding of the ineffable mystery of the two natures, and we will not easily abandon a better understanding and utterance of this precious truth. We would rather suffer with the truth than run away from it.

It is worth noting that though the theological use of the term *mingling* is not common on the modern scene, Witness Lee's use is not unique. The noted Scottish theologian William Milligan uses *mingle* in precisely the same context, describing the relationship of the divine Spirit and our spirit after the former indwells the latter:

When spirit is brought home to spirit, the Spirit of Christ to the spirit of man, the two cannot in the nature of things remain separate from each other. The one cannot be set within the other as a precious jewel may be set in gold, the jewel remaining the jewel, the gold the gold. They must rather mingle like two different atmospheres, each diffusing itself throughout the other, so that both shall be found in every particle of their united volumes...He [the Spirit] penetrates their being; He acts at the centre of their life. "He that is joined to the Lord is one Spirit." (*The Ascension and Heavenly Priesthood of Our Lord* [London; New York: Macmillan, 1894], 183-184)

Christ as Both Creator and Creature

Witness Lee has also been falsely accused of teaching that Christ is exclusively a creature and not truly God. This accusation is one of the very first he suffered, dating back to the late

1950s when he was ministering in Taiwan and Hong Kong. Because he understood the phrase *the Firstborn of all creation* in Colossians 1:15 to be a reference to Christ in His humanity, some of his younger co-workers at that time took exception, assuming that, like Arius in the fourth century, he did not believe that Christ was God. This accusation continues to this day but is mostly circulated in the Far East; most readers in the West have understood what he meant, even if Witness Lee does not share the standard modern interpretation of Colossians 1:15. Witness Lee has commented on this matter numerous times in his ministry, but again a few examples will be sufficient to demonstrate his actual understanding:

For Christ to be the Firstborn of all creation means that He is the first item of all the creatures. Due to the heresy of Arius, not many Bible teachers would take this point in Colossians 1:15 according to the literal meaning of the Greek. Arius taught that Christ was not divine, that He was not God, but was rather something created by God in eternity, and he based his heretical teaching on Colossians 1:15. According to history, Arius was condemned because of his heresy and cast out, even exiled, by the Nicene Council in A.D. 325. Due to this heretical teaching of Arius, from the time of the Nicene Council until today, most of the Bible teachers would not interpret Colossians 1:15 according to the literal translation, for fear that they might be condemned for heresy as Arius was....

Since 1958 I have put out some writings to declare that our Christ is surely not only the Creator but also a creature because He is both God, as the Creator, and man, as a creature. (*Elders' Training, Book 2: The Vision of the Lord's Recovery, 20-21*)

Concerning this point, we must know that in church history there existed another heretical sect, the Arians....The Arians maintained that although Christ is the Son of God, He was not God in eternity but became God at a certain time. The Jehovah's Witnesses belong to this sect, which originated with Arius of the fourth century. Based upon Colossians 1:15b, which says, "Who [the Son of the Father's love] is...the Firstborn of all creation," Arius advocated that since Christ is a creature, He does not have the same essence (Gk. *ousia*) of

God, and that although the universe and all things were created through Him (Heb. 1:2; John 1:3), His existence is not eternal but had a beginning. Therefore, Arius taught that since Christ is a creature, He cannot be equal with the Father....This kind of teaching is a great heresy.

It is true that we believe the Son is the Firstborn of all creation, but our belief is not according to the teaching of Arius but according to the pure revelation of the Bible. The Bible says that Christ is the Firstborn of all creation not according to His divinity but according to His humanity. According to His divinity, He is the eternal God, the Creator; however, since He became flesh and put on a body of flesh and blood, He also possesses humanity. Hence, in the aspect of His being a man, He has humanity and is a creature. (*The Revelation and Vision of God*, 30)

As God, Christ is the Creator, but as man, He is a creature. How could He have flesh, blood, and bones if He were not a creature? Did not Christ become a man? Did He not take on a body with flesh, blood, and bones? Certainly He did.... Our Christ is God, has always been God, and always will be God. But through incarnation He became a man. Otherwise He could not have been arrested, tried, and crucified; and He could not have shed His blood on the cross for our sins. Praise the Lord for the truth that our Christ is both God and man! (*Life-study of Colossians*, 66-67)

To say that Witness Lee denied the deity of Christ simply because he interpreted the phrase *the Firstborn of all creation* as a reference to Christ's humanity is to assign guilt by association. Certainly, Arius understood the phrase as a reference to Christ as a creature, but unlike Witness Lee, he used that interpretation to "prove" his mistaken notion that Christ was not truly God. Witness Lee has taught in abundant measure that Christ is truly God, and he has made clear that his understanding of Colossians 1:15 should in no way diminish that truth. Further, Witness Lee, though certainly not adhering to the majority of modern interpreters on this point, is not alone in understanding the phrase as a reference, at least in some sense, to the humanity of Christ. Athanasius (*Arianos* 2.62-64), Gregory

of Nyssa (*Eunom.* 2.8; 3.3; *Perf.*), and Cyril of Alexandria (*The.* 25; *Trin. Dial.* 4; 6), teachers highly respected for their contributions to the development of the orthodox view of Trinity and Christology, recognized in the phrase some reference to Christ as part of creation. It is probably superfluous to note that the first of these, Athanasius, was arguing against Arius, yet he did not need to abandon this sense in his interpretation of the phrase. He could see Christ, the Firstborn of all creation, as part of creation in some sense without undermining his principal argument that Christ is truly God. Likewise, Witness Lee has advocated that the phrase refers to Christ in His status as a human being and thus as part of the created realm, but that does not mean that he teaches that Christ is not also truly God.

