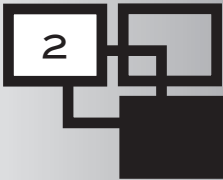


DEFENSE AND CONFIRMATION OF THE GOSPEL

BROTHERS, HEAR OUR DEFENSE



CONCERNING
THE DIVINE TRINITY

DCP
PRESS

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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 on the cover and title page of this book (*Defense and Confirmation of the Gospel*), 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

This book is the second in a series that corrects errors in an article written by Norman Geisler and Ron Rhodes rejecting a reassessment performed by the Christian Research Institute (CRI) concerning the teachings of Witness Lee and the local churches. CRI, one of the earliest apologetics ministries in the United States to criticize those teachings, discovered, based upon extensive primary research, that they had erred in their earlier assessment. To correct the misinformation that had been propagated from their earlier writings, CRI published a special edition of the *Christian Research Journal* entitled “We Were Wrong.”¹ Shortly after the release of the special issue of the *Journal*, Geisler and Rhodes published a response on the Internet attacking CRI’s new findings.

The books in this series point out some of the more significant problems with that response. This book addresses some crucial truths concerning the Triune God:

- The difficulties associated with using the word “person” in relation to the Divine Trinity;
- A case of blatant quote twisting by Norman Geisler and Ron Rhodes in their attempt to “prove” the local churches teach patripassianism;
- The participation of the Father in the Son’s work;
- The biblical truths undergirding the statement in Isaiah 9:6 that the Son given to us is called “eternal Father”; and
- The apostle Paul’s teaching in 2 Corinthians 3:17 that the Lord Jesus Christ is the Spirit.

Following the article on the Lord being the Spirit are over fifty quotes from scholars and Bible teachers who affirm that the Lord Jesus Christ is the Spirit.

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

THE ERROR OF INSISTING ON THREE “PERSONS” AS A LITMUS TEST OF ORTHODOXY

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

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

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

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

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

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

They present this statement completely apart from its original context as proof positive of heresy and claim that to speak of

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

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

³ Witness Lee, *The Triune God to Be Life to the Tripartite Man* (Anaheim: Living Stream Ministry, 1996), p. 48.

God as “one person” and as “three persons” is impossibly contradictory:

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

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

- The term *person* in reference to the Father, the Son, and the Spirit is not a biblical one, but was invented to try to explain the biblical revelation.
- Many theologians recognize the problem of using the word *persons* to speak of the Father, the Son, and the Spirit.
- Part of the problem with the term *person* is that as it entered into the vernacular, the common understanding of what it means changed.
- The modern understanding of *person* tends to lead towards tritheism.
- Norman Geisler’s insistence that the one God cannot be spoken of as a person in the singular sense contradicts the biblical record.
- In the context that Geisler and Rhodes omitted, Witness Lee did clearly state the “sense” in which he used the term *one person*.

⁴ Norman Geisler and Ron Rhodes, “A Response to the Christian Research Journal’s Recent Defense of the ‘Local Church’ Movement,” December 2009.

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

Person Not a Biblical Term

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

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

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

The term ‘person’ only approximately represents the truth. Although this word, more nearly than any other single word, expressed the conception which the Scriptures give us of the relation between the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, it is

⁵ Thomas F. Torrance, *The Christian Doctrine of God, One Being Three Persons* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1996), p. 155. Although we quote a number of Christian writers in this article, we do not mean to imply that we agree with them on every point of truth or they with us. What the quotations included in this article show is that the teaching of the local churches is well within the bounds of accepted Christian teaching.

not itself used in this connection in Scriptures, and we employ it in a qualified sense, not in the ordinary sense in which we apply the word ‘person’ to Peter, Paul, and John.⁶

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

⁶ Augustus H. Strong, *Systematic Theology* (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 1907), p. 330.

⁷ J. Scott Horrell, “The Eternal Son of God in the Social Trinity,” *Jesus in Trinitarian Perspective*, Fred Sanders and Klaus Issler, eds. (Nashville, TN: B&H Academic, 2007), p. 52.

⁸ Thomas Weinandy, *The Father’s Spirit of Sonship: Reconceiving the Trinity* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1995), p. 111.

⁹ John Wesley, “On the Trinity” (1775), Sermon 55, in *The Works of John Wesley, vols. 5 and 6*, 3rd edition (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1872, 2002) pp. 200-201.

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

Problems with the Definition of the Term

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

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

The Scottish theologian H. R. Mackintosh wrote:

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

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

In our opening sentence of our section we avoided the concept “Person.” Neither was it on its introduction into ecclesiastical language made sufficiently clear, nor has the subsequent interpretation, imparted to it and enforced as a

¹⁰ Millard J. Erickson, *God in Three Persons: A Contemporary Interpretation of the Trinity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1995), p. 19.

¹¹ H.R. Mackintosh, *The Doctrine of the Person of Jesus Christ* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1913), p. 524.

whole in mediæval and post-Reformation scholasticism, really issued in such a clearing up, nor has the introduction of the modern concept of personality into this debate produced anything else but fresh confusion.¹²

In his *Dogmatics in Outline* Barth further states:

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

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

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

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

Much has been written about this history of the term *persona* and its application to Trinitarian language. The contours of the term are both obscure and wide. In its original sense it has the meaning of “mask” as worn by an actor in a play, thus denoting something that is not “real” for the human being behind the mask. The other extreme, the modern one, is to regard the *persona* as not only something “real” about the human being but also highly individualistic... Understandably,

¹² Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics, I:1: The Doctrine of the Word of God* (Edinburgh, T&T Clark, 1936), p. 408.

¹³ Karl Barth, *Dogmatics in Outline* (New York: Harper & Row, 1959), pp. 42-43.

¹⁴ Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 4th ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans (1939, 1941), p. 87.

neither the etymology of the term nor its highly individualized modern meaning captures the principles of distinction-in-unity meant by those who first applied it to describe the Christian God.¹⁵

Problems with the Common Understanding of *Person*

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

But if we leave aside the historical arguments (exegetical and those from the history of religions and of dogma) and look at the arguments based directly on the content of the teaching, then one objection stands out as more important than the

¹⁵ Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, *The Trinity: Global Perspectives* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007), p. 30.

¹⁶ As J. N. D. Kelly pointed out, the actual meaning of the word “Persons” as applied to the Trinity has undergone substantial change since it was introduced by Tertullian in “Against Praxeas” (see *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. III, Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, eds. (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1980), p. 598):

Hence, when he [Tertullian] speaks of the Son as being ‘of one substance’ with the Father, he means that They share the same divine nature or essence, and in fact, since the Godhead is indivisible, are one identical being. On the one hand the terms *πρόσωπον* and *persona* were admirably suited to express the otherness, or independent subsistence, of the Three. After originally meaning ‘face’, and so ‘expression’ and the ‘role’, the former came to signify ‘individual’, the stress being usually on the external aspect or objective presentation. The primary sense of *persona* was ‘mask’, from which the transition was easy to the actor who wore it and the character he played. In legal usage it could stand for the holder of the title to a property, but as employed by Tertullian it connoted the concrete presentation of an individual as such. In neither case, it should be noted, was the idea of self-consciousness nowadays associated with ‘person’ and ‘personal’ at all prominent. (J. N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1817), p. 115)

others: modern subjectivity and the modern concept of person which it has produced. In the modern period, person is no longer understood in ontological terms but is defined as a self-conscious free center of action and as individual personality.¹⁷

Thomas F. Torrance also noted:

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

Concerns That “Persons” Leads to Tritheism

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

The term “Person” is also sometimes objected to. Like all human language, it is liable to be accused of inadequacy and

¹⁷ Walter Kasper, *The God of Jesus Christ*, translated by Matthew J. O’Connell (New York: Crossroad, 1994), p. 285.

¹⁸ Thomas F. Torrance, *The Christian Doctrine of God, One Being Three Persons* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1996), pp. 159-160.

even positive error. It certainly must not be pressed too far, or it will lead to Tritheism. While we use the term to denote distinctions in the Godhead, we do not imply distinctions which amount to separateness, but distinctions which are associated with essential mutual co-inherence or inclusiveness....

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

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

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

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

Griffith Thomas’ concern was echoed by Thomas Weinandy:

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

¹⁹ W. H. Griffith Thomas, *The Principles of Theology* (London: Church Book Room Press, 1956), p. 31.

consciousnesses and thus lead to tritheism when applied to God?²⁰

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

Norman Geisler's Position Contradicts the Bible

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

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

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

²⁰ Thomas Weinandy, *The Father's Spirit of Sonship: Reconceiving the Trinity* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1995), pp. 111-112.

²¹ The following are a few among many examples: *The Crucial Points of the Major Items of the Lord's Recovery*, chapters 1-3 of *The Revelation and Vision of God*, chapter 4 of *Elders' Training Book 1: The Ministry of the New Testament*, and chapter 7 of *Young People's Training*. Some shorter examples are given in note 37.

²² Norman Geisler, *The Baker Encyclopedia of Christian Apologetics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1999), p. 757.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The revelation of the Triune God can be found throughout the New Testament. In Matthew 28:19, the Lord Jesus charged the disciples to baptize the nations “into the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.” In this verse, *name* is singular in number, yet the one name refers to three persons. This shows that there is one name for the Divine Trinity (see notes 5 and 6 on Matthew 28:19 in the Recovery Version). The word *person* is often used to describe the three of the Divine Trinity, yet we must be careful in using such a term...

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

In this passage Witness Lee said both “the one name refers to three persons” (which Geisler and Rhodes do not quote) and “the Father, the Son, and the Spirit are not three separate persons” (which they do quote out of context). Geisler and

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

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

An Inconsistent Standard of Truth

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

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

Geisler and Rhodes write:

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

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

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

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

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

Is God a Person?—What Others Say

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

Lewis Sperry Chafer, founder of Dallas Theological Seminary:

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

Karl Barth:

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

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

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

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

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

But there is a great deal of direct evidence for saying that God is a person. Have you noticed how the presence of God is always described in a personal way? Take the name of God that we have considered: 'I am', that is a personal statement, it is a person who can say, 'I am,' and God says that He speaks of Himself in this manner. Every single representative of God has

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

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

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

declared that God is a person and not simply an unconscious force.³¹

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

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

Geisler and Rhodes Contradict Themselves

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

spoke of God as one person and in what sense they spoke of Him as three.

Geisler and Rhodes Refuse to Address All the Evidence

The Triune God is a major theme in the ministry of Witness Lee. His writings contain many thorough and balanced expositions on the subjects of God being one yet having the aspect of three, of all Three being eternal and being God, of all Three co-existing and coinhering eternally, and of the errors of both modalism and tritheism.³⁷ Moreover, on many occasions Witness Lee did use

³⁷The following are a few short examples:

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

Among the three of the Divine Trinity, there is distinction but no separation. The Father is distinct from the Son, the Son is distinct from the Spirit, and the Spirit is distinct from the Son and the Father. But we cannot say that They are separate, because They coinhere, that is, They live within one another. In Their coexistence the three of the Godhead are distinct, but Their coinherence makes them one. They coexist in Their coinherence, so They are distinct but not separate. – Witness Lee, *The Crucial Points of the Major Items of the Lord's Recovery* (Anaheim, CA: Living Stream Ministry, 1993), pp. 10-11

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

We need to be very clear concerning the error in modalism. Modalism teaches that the Father, the Son, and the Spirit are not all eternal and do not all exist at the same time. Instead, modalism claims that the revelation of the Son ended with the ascension and that after the ascension the Son ceased to exist. Modalism has gone

the term *persons* in relation to the three of the Divine Trinity.³⁸ Geisler and Rhodes and those who signed the “Open Letter” with them address none of these.

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

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

³⁸ The following are two relatively short examples:

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

In His economy, God is three—the Father, the Son, and the Spirit. The great theologians of the fourth and fifth centuries referred to the Three of the Trinity as three hypostases. The primary sense of the Greek word for *hypostasis* is something which stands underneath, that is, a support or a foundation. To illustrate, one table has four legs supporting it, and the four legs of the table are its four hypostases. Likewise, there is one God, but He is the Father, the Son, and the Spirit. These three—the Father, the Son, and the Spirit—are the three divine hypostases. The word *hypostasis*, which was used in the theological writings that appeared in the Greek language, can also be translated *substance*. Later, when theology entered into the Latin language, the word *persona* was used. Then, in the English language, the term became *person*. Thus, it is said that the Father, Son, and Spirit are three persons.

