

A DEFENSE OF THE GOSPEL

*Responses to an
Open Letter from
“Christian Scholars
and Ministry Leaders”
(2)*

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

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

Editors’ note: *The gospel*, as used in the title of this book (*A Defense of the Gospel: Responses to an Open Letter from “Christian Scholars and Ministry Leaders (2)”*), 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

Throughout the history of the church, many scholars have contributed to our understanding and appreciation of the Bible, the Christian faith, and church history. We are grateful to the Lord for the labors and insights of such faithful stewards of the truth. However, at times some have misused their scholarly credentials to pass off superficial research as informed opinion and in doing so have misrepresented others' beliefs and practices to a trusting public. To do so is to render a great disservice to Christ and His church.

The designation "scholar" suggests that one is engaged in factual, unbiased research and is faithful to represent accurately the sources consulted in the course of research. Such is the minimum standard that secular scholars are expected to maintain before the academic community, but the standard for Christian scholars should be even higher, as they should be bound by conscience to deal with others fairly and righteously in the sight of God. Those who call themselves Christian scholars should adhere to the highest standard of professional conduct, including performing direct, primary research when possible and providing an accurate, balanced representation of their subjects.

In early 2007 a group of "evangelical Christian scholars and ministry leaders"¹ posted an open letter² on the Internet calling on the leadership of Living Stream Ministry (LSM)³ and the local churches to "disavow and cease to publish" certain statements made by Witness Lee. The sole documentary support given for the open letter was a series of short quotations from the ministry of Witness Lee. All the quotations were presented apart from their original contexts, which created a very distorted and unbalanced impression of Witness Lee's teaching. To those

¹ From the press release announcing the open letter, January 9, 2007.

² "An Open Letter to the Leadership of Living Stream Ministry and the 'Local Churches,'" available at www.open-letter.org.

³ LSM publishes the ministry of Watchman Nee and Witness Lee.

familiar with Witness Lee's teaching it was evident that the real purpose of the letter was not to induce the leadership of LSM and the local churches to disavow certain teachings of Witness Lee. Rather, its goal was to turn fellow believers away from the ministry of Witness Lee and to dissuade them from having fellowship with the believers meeting in the local churches.

We realize that many of the signers of the open letter have not had extensive exposure to the teachings of Witness Lee and the local churches. However, by attaching their names, their credentials, and the names of their institutions to the open letter, they are using their scholastic prestige to lend a perceived authority to the letter's contents. Thus, they bear a responsibility that the letter be accurate, fair, and balanced. Furthermore, it is reasonable to expect them to respond when errors or imbalance are brought to their attention. They should be concerned when informed that quotations taken out of context have presented a distorted view that has exposed others to unwarranted censure. Sadly, this has not been the case.

In February 2007 representatives of LSM and the local churches posted a brief response addressing the open letter's concerns in a clear and direct manner.⁴ This brief response was sent with personal letters to most of the signers of the open letter. Many of these letters explicitly invited the recipients to engage representatives of LSM and the local churches in dialogue. Only two signers responded, and both dismissed our appeal without further research or consideration of the issues.

When our brief response was made available, two things were promised: a longer response treating the broad theological issues raised by the open letter and a response dealing with the specific quotations presented out of context in the open letter. The longer response was originally published on the Internet in December 2008.⁵ Both the brief and longer responses are

⁴ Available at www.lctestimony.org/ResponseToOpenLetter.html.

⁵ Available at www.lctestimony.org/LongerResponse.html.

contained in Volume 1 of this series. In this volume we offer responses to the out-of-context quotations themselves.

In December 2009 the Christian Research Institute (CRI) devoted an issue of its *Christian Research Journal* to a reassessment of the teachings and practices of Witness Lee and the local churches. The cover of the issue declared, “We Were Wrong,” in reference to CRI’s critical stance dating back to the 1970s. The findings presented in the *Journal* were the culmination of a six-year primary research project. When we learned in the late fall of 2009 that CRI planned to publish its new findings, we withheld publication of this volume to give CRI’s reassessment a chance to stand on its own and to allow the signers of the open letter time to reconsider the issues so ably addressed by CRI.

Following the publication of the *Journal*, CRI President Hank Hanegraaff and the *Journal*’s Editor-in-Chief Elliot Miller discussed CRI’s findings on two broadcasts of the *Bible Answer Man* radio program.⁶ While most responses to the *Journal* and the radio broadcasts have been positive, one critical response was published in February 2010 by Norman Geisler and Ron Rhodes, two signers of the open letter. The Geisler/Rhodes response was posted first on Geisler’s personal website, subsequently on the website of Veritas Seminary (which Geisler co-founded), and eventually on the open letter website. This latest posting links all those whose names are included as signatories on the open letter with Geisler and Rhodes’ conclusions. Such an implicit endorsement of the serious errors in truth and scholarship in Geisler and Rhodes’ response reflects poorly on the open letter signers.⁷

In fact, even the open letter itself does not represent the views of all its purported signers. In an article responding to Geisler

⁶ Links to the *Journal* issue and the radio broadcasts are available on the Internet at www.contendingforthefaith.org/dialogues/CRI_links.html.

⁷ See www.contendingforthefaith.org/articles/Geisler-Rhodes/index.html for a series of articles pointing out some of the more serious errors in the article by Geisler and Rhodes.

and Rhodes in a subsequent *Journal*, Hank Hanegraaff wrote, “The first two scholars I called told me they were *not* aware of the Open Letter, did *not* endorse its conclusions, and *never* knowingly lent their names to it.”⁸ Thus, Hanegraaff concludes, “Given our research thus far, there is reason to suspect that the list of signatories has been inflated.”⁹ While encouraged by these indications, we earnestly desire that those whose names remain as endorsers of the open letter will be persuaded by conscience to weigh the allegations in the open letter in light of our responses and CRI’s in-depth reassessment.

It is important that the Christian public be informed concerning the issues raised in the pages of this volume. We hope that fair-minded and discerning Christian readers will see that, contrary to the perception the open letter hopes to cultivate, our teaching is well within the boundaries of the common faith.

We also believe that those who call themselves “Christian scholars and ministry leaders” and represent themselves as authorities by drawing on the reputations and prestige of the institutions that employ them have a particular responsibility to uphold a high standard of integrity in scholarship and Christian conduct. This volume documents an abusive misrepresentation of the ministry of Witness Lee. As such, it sounds a broader call to the community of Christian scholars and ministry leaders to insist upon a higher standard of scholarship in the conduct of Christian apologetics. It is our sincere hope that the response contained in this volume would resonate with the Christian consciences of our readers and with those of the signers themselves. We reiterate our willingness to engage all earnest lovers of the truth in open dialogue and look to our Lord that He would grant us opportunity to enter into more meaningful fellowship with our fellow believers in Christ.

Benson Phillips Dan Towle Andrew Yu Chris Wilde
August 2010

⁸ Hank Hanegraaff, “D-I-S-C-E-R-N,” *Christian Research Journal*, 33:3, 12.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 15, endnote 17.

**ON THE TRINITY, GOD’S FULL SALVATION,
AND THE CHURCH:
A DEFENSE OF SEVENTEEN QUOTATIONS
FROM THE MINISTRY OF WITNESS LEE**

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INTRODUCTION

In early 2007 a group identifying themselves as “Christian scholars and ministry leaders” posted on the Internet an open letter to the leadership of Living Stream Ministry and the “local churches.” In the letter they called for our disavowal and withdrawal of a number of quotations which they extracted and published in isolation from the ministry of Witness Lee.¹ We have previously responded to that open letter, first in brief and later in detail, giving a full defense of our beliefs, which have been grossly misrepresented by quotations taken out of context from Witness Lee’s ministry.²

While we have made clear in our previous responses our position on the critical issues of the Christian faith that the open letter calls attention to, we promised an explanation of the quotations themselves, and here we are pleased to offer one. The quotations, in isolation and ganged together as they are in the open letter, give a shocking impression that Witness Lee held notions which “appear to contradict or compromise essential doctrines of the Christian faith,” as the signers contend. However, the impression made by this juxtaposition of short quotations does not fairly or accurately represent the actual

¹ Available at <http://open-letter.org/>.

² Both of these responses are available at www.lctestimony.org/OpenLetterDialogue.html. They are also available in book form at [www.contendingforthefait.org/eBooks/Open Letter Response \(1\).pdf](http://www.contendingforthefait.org/eBooks/Open%20Letter%20Response%20(1).pdf). In these responses we have also addressed the open letter’s other issue related to our answering critics and resolving disputes.

beliefs of Witness Lee and of us in the local churches.³ But the quotations stand there in the open letter apart from their proper contexts; thus, they now require this explanation.

Before examining the quotations, however, we should consider some general points about how the quotations were presented by the signers of the open letter. Hopefully, this will enable us to accurately assess the signers' intent and what we should make of their intentions.

Identifying the Signers' Intended Complaints against Us

The signers of the open letter present the quotations from Witness Lee's ministry without explaining how the quotations allegedly contradict the Christian faith. The seventeen quotations are arranged under the headings "On the Nature of God," "On the Nature of Humanity," and "On the Legitimacy of Evangelical Churches and Denominations," but other than these general rubrics, no precise complaint is lodged against any of the quotations. The signers apparently believe that what is to be condemned in each quotation is self-evident. Thus, it is left to us to make explicit here what the signers have failed in courtesy to identify themselves.

We feel that we know what is at issue in each instance, because the complaints are not new to us, and neither should our responses be new to the letter's signers. Some of our responses

³ Throughout this article we will collectively refer to ourselves as "the local churches," our preferred designation. For an explanation of what we mean by so generic a term as well as its significance in Christian truth, see our article "A Statement concerning the Teachings of the Local Churches and Living Stream Ministry in Response to Dialogue with Fuller Theological Seminary," specifically the section subtitled "The Genuine Ground of Oneness in the Body of Christ" at www.lctestimony.org/StatementOfTeachings.html#genuine-ground. The complete statement, as well as a statement from Fuller Theological Seminary, is available in book form at www.contendingforthefaith.org/eBooks/Concerning Our Teachings.pdf.

have been in the public arena for over 30 years without substantive response from any of the open letter signers.⁴

Some who have taken issue with us on these same questions in the past have had their concerns allayed through personal research and direct dialogue with us. For example, two major apologetics ministries, Christian Research Institute (CRI) and Answers in Action (AIA), declared that they were fully convinced of our Christian orthodoxy after reading our publications and engaging in extensive dialogue with us.⁵ This is particularly significant because CRI and the co-founder and current director of AIA were two of the original sources to voice the concerns now raised in the open letter. In addition, Fuller Theological Seminary examined the same issues and found our teachings to “represent the genuine, historical, biblical Christian faith in every essential aspect.”⁶

For many readers, only the status of the signers as “scholars and ministry leaders” validates their claim that the quotations

⁴ Among these are:

- Witness Lee, *Concerning the Person of Christ* [1971];
- Witness Lee, *The Revelation of the Triune God According to the Pure Word of the Bible* [1976];
- Witness Lee, *The Clear Scriptural Revelation Concerning the Triune God* [c. 1976];
- Ron Kangas, *Modalism, Tritheism, or the Pure Revelation of the Triune God according to the Bible* [1976]
- Ron Kangas, *The Triune God: A Testimony of Our Belief and Experience* [1976];
- Ron Kangas, *The Truth Concerning Exclusivism* [c. 1978];
- Ron Kangas, *The Truth Concerning Salvation* [c. 1978]; and
- *The Beliefs and Practices of the Local Churches* [1978].

All of these titles were originally published by Living Stream Ministry and are available online at www.contendingforthefaith.org/responses/index.html.

⁵ See *The Local Churches: “Genuine Believers and Fellow Members of the Body of Christ”* [DCP Press, 2008], also available at www.contendingforthefaith.org/eBooks/Hanegraaff-Passantino-Fuller.pdf.

⁶ See *A Confirmation of the Gospel: Concerning the Teaching of the Local Churches and Living Stream Ministry* [DCP Press, 2009] also available in book form at www.contendingforthefaith.org/eBooks/Concerning Our Teachings.pdf.

presented in the open letter are controversial and at odds with the essential doctrines of the Christian faith. Believers are generally inclined to trust such scholars and ministry leaders, but we know, as the general public may also realize, that those perceived as experts sometimes abuse that status. Thus, it is imperative that our readers examine the evidence presented here and consider whether the claims against us should be accepted based simply upon the signers' status as "scholars and ministry leaders."

The Responsibility of All Believers to Contend for the Common Faith

We feel that it is appropriate from two perspectives for believers to examine the integrity with which the signers proffered the open letter. First, we do not believe that the issues raised in the quotations are beyond the comprehension of most believers, for the issues relate to "the faith once for all delivered to the saints," which all believers are exhorted to contend for (Jude 3). We intend to openly and clearly place before our readers the matters related to the essential doctrines of the Christian faith that, the signers say, are at issue in the quotations and to show that the quotations, in their original contexts and in the context of Witness Lee's larger ministry, indeed support a proper understanding of the common faith.

Second, we do not feel that "Christian scholars and ministry leaders" are beyond the scrutiny of common believers or that common believers are not able to ascertain when scholarship has been executed improperly and without integrity. If we blindly defer to those with scholarly or ministerial credentials, we shrink from our God-ordained and common responsibility to contend for the faith delivered to us all.

A Question of Integrity and Credibility

But we do not want our readers to think that we are examining the integrity of the signers of the open letter without first giving the signers a proper opportunity to consider what they have

done and to retract their signatures. We have already provided them with such an opportunity. We have offered two substantial responses to their open letter, and these responses have been available on the Internet for some time (the first for three and a half years; the second for a year and a half). We also sent most of the signers a personal letter pointing out the problem in their quoting Witness Lee out of context and referring them to the positive conclusions of credible Christian scholars and institutions who have thoroughly researched our writings and have participated in in-depth dialogue with us over points of controversy.⁷ In the two years since we sent these letters, only two signers have replied, both with negative responses. One of the two who responded admitted that his “research” consisted of looking only at single pages of Witness Lee’s writings from which the quotations were extracted. The other summarily denounced the credibility of the scholars and institutions that concluded, after conducting a thorough investigation, that our teachings do not in any way contradict or compromise essential doctrines of the common Christian faith.

Further, the signers of the open letter rely on braggadocio, hoping to overwhelm their readers by declaring that “more than 70 evangelical Christian scholars and ministry leaders from seven nations” have found fault in our teachings.⁸ Indeed, this is the point of stress in the Internet advertisements for the open letter. It is as if the signers of the open letter expect the readers of their letter to conclude that there is a problem simply because they say that there is.

On the other hand, the approach of those who have come to our defense has consisted of “years of extensive dialog” and “a thorough review and examination of the major teachings and

⁷ The signers should also have received and read the “We Were Wrong” and “D-I-S-C-E-R-N” issues of the *Christian Research Journal* (32:6 and 33:3).

⁸ The signers “from seven nations” include one from each of the following: Ecuador, Mexico, Ukraine (a researcher in nuclear science), England, Brazil, and Russia. The remainder are from the United States.

practices of the local churches, with particular emphasis on the writings of Witness Lee and Watchman Nee, as published by Living Stream Ministry.”⁹ Further, unlike the individuals who signed the open letter and carefully disclaimed responsibility for the institutions who employ them, the experts who support us do so as institutions and as individual scholars, well known in their respective fields. They did not rely on boasts, nor did they denounce those who differ from their opinion. Our readers should bear in mind these differing demeanors of those who testify for us and against us, respectively. While it will be the quotations themselves that we defend below, our readers should also weigh carefully the integrity of those who have assailed us.

Our Hope and Expectation

Having offered these general points, we now put before the Christian public an explanation of the quotations presented in the open letter, and we ask that our readers judge for themselves the real meaning of these quotations in their proper contexts. We are confident that our readers will judge fairly, soberly, and in love, the highest of Christian virtues. We also believe that our readers will exercise their role to judge the actions of the signers of the open letter and to test whether they have done their service properly as scholars and as fellow believers in Christ. Although we hope and pray to the contrary, we do not expect all of the signers to be moved by our response here, since our two previous articles have gone unheeded. Rather, we expect that the open letter will remain online, in one form or another, for years to come and will be circulated by unknowing or unbending people until the Lord returns. But we trust in the sensibilities of our readers and believe that their secret judgments are of greater value than the public posturing of the signers and promulgators of the open letter.

⁹ www.lctestimony.org/FullerStatement.pdf.