The Immanent and Economic Aspects of the Trinity

Before turning from these points in our teaching on Trinity and Christology which have excited some controversy, we would like to offer one other fundamental matter which underpins much of our understanding concerning the Triune God and the person of Christ. Recognizing the aspect of incommunicability in God and yet believing that God has nevertheless communicated Himself through the mystery of the incarnation, we understand that in the Godhead there are the aspects of both His immanent existence and His economic operation, and thus we agree with the many prominent theologians across the centuries who speak of the immanent Trinity and the economic Trinity. In his ministry Witness Lee relied heavily on this distinction. (In his writings he employed the older designation for the former of these aspects, referring to it as the essential Trinity.) Some of our detractors accuse us of doublespeak because in defending the truth as we understand it, we frequently present portions from our ministry which affirm both sides of what seem to be contradictory positions. They charge us with openly declaring orthodox views on certain matters but obliquely espousing heterodoxical views on the same matters. But we are not ashamed of our

understanding of the truth in all its facets, and there is no need for us to be oblique in our presentation. We understand that some may wish to malign us by highlighting one side of our understanding of the truth and ignoring the other side that gives proper balance to our views. But when we attempt to set the record straight, we are then accused of dissembling, and people everywhere are warned of our alleged “cunning” in saying one thing and meaning another. We expect that this too will be the response of some of our critics when they read this article. It is an argument that cannot be answered, of course, not because there is any truth to it but simply because it ignores the issues and is ad hominem.

Much of the basis for our alleged doublespeak is our recognition of an immanent and an economic aspect in the Divine Trinity. While we teach, for example, that there is some sense in which the Son can be called the Father and in which the resurrected Christ can be said to be the life-giving Spirit, at the same time we maintain that the Son is not the Father, that the Son is not the Spirit, and that the Spirit is not the Son or the Father. The former statements respect the Trinity in His economic operations, while the latter statements preserve the Trinity in His immanent existence. Witness Lee writes,

Whereas the essential Trinity refers to the essence of the Triune God for His existence, the economical Trinity refers to His plan for His move. There is the need of the existence of the Divine Trinity, and there is also the need of the plan of the Divine Trinity.

The Father accomplished the first step of His plan, His economy, by working to choose and predestinate us, but He did this in Christ the Son (Eph. 1:4-5) and with the Spirit. After this plan was made, the Son came to accomplish this plan, but He did this with the Father (John 8:29; 16:32) and by the Spirit (Luke 1:35; Matt. 1:18, 20; 12:28). Now that the Son has accomplished all that the Father has planned, the Spirit comes in the third step to apply all that He accomplished, but He does this as the Son and with the Father (John 14:26;

15:26; 1 Cor. 15:45b; 2 Cor. 3:17). In this way, while the divine economy of the Divine Trinity is being carried out, the divine existence of the Divine Trinity, His eternal coexistence and coinherence, remains intact and is not jeopardized. (*The Crucial Points of the Major Items of the Lord's Recovery Today*, 10)

The process through which the Triune God passed to become the life-giving Spirit is an economical, not essential, matter. Change with God can only be economical; it can never be essential. Essentially, our God cannot change. From eternity to eternity He remains the same in His essence. But in His economy the Triune God has changed in the sense of being processed. First, He who was merely God became a God-man. When He was merely God, He did not have humanity. But when He changed by becoming a God-man, humanity was added to His divinity. This does not mean, however, that God changed in His essence. On the contrary, He was changed only in His economy, in His dispensation. God has changed in His economy, but He has never changed in His essence.

Although God has changed in His economy, no longer will He change economically. Rather, He will remain the same. (*The Conclusion of the New Testament*, 914-915)

Upon careful analysis many instances of our purported “dissemblance” can likewise be adequately explained in terms of this respect for the immanent and economic aspects in the Divine Trinity. In the second portion above, notice particularly Witness Lee’s comment about God undergoing change and being processed, for which he has been assailed repeatedly. The full context of this comment gives the balance that he had in his understanding. While we cannot fully fathom how it can be so—the mystery is ineffable—we recognize both that God does not change in His immanent existence but that in His economic operations He underwent the process of incarnation, human living, death, and resurrection, and now indwells His believers as the life-giving Spirit.

What seems clear is that the presence of both aspects (immanent and economic) in the entire body of one’s teaching concerning

the Triune God should not give rise to accusations of doublespeak, but rather should serve to properly anchor the teaching squarely in the center of orthodoxy. The two do not negate or contradict one another, but preserve the balance of Scripture itself. The great church historian Philip Schaff notes that this dilemma has plagued faithful scholars even from the time of the Nicene Fathers:

Many passages of the Nicene fathers have unquestionably a tritheistic sound, but are neutralized by others which by themselves may bear a Sabellian construction; so that their position must be regarded as midway between these two extremes. (*History of the Christian Church*, vol. 3, [Grand Rapids, MI: W. B. Eerdmans, 1910], 674)

Schaff even allows that the term *modes* can be used in an orthodox sense but may give rise to misunderstanding if not properly balanced:

The church teaches not *one* divine essence *and* three persons, but *one* essence *in* three persons. Father, Son, and Spirit cannot be conceived as three separate individuals, but are in one another, and form a solidaric unity.