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

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

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

It is significant that the critique of Geisler and Rhodes does not even address the main theme of the book from which the quote in question is excised—*The Triune God to Be Life to the Tripartite*

However, we should not understand this to mean that They are three separate persons according to the common understanding of the word *person*. – Witness Lee, *A Brief Presentation of the Lord's Recovery* (Anaheim, CA: Living Stream Ministry, 1990), p. 9

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

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

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

Conclusion

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

A FALSE ACCUSATION OF PATRIPASSIANISM SUPPORTED BY SPECIOUS SCHOLARSHIP

In their critique of Elliot Miller's article in the *Christian Research Journal*, which reassesses the teachings of Witness Lee and the local churches, Norman Geisler and Ron Rhodes proffer three quotes as proof that the local churches teach the heresy of patripassianism¹:

Likewise, the LC's alleged repudiation of patripassianism (the heresy that the Father suffered on the cross) is unconvincing since they also claim (and CRI apparently supports) the view, based on the doctrine of coinherence, that both the Father and the Son are involved in each other's activities. They say, "no person of the Trinity goes anywhere or *does anything* apart from the presence and *involvement* of the other two persons." (23, emphasis added). If this were true, then the Father would have been involved in the suffering of Christ on the cross, which even they admit is the heresy of patripassianism. God was certainly present in His omnipresence, but God the Father is not God the Son, and the Father certainly was not involved in the experience of Christ's suffering on the cross. CRI claims that "what is distinctly the Son's actions...is likewise the Father's operation." They cite with approval the statement that "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 other..." (22). But, again, this confuses the different roles and actions of different members of the Godhead. For example, the Father did not die for our sins, nor does the Father eternally proceed from the Father, as the Son does from the Father.

¹ When Geisler and Rhodes speak of "the LC's alleged repudiation of patripassianism," they expose either their own ignorance or a callous disregard of facts. The local churches have never espoused patripassianism, and Living Stream Ministry published a booklet in English exposing its errors as early as 1976 (see Ron Kangas, *Modalism, Tritheism, or the Pure Revelation of the Triune God According to the Bible* (Anaheim, CA: Living Stream Ministry, 1976), pp. 3-4, 23-24).

Dealing with the unfounded charge of patripassianism is the subject of a separate article.² This article demonstrates how Geisler and Rhodes' treatment of the three quotes in the paragraph above constitutes an example of poor and perhaps even dishonest apologetic writing.

Concerning the first quote—"No person of the Trinity goes anywhere or does anything apart from the presence and involvement of the other two persons":

1. Geisler and Rhodes present this as a statement made by the local churches. It is not. It is Elliot Miller's words, although we agree with it.
2. Geisler and Rhodes purposefully quote only part of a sentence and then attack that isolated fragment as heresy. Furthermore, they do not address the substantive point of Elliot Miller's argument, which was that by quoting eight words ("...the entire Godhead, the Triune God, became flesh") out of a 240-word paragraph, the signers of the open letter distorted what Witness Lee said. Miller wrote:

The context of the paragraph is clearly and exclusively the coinherence of the Trinity, and it is in this sense and this sense only that Lee wrote those eight words: because of their unity of being, no person of the Trinity goes anywhere or does anything apart from the presence and involvement of the other two persons. When an author is indicted on the basis of an incomplete sentence it should raise a red flag for any discerning reader; in this case, further research bears out that the author was indeed taken out of context.

It is ironic that in attacking Elliot Miller's article, Geisler and Rhodes commit the very same error to which Miller was drawing attention. They repeatedly take fragments of statements made in the *Christian Research Journal* article

² See "The Error of Denying the Involvement of the Father in the Son's Work" in this volume.

and twist them to their own ends without respect to the authors' meaning or the original context.

3. Coinherence (and the similar term in Greek, perichoresis) refers to the mutual indwelling of the three of the Godhead. In the Gospel of John the Lord repeatedly told His disciples that He was in the Father and the Father was in Him (10:38; 14:10-11, 20; 17:21, 23). In both John 10:37-38 and 14:10, this coinherence is the basis for the Lord saying that He was doing the works of the Father and that the Father was doing His works through His abiding in the Son. This is the basis for and exactly matches Elliot Miller's statement. Geisler and Rhodes provide no explanation that reconciles the revelation of the Father and the Son's coinherence found in the Gospel of John with their apparent claim that the three of the Divine Trinity are carrying out completely independent works. Instead, Geisler and Rhodes say only that God was "present in His omnipresence," which refers to God's relation to His creation. Coinherence is the mutual indwelling of the Father and the Son as these verses in the Gospel of John show. In fact, Geisler and Rhodes do not clearly state whether they accept the mutual indwelling of the three of the Godhead.³
4. Many respected Bible teachers—including Millard Erickson, Cornelius Van Til, Carl F. H. Henry, Gordon Lewis, Bruce Demarest, William Lane Craig, and Lorraine Boettner—have written statements that are similar to Elliot Miller's (see "Scholars Who Affirm the Working Together of the Three of the Divine Trinity" in this volume). Would Geisler and Rhodes accuse them of teaching patripassianism?

³ This is discussed in greater detail in "The Error of Denying the Involvement of the Father in the Son's Work" in this volume.

Concerning the second quote—“CRI claims that ‘what is distinctly the Son’s actions...is likewise the Father’s operation.’”:

1. Geisler and Rhodes attribute this quote to CRI. Their attribution, however, is again incorrect. As Elliot Miller’s article clearly states, the quote is from a paper prepared by representatives of Living Stream Ministry’s editorial section and of the local churches for a faculty panel at Fuller Theological Seminary.
2. Geisler and Rhodes destroy the meaning of the original statement by excising it from its context and inaccurately quoting only selected words. The original statement reads:

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”).

In context the sentence Geisler and Rhodes criticize is an explanation of John 14:10. Here the Lord Himself clearly associates the matter of His coinherence with the Father (“I am in the Father and the Father is in Me”) with His speaking being the work of the Father who abides in Him. By stripping this quotation of its proper context, Geisler and Rhodes obscure the import of the Lord’s own words from John 14:10. If they believe this exposition of John 14:10 is in error, they should have addressed the issue squarely instead of miscasting it. Furthermore, to accuse Witness Lee and the local churches of patripassianism based on an exposition of the coinhering of the Father and the Son in John 14:10 is a considerable leap in logic.

Concerning the third quote—“They [CRI] cite with approval the statement that ‘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 other...’”:

1. Geisler and Rhodes give the impression that the statement cited with CRI’s approval was made by Witness Lee or the local churches. It was not. It was quoted in a paper provided by Living Stream Ministry (LSM) and the local churches to Fuller Theological Seminary, but the original quote is from Augustus H. Strong, a highly respected Baptist theologian. The complete passage from Strong’s *Systematic Theology* as quoted in the paper and subsequently in Miller’s article reads:

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 other**, and the manifestation of one to be recognized in the manifestation of the other. 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....” 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.⁴ [boldface added to indicate the portion quoted in Geisler and Rhodes’ article; the rest was omitted]

⁴ Augustus H. Strong, *Systematic Theology* (Old Tappan, NJ: Revell, 1960, c1907), pp. 332-333.

2. Later in their critique, Geisler and Rhodes cite the same Strong quote with approval themselves, saying:

For Strong rightly says that “there is intercommunication of persons and an immanence of one person in another which permits the peculiar work of one to be ascribed...to either of the other...”

Their hypocrisy is stunningly overt. They misattribute and then condemn a quote in one part of their critique as proof of patripassianism and condemn CRI for citing it “with approval,” but then commend the exact same quote later in the same paper, this time rightly identifying the author. It seems that it is not the truth that one speaks that matters to them, but who it is doing the speaking. When a quote is attributed to Witness Lee or the local churches, Geisler and Rhodes condemn it; when it is attributed to a respected Baptist theologian, they approve it.

3. Furthermore their quotation of Strong is not even accurate. Strong says there is “an intercommunion,” not “intercommunication,” and Geisler and Rhodes inexplicably leave out the word “divine.” This is a further evidence of their carelessness and cavalier treatment of both the subject matter and the words of others. Moreover, they omitted a substantial portion of Augustus Strong’s words as they appeared in both the *Journal* and in the response to Fuller which the *Journal* article quoted. The portion they left out specifically comments on 1 Corinthians 15:45 and 2 Corinthians 3:17 in nearly identical language to that which Geisler and Rhodes condemn as “modalistic-sounding” when used by Witness Lee.

Conclusion

In this brief analysis of three quotations from one paragraph, we have seen that each quote is misattributed and misrepresented. What Elliot Miller said is attributed to the local churches. What LSM and the churches wrote is attributed to CRI. What Augustus Strong said is first misattributed to the churches and

attacked and later properly attributed to Strong and defended. The mishandling of these three quotations should cause readers to question whether or not Geisler and Rhodes' analysis can be accepted as trustworthy and authoritative.

THE ERROR OF DENYING THE INVOLVEMENT OF THE FATHER IN THE SON'S WORK

In the special “We Were Wrong” issue of the *Christian Research Journal*, veteran apologist Gretchen Passantino, who participated in the earliest criticisms of the local churches published in the United States over thirty years ago, made an impassioned appeal. She asked her fellow apologists and the signers of an open letter criticizing the teachings of Living Stream Ministry (LSM) and the local churches to reconsider their condemnation, saying that her own further research had changed her opinion.¹ Norman Geisler and Ron Rhodes rejected her appeal out of hand, saying:

However, it is clear that truth does not always reside with the persons who have read more or studied longer. Rather, it rests with those who can reason best from the evidence.²

¹ Gretchen Passantino wrote:

My previous research (developed with and shared by Bob [Passantino], Walter [Martin], Elliot [Miller], and Cal [Beisner]) was inadequate to the extent that my conclusion was wrong. My current research (developed with and shared by Hank [Hanegraaff] and Elliot) is far deeper and wider than the previous, and is adequate to the extent that it has overturned my previous conclusion. No matter how many people sign the Open Letter and how many times the same inadequate sources are cited, the conclusion supported in this issue of the Journal prevails in the arena of truth. The local churches believe the essentials of orthodox Christian theology and should be embraced as brothers and sisters in Christ rather than opposed as believers in heresy. I pray other apologists will rescind their condemnation, if not reengage the issue to the same depth we have. We risk either being guilty of accusing a brother or of falsely embracing a heretic. What spiritual right do we have to refuse to revisit this issue? (Gretchen Passantino, *Christian Research Journal* 32:6, 2006, p. 50)

² The complete paragraph says:

One argument used by CRI is that their conclusions in favor of the LC should be believed because they have done better and more research on the topic (50). First of all, as we all know, *more* does not necessarily mean *better*. So, we can concentrate on what really matters. Gretchen Passantino Coburn claims she has done more research on this topic than most others and that she has been

Thus, Geisler and Rhodes dismissed the need for further research in spite of the lapse of thirty-five years since the original research was performed in which Gretchen Passantino participated. Instead, Geisler and Rhodes assert their own superior ability to reason apart from further evidence. In fact, their reasoning is flawed in many respects. This article examines one such case in which Geisler and Rhodes' "reasoning" is woefully deficient. Geisler and Rhodes backhandedly accuse the local churches of espousing the ancient heresy of patripassianism, which states that Jesus Christ, as the Son of God, was simply the Father in another mode of existence, so that it was the Father who suffered on the cross. Geisler and Rhodes say:

Likewise, the LC's alleged repudiation of patripassianism (the heresy that the Father suffered on the cross-17) is unconvincing since they also claim (and CRI apparently supports) the view, based on the doctrine of coinherence, that both the Father and the Son are involved in each other's activities.

There are several defects in Geisler and Rhodes' analysis:

- All three quotes they use to support this accusation are misattributed (see "A False Accusation of Patripassianism Supported by Specious Scholarship");
- To speak of the local churches' "alleged repudiation of patripassianism" gives the false impression that the local churches ever held that belief;
- Their reasoning that the espousal of coinherence and the co-working of the Father and the Son is equivalent to patripassianism is based on both faulty logic and faulty theology;
- Their rejection of the Father's involvement in the Son's work betrays a shortage in their apprehension of the biblical record; and

doing it for a longer time (50). However, it is clear that truth does not always reside with the persons who have read more or studied longer. Rather, it rests with those who can reason best from the evidence.

- They ignore the many respected Bible teachers and theologians who have made similar statements concerning the biblical record of the involvement of all three of the Godhead in the operation of each One (see “Scholars Who Affirm the Working Together of the Three of the Divine Trinity” in this volume).

Geisler and Rhodes’ Dismissal of the Local Churches’ Rejection of Patripassianism

Brushing aside the local churches’ disavowal of patripassianism by calling it “alleged” is in keeping with Geisler and Rhodes’ dismissal of the need for research. In fact, as early as 1976, LSM published *Modalism, Tritheism, or the Pure Revelation of the Triune God according to the Bible*,³ which clearly rejected the heresy of modalism upon which patripassianism is based. Furthermore, in a book published in 1985, Witness Lee said:

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.⁴

In addition, in an article entitled “The Divine Trinity in the Divine Economy” in a 1999 issue of *Affirmation & Critique*, Kerry Robichaux clearly explained the distinction between patripassianism and the co-working of the Divine Trinity in Christ’s crucifixion. This distinction and Kerry Robichaux’s explanation will be considered in more depth below.

³ Ron Kangas, *Modalism, Tritheism, or the Pure Revelation of the Triune God according to the Bible* (Anaheim, CA: Living Stream Ministry, 1976).