“ON THE NATURE OF GOD”

Quotation 1

The Son is called the Father; so the Son must be the Father. We must realize this fact. There are some who say that He is called the Father, but He is not really the Father. But how could He be *called* the Father and yet not *be* the Father?...In the place where no man can approach Him (1 Tim. 6:16), God is the Father. When He comes forth to manifest Himself, He is the Son. So, a Son is given, yet His name is called “The everlasting Father.” This very Son who has been given to us is the very Father. (*The All-Inclusive Spirit of Christ*, 4-5)

Quotation 2

...the entire Godhead, the Triune God, became flesh. (*God's New Testament Economy*, 230)

Quotation 3

The traditional explanation of the Trinity is grossly inadequate and borders on tritheism. When the Spirit of God is joined with us, God is not left behind, nor does Christ remain on the throne. This is the impression Christianity gives. They think of the Father as one Person, sending the Son, another Person, to accomplish redemption, after which the Son sends the Spirit, yet another Person. The Spirit, in traditional thinking, comes into the believers, while the Father and Son are left on the throne. When believers pray, they are taught to bow before the Father and pray in the name of the Son. To split the Godhead into these separate Persons is not the revelation of the Bible.... (*Life Messages*, 164)

Quotation 4

THE SON IS THE FATHER, AND THE SON IS ALSO THE SPIRIT....and the Lord Jesus who is the Son is also the Eternal Father. Our Lord is the Son, and He is also the Father. Hallelujah! (*Concerning the Triune God—The Father, the Son, and the Spirit*, 18-19)

Quotation 5

Therefore, it is clear: The Lord Jesus is the Father, the Son, and the Spirit, and He is the very God. He is also the Lord. He is the Father, the Son, the Spirit, the Mighty God, and the Lord. (*The Clear Scriptural Revelation Concerning the Triune God*, www.contendingforthefaith.org/responses/booklets/triune.html)

Quotation 6

The Father, the Son, and the Spirit are not three separate persons or three Gods; they are one God, one reality, one person. (*The Triune God to Be Life to the Tripartite Man*, 48)

**The Essential Doctrine of the Christian Faith at Issue:
The Father, the Son, and the Spirit Being Eternally
Distinct in the Godhead**

The first six quotations, presented under the heading “On the Nature of God,” are grouped together apparently because the complaint in each is the identification of one person in the Godhead with another, that is, the identification of the Son with the Father or with the Spirit. By isolating these quotations for scrutiny in the open letter, the signers apparently intend to imply that Witness Lee denied the eternal distinctions of Father, Son, and Spirit in the Godhead and taught that in God there is only the side of oneness and not the side of threeness as well. The Christian church has long affirmed that our God is eternally both one and three. Father, Son, and Spirit are not mere variant terms for the one God, nor do they simply refer to stages in God’s manifestation in time, as some have taught from time to time across the centuries. The notion that the Father, the Son, and the Spirit are merely labels or that they refer to successive stages in the manifestation of God in time and not to eternally distinct realities in the Godhead is called modalism, and we suspect that this is what the signers wish to accuse Witness Lee of. Modalism is an ancient heresy that survives to this day among some believers and Christian teachers. For the benefit of those of our readers who may not be familiar with the notion, we offer a brief definition from an able scholar.

Modalism Defined

J. N. D. Kelly, in his highly respected volume on doctrines of the early church,¹⁰ provides one of the best descriptions of modalism (or, more technically, modalistic monarchianism) in both its more naive and its more sophisticated forms. In its more naive form, modalism, which dates back to the late second century A.D. and was espoused by Noetus of Smyrna and a certain “Praxeas,” asserts that there is only one God, the Father, and that Christ, who is God, must be identical with the Father and indistinct from Him. “Consequently, if Christ suffered, the Father suffered, since there could be no division in the Godhead” (Kelly 120). The essence of this more naive form of modalism is that God exists as only the Father and that the Son “was distinct only verbally or in name, being a projection of the Father Himself” (Kelly 120). The same would be true of the Spirit. Thus, according to this form of modalism, there are not three distinct persons in the Godhead, but only the unique Father, who is sometimes called the Son and sometimes the Spirit.

In its more systematic and philosophical form, modalism, as espoused by Sabellius (and thus the name Sabellianism given to it) “regarded the Godhead as a monad...which expressed itself in three operations...the Father was, as it were, the form or essence, and the Son and the Spirit His modes of self-expression” (Kelly 122). Hence, Father, Son, and Spirit are genuine realities but not eternal ones, as the Father is understood to be “projecting Himself first as Son and then as Spirit” in the course of His work in time (Kelly 122). “Thus the one Godhead regarded as creator and law-giver was Father; for redemption It was projected like a ray of the sun, and was then withdrawn; then, thirdly, the same Godhead operated as Spirit to inspire and bestow grace” (Kelly 122, paraphrasing

¹⁰J. N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, rev. ed. (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1978), 119-126.

Epiphanius, *Haer.* 62.1). The essence of this more sophisticated form of modalism stresses that the one God manifests Himself as three temporary or successive “modes” of Father, Son, and Spirit to accomplish His plan of redemption in time and that none of the modes exists simultaneously with another. As with the more naive form, in this form of modalism there are not three distinct persons in the Godhead; rather, there is only one person who in time becomes the second and still later the third. The error of modalism in both its forms is that it overemphasizes the oneness of the Trinity to a heretical extreme and denies the genuine threeness of the Trinity, that is, that the Father, the Son, and the Spirit coexist eternally.

Because Witness Lee echoed certain biblical statements that the Son “will be called...Eternal Father” (Isa. 9:6), that “the last Adam [Christ] became a life-giving spirit” (1 Cor. 15:45b), and that “the Lord is the Spirit” (2 Cor. 3:17), he was unfairly charged with denying the eternal distinctions among the three and, thus, of adhering to modalism. The signers of the open letter apparently hope to make the same charge in isolating the six quotations from his ministry above. The question is, did Witness Lee deny the eternal distinctions among the three of the Godhead and thereby teach modalism?

Witness Lee’s Stance against Modalism and for the Eternal Distinctions in the Godhead

Witness Lee repudiated the charge of modalism, as he repeatedly made clear in his spoken messages and in print.¹¹ In two of

¹¹ See, for example, *The Revelation and Vision of God*, 26-27, 34-36, 43-44; *What a Heresy—Two Divine Fathers, Two Life-Giving Spirits, and Three Gods!*, 3-5; *The Conclusion of the New Testament*, 28-30, 2466-2467; *Young People’s Training*, 74-76, 84; *Christ in His Excellency*, 54; *Elders’ Training, Book 3: The Way to Carry Out the Vision*, 33, 68-69, 78; *The Central Line of the Divine Revelation*, 22; *The Economy of God and the Mystery of the Transmission of the Divine Trinity*, 150; *The Full Knowledge of the Word of God*, 71-72; *The Basic Revelation in the Holy Scriptures*, 24; *Vessels Useful to the Lord*, 157-158; *Life Messages, Volume One*, 269-270, 272-273; *The Crucial Points of the Major Items of the Lord’s Recovery Today*, 13-15.

the many cautions to his audiences concerning the error of modalism, he stated:

Modalism teaches that the Father, the Son, and the Spirit are not all eternal and do not all exist at the same time, but are merely three temporary manifestations of the one God. Tritheism teaches that the Father, the Son, and the Spirit are three Gods. To which of these schools do you belong? Are you a modalist? I beg you to have nothing to do with modalism, for that extreme view is a heresy. It is also a great heresy to teach that there are three Gods. Probably a great many of you in the past unconsciously held the idea of three Gods. (*Young People's Training*, 74)

Modalism is another heresy, resulting from taking an extreme position. Its leading exponent was Sabellius, who claimed that the Father, the Son, and the Spirit were not eternally co-existent. In modalistic thinking the Three are merely three successive manifestations of the divine Being or three temporary modes of His activity. Passages like Isaiah 9:6, where the Son is called the everlasting Father, and John 14:9, where the Lord says, “He who has seen Me has seen the Father,” are used to support modalism’s position.

Just as tritheism pushed the matter of the three Persons too far and ended up with three Gods, so modalism pushed the oneness of the Godhead too far and taught that when the Son came the Father was over, and when the Spirit came the Son was over.

This teaching we cannot accept. (*Life Messages*, 269-270)

But more significantly, Witness Lee explicitly taught that the distinctions in the Godhead are eternal realities that should be respected in our understanding of and teaching concerning the Divine Trinity. He rejected any thought that there is no eternal distinction between the Father, the Son, and the Spirit, as these sample excerpts attest:

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. (*The Crucial Points of the Major Items of the Lord's Recovery Today*, 10-11)

We cannot say that since the Father and the Son are one, They are exactly the same. If They were exactly the same, there would not be any distinctions among the Father, the Son, and the Spirit. God would simply be one and would not be the Father, the Son, and the Spirit. (*Vessels Useful to the Lord*, 157)

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. (*Truth Lessons*, Vol. 1, Level 1, 23)

Furthermore, Witness Lee clearly taught that even in time, while God operates to accomplish His great plan, or economy, the distinctions among the three are to be respected, even to the extent that each has His distinct operation in that economy, as the Christian church has long affirmed. This understanding is clearly enunciated in these sample excerpts:

The Father accomplished the first step of the plan, of the economy. He worked in choosing us and in predestinating us. The work of selection and the work of predestination were done by the Father, not by the Son or by the Spirit. We must be careful, though, to realize that the Father did the selection and the predestination, but He did not do them alone. The Father of the Triune Godhead did the choosing and the predestination in the Son and with the Spirit. (*Elders' Training, Book 3: The Way to Carry Out the Vision*, 69)

In the work of the Father's plan we can say that the Father did the works in the Son and with the Spirit, but we cannot say that the Son did that work with the Father and by the Spirit. Neither can we say that the Spirit did the works of the plan as the Son, with the Father. (*Ibid.*, 70)

There is nothing wrong with saying that God exercised His foreknowledge, chose us, predestinated us, and created the world. God also became flesh and accomplished redemption. He regenerated us and He is sanctifying us and guiding us. We

cannot say, however, that the Son selected us and that the Spirit predestinated us. Neither can we say that the Father became flesh, died on the cross for our sins, resurrected, and ascended. Acts 20:28 tells us that God purchased the church with His own blood. We can say in a general way that God purchased or redeemed the church. We cannot say, however, that the Father purchased us. In the Bible we cannot see the church of the Father or the church of the Spirit, but the church of Christ and the church of God. The Father, however, has regenerated us because His function as a Father is begetting. (Ibid., 84)

Also, in the second step of God’s economy, the step of accomplishment, the Son did all the works. We cannot say the Father did the accomplishing work with the Son and by the Spirit. Neither can we say that the Spirit accomplished the Father’s plan as the Son, with the Father. 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. (Ibid., 70-71)

It is simply wrong to charge or even imply, as the signers of the open letter do, that Witness Lee was a modalist who denied the eternal distinctions among the three of the Divine Trinity. As can be seen above, he explicitly denied a modalistic view of God and clearly affirmed the distinctions of Father, Son, and Spirit as realities in the Godhead that exist eternally.

We suspect that the signers of the open letter would now counter by asking, “If Witness Lee was not a modalist and truly believed that the Father, the Son, and the Spirit are eternally distinct, why then did he say what he said in the first six quotations, under our heading ‘On the Nature of God’?” To properly answer this question, we must first understand that all six quotations directly address the other, equally important side of

the truth concerning the Divine Trinity, that is, the oneness of God even in His trinity. Unless we understand this point clearly, the six quotations, taken in isolation as they are in the open letter, appear modalistic. In point of fact, what Witness Lee was trying to do, and what the larger contexts of the six quotations make clear, was to affirm the truth concerning the oneness of God, which should be held equally by all Christians and which we hope the signers of the open letter will agree with.

Witness Lee and the Truth concerning the Oneness of God

While we must recognize that God is three and that the Father, the Son, and the Spirit are eternally distinct realities in the Godhead, we must never lose sight of the fact that the God whom we believe in, worship, and love is one God, not three Gods. We Christians, who hold dearly that God is triune, must hold, in that faith, its fundamental realization that there is but one God, declared both by our Lord (echoing Moses) and by Paul: “Hear, Israel: the Lord our God is one Lord” (Mark 12:29; cf. Deut 6:4) and “To us there is one God” (1 Cor. 8:6). While our faith apprehends that God is three, it firmly denies that there are three Gods. The faith of the Christian church across the ages substantiates the reality of one God in trinity—the Father, the Son, and the Spirit. Admittedly, this is a great mystery to human intellect, but we must not fall prey to the urges of human intellect and allow ourselves, even subconsciously, to think that there are three Gods. The tendency to do so is great indeed. For example, we ask our readers to examine their own personal understanding concerning the Triune God: Do you consider that the Father, the Son, and the Spirit are three separate persons, or do you understand that They are one God always, certainly distinct from one another but never separate, as the Bible clearly teaches¹² and as great teachers of the Christian

¹²In the ensuing discussion, emphasis is given to those portions of Scripture addressed in the quotes from Witness Lee’s ministry that are

faith in the early church¹³ and the Reformation,¹⁴ as well as respected theologians in more recent times,¹⁵ properly affirm?

printed out of context in the open letter. Many more scriptural passages could be cited that demonstrate the inseparability of the Father, Son, and Spirit.

¹³ Tertullian (2nd c.): “Bear always in mind that this is the rule of faith which I profess; by it I testify that the Father, and the Son, and the Spirit are inseparable from each other” (*Against Praxeas*, 9, cited in *The Teachings of the Church Fathers* [ed. by John R. Willis, S.J. New York: Herder and Herder, 1966], 177); Gregory Nazianzen (4th c.): “The Godhead is, to speak concisely, undivided in separate Persons” (*The Fifth Theological Oration—On the Holy Spirit*, sec. 14, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, Series II [NPNF2] [ed. by Philip Schaff and Henry Wace. New York: The Christian Literature Co., 1895], VII:318); Basil of Caesarea (4th c.): “For it is in no wise possible to entertain the idea of severance or division, in such a way as that the Son should be thought of apart from the Father, or the Spirit be disjoined from the Son” (*Letters*, 38, cited in Willis, 185); Ambrose (4th c.): “We hold the distinction, not the confusion of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit; a distinction without separation; a distinction without plurality” (*To Gratian, On the Christian Faith*, 4:8, cited in Willis, 185); *Symbol of the Eleventh Council of Toledo* (675): “For this reason we profess and believe that this Trinity is inseparable and distinct [*inconfusa*]. We say, therefore, of these three persons, as our forefathers defined it, that they should be acknowledged, not separated” (cited in J. Neuner & J. Dupuis, *The Christian Faith in the Doctrinal Documents of the Catholic Church* [5th ed., London: HarperCollins Religious, 1991], 113-114)

¹⁴ Calvin et al. (1559): “The three persons not confused, but distinct, and yet not separate, but of the same essence, equal in eternity and power” (*The French Confession of Faith*, Art. 6, cited in *The Creeds of Christendom* [ed. by Philip Schaff; rev. by David S. Schaff. Harper and Row, 1931. Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1983], 363); Martin Luther (1566): “But let us stick to God’s Word in the Holy Scripture, namely, that Christ is true God with God the Father, and that the Holy Ghost is true God, and yet there are not three Gods, nor three substances, as three men, three angels, three sons, three windows, &c. No: God is not separated or divided in such manner in his substance, but there is only and alone one divine essence, and no more” (*Table Talk*, tr./ed. by William Hazlitt [London: George Bell and Sons, 1875], 75; *The Second Helvetic Confession* (1566): “Notwithstanding we believe and teach that the same immense, one and indivisible God is in person inseparably and without confusion distinguished as Father, Son and Holy Spirit” (cited in *Reformed Confessions of the 16th Century* [ed. by Arthur C. Cochrane. Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1966], 228).

¹⁵ Augustus H. Strong: “The Scripture representations of this intercommunion prevent us from conceiving of the distinctions called Father,

The question, we believe, poignantly exposes the ineffability of the mystery of the Triune God. Historically, Christians have often tended to drift in concept toward tritheism, the mistaken belief that there are three Gods, even while openly confessing otherwise. In point of fact, the varieties of modalism that we have examined above came into existence in the early church due to fears concerning the notion, rational yet nevertheless mistaken, that the Father, the Son, and the Spirit are three separate Gods (Kelly 119). Yet the more subtle danger to a proper understanding of the Divine Trinity has never been the obvious error of modalism, and the Christian church has repeatedly repelled this heresy. The other extreme belief, the concept that there are three Gods, which is secretly held so often in the unguarded thoughts of many a common believer

Son, and Holy Spirit as involving separation between them" (*Systematic Theology*, [Old Tappan, N.J.: Revell, 1960, c1907], 333); H. R. Mackintosh: "In strictness, then, as was argued previously, we use the word 'Person' from simple poverty of language: to indicate our belief, that is, in the reality of Divine distinctions, not to affirm separate conscious beings" (*The Doctrine of the Person of Jesus Christ* [Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1913], 524); Louis Berkhof: "Experience teaches that where you have a person, you also have a distinct individual essence. Every person is a distinct and separate individual, in whom human nature is individualized. But in God there are no three individuals alongside of, and separate from, one another, but only personal self-distinctions within the Divine essence, which is not only generically, but also numerically, one." (*Systematic Theology* [Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1941], 87); Lewis Sperry Chafer: "Language labors under difficulties at this point. The Persons are not separate, but distinct. The Trinity is composed of three united Persons without separate existence—so completely united as to form One God." (*Systematic Theology* [Dallas: Dallas Seminary Press, 1947], 276); Loraine Boettner: "When we say there are three distinct persons in the Godhead we do not mean that each one is as separate from the others as one human being is from every other... The Father, Son and Holy Spirit can be distinguished, but they cannot be separated; for they each possess the same identical numerical substance or essence. They do not merely exist alongside of each other, as did Washington, Jefferson and Franklin, but they permeate and interpenetrate each other, are in and through each other." (*Studies in Theology* [Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co., 1947], 109). Numerous other sources are available.

and even of many a Christian teacher, has long been with the church and continues among us to this day. While we can, with some ease, cast off the simple error of modalism, the genuine truth of one God in trinity is apprehended by faith and not casually, and it is often replaced more easily with the simplistic and hidden notion of three separate persons, three separate Gods.