In this one divine essence there are *three persons* or, to use a better term, *hypostases*, that is, three different modes of subsistence of the one same undivided and indivisible whole, which in the Scriptures are called the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost. (673, 675-676)

God's Full Salvation— Judicial Redemption and Organic Salvation

We turn now to a point which has not engendered much controversy but which quite clearly encapsulates our particular view about God's economy among humankind—the judicial redemption and organic salvation of God's full salvation. We speak of God's full salvation because we understand that salvation according to the economy of God expressed in the New Testament is not a simple matter nor one that has only one level of

significance and effect. Our longstanding observation is that many Christians, particularly those in Western Christianity, understand God's salvation as primarily salvation *from* something. But as we read the New Testament, we see that salvation more importantly is salvation *into* something. The key verse that captures this distinction and the verse that governs our understanding of God's full salvation is Romans 5:10: "If we, being enemies, were reconciled to God through the death of His Son, much more we will be saved in His life, having been reconciled." While we gratefully declare our faith in the judicial aspects of Christ's marvelous redemptive work, we do not believe that this is the full significance of our salvation; rather, we understand our redemption by Christ, our justification before God, and our reconciliation to God to be the basis of Christ's fuller salvation in life. On Romans 5:10 Witness Lee comments,

Verse 10 of this chapter points out that God's full salvation revealed in this book consists of two sections: one section is the redemption accomplished for us by Christ's death, and the other section is the saving afforded us by Christ's life. The first four chapters of this book discourse comprehensively regarding the redemption accomplished by Christ's death, whereas the last twelve chapters speak in detail concerning the saving afforded by Christ's life. Before 5:11, Paul shows us that we are saved because we have been redeemed, justified, and reconciled to God. However, we have not yet been saved to the extent of being sanctified, transformed, and conformed to the image of God's Son. Redemption, justification, and reconciliation, which are accomplished outside of us by the death of Christ, redeem us objectively; sanctification, transformation, and conformation, which are accomplished within us by the working of Christ's life, save us subjectively. Objective redemption redeems us positionally from condemnation and eternal punishment; subjective salvation saves us dispositionally from our old man, our self, and our natural life.

To be saved in Christ's life is to be saved in Christ Himself as life. He dwells in us, and we are organically one with Him.

By the growth of His life in us, we will enjoy His full salvation to the uttermost. Redemption, justification, and reconciliation are for the purpose of bringing us into union with Christ so that He can save us in His life unto glorification (8:30).

We have been saved by Christ's death from God's eternal judgment and eternal punishment, but we are still being saved by Christ's life in His resurrection. (New Testament Recovery Version, notes 2, 4, and 5 on Rom. 5:10)

Therefore, concerning all that God wants to do for man according to His heart's desire, there is a great need judicially. All that God wants to do for man organically according to His life requires that God redeem the fallen sinners back judicially according to His righteous requirement. God's righteousness requires that God redeem the sinners. It is as if God's righteousness says to God, "O God, it is good that You love them, and it is also good that You desire to carry out many things in them organically. But You must first redeem them to satisfy the requirements of Your righteous law." This is redemption. By redeeming the sinners judicially, God may freely do as He pleases by His life organically according to His heart's desire. "To do as one pleases" does not sound very positive. How can we say that God may do as He pleases? Yes, indeed, because of His redemption, today our God may do as He pleases. If He wants to save a robber, He may do so; if He wants to save a prostitute, He may also do so. Hence, in the Bible we see a robber saved (Luke 23:39-43) and we also see harlots saved (Matt. 21:31-32; cf. Luke 7:37; John 4:17-18). Today God truly may do as He pleases. Thus, God's complete salvation comprises the redemption required judicially and the salvation accomplished through God's life organically. We need to distinguish between these three things: God's redemption, which is judicial; God's salvation, which is organic; and God's complete salvation, which is the totality of God's redemption and God's salvation. (*The Organic Aspect of God's Salvation*, 11)

In our view, God's complete salvation results in His believers being made God in life and nature, though certainly not in His Godhead. Again, this respects the distinction in the Godhead between what He is immanently and what He does economically. He alone is God by virtue of His own being and existence;

we *are made* God by virtue of our union with and participation in Him who is uniquely God. Because of God's incommunicability, human beings will never take part in the Godhead; we will never be a fourth person in the Trinity; we will never be worshipped as God. Because human beings will never lose their attributes as creatures, we will never be the Creator. We will forever possess the human form and the human nature; thus, we will never be omnipresent. We will forever be endowed with limited mental faculties as given in our creation; hence, we will never be omniscient. God is God both outside of creation and within creation; we human beings can at best be joined to God and thereby become God within the confines of creation. That human beings may become God is not merely the elevation of the believers to the eternal plane but the glorification of God Himself in humanity; it serves to magnify God, not to minify Him.

Of course, this is the classical Christian notion of deification, which was generally accepted throughout the Christian church in its early centuries. It was most elegantly expressed by Athanasius (d. 373) in his famous aphorism: "For He was made man that we might be made God" (*Inc.* 54.3), and he is understood to be echoing Irenaeus (d. circa 200), who declared that Christ "became what we are, that He might bring us to be even what He is Himself" (*Haer.* 5, pref.). Most patristic scholars see in both teachers' words an allusion to Paul's similar statement in 2 Corinthians 5:21: "Him who did not know sin He made sin on our behalf that we might become the righteousness of God in Him." The notion of deification has generally been ignored in Western Christianity, and for this reason it is usually viewed with suspicion by Protestant Christians and only mildly acknowledged by Roman Catholics. Christians in the Eastern tradition, however, never abandoned the notion that deification is in fact the full significance and effect of God's salvation. However, unlike the Eastern Orthodox, we in the local churches do not understand deification to be the issue of sacraments, liturgy, and other ritual. Rather, we believe that we become God

through the operation of grace partaken of through our daily enjoyment of the Word of God, through prayer, and through fellowship with the believers in the many gatherings of the church. We are made God through our partaking of Christ and our living Christ by grace in our daily lives in the church. While some have voiced concern about our view of salvation as deification, most educated readers of our ministry realize that we hold to the altogether orthodox view of this precious truth, even if it is not currently in the mainstream of Protestant thought. We are very encouraged, however, that there is growing interest in this understanding of God's salvation among Protestants today and that even among evangelical thinkers serious consideration is being given to this deeper view. At the same time, we acknowledge that less serious teachers have picked up the language of deification and distorted its proper teaching into something that is fantastical and truly heretical, ignoring the distinctions in the Godhead that respect His incommunicability yet recognize His economic actions to join Himself to humankind. These latter distortions we soundly reject, and attempts to identify our proper teaching with these aberrations we plainly characterize as unfounded.

