

## The Error of Denying That the “Son” Is the “Eternal Father” in Isaiah 9:6<sup>1</sup>

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

Isaiah 9:6 - 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.

Norman Geisler and Ron Rhodes claim that Witness Lee’s statement that “the Son is the Father” based on Isaiah 9:6 is modalistic. In their critique they attempt to explain how the name “Eternal Father” does not mean what it plainly says. When the same arguments were advanced over thirty years ago, Witness Lee thoroughly dismantled them in the booklet *What a Heresy—Two Divine Fathers, Two Life-giving Spirits, and Three Gods!*<sup>2</sup> Geisler and Rhodes completely ignore the points made by Witness Lee in that booklet and simply rehash the same accusations. In examining the present critique, it is instructive to compare Witness Lee’s treatment of the words of the Bible with that of Geisler and Rhodes and to see where each approach leads.

Witness Lee starts from the conviction that the Bible means what it says. His hermeneutic is based on God’s eternal purpose and plan, that is, His economy. He saw that in God’s economy the coinherence of the Triune God is a model of the believers’ relationship with God in Christ. Geisler and Rhodes, on the other hand, start from the presumption that the words of the Bible cannot mean what they say. On that basis they:

- Errantly insist that the Father in the Godhead is not mentioned in the Old Testament;
- Negate the word “Father” in Isaiah 9:6, relying on a rabbinical paraphrase to undergird their preconceptions;
- Support their interpretation using a rabbinical paraphrase that also changes other key passages in Isaiah;
- Contradict Geisler’s own statements concerning the identity of Yahweh; and
- Subvert the plain meaning of the Bible to promote a doctrine lacking any power to edify its readers.

Norman Geisler is a vocal proponent of the infallibility of the Bible. In their criticism of the Christian Research Institute’s reassessment of the teachings of Witness Lee and the local churches, Geisler and Rhodes declare, “Whatever the Bible affirms, God affirms.” They charge Fuller Theological Seminary with “deviation from orthodoxy on the doctrine of Scripture” for retaining a faculty member who did not affirm Paul’s teaching concerning head covering in 1 Corinthians 11. It is ironic, therefore, that when it comes to Isaiah 9:6, a verse that touches the very person of the Triune God, Geisler and Rhodes do not affirm what the Bible affirms, but employ the trappings of scholarship to subvert the clear meaning of the words in order to preserve their predetermined theological model.

### ***Witness Lee’s Affirmation of Isaiah 9:6***

Witness Lee, on the other hand, affirms what the Bible affirms. Concerning Isaiah 9:6 he wrote:

As for me, I would stand with what the Bible says, not with any twistings. Those who twist this verse do not believe the Bible according to the clear word. Instead, they believe the Bible in their twisting way. Whatever fits their understanding they take, but whatever does not fit their understanding they twist. If you twist the words of the Bible, you will suffer a loss, for you are changing the holy Word. You are either taking something away from the Word or adding something to it. This is very serious. Whether or not I understand what the Bible says, I believe whatever it says. When the Bible says that the Son is called the everlasting Father, I say, “Amen, the Son is the Father.” I do not care how men interpret this verse; I only care for what the Bible says.<sup>3</sup>

The first principle Witness Lee applied in reading the Bible was to receive the Word of God in simplicity as the complete divine revelation. Whatever the Bible says, he believed and taught. Second, he took care of the immediate context. The context of Isaiah 9:6 is one of the clearest prophecies in the Old Testament concerning the incarnation of Christ. Third, he examined the context of the book in which the passage is found. In the case of Isaiah 9:6 he realized that the concept of “Father” was further developed in Isaiah 63:16 and 64:8:

Furthermore, Isaiah 63:16 says, “Thou, O Lord, art our Father; our Redeemer from eternity is thy name” (Heb.). And Isaiah 64:8 says, “O Lord, thou art our Father; we are the clay, and thou our potter; and we are the work of thy hand.” The prophet Isaiah used these two verses as a further development of what he prophesied concerning Christ as the Father of eternity in Isaiah 9:6. In 64:8 Isaiah tells us that the Father of eternity in 9:6 is our Creator, and in 63:16 he tells us that the Father of eternity is our Redeemer. In the whole Bible, Christ is revealed as our Creator and especially as our Redeemer (John 1:3; Heb. 1:10; Rom. 3:24; Titus 2:14). The Father of eternity being both our Creator and our Redeemer not only confirms but also strengthens the understanding that the Redeemer, Christ, is the Father of eternity, the holy Father in the Godhead. Hence, to say that the everlasting Father, or the Father of eternity, in Isaiah 9:6 is some kind of Father, other than the Father in the Godhead, is not according to the context of the whole book of Isaiah.<sup>4</sup>