Very often in his ministry Witness Lee battled the concept of tritheism, hidden in the hearts of many believers today. Explicit denunciations of tritheism in his ministry are numerous, but a few examples here will suffice for the point:

Certain of today’s fundamental Bible teachers are actually tritheistic, perhaps unconsciously. These teachers say not only that the Father, the Son, and the Spirit are distinct but also that They are separate. We can say that the Father, the Son, and the Spirit are distinct, but not that They are separate. We cannot separate the Son from the Father, or the Father and the Son from the Spirit, because all three coexist and coinhere. (*The Conclusion of the New Testament*, 31)

The other great heresy is tritheism, which says that the Father, the Son, and the Spirit coexist simultaneously and separately. The tritheists ignore the coinherence of the Father, the Son, and the Spirit. Thus, they separate the Triune God into three Gods. This is a prevailing heresy today. Many dare not confess that they hold this view because the Bible clearly says that there is only one God, but they believe this in their heart. (*The Full Knowledge of the Word of God*, 72)

There should not be any doubt in us that the Father, the Son, and the Spirit are truly one and are one God. Although we believe in the Trinity, we definitely do not believe in three Gods. Tritheism, the belief in three Gods, is heresy, and we must condemn it. Although God is one, there is a clear distinction between the Father, the Son, and the Spirit in the Godhead. (*Life-study of 1, 2, & 3 John, Jude*, 196)

A number of Christians today believe that the three of the Triune God are three gods. They believe the wrong teaching of tritheism. Tritheism, the teaching that there are three gods, is

heresy. The three of the Godhead are distinct, but they are not separate. The three of the Godhead mutually indwell and live in one another. This is called coinherence. (*The Intrinsic View of the Body of Christ*, 91)

QUOTATIONS 3 AND 6

In evaluating the first six quotations in the open letter, we must, first of all, understand that in the context of each Witness Lee was trying to override the mistaken concept that the three of the Godhead are separate Gods. In Quotations 3 and 6 this attempt is strongly evident:

Quotation 3

The traditional explanation of the Trinity is grossly inadequate and borders on tritheism. When the Spirit of God is joined with us, God is not left behind, nor does Christ remain on the throne. This is the impression Christianity gives. They think of the Father as one Person, sending the Son, another Person, to accomplish redemption, after which the Son sends the Spirit, yet another Person. The Spirit, in traditional thinking, comes into the believers, while the Father and Son are left on the throne. When believers pray, they are taught to bow before the Father and pray in the name of the Son. To split the Godhead into these separate Persons is not the revelation of the Bible.... (*Life Messages*, 164)

Quotation 6

The Father, the Son, and the Spirit are not three separate persons or three Gods; they are one God, one reality, one person. (*The Triune God to Be Life to the Tripartite Man*, 48)

We understand that the signers of the open letter may take offense with Witness Lee's characterization of "the traditional explanation of the Trinity" as "grossly inadequate" and one that "borders on tritheism" in Quotation 3. But as we have seen, no proper explanation of the Divine Trinity should admit the notion that the three of the Godhead are separate, regardless of tradition or personal sentiment. Thus, when the Spirit comes to indwell the believers, an action that is distinctly the Spirit's, we

must understand that His coming and His indwelling are inseparable from the Father and from the Son because in His eternal being He is inseparable from the Father and the Son yet nevertheless distinct.¹⁶ This notion, that the three are distinct yet not separate, is not an easy one to fully grasp, but it is a belief that we must properly hold to. It is indeed the case that much of Christianity today gives the impression that when the Spirit comes, the Father and the Son are apart from Him. We believe that our Christian readers can attest to this impression, and the very fact that the signers find Quotation 3 offensive indicates that they themselves have this impression. What Witness Lee is denouncing is the thought that the Spirit is separated from the Father and the Son and, thus, that there are three

¹⁶ Charles Gore: “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” (*The Incarnation of the Son of God* [New York: Charles Scribner & Sons, 1891], 218; James Denney: “Here [in 2 Corinthians 3:17], so far as the practical experience of Christians goes, no distinction is made between the Spirit of Christ and Christ Himself; Christ dwells in Christians through His Spirit” (*The Second Epistle to the Corinthians* [London: Hodder and Stroughton, 1894], 134); H. B. Swete: “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” [ellipses and italics in original] (*The Holy Spirit in the New Testament* [London: Macmillan and Company, 1910], 301); W. H. Griffith Thomas: “It is essential to preserve with care both sides of this truth. Christ and the Spirit are different yet the same, the same yet different” (*The Holy Spirit* [Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 1986 (1913)], 144; Loraine Boettner: “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” (*Studies in Theology* [Phillipsburg, NJ: The Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1947], 107); F. F. Bruce, commenting on “Christ in you, the hope of glory” in Colossians 1:27: “The indwelling Christ and the indwelling Spirit are practically interchangeable thoughts for Paul (cf. Rom. 8:10-11), although elsewhere it is the indwelling Spirit that he presents as the hope or guarantee of coming glory” (*The Epistles to the Colossians, to Philemon, and to the Ephesians* [Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1984], 86).

separate Gods. In Quotation 3, he forcefully says that “God is not left behind, nor does Christ remain on the throne,” and his point in making this stark statement is that the Father and the Son should not be conceived of as being separated from the Spirit when the Spirit is joined to the believers. This does not destroy the distinctions between the three, but it does annul the concept of three separate persons, three separate Gods, as well it should. Further, the signers of the open letter may wish their readers to understand in this quotation that Witness Lee denies that the Father and the Son are on the throne now that the Spirit is in the believers. He does not. What he is denying is the mistaken notion that splits “the Godhead into these separate Persons,” not that the Father and the Son are on the throne. Elsewhere he makes this clear:

We must also realize that while the Father is with the Son and in the Son, He is also on the throne. The two are distinct, yet not separate. This is a divine mystery which we cannot fathom. On the one hand, the three in the Godhead coexist and on the other hand, they coinhere. They mutually indwell each other and interpenetrate one another...God the Father was within Jesus on the earth and at the same time He was on the throne. We should not be bothered by this...Because He is the eternal God, He is above time and space and not limited by them. (*God's New Testament Economy*, 25)

Contrary to physical logic, God the Father was both on the throne in the heavens and with and in the Son on the earth (John 8:29; 10:38; 14:10, 20, 21; 17:23). While they are certainly distinct, they are inseparable. Where the Son is, the Father is there with and in Him. Likewise, as the Spirit dwells in the believers, He dwells inseparably from the Father and the Son, and this is the point that Witness Lee stresses in Quotation 3.

The same stress is found in Quotation 6: “The Father, the Son, and the Spirit are not three separate persons or three Gods.” We seriously wonder about the orthodoxy of the signers of the open letter if they take exception to this fundamental matter. Do they wish to defend the notion that the Father, the Son, and the

Spirit *are* three separate persons or three Gods? We hope not, but we believe that our readers will question, as we do, why the signers find this quotation offensive. We also hope that they do not take exception with Witness Lee’s declaration that “they are one God, one reality.” As we have made clear above, belief in one God is thoroughly Christian, and since God is both one and three, belief in God as one reality is also thoroughly Christian. It is certainly true that God is also three, but that respects only one aspect of the truth concerning the Triune God. If God is also one God, as we adamantly maintain that He is, then He is also one reality. Perhaps, then, it is Witness Lee’s declaration that “they [i.e., the Father, the Son, and the Spirit]...are one person” which bothers the signers of the open letter. This may well be the case since traditional theology has generally expressed the mystery of the Trinity as “one God in three persons.” But against the background of all that we have seen from his other writings above, Witness Lee can hardly be understood to be saying that the Father, the Son, and the Spirit are not eternally distinct. To try to press Witness Lee into a modalistic point of view simply because he says in Quotation 6 that the three are one person is against the immediate context from which the quotation was excised and against the stronger testimony of his larger ministry. At most, one could argue that Witness Lee does not like the word *person* as the best term to describe what is distinct in the Godhead, and certainly that argument could be made based on several excerpts from his ministry. Often, in expressing his reluctance to use the word *person* to describe the three of the Divine Trinity, he incorporated the comments on the use of this word by the theologian Griffith Thomas (one of the co-founders of Dallas Theological Seminary, with which four of the signers, including its current president, are affiliated):

The term *three Persons* does not exist in the Scriptures, but is added by men in their interpretation. Since they cannot say that the three—the Father, Son, and Spirit—are three Gods, what else can they say? So the designation *three Persons* is used. 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. Therefore, Griffith Thomas (famous for his expositions on the book of Romans), in his book *The Principles of Theology*, wrote in this wise concerning the trinity of the Godhead: "The term 'Person' is also sometimes objected to. Like all human language, it is liable to be accused of inadequacy and even positive error. It certainly must not be pressed too far, or it will lead to Tritheism....While, 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 truth and experience of the Trinity is not dependent upon theological terminology." Therefore, concerning the three Persons we can only say this much. We should not "press too far," or it will lead to tritheism. (*Concerning the Triune God—the Father, the Son, and the Spirit*, 10-11, quoting W. H. Griffith Thomas, *The Principles of Theology: An Introduction to the Thirty-Nine Articles* [6th rev. ed. Greenwood, S.C.: Attic Press, 1978], 31)

The problem with the term *three persons* is that for many people it really means three persons in the common sense of the term and suggests three separate beings, which would go against the side of the truth concerning the oneness of God. Yet, while Witness Lee did not like to press the term *person* too far, he did not object to its use for convenience, as this excerpt makes clear:

Many preachers, ministers, pastors, and Bible teachers unconsciously believe in three gods. According to theology, they are taught that God is one, yet they may have difficulty concerning God also being three. He is the Father, the Son, and the Spirit (Matt. 28:19). Some have said that there is one God in three persons. But the term *person* is not found in the Bible in regard to the Triune God. W. H. Griffith Thomas, one of the founders of Dallas Theological Seminary, said that the term *person* must not be pressed too far, or it will lead to tritheism. The term *person* can be borrowed temporarily in order to describe the three of the Godhead. (*The Practice of the Church Life according to the God-ordained Way*, 73)

In fact, he uses the term *three persons* frequently in his ministry, especially when he is not stressing the obvious danger of the term. Here is one of the numerous instances of his own use of the term to refer to the three of the Godhead:

In the same principle, while our unique God has three persons—Father, Son, and Spirit—we should never consider Them as three Gods. Although They are three, yet They are one God; although one God, yet there are the three persons—Father, Son, and Spirit. This is the unique God whom we serve and worship! And this also is the only Lord whom we believe and adore! Hallelujah! (*Concerning the Triune God—the Father, the Son, and the Spirit*, 25-26)

Thus, we have clear examples that Witness Lee, following traditional practice, speaks of God as three persons, and we have the quotation, isolated by the signers of the open letter, in which he speaks of God as one person. Knowing now his proper reluctance for the term *person* and yet his leniency in its use, our readers should find no fault in Witness Lee for Quotation 6. The signers of the open letter have either failed to recognize Witness Lee’s true position on this issue or, worse, chosen to ignore it.

QUOTATIONS 1, 4, AND 5

Turning now to Quotations 1, 4, and 5, we can easily see that, in isolation as they are in the open letter, these quotations give the reader the impression that Witness Lee blurred or, worse, annihilated the distinctions among the persons of the Trinity in his teaching. We hope that we have adequately demonstrated above that he did not. But it is also true that Witness Lee did not hesitate to identify the Son with the Father or the Son with the Spirit, because the Bible itself does so in plain language, most notably in the following three verses, which are the objects of Witness Lee’s commentary in Quotations 1, 4, and 5:

For a child is born to us,
 A Son is given to us;
 And the government
 Is upon His shoulder;

And His name will be called
Wonderful Counselor,
Mighty God,
Eternal Father,
Prince of Peace. (Isa. 9:6)

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

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

While some theologians overemphasize the distinctions between the persons of the Trinity—sometimes to the point of wrongly separating the persons—and view the biblical identifications of the Son with the Father and with the Spirit as threats to those distinctions, Witness Lee sought to understand why the identifications are made in the Bible in the first place. This approach, we feel, gives proper primacy to the divinely-inspired text and avoids the peril of making something external to the Bible a final arbiter of truth. We must stress the fact that it is the Bible that makes these identifications, and it is in the Bible that the meaning of such identifications must be found. Some theologians deny the identifications of the Son with the Father and with the Spirit in the scriptural passages above, but they do so only by the applications of theological systems of thought that are external to the Bible. Witness Lee strongly disagreed with this approach to understanding these and all portions of Scripture. This does not mean that he had no use for theology as a help to our study of the Word of God, but he certainly disagreed with the notion that an external system of theology should become the yardstick by which the divine truth is measured. Those theologians who deny the identification of the Son with the Father and with the Spirit in the three biblical portions above do so because their theologies require that the Son cannot be called the Father, that the last Adam (Christ) could not have become the life-giving Spirit, and that the Lord Jesus Christ could not be the Spirit, contrary to what the Bible says clearly. Of course, to do so, they must offer alternative interpretations of what these verses mean, and if space permitted, these alternatives could be presented and critiqued

here.¹⁷ But even without a full evaluation of the alternative interpretations, the basis for all of them is clear: in the theologies that these interpretations represent, the Son cannot, in any way, be identified with the Father and with the Spirit, so the Scriptures that clearly indicate that He is must not mean what they say; these verses *must* have some other interpretations. Witness Lee was not content with this assumption.

In quotations 1 and 4 Witness Lee is specifically commenting on Isaiah 9:6, although the signers of the open letter do not include anything from the surrounding context of these quotations to indicate that he is relying on the text of the Bible for his statements. In the preceding contexts of both quotations, he quotes Isaiah 9:6, and his point in both contexts is that the Bible says that the Son given to us is to be called not only the Mighty God (which we all should believe) but also the Eternal Father (which the signers hope we will not believe). We add in brackets below portions of the contexts for each quotation that are necessary for understanding Witness Lee’s full intention but were omitted by the signers of the open letter:

Quotation 1 [in context]

[In Isaiah 9:6 there is a parallel line: that is, “unto us a son is given...and his name shall be called...The everlasting Father.” It is abundantly clear that the Son mentioned here is Christ; yet the Son is called, “The everlasting Father.” This statement cannot be easily comprehended; yet it is written.] The Son is called the Father; so the Son must be the Father. We must realize this fact. There are some who say that He is called the Father, but He is not really the Father. But how could He be *called* the Father and yet not *be* the Father?...In the

¹⁷ See “The Distinctiveness of the Son in the Divine Trinity” in “A Statement concerning the Teachings of the Local Churches and Living Stream Ministry in Response to Dialogue with Fuller Theological Seminary” for a review of the major alternative interpretations of these verses (available at www.lctestimony.org/StatementOfTeachings.html#divine-trinity and in the book *A Confirmation of the Gospel: Concerning the Teaching of the Local Churches and Living Stream Ministry* (DCP Press, 2009), 14-20, at www.contendingforthefaith.com/eBooks/Concerning Our Teachings.pdf.

place where no man can approach Him (1 Tim. 6:16), God is the Father. When He comes forth to manifest Himself, He is the Son. So, a Son is given, yet His name is called “The everlasting Father.” This very Son who has been given to us is the very Father. (*The All-Inclusive Spirit of Christ*, 4-5)

Quotation 4 [in context]

THE SON IS THE FATHER,
AND THE SON IS ALSO THE SPIRIT

[Isaiah 9:6 says, “Unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given...and his name shall be called...Mighty God, Everlasting Father.” In this verse, the “Mighty God” matches the “child,” and “Everlasting Father” matches the “son.” Yes, He is a child, yet He is the Mighty God. The child who was born in the manger in Bethlehem was the Mighty God. Since the child and the Mighty God are one, so also the Son and the Everlasting Father are one. The Son is the Eternal Father. It is indeed difficult to fully explain this matter, yet the Scriptures have so said. “Unto us a son is given...and his name shall be called... Everlasting Father.” Does this not plainly say that the Son is the Father? If the Son is not the Father, how could the “son” be called the “Father”? If we acknowledge that the “child” of which this verse speaks is the “Mighty God,” then we must also acknowledge that the “son” of which this verse speaks is also the “Everlasting Father”; otherwise, we are not believing the clearly stated revelation of the Scriptures. But we do deeply believe that according to the words here the Lord Jesus who became the child is the Mighty God;] and the Lord Jesus who is the Son is also the Eternal Father. Our Lord is the Son, and He is also the Father. Hallelujah! (*Concerning the Triune God—The Father, the Son, and the Spirit*, 18-19)