Our view of God's economy to save humankind is markedly more organic than what many Christians will recognize. We emphasize the inner working of the divine life in the believers to firstly (literally) regenerate them and then to gradually transform them "metabolically" and conform them through an organic process to the image of Christ, the firstborn Son. While we recognize, appreciate, and herald the judicial basis of Christ's redemptive death, we understand the greater work of God's salvation to be His salvation in the divine life. Eternal life, for us, is not merely a future state of eternal bliss but the very life that is God Himself and that He dispenses into His believers through His indwelling Spirit. Now enlivened by God Himself, we are not merely His children judicially, as though adopted, but more intrinsically we are His children organically, as having His

very life and nature (1 John 5:11; 2 Pet. 1:4). “Behold what manner of love the Father has given to us, that we should be called children of God; and we are” (1 John 3:1). Our view is that our first responsibility and privilege in the Christian life, as illustrated by eating in our human life, is to partake of the life of God as our daily supply. We recall that in the beginning the first pair was set before a tree of life for their supply and enjoyment (Gen. 2:9), and we look forward to an eternity of supply and enjoyment from God in the tree of life in the New Jerusalem (Rev. 22:2, 14). These metaphors point to the availability of God in Christ as the Spirit for the believers’ enjoyment and supply. On the bridge of time we take Christ as our present tree of life (cf. John 15:1), who supplies us richly with Himself as Spirit and life (John 6:63). We eat Him daily and live because of Him (John 6:57). Under the light of this organic vision, we see God’s work in the age of grace as primarily a dispensing work, not simply a judicial work. God dispenses what He is in Christ through the Spirit into the believers to make them what He is in life and nature and to express what He is organically. The believers, enlivened with the Triune God inwardly and built together organically as the Body of Christ outwardly, will bear to all creation what God is in life, nature, and expression. This organic identity of the believers as the regenerated, transformed, glorified members of Christ’s Body will ultimately be consummated in the New Jerusalem, the mutual abode of God and man for eternity. Witness Lee offers this précis of our organic understanding of what God is doing and what He is after:

What is the meaning of the term *economy*, and what is God’s economy? What is God’s dispensing? The word *economy* in Greek is *oikonomia*. It means “household law, household administration, or household government.” It is used to denote a dispensation, a plan, or an economy in an administration. Hence, it is a household management. The Bible is composed of sixty-six books, and it includes many teachings. If we have the spiritual discernment and would study the Bible finely and carefully, we will see that God’s economy is the plan whereby

He dispenses Himself into humanity. The focus of God's accomplishments in His economy is His dispensing. The Divine Trinity is for God's dispensing. The matter of dispensing is revealed in Ephesians 3:2 and Colossians 1:25-27. In these verses the word *stewardship* has the sense of dispensing. God's stewardship is the dispensing of the processed Triune God in Christ into His chosen, redeemed, and regenerated people that He may be their life and everything, to produce the unique Body of Christ in the universe to be His corporate expression. This Body is the church in this age and the New Jerusalem in eternity. (*The Economy and Dispensing of God*, 8)

Again, William Milligan comes strikingly close to Witness Lee's language regarding both the pneumatic aspect of Christ and the economical operation of this pneumatic Christ within the believers. Witness Lee's "dispenses" and Milligan's "diffuses" seem synonymous:

As the Spirit of the exalted and glorified Lord, He is not the Third Person of the Trinity in His absolute and metaphysical existence, but that Person as He is mediated through the Son, who is human as well as Divine. It is on this particular aspect of His being that He diffuses Himself through the members of Christ's body, and abides in them. (*The Ascension and Heavenly Priesthood of Our Lord* [London; New York: Macmillan, 1894], 189)

The Genuine Ground of Oneness in the Body of Christ

A final point in our understanding of biblical truth concerns the local church. Our understanding has been a source of controversy among other Christians since we first began to meet in this country according to this view in the early 1960s. Put simply, our view is that just as there is only one Body of Christ universally, there should be only one church in each locality practically. Our understanding is based on the teaching that Watchman Nee first introduced in his classic work *The Normal Christian Church Life*, published in 1938. He further developed this matter in a second work on the subject, *Further Talks on the Church Life*, which contains some of the last messages he gave before his ministry was prematurely terminated by his imprisonment in 1952. In

the portion below, from *The Normal Christian Church Life*, Watchman Nee identifies the principle that governs the oneness of the universal church and those that should define the oneness of the local church:

In any place where the gospel has been proclaimed and people have believed on the Lord, they are the church in that place, and they are our brethren.

How are we going to determine who are our brothers and our fellow members in the Church of God? Not by inquiring if they hold the same doctrinal views that we hold, or have had the same spiritual experiences; nor by seeing if their customs, manner of living, interests, and preferences tally with ours. We merely inquire, Are they indwelt by the Spirit of God or not? We cannot insist on oneness of opinions, or oneness of experience, or any other oneness among believers, except the oneness of the Spirit. That oneness there can be, and always must be, among the children of God. All who have this oneness are in the Church.

Now what is true of the universal Church is also true of a local church. The universal Church comprises all those who have the oneness of the Spirit. The local church comprises all those who, in a given locality, have the oneness of the Spirit. The Church of God and the churches of God do not differ in nature, but only in extent. The former consists of all throughout the universe who are indwelt by the Spirit of God; the latter consists of all in one locality who are indwelt by the Spirit.