## **The Coinherence of the Father and the Son**

Witness Lee further considered the truth concerning the incarnation of Christ that is spoken of in Isaiah 9:6 in the context of the entire divine revelation. In particular, the Gospel of John shows us a unique revelation concerning the relationship between the Son and the Father. For example, in John 1:14—“the only Begotten from the Father”—the Greek word for “from” is *παρὰ* (*para*). As Witness Lee explained in his footnote on this word, *para*:

means by the side of, implying with; hence, it is, literally, from with. The Son not only is from God but also is with God. On the one hand, He is from God, and on the other hand, He is still with God (8:16b, 29; 16:32b).

In John 10:30 the Lord said, “I and the Father are one.” In John 14:9 He said, “If you have seen Me, you have seen the Father.” These verses themselves must be understood in the light of the relationship shown in the Gospel of John between the Father and the Son. Witness Lee is not alone in making this association as the following examples demonstrate:

Clement of Alexandria:

Who, then, is this infant child? He according to whose image we are made little children. By the same prophet is declared His greatness: “Wonderful, Counsellor, Mighty God,

Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace; that He might fulfil His discipline: and of His peace there shall be no end.” O the great God! O the perfect child! The Son in the Father, and the Father in the Son.<sup>5</sup>

Robert Jamieson, A. R. Fausset, and David Brown:

**The everlasting Father.** This marks Him as “Wonderful,” that He is “a child,” yet the “everlasting Father” (John x. 30; xiv. 9).<sup>6</sup>

B. B. Warfield:

Here [in John’s writings] He not only with great directness declares that He and the Father are one (x. 30; cf. xvii. 11, 21, 22, 25) with a unity of interpenetration (“The Father is in me, and I in the Father,” x. 38; cf. xvi. 10, 11), so that to have seen Him was to have seen the Father (xiv. 9; cf. xv. 21); but He removes all doubt as to the essential nature of His oneness with the Father by explicitly asserting His eternity (“Before Abraham was born, I am,” Jn. VIII. 58), His co-eternity with God (“had with thee before the world was,” xvii. 5; cf. xvii. 18; vi. 62), His eternal participation in the Divine glory itself (“the glory which I had with thee,” in fellowship, community with Thee “before the world was,” xvii.5).<sup>7</sup>

The oneness the Three in the Godhead share is not just a common purpose nor is it merely a shared nature. It is a oneness of mutual indwelling. The Lord’s word in John 10:38—“the Father is in Me and I am in the Father”—is an explanation of verse 30—“I and the Father are one.” Similarly, his words to His disciples in John 14:10—“Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in Me?”—explain why it is that to see the Son is to see the Father in verse 9. Thus, the oneness spoken of in the Gospel of John is a oneness of coinherence.

### **The Coinherence of the Believers with the Triune God**

This revelation of the mutual coinhering of the Son and the Father is not in the Bible for mere theological speculation about the ontology of the Trinity. It is a matter of great significance for our Christian life and living. Christ’s human living on the earth is the model of the Christian life (1 Peter 2:21). Of course, this does not mean that we can participate in His redemptive work. What it does mean is that our Christian life is not merely an attempt to live a moral life in outward imitation of Christ’s human living, but our Christian life is that He lives in us and we live in Him. In John 17:21-23 the Lord Himself prayed:

[21] 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. [22] And the glory which You have given Me I have given to them, that they may be one, even as We are one; [23] I in them, and You in Me, that they may be perfected into one, that the world may know that You have sent Me and have loved them even as You have loved Me.

Concerning the Lord’s prayer in John 17, Witness Lee commented:

In John 15 the fact of our being in Christ and Christ being in us is clearly revealed (vv. 4-5). But in John 17 the Lord prayed for our realization of this fact (vv. 20-21). He prayed so that we would realize that we are in Him just as He is in the Father, and He is in us just as the Father is in Him. With the Divine Trinity there is such a wonderful coinhering oneness. This coinhering oneness has been duplicated by Christ with His believers. Today Christ is in His believers, causing His believers to be in Him. This is like the Father being in the Son, causing

the Son to be in the Father. The prayer of Christ in John 17 is a revelation of such a coinhering oneness.<sup>8</sup>

Understanding Isaiah 9:6 in this light opens up our realization and appreciation of God's purpose. This purpose is the producing of the Body of Christ as the enlargement of the coinhering oneness of the Triune God. It was for this that God was incarnated in Christ. It was for this that Christ went to the cross and died to accomplish an eternal redemption. It was for this that He was resurrected from the dead so that He, with the Father and the Spirit could dwell in His believers (Eph. 4:6; Gal. 2:20; John 14:17) and they could dwell in Them (John 17:21; 1 John 4:13; 1 Cor. 12:13) for the enlargement and expression of the mutual coinherence of the Divine Trinity.