Once the scriptural basis for Witness Lee’s statements above is acknowledged and once we realize that he is accounting for pronouncements that are purely biblical, Quotations 1 and 4 lose some of the dramatic effect that they have due to the signers isolating them. His point is simply this: the Bible says that the Son is to be called the Father; thus, there must be a valid sense in which the Son is, in some way, the Father. And yet, in trying to understand how the Son is the Father, we cannot lose sight

of the equally valid truth that the Son is distinct from the Father, as Witness Lee strongly asserts elsewhere. We believe that he is implicitly acknowledging the distinction when he admits that “this statement cannot be easily comprehended; yet it is written”; that “it is indeed difficult to fully explain this matter, yet the Scriptures have so said.” Some may wish to explain the difficulty away by appealing to any number of interpretations that deny the identification of the Son with the Father, but Witness Lee explained the difficulty by appealing to the reality of coinherence, of mutual indwelling, in the Godhead, which the Holy Scriptures firmly support:

Philip said to Him, Lord, show us the Father and it is sufficient for us. Jesus said to him, Have I been so long a time with you, and you have not known Me, Philip? He who has seen Me has seen the Father; how is it that you say, Show us the Father? Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in Me? The words that I say to you I do not speak from Myself, but the Father who abides in Me does His works. Believe Me that I am in the Father and the Father is in Me; but if not, believe because of the works themselves. (John 14:8-11)

Witness Lee explains:

We have a word concerning this coinherence in John 14:10a: “Do you not believe that I am in the Father, and the Father is in Me?” Here we have the mutual indwelling of the Father and the Son. In John 14:11 the Lord goes on to say, “Believe Me that I am in the Father and the Father in Me.” The Lord says that the Son is in the Father and the Father is in the Son. What a mystery this is! Because the Father is in the Son, when the Son speaks, the Father, who abides in the Son, does His work. The Father does His work in the Son’s speaking because they are in one another. (*The Conclusion of the New Testament*, 239-241)

Some have mistakenly thought that the Son and the Father are separate and that the Son merely represents the Father. But the Lord Jesus said, “He who has seen Me has seen the Father” (John 14:9). This is not a matter of representation but a matter of embodiment. The Father is embodied in the Son

(Col. 2:9). When we see the Son, we see the Father, because the Son is the embodiment of the Father. The Son as the embodiment of the Father cannot be separated from the Father. He and the Father are one in the way of coinherence. (*The Conclusion of the New Testament*, 242)

In explaining the hard passages from Scripture that identify the Son with the Father or the Son with the Spirit, Witness Lee appealed to the reality of coinherence as the basis for the oneness in the Godhead, which, he felt, underlies these biblical statements.¹⁸ Because the Father is in the Son and the Son is in

¹⁸ The doctrine of coinherence is by no means Witness Lee's invention. The mutual indwelling of the Father, Son, and Spirit has been affirmed by the church since its inception. Athanasius: "...so it is that these men still, as if bedewed with the serpent's poison, not seeing what they ought to see, nor understanding what they read, as if in vomit from the depth of the irreligious heart, have next proceeded to disparage our Lord's words, 'I in the Father and the Father in Me;' saying, 'How can the One be contained in the Other and the Other in the One?'" (Against the Arians, Discourse III, *NPPF2*, Vol. IV, 23, [ed. by Philip Schaff and Henry Wace. New York: The Christian Literature Co., 1895], 393); Hilary of Poitiers: "The words of the Lord, *I in the Father, and the Father in Me*, confuse many minds, and not unnaturally, for the powers of human reason cannot provide them with any intelligible meaning.... [They] reciprocally contain One Another, so that One should permanently envelope, and also be permanently enveloped by, the Other, whom yet He envelopes. This is a problem which the wit of man will never solve, nor will human research ever find an analogy for this condition of Divine existence. But what man cannot understand, God can be" (On the Trinity, *NPNF2*, Vol. IX [ed. by Philip Schaff and Henry Wace. New York: The Christian Literature Co., 1895], 62); Augustine: "So both each [of the Three] are in each, and all in each, and each in all, and all in all, and all are one. Let him who sees this, whether in part, or 'through a glass and in an enigma,' rejoice in knowing God; and let him honor Him as God, and give thanks; but let him who does not see it, strive to see it through piety, not to cavil at it through blindness" (On the Trinity, *NPNF2*, Vol. III, [ed. by Philip Schaff and Henry Wace. New York: The Christian Literature Co., 1895], 103); Bishop George Bull: "The persons mutually contain each other, and all the three have an immeasurable whereabouts (*immensum ubi*, as the schoolmen expressed it;) so that wherever one Person is, there the other two exist; in other words, They all are every where..." (*A Defense of the Nicene Creed*, Vol. 2 [Oxford: John Henry Parker, 1852], 652-653); W. H. Griffith Thomas: "While we use the term to denote distinctions in the Godhead, we do not imply distinctions which amount to separateness, but distinctions which

the Father, because the Father and the Son coinhere eternally, at times the Bible says that the Son is identified with the Father, as we see in Isaiah 9:6. The Son, who is certainly distinct from the Father, is to be called the Eternal Father because in Him the Eternal Father dwells and in Him the Eternal Father works. To see the Son is to see the Father. The fact that there is indeed a Son and indeed a Father respects the distinctions between them, but the fact that the Son can be called the Father and is the Father in the sense that He is indwelt by and manifests the Father respects the oneness in the Godhead. We believe that the signers have misaimed their call on us “to disavow and cease to publish” Quotations 1 and 4. What they are actually calling for is a disavowal of and a cessation to herald the declaration of Isaiah the prophet in the inspired Word of God, which we obviously refuse to do.

In Quotation 5 Witness Lee identifies the Son not only with the Father but also with the Spirit:

Quotation 5

Therefore, it is clear: The Lord Jesus is the Father, the Son, and the Spirit, and He is the very God. He is also the Lord. He is the Father, the Son, the Spirit, the Mighty God, and the Lord. (*The Clear Scriptural Revelation Concerning the Triune God*, www.contendingforthefaitth.org/responses/booklets/triune.html)

What the signers of the open letter have not made clear, however, is that in the extensive preceding context of this quotation Witness Lee examines a series of scriptural passages which indeed identify the Lord Jesus, the Son, with the Father and with the Spirit and as the Mighty God and the Lord. The three verses that we presented at the beginning of this section are among those he examines, but he offers even more in this

are associated with essential mutual co-inherence or inclusiveness” (*The Principles of Theology* [New York: Longmans, Green, & Co., 1930], 31).

context.¹⁹ Again, Witness Lee's point is that it is the Bible that makes these identifications, and though it is difficult to explain them in view of the distinctions which must be held, we cannot simply ignore them or interpret them away in deference to a latent tritheism. To what we have said above about Isaiah 9:6 (which identifies the Son with the Father and the Mighty God), we should now add that 1 Corinthians 15:45 says that Christ, the last Adam, became a life-giving spirit, and there is but one life-giving Spirit in the Godhead. Further, 2 Corinthians 3:17 says that "the Lord is the Spirit," and the Lord in the surrounding context of Paul's letter is Christ. Thus, there is a sense, made valid by Paul himself, in which Christ can be identified with the Spirit. It is quite interesting to note here that the recently published *English Standard Version (ESV) Study Bible*, relying on the most recent evangelical Christian scholarship (which, we assume, the "more than 70 evangelical Christian scholars and ministry leaders" who signed the open letter respect) admits that Paul can be understood as identifying, in some sense, the Son with the Spirit:

Different explanations have been offered for this difficult and compressed statement: Paul may be saying that Christ and the Spirit function together in the Christian's experience—i.e., that the Lord (Christ) comes to us through the ministry of the Spirit (though they are still two distinct persons). (footnote on 2 Cor. 3:17 in *ESV Study Bible* [Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway Bibles, 2008])

These evangelical scholars continue their note with another possible interpretation and may indeed favor it, but here they admit first that an interpretation that identifies Christ with the Spirit, insofar as He "comes to us through the ministry of the Spirit (though they are still two distinct persons)," is valid. Certainly this interpretation is not the same as Witness Lee's, but it is this much similar to it: it allows a sense in which Christ

¹⁹ The full text of this booklet is on the Internet, as cited in Quotation 5, and can be examined there by our readers. It is not lengthy, and therefore, we recommend its full content to our readers.

is identified with the Spirit. They, like Witness Lee, realize that the Bible here offers “a difficult...statement” and that one way to view the statement is to admit to an identification of the Son with the Spirit on some level. Witness Lee’s way to understand how the Bible can say that Christ became the life-giving Spirit and that He is the Spirit is to rely on the coinherence of the Son and the Spirit, by which they are one. This point, however, is not presented to the readers of the open letter by its signers.

QUOTATION 2

The remaining quotation under the heading “On the Nature of God” deals with the incarnation, and we assume that the signers of the open letter have isolated it from its larger context because by themselves these eight words seem either to annul the distinctions in the Trinity or confuse the distinct roles that each of the three have in God’s move in time. These are the eight isolated words:

Quotation 2

...the entire Godhead, the Triune God, became flesh. (*God’s New Testament Economy*, 230)

Let us first say, from a purely logical point of view and without appeal to the larger context that this quotation was severed from, that in these eight words alone the distinctions in the Trinity are implicitly preserved by the phrases *the entire Godhead* and *the Triune God*. That Witness Lee refers to the entire Godhead implies that he understands that the Godhead is not a simple, internally undistinguished reality. That he particularly mentions the Triune God indicates that he holds to the notion that the one God is three. Thus, if the signers have isolated these eight words to adduce, as they attempt to do in the other five quotations under their first heading, that Witness Lee was a modalist who did not respect the eternal distinctions in the Godhead, they have failed to grasp the very words of the quotation that they have isolated. This quotation on its own does not provide evidence that Witness Lee was a modalist, and in view

of all that we have seen above from his ministry, it would be wrong to assert this even if it did in isolation.

But it may be that what the signers hope to alert their readers to in these eight isolated words is that Witness Lee, in their estimation, confused the distinct role of the Son in the incarnation with the roles of the Father and the Spirit. However, it is only in these eight words, taken in isolation, that he could be understood to be confusing the distinct roles in the Trinity. The signers of the open letter either did not read or did not want their readers to read the full pages of the chapter from which these eight words were severed.²⁰ In the full context Witness Lee makes a number of points regarding the scriptural revelation concerning the incarnate Christ. We quote some of those necessary points here, for they provide the basis for what he says in Quotation 2.

The beginning of Matthew tells us how Christ was conceived of the Holy Spirit in the womb of a virgin (1:18, 20). (*God's New Testament Economy*, 227)

The One who came to redeem us was God the Son, but the Lord Jesus told us that as He was working the Father was also working (John 5:17). This shows that the redeeming work was also the Father's work. (*Ibid.*, 229)

Then, later, Quotation 2 and what immediately follows:

...the entire Godhead, the Triune God, became flesh. Economically speaking, God became flesh in the Son. This One who was conceived of the Holy Spirit was born to be a God-man. We cannot say that this God-man is the Son-man. This God-man is the Triune God-man. We believe that Jesus was the complete God and the perfect man. He was the Father, the Son, and the Spirit-man. He lived on this earth as the Triune God for thirty years before the beginning of His earthly ministry. In those thirty years, He was mainly a carpenter in Nazareth. While He was doing His carpentry, the Father was there with Him (John 16:32). Also, while the Father was with

²⁰ The full chapter is available at <http://www.ministrybooks.org>: *God's New Testament Economy*, ch. 21.

Him He did everything by the Spirit (Matt. 12:28). He is a wonderful Person. (Ibid., 230)

And finally, the last paragraph in this section of the chapter:

I hope that we all realize that whatever the Father did, He did in the Son by the Spirit; whatever the Son did, He did with the Father by the Spirit; and whatever the Spirit does, he does as the Son with the Father. The three in the Godhead are not separate, but they are essentially one. Economically the three in the Godhead are consecutive, yet the essential aspect still remains in the economical aspect. The Father’s choosing, the Son’s redeeming, and the Spirit’s applying are all economical, yet in these economical aspects, the essential aspect of the Trinity is still here. When the Father was choosing, the essential Trinity was there also. When the Son came to redeem and when the Spirit comes to apply, the essential Trinity is there. As the conclusion of the sixty-six books of the Bible, Revelation is an all-inclusive revelation comprising all the essential and economical aspects of the Trinity. We have seen a wonderful Person who is both essential and economical. (Ibid., 232-233)

Witness Lee makes it clear that it is indeed the Son who “was conceived,” “who came to redeem us,” and “became flesh”; it is “the Son’s redeeming,” not the Father’s or the Spirit’s. Thus, he identifies the Son as the distinct Agent of the incarnation, as the Christian church has long held. But part of his point in this chapter is that when the Son came in incarnation, He was not separate from the Father and the Spirit, as tritheism supposes. “The three in the Godhead are not separate.” Rather, when the Son came in incarnation, He was in essence “begotten of the Holy Spirit” (Matt. 1:18, 20). When He did anything, the Father was abiding in Him and working in His doing: “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” (John 14:10). “My Father is working until now, and I also am working” (John 5:17). During His ministry on the earth, He worked by the Spirit of God and brought in not His own reign but that of God: “But

if I, by the Spirit of God, cast out the demons, then the kingdom of God has come upon you” (Matt. 12:28). Thus, when the Son became flesh, He incorporated the Father and the Spirit by virtue of the mutual indwelling that exists among the three of the Godhead (coinherence) and by virtue of their working together as one. In a later publication, Witness Lee enunciates this point with striking clarity:

God in His Divine Trinity is an incorporation (John 14:10-11). The three of the Divine Trinity are an incorporation both in what They are and in what They do.

The three of the Divine Trinity are incorporated by coinhering mutually. Concerning this, the Lord Jesus said, “Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in Me?” (v. 10a). In verse 11a He went on to say, “Believe Me that I am in the Father and the Father is in Me.” The Son is in the Father and the Father is in the Son by a mutual coinhering.

The three of the Divine Trinity are an incorporation also by working together as one. In verses 10b and 11b the Lord said, “The words that I say to you I do not speak from Myself, but the Father who abides in Me does His works.... Believe... because of the works themselves.” Here the Lord seemed to be saying, “You have seen all the works which I have done. These works were not done by Me, for I never did anything of Myself. Whatever I did was the Father’s work. The Father and I work together mutually.” This working together as one reveals that the Divine Trinity is an incorporation. (*The Issue of Christ Being Glorified by the Father with the Divine Glory*, 24-25)

It is in this sense that Witness Lee can say, in eight simple words: “The entire Godhead, the Triune God, became flesh.” As Christians, we all must confess that “Jesus Christ has come in the flesh.” To do so is to be of God and to show evidence that the Spirit of God is operating within our spirit (1 John 4:2). But we must also understand that Jesus Christ, who came in the flesh, incorporated the Father and the Spirit in His being and in His doing. He incorporated the entire Godhead, the Triune God, in who He was and in what He did (Col. 2:9). When He became flesh, the entire Triune God was with Him and operating in

Him. Certainly, He is the subject of that incarnation, as Witness Lee also confesses, but we should not deny that He incorporated the Father and the Spirit in His being and His actions. To do so would be to sever the Son from the Father and the Spirit, to isolate the three into separate persons, and to propose three Gods. Actually, this is what we suspect the signers of the open letter are subconsciously doing, and our readers should not fall into the same error of the signers, regardless of the status of the signers as evangelical scholars and ministry leaders.

On the Nature of Quotations 1 through 6

As we have seen above, Witness Lee keenly understood the pitfalls of both modalism and tritheism, and because he sought and, we believe, found the proper balance in his teaching, our readers should not be persuaded that he espoused either heresy. We would ask our readers to be fairer, nobler, and more Christian in their understanding of Witness Lee than the signers of the open letter were in their isolating of these six statements of his. Long before the open letter was published, Witness Lee recognized that quotations could be taken out of context from his ministry to make him look like either a modalist or a tritheist, as, he notes, could be done with the writings of Augustine (A.D. 353-430):

Throughout the years I have given many messages on the Triune God. If certain sentences in those messages are taken out of context, it may appear that I teach modalism. However, if certain other sentences are taken out of context, it may appear that I also teach tritheism. Of course, I teach neither modalism nor tritheism.

Augustine, a leader in teaching the divine Trinity, was sometimes accused of being modalistic and at other times was accused of being tritheistic. Because he taught that the Father, Son, and the Spirit are one God, not three separate Gods, he was accused of teaching modalism. But because he strongly emphasized that God is three—the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—he was also accused of teaching tritheism. Likewise, when we point out the Scriptures that reveal that our God is absolutely one, that the Son is even called the Father (Isa. 9:6),

and that the Son is the Spirit (1 Cor. 15:45; 2 Cor. 3:17), we have been falsely accused of teaching modalism. But when our writings are considered fairly and completely, it will become evident that we teach neither modalism nor tritheism but the pure revelation of the Triune God according to the Scriptures. (*The Conclusion of the New Testament*, 29-30)

This is exactly what the signers of the open letter have done. What is unfortunate is that as scholars they should be aware that others before them have executed similarly misguided treatments of the writings of not only Augustine but also Irenaeus, Tertullian, Athanasius, the Cappadocian Fathers, and a list of other solidly orthodox teachers on the Trinity. Sadly, the signers of the open letter have stumbled over the basic tenet of proper research, that is, fairly and completely representing their quoted sources. We genuinely believe that our readers will recognize their serious error and turn away from their attempts to unfairly discredit Witness Lee. We do not ask that anyone agree with Witness Lee or with us who accept his ministry, but we do hope that no one will accept the unfair, unprofessional, and unconscionable treatment of his writings that the signers of the open letter have published.