⁴ Witness Lee, *Elders’ Training, Book 3: The Way to Carry Out the Vision* (Anaheim, CA: Living Stream Ministry, 1985), pp. 70-71.

Geisler and Rhodes ignore not only these three clear declarations but also all such repudiations of modalism and patripassianism published by Living Stream Ministry. Thorough research is indispensable to Christian apologists who desire to understand and represent their subjects in a fair and balanced way. Geisler and Rhodes, however, have simply labeled the local churches as heretical, while rejecting all evidence to the contrary.

Geisler and Rhodes' Flawed Reasoning

The error of modalism (and by extension, patripassianism) is that it does not recognize the distinctions among the three of the Divine Trinity. Modalism developed out of a desire to protect the oneness of God, but it erred in making the Father, the Son, and the Spirit temporary manifestations of God in time. Both modalism and patripassianism are heresies that are firmly and unambiguously rejected in the teaching of Witness Lee and the local churches.⁵ Geisler and Rhodes, however, label the local churches as heretical by claiming that espousal of the coinherence of the Divine Trinity and of the involvement of the Father and the Son in one another's activities necessarily leads to patripassianism. Their logic is flawed in three major respects:

- Geisler strongly affirms God's immutability, but he and Rhodes avoid endorsing coinherence, something that is clearly revealed in the Lord's own words in the Gospel of John. Geisler and Rhodes seem to make allowance that coinherence is within the realm of orthodoxy. However, if we accept Christ's own word that He was coinhering with the Father in John 10, 14, and 17, then the Father and the Son must also have been coinhering as Christ was being crucified on the cross or else God's immutability would be compromised.

⁵ E.g., in Witness Lee, *The Clear Scriptural Revelation Concerning the Triune God* (Anaheim, CA: Living Stream Ministry, n.d.) and Witness Lee, *The Revelation of the Triune God According to the Pure Word of the Bible* (Anaheim, CA: Living Stream Ministry, 1976).

- By insisting that if the Father was coinhering with the Son on the cross, the Father must have suffered, Geisler and Rhodes contradict Geisler's own writings on God's impassibility.
- Equating "involvement" with "patripassianism" is an unwarranted conclusion.

Coinherence and God's Immutability

Coinherence refers to the mutual indwelling of the three of the Divine Trinity. In the Gospel of John the Lord repeatedly told His disciples that He was in the Father and the Father was in Him (John 10:38; 14:10, 20; 17:21, 23). The coinhering oneness of the Divine Trinity is fundamental to understanding how the Father, the Son, and the Spirit can be one God. The coinherence of the Divine Trinity is beyond illustration, as it has no corollary in the physical universe. Even more, it is beyond the ability of man-made systems of logic to explain. It is the greatest mystery concerning the Triune God and shatters all attempts to neatly explain the Trinity.

Perhaps for this reason, it is not a point that Geisler and Rhodes stress. Coinherence is not mentioned in either Geisler's *Systematic Theology, Volume 2: God, Creation* or his *Baker Encyclopedia of Christian Apologetics*, even though both deal extensively with the Trinity. If the Scripture Indexes in these two books are accurate, Geisler himself makes no reference in either book to any of the verses that clearly show the coinherence of the Father and the Son in the Gospel of John. The only reference to any of these verses is a citation to John 14:10 in a quote from John Calvin which strongly confirms the mutual indwelling of the Father and the Son:

The whole Father is in the Son, and the whole Son is in the Father, as the Son himself also declares (John xiv. 10), "I am in the Father, and the Father is in me"; nor do ecclesiastical

writers admit that the one is separated from the other by any difference of essence.⁶

Nonetheless, it is not at all clear if Geisler and Rhodes embrace the importance or even the truth of the coinherence of the Father, the Son, and the Spirit in understanding the Trinity. However, they do appear to make allowance for coinherence within the realm of orthodoxy in their critique of CRI's reassessment of the local churches. There they say, "*Even if one holds to the doctrine of coinherence...*" [emphasis added]. In other words, they themselves equivocate. They do not commit themselves to coinherence, but neither do they say it is a false teaching. Such equivocation is inexcusable in a work that claims to defend a truth as crucial as the Trinity against purported error. The problem for Geisler and Rhodes is that if they affirm coinherence, then they must admit that the Father and the Son were coinhering essentially even as Christ was being crucified. To claim otherwise would be to deny God's immutability. It would be to say that God's essential being changed at some point either during Christ's incarnation or His crucifixion.

Immutability refers to the fact that God does not change in His attributes, in His nature, or in His intrinsic being. Since the coinherence of the three of the Divine Trinity is an aspect of God's intrinsic being, the coinherence of the three of the Divine Trinity is eternal and immutable. Since that coinherence is immutable, then it was unchanged throughout the entire course

⁶ Norman Geisler, *Systematic Theology, Volume 2: God, Creation* (Minneapolis, MN: Bethany House, 2003), p. 305, quoting from John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 1.13.2, 19. Unlike Geisler, Calvin strongly affirmed the truth of coinherence in his commentary on John 17:3:

...then we perceive that he is wholly in the Father, and that the Father is wholly in him. In short he who separates Christ from the Divinity of the Father, does not yet acknowledge Him who is *the only true God*, but rather invents for himself a strange god. – John Calvin, *Calvin's Commentaries, Volume XVIII: John 12-21; Acts 1-13*, William Pringle, trans. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1848, 1981), p. 167

of Christ's incarnation, human living, crucifixion, and resurrection. Herein lies the basic issue that Geisler and Rhodes seem unwilling to address. If they endorse coinherence but say that the Father was no longer coinhering with His Son as Christ was being crucified, then they are saying that a basic aspect of God's being—His coinhering oneness—changed. Geisler and Rhodes say:

God was certainly present in His omnipresence, but God the Father is not God the Son, and the Father certainly was not involved in the experience of Christ's suffering on the cross.

This statement sidesteps the basic issue—whether the Father was coinhering with the Son during the crucifixion. God's omnipresence, which we also affirm, refers to His being everywhere simultaneously. However, God's omnipresence is particularly related to the physical universe, not to the relatedness of the Father, the Son, and the Spirit in the Godhead. That relationship is one of coinherence. Geisler and Rhodes switch subjects from coinherence to omnipresence. The problem with this argument is that if we accept the Lord's word in the Gospel of John that He was in the Father and the Father in Him, but then claim the Father was at the crucifixion of Christ in His omnipresence only and was no longer coinhering with the Son, as Geisler and Rhodes seem to imply, then God changed in His essential being. This cannot be.

Impassibility

Impassibility, as it related to the crucifixion of Christ, is a term used by theologians to indicate that God cannot be caused to suffer by His creation.⁷ As Geisler and Rhodes state, the Patripassian heresy taught that God the Father suffered at the cross.

⁷ This article does not attempt to evaluate the merits of the doctrine of God's impassibility. Rather it demonstrates the inconsistency between Geisler's espousal of the impassibility of the divine nature and his accusation that when the local churches teach that the three of the Godhead participate in one another's activities they are teaching patripassianism.

This teaching was rightly rejected by the early church as heresy. Based on the assertion of God’s impassibility, the inability to cause God to suffer has come to be applied not just to the Father but to the entire Godhead, including the divine nature in the incarnate Son of God. The 19th century Calvinist theologian Charles Hodge wrote:

He was not a mere man, but God and man in one person. His obedience and sufferings were therefore the obedience and sufferings of a divine person. This does not imply, as the Patripassians in the ancient Church assumed, and as some writers in modern times assume, that the divine nature itself suffered. This idea is repudiated alike by the Latin, Lutheran, and Reformed churches.⁸

Geisler himself wrote:

Patripassianism means literally the “Father suffered.” It arose in the early third century in the form of monarchianism, holding that God the Father suffered on the cross as well as Christ. However, the divine nature possessed by Christ did not suffer or die: God is impassible and, hence, incapable of undergoing suffering.⁹

The incarnate Christ has two natures—the divine nature and the human nature. What Geisler is saying is that Christ’s divine nature was impassible and, as a result, did not suffer on the cross. Yet Geisler maintains that Witness Lee’s teaching that the Father and the Son coinhere means that the Father must have suffered on the cross. However, if, as Geisler claims, the divine nature in Christ is impassible and did not suffer during His crucifixion, then the divine Father who coinheres with the Son likewise could not, by definition, have suffered on the cross. It is significant that Geisler and Rhodes cannot produce a single quote that even intimates that Witness Lee and the local

⁸ Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology, Volume 2* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1979), p. 483.

⁹ Norman Geisler, *Systematic Theology, Volume 2: God, Creation* (Minneapolis, MN: Bethany House, 2003), p. 296.

churches teach that the Father suffered on the cross, yet they make such an accusation based on their own presumptive and faulty reasoning.

“Involvement” Is Not “Patripassianism”

Furthermore, the leap Geisler and Rhodes make from “involvement” to “patripassianism” is unwarranted. Hebrews 9:14 states that on the cross Christ offered Himself as the unique sin offering to God through the eternal Spirit. To say, based on this verse, that the Father, the Son, and the Spirit are all involved in Christ’s accomplishment of an eternal redemption (9:12) is not patripassianism; it is the divine revelation in the Holy Bible. Kerry Robichaux explained:

What shall we say then concerning the death of Christ? Here most believers blanch. Even the most minimally educated in theology understand the error of patripassianism, against which Tertullian took careful aim (*Against Praxeas* II, XIII, XXIX-XXX). We must be careful to avoid understanding that the Father (or the Spirit) was the subject of the suffering in the death of Christ, but we must be equally careful to avoid understanding that the Son was separate from the Father and the Spirit in the crucifixion. What we must maintain is that in the visible death of Christ the three of the Trinity operated so as to make manifest the distinct activity of the Son on the cross. It was indeed the Son whom we should identify as the subject of the death of the God-man (even though we confess that God Himself does not die!), but we must hold at the same time the realization that the Father and the Spirit were also in operation and that the operation of the three made the distinct action of the Son possible. The Scriptures bear this testimony as well. Paul tells us that in the death of Christ God was:

wiping out the handwriting in ordinances, which was against us, which was contrary to us; and He has taken it out of the way, nailing it to the cross. Stripping off the rulers and the authorities, He made a display of them openly, triumphing over them in it. (Col. 2:14-15)

There was more to the death of Christ than what met the eye. As the God-man hung on the cross dying for all humankind, God operated to forgive the offenses accumulated against us and to triumph over the fallen angelic host that opposed Him through humankind, and this operation issued in our redemption. We understand that redemption is of the Son, but in operation redemption is the activity of the entire Godhead, Father, Son, and Spirit. The writer of Hebrews likewise recognizes the operation of the Trinity in the death of Christ: “How much more will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered Himself without blemish to God, purify our conscience from dead works to serve the living God?” (9:14). To gain a redemption that was eternal in quality and effect (v. 12), the Son offered Himself through the eternal Spirit to the living God.¹⁰

By claiming no need to do further research, Geisler and Rhodes seek to avoid dealing with such a careful and balanced exposition of the truth concerning the Triune God and the crucifixion of Christ. Instead, Geisler and Rhodes make a sweeping and unwarranted generalization that “involvement” necessarily implies “patripassianism.” As Kerry Robichaux’s article makes clear, this presumption by Geisler and Rhodes is wrong. Thomas F. Torrance, an esteemed Scottish reformed theologian, also attested to the involvement of the entire Triune God in the work of redemption when he wrote:

‘God crucified’! That is the startling truth of the Gospel. Of course only if God is a Trinity, does this make sense, for it was not the Father or the Spirit who was crucified but the incarnate Son of God, crucified certainly in his differentiation from the Father and the Spirit, but nevertheless crucified in his unbroken oneness with the Father and the Spirit in being and activity. The whole Trinity is involved in the sacrifice of Christ on the Cross.¹¹

¹⁰ Kerry S. Robichaux, “The Divine Trinity in the Divine Economy,” *Affirmation & Critique IV*:2, April 1999, pp. 40-41.

¹¹ Thomas F. Torrance, *The Christian Doctrine of God: One Being Three Persons* (London: T&T Clark, 1996), p. 247.

Geisler and Rhodes' Deficiency in Apprehending the Revelation in the Bible

If Geisler and Rhodes truly believe that the Father was in no way involved in the Son's incarnation, human living, crucifixion, and resurrection, they are deplorably deficient in apprehending the revelation in the Bible concerning the Trinity and concerning the Person and work of Christ.

The coinherence of the three of the Divine Trinity is eternal and immutable. It did not cease when the Son of God became a man through incarnation, nor was it limited to the brief time when the Son lived on earth in His humanity. Although it was the Son of God who was the subject of the incarnation and who lived as a man, was crucified, and resurrected, the clear testimony of the Bible is that the entire Triune God was involved with every step of the process that God passed through in Christ. Jesus was conceived of the Holy Spirit (Matt. 1:18, 20; Luke 1:35); thus, His source was the Holy Spirit, and His element was divine. According to John's Gospel, the Son was never alone; the Father was always with Him (John 8:16, 29; 16:32). The Bible tells us that all the fullness of the Godhead dwells in Him bodily (Col. 2:9) and that He was God manifested in the flesh (1 Tim. 3:16) and was God with us (Matt. 1:23). It does not say that the fullness of one-third of the Godhead dwells in Him bodily, nor does it say that one-third of God was manifested in the flesh or that He was one-third of God with us.