### ***A Critique of Geisler and Rhodes' Interpretation of Isaiah 9:6***

The statements in the critique by Norman Geisler and Ron Rhodes of Witness Lee's affirmation of the words of the prophecy of Christ's incarnation in Isaiah 9:6 lead in an entirely different direction.

### **A Wrong Assertion That "Father" Is a "Distinctly New Testament Term"**

Geisler and Rhodes say, "First, when used of the First Person of the Trinity, the term 'Father' is a distinctly New Testament term." They are wrong. In 2 Samuel 7:12-14a, the prophet Nathan related to David the following word from Jehovah: "When your days are fulfilled and you sleep with your fathers, I will raise up your seed after you, which will come forth from your body, and I will establish his kingdom. It is he who will build a house for My name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever. I will be his Father, and he will be My son." This prophecy is repeated in 1 Chronicles 17:11-14; 22:10; and 28:6-7. It is what is known as a double prophecy. In type, this prophecy referred to Solomon, but the New Testament opens with the declaration that Jesus Christ is the son of David (Matt. 1:1), and it is Christ who is the real fulfillment of the prophecies concerning the seed of David (Matt. 9:27; 12:23; 15:22; 20:30-31; 21:9; 22:42, 45; Luke 1:32; Rom. 1:3; Rev. 22:16).

In a book he co-authored, Geisler states that "I will be his Father" in 2 Samuel 7:14 refers to "God as Father of David's line."<sup>9</sup> Elsewhere, however, he acknowledges that this verse is a prophecy of Christ as the Son of David, as does Rhodes.<sup>10</sup> Since Christ is the Son, then "his Father" in reference to God must mean the Father in the Godhead. Thus, Geisler and Rhodes' statement that "Father" is not used in the Old Testament to refer to the first Person of the Trinity is indefensible.

Further, Hebrews 1:5b quotes 2 Samuel 7:14 and applies this prophetic word to Christ directly—"I will be a Father to Him, and He will be a Son to Me." The book of Hebrews shows the superiority of Christ to all of the types in the Old Testament and as the fulfillment of those types. Verses 4 through 14 of chapter 1 show the superiority of Christ as the Son of God to the angels. Thus, Hebrews 1:6 continues by saying, "And when He brings again the Firstborn into the inhabited earth, He says, 'And let all the angels of God worship Him.'" Christ as the Firstborn Son of God in resurrection became the Ruler of the kings of the earth (Rom. 8:29; Rev. 1:5). This was clearly prophesied in Psalm 89:26-27, which says, "He will call upon Me, saying, You are My Father / My God and the rock of My salvation. / I will also make Him the Firstborn, / The highest of the kings of the earth." Here again is a case of a prophetic utterance in the Old Testament speaking of the Father in His relationship to the Son in the Godhead.

Geisler and Rhodes also neglect the nature of the book of Isaiah. Isaiah is particularly rich in its prophetic utterance of New Testament themes, so much so that it has been referred to as “the fifth gospel.”<sup>11</sup> The book of Isaiah contains more prophecies concerning the Person and work of Christ that are quoted in the New Testament than any of the other books of prophecy. In the gospels the expression “that what was spoken through Isaiah the prophet might be fulfilled” appears repeatedly (Matt. 4:14; 8:17; 12:17; cf., 1:22; 3:3; 13:14; 15:7). When the Lord stood up in the synagogue to proclaim the New Testament jubilee of grace, he read from Isaiah (Luke 4:17). Philip expounded the gospel to the Ethiopian eunuch from the chapter in Isaiah that the latter was reading (Acts 8:27-35).

Isaiah’s prophecies concerning the incarnation and crucifixion of Christ are particularly significant. Isaiah 7:14 says, “Therefore the Lord Himself will give you a sign: Behold, the virgin will conceive and will bear a son, and she will call his name Immanuel.” When the angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph, he quoted this verse: “Now all this has happened so that what was spoken by the Lord through the prophet might be fulfilled, saying, ‘Behold, the virgin shall be with child and shall bear a son, and they shall call His name Emmanuel’ (which is translated, God with us).” Isaiah 9:6 is also a prophecy of the incarnation: “For a child is born to us, a son is given to us.” This matches the language of John 3:16a: “For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son.” Isaiah 53, which foretells the sufferings of Christ, is a clear prophecy of His rejection by men and His crucifixion. Isaiah’s prophecy even extends to the new heaven and new earth (Isa. 65:17). None of these was fulfilled in the Old Testament, but they are surely spoken of in a New Testament sense.