“ON THE NATURE OF HUMANITY”

Quotation 7

Christ is of two natures, the human and the divine, and we are the same: we are of the human nature, but covered with the divine. He is the God-man, and we are the God-men. He is the ark made of wood covered with gold, and we are the boards made of wood covered with gold. In number we are different, but in nature we are exactly the same. (*The All-Inclusive Christ*, 103)

Quotation 8

God can say to His believers, “I am divine and human,” and His believers can reply, “Praise You, Lord. You are divine and human, and we are human and divine.” (*The Triune God to Be Life to the Tripartite Man*, 51-52)

Quotation 9

My burden is to show you clearly that God’s economy and plan is to make Himself man and to make us, His created beings, “God,” so that He is “man-ized” and we are “God-ized.” In the end, He and we, we and He, all become God-men. (*A Deeper Study of the Divine Dispensing*, 54)

Quotation 10

We the believers are begotten of God. What is begotten of man is man, and what is begotten of God must be God. We are born of God; hence, in this sense, we are God. (*Ibid.*, 53)

Quotation 11

Because the Father, the Son, and the Spirit are all one with the Body of Christ, we may say that the Triune God is now the “four-in-one God.” These four are the Father, the Son, the Spirit, and the Body. The Three of the Divine Trinity cannot be confused or separated, and the four-in-one also cannot be separated or confused. (*Ibid.*, 203-204)

The Essential Doctrine of the Christian Faith at Issue: The Goal of God's Salvation of the Believers in Christ

Quotations 7-11, culled from three publications and compiled under the heading "On the Nature of Humanity," concern the goal of God's salvation of the believers in Christ, that is, the full result of God's divine work in the believers. Here again a false impression has been created by excising and clustering together a few carefully chosen quotations from Witness Lee's ministry, and once again the impression created is shocking and not consistent with Witness Lee's actual understanding of the doctrine in question. In this case, the quotations as compiled give readers of the open letter the misimpression that Witness Lee promoted man to the position of deity and, by so doing, demoted God from His position of eternal inaccessibility as God. This deeply concerns us, for the open letter seems to take advantage of a Christian reader's innate and proper regard for God's complete otherness. Consequently, those readers who are alarmed at the out-of-context quotations may have no hesitation to brand Witness Lee as a heretic who demotes God and promotes human beings to be fully equal with God, as the signers of the open letter hope that they will do. This is unwarranted. What Witness Lee believed and properly taught was the truth of the deification of man, which has been viewed since the second century as an acceptable understanding of the goal of God's salvation by many orthodox teachers in the Christian church. It is certainly not the case that this understanding has been accepted by all Christians, but, as the signers of the open letter should know, a proper understanding of the deification of man has a valid place in the thought and teaching of the Christian church, even if that view is not widely held or known. We doubt that the scholars who signed the open letter are unaware of the historical existence of an acceptable understanding of deification, and hence, we find it unconscionable that they would ignore this fact in order to present Witness Lee as a heretic. It is incumbent upon us, therefore, to make it clear to our readers

that the teaching of the deification of man has had validity in the Christian church for millennia. We understand that many evangelical Christian teachers and their followers today do not hold to this view of the goal of God’s full salvation, and our intention here is not to persuade them or our readers that this view is correct²¹. Rather, we simply hope to make clear that this view has been regarded by many highly orthodox teachers across the centuries as being acceptable and not heretical as the signers of the open letter unfairly and unprofessionally hope to assert. It seems that they wish to enforce their own evangelical view of God’s salvation as the only orthodox view and to brand Witness Lee as being heretical because he does not hold to a view that accords with their own. We may not all agree on the full extent of God’s salvation, but it is highly improper to isolate someone’s statements in such a way as to imply that his or her understanding is not merely a valid alternative but instead a heretical view. We believe that our readers will recognize how far from proper scholarship this is.

Deification in Christian Thought

There are a number of studies that outline in great detail a doctrine of deification that has been promulgated by accepted teachers throughout the centuries.²² But for our purposes and

²¹ For a fuller treatment of our understanding of deification as the goal of God’s full salvation, see *Affirmation & Critique*, 7:2 (2002), available at http://www.affcrit.com/archives/ac_02_02.html.

²² Studies abound, but the following are often cited in literature on deification (also known as divinization and theosis): *Theosis: Deification in Christian Theology*, eds. Stephen Finlan and Vladimir Kharlamov, Princeton Theological Monograph Series (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2006). Jules Gross, *The Divinization of the Christian according to the Greek Fathers*, tr. Paul A. Onica (Anaheim, CA: A & C Press, 2002). Paul R. Hinlicky, “Theological Anthropology: Toward Integrating Theosis and Justification by Faith,” *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 34 (1997): 38-73. Tuomo Mannermaa, “Justification and *Theosis* in Lutheran-Orthodox Perspective,” in *Union with Christ* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 25-41. Steve McCormick, “Theosis in Chrysostom and Wesley: An Eastern

given the fact that the signers of the open letter identify themselves as “evangelical scholars and ministry leaders,” it may be appropriate to consult an evangelical examination of the doctrine by Robert V. Rakestraw, which was published some years back in *The Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*,²³ the flagship publication for evangelical theological studies today. The signers of the open letter are no doubt aware of this journal and its prestige among scholars of their own persuasion. The fact that “an evangelical doctrine of theosis” (deification) was proposed in the premier theological journal of evangelical scholars shows that deification is not strikingly at odds with a proper understanding of God’s salvation. Professor Rakestraw begins his article with these preliminary remarks (with his footnotes included and renumbered):

In one of his letters, Athanasius, the fourth-century defender of the faith, made his famous statement that the Son of God became man “that he might deify us in himself.”²⁴ In his great work, *On the Incarnation*, he wrote similarly that Christ “was made man that we might be made God.”²⁵ This is

Paradigm on Faith and Love,” *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 26 (1991): 38-103. Michael McDaniel, “Salvation as Justification and *Theosis*,” in *Salvation in Christ: A Lutheran-Orthodox Dialogue*, eds. Robert Tobias and John Meyendorff (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1992), 67-83. John Meyendorff, “Theosis in the Eastern Christian Tradition,” in *Christian Spirituality: Post-Reformation and Modern*, eds. Louis Dupré and Don E. Saliers (New York: Crossroad, 1989), 470-476. Frederick W. Norris, “Deification: Consensual and Cogent,” *Scottish Journal of Theology* 49 (1996): 411-428. Norman Russell, *The Doctrine of Deification in the Greek Patristic Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004). Anna Ngaire Williams, *The Ground of Union: Deification in Aquinas and Palamas* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999).

²³ Rakestraw, Robert V. “Becoming like God: An Evangelical Doctrine of Theosis,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 40.2 (June 1997): 257-269.

²⁴ Athanasius, Letter 60, to Adelphius, 4. See also sect. 3 and 8. *NPNF2*, IV, 575-578.

²⁵ Athanasius, *On the Incarnation* 54. *NPNF2*, IV, 65.

the doctrine of theosis, also known as deification, divinization, or, as some prefer, participation in God.²⁶

While the concept of theosis has roots in the ante-Nicene period, it is not an antiquated historical curiosity. The idea of divinization, of redeemed human nature somehow participating in the very life of God, is found to a surprising extent throughout Christian history, although it is practically unknown to the majority of Christians (and even many theologians) in the West. In [Eastern] Orthodox theology, however, it is the controlling doctrine. Furthermore, “it is not too much to say that the divinization of humanity is the central theme, chief aim, basic purpose, or primary religious ideal of [Eastern] Orthodoxy.”²⁷ With the growing interest in Eastern Orthodox/Evangelical rapprochement, it is essential that theosis studies be pursued. Evangelicals may receive considerable benefit from a clear understanding and judicious appropriation of the doctrine. This is so particularly in light of the crying need for a robust, biblical theology of the Christian life that will refute and replace the plethora of false spiritualities plaguing Church and society.

Rakestraw notes that deification is a long-standing teaching of the Christian church with “roots in the ante-Nicene period” (that is, prior to A.D. 325) and is still generally held as the central teaching of salvation in Eastern Orthodox Christianity.²⁸

²⁶ A. M. Allchin titles his book on theosis *Participation in God: A Forgotten Strand in Anglican Tradition* (Wilton, CT: Morehouse-Barlow, 1988).

²⁷ Daniel B. Clendenin, “Partakers of Divinity: The Orthodox Doctrine of Theosis,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 37:3 (1994): 365-379.

²⁸ However, it should be noted that interest in a proper understanding of deification is growing in Western Christianity as a whole and even in American evangelicalism more narrowly, as the publication of Rakestraw’s article indicates. Indeed, it is significant that a portion of the writings of the fourteenth-century Greek theologian Gregory Palamas, who is credited with developing a full theology of deification, has been entered into the collection of *The Classics of Western Spirituality* (emphasize *Western*). On the attention that this inclusion invites, Jaroslav Pelikan writes in the preface to the volume: “But now, apparently, [Palamas] is becoming a saint to increasing parts of the Western Church as well—an uncanonized saint, to be sure, but one who deserves attention as something more than a museum piece from Mount Athos” (Preface in

He then goes on to offer at least a skeletal basis in the Bible for deification by commenting on two passages that are commonly quoted by writers who advance the teaching (Gen. 1:26 and 2 Peter 1:4).²⁹ He next presents the ancient doctrine as found in the writings of some of the church fathers. The patristic material he provides is brief but well-chosen. Irenaeus, the author of *The Epistle to Diognetes*, Hilary of Poitiers, Maximus the Confessor, and Gregory of Nyssa are referenced. These references alone would confirm the fact that deification was accepted and taught by well-respected teachers in the Christian church, but to Rakestraw's short list we can add the following prominent teachers who held to the teaching, at least in notion if not in full emphasis: Augustine, Gregory Palamas, Thomas Aquinas, Martin Luther, John Calvin, and John and Charles Wesley.³⁰ The list is impressive and further confirms Rakestraw's observation that deification "is not an antiquated historical curiosity." Thus, while the deification of man is not stressed in Western Christian

Gregory Palamas: The Triads, ed. by John Meyendorff; transl. by Nicholas Gendle, in *The Classics of Western Spirituality* [Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1983], xii).

²⁹ Genesis 1:26: "And God said, Let Us make man in Our image, according to Our likeness..."; 2 Peter 1:4: "...that...you might become partakers of the divine nature..."

³⁰ See footnote 22. Other examples include Martin Luther: "Just as the word of God became flesh, so it is certainly also necessary that the flesh become word. For the word becomes flesh precisely so that the flesh may become word. In other words: God becomes man so that man may become God. Thus power becomes powerless so that weakness may become powerful" (*Weimar Ausgabe I*: 28, 25-32); John Calvin: "Let us then mark, that the end of the gospel is, to render us eventually conformable to God, and, if we may so speak, to deify us" ("Commentaries on the Catholic Epistles," in *Calvin's Commentaries, Volume XXII*, tr./ed. by John Owen [Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1981], 371); Charles Wesley: "Didst thou not in thy person join / The natures human and divine, / That God and man might be / Henceforth inseparably one? / Haste then, and make thy nature known / Incarnated in me" (Charles Wesley, "All-wise, all-good, almighty Lord," *The Poetical Works of John and Charles Wesley, Vol. IV* [London: Wesleyan-Methodist Conference Office, 1869], 121, originally published in *Hymns for the Nativity of Our Lord* [London: William Strahan, 1745]).

thought, it is not, as the signers of the open letter hope to portray, completely absent from Christian thought, even in the West. That Witness Lee taught that the believers can, as Athanasius said, “be made God” is not at all out of line with a long-standing understanding of the goal of God’s salvation, even if it is not the understanding of the seventy signers of the open letter. Thus, what is at issue in this second section of the open letter are not really “statements by Witness Lee [that] appear to contradict or compromise essential doctrines of the Christian faith,” but statements that grind against the theological stances of the signers of the open letter. This amounts to no more than intolerance on their part, and we certainly hope that our readers will recognize this for what it really is.

But we do not want our readers to be left with a wrong impression about the doctrine of deification, as the signers of the open letter may have hoped to leave. Understandably, statements like that of Athanasius—God “was made man that we might be made God”—strike at the reverent sensibilities of many Christians today. Unfortunately, many modern Christians are satisfied with far less than what the church has fully taught in all its centuries concerning our salvation. Lamentably, some modern Christians deride and even oppose a deeper view of salvation that includes man’s deification. When pressed for a rationale for such opposition, they ultimately appeal to the view that God is only transcendent, only incommunicable, only absolutely “other” than His creation, and not at all to be violated by the deification of human beings. This is what Rakestraw calls “the historic Christian understanding of the essential qualitative distinction between God and the creation.”³¹ While God is indeed incommunicable, He is not incommunicable only, and this is yet another aspect of His mystery as the Triune God. In God’s great step for man’s redemption, the incarnation, He demonstrated another aspect of His being, His vast communicability, which He shared

³¹ Rakestraw, 266.

with humanity, and indicated that He has had no intention of only being aloof from man. While it appears that many Christians wish to protect God's integrity as God, in a real sense God Himself took the greater risk to His integrity by becoming a man. The New Testament speaks of the incarnation as an emptying (Phil. 2:7) and of Christ's death in the flesh as His humiliation (Acts 8:33). By the virtue of His mysterious communicability, God became a man, and by that same virtue, God is able to make man what He is, that is, God, not as independent deities nor with any of the incommunicable attributes that make Him uniquely God. The distinction is important and profound: He is God by virtue of who He is in Himself; we are made God by virtue of what He Himself is, not because of anything that we are in ourselves. That man may become God is not merely the elevation of man to the eternal plane but more significantly the glorification of God Himself in humanity. Christian deification serves to magnify God, not to minimize His identity. Hence, the deification of man, insofar as God's communicable aspect will allow and with proper respect for the uniqueness of His Godhead, is no affront to God's integrity; rather, it is His own chosen means to glorify Himself in, with, and through His redeemed, regenerated, transformed, and glorified creature. On the one hand, by respecting the incommunicability of His Godhead and rendering Him the worship that He deserves as the unique God, we need not fear offending Him. But on the other hand, if we ignore the full provisions of His salvation and fail to enjoy the full extent of His communicability, we risk insulting Him in His grace and His economy. In our view, it is a grave offense for us His believers to fail to accept the full gift of His salvation.

The teaching of deification that has been long held in the Christian church respects the aspects of incommunicability and communicability in God. Ancient writers on the subject distinguished between *God by nature*, referring to God as He is in Himself as God, and *God by grace*, referring to the believers who are made God through His work of grace in them. Their use of

these terms accurately expresses the difference between God as He is in Himself and God by virtue of what is gained by us through grace by participation in a union with Christ. Hence, in the teaching of the early church, only the Triune God Himself is God by virtue of what He is in Himself; we believers are God only by virtue of what we have received from God, by virtue of our union with God. Today also, any proper teaching of deification must notionally respect this distinction, even if the terms employed to support the distinction vary.

Witness Lee’s Balance in His Teaching on God’s Full Salvation

Witness Lee keenly understood the potential for just the kind of misrepresentation brandished by the signers of the open letter. Therefore, he repeatedly qualified his teaching with clear and emphatic statements concerning what he understood deification *not* to mean. We count these qualifiers to be of like importance to the truth concerning what believers in Christ positively become in deification, for by seeing equally what we do *not* become, our valuation of our inheritance in Christ is justly kept within the God-ordained limits of that inheritance. This balance, which is neglected by the signers of the open letter even though it is prevalent in Witness Lee’s ministry, respects that God has both communicable attributes (e.g., love, light, holiness, and righteousness) and incommunicable attributes (e.g., omniscience, omnipotence, and omnipresence). Because of this distinction, God can fulfill His eternal purpose to have a full expression of Himself in humanity while preserving the uniqueness and transcendent “otherness” that He alone possesses. The following sample excerpts attest to this balance:

To say that we are mingled with God, though, does not mean that we become God in His deity and that we are qualified to be the object of people’s worship. This is a top blasphemy and is utterly heretical. To say that we have been born of God, though, and that we have the life of God and the nature of God is a divine, scriptural fact (John 1:13; 1 John

5:11-12; 2 Pet. 1:4). Since we all were born of a man, this makes us a man. Whatever is born of a dog is a dog. Because we were born of a man, we have a man's life and a man's nature. In like manner, the fact that we have been born of God means that we have God's life and God's nature and that we are the sons of God. If you say that you are God and that you are deified with His deity and Godhead to be an object of worship, this is heresy. However, if you say that you are like God in your being (1 John 3:2), having His life and nature, this is the truth according to the divine revelation.

The New Testament tells us that the Lord Jesus is God and the Son of God; also the Lord Jesus is man as well as the Son of Man. Some of the church fathers have used the term "deification" to describe the fact that we have been mingled with God and that we are partakers of God's life and nature. When you use the word deified, though, if you mean that you have been made God in His Godhead to be an object of worship, this is heresy. On the other hand, if your denotation is that through regeneration you have received God's life and nature and that now you are a son of God, this is altogether safe and scriptural. We all have to admit and boast of the wonderful fact that we have been born of God. We have received His life and His nature, and we are now partakers of the divine nature, enjoying the divine nature daily. We and our God are mingled together as one entity.