As a man, the eternal Son of God, who is the embodiment of the fullness of the Godhead, passed through human living, was crucified, entered into resurrection, and was exalted to be Lord and Christ (Acts 2:36). In each of these stages of His existence in humanity, the Son of God was still coinhering with the Father and the Spirit; at no time was He separate from Them. To claim otherwise would be to claim that the essential nature of God changed. That would be a great heresy.

At His baptism the Spirit anointed Christ economically for the carrying out of His ministry (Matt. 3:16; Luke 4:18). This outward anointing does not mean that prior to this time the Spirit was not already coinhering with Him, just as the pouring out of the Spirit economically in Acts 2 to empower the apostles in their gospel service does not negate the fact that they had already received the Spirit essentially in John 20:22. Following Christ's baptism, He lived, moved, and worked by the Spirit (Luke 4:1). When He cast out demons, He did so by the Spirit (Matt. 12:28). Furthermore, it was as the God-man that He declared that the Father was always with Him (John 8:29; 16:32) and that He and the Father mutually indwelt one another (14:10-11; 17:21). It was on the basis of His coinherence with the Father that He could say that since the disciples had seen Him, they had seen the Father (14:9) and that in His, the Son's, speaking, the Father who abode in Him did His works (14:10).

In Christ's crucifixion God forsook Him economically (Matt. 27:45-46), but as the divine only begotten Son of God, He was still coinhering with the Father and the Spirit essentially. In this sense, what happened in the crucifixion of Christ is truly a mystery, the depths of which we cannot fully penetrate; we can only affirm what the Bible affirms. The Bible tells us that at the cross:

- God (not one-third of God) was in Christ reconciling us to Himself (2 Cor. 5:18-19);
- God purchased the church through His own blood (Acts 20:28); and
- Christ offered Himself to God (the Father) as the unique sacrifice for sin through the eternal Spirit, giving His redemption eternal efficacy (Heb. 9:14, 12).

Concerning the Triune God's operation in accomplishing redemption, Witness Lee said:

An eternal redemption was accomplished by the blood of the Son of God through the eternal Spirit (Heb. 9:12, 14; 1 John 1:7). The blood He shed on the cross was not only the blood of Jesus the Man, but also of the Son of God. First John

1:7 tells us that the blood of Jesus the Son of God cleanses us from all sin. The blood of Jesus the Man qualifies His redemption for us as men. He was a genuine man who died for us and shed genuine blood for us. But the efficacy of His redemption has to be secured by His divinity and it has been secured for eternity by Him as the Son of God. Therefore, His redemption is the eternal redemption (Heb. 9:12) because this redemption was accomplished not only by the blood of Jesus the Man but also by the blood of Jesus the Son of God, which the Apostle Paul even called "God's own blood" (Acts 20:28). This is marvelous!¹²

Similarly, concerning Christ's resurrection, the Bible testifies that the entire Triune God was involved. It says:

- God (the Father) raised Him from the dead (Acts 2:24, 32; 10:40; Gal. 1:1);
- The Lord raised Himself up (John 2:19; Acts 10:41; 1 Thes. 4:14);
- The Spirit also was involved (Rom. 1:4; 1 Pet. 3:18).

If we receive the Bible's testimony concerning the eternal co-inherence of the Divine Trinity,¹³ then we must affirm that even as Christ was passing through death and entered into resurrection, He was never separated from the Father and the Spirit essentially. Of this truth, Thomas F. Torrance wrote:

The Son and the Father were one and not divided, each dwelling in the other, even in that 'hour and power of darkness' when Jesus was smitten of God and afflicted and pierced for our transgressions.¹⁴

Geisler's theology seems to have no room for biblical statements that do not conform to what he presupposes as

¹² Witness Lee, *God's New Testament Economy* (Anaheim, CA: Living Stream Ministry, 1986), pp. 49-50.

¹³ Concerning the basic truths concerning the biblical revelation of the Triune God, see Ed Marks, "A Biblical Overview of the Triune God," *Affirmation & Critique*, 1:1, January 1996, pp. 23-31.

¹⁴ Torrance, *The Mediation of Christ* (Colorado Springs, CO: Helmers & Howard, 1992), p. 43.

logical imperatives. However, the coinhering oneness of the Triune God transcends the ability of human logic to systematize. Perhaps it is this dogged reliance on human logic that causes Geisler and Rhodes to equivocate on the coinhering oneness of the Triune God and leads them to espouse a position that is contrary to the biblical record. While they profess to believe in one God, they seem to view the three of the Godhead as operating separately and independently from one another. Thus, in their understanding it was the Son alone, in isolation from the Father and the Spirit, who came into humanity through incarnation and went to the cross to accomplish redemption. Furthermore, according to this view, it is the Spirit alone who indwells the believers.

It is true that the Son is the central figure and subject of the incarnation (John 1:14; Rom. 8:3) and that it was the Son who went to the cross to accomplish redemption (Eph. 1:7; 1 John 1:7). It is also true that the Spirit plays the central role in the believers' indwelling (Rom. 8:11; 1 Cor. 3:16). But that is not the complete revelation of the Bible. Yes, the Father sent the Son, but in what way did He send the Son? He sent the Son through the divine conception by the Holy Spirit (Matt. 1:18, 20; Luke 1:35), and in the Son's coming, the Father came with Him and even in Him (John 8:29; 14:10-11; 16:32). When Christ died on the cross, God was in Him reconciling the world to Himself (2 Cor. 5:19; cf. Rom. 5:10). Furthermore, when the Father sent the Spirit to indwell the believers, this was equivalent to the Son coming to indwell the believers (John 14:16-17, 20; cf. Rom. 8:9-11; 2 Cor. 13:5; Gal. 2:20; Col. 1:27) and the Father and the Son coming to make Their home in them (John 14:23). Not only so, in the Spirit's coming, we have come to know that the Son is in the Father, that we are in the Son, and that the Son is in us (John 14:20).¹⁵

¹⁵ For a discussion of the implications of coinherence for our Christian life, see "The Error of Denying That the 'Son' Is the 'Eternal Father' in Isaiah 9:6."

Conclusion

Geisler and Rhodes' rejection of the need for more research to understand the teaching of Witness Lee and the local churches is itself disturbing. It is even more so when their "reasoning" is examined. Their logic is flawed and leads them into contradictions involving two basic attributes of God—His immutability and His coinherence—as well as with Geisler's own writings about God's impassibility. It also leads them to assert a false dilemma, that is, that one must either embrace patripassianism or reject the testimony of the Scriptures that all three of the Godhead participate in the work peculiarly ascribed to one of Them.

The root of the problem is that Geisler and Rhodes have an insufficient grasp of the divine revelation in the Bible concerning the coinhering and co-working of the three of the Divine Trinity in the incarnation, human living, crucifixion, and resurrection of Christ. Further, they seek to impose their deficient understanding on others as a litmus test of orthodoxy. The crucial truth of the coinherence of the Divine Trinity is completely missing from their theological writings because it shatters their tidy, yet deficient, model of the Trinity. Their insistence on narrowly applying their own logical standards to the divine revelation in the Bible causes them to stumble on this point to the extent that they neither affirm nor deny coinherence. Yet, this vital truth concerning the relationship among the Three in the Godhead was so clearly spoken by the Lord Himself in John 14 and 17. Furthermore, Geisler and Rhodes not only refuse to definitively affirm the clear import of the Lord's words, but they also seek to prevent the Lord's people from entering into the precious implications of coinherence for the believers' experiential apprehension of and oneness with the Divine Trinity (John 14:20; 17:21, 23) by associating coinherence with a charge of heresy (cf. Matt. 23:13).

Many students of the Bible err because they have confidence in their own mental capacities to understand the divine revelation. As Watchman Nee wrote in 1927:

In Philippians 3:3 the apostle mentioned “confidence in the flesh.” “Confidence” in the original text is “belief.” He said that he himself did not “believe in the flesh.” The greatest work of the flesh is self-confidence! Since one thinks he is able, he does not need to trust in the Holy Spirit. Christ crucified is the wisdom of God, but a believer trusts in his own wisdom. He can read the Bible, preach the Bible, hear the Word, and believe in the Word; however, all of these are done through the power of his own mind, and he does not think that he absolutely must ask for the Holy Spirit to teach him. Many people believe they have received all the truth, even though what they have is something which they have received from others and from their own searching and what they have is more of man than of God! Furthermore, they do not have a teachable heart that is willing to wait on God and to let Him reveal His truth in His light.¹⁶

Pride in our education or abilities is a major obstacle to receiving the revelation contained in the Word of God. What is needed is a proper humility, as Witness Lee explains:

Being proud of your education will hinder you from knowing the Scriptures. No matter how educated you are, you must humbly tell the Lord that you are a teachable little child and that in your whole being you are utterly empty. You should be able to say, “Lord, although I have three Ph.D.’s, I know nothing. I am not filled up by my education. I am empty in my spirit, in my mind, and in my whole being.” Many highly educated professional people are filled to the brim. For this reason, even after they are saved, they are unable to receive anything from the Word. Their pride has usurped them.¹⁷

¹⁶ Watchman Nee, *The Collected Works of Watchman*, vol. 12: *The Spiritual Man (I)* (Anaheim, CA: Living Stream Ministry, 1992), p. 108.

¹⁷ Witness Lee, *Life-study of Genesis* (Anaheim, CA: Living Stream Ministry, 1987), p. 1114.

As the Lord's children we should all learn to look to the Lord for His grace to be preserved in simplicity and purity toward Christ (2 Cor. 11:3) so that we may receive all that He speaks in His holy Word, unfiltered by preconceived theological or philosophical constructs.

SCHOLARS WHO AFFIRM THE WORKING TOGETHER OF THE THREE OF THE DIVINE TRINITY

But in the case of the Divine nature we do not similarly learn that the Father does anything by Himself in which the Son does not work conjointly, or again that the Son has any special operation apart from the Holy Spirit; but every operation which extends from God to the Creation, and is named according to our variable conceptions of it, has its origin from the Father, and proceeds through the Son, and is perfected in the Holy Spirit. - Gregory of Nyssa, "On Not Three Gods," *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Series 2, Volume 5*, Philip Schaff and Henry Wace, eds. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1892, 1979), p. 334

[T]he will of the Father and the Son is one, and their working indivisible. In like manner, then, let him understand the incarnation and nativity of the Virgin, wherein the Son is understood as sent, to have been wrought by one and the same operation of the Father and of the Son indivisibly; the Holy Spirit certainly not being thence excluded, of whom it is expressly said, "She was found with child by the Holy Ghost." - Augustine, "On the Holy Trinity," *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Series I, Volume 3*, Philip Schaff, ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1887, 1978), p. 41

The Son indeed and not the Father was born of the Virgin Mary; but this very birth of the Son, not of the Father, was the work both of the Father and the Son. The Father indeed suffered not, but the Son, yet the suffering of the Son was the work of the Father and the Son. The Father did not rise again, but the Son, yet the resurrection of the Son was the work of the Father and the Son. - Augustine, *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Series I, Volume 6*, "Sermon II: Of the words of St. Matthew's Gospel, Chap. iii. 13, 'Then Jesus cometh from Galilee to the Jordan unto John, to be baptized of him.' Concerning the Trinity.", Philip Schaff, ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1887, 1979), p. 261

I say not this as though one person succeeded unto another in their operation, or as though where one ceased and gave over a work, the other took it up and carried it on; for every divine work, and every part of every divine work, is the work of

God, that is, of the whole Trinity, inseparably and undividedly...
 - John Owen, *Pneumatologia*, p. 94, available at www.ccel.org/ccel/owen/pneum.i.v.iv.html

Perichoresis means that not only do the three members of the Trinity interpenetrate one another, but all three are involved in all the works of God. While certain works are primarily or more centrally the doing of one of these rather than the others, all participate to some degree in what is done. Thus, while redemption is obviously the work of the incarnate Son, the Father and the Spirit are also involved. - Millard J. Erickson, *God in Three Persons: A Contemporary Interpretation of the Trinity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1995), p. 235

When Scripture ascribes certain works specifically to the Father, others specifically to the Son, and still others specifically to the Holy Spirit, we are compelled to presuppose a genuine distinction within the Godhead back of that ascription. On the other hand, the work ascribed to any of the persons is the work of one absolute person. - Cornelius Van Til, *An Introduction to Systematic Theology* (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Theological Seminary, 1961), p. 228