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

Biblically our understanding of one church in one city is founded on the same practice in the New Testament. While not taught explicitly in the New Testament, the locality as the basis of the church's practical ground of oneness appears to have been universally adopted by the believers from the very beginnings of

the church. All the believers in Christ in a city met as one church in that city, regardless of size (cf. Acts 2:41; 4:4; 5:14; 6:1; 21:20). In Revelation 1:11 the identification of the practical church with the city in which it was located is indicated quite strongly:

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

Commenting on this verse, Witness Lee writes,

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

Our firm conviction is that nothing should divide the believers from one another—no teaching, no practice, no national, cultural, or personal agenda. We believe that the practical oneness of the believers was the original expression of the church in the New Testament and, for that matter, was the characteristic of the Christian church up until division began to manifest itself in the first Great Schism of the eleventh century and in the advent of the state churches in the sixteenth century. Today Christians have all but abandoned the practical expression of the oneness of the Body of Christ, allowing themselves to be divided according to a dizzying array of doctrines, ministries, practices, personal ambitions, and national or ethnic origins. So pervasive is the disunity today that most Christians have become numb to the divisiveness that characterizes Christianity,

and some even ennoble it by saying that it expresses the “beautiful” variety in the Body of Christ. The world mocks us because of this divisiveness. To our shame we fall quite short of our Lord’s petition to the Father: “That they all may be one; even as You, Father, are in Me and I in You, that they also may be in Us; that the world may believe that You have sent Me” (John 17:21).

Some take exception that this “practical” oneness is not practical at all, because, they say, today the number of Christians in almost any modern city would make it impossible for them all to meet together in oneness in that city. But this is not the real issue. The mechanics of this kind of practical oneness are secondary. Large Christian communities existed without division in the cities of Europe and the Middle East prior to the schisms of the sixteenth century. We are not, of course, advocating a return to unity under the Roman Catholic Church—we accept the great advances of the Reformation—but we are insistent that the Christian church need not be divided at all. All the main denominational bodies today are able to exercise a kind of intra-denominational oneness that encompasses all the congregations in a city and across their cities. What if all the bases that define the denominations were dissolved by the grace of God, and all Christian congregations in a city exercised a larger oneness that encompassed not just those who hold to Lutheran doctrine or Methodist doctrine or any other doctrine but all those who confess Christ? Certainly we would all have to drop many things that we insist on today, and we would have to open ourselves to a number of differences that certainly exist among the members of Christ’s Body. But what glory there would be to Him if our only stand in every city where we live were just Christ alone—no national origin, no religious practice, no doctrinal preference, no cultural distinction, but Christ as all and in all (cf. Col. 3:11)! This is our vision and our dream, even if it is admittedly a minority view.

We acknowledge that our understanding of the scriptural teaching on the practical oneness calls into question the standing of every other Christian congregation. But this view of the local church as the proper expression of the church does not in any way question or minimize the intrinsic aspect of the universal church as the Body of Christ, which encompasses all Christ's believers throughout time and throughout the world at any time. While the gathering of the believers according to the principle of "one church, one city" is the proper expression of the church, this principle in no way annuls the membership of all the believers in the one church of God in the Body of Christ; it does not define Christian salvation or determine who is or is not a genuine believer. When we declare that the local church, so defined, is the only genuine and proper expression of the one universal church, some have leapt to the conclusion that we also teach that our local churches are the only true church and, by extension, that we are the only true Christians, everyone else in Christianity being unsaved and doomed to eternal perdition. This is simply not true and not what we believe. We hold every person who confesses Christ as a genuine believer and as our genuine brother or sister regardless of how they choose to meet with other Christians. It would be counter to our own convictions concerning the practical oneness of the church if we denied that all the believers in the Christian denominations are God's genuinely redeemed people. Our stand is that Christianity today is divided, wrongly, but not that the Christians themselves are anything less than God's precious redeemed people. Further, our practice in all the local churches is to receive all the believers into fellowship with us simply because they believe in Christ. We boldly invite everyone to test us on this one matter and see if it is not so: attend any meeting of any of the local churches anywhere and see if you are refused fellowship; see if you are refused participation in our Lord's table there; see if you are not welcomed based only on your faith in Christ. We have no catechism that you must learn, no creed that you must declare,

no practice that you must adopt, no natural characteristic that you must possess. You must only be able to declare that Christ is God come in the flesh and is the very God who saved you from your sins through His death on the cross and through His resurrection from the dead. That alone makes you a member of the church in the city where you live and qualifies you to participate fully in the fellowship of the local church in that city. Contrary to what others have said about us, in vision and in practice we are not exclusive at all but include all Christ's believers in our estimation of who they are in Christ and in how we practically receive them.

Both Watchman Nee and Witness Lee taught this inclusivity throughout their ministries, as these examples from their writings indicate:

The fundamental fellowship of a church in a locality is based upon the fellowship of God. We must receive a brother whom God has received. We cannot have any reason to refuse him; otherwise, we are a sect, not a church....The universal church receives all whom God has received in the whole world; a local church receives all whom God has received in a locality. No matter how different a brother is from us or how far short he is of our standard, there is only one requirement for us to receive him—that is, has God received him? If God has received him, we must receive him. Therefore, a local church—we must be very clear about this—must take the life of Christ and faith in God as the basis for receiving believers. Apart from this we do not have any other demands. If we make other demands as certain requirements, we are a sect just like any other sect. A sect is condemned and is therefore a very serious matter. (Watchman Nee, *Further Talks on the Church Life*, 52-53)