The pivotal event that is the dividing line between the Old and New Testaments is the incarnation of Christ. Isaiah 9:6 is one of the clearest prophecies concerning the incarnation in the Old Testament. Geisler agrees, saying, “Indeed, there is no clearer messianic passage on the deity of Christ than Isaiah 9:6.”<sup>12</sup> This verse tells us that the human child born among men shall be called the mighty God. His being *called* the mighty God surely indicates that He *is* the mighty God. Isaiah 9:6 also tells us that the son given to us shall be *called* the eternal Father. To say, because of adherence to an extrabiblical standard of truth and logic, that this cannot mean that the Son *is* the Father in some sense is to reject the testimony of Scripture. It is, in fact, to set aside the Word of God for the tradition of men (Mark 7:6-9). Whether or not we understand in what sense the Son is called the Father is secondary; God’s first requirement is that we receive His revelation of Himself, that is, that we affirm what God affirms. Geisler and Rhodes rightly object when the Jehovah’s Witnesses claim that the mighty God in Isaiah 9:6 is different than the almighty God,<sup>13</sup> yet they do the same thing in principle when they claim that the eternal Father in the very same verse is someone other than the one God and Father (Eph. 4:6).

### **Does “Father of Eternity” Simply Mean “Jesus Is Eternal”?**

Geisler and Rhodes say, “Based on the original Hebrew, the phrase ‘eternal Father’ is better rendered into English, ‘Father of eternity.’” The structure of the Hebrew names for “Father” used in many verses in Isaiah takes the form of a compound title consisting of “Father” and a qualifier. For example, the literal translation of “Father” in Isaiah 63:16 and 64:8 (אֲבִינֵנוּ) is “Father of us,” but it is universally translated as “our Father.” In the same way, the literal “Father of eternity” in Isaiah 9:6 (אֲבִי עֶד) is generally understood to be a divine title, either as “everlasting Father” or

“eternal Father.” Thus, it is translated as either “eternal Father” or “everlasting Father” in the King James Version, American Standard Version, New American Standard Bible, New International Version, and English Standard Version to name five respected and commonly used English language translations.

Based on translating Isaiah 9:6 as “Father of eternity,” Geisler and Rhodes begin to speculate on what this name might mean. They first posit that it may simply mean that “Jesus is eternal” and claim that “a strong case can therefore be made that the term simply indicates the eternality of the divine Messiah.”<sup>14</sup> In support of their conjecture, they cite “the ancient Targums-simplified paraphrases of the Old Testament.” There are several problems with their argument.

First, this interpretation is unfaithful to the language of the Hebrew Old Testament as it completely eliminates the word “Father” from the text. As previously mentioned, the title “Father” in Isaiah 9:6 is a compound word. The root word for “Father” in its compound form is אָבִי, while the word for “eternal Father” is אָבִי עֶד. Nevertheless, Geisler and Rhodes claim that “Father” is not essential to the understanding of the text, even though it is the root of the name in the Hebrew Scripture. This is to be unfaithful to the text.

## Targums

Second, the “Targums-simplified paraphrases of the Old Testament” should not be relied upon as an authoritative source, particularly in a case such as this one, where the meaning of the underlying Hebrew text of the Old Testament is clearly altered. The Targums are rabbinical paraphrases of portions of the Old Testament into Aramaic. According to Bruce Metzger, one of the leading authorities on the textual bases of the Old Testament and ancillary ancient manuscripts:

All translations of the Bible are necessarily interpretive to some extent, but the Targums differ in that they are interpretive as a matter of policy, and often to an extent that far exceeds the bounds of translation or even paraphrase.<sup>15</sup>

Ernst Würthwein, another noted Old Testament textual scholar, comments:

...in no other versions of the Bible is the interpretive element as pronounced as in the Targums. They paraphrase, they add explanatory phrases, they reinterpret the text (sometimes quite boldly) according to the theological temper of their time, they relate the text to contemporary life and political circumstances, and so on.<sup>16</sup>

In his footnote at the end of the paragraph in which the above passage appears, Würthwein states:

A particularly bold reinterpretation was necessitated in Isa. 52:12-53:12 under the influence of anti-Christian polemics.<sup>17</sup>

It is very significant that the passage Würthwein cites as “a particularly bold reinterpretation” that discounts a critical aspect of the incarnate Redeemer is in a Targum of the same book, Isaiah, as the one Geisler and Rhodes cite as support for their interpretation. Würthwein’s concern that an anti-Christian polemic informed the Targum Jonathan’s paraphrase of Isaiah is echoed by many reputable scholars.<sup>18</sup> Even those who do not subscribe to this opinion recognize that the targumic rendition of Isaiah 52:12-53:12 is not faithful to the original Hebrew.<sup>19</sup>