When believers complain that they cannot distinguish between the separate activities in their lives of the Father, the Risen Lord, and the Holy Spirit, the matter is sometimes phrased in a way that obscures God's unity, a fundamental doctrine of both the Old and New Testament. Every action of any of the persons of the Trinity is an action of God, although in many actions the persons of the Godhead may be active in different ways. All authentic spiritual experience is an experience of the one God. - Carl F. H. Henry, *God, Revelation and Authority*, VI:2 (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1983), p. 400

Yet by virtue of the common essence, what one divine person performs each may be said to perform (the principle of *perichoresis*). Accordingly, the Son creates (1 Cor. 8:6; Col. 1:16) and the Spirit creates (cf. Job 33:4; Ps. 33:6); the Father redeems (2 Cor. 5:18-19; Eph. 2:4-5, 8) and the Spirit redeems (Rom. 8:4; Titus 3:5); and the Father sanctifies (Eph. 1:3-4; 1 Thess. 5:23) and the Son sanctifies (Eph. 4:15-16; 5:25-27). - Bruce Demarest and Gordon Lewis, *Integrative Theology, vol. 1* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1987), p. 267

The ancient doctrine of perichoresis, championed by the Greek Church Fathers, expresses the timeless interaction of the persons of the Godhead. According to that doctrine, there is a complete interpenetration of the persons of the Trinity, such that each is intimately bound up in the activities of the other. Thus, what the Father wills, the Son and Spirit also will; what the Son loves, the Father and Spirit also love, and so forth. - William Lane Craig, "Divine Timelessness and Personhood," *International Journal for Philosophy and Religion*, 43:2, April 1998, p. 122

Since the three Persons of the Trinity possess the same identical, numerical substance and essence, and since the attributes are inherent and inseparable from the substance or essence, it follows that all of the Divine attributes must be possessed alike by each of the three Persons and that the three Persons must be consubstantial, co-equal and co-eternal. Each is truly God, exercising the same power, partaking equally of the Divine glory, and entitled to the same worship. When the word "Father" is used in our prayers, as for example in the Lord's prayer, it does not refer exclusively to the first person of the Trinity, but to the three Persons as one God. The Triune God is our Father. - Loraine Boettner, *Studies in Theology* (Phillipsburg, NJ: The Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1947), p. 107

This chapter will argue, in part, that the "success" of the atonement depends on the identity of Christ as the theanthropic person, the One who is both fully God and fully man in the incarnation. But adding to the importance of seeing the atonement as the accomplishment of the God-man is the realization that the atonement's accomplishment depends just as much on the work of the Father and the Spirit in conjunction with the Son. - Bruce Ware, "Christ's Atonement: A Work of the Trinity," *Jesus in Trinitarian Perspective*, Fred Sanders and Klaus Issler, eds. (Nashville, TN: B&H Publishing Group, 2007), p. 156

All actions carried out through the omnipotence of the divine essence necessarily involve all three divine persons, for each of them fully possesses that divine essence. Thus, any physical action which God undertakes in the material creation should be understood to be the action of all three divine persons. Michael L. Chiavone, *The One God: A Critically Developed*

Evangelical Doctrine of Trinitarian Unity (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2009), p. 214

The co-working of the three of the Divine Trinity based on Their coinherence (or mutual indwelling) is a particularly strong emphasis in the teaching of the distinguished Scottish reformed theologian Thomas F. Torrance, from whose books the following selections are excerpted:

It was, of course, not the Godhead or the Being of God as such who became incarnate, but the Son of God, not the Father or the Spirit, who came among us, certainly from the Being of the Father and as completely *homoousios* with him, yet because in him the fullness of the Godhead dwells, the whole undivided Trinity must be recognised as participating in the incarnate Life and Work of Christ. - Thomas F. Torrance, *The Christian Doctrine of God: One Being Three Persons* (London: T&T Clark, 1996), p. 108

Since God's Being and Activity completely interpenetrate each other, we must think of his Being and his Activity not separately but as one Being-in-Activity and one Activity-in-Being. In other words, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit always act together in every divine operation whether in creation or redemption, yet in such a way that the distinctive activities of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, are always maintained, in accordance with the propriety and otherness of their Persons as the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. This may be called the 'perichoretic coactivity of the Holy Trinity'...

The primary distinction was made there, of course, for it was the Son or Word of God who became incarnate, was born of the Virgin Mary, was crucified under Pontius Pilate, and rose again from the grave, and *not* the Father or the Holy Spirit, although the whole life and activity of Jesus from his birth to his death and resurrection did not take place apart from the presence and coactivity of the Father and the Spirit. - *Ibid.*, pp. 197-198

Thus the atonement is to be regarded as the act of God in his being and his being in his act. That is not to say, of course, that it was the Father who was crucified, for it was the Son in his distinction from the Father who died on the cross, but it is

to say that the suffering of Christ on the cross was not just human, it was divine as well as human, and in fact is to be regarded as the suffering of God himself, that is, as the being of God in his redeeming act, and the passion of God in his very being as God... While the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit are personally distinct from one another, they are nevertheless of one and the same being with one another in God, and their acts interpenetrate one another in the indivisibility of the one Godhead. - Thomas F. Torrance, *The Mediation of Christ* (Colorado Springs, CO: Helmers & Howard, 1992), p. 113

It was not of course the Father but the Son who was incarnate and suffered on the cross, but the distinctiveness of the Persons of the Father and of the Son, does not imply any division in the oneness of their being, or in the oneness of their activity, for God's being and act are inseparable. - *Ibid.*, p. 118

THE ERROR OF DENYING THAT THE “SON” IS THE “ETERNAL FATHER” IN ISAIAH 9:6¹

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!*² 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.

¹ 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

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.

following date from the mid-1970s and have been available for many years on the Contending for the Faith Web site (www.contendingforthefaith.org) operated by the Defense & Confirmation Project:

- 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.

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

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.³

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

³ Ibid., p. 17.

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.⁴

⁴ 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?

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)

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 *παρά* (*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.⁵

⁵ 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.

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).⁶

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).⁷

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

⁶ 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.

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

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.⁸

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

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

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."⁹ Elsewhere, however, he acknowledges that this verse is a

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

prophecy of Christ as the Son of David, as does Rhodes.¹⁰ 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.”¹¹ 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

¹⁰ 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.

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

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.”¹² 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

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

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,¹³ 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.

¹³ 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.

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.”¹⁴ 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

¹⁴ 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.

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.¹⁵

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.¹⁶

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.¹⁷

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

¹⁶ 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.

¹⁷ 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.

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.¹⁸ 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.¹⁹

¹⁸ 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.

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).

¹⁹ 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

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’.”²⁰

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.²¹

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

the Prophets) reveals considerable differences between the Hebrew and Aramaic versions.

²⁰ 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.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 60. See note 20.

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.²² Geisler himself acknowledges this principle of textual criticism.²³ 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 9:6.²⁴

²² 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.

²³ 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.

²⁴ 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

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.²⁵

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.²⁶

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

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.

²⁵ Norman L. Geisler, *Baker Encyclopedia*, op. cit., p. 732.

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

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)."²⁷

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.²⁸

Luther says further:

²⁷ Norman L. Geisler, *Baker Encyclopedia*, op. cit., p. 731.

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

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.²⁹

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.

²⁹ Ibid., pp. 91-92.

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.

**THE ERROR OF DENYING THAT
“THE LORD IS THE SPIRIT”
IN 2 CORINTHIANS 3:17 REFERS TO CHRIST¹**

2 Corinthians 3:17 - And the Lord is the Spirit; and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom.

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

Rom. 8:9-11 - [9] But you are not in the flesh, but in the spirit, if indeed the Spirit of God dwells in you. Yet if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he is not of Him. [10] But if Christ is in you, though the body is dead because of sin, the spirit is life because of righteousness. [11] And if the Spirit of the One who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, He who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through His Spirit who indwells you.

Norman Geisler and Ron Rhodes condemn Witness Lee’s affirmation of the Apostle Paul’s word in 2 Corinthians 3:17 as heresy. In this verse Paul plainly says, “The Lord is the Spirit.”

¹ 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 Spirit in 2 Corinthians 3:17, 1 Corinthians 15:45, and elsewhere in the New Testament. 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 Spirit in the Divine Trinity. While we do affirm the clear word of the Bible concerning the identification of Christ with the Spirit, particularly in relation to the believers’ experience, 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

This word tells us clearly that today Jesus Christ is not only the resurrected and ascended Lord in bodily form seated at the right hand of God in the third heavens (Acts 2:33, 36; 5:31; Heb. 12:2), but He is also the Spirit who can be received by and thereafter indwell the believers (Gal. 3:2; Rom. 8:9-11; cf. 2 Cor. 13:5). Sadly, the insistence by Geisler and Rhodes on an erroneous systematized theological construct has veiled them to the pure revelation contained in the Bible. Thus, in their article criticizing the reassessment of the teaching of Witness Lee and the local churches performed by the Christian Research Institute (CRI), Geisler and Rhodes say:

Nor is there any real support for saying the Son (the Second Person of the Trinity) is also the Spirit (the Third Person of the Trinity) from 2 Corinthians 3:17 (“Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom”). Many expositors view this verse as saying that the Holy Spirit is “Lord” not in the sense of being Jesus but in the sense of being Yahweh (the Lord God) (cf. v. 16, which cites Exod. 34:34).

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:

- 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.

Their analysis is flawed on several points:

- It ignores the meaning of "Lord" in the immediate context of 2 Corinthians 3 and 4.
- It ignores the identification of the Lord Jesus in the New Testament with Yahweh in the Old Testament, an identification which both Geisler and Rhodes acknowledge.
- It completely avoids the plain language of 1 Corinthians 15:45.
- It summarily dismisses the many credible expositors who have strongly identified Christ and the Spirit based on these verses.

"Lord" in 2 Corinthians 3:17 in Context

Every faithful expositor of the Bible knows that words must be interpreted in their proper context. Read in context, it is clear that the "Lord" in 2 Corinthians 3:17 refers to Christ, not just to the Old Testament Yahweh. In 3:3-6 Paul tells the Corinthians that they are a letter of Christ (the Lord) ministered by him with the Spirit of the living God, which Spirit gives life. He then compares the New and Old Testament ministries, showing the superiority of the ministry of the New Testament as a ministry of righteousness and of glory (vv. 7-11). Following this he speaks of the new covenant ministers through whom the gospel of the glory of Christ shines forth (4:4) by their beholding and reflecting the glory of the Lord (3:18).

Verses 14 through 16 make it very clear that the Lord to whom the heart must turn is Christ. In 3:15 Paul says that a veil lies over the heart of the unbelieving Jews. This veil is "done away with in Christ" (v. 14) "whenever their heart turns to the Lord" (v. 16). According to the truth of the gospel, this is not when the Jews turn their heart to the Old Testament Yahweh, but, as verse 14 says, when man turns his heart to the Lord Jesus Christ. Thus, "Lord" in verse 16 refers back to "Christ"

in verse 14. It is, therefore, contrary to the immediate context to say that “Lord” in verse 17 refers to someone else.²

The ensuing text makes this connection even stronger. Verse 18 says that “we all with unveiled face, beholding and reflecting like a mirror the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory.” Chapter 4 continues with these same elements introduced in chapter 3—Christ, the Lord, the image of God, the veil over the hearts of unbelievers, and the glory of the Lord Jesus Christ—as follows:

- In verse 3 the gospel is veiled to the unbelievers who have been blinded by the god of this age (v. 4a); this veil is a reference back to 3:14-15.
- According to 4:4 Christ is the image of God; this refers back to the image into which we are being transformed in 3:18.
- The gospel preached by the apostles was “the gospel of the glory of Christ” (4:4); this glory is the glory of the Lord in 3:18, which 4:6 identifies as “the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.”

² The understanding that “the Lord” in 2 Corinthians 3 refers to Christ is confirmed by the following sources:

William Milligan, *The Resurrection of Our Lord* (London: Macmillan, 1890), p. 248:

Apart from the general usage of the Apostle, it will hardly be denied that the whole context and argument of the chapter compel us to understand by the words “the Lord” the Risen Lord. It is “the glory of the Lord” in His heavenly condition that we behold, as Moses beheld the glory of God upon the mount; and, as we behold it, gazing upon it with ever increasing love and fervour, we are enabled to reflect it better, until we are transformed into the same image from glory to glory.

Peter Yoon, *Our Triune God* (Wheaton, IL: BridgePoint, 1996), p. 189:

In context Paul is saying that when people turn to the Lord Jesus, as Moses turned to Yahweh at Mount Sinai (Ex. 34:34), a veil of spiritual blindness is lifted from their eyes.

The sources cited on pages 91-104 further affirm the biblical revelation that Jesus Christ the Lord is the Spirit.

- Finally, verse 5 contains the direct statement: “For we do not preach ourselves but **Christ Jesus as Lord**” [emphasis added].