Except in the matters of idol worship (1 John 5:21; 1 Cor. 8:4-7), fornication, rapaciousness, reviling, and other such gross sins (1 Cor. 5:9-11; 6:9-10), division (16:17; Titus 3:10), and the denial of the incarnation of Christ (2 John 7-11), we must learn not to pass judgments on the doctrinal views of others. As long as one is a genuine Christian and has the

fundamental faith of the New Testament, we should not exclude him, even though he may differ from us with respect to doctrine; rather, we should receive him in the same one Lord. (Witness Lee, New Testament Recovery Version, note 3 on Rom. 14:1)

The basis on which we receive the believers is that God has received them. God receives people according to His Son. When a person receives God's Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, as his Savior, God receives that person immediately and ushers him into the enjoyment of the Triune God and of all He has prepared and accomplished in Christ for us. We should receive people in the same way and should not be more narrow than God. Regardless of how much they differ from us in doctrinal concepts or religious practices, we must receive them. When we receive people according to God and not according to doctrine or practice, we demonstrate and maintain the oneness of the Body of Christ. (Witness Lee, New Testament Recovery Version, note 2 on Rom. 14:3)

This is not to say that all of us in the local churches are as clear about this matter as Watchman Nee and Witness Lee were. We humbly admit that sometimes we have fallen far short of this proper understanding and practice, and that, like every group of believers, we have our fair share of zealots and immature ones who go beyond what a proper understanding allows. We can never say that we do not make mistakes in our application of this and any other biblical truth, and like all believers everywhere, we too ask for forgiveness for our offenses even as we also must forgive others their offenses. But all our excesses—and we own them all as our own even if they were done by zealots or immature ones among us—cannot diminish our conviction that all the believers should be one, not just in the spiritual and invisible bond of the Holy Spirit but in the practical and visible way (John 17:21 “that the world may believe”) of meeting simply as Christians in the cities and towns where they live.

Our Way to Meet and Serve

Before concluding, we would like to offer some brief comments

about how we meet in the local churches and how we conduct our Christian service. Our meetings are living; that is, they are full of the enjoyment and expression of the divine life, which we as the children of God possess. Our meetings are focused on the truth; that is, we take the Bible and its revelation concerning the Triune God and His economy, the person and work of Christ, and the operation of the Spirit as our content. Our meetings are in mutuality; that is, we encourage the speaking of every believer and reject the clergy-laity system, whereby only one person speaks and all others listen passively. Our meetings are inclusive; that is, we accept and welcome all who believe in Christ as the God-man who lived, died, and rose from the dead because of our sins and for our justification before God (Rom. 4:25). Our meetings are based more on function than on form; that is, we conduct our meetings not according to ritual and tradition but for the sake of furthering the edification of the saints and the building up of the Body of Christ. The Christian life is a corporate life, and a great part of our corporateness is expressed in our meetings. As the Scriptures exhort, we do not abandon our assembling together, as the custom with some is, and so much the more as we see the day of our Lord's return drawing near (Heb. 10:24-25).

Our simplest meetings are home meetings for our newly saved believing friends or family. We meet in homes at least weekly so that we may lead our relatives, neighbors, friends, and colleagues to accept the Lord's salvation. Once they are saved, we continue to meet with them in the homes in order to nourish them and help them grow in the Christian life. These meetings are generally small, consisting of one or two shepherding believers and the new believer. During these times, we help the new ones to enjoy the Lord through prayer, singing, fellowship, and Bible reading and study.

Because we desire that every believer be brought into his or her organic function of building up the Body of Christ, we realize

the need for the perfecting of the saints, as spoken of in Ephesians 4:12. We have found that the best way to perfect the spiritual gifts that the believers possess is to give them frequent opportunity to function; hence, we have meetings just for this purpose. These perfecting meetings are also held in our homes and consist of around ten to fifteen brothers and sisters. These meetings are characterized by much mutuality in teaching, questioning, answering, shepherding, interceding, and caring. Every believer, regardless of spiritual maturity or capacity, can be helped practically, and all can exercise their function to minister to one another for the building up of the Body of Christ. During these meetings, we all learn from one another how to function properly in the church. In the intimate fellowship of these meetings, we can be corrected by others in love so that we can be perfected in our function. As is taught in Hebrews 10:24-25, in these meetings we incite one another and exhort one another.

The church, as the pillar and base of the truth (1 Tim. 3:15), meets together to express the Lord corporately in its locality. The meetings of the church perform a special function that no other gatherings of the believers can. The most important meeting of the church is the Lord's table meeting, or the bread-breaking meeting (1 Cor. 10:14-22; 11:17-34). In this meeting we the believers gather to participate in the fellowship of our Lord's blood and body for our enjoyment (1 Cor. 10:16-17) and to remember the Lord for His enjoyment (1 Cor. 11:24-25). The bread we partake of signifies not only our Lord's physical body, which was once broken for us on the cross, but also His mystical Body, of which we are the many members. In partaking of the Lord's table, we "discern the body," as the apostle Paul exhorts us to do (1 Cor. 11:29); that is, we examine ourselves concerning the Lord's Body, asking whether we are divisive individually or whether our meeting is a meeting in division. Here our standing as the church, expressing the oneness of the Body of Christ, is made manifest. We participate in, partake of, and display openly

this oneness through our gathering at the Lord's table. The apostle Paul speaks also of another kind of church meeting in his first Epistle to the Corinthians: "What then, brothers? Whenever you come together, each one has a psalm, has a teaching, has a revelation, has a tongue, has an interpretation. Let all things be done for building up" (14:26). This is a meeting in which all the brothers and sisters exercise their function to speak for the building up of the Body of Christ. This is what Paul calls prophesying. It is not only foretelling but "forth-telling," speaking for God and speaking forth Christ from the Word of God for the edification of the believers and for the building up of the church (1 Cor. 14:3-4). This meeting in which all can prophesy provides the brothers and sisters with the teaching, revelation, consolation, and exhortation that they need as the one church in their locality, and these things are ministered not by a few gifted ones but by all the members mutually (1 Cor. 14:1, 31). We also gather as the church to pray corporately. In the New Testament there are numerous instances of the believers gathering to pray (Acts 2:42; 4:23-31; 12:5). The church gathers at least once a week to pray for the move of God's economy on the earth, for the binding of the activities of God's enemy, and for the needs of the local church. In this meeting we function one by one, praying short, released prayers to discharge our burden for the Lord's move through the church. Sometimes in larger churches, the church meetings are held in district groups of around fifty saints so that there may be more opportunity for the saints to function. The Lord's table meeting, the prophesying meeting, and the prayer meeting are sometimes held in districts.