On the one hand, we are one with God, being mingled with Him. On the other hand, He is the object of our worship and we are His worshippers. (*God's New Testament Economy*, 440-441)

In this oneness we, God's people, are not separate from God, but we definitely remain distinct from Him. We are one with God in life, in nature, in element, in essence, and in constitution. We are also one with Him in purpose, goal, image, and likeness. Nevertheless, no matter how much we are one with God, we do not share His Godhead and will never share it. Man remains man, and God remains God. Yes, in the incarnation of Christ, God became a man, but He did not give up His Godhead. Rather, He has reserved and preserved the Godhead for Himself alone. Thus, man is still limited, and God

still possesses the unique Godhead. (*Life-study of Jeremiah and Lamentations*, 82)

Although the believers are constituted with God, there is still a distinction between them and God. God remains God with the Godhead, and we, the believers, are made the same as God in life and in nature but not in the Godhead. This means that except for the Godhead, we are exactly the same as God. Since we are the same as God in life and in nature, we become His increase, His enlargement, as His fullness to express Him. (*Life-study of Jeremiah and Lamentations*, 184)

Man cannot be God in His Godhead, but he can be God in His life and nature....Because we are children of God, we are God in nature and in life, but not in the Godhead, that is, not in God's position or rank. (*The Organic Union in God's Relationship with Man*, 27)

God's intention is to become one with us. The vast majority of Christians do not realize this. Christianity has largely missed the mark. They are familiar with redemption and regeneration. God's economy, however, goes far beyond this. He has made us one with Himself. This is not to say that we are deified and are objects of worship. It is to say that we have God's life and nature, but not His deity, not that we have become part of the Godhead. (*The Mending Ministry of John*, 69)

Witness Lee clearly respected the limits of deification as revealed in the Bible, but he also recognized the great loss to be incurred by believers in Christ who either naively devalue or bluntly deny the truth of deification and thus frustrate their experience and enjoyment of the very Christ who deifies. We believe, as Witness Lee did, that the truth of deification and, thus, the believers' full and proper experience of God's deifying salvation, must be recovered today, for deification, properly understood, was universally accepted as the goal of God's salvation in the first several centuries of the church's existence but remains, with growing exception, largely discounted by the church in our own day.

Witness Lee's Teaching concerning Deification Properly Acknowledging that of the Early Church Fathers

Witness Lee's teaching concerning deification was not, in his view, an innovation in thought. He was fully aware, perhaps even more so than the seventy scholars and ministry leaders who have signed the open letter against him, that Christian deification was once widely taught in the early church and has been accepted by many, though not all, believers since then. Appreciating this history, he referred to it at times in his ministry:

Certain early church fathers taught concerning the deification of the believers. But they did not teach that the believers attained to the Godhead, or that they would ever be worshipped as God. Rather, they meant that Christians, those who have been regenerated of God, have God's life and nature. We, the regenerated ones, are the same as God in life and nature, but we are not the same as God in position in the Godhead. (*The Conclusion of the New Testament, Messages 1-20, 67*)

In A.D. 325, Athanasius, a young theologian who was a student under the church fathers and who assisted in the drafting of the Nicene Creed, made a statement: "God became man that man might become God." This statement became an aphorism in Christianity for generations. But in the past several hundred years it has been seldom referred to in Christian literature. (*A General Outline of God's Economy and the Proper Living of a God-Man, 35-36*)

"God becoming man and man becoming God" was very prevailing in ancient times. Hence, early in the fourth century Athanasius, who was present at the Nicene Council, said that "He was made man that we might be made God." Actually, this word means that God became a man in order to make all of us, His believers, God. This had already been spoken in the second century,³² but, later, people did not have the boldness

³² E.g., Irenaeus (circa A.D. 180) speaks of Christ as He "who, because of His immeasurable love, became what we are, in order that He might cause us to be what He is Himself" (*Against Heresies, 5, preface*).

to say this. What God created was a man, but that man had the image of God. Eventually, God would come in to beget men to be His children, having His life and nature. Hence, man is of God’s kind in life and nature. (*The High Peak of the Vision and the Reality of the Body of Christ*, 41)

Actually, early in the fourth century Athanasius, who was present at the Nicene Council, said that “He was made man that we might be made God.” At that time he was an unnoticed young theologian. This word of his became a maxim in church history. However, later, gradually people in Christianity not only would not teach this but did not dare to teach this. (*The High Peak of the Vision and the Reality of the Body of Christ*, 15)

What the signers of the open letter have failed to include in their “quotations” from Witness Lee’s ministry and what, we must conclude, they hoped to hide from their readers are these matters: 1) that there is a proper way to understand how man can become God in God’s full salvation, a way that has been held by many prominent teachers in the Christian church since at least its second century; 2) that Witness Lee recognized this selfsame tradition in Christian thought, respected it, and adopted it in his ministry; and 3) that Witness Lee understood the necessary balance in the proper teaching of Christian deification, which has been held for centuries and which he carefully employed in his own presentation of the teaching. It is indeed regrettable that the signers of the open letter have misrepresented not only a fellow teacher but more seriously a fellow believer in Christ. We sincerely hope that our conclusion is wrong and that the misrepresentation was not intentional. If, however, it was intentional, then the signers have transgressed the ninth commandment: “You shall not testify with false testimony against your neighbor” (Exo. 20:16), and have become like the Sanhedrin of old, who engineered the death of our Savior through false testimony (Matt. 26:59), and the jealous religionists in Acts, who prompted the martyrdom of Stephen by similar actions (Acts 6:8-13).

Witness Lee's Particular Understanding of Deification Based on the Actual Regeneration of the Believers

We assume, based on the quotations selected for inclusion in this section of the open letter, that the signers of the open letter reject the proposition that the believers receive the very life and nature of God through regeneration. Almost all proper presentations of Christian deification rely on the apostle Peter's declaration in his second Epistle that the believers "become partakers of the divine nature" (1:4). Like those who taught deification before him, Witness Lee also relied on this passage as a major basis for his teaching. Further, Witness Lee believed strongly that regeneration is literal, that is, that through faith in Christ Jesus human beings are born again and receive the very life of God within themselves, which makes them literally and organically the children of God. Regeneration is not, for Witness Lee, a metaphor for conversion as it is for many modern Christian teachers and their followers. Because of this, he flatly rejected the notion that the sons of God are mere adopted children and (rightly) perceived that the rendering of the Greek word *huiiothesia* as *adoption* in most New Testament translations is not fully in line with the thought of the New Testament writers, who recognized the divine birth of the believers and their possession of the divine life, as these few verses affirm:

But as many as received Him, to them He gave the authority to become children of God, to those who believe into His name, who were begotten not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God. (John 1:12-13)

That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit. Do not marvel that I said to you, You must be born anew. (John 3:6-7)

For if we, being enemies, were reconciled to God through the death of His Son, much more we will be saved in His life, having been reconciled. (Rom. 5:10)

Everyone who has been begotten of God does not practice sin, because His seed abides in him; and he cannot sin, because he has been begotten of God. (1 John 3:9)

Having been regenerated not of corruptible seed but of incorruptible, through the living and abiding word of God. (1 Pet. 1:23)

Thus, a core notion in Witness Lee’s ministry, and one which forms the basis of his teaching on deification, is his insistence that the believers in Christ are actually born of God and partake of the divine life to be God’s genuine sons in life and nature and not merely in designation:

How could we, the created human beings, become the sons of God? We do not become His sons by adoption but by His begetting. God begot us. In order for a person to beget a child, his life needs to be imparted into that child. This impartation is what we call dispensing. (*The Issue of the Dispensing of the Processed Trinity and the Transmitting of the Transcending Christ*, 10)

Although we do not know thoroughly what birth is, we can be certain of a basic principle related to birth. This principle is that birth is altogether a matter of the dispensing of life. Adopting a child, on the contrary, is not related to life. Instead, adoption involves the fulfillment of certain legal requirements. But birth is a matter of life. In particular, birth comes through the dispensing of life. A father’s life is dispensed into his child. Therefore, the story of one’s birth is a story of life-dispensing. (*The Divine Dispensing of the Divine Trinity*, 276)

Sonship is different from adoption. In human society, to adopt someone is to give only the position of sonship to one who was not born of us. In contrast to this, the divine sonship means that God has imparted the life of His Son into us. Originally, we were not sons of God, but one day God imparted the Spirit of His Son (Gal. 4:6) into us to make us the sons of God. Therefore, the Spirit of His Son is the Spirit of the divine sonship. (*Christ as the Spirit in the Epistles*, 26-27)

God is not only our Creator; He is also our Father. For God to be our Father involves much more than His merely being

our Creator. How was it possible for God the Creator to become our Father? In other words, how could we, creatures of God, become children of God the Father? God has no intention to become our Father by adoption, our stepfather, or our father-in-law. On the contrary, He is our Father-in-life. This means that we have received God's life. This took place when we were born of God. (*Life-study of 1 & 2 Thessalonians*, 57)

Although we are of different races and nationalities, by His mercy we have all become the same: we are all God-men. A God-man is one who has been born of God. In Christianity there is a theology that tells people that we believers became sons of God not by birth but by adoption. According to this theology, we were not born of God but were merely adopted by God. However, according to the Scriptures, we, the believers in Christ, were all born of God to be His sons. As the sons of God, surely we are God-men. We are the same as the One of whom we were born. It would be impossible to be born of God and not be the sons of God. Since we are the sons of God, we are God-men.

As sons of God and as God-men, we have the divine life (John 3:15, 36a). Many Christians realize that they have eternal life, yet they do not know what eternal life is. Furthermore, they do not know what the divine life is. They do not know that, as regenerated ones, they have another life in addition to their own human life. We all need to realize that in addition to our natural life, we have another life, the divine life. The natural life makes us a natural man, and the divine life makes us a divine man. We all can boast that we are divine persons because we have been born of the divine life. Since we have been born of the divine life and possess the divine life, surely we are divine persons. We have been born of the divine life; therefore, we are divine. It is a pity that the majority of regenerated people do not know that they have God's life in addition to their own life. Our own life is a human life; thus, we are all human. But through regeneration we have received another life, which has been added to our natural life. This life is not only holy and heavenly but also divine. Thus, we have all become divine. (*The God-men*, 11-12)

In light of the foregoing, Quotations 7-11 cannot be construed, by anyone of good conscience, as attempts by Witness Lee to exalt man to the level of the Godhead or to do away with the proper function of humanity to glorify God. On the contrary, the contexts of all five quotations concern the Triune God’s desire to have a full expression of Himself in humanity and the need for the divine and human natures for that expression.

QUOTATION 7

Quotation 7 and its surrounding context consider the expression of God in man both in the individual Jesus, typified in the Old Testament by the Ark of the Covenant, and in the corporate church, typified by the tabernacle that housed the ark of the covenant.

Quotation 7

Christ is of two natures, the human and the divine, and we are the same: we are of the human nature, but covered with the divine. He is the God-man, and we are the God-men. He is the ark made of wood covered with gold, and we are the boards made of wood covered with gold. In number we are different, but in nature we are exactly the same. (*The All-Inclusive Christ*, 103)

We hope that the signers of the open letter do not take exception to the statement that “Christ is of two natures, the human and the divine,” for this is fundamental to a proper understanding of the person of Christ, as was firmly acknowledged at the fourth ecumenical council at Chalcedon in A.D. 451. The points of contention for the signers seem to be Witness Lee’s statements that “in nature we are exactly the same” as Christ and that, therefore, we are “God-men.” On the first of these, we know that Christ is both God and man with both the divine and the human natures, as the Scriptures affirm and the church has long held. But what do human beings become if they are regenerated with the divine life and partake of the divine nature, as the Scriptures affirm and as Witness Lee held? Are they not also human and divine, as Christ Himself is? And if God the Father

has many sons and Christ the Firstborn Son has many brothers, as the Scriptures plainly affirm that they do (Rom. 8:14; Heb. 2:10; Rom. 8:29), then what are the sons of the Father and the brothers of the Firstborn Son if not the same in nature as Christ, that is, human and divine? The picture of the ark and the tabernacle (Exo. 25:10-11; 26:15-30), referenced in this quotation, points to the believers being the same in life and nature as Christ, and this is the point of Witness Lee's statement in Quotation 7. The ark, signifying the individual Christ, was made of wood (signifying humanity) overlaid with gold (signifying divinity), and the tabernacle, considered as the enlargement of the ark and signifying the church, consisted of forty-eight boards of wood overlaid with gold.³³ Hence, the tabernacle was in nature exactly the same as the ark, even though certainly it was not the same object with the same function or with the same respect as that of the ark. Witness Lee's point here is that the church is the expression of Christ (not merely His representative, as some teachers may consider) because the believers in the church

³³ Like Witness Lee, other commentators have also interpreted the standing boards to typify the believers as the Body of Christ. See, for example, Joseph S. Exell: "The Church of Christ is here seen in type as the dwelling place of God. It was set upon the earth and God dwelt in it. The Church of Christ is composed of many persons separated from the world, and built upon the sure foundation, which is Christ. And as those boards were covered with gold, so the people of God are made partakers of the Divine nature (2 Peter 1:4)..." (*The Biblical Illustrator*, Vol. 2 [Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 1978], 488-489); Robert T. Ket-cham: "Since the Tabernacle in the wilderness is a dual type of Christ and the believer, we shall expect to see the believer pictured at various points. One such point is to be found in these boards. They are beautiful types of the believer in his relationship to Christ....That believers are such a dwelling place for the Most High is clear from Ephesians 2:21,22..." (*Old Testament Pictures of New Testament Truth* [Des Plaines, Illinois: Regular Baptist Press, 1965], 22-25); C.A. Coates: "'The boards for the tabernacle' give the idea of stable support for the curtains and their coverings. I believe them to represent the saints as viewed in the Epistle to the Romans....I think God's character coming out in the saints as having the Spirit, answers to the boards being covered with gold" (*An Outline of the Book of Exodus* [Sussex, England: Kingston Bible Trust, n.d.], 192-197).

(signified by the forty-eight standing boards³⁴) have the same natures (wood, signifying humanity; gold, signifying divinity) as Christ (signified by the ark of wood and gold³⁵), whose Body they are. The full context of Quotation 7, which the signers of the open letter disregarded, makes this clear. Here is Quotation 7 in its immediate context, with the portions not included in the open letter set off in brackets:

[Everyone of us has been saturated with the nature of Christ and built up together in Him.] Christ is of two natures, the human and the divine, and we are the same: we are of the human nature, but covered with the divine. He is the God-man, and we are the God-men. He is the ark made of wood covered with gold, and we are the boards made of wood covered with gold. In number we are different, but in nature we are exactly the same. [Christ is the manifestation of God, and all these boards combined together as one in the gold are the expression of Christ. When this point is reached, the God of glory comes down and fills us. This is the testimony. We are testifying nothing but this Christ who is the manifestation of God and who has been enlarged through us, thereby filling us with the glory of God.] (Ibid., 103)

While the signers of the open letter may not agree, in contradiction to the literal meaning of the Scriptures, that Christ's believers have undergone a divine birth, have the divine life, partake of the divine nature, and therefore express Christ as His Body by virtue of their experience of His divine life and nature, they are wrong in condemning Witness Lee for holding to these views and teaching them boldly. Witness Lee is careful when he asserts that “in nature we are exactly the same” as Christ, and in the context of his ministry and of Quotation 7 itself it is clear that his fronted modifier *in nature* is to be taken seriously as a qualification to the rest of his statement, *are exactly the same*. As he says in many other places, he says so here, that there is a limit to the sameness of the believers to Christ. We are “exactly

³⁴ Exodus 26:19-20, 22-23.

³⁵ Exodus 25:10-11.

the same” “in nature,” says Witness Lee; this sameness is not in object, not in person, not in position, not in respect, not in reverence, and not in worship, even though the signers of the open letter, by isolating his statements as they do, imply that Witness Lee means just the opposite.

The signers of the open letter also seem to object to Witness Lee’s use of the term *God-men* to refer to the believers, and again they rely on the isolation of the quotation to give it its most offensive possible effect. His use of the term is in line with his general understanding of how human beings may become God in life and nature, but not in the Godhead, which we have presented above. Elsewhere he specifically indicates what he does *not* mean by the term *God-men*, and again the readers of the open letter have been misled by being denied a full explanation of what he does mean by the term:

Moreover, all those who believe in Him have also become God-men. John 1:12-13 says, “But as many as received Him, to them He gave authority to become children of God, to those who believe in His name: who were born...of God.” Those who were born of man are men. Hence, those who were born of God are gods. But this does not mean that we who are born of God share in His Godhead. We do not have God’s person, and we cannot be worshiped as God. However, as far as our life goes, we are the same as God is. God has regenerated us and has given His life to us. This is like being begotten of our father; we share the same life as our father. He is a man. As those begotten of him, we are also men. However, we do not have the position of the father. From this point of view, we are the same as the God who has regenerated us, and He and we are both God-men. (*A Deeper Study of the Divine Dispensing*, 18)

As is always the case with the language of Christian deification, terms like *God-men* and statements like *those who were born of God are gods* can be accepted only with the proper qualification that the references are limited to the believers’ participation in God’s life and nature and not in the incommunicable aspects of God’s Personhood and very Godhead. Witness Lee, like other proper teachers of Christian deification, offers this qualification often

in his ministry, but the presentation of quotes in the open letter does not allow readers to know this.