A translation of the Targum of Isaiah 9:6 reads as follows:

The prophet said to the house of David “For a boy has been born to us, a son has been given to us, and he has taken the Torah upon himself to observe it. And his name has been called from before the One who gives wonderful counsel, the mighty God, everlasting: ‘the Messiah in whose days the peace will increase upon us’.”<sup>20</sup>

Roger Syrén, Docent of the Old Testament with Jewish Studies at Åbo Akademi in Finland and a member of the Steering Committee of the International Organization for Targum Study since 1995, commented that in the Targumist’s paraphrase of Isaiah 9:6, the expression “his name has been called from before” stands alone, that is, it is not a continuation of the description of the promised Messiah, as it is in the Hebrew text. Syrén concluded:

Thus, it seems that the Targumist has manipulated the context here, in 9,5, in order to avoid ascribing the appellation “God” to Messiah.<sup>21</sup>

Also of note is the misplaced emphasis on the Torah and the complete omission of the divine title of “Father” which is part of the Hebrew word in Isaiah 9:6. It is this omission that Geisler and Rhodes are willing to embrace rather than confess what the Bible confesses and then justify based on a paraphrase that seeks to circumvent the deity of Christ.

In removing “Father” from Isaiah 9:6, Geisler and Rhodes are practicing textual criticism based on a preconceived theological position. This is an unsound practice. Removing “Father” to accommodate their concept of the Trinity contravenes one of the main principles of textual criticism, *lectio difficilior lectio potior* (“the more difficult reading is the more probable reading”), which means that where there are differences in the text, it is more likely that the more difficult reading was replaced with the simpler and less controversial one as the text was copied.<sup>22</sup> Geisler himself acknowledges this principle of textual criticism.<sup>23</sup> This principle is generally applied to differences in the manuscripts in the original languages (Greek and Hebrew), but the principle also has applicability here. A “simplified paraphrase” simply should not be substituted for the Hebrew text, even if the meaning of the original text challenges one’s theological preconceptions. It should also be noted that some English language translations by Jewish scholars follow the Masoretic text and retain “Father” as a divine title in their translations of Isaiah 9:6.<sup>24</sup>

The dependence for support on a rabbinical paraphrase is even more striking considering the fact that the Jews misunderstood the prophecies concerning the Lord’s first coming and did not recognize in Him the fulfillment of those prophecies in the Old Testament. Whether or not we accept that the paraphrases in the Targum of Isaiah were influenced by an “anti-Christian polemic,” it is clear that the Targumists did not understand the Old Testament prophecies and are therefore not reliable interpreters of them. It is ironic indeed that in the same article Geisler and Rhodes both champion Biblical inerrancy and yet appeal to a rabbinical paraphrase to support their attempt to explain away the clear statement of inerrant Scripture.

### **Geisler’s Contradictory Statements**

Third, the denial by Geisler and Rhodes that Isaiah refers to the Father in the Godhead also contradicts Geisler’s published writings concerning the divine name of Yahweh (Jehovah). Speaking of the Old Testament he says:

The Bible’s descriptions of Yahweh as Father and Jesus as Son says something of how the Son relates to the Father.<sup>25</sup>

Elsewhere Geisler states:

Marcion, a second-century heretic, represented the most dangerous movement associated with Gnosticism. According to him, the Father of Jesus is not the same as Yahweh, the God of the Old Testament. If this is true, Christianity is severed from its historic roots.<sup>26</sup>

We agree with this analysis. We also agree with Geisler when he says:

Jesus claimed to be Yahweh God. YHWH; translated in some versions Jehovah, was the special name of God revealed to Moses in Exodus 3:14, when God said, “I AM WHO I AM.” In John 8:58, Jesus declares: “Before Abraham was, I am.” This statement claims not only existence before Abraham, but equality with the “I AM” of Exodus 3:14. The Jews around him clearly understood his meaning and picked up stones to kill him for blaspheming (see Mark 14:62; John 8:58; 10:31–33; 18:5–6). Jesus also said, “I am the first and the last (Rev. 2:8).<sup>27</sup>

What is incomprehensible is how Geisler can identify the Father with Yahweh in the Old Testament and Jesus with Yahweh in the New Testament yet claim no identification between Jesus and the Father. If the Old Testament Yahweh is the Father and the New Testament Yahweh is Jesus, how is it heresy to affirm the testimony of Isaiah 9:6 that because Jesus is called the Father He must in some sense be the Father?