Thus, from the immediate context it is abundantly clear that Paul’s use of the word “Lord” in 3:17 (“Now the Lord is the Spirit”) is in reference to the Lord Jesus Christ. To say that in 2 Cor. 3:17 “the Holy Spirit is ‘Lord’ not in the sense of being Jesus but in the sense of being Yahweh” is to veil the gospel of Christ. The one to whom the heart must turn is not the Spirit in the sense of being the Old Testament Yahweh, but the incarnate, crucified, and resurrected Lord Jesus Christ. The insistence of Geisler and Rhodes that these verses cannot be interpreted as referring to Christ is sheer artifice to avoid implications that contradict their overly simplistic formulation of the Divine Trinity.

Geisler and Rhodes: The Lord Jesus is Jehovah

We agree that 2 Corinthians 3 refers back to Exodus 34 where “the Lord” Moses beheld was revealed as “Yahweh.” But claiming that 2 Corinthians 3:17 refers to Yahweh and not the Lord Jesus Christ is still an absurd proposition from another perspective. The New Testament Jesus is the incarnation of the Old Testament Yahweh, as Geisler himself admits in his *Systematic Theology*. In a section headed “Jesus Claimed to Be Yahweh (Jehovah),” he cites numerous passages that identify Jehovah of the Old Testament with Jesus in the New Testament. In his concluding paragraph he writes:

Perhaps the strongest claim Jesus made to be Jehovah is in John 8:58, where He says, “Before Abraham was born, 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 (cf. John 10:31-33). The same claim is also made in Mark 14:62 and John 18:5-6.³

³ Norman Geisler, *Systematic Theology, vol. 2: God, Creation* (Minneapolis: Bethany House, 2003), p. 280. Geisler repeats essentially the same

Rhodes also strongly asserts the Jesus is Yahweh. In his book *The Complete Book of Bible Answers: Answering the Tough Questions* he devotes two pages to answering the question: “What biblical evidences exist to prove that Jesus is Yahweh?” He includes numerous Scripture citations after which he concludes, “Clearly, then, Jesus is Yahweh.”⁴

We agree with these expositions by Geisler and Rhodes showing that Jesus was Jehovah, and therefore cannot agree that “Lord” in 2 Corinthians 3:17 refers only to the Old Testament Jehovah and not the New Testament Lord Jesus. After all, the entire context of the passage is the superiority of the New Testament ministry of the apostles to the Old Testament ministry of Moses. Why then would Paul talk about turning to the Jehovah of the Old Testament rather than the Lord Jesus of the New Testament?

The Bible says, “The Lord [Christ] is the Spirit.” Geisler and Rhodes start from the presumption that this cannot be, so they endeavor to find an explanation that fits their concept. This is exegetically unsound and elevates their attempts at theological systematization above the authority of the Bible.

Logic Fallacies in Geisler’s Argument

Norman Geisler claims to believe in applying the rigors of formal logic to the study of the Bible.⁵ To that end he wrote a

exposition in *Baker Encyclopedia of Christian Apologetics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1999), pp. 129 and 731; and *When Skeptics Ask* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1990, 1996), 105-106.

⁴ Ron Rhodes, *The Complete Books of Bible Answers: Answering the Tough Questions* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House Publishers, 1997), pp. 115-117.

⁵ Actually, according to Lewis Sperry Chafer, founder of Dallas Theological Seminary, this practice is contrary to the orthodox Protestant faith. He wrote:

THE ORTHODOX PROTESTANT FAITH. Certain well-defined articles of faith concerning the Scriptures have been and are held by the orthodox Protestants:

- a. The Bible is the infallible Word of God.
- b. The Bible is the only rule of faith and practice.
- c. **Human reason and knowledge should be wholly subject to the Scriptures.** [emphasis added]

book with Ronald Brooks entitled *Come, Let Us Reason*. In this book he cites several examples of logical fallacies. Given his obvious familiarity with the principles of logic and rhetoric, it is distressing to see him criticize Witness Lee’s interpretation of 2 Corinthians 3:17 by employing the very logic fallacies he castigates in his book. For example, Geisler and Rhodes say that there is no “real support for saying the Son ... is also the Spirit ... from 2 Corinthians 3:17” based on what “many expositors” say. This type of argumentation based on what “many say” is identified by Geisler and Brooks as *argumentum ad populum*, for which they give the following definition:

This is the fallacy of deciding truth by opinion polls. It says, “Accept this because it has popular appeal.” It is the kind of argument that plays to the galleries, not to the facts. It is an attempt to win by fashionable ideas, not by good arguments. These arguments have “snob appeal” because they agree with an elite or select group and demand that everybody jump on the bandwagon. Hey, it worked for Hitler!⁶

The same appeal to what “many expositors” say also smacks of an improper *argumentum ad verecundiam* (appeal to authority), which Geisler describes as follows:

“Accept this because some authority said it.” As we all know, “authorities” can be wrong, and often are. Furthermore, there are conflicting authorities. Which one should I accept?

-
- d. There is no inner light or added revelation ever given beyond what is contained in the Bible...
 - e. No authority relative to the forming of truth has ever been committed to the church or to men beyond that given to the New Testament writers.

Lewis Sperry Chafer, *Systematic Theology, Volume 1: Prolegomena, Bibliology, Theology Proper* (Dallas, TX: Dallas Theological Seminary, 1947), p. 15.

The point Chafer makes—that human reason should be subject to the revelation in the Bible and not its master—is true. Human reason is limited and fallible. However, the point made in this article is that Geisler is not even faithful to the principles he himself espouses but instead uses logical fallacies to support his agenda.

⁶ Norman Geisler and Ronald Brooks, *Come: Let Us Reason: An Introduction to Logical Thinking* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1990), p. 97.

The mere appeal to authority should never be substituted for evidence or a good argument.⁷

It is telling that in their critique of CRI's article Geisler and Rhodes give very little evidence for their claim that the risen Lord is not the Spirit according to 2 Corinthians 3:17. Rather, they seek to appeal to the implied authority in the expression "many expositors" to excuse themselves from having to provide any evidence of their own.

Finally, the argument of Geisler and Rhodes fits the definition of "special pleading":

This is yet another way to make certain the opposing view doesn't get a fair shake. Here only the evidence that supports one view is cited, and the rest is left out. This is the fallacy of saying, "Accept this because this select evidence supports it (even though other evidence is neglected)."⁸

For one thing, the "analysis" put forth by Geisler and Rhodes completely ignores 1 Corinthians 15:45b: "The last Adam became a life-giving Spirit." The last Adam is universally recognized as a reference to Christ, including by Geisler.⁹ The word translated "became" is the same word in Greek as is used in John 1:14: "And the Word became flesh." John 1:14 speaks of the incarnation of the Son of God into humanity. First Corinthians 15:45 speaks of the glorification of Christ in resurrection (cf. John 7:39; Luke 24:26). In that resurrection Christ became a life-giving Spirit.¹⁰ Although Elliot Miller included this in his

⁷ Ibid., p. 98.

⁸ Ibid., p. 102

⁹ Norman Geisler, *Baker Encyclopedia of Christian Apologetics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1999), p. 487.

¹⁰ Some have tried to say that this Spirit is not the Holy Spirit, but it is important to note that the word "life-giving" has as one of its roots the Greek word *zoe*, which in the New Testament generally refers to the divine life of God (e.g., Eph. 4:18). It is this life that the Spirit gives (2 Cor. 3:6), and it is this life-giving Spirit that Christ, the last Adam, became. On page 663 of the *Baker Encyclopedia of Christian Apologetics*, Geisler gives a thoroughly unsatisfactory explanation of this verse. He says, "*Life-giving spirit* does not speak of the *nature* of the resurrection

discussion of CRI’s reassessment of the teaching of Witness Lee and the local churches, Geisler and Rhodes ignore it entirely. Thus, their review of the available evidence is highly selective, and they construct their argument accordingly.

What Others Say

Geisler and Rhodes say there is not “any real support” for the idea that 2 Corinthians 3:17 refers to Christ and reference “many [unnamed] expositors” who take their view that the Lord refers to Yahweh. These two statements create a false impression that Witness Lee was alone in identifying the Lord as Christ in this verse. While the testimony of Scripture should be sufficient for us to believe that “the Lord is the Spirit” and “the last Adam became a life-giving Spirit,” there are also many significant scholars and Bible teachers who affirm the identification of Christ and the Spirit in the New Testament teaching of the apostles. If such an affirmation is to be condemned as modalistic, then Geisler and Rhodes must similarly condemn:

- Athanasius
- Marius Victorinus
- John Albert Bengel
- Charles Hodge
- Robert Jamieson, A. R. Fausset, and David Brown
- Joseph Cook
- Marvin Vincent
- Andrew Murray
- Herman Gunkel
- A. B. Simpson
- James Denney
- Alexander Balmain Bruce
- David Somerville
- John Peter Lange
- Henry Barclay Swete
- Adolf Deissman
- W. H. Griffith Thomas
- Thomas Rees
- Robert C. Moberly
- Alan H. McNeile
- Terrot R. Glover
- R. Birch Hoyle
- H. Wheeler Robinson
- W. F. Lofthouse
- R. H. Strachan

body, but of the divine *origin* of the resurrection.” We agree that the term *life-giving Spirit* does not refer to the nature of Christ’s body in resurrection, but Geisler’s interpretation is not faithful to the text of the verse, which does not talk about the origin of the resurrection but about what Christ, as the last Adam, became.

- C. H. Dodd
- William R. Newell
- Lucien Cerfaux
- William Barclay
- Prosper Grech
- Neill Q. Hamilton
- Karl Barth
- Eduard Schweizer
- C. A. A. Scott
- S. H. Hooke
- Hendrikus Berkhof
- David Hill
- F. F. Bruce
- G. R. Beasley-Murray
- James D. G. Dunn
- Walter Kasper
- G. W. H. Lampe
- Walter C. Wright, Jr.
- Richard B. Gaffin, Jr.
- Ernst Käsemann
- Carl F. H. Henry
- Lewis B. Smedes
- Bruce Demarest
- Gordon Lewis
- Mehrdad Fatehi
- John S. Feinberg

All of these expositors have identified Christ with the Spirit based on the verses at issue from 1 and/or 2 Corinthians. A sampling of their statements is included in “Scholars and Bible Teachers Who Affirm the Lord Jesus Christ Is the Spirit.”

Conclusion

The contention put forth by Geisler and Rhodes that there is no real support for Witness Lee’s interpretation of 2 Corinthians 3:17 is itself insupportable. The correct interpretation of Paul’s words cannot be dictated by fiat. Witness Lee’s interpretation is supported by the immediate context of 2 Corinthians 3 and 4, by the identification of the Old Testament Jehovah with the New Testament Lord Jesus, and by the writings of many respected teachers. Geisler and Rhodes dismiss the clear meaning and import of Paul’s words in this verse and ignore 1 Corinthians 15:45 because these verses do not fit neatly into their extra-biblical theological construct. They then employ a variety of logic fallacies to support their position. The Word of God deserves better treatment.

SCHOLARS AND BIBLE TEACHERS WHO AFFIRM THAT THE LORD JESUS CHRIST IS THE SPIRIT

The inclusion of the following quotes in this document is not meant to imply that their sources agree entirely with the teachings of Witness Lee and the local churches on every point of interpretation or that we in the local churches agree entirely with them on every point of truth. All of these sources do, however, identify the Lord Jesus as the Spirit.