QUOTATIONS 8-10

Quotation 8

God can say to His believers, “I am divine and human,” and His believers can reply, “Praise You, Lord. You are divine and human, and we are human and divine.” (*The Triune God to Be Life to the Tripartite Man*, 51-52)

Quotation 9

My burden is to show you clearly that God’s economy and plan is to make Himself man and to make us, His created beings, “God,” so that He is “man-ized” and we are “God-ized.” In the end, He and we, we and He, all become God-men. (*A Deeper Study of the Divine Dispensing*, 54)

Quotation 10

We the believers are begotten of God. What is begotten of man is man, and what is begotten of God must be God. We are born of God; hence, in this sense, we are God. (Ibid., 53)

Quotations 8-10 provide much the same declarations as those found in Quotation 7, and thus, their defense is the same: the believers can be said to be divine insofar that they have, according to the Scriptures, an actual divine birth and possess the divine life and nature; what is begotten of God is not something other than Himself in kind, and thus, the believers, who have been begotten of God, are God in life and nature, though not in His unique Person and Godhead; and because the believers possess both humanity through creation and divinity through new creation (initiated by regeneration), they can be said to be God-men, again with the understanding that they are God only in His life and nature and not in themselves or apart from being joined to Him. They are genuinely divine, genuinely God, and genuinely God-men because they are indwelt by Him and can manifest Him for His glory through His operation in grace within them. Their being God and God-men is completely the

issue of His divine life and nature and His divine operation within them.

Specifically in Quotation 8, Witness Lee affirms what the Christian church has long recognized, that according to the Scriptures God became a genuine man in the person of Jesus Christ and that the humanity taken on by Him was neither partial nor illusory. If the signers of the open letter hope to imply that Witness Lee believed that the eternal God has humanity, they can do so only by ripping the sentence from its immediate, foregoing context, which we reproduce here with the ignored portions in brackets:

[After He passed through death, the Triune God entered into resurrection. In resurrection, He brought humanity into divinity, making the believers of Christ sons of God and members of Christ (1 Pet. 1:3; John 1:12; Rom. 12:5). To bring humanity into divinity is to bring man into God. The incarnation of the Triune God brought God into man, and His resurrection brought man into God. Through this kind of traffic, a wonderful mingling takes place. Now, in His resurrection, God is mingled with man and man is mingled with God. Thus, man and God, God and man, are one. How wonderful this is! In this mingling, God made the believers of Christ sons of God. These sons of God are human and divine.] God can say to His believers, "I am divine and human," and His believers can reply, "Praise You, Lord. You are divine and human, and we are human and divine." [This was accomplished through His resurrection.] (*The Triune God to Be Life to the Tripartite Man*, 51-52)

Clearly, Witness Lee is referring to the historical facts of the incarnation, human living, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, who, as we have shown in detail in the first section of this article, embodies the Triune God even in these, His distinct actions.

In the mingling to which Witness Lee refers above, divinity and humanity are joined together in combination, but this mingling does not, nor will it ever, produce a third element that is neither

divine nor human. On the contrary, the divine and human natures remain eternally distinguishable in the combination.³⁶ The result of this mingling is the producing of many God-men, reproductions of the first God-man, who are, as He is, both human and divine. And yet, in all of this, deified man never breaches the Godhead or becomes self-existent as God, for deified man, eternally a creature, for eternity will depend on God, His Creator, who alone has self-existence as God, and will eternally glorify Him as God. All praise and glory be to Him, and to Him alone!

³⁶ Witness Lee’s use of the term *mingling* has been objected to by some. They claim that by saying that the human and the divine natures in Christ (or in the believers) are “mingled,” Witness Lee confounds the two natures, destroys the distinction between them, and, in effect, creates a third thing (*tertium quid*), which is neither human nor divine, contrary to what the Christian church has affirmed, particularly at Chalcedon in A.D. 451. Over the past decades we have offered in various places a rebuttal to this charge, and apparently the rebuttal is beginning to gain traction, as evidenced by the open letter’s complete avoidance of the point. Our latest published attempt can be found at www.lctestimony.org/StatementOfTeachings.html#two-natures and in the book *A Confirmation of the Gospel: Concerning the Teaching of the Local Churches and Living Stream Ministry* (DCP Press, 2009), 24-29, also available at <http://www.contendingforthefaith.com/eBooks/ConcerningOurTeachings.pdf>. The very simple heart of our rebuttal has been this: the word *mingling* in English does not mean a confounding of things joined, to the destruction of their distinctive identities, as evidenced by our dictionaries and by even attested and accepted use (“to bring or combine together or with something else so that the components remain distinguishable in the combination” [“mingle,” *Webster’s Third New International Dictionary* (Springfield, MA: Merriam-Webster, 1993)]; “to mix or bring together in combination, usually without loss of individual characteristics” [“mingle,” *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*, 4th ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2006)]; “Mingle implies combination without loss of individual characteristics: ‘Respect was mingled with surprise’ [Sir Walter Scott]. ‘His companions mingled freely and joyously with the natives’ [Washington Irving].” [“mix, Synonyms: mix...,” *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*, 4th ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2006)]). The word does not mean what Witness Lee’s detractors say it means, and in using the word, Witness Lee did not mean what the word does not mean. We hope that we have heard enough of yet another mischaracterization of Witness Lee’s teachings.

Based on what we have seen above, Quotations 9 and 10 should be readily understood within the context of Witness Lee's larger ministry. However, the immediate context of both quotes, which were drawn from the same publication and in close proximity to each other, makes the same points equally well and can be quoted at some length here. Before turning to those portions, though, we would like to address particularly the declaration "we are God" from Quotation 10, which we believe may still grate some of our readers' ears despite what has been offered thus far. We respect this and do not wish to leave them without further qualification of this striking statement. In fact, Witness Lee recognized the discomfort that such wording might pose for some, and he again clearly delineated his intention in using this and similar utterances. While the immediate context of Quotations 9 and 10 makes his intention unequivocally clear, as we will see below, we wish also to offer here Witness Lee's particular use of "God," as in Quotations 9 and 10, to denote species and not person:

Thus, in regeneration God begets gods. Man begets man. Goats beget goats. If goats do not beget goats, what do they beget? If God does not beget gods, what does He beget? If the children of God are not in God's kind, in God's species, in what kind are they? If they are not gods, what are they? We all who are born of God are gods. But for utterance, due to the theological misunderstanding, it is better to say that we are God-men in the divine species, that is, in the kingdom of God. (*Crystallization-study of the Gospel of John*, 124)

In addition to becoming the firstborn Son of God, Christ became the life-giving Spirit, the pneumatic Christ. Furthermore, in His resurrection He regenerated all His believers to be God's children, God's species. In His incarnation He, the very God, became a man, and in His resurrection He regenerated His believers, who are men, and thereby made them the children of God. He was God becoming a man, and now we are men becoming God in life and in nature but not in the Godhead. In this sense, we may say that He was God becoming a man, and now we, who are the children of God, are men becoming gods. The children of God are gods.

However, to avoid theological misunderstanding, it may be better to say that as children of God we are God-men in the divine species. (*The Issue of Christ Being Glorified by the Father with the Divine Glory*, 23)

Some may ask, “If Witness Lee was aware of the ‘theological misunderstanding’ such phrasing would cause, then why did he use it at all?” Simply put, Witness Lee recognized that this wording accurately and concisely conveys the truth concerning the regenerated believers being of the divine species and that its use was permissible with that understanding. However, we are quite certain, as was Witness Lee, that there will always be an intractable minority that refuses to accept his properly qualified statements. Whether such refusal is out of malice or ignorance is beyond our ability to judge, but the refusals, we suspect, will persist indefinitely and may at times find vocal, public form, as they have in the open letter. Despite such obstinacy, however, we are quite comfortable in Witness Lee’s heralding of this truth, that we were born of God, not adopted by Him, and that therefore we are the species of God and are, quite simply, God in kind though not in Godhead, person, rank, or position. Witness Lee made the same qualification by pointing to the distinction between human fathers and the children whom they beget:

Since our Father is God, what are we, the sons? The sons must be the same as their Father in life and in nature. We have been born of God to be the children of God (1 John 3:1). Eventually, when Christ comes, He will make us fully the same as God in life and in nature (v. 2). However, none of us are or can be God in His Godhead as an object of worship. In a family, only the father has the fatherhood. The children of the father do not have his fatherhood. There is only one father with many children. The father is human, and the children also are human, but there is only one father. In the same way, God is our unique Father; only He has the divine fatherhood. But we as His children are the same as He is in life and in nature. (*The Christian Life*, 133-134)

The New Testament reveals that God is our Father and that we are His sons. We are not sons who have been adopted by

God but sons who have been born of God. God is our Father because He has begotten us, and we are His sons because we have been born of Him. Just as a child shares the life and nature of his father but not the fatherhood, so we as sons born of God share God's life and nature but not His fatherhood nor His Godhead. We are the same as God our Father in life and nature, but we surely are not God in His Godhead or the Father in His fatherhood. This is the intrinsic revelation of the Bible, especially of the New Testament. (*Life-study of the Minor Prophets*, 210)

Those created men who were chosen by God were born of Him to become His children. We have been born of God, and God is now our Father. The children of a father are the same as their father in life, but they are not the same as he is in his fatherhood. Only he is the father. They are the children. In the same way, as the children of God, we are the same as God because we have His life and nature. However, we are not the same as God in His Godhead or in His fatherhood. As the children of God, we are one with our Father God. (*The Intrinsic View of the Body of Christ*, 85)

Witness Lee's main point in the context of Quotations 9 and 10 is that God is now dispensing His life into His redeemed believers so that they would be, with Christ, genuine God-men with the divine and human natures and, thus, able to live God in humanity. Here we offer the full context of Quotations 9 and 10, with the portions not included in the open letter in brackets. In the full context, it should be noted, Quotation 10 comes before Quotation 9.

[God's ultimate desire is to enter into the created man to be his life so that he would gain Him and be joined and mingled with Him to live God's living. For this purpose, He first came to be a man, to "man-ize" Himself. Then He enables us to partake of His life, thus to "God-ize" us. In this way, He and we become one and share one living.

The ultimate purpose of God is to work Himself into us that He may be our life and everything to us so that one day we can become Him. But this does not mean that we can become part of the Godhead and be the same as the unique God. We have to know that although we are born of God and have God's life

to become God’s children, His house, and His household, we do not have a share in His sovereignty or His Person and cannot be worshipped as God.

In church history, beginning from the second century, some church fathers who were expounding the Bible used the term deification, which means to make man God. Later they were opposed by others and were considered as heretics. But John 1:12-13 does say, “But as many as received Him, to them He gave authority to become children of God, to those who believe in His name: who were born not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God.”] We the believers are begotten of God. What is begotten of man is man, and what is begotten of God must be God. We are born of God; hence, in this sense, we are God. [Nevertheless, we must know that we do not share God’s Person and cannot be worshipped by others. Only God Himself has the Person of God and can be worshipped by man.

THE DIVINE DISPENSING MAKING THE BELIEVERS GOD-MEN

The traditional concept in Christianity is that God wants us, the saved ones, to be good, to be spiritual, and to be holy, but there is no concept that God wants us to be God-men. When God became flesh and came to earth, He was both God and man, a wonderful God-man, having both divinity and humanity. As for us, we are not only created by Him, but we have Him begotten into us, so that every one of us has God’s life and nature, and we are now God’s children (2 Pet. 1:4). Therefore, as those begotten of God, we are all God-men.]

My burden is to show you clearly that God’s economy and plan is to make Himself man and to make us, His created beings, “God,” so that He is “man-ized” and we are “God-ized.” In the end, He and we, we and He, all become God-men. [Hence, it is not enough for us to be good men, spiritual men, or holy men. These are not what God is after. What God wants today is God-men. God does not expect us to improve ourselves, because God is not after our being good men. He wants us to be God-men. He is our life and everything to us for the purpose that we would express Him and live Him out.

When God created us, He created us according to His image and after His likeness. We are like a picture, which has His image, but is without His life. After we are regenerated, this picture becomes the “real” person, having His life and nature, and being the same as He is. He is God “man-ized,” and we are man “God-ized.” In the end, the two become one, both being God-men. This is the divine revelation of the Bible.]
(*A Deeper Study of the Divine Dispensing*, 53-54)

Witness Lee asserts, correctly, that the believers are God in the sense of having the life and nature of God and are thus being “God-ized” to become the expression of God in humanity. As for God being “man-ized,” Witness Lee’s point is that Christ has taken on humanity and has not cast off that humanity but retains it even in resurrection and ascension. Therefore, God and man have now become one in the sense that divinity has been mingled with humanity to produce the expression of God in man. God in His eternal Godhead, however, has not been violated by these processes. God remains eternally God in Person and Godhead, and He alone deserves our worship forever. Our readers should note the specific carefulness that Witness Lee employs in Quotation 9 by placing the words *God* and *God-ized* in quotation marks, indicating that he is using the terms in nonstandard senses.³⁷ In the economy of His salvation, God intends to make us, His created beings, God, but not in the same sense that He is God; rather, we are made God through the impartation of His life and nature, and this enables us to express Him as God through our living of Him within our being. We can be God-ized, but this relies on a sense of the word *God* that is different from the sense that applies to Him alone. Even though the signers of the open letter have isolated Quotation 9 in order to condemn him, we believe that a careful reader will recognize and respect Witness Lee’s carefulness in this matter, which is so clearly expressed typographically.

³⁷ *The Chicago Manual of Style*. 15th ed. (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 293.

QUOTATION 11

The signers of the open letter would have their readers believe that Witness Lee added the Body of Christ to the Divine Trinity and, therefore, made the Body of Christ a part of the Godhead based on Quotation 11:

Quotation 11

Because the Father, the Son, and the Spirit are all one with the Body of Christ, we may say that the Triune God is now the “four-in-one God.” These four are the Father, the Son, the Spirit, and the Body. The Three of the Divine Trinity cannot be confused or separated, and the four-in-one also cannot be separated or confused. (Ibid., 203-204)

In defending this second group of quotations (7-11), we have shown that Witness Lee understood, respected, and repeatedly taught that the incommunicability of God is not violated by His full salvation for His believers. If the believers can be said to be God, as Witness Lee affirms along with very many others in the Christian church across the centuries, it is only through their being begotten of the Father (John 1:13; 1 John 3:9; 4:7; 5:1, 4, 18), being joined to Christ in spirit (1 Cor. 6:17; John 15:4-5; Rom. 6:5; 11:17, 19), and being indwelt and filled by the Spirit inwardly (Rom. 8:9, 11; Eph. 5:18), and not through any virtue of their own apart from Him. The signers of the open letter certainly do not want their readers to know this crucial aspect of Witness Lee’s understanding, hoping to make their case by providing only statements which, in isolation, wrongly imply that he was heretical in his teaching. The very same is true in their use of Quotation 11. Witness Lee, however, did not compromise the inviolability of the Godhead, and he did not understand and teach that the Body of Christ shares the deity of God, as the following sample excerpt attests:

To say that the church is the embodiment of the Triune God is not to make the church a part of deity, an object of worship. We mean the church is an entity born of God (John 1:12-13), possessing God’s life (1 John 5:11-12), and enjoying God’s

nature (2 Pet. 1:4). The church has the divine substance, bears the likeness of Christ, and expresses the very God. Since we have been born of God, we surely have God's life and possess His nature, and we enjoy this life and nature every day. (*The Basic Revelation in the Holy Scriptures*, 67)

In the same publication as that of Quotation 11, Witness Lee emphasizes the life relationship between the Father and His many children and affirms that, apart from this relationship, there can be no church:

The Father is both our God and our Father. His being our Father means that we are born of Him. His being our God means that we were created by Him. If we were only created by God but not begotten of Him, we are not in the church. By being born of God we enter into a life relationship and an organic union with Him. First, God created us, and then He begot us. Since we are created by God and born of God, our relationship with Him is twofold. First, we are God's creatures, and He is our Creator. Then, we are God's children, and He is our Father. If there were no children of God, there would be no church. We in the church have been both created by God and born of God. Thus, we are created as proper human beings and born as children of God. This is the church. (*A Deeper Study of the Divine Dispensing*, 203)

Central to the immediate context from which Quotation 11 is drawn is Witness Lee's emphasis on the scriptural relationship between the Triune God and the Body of Christ, as indicated in Ephesians 4:4-6, which he quotes in the opening section of his chapter:

One Body and one Spirit, even as also you were called in one hope of your calling;
 one Lord, one faith, one baptism;
 one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.