### **Geisler and Rhodes Subvert the Clear Meaning of the Words**

Fourth, Geisler and Rhodes’ interpretation violates one of the chief principles of Biblical interpretation dating from the time of the Reformation. This principle, called *sensus literalis*, which Luther describes as follows:

Neither a conclusion nor a figure of speech should be admitted in any place of Scripture unless evident contextual circumstances or the absurdity of anything obviously mitigating against an article of faith require it. On the contrary, we must everywhere adhere to the simple, pure, and natural meaning of the words. This accords with the rules of grammar and the usage of speech (*usus loquendi*) which God has given to men.<sup>28</sup>

Luther says further:

The Holy Spirit is the plainest Writer and Speaker in heaven and on earth. Therefore His words can have no more than one, and that the most obvious, sense. This we call the literal or nature sense.<sup>29</sup>

By manufacturing arguments that Isaiah 9:6 does not mean what it clearly says, Geisler and Rhodes make the inspired words of the Bible subservient to their man-made theology.

### **Conclusion**

By their dependence on non-biblical sources to inform their interpretation, Geisler and Rhodes have diluted the force of the clear words of Isaiah 9:6, in effect denying what it says concerning the relationship between the Father and the Son in the incarnation. It is worthwhile to consider where their considerable expenditure of effort leads. In terms of understanding the Divine Trinity, it leads to the untenable state of having two divine Fathers—the eternal Father in the Godhead and Jesus as the Father of eternity. This is precisely the error Witness Lee pointed out over thirty years ago in *What a Heresy—Two Divine Fathers, Two Life-giving Spirits, and Three Gods!* As far as entering into the depths of the divine revelation, Geisler and Rhodes’ explanation of Isaiah



9:6 leads precisely nowhere. It makes the relationship among the three of the Godhead a matter of objective speculation rather than a model for the believers' oneness. This is not according to the basic nature of the Bible, which is the revelation of God in His move to carry out His purpose among men. The way taken by Geisler and Rhodes ultimately leads in a different direction. The result may be a self-satisfied sense of having maintained one's intellectual model of the Trinity intact, notwithstanding its inconsistency with the totality of the divine revelation in the Bible.

On the other hand, Witness Lee's consideration of the pure word in the Bible regarding the Trinity led him to realize that God's heart's desire is to have a group of people conformed to Christ, God's firstborn Son, and living in the mutual indwelling of God and man for the building up of the Body of Christ. His teaching similarly seeks to bring believers to such a realization of God's purpose so that they can participate in God's move to carry out His divine economy. The issue of Witness Lee's teaching is to produce in God's people a spiritual hunger to experience and participate in the mutual indwelling of God and man for the corporate expression of God in man according to God's eternal purpose and heart's desire.

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<sup>1</sup> This article examines one aspect of the truth concerning the Trinity which has been neglected by most theologians and by Christians generally, that is, the identification of Christ with the Father in Isaiah 9:6. The reader should not presume that this represents the full teaching of Witness Lee or of the local churches concerning the relationship between the Son and the Father in the divine Trinity. While we do affirm the clear word of the Bible concerning the identification of Christ with the Father, we also affirm the eternal distinction between Them. As Witness Lee wrote:

Among the three of the Divine Trinity, there is distinction but no separation. The Father is distinct from the Son, the Son is distinct from the Spirit, and the Spirit is distinct from the Son and the Father. The three of the Godhead co-exist in Their coinherence, so They are distinct but not separate. In the Triune God there is no separation, only distinction. The Triune God exists in His coinherence. On the one hand, the three are coinhering; on the other hand, at the same time they are co-existing. Thus, They are one. They are not separate. (*The History of God in His Union with Man* (Anaheim, CA: Living Stream Ministry, 1993), p. 17)

The publications of Living Stream Ministry contain many balanced presentations of the truths concerning the Triune God. Of these, the following date from the mid-1970s and have been available on this site for many years:

- Witness Lee, *The Revelation of the Triune God According to the Pure Word of the Bible* (Anaheim, CA: Living Stream Ministry, 1976)
- Witness Lee, *The Clear Scriptural Revelation Concerning the Triune God* (Anaheim, CA: Living Stream Ministry, n.d.)
- Ron Kangas, *Modalism, Tritheism, or the Pure Revelation of the Triune God according to the Bible* (Anaheim, CA: Living Stream Ministry, 1976)

The inaugural issue of *Affirmation & Critique* (I:1, January 1996) was devoted to the subject of "Knowing the Triune God." It contains several excellent articles, including:

- Kerry S. Robichaux, "Axioms of the Trinity," pp. 6-11.
- Ron Kangas, "Knowing the Triune God as Revealed in the Word of God," pp. 12-22.
- Ed Marks, "A Biblical Overview of the Triune God," pp. 23-31.
- Kerry S. Robichaux, "The Straight Cut: Some Biblical Trinitarian Conundrums," pp. 46-49.