Study too the context and ‘turn to the Lord;’ now ‘the Lord is that Spirit;’ and you will see that it is the Son who is signified. - Athanasius, “Against the Arians, I, 4:11,” *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church, Series 2, Vol. IV*, Philip Schaff and Henry Wace, eds., (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1891), p. 312

The Holy Spirit in some sense is Jesus Christ Himself, but a Christ hidden from sight, a Christ within, who converses with souls and teaches these things; gives understanding... - Marius Victorinus, quoted in Henry Barclay Swete, *The Holy Spirit in the Ancient Church* (London, Macmillan and Co., Ltd., 1912), pp. 306-307

17. *Now the Lord is the Spirit*—[*The Lord* (to whom they shall turn, ver. 16) *is the Spirit* (received at this conversion. Comp. Rom. viii.9-11... The *turning* is made to the Lord, as the Spirit. *And where the Spirit of the Lord is*—Where Christ is, there is the Spirit of Christ; where the Spirit of Christ is, there is Christ; Rom. viii. 9, 10. - John Albert Bengel, *New Testament Word Studies* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 1971), p. 288

It is plain that *the Lord* here means Christ. This is clear not only because the word *Lord*, as a general rule, in the New Testament, refers to Christ, but also because the context in this case demands that reference. In v. 14 it is said that the veil is done away in Christ, and in v. 16 that it is removed when the heart turns to the Lord, and here that the Lord is the Spirit. - Charles Hodge, *An Exposition of the Second Epistle to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1859, 1980), p. 73

“The Lord is the Spirit,” that is, Christ is the Holy Spirit; they are one and the same. - Charles Hodge, *An Exposition of the*

Second Epistle to the Corinthians (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1859, 1980), p. 74

17. **the Lord**—Christ (vv. 14, 16; ch. iv. 5). **is that Spirit**—is THE Spirit; viz., *that Spirit* spoken of in v. 6, and here resumed after the parenthesis (vv. 7-16)... - Robert Jamieson, A. R. Fausset, and David Brown, *A Commentary on the Old and New Testaments, vol. 3* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2002), p. 345

It is significant beyond comment that our Lord was often called “The Spirit,” and “The Spirit of God,” by the early Christian writers. “The Son is the Holy Spirit,” is a common expression. Ignatius said: “Christ is the Immaculate Spirit.” Tertullian wrote: “The Spirit of God and the Reason of God—Word of Reason and Reason and Spirit of Word—Jesus Christ our Lord, who is both the one and the other.” Cyprian and Iræneus said: “He is the Holy Spirit.” - Joseph Cook, *The Boston Monday Lectures, vol. 1* (London: Richard D. Dickinson, 1881), p. 78

Paul identifies Christ personally with the Spirit (2 Cor. iii. 17); and in Rom. viii. 9, 10, “Spirit of God,” “Spirit of Christ,” and “Christ” are used as convertible terms. (Marvin R. Vincent, *Word Studies in the New Testament, vol. IV* - Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1887, 1980), p. 243; see also *vol. III*, pp. 308 and 423

It was when our Lord Jesus was exalted into the life of the Spirit that He became ‘the Lord the Spirit,’ could give the New Testament Spirit, and in the Spirit come Himself to His people. - Andrew Murray, *The Spirit of Christ* (Fort Washington, PA: Christian Literature Crusade, 1963, 1978), p. 167; see also p. 168

It must seem strange that in some passages Paul simply identifies the Spirit with Christ (1 Cor. 15:45; see 6:17; 2 Cor. 3:17). According to these passages the Spirit does not come through Christ; rather, Christ himself is this Spirit. - Hermann Gunkel, *The Influence of the Holy Spirit: The Popular View of the Apostolic Age and the Teaching of the Apostle Paul*, translated by Roy A. Harrisville and Philip A. Quanbeck II (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1979), p. 113

Let us bear in mind ... that the Holy Spirit identifies Himself with the Lord Jesus and that the coming of the Comforter is just the coming of Jesus Himself to the heart. - A. B. Simpson, *When the Comforter Comes, 2nd day* (Harrisburg, PA: Christian Publishers, c1911)

The Lord, of course, is Christ, and the Spirit is that which Paul has already spoken of in the sixth verse. It is the Holy Spirit, the Lord and Giver of life under the new covenant. He who turns to Christ receives the Spirit.... Practically, therefore, the two may be identified.... Here, so far as the practical experience of Christians goes, no distinction is made between the Spirit of Christ and Christ Himself.... - James Denney, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians* (London: Hodder and Stroughton, 1894), pp. 133-134

Hence it comes that the Spirit and Christ are sometimes identified, as in the sentence, "The Lord is the Spirit," and the expression, "The Lord the Spirit." As a matter of subjective experience the two indwellings cannot be distinguished; to consciousness they are one. The Spirit is the *alter ego* of the Lord. - Alexander Balmain Bruce, *St. Paul's Conception of Christianity* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1896), p. 254

But Paul not only identifies the Spirit of God with that of Christ, he identifies both with the very *Person of Christ*. "The Lord is the Spirit," we read; and again, "we are changed into the same image by the Lord, the Spirit." ...in the thought of the apostle, "Christ," the "Spirit of Christ," and "the Spirit of God" are practically synonymous. At the Resurrection Christ became a Life-giving Spirit to mankind... - David Somerville, *St. Paul's Conception of Christ* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1897), pp. 117-118; see also pp. 121, 122

'But the Lord, to whom their heart thus turns, is the Spirit.' Many artificial explanations have been given of this verse. Without noticing those attempts which have been in direct contradiction to the meaning of the words and the scope of the context...we find here such an identification of Christ and the Holy Spirit, that the Lord, to whom the heart turns, is in no practical respect different from the Holy Spirit received in conversion. - John Peter Lange, *Commentary on the Holy Scriptures: Critical, Doctrinal and Homiletical*, translated and edited by Philip Schaff, Volume 10, "The Second Epistle of Paul to the Corinthians" (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1960), p. 58

The Spirit in its working was found to be in effect the equivalent of Jesus Christ. Thus St Paul writes, If any has not

Christ's Spirit, that man is not his (Christ's); but if Christ is in you, the body indeed is dead...but the spirit is life..., where the possession of the Spirit of Christ is clearly regarded as tantamount to an indwelling of Christ Himself. The same line of thought seems to be followed in the words, The Lord is the Spirit, but where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty. But we all...are being transformed...as by the Lord the Spirit, where 'the Spirit of the Lord' and 'the Lord the Spirit' (i.e. Christ in the power of His glorified life) are viewed as being in practice the same. - Henry Barclay Swete, *The Holy Spirit in the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1910), pp. 300-301; see also pp. 301-304

As Pneuma, as Spirit the living Christ is not far off, above clouds and stars, but near, present on our poor earth he dwells and rules in His own. Here again, there is no lack of suggestion in this direction in the Septuagint, and Paul himself created the significant formulæ:

The Lord is the Spirit,
The last Adam became a life-giving Spirit,
He that is joined to the Lord is one Spirit.

- Adolf Deissmann, *Paul: A Study in Social and Religious History*, translated by William E. Wilson (Gloucester, MA: Peter Smith, 1912, 1972), p. 138; see also p. 140

Then there is a close association of the Spirit of God and the Spirit of Christ with the Person of Christ. No line of demarcation is drawn between Christ and the Spirit. The great passage is 2 Cor. iii. 17. 'Now the Lord is the Spirit.' So close is the association that [A. B.] Bruce is able to say, 'The Spirit is the Alter Ego of the Lord.' - W. H. Griffith Thomas, *The Holy Spirit* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 1986), p. 34

Christ and the Spirit are different yet the same, the same yet different. - W. H. Griffith Thomas, *The Holy Spirit* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 1986), p. 144

At the centre of Paul's thinking, where his thought is most his own, Christ and the Spirit are practically and essentially one; but at the circumference, where his thought speaks the language of his time, the two are formally distinct. - Thomas

Rees, *The Holy Spirit in Thought and Experience* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1915), p. 101

This grace, this peace, no longer only in the Person of Jesus Christ; —but through the Person of Jesus Christ, *to you and in you*: What is this but Christ in you? And how Christ in you,—save in, and as, Spirit? Christ in you, or the Spirit of Christ in you; these are not different realities; but the one is the method of the other. It is in the person of Christ that the Eternal God is revealed in manhood, to man. It is in the Person of His Spirit that the Incarnate Christ is Personally present with the spirit of each several man. The Holy Ghost is mainly revealed to us as the Spirit *of the Incarnate*. - Robert C. Moberly, *Atonement and Personality* (London, John Murray, 1917), p. 194

He breathed on the them, and saith unto them, “Receive ye [the] Holy Ghost”—(λάβετε πνεῦμα ἅγιον). This is not the action of one who, by prayer, would invoke upon them, a Spirit which is not of, or from, Himself: it is the symbolism rather of one who would transfer to them the very Spirit which animates—which may be said to *be*—Himself. - Robert C. Moberly, *Atonement and Personality* (London, John Murray, 1917), pp. 196-197

He is so unutterably sure that he is filled with the Spirit of the risen Lord that the language which he uses about Christ and about the Holy Spirit is sometimes hardly distinguishable. The Spirit of God and the Spirit of Christ are one and the same (Rom. viii. 9). Christ and the Holy Spirit are spoken of in parallelism (ix. 1. ‘He that is joined to the Lord [i.e. Christ] is one spirit’ (I Cor. vi. 17). ‘The Spirit of His Son’ (Gal. iv. 6). His Spirit in the inner man is equated with Christ dwelling in your hearts by faith (Eph. iii. 16, 17). ‘The supply of the Spirit of Christ Jesus’ (Phil. 1. 19). And most explicitly ‘The Lord is the Spirit’ (2 Cor. iii. 17), ‘the Lord Spirit’ (v. 18). ‘The last Adam became a life-giving Spirit’ (I Cor. xv. 45).

Thus if the Holy Spirit of God is the Spirit of Christ, it is equally true to say either that the Holy Spirit or Christ is in Christians, and they in Him. - Alan H. McNeile, *St. Paul: His Life, Letters, and Christian Doctrine* (Cambridge: University Press, 1920), pp. 283-284

Elsewhere Paul says explicitly: “The Lord is the Spirit, and where the spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty.” The Spirit and the Risen Christ are for him practically indistinguishable—the source of the new life, the earnest of God’s intentions for us, the hope of glory, the origin of the graces of love, joy, peace and the rest. - Terrot R. Glover, *Paul of Tarsus* (London: Student Christian Movement, 1925), p. 219

‘Kyrios’ in verse 17 is the same person as the one mentioned in verse 16 and that reference points back to ‘Christ’ in verse 14; and from the context it would seem that the Lord is Christ, and in the sequel the ‘glory’ is on His face (v. 18 and iv. 6). Hence we conclude that by the phrase ‘The Lord is the Spirit’ Paul means ‘The Lord (i.e. the Risen Christ) is the Spirit’. - R. Birch Hoyle, *The Holy Spirit in St. Paul* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, Doran, & Company, 1928), p. 143

Faith-surrender to the deliverer, Jesus Christ (“The Lord the Spirit”, 2 Cor. iii. 17, 18), unites this inner man with One Who, like the law, is spiritual, but, unlike the law, is able to deliver where that could only condemn. In both “justification” and “sanctification”, to use the technical terms of theology, the faith-union is a spiritual union with the Lord the Spirit, the risen and ascended Christ. - H. Wheeler Robinson, *The Christian Experience of the Holy Spirit* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1928), p. 230

It is spoken of as the spirit of God, and the spirit of Christ; or as the spirit of life acting in Christ (Rom. viii. 2); and in one passage, the Lord—Christ—and the Spirit are identified (2 Cor. iii. 17). - W. F. Lofthouse, *The Father and the Son* (London: Student Christian Movement Press, 1934), p. 179

The Lord means the Spirit identifies Jesus and the Spirit, at least in the experience of men. The Lord is the risen and exalted Jesus, upon whom God has conferred ‘the name which is above every name’ (Phil. ii. 9 ff.). Moreover, it may be contended, the Jews did not need to turn to Jahveh, but to Christ. In Rom. viii. 9-11 the life of Christ in the Christian is identified with the life of the Spirit. - R. H. Strachan, *The Second Epistle of Paul to the Corinthians* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1935), p. 88

Thus the "communion of the Holy Spirit" was also "the communion of the Son of God" (1 Cor. i. 9). It was not enough to say that Christ, being exalted to the right hand of God, had "poured forth" the Spirit. The presence of the Spirit in the Church is the presence of the Lord: "the Lord is the Spirit" (2 Cor. iii. 17). - C. H. Dodd, *The Apostolic Preaching and Its Developments* (London: Hodder & Stoughton (1936, 1944), p. 62

But the other part of the great mystery is here before us in Romans 8:10: *Christ is in us*. Although, as we know, He is within us by His Spirit, yet it is Christ Himself who is in us. That the Spirit can make Christ present in us, we see in the beautiful words of II Corinthians 3.17, 18: "Now the Lord is the Spirit: ... We ... are transformed into the same image from glory to glory, even as from the Lord the Spirit." Or, as Paul says in the solemn words of II Corinthians 13.5: "Know ye not as to your own selves, that Jesus Christ is in you?" - William R. Newell, *Romans: Verse by Verse* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Classics, 1994), p. 302

Because the article is there (το πνεῦμα), we think that Saint Paul meant by this word the Holy Spirit... But "when we turn to the Lord, the veil is taken away" (3:16 following Exod. 34:34). Paul takes "the Lord" to be Christ, and he adds the remark: the Lord, who is the Holy Spirit. - Lucien Cerfaux, *Christ in the Theology of St. Paul*, translated by Geoffrey Webb and Adrian Walker (New York: Herder and Herder, 1952, 1959), p. 293

In this passage Paul has set for many a theological problem. He says, "The Lord is the Spirit." He seems to identify the Risen Lord and the Holy Spirit. We must remember that Paul was not writing theology; he was setting down experience. And it is in the experience of the Christian life that the work of the Spirit and the work of the Risen Lord are one and the same. The strength, the light, the guidance we receive come alike from the Spirit and from the Risen Lord. It does not matter how we express it as long as we experience it. - William Barclay, *The Letters to the Corinthians* (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Press, 1954, 1956), p. 216

Here we shall only give an exposition of the opinion which we consider the most probable interpretation of 2 Cor 3,17.

According to this opinion, the subject of the phrase in 17a is “Kyrios.” “*Pneuma*” is the Holy Spirit, the third Person of the Blessed Trinity, while the *Kyrios* is identical with the *Kyrios* in v. 16...

V. 17 is not an independent verse; it does not start a new thought—note the *de* of transition—but continues that of v. 16. Were it independent, there would be reason enough to apply the *Kyrios* to Christ, but since it is a transition sentence, the mind of the reader does not have enough time or opportunity to switch its attention to another subject. The *Kyrios* of v. 17 therefore is the same *Kyrios* of v. 16.