In the apostle Paul's view, the Body of Christ involves the entire Triune God—the Father, the Son, and the Spirit, and Witness Lee, offering a careful reading of this text, perceived that the Triune God is the God of the Body of Christ and is, in this

sense, the “four-in-one God.” The following is Quotation 11 in its full context, with the portions not included in the open letter again presented in brackets:

[Ultimately, the church is a group of people who are in union with the Triune God and are mingled with the Triune God. The Triune God and the church are four-in-one.] Because the Father, the Son, and the Spirit are all one with the Body of Christ, we may say that the Triune God is now the “four-in-one God.” These four are the Father, the Son, the Spirit, and the Body. The Three of the Divine Trinity cannot be confused or separated, and the four-in-one also cannot be separated or confused. [This mysterious union and mingling of the Triune God with the Body of Christ is for the purpose of dispensing. The Spirit as the essence of the Body of Christ continually dispenses Himself into us. At the same time, the Lord is constantly dispensing His element into us. Likewise, while the Father is over us, overshadowing us, while He is passing through us, caring for us, and while He is in us, remaining with us, He continually dispenses Himself into us. Thus, the church is the result of the dispensing of the Triune God.

When the Triune God dispenses Himself into His believers, the church as an organism is produced in the universe. Furthermore, the Triune God is continually, little by little, dispensing Himself into all the members as their element, their essence, and their enjoyment.] (Ibid., 203-204)

Again, we believe that a discerning reader will immediately acknowledge the function of the quotations marks around the term *four-in-one God*, indicating that the term is not to be understood at face value, as the signers of the open letter hope that it will be. At most, the readers of the open letter can only suspect that Witness Lee understood and taught that the Body of Christ has become part of the Godhead, pending other evidence (unavailable to them through its omission by the signers). But if other evidence is available, we hope that readers everywhere will be more noble than the signers of the open letter and accept that Witness Lee did not understand and teach this. And other evidence is clearly available, as the following quotations prove:

The church is the issue of the Triune God: the Father embodied in the Son, the Son realized as the Spirit, and the Spirit mingled with us. Therefore, in Ephesians 4, there are the Father, the Lord, the Spirit, and us, the Body. This is not to make ourselves deified, to make ourselves God. We are divine only in life, in nature, in element, and in essence, but not in the Godhead. Only one in this universe is God in the Godhead—that one is the Triune God. (*Five Emphases in the Lord's Recovery*, 47)

The Body of Christ is composed first of the redeemed ones who were born by the Spirit to be the children of the Father. They are the God-men, and they are the very Body of Christ, the framework. Built within them are the Spirit, the Lord, and the Father. All three of the Divine Trinity have been built into the redeemed, regenerated believers. So there is such a building, such a structure, constituted with humanity and divinity in the Divine Trinity. Man, the Spirit, the Lord, and the Father are built together. This is not just three-in-one. This is four-in-one. God became a man that we, His redeemed, might become God. With Him there is the Godhead. But regardless of how much divine life and divine nature we have to be the same as God, we do not have the Godhead. (*The Practical Points Concerning Blending*, 24)

The signers of the open letter may feel that Witness Lee leaves himself open to attack in Quotation 11 (presented in isolation as it is), yet he makes himself very clear in these other places (and more, but these suffice). So then, where does the fault lie? Is it in his not adequately protecting himself in the three sentences of Quotation 11, or is it in the signers' taking advantage of these sentences by not acknowledging all others? We simply appeal to our readers' greater sense of justice in this matter. Ripped from its immediate context and from the larger context of his entire ministry, Witness Lee's term *four-in-one God* can, of course, be understood to refer to a heretical addition to the eternal and inviolable Triune Godhead. But doesn't simple decency require that we ask, "Is that really what he meant, especially since he puts the term in quotation marks and since the sentences in which the term is found have been severed from

their context”? We know now, from other places in his ministry, that that is not what he meant, and the signers are left bearing the fault.

Concerning the Seriousness of the Error of the Open Letter

We believe that our treatment of Quotations 7-11 above has demonstrated that Witness Lee held to a proper notion of the deification of the believers, one which has been held by many proper teachers in the Christian church across the ages and which is in line with a valid interpretation of the Scriptures, even if that interpretation is not as widely accepted today. We also believe that it is once again evident that the signers of the open letter have behaved unprofessionally and irresponsibly by quoting Witness Lee out of context, thereby suppressing his fuller and balanced understanding of these matters and consequently misrepresenting his intent to their international audience. By dangling the carefully selected quotations on the Internet, the signers of the open letter have induced their readers to make recriminations based only on the excised portions of Witness Lee’s ministry, and in so doing, they have not only compromised basic principles of sound scholarship but have more seriously deceived their readers and provoked them to pass false judgment on a fellow believer. Can we, then, regard them as reputable custodians of the truth when they have behaved in a manner contrary to the truth that they claim to defend? We sincerely believe that our readers will sensibly judge whether or not the signers of the open letter warrant the unquestioning deference to their credentials and assessments of orthodoxy that they evidently believe they deserve.

“ON THE LEGITIMACY OF EVANGELICAL CHURCHES AND DENOMINATIONS”

Quotation 12

The Lord is not building His church in Christendom, which is composed of the apostate Roman Catholic Church and the Protestant denominations. This prophecy is being fulfilled through the Lord’s recovery, in which the building of the genuine church is being accomplished. (*The Holy Bible Recovery Version*, note 18⁴, Matthew 16:18)

Quotation 13

The apostate church has deviated from the Lord’s word and become heretical. The reformed church, though recovered to the Lord’s word to some extent, has denied the Lord’s name by denominating herself, taking many other names, such as Lutheran, Wesleyan, Anglican, Presbyterian, Baptist, etc....To deviate from the Lord’s word is apostasy, and to denominate the church by taking any name other than the Lord’s is spiritual fornication. (*The Holy Bible Recovery Version*, note 8³, Revelation 3:8)

Quotation 14

I am afraid that a number of us are still under the negative influence of Christendom. We all have to realize that today the Lord is going on and on to fully recover us and bring us fully out of Christendom. (*The History of the Church and the Local Churches*, 132)

Quotation 15

In every denomination, including the Roman Catholic Church, there are real, saved Christians. They are God’s people belonging to the Lord. But the organization of the denominations in which they are is not of God. The denominational organizations have been utilized by Satan to set up his satanic system to destroy God’s economy of the proper church life. (*Life-study of Genesis*, Volume 1, 464)

Quotation 16

We do not care for Christianity, we do not care for Christendom, we do not care for the Roman Catholic church, and

we do not care for all the denominations, because in the Bible it says that the great Babylon is fallen. This is a declaration. Christianity is fallen, Christendom is fallen, Catholicism is fallen, and all the denominations are fallen. Hallelujah! (*The Seven Spirits for the Local Churches*, 97)

Quotation 17

To know God is not adequate. To know Christ is also not adequate. Even to know the church is not adequate. We must go on to know the churches which are local. If we are up-to-date in following the Lord, we will realize that today is the day of the local churches. (Ibid., 23)

The Particular Aspect of Today's Christianity at Issue: Evangelical Denominationalism

The open letter takes a noticeable turn in its third section of quotations from Witness Lee, presented under the heading "On the Legitimacy of Evangelical Churches and Denominations." Preceding the list of quotations is the following complaint:

We decry as inconsistent and unjustifiable the attempts by Living Stream and the "local churches" to gain membership in associations of evangelical churches and ministries while continuing to promote Witness Lee's denigrating characterizations of such churches and ministries as follows:

The signers of the open letter do not charge that Quotations 12-17 "appear to contradict or compromise essential doctrines of the Christian faith," as they contend that Quotations 1-11 do, although they repeat their exhortation that we "disavow and cease to publish" the statements included as Quotations 12-17. Rather, their implicit charge in this instance is that LSM and those meeting in the local churches are hypocritical for promoting Witness Lee's statements concerning the system of Christendom while seeking fellowship with those who are active within that system. The open letter further states:

If the leadership of Living Stream Ministry and the "local churches" do not regard evangelical Christian churches, organizations, and ministries as legitimate Christian entities, we ask that they publicly resign their membership in all associations of evangelical churches and ministries.

As we stated in our brief response to the open letter, which has been entirely ignored by the signers, LSM and the local churches do not belong to any “associations of evangelical churches and ministries,” per se. The local churches do not belong to any associations of denominational “churches,” evangelical or otherwise, as that would undermine their very existence and stand, as we will see below. As a Christian publisher LSM—and not the local churches—maintains membership in organizations such as the Evangelical Christian Publishers Association (ECPA) and a Christian credit union. These are trade organizations and not associations of churches, and LSM, as a publisher and not a church, associates with these on the basis of commonality in Christian publishing and finances, not on the basis of what the church is. These organizations we indeed regard as “legitimate Christian entities” (but not as churches), just as we hope that others would regard LSM as a legitimate Christian entity (but not as a church). And because we regard them as legitimate Christian entities, we associate with them at the level of what we have in common, publishing and finances. Yet our association with them does not annul our conviction, also made in our previous response, that the idea of evangelical “churches” (i.e., “churches” denominated under an “evangelical” banner) is not consistent with the churches described in the New Testament. According to the New Testament, the church is not to be denominated according to great teachers, proper doctrines, right practices, or other bases, and LSM and the local churches will not participate in associations of churches so denominated. Nonetheless, this does not affect our commitment to receive as brothers and sisters in Christ those who meet in evangelical “churches” and to welcome opportunities for fellowship with them. We find nothing “inconsistent and unjustifiable” in our stand and in our practice in this regard. Indeed, our practice is completely consistent with our stand concerning the proper character of the church and is not only justified by that stand but, even more importantly, compelled by it.

While ours is admittedly a minority stand, it is nonetheless our stand, and we can hardly be considered heretical, extremist, or exclusive for holding to it. It seems quite obvious, though, that the signers of the open letter, based on their isolation of Quotations 12-17, want their readers to believe that Witness Lee was severely exclusive of other Christians and that we who receive his teaching continue to be such. This, however, was never the case with Witness Lee, and it is not the case with us today. It is unfortunate that Witness Lee's statements, presented in isolation to generate the greatest shock, will undoubtedly cause irreparable offense to some Christians, as the signers obviously hope that they will (and for which they themselves must bear responsibility). We are pained at the prospect that any would be turned away from us and from Witness Lee's ministry, and we pray that our response here will prove the earnestness of our desire to be understood properly and received fairly. Witness Lee's intention, as the full contexts of the quotations and of his larger ministry will make clear below, was not to speak against the believers in Christianity but against some aspects of the system of Christianity. We believe that almost all Christians today understand this distinction and that, while respecting the dear believers in it, they agree that the system is not above reproach and fails on a number of points, including particularly the oneness of the Body of Christ. Hence, we believe that Quotations 12-17 make a very valid point concerning degradation in Christianity, a point that many Christians will agree with, if the quotations are not judged apart from their original contexts. Further, Quotations 12-17 focus on only one side of this issue, that is, the side of the indictment of a divisive system, but they do not offer the balancing side of Witness Lee's stand for the oneness as a testimony against the divisions promoted within Christendom and, more to the point, against the principle of division itself. Therefore, the deliberate stringing together of Quotations 12-17 has created yet another incomplete, unfair, and ultimately inaccurate portrayal of Witness Lee.

Many Christians will also agree that Christianity has allowed some unclean and evil things into its midst. Consequently, the church, which should be a pure and undefiled virgin to Christ (2 Cor. 11:2-3; Eph. 5:25-27), has been violated by impure elements, and the testimony of the pure and incorruptible Christ that she should bear to the world has become alloyed. The mixture produced by such compromise is condemned in the Scriptures (1 Cor. 5:6-7), and the consummate issue of such mixture is identified as both the “great harlot” and “Mystery, Babylon the Great” in Revelation 17:1, 5. The apostate Roman Catholic Church has particularly been identified as Babylon the Great at least as far back as the fourteenth century (among some of the so-called Spirituals of the Franciscan order of Catholic mendicant friars³⁸), and in all its centuries teachers in Protestantism have made the same identification.³⁹ The great harlot, however, is not alone but is said to be “the mother of the harlots” (Rev. 17:5), indicating that she has spawned offspring who carry with them the evils of the mother and who behave as she does in her harlotries. While it may be shocking, even deeply troubling, for some to hear, perhaps for the first time, it is nonetheless true that even some from within the Protestant tradition identify the many sects in Christendom generally, and in Protestantism specifically, as the daughters of the harlot. Whereas the Roman Catholic Church has taken in heretical teachings, pagan practices, unscriptural traditions, and even idols, the daughters of the harlot, having their source in the harlot mother, have ingested, to varying degrees, unclean things from their mother. On this point Witness Lee writes:

³⁸ K. S. Latourette, *A History of Christianity, Vol. I: Beginnings to A.D. 1500* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1953, 1975), 436.

³⁹ Among the many expositors who have made this association are Martin Luther, John Calvin, Matthew Poole, John Gill, John Wesley, Albert Barnes, John Nelson Darby, Andrew Miller, William Kelly, Charles H. Spurgeon, Charles Hodge, John Peter Lange, Robert Govett, C. I. Scofield, Arno C. Gaebelien, H. A. Ironside, William R. Newell, C. A. Coates, Louis Talbot, W. A. Criswell, Lehmann Strauss, John F. Walvoord, and Donald Grey Barnhouse.

Since the mother of the harlots is the apostate church, the harlots, the daughters of the apostate church, must be all the different sects and groups in Christianity that hold to some extent the teaching, practices, and traditions of the apostate Roman Church. The pure church life has no evil that has been transmitted from the apostate church. (*The Holy Bible Recovery Version*, note 5², Revelation 17:5)

But Witness Lee was not alone on this point. Donald Grey Barnhouse (1895-1960), widely respected scholar and founder of The Evangelical Foundation, comments quite similarly:

This woman [in Rev. 17:5] is called the mother of the harlots. There is the mother harlot and there are the daughter harlots. The course of history has revealed the development of the mother system of idolatry which has spawned many a lesser system. During the Reformation times, the Protestant commentators always identified the great harlot as the Roman Church. The Bible includes the Protestant organizations as the harlot daughters....God has true witnesses today in every denomination. They are saved, not because of the systems, but in spite of them.⁴⁰

Walter L. Wilson (1881-1969), in his *Wilson's Dictionary of Bible Types*, lists the following entry for "Harlot":

Babylon is a type of the Roman Catholic Church. This is so stated by many historians and scholars who are authorized to explain the Scriptures. Many large denominations have hived off from this church, and have carried with them many of the traditions and practices of the mother church. Many of these follow the practice of the mother church in seeking the favor and the gifts of the world.⁴¹

While not as explicit as Wilson, former Dallas Theological Seminary professor Merrill F. Unger (1909-1980), in his still-

⁴⁰ Donald Grey Barnhouse, *Revelation: An Expository Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1971, 1982), 324.

⁴¹ Walter Lewis Wilson, *Wilson's Dictionary of Bible Types* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1957, 1979), 241.

popular *Unger’s Bible Dictionary*, equates Babylon not merely with the Roman Catholic Church but with all of “apostate Christendom.”⁴²

Despite the impression that the open letter gives and that its signers hope to advance, Witness Lee simply was not a lone voice protesting the errors of Christendom. The situation in Christianity is dire. The church is divided asunder and has compromised the purity of its testimony to the world, and Witness Lee was not the only one to sound the alarm. Was he wrong, then, for advocating the oneness of the believers and the forsaking of worldly, idolatrous, and satanic influences? We believe that he was not wrong for taking the stand that he did. If the signers of the open letter take offense at his characterizations, do they not then condone what is wrong in Christianity today or at least fail to recognize that something is wrong?

We are concerned that the improper excising of Quotations 12-17 may have created a false impression that Witness Lee went beyond indicting a system of error to attacking fellow Christians who meet and practice within that system. This is not the case. Witness Lee was unflinching in exposing the deviations of the system, but he also clearly differentiated between the system, which stands condemned by the Lord Himself, and the believers in Christ, who have received His eternal salvation, as this sample excerpt from his ministry demonstrates:

Of course, we cannot go along with any divisions. But that should not hinder our fellowship. Regardless of whether others are in the divisions or not, we must recognize that they

⁴² Merrill F. Unger, *Unger’s Bible Dictionary* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1957, 1982), 116. Others who have made similar statements include Robert Jamieson, A. R. Fausset, and David Brown, *Bible Commentary, Volume 3: Matthew—Revelation* (Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 2002), 709; Lehmann Strauss, *The Book of the Revelation* (Neptune, NJ: Loizeaux Brothers, 1964), 291; and Louis Talbot, *The Revelation of Jesus Christ* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1946), 199, 201-202, 207.

are our brothers. This does not mean that we go along with their divisions. No, we cannot do this, but we must love all the saints, even those in the Roman Catholic Church. There are some real believers in the Roman Catholic Church, and they all have the same divine life as we. They may wear their clerical robes, but in redemption and in life we are all the same. (*The Practical Expression of the Church*, 103-104)⁴³

The impression given by the open letter is that Witness Lee was intolerant, discriminatory, and sectarian. We believe that he has been unfairly targeted, especially in light of the fact that, as we have seen above and as we will see even more clearly below, reputable scholars, some from the same institutions and denominational groups as the signers themselves, spoke with striking similarity to Witness Lee on the points in question. Why, then, have these other writers not also been called to task for expressing the very same concerns that Witness