According to the pattern of the New Testament, we also have meetings for the release of the New Testament ministry. During these meetings gifted members preach the gospel, teach the truth, edify and train the saints, release a particular truth from the Scriptures, or lead a study of a particular portion of the Bible. The meetings held for Peter's preaching (Acts 2:14; 3:12; 10:34)

and Paul's teaching (Mark 16:20; Acts 19:9-10; 20:7; 28:30-31) are examples of this kind of ministry meeting. The major burden of these ministry meetings is borne by those who have the gift to function in this way, but frequently there is additional open sharing by those who attend these meetings; thus, even in the ministry meetings there can be the mutual speaking. A degree of perfecting occurs in these ministry meetings that cannot be attained in any other meetings of the believers.

Our Christian service is governed by the vision that all the believers are priests to God (1 Pet. 2:5, 9; Rev. 1:6) and that, as such, we all can and must bear a spiritual service to Him. We view all the believers as New Testament priests of the gospel, and accordingly we labor specifically in preaching the gospel, in feeding the newly saved, in perfecting the believers among us, and in bringing the perfected believers into prophesying for the building up of the church. Before our Lord ascended to the heavens, He commissioned His disciples to go forth and disciple all the nations (Matt. 28:19-20). Our view is that to disciple the nations requires our labor mainly in these four areas.

God desires all men to be saved (1 Tim. 2:4), but none can be saved without the preaching of the gospel (Rom. 10:13-15). God has entrusted the believers in Christ with the gospel (1 Thes. 2:4), and through preaching, people are saved by Him. While God is always ready to save, we must be willing to preach. Our Lord Jesus Himself had continual contact with people and visited many during the years of His public ministry on the earth (Matt. 9:35; Mark 6:6; Luke 13:22); He also sent His disciples out to visit people with the gospel (Luke 9:1-2; 10:1-9). After the Lord's ascension, the early believers followed His pattern and went out to visit people everywhere with the gospel of Jesus Christ (Acts 8:1, 4; 26:19-20). Today we carry out the same commission by visiting our relatives, neighbors, friends, and colleagues and sharing with them the good news of God's salvation. Indeed, we bear this commission to the ends of the earth (Matt. 28:19-20; Mark 16:15; Luke 24:47; Acts 1:8). Our

hope is that all men would be saved to become the members of Christ and to be brought into the building up of His Body through our preaching of the gospel.

Those who have been newly saved, like all living things, require nourishment in order to grow in life. We have been commissioned to preach the gospel, but our commission also includes nourishing those who have been saved through us. The Lord Jesus charged Peter to feed His lambs (John 21:15-17), and Peter took the Lord's charge seriously (1 Pet. 2:2; 5:2). Paul also cared for the believers in the way of nourishing them (1 Thes. 2:7). We too bear this burden for nourishing the believers today. Every new believer is a spiritual babe (1 Pet. 2:2) who requires continual nourishing. To accomplish this, we visit the new believers in their homes or meet with them in any place available, week after week. During these regular times of care, we lead the new believers to exercise their regenerated spirits, read the Bible, sing spiritual songs, and pray to the Lord. By these, they are fed with the riches of Christ and are supplied with the divine life that they may grow spiritually. Only through such regular and consistent nourishment can the new ones remain healthy in the Christian life.

The apostle Paul speaks of the perfecting of the saints in his letter to the Ephesians: "He Himself gave some as apostles and some as prophets and some as evangelists and some as shepherds and teachers, for the perfecting of the saints unto the work of the ministry, unto the building up of the Body of Christ" (4:11-12). God desires that all the believers would be perfected for the work of the ministry, which is the building up of the Body of Christ. It is clear from Paul's words that the Lord has entrusted this perfecting work to His believers; thus, it is also a part of our commission. The believers are perfected—especially by the gifted persons (apostles, prophets, evangelists, and shepherds and teachers) given by Christ as gifts to His Body—through mutual shepherding, mutual care, mutual

intercession, and mutual teaching in small groups (Heb. 10:24-25), mostly in the believers' homes, in groups of about ten to fifteen, week after week. There is no need for appointed speakers or teachers, for all the believers can perfect others to some extent. By being open to the good deposit (2 Tim. 1:14) in one another, all the members can be mutually perfected in these small groups. Paul speaks of this mutual perfecting in Ephesians 4:16: "All the Body, being joined together and being knit together through every joint of the rich supply and through the operation in the measure of each one part, causes the growth of the Body unto the building up of itself in love." As believers in Christ, we pursue this perfecting of the saints in all the churches.