<sup>2</sup> Witness Lee, *What a Heresy—Two Divine Fathers, Two Life-giving Spirits, and Three Gods!* (Anaheim, CA: Living Stream Ministry, 1977), available at <http://www.contendingforthefaith.org/responses/booklets/heresy.html>.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 17.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 13. George Rawlinson, *The Pulpit Commentary: Isaiah, Vol. 1* (London: Funk & Wagnalls, 1910), p. 167, comments:

The Everlasting Father; rather, Everlasting or Eternal Father. But here again, there is a singularity in the idea, which makes the omission of the article unimportant; for how could there be more than one Everlasting Father, one Creator, Preserver, Protector of mankind who was absolutely eternal?

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In one of the homilies that follows Rawlinson's exposition, Rev. R. Tuck says:

He is the Son, and yet it can be said of him that he is the "Everlasting Father." This last assertion seems to be the most astonishing of them all. "The Son is the Father." Christ sustained this view: "He that hath seen me hath seen the Father." Every man's work is to find the Father in Christ. No man has truly seen Christ who has not found in him the Father, and learned from him the fatherhood of God. (p. 181)

<sup>5</sup> Clement of Alexandria, "The Instructor [Pædagogus]," *The Ante-Nicene Fathers, vol. II*, edited by Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1979), p. 215.

<sup>6</sup> Robert Jamieson, A. R. Fausset, and David Brown, *A Commentary on the Old and New Testaments, vol. 2* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2002), p. 594, emphasis in original.

<sup>7</sup> Benjamin B. Warfield, *Biblical and Theological Studies* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1968), p. 38.

<sup>8</sup> Witness Lee, *The Conclusion of the New Testament, Messages 276-294* (Anaheim, CA: Living Stream Ministry, 2004), p. 2957.

<sup>9</sup> Norman Geisler and R. E. MacKenzie, *Roman Catholics and Evangelicals : Agreements and Differences* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1995), p. 39.

<sup>10</sup> Norman L. Geisler, *A Popular Survey of the Old Testament* (Peabody, MA: Prince Press, 1977, 2003), p. 24. Ron Rhodes, *Christ before the Manger: The Life and Times of the Preincarnate Christ* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1992), p. 235.

<sup>11</sup> See John F. Sawyer, *The Fifth Gospel: Isaiah in the History of Christianity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

<sup>12</sup> Norman Geisler, *Christian Apologetics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1976), p. 336.

<sup>13</sup> As, for example in Norman Geisler and Ron Rhodes, *When Cultists Ask: A Popular Handbook on Cultic Misinterpretations* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1997), pp. 78-79.

<sup>14</sup> Geisler and Rhodes actually posit two "viable view[s]" of the meaning of *eternal Father*. One is that Jesus is eternal and the other is that Jesus is the giver of eternal life. However, Rhodes elsewhere has stated that there is only one possible interpretation: "Clearly, the ancient Jews considered the phrase 'Father of eternity' a reference to the eternality of the Messiah. There can be no doubt that this is the meaning Isaiah intended to communicate to his readers" (Ron Rhodes, *Reasoning from the Scriptures with the Jehovah's Witnesses* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House Publishers 1993), p. 166). Apparently, there is doubt as even Geisler and Rhodes could not agree on the correct interpretation.

<sup>15</sup> Bruce Metzger "Important Early Translations of the Bible," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 150:597 (January-March 1993), p. 42.

<sup>16</sup> Ernst Würthwein, *The Text of the Old Testament: An Introduction to Biblica Hebraica*, translated by Erroll F. Rhodes (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1979) p. 76. Pierre Grelot, *Les Poèmes du Serviteur* (Paris: Les Éditions du Cerf, 1981), p. 222, states:

Thus, one is no longer confronted with a problem of translation, even somewhat broadly: more even than the Septuagint, the Targum is a recomposition of the text which has its own coherence.

<sup>17</sup> Würthwein, op. cit., p. 76. Harald Risenfeld, *Jésus Transfiguré* (Copenhagen: Ejnar Munksgaard, 1947), pp. 85-86, says:

It is evident that there we have in essence an intentional and systematic transposition. One cannot avoid supposing that this transformation was made during the targumic translation or later with the aim of replacing, with a polemic intention, a different Messianic concept which one disapproved of, namely that of a suffering Messiah.