Since v. 17a is a sentence of transition continuing the sense of v. 16, *estin* is then explicative, and v. 17 becomes an exegetical explanation of v. 16 *viz.*, the *Kyrios* just mentioned in v. 16 is the Spirit. But whom does the Spirit denote?

In v. 17b it is said that this Spirit gives freedom. We now know from Rom 8 that the Spirit of freedom as opposed to the enslaving letter of the Law is the Holy Spirit. This finds confirmation in the whole context of our verse, ch. 2 and 3, where there can hardly be any doubt that St. Paul is always referring to the Holy Spirit whenever he mentions *Pneuma*. - Prosper Grech, “2 Corinthians 3, 17 and the Pauline Doctrine of Conversion to the Holy Spirit,” *Catholic Bible Quarterly*, XVII (Washington, DC: Catholic Bible Association of America, 1955), pp. 421-422

In the light of what we have seen of Paul’s thought in this regard, a ‘becoming’ predicted of Christ which results in His identification with the Spirit, can only refer to what occurred at His resurrection. In 2 Cor.3. 17 we saw that the Spirit was identical with the Lord (i.e., the resurrected exalted Christ). - Neill Q. Hamilton, *The Holy Spirit and Eschatology in Paul*, *Scottish Journal of Theology Occasional Papers*, No. 6 (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1957), p. 14

...He [the Spirit] is no other than the presence and action of Jesus Christ Himself: His stretched out arm; He Himself in the power of His resurrection, i.e., in the power of His revelation as it begins in and with the power of His resurrection and continues its work from this point. - Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, IV:2: *The Doctrine of Reconciliation*, G. W. Bromiley & T. F. Torrance, eds. (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1958), pp. 322-323

In v. 6 and v. 8 the new ministry is depicted as that which is controlled by the πνεῦμα [Spirit], not the γράμμα [letter]. It is then shown that the unbelieving Jew still lives under the veil which is done away only ἐν Χριστῷ [in Christ] (v. 14). Turning to the κύριος [Lord] (= Χριστός [Christ] in v. 14 as always, → III. 1087.5ff.) takes the veil away. The statement that this κύριος [Lord] is the Spirit connects the two trains of thought. The exalted κύριος [Lord] to whom Israel must turn instead of to Moses (cf. Rom. 10:4 f.; 1 C. 10:2) is identified with the πνεῦμα [Spirit]. This shows that turning to Him means turning to the new διακονία [ministry] in the πνεῦμα [Spirit]. It is not wholly true that, while Paul ascribes the same functions to Christ and the Spirit, he does not elsewhere equate them. - Eduard Schweizer, "πνεῦμα, πνευτικόςμα," in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, vol. VI, Gerhard Friedrich, ed., translated and edited by Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1968), p. 418

In all that concerns the present experience of the Christian, moral or spiritual, St Paul treats the heavenly Christ and the Holy Spirit as practically interchangeable. - Charles A. Anderson Scott, *Christianity according to St Paul* (Cambridge: University Press, 1961), p. 260

We have spoken of the sporadic activity of Yahweh in the history of Israel, directing the acts and inspiring the words of the prophets; but never until the Son of Man had ascended up where he was before, and the last Adam had become a life-giving spirit, had it been possible for the Spirit to enter into and become the life of the believer, producing in him the life of Jesus, as Paul says, 'That the life of Jesus may be manifested in our mortal flesh' (II Cor. iv. 11). - S. H. Hooke, "The Spirit Was Not Yet," *New Testament Studies*, vol. 9, Issue 4, July 1963, p. 380

...The word "Lord" in verses 17 and 18 always means Christ. He himself is the Spirit; as the close of verse 18 repeats: "this comes from the Lord who is the Spirit." Other features of this conception in Paul are found in 1 Corinthians 6:17: "he who is united to the Lord becomes one Spirit with him," and in Romans 8:9-11, where the divine principle which dwells in the faithful alternately is called the Spirit, the Spirit of God, the Spirit of Christ, and Christ. - Hendrikus Berkhof, *The Doctrine of the Holy Spirit* (Richmond, VA: John Knox Press, 1964), pp. 24-25; see also pp. 18, 25-27

In this context, the word 'Lord' must refer to Christ, since v. 14 clearly states that 'only in Christ is it (the veil) removed'. Verse 17 goes on to declare, 'Now the Lord is the Spirit', that is to say, the Lord to whom we can turn for illumination and for understanding is the Spirit, that Spirit which is experienced as life-giving, liberating power within, and which is the means by which Christ is operative in the Church. - David Hill, *Greek Words and Hebrew Meanings: Studies in the Semantics of Soteriological Terms* (Cambridge: University Press, 1967), p. 278; see also pp. 279, 281

17. Now the Lord is the Spirit: ...Paul elsewhere distinguishes between **the Lord** (i.e. Christ) and **the Spirit** (cf. 1 C. 12.4f; 2 C. 13.14), but dynamically they are one, since it is by the Spirit that the life of the risen Lord is imparted to believers and maintained within them (cf. Rom. 8.9-11; see also note on 1 C. 15.45b). - F. F. Bruce, ed., *New Century Bible* (London: Oliphants, 1971), p. 193

An interpretation that has become popular in recent times has found embodiment in the NEB rendering of this verse: "Now the Lord of whom this passage speaks is the Spirit." This views the clause as an explanatory comment on Exodus 34:34: the Lord to whom the Scripture says that Moses turned, and to whom the Jew should turn today for illumination, is the Holy Spirit. As an explanation of the difficulty in the text the rendering above will hardly suffice, for in v. 16 the **Lord** to whom the Jew should turn for the removal of the veil is surely the Lord Christ, as implied in v. 14. If Paul in v. 17 is intending to identify the person of the Lord in the Exodus narrative, he must mean first of all Christ, and then he proceeds to declare that this Lord Christ is the Spirit. - G. R. Beasley-Murray, "2 Corinthians," *The Broadman Bible Commentary*, vol. 11: *2 Corinthians-Philemon* (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1971), p. 26

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. - James D. G. Dunn, "1 Corinthians 15:45 – last Adam, life-giving Spirit," *Christ and Spirit in the New Testament*, Barnabas Lindars and Stephen S. Smalley, eds. (Cambridge: University Press, 1973), p. 139; see also pp. 132-133, 141; "Jesus—

Flesh and Spirit: An Exposition of Romans I. 3-4," *Journal of Theological Studies*, XXIV:1, April 1973, p. 67; *Christology in the Making: A New Testament Inquiry into the Origins of the Doctrine of the Incarnation* (London: SCM Press, 1980), pp. 145, 146)

Thus the Spirit is the medium and the force in which Jesus Christ as the new Lord of the world is accessible to us, and where we can know him. The Spirit is the active presence of the exalted Lord in the Church, in individual believers and in the world. 'In the Spirit' and 'In Christ' are for Paul almost interchangeable expressions. - Walter Kasper, *Jesus the Christ* (New York: Paulist Press, 1976), p. 256

Jesus' promise that the Spirit of truth will 'be with you for ever' is only another form of the promise, 'I will not leave you bereft; I am coming back to you'; for the indwelling Spirit is the mode in which Jesus returns. - G. W. H. Lampe, *God as Spirit* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977), p. 10

Again Paul appears to identify the divine pneuma and the risen Christ. It is doubtful that Paul is interested in the ontological discussion that resulted in the later Trinitarian formulation. But he does appear to be concerned that the Corinthians understand that the Christ upon whom their hope is built is the one encountered in their experience of pneuma. It is through pneuma that Christ has illuminated their hearts and minds. Christ has come to them as life-giving pneuma and continues to lead them into new stages of glory as they become more and more like him. For Paul, and for his readers, there was no difference between the risen Christ and the pneuma in experience. Christ met them as pneuma. It was the pneuma of Christ that gave them life. In short, the risen Lord is the pneuma – the pneuma is Christ. - Walter Clifford Wright, Jr. "The Use of Pneuma in the Pauline Corpus with Special Attention to the Relationship between Pneuma and the Risen Christ," Ph.D. Dissertation, Fuller Theological Seminary, 1977, p. 246

Seen in their respective contexts, I Corinthians 15:45c and II Corinthians 3:17a are closely correlative so that it is difficult to evade the conclusion that the identification expressed in the latter dates from Jesus' resurrection. Because at his resurrection he became life-giving Spirit, now he is the Spirit. - Richard B. Gaffin, Jr., *Resurrection and Redemption: A Study in Paul's*

Soteriology (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing, 1978, 1987), p. 96; see also pp. 86, 95

The Spirit, however, is the earthly presence of the exalted Lord... - Ernst Käsemann, *Commentary on Romans* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1980), p. 241

The Spirit that indwells believers is the selfsame Spirit of the glorified Lord. - Carl F. H. Henry, *God, Revelation and Authority*, VI:2 (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1983), p. 400

After His resurrection, says Paul, Jesus Christ, the Second Adam, “became a life-giving Spirit” (I Cor. 15:45). Whatever weight is given to the verb “became,” it is clear that it comes close to identifying the risen Jesus with the divine Spirit. In one perplexing sentence Paul says, “The Lord is the Spirit” (II Cor. 3:17). Had he said, “The Lord sends the Spirit” or “The Spirit is divine,” he would have made things simpler. But we have to deal with what he actually says.

We should notice, too, the mixing of Spirit and Christ in Romans 8. In the span of a few sentences Paul has “Spirit in us” and “Christ in us” as well as “Spirit of God” and “Spirit of Christ.” So, brushing aside all nuances of context and grammar, we can say this much without further examination: Spirit and Christ are inseparable. - Lewis B. Smedes, *Union with Christ* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1970, 1983), pp. 26-27

Who is “the Lord” in the sentence [2 Cor. 3:17]? Interpreters have sometimes thought Him to be Jehovah of Exodus 34. The point would then be that the Spirit of the new covenant is really the Spirit of Jehovah, showing that there is no contradiction between the Old Testament and the New. But Paul’s whole argument is not to show the identity but the contrast between the covenants. He wants to say that Israel has been brought to a stage in history when they are now confronted specifically with the claims of Jesus, the surprising Messiah.

The Lord is Jesus. This is the core of Paul’s message here and everywhere. The Lord in verse 17 is the concrete individual Jesus who died and rose again and is now Lord of “all things.” This identifiable and concrete person is the Spirit. - Lewis B. Smedes, *Union with Christ* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1970, 1983), pp. 39-40

Paul upholds the deity of the Holy Spirit when he states, "The Lord is the Spirit" (2 Cor. 3:17; cf. v. 18). Although some identify *kyrios* as the God of the Old Testament, it seems preferable, given the immediate context (v. 14), to hold that the apostle identifies Christ and the Spirit. That being so, "The Lord and the Spirit are 'one' in the same sense that Jesus said that He and the Father were one (John 10:30)." - Bruce Demarest and Gordon Lewis, *Integrative Theology, vol. 1* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1987), p. 266; the last sentence quotes R. V. G. Tasker, *2 Corinthians, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1983), p. 66

Most significant of all, the Spirit for Paul has been constitutively stamped with the character of Christ. Christ by his resurrection entered wholly upon the realm of the Spirit (Rom. 1:4; cf. 8:11). Indeed, Paul can say that Christ by his resurrection "became life-giving Spirit" (1 Cor. 15:45). That is to say, the exalted Christ is now experienced in, through, and as Spirit. - James D. G. Dunn, *The Christ and the Spirit, vol. 2: Pneumatology* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1998), p. 16; see also pp. 338, 341

Nevertheless, the dynamic identification between Christ and the Spirit includes, most probable, also an *ontic* or *ontological* aspect, to use present day theological language and conceptual distinctions, which goes beyond a merely functional identification. In other words, one should not speak merely of the Spirit playing the role of Christ, or of the Spirit only representing Christ. Rather, there is a sense in which the risen Lord himself is actually present and active through the Spirit which is hardly imaginable without there being some ontic or ontological connection between the two. Thus it seems appropriate to speak also of an ontological, though dynamic, identification between the Spirit and Christ in Paul. - Mehrdad Fatehi, *The Spirit's Relation to the Risen Lord in Paul: An Examination of Its Christological Implications* (Tübingen, Germany: Mohr Siebeck, 2000), p. 305; see also p. 332

There are also passages that teach that the Son and the Spirit are one. In Rom. 8:9-10 Paul speaks of the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, but he says that anyone who does not have the Holy Spirit does not belong to Christ. Thus, in having Christ, one also has the Holy Spirit and vice versa. All of this suggests

their unity. Moreover, consider 2 Cor 3:17. As we have already seen, this verse says that the Lord is the Spirit, and the word for Lord is *kyrios*, the Greek for the Hebrew *yhwh*. Many see *kyrios* here as a reference to Jesus who, of course, is often called by this name. In that case, the verse asserts unity between the Son and the Spirit. - John S. Feinberg, *No One Like Him* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2001), p. 467