God desires the building up of the Body of Christ, and according to the Scriptures, the practicality of the building up of the Body of Christ comes through the believers' prophesying in the meetings of the church. Paul says, "He who prophesies speaks building up and encouragement and consolation to men....he who prophesies builds up the church" (1 Cor. 14:3-4). As we mentioned above, the prophesying that is spoken of here, the prophesying that builds up the church, is not a kind of foretelling; rather, it is a kind of "forth-telling" of the unsearchable riches of Christ (Eph. 3:8). To prophesy in this way is to speak for God and to speak forth Christ so that the saints can be edified and the churches can be built. This is a divine speaking that the believers alone are privileged to participate in. As the apostle Paul charges us, all believers should desire earnestly to prophesy (1 Cor. 14:1). Such prophesying consummates the building up of the Body of Christ. Ultimately, every believer should be brought into this function of speaking for God and speaking forth Christ for the building up of the Body of Christ. We believe that by this mutual speaking of all the believers in all the gatherings of the church, small and large, all the believers will be built up, encouraged, and led to grow together unto the

fullness of expression that God desires in the Body of Christ (Eph. 4:13).

These four matters—begetting, nourishing, perfecting, and building up—constitute our Christian service to God. We do not relegate these functions to some small class of experts among us; we have no clergy but are all laboring priests of the gospel (Rom. 15:16) in this full sense of Paul's Greek term. We desire to remain in this commission and service until Christ comes back, and we earnestly expect to see the consummation of the building up of the Body of Christ, which will usher in the Lord's triumphant return. What a privilege it is to us, His believers, to labor with God in this great universal enterprise!

Conclusion

Lest we abuse the gracious patience of our readers, we must end here our presentation of what we hold as the common faith and what we understand particularly about various Christian truths that either have caused some controversy or define our distinctive standing. We realize that this brief presentation cannot answer every question and allay every concern, but we do hope that it will persuade many that we are at least genuine believers in Christ and not the heretics and cultists that some hope to make us out to be. We realize that some points in this presentation invite further inquiry and perhaps even challenge, and we are open for further fellowship and dialogue regarding our beliefs and practices. We are strong in our conviction that what we believe has been delivered to us by our Lord through the Spirit, and we are more than eager to express our full view on all matters and to detail our full reasons for understanding God's economy as we do. We hope the Lord will give us more and more opportunities to do so, even as we feel He has done through the fellowship with our brothers at Fuller and in this article. As our past dialogue with our brothers at Fuller has shown, this kind of fellowship helps to dispel the suspicions and rumors about us, and it helps us greatly in our own endeavoring

to live the Christian life and build up the Body of Christ. May the Lord, our Great Shepherd, through this more open fellowship and mutual understanding, lead us all into the oneness of the faith and of the full knowledge of Himself, the Son of God (Eph. 4:13).

*Respectfully offered by various brothers representing the local churches
and by the editorial section of Living Stream Ministry
January 20, 2007*

STATEMENT FROM FULLER THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

Fuller Theological Seminary (Fuller) and leaders from the local churches and its publishing service, Living Stream Ministry (LSM), have recently completed two years of extensive dialog. During this time Fuller conducted a thorough review and examination of the major teachings and practices of the local churches, with particular emphasis on the writings of Witness Lee and Watchman Nee, as published by Living Stream Ministry. This process was undertaken in an attempt to answer many of the questions and accusations that are often associated with this group of churches and to locate the teachings and practices of these two men and the local churches in light of historical, orthodox Christianity. Participants in the dialog from Fuller included Dr. Richard Mouw, President and Professor of Christian Philosophy; Dr. Howard Loewen, Dean of the School of Theology and Professor of Theology and Ethics; and Dr. Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, Professor of Systematic Theology. Representing the local churches were Minoru Chen, Abraham Ho, and Dan Towle. Representing LSM were Ron Kangas, Benson Phillips, Chris Wilde, and Andrew Yu.

It is the conclusion of Fuller Theological Seminary that the teachings and practices of the local churches and its members represent the genuine, historical, biblical Christian faith in every essential aspect. 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.

It is important to note, in understanding the process that we have undergone, that considerable attention was devoted at the outset to the stand of these churches on the essential elements of the genuine Christian faith adhered to by all true Christian believers. We believe that if agreement on the basic tenets of the faith can be clearly established, then subsequent dialog and discussion concerning non-essential teachings properly fall within the realm of the fellowship of believers. This determination was made by reading their publications and through our fellowship in five face-to-face meetings between Fuller and representatives of these churches and this ministry. In regard to their teaching and testimony concerning God, the Trinity, the person and work of Christ, the Bible, salvation, and the oneness and unity of the Church, the Body of Christ, we found them to be unequivocally orthodox. Furthermore, we found their profession of faith to be consistent with the major creeds, even though their profession is not creedal in format. Moreover, we also can say with certainty that no evidence of cultic or cult-like attributes have been found by us among the leaders of the ministry or the members of the local churches who adhere to the teachings represented in the publications of Living Stream Ministry. Consequently, we are easily and comfortably able to receive them as genuine believers and fellow members of the Body of Christ, and we unreservedly recommend that all Christian believers likewise extend to them the right hand of fellowship.

Our times together were characterized by sincere, open, transparent, and unrestricted dialog. There were several topics that we at Fuller approached with particular interest, such as the

Trinity, the mingling of divinity and humanity, deification, modalism, their interpretation and practice of the “local” church, the divine and human natures of Christ, and their attitude toward believers outside their congregations. We were given unlimited freedom to explore each of these areas. In every instance we found the public perception of some to be far removed from the actual published teachings as well as the beliefs and practices of the believers in the local churches.

This statement is intended to provide those interested with a general overview of the process that we have been involved with and our overall conclusions. This brief statement will be followed in the coming months by a paper addressing the aforementioned and other important theological topics in greater detail. Representatives of the local churches and Living Stream Ministry have agreed to write a statement outlining in summary form their teachings on the major topics of interest concerning them. Comments by Fuller will be offered on their teachings, as we have come to understand them after significant research and dialog.

Dated: January 5, 2006

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