<sup>18</sup> E.g., J. Jeremias, "παῖς θεοῦ," *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament, vol. V*, Gerhard Friedrich, ed., translated by Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1967), 695:

Though we have already noted an earlier tendency of the LXX to attenuate the passion texts of Is. 53 [1965], there is only one possible explanation for this violent wresting of the chapter in the Tg. [Targum], with its consistent reversal of the meaning, namely, that we have here an instance of anti-Christian polemic.

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Roger Syrén, “Targum Isaiah 52:13-53:12 and Christian Interpretation,” *Journal of Jewish Studies*, 40:2, (Oxford: Oxford Centre for Postgraduate Hebrew Studies, Autumn 1989), pp. 205-206:

If we drew an axis with two extremes, ‘translation’ and ‘recomposition’ along which to place Tg Is. 53, the opinion of a majority of scholars would certainly tip the balance in favour of the second extreme.

‘Recomposition’ is precisely the word used by Grelot in his characterization of the chapter, and he also classifies this text (and parts of the other ‘Servant Songs’ in the Tg as an Aramaic Midrash for which the text is just a pretext for expressing a certain theological stance. Others have characterized the passage as ‘une transposition intentionnelle et systématique’ (H. Riesenfeld), or, with a well-found simile, ‘not a translation, or even a paraphrase, but a rewriting which preserved nothing of the idea and architecture of the original edifice; instead, it used only the building stones to erect something completely new’ (H. S. Nyberg).

<sup>19</sup> E.g., Jostein Ådna, “The Servant of Isaiah 53 as Triumphant and Interceding Messiah: The Reception of Isaiah 52:13–53:12 in the Targum of Isaiah with Special Attention to the Concept of the Messiah,” *The Suffering Servant: Isaiah 53 in Jewish and Christian Sources*, Bernd Janowski and Peter Stuhlmacher, eds. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004), p. 190:

Even a superficial reading of Isaiah 52:13-53:12 in the Hebrew Bible and the Targum of Isaiah (a part of the Targum Jonathan to the Prophets) reveals considerable differences between the Hebrew and Aramaic versions.

<sup>20</sup> Roger Syrén, “The Isaiah-Targum and Christian Interpretation,” *Scandinavian Journal of the Old Testament: 3:1*, (Aarhus University Press, 1989), p. 57. Note: The numbering of verses varies among versions. The version cited here identifies this verse as Isaiah 9,5, which matches, for example, the Jewish TANAKH.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 60. See note 20.

<sup>22</sup> Concerning *lectio difficilior* see: Bruce Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament* (Stuttgart: United Bible Societies, 1971), pp. xxvi-xxvii; Bruce Metzger, *The Text of the New Testament: Its Transmission, Corruption, and Restoration* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1968), p. 209; Ernst Würthwein, *The Text of the Old Testament: An Introduction to the Biblia Hebraica*, translated by Erroll F. Rhodes (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1979), p. 116; Philip Comfort, *Encountering the Manuscripts: An Introduction to New Testament Paleography & Textual Criticism* (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman, 2005), pp. 293, 386; D. A. Carson, *The King James Version Debate: A Plea for Realism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1979), p. 30.

<sup>23</sup> Norman L. Geisler, *Baker Encyclopedia of Christian Apologetics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1999), p. 552, quoting Ernst Würthwein. *The Text of the Old Testament: An Introduction to the Biblia Hebraica*, translated by Erroll F. Rhodes (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1979), pp. 80-81.

<sup>24</sup> For example, the JPS *TANAKH* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1985) says, “Eternal Father.” The rendering of Isaiah 9:6 in *The Holy Scriptures According to the Masoretic Text* (Jewish Publication Society, 1917) uses a transliteration of the Hebrew which combines all of the descriptive titles (“Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Eternal Father, Prince of Peace”) into one compound name—“Pele-joez-el-gibbor-Abi-ad-sar-shalom.” Of note here is that “Abi” which is “Father” is capitalized, indicating that the translators recognized it as a divine title. A Messianic Jewish translation, the *Complete Jewish Bible*, translated by David H. Stern (Nashville, TN: Jewish New Testament Publications) also capitalizes “Father” as a divine title in this verse.

<sup>25</sup> Norman L. Geisler, *Baker Encyclopedia*, op. cit., p. 732.

<sup>26</sup> Norman L. Geisler and R. E. MacKenzie, *Roman Catholics and Evangelicals*, op. cit., p. 82.

<sup>27</sup> Norman L. Geisler, *Baker Encyclopedia*, op. cit., p. 731.

<sup>28</sup> Martin Luther, *What Luther Says: An Anthology, Vol. 1*, Ewald M. Plass, ed. (St. Louis, MO, Concordia, 1959), p. 93.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 91-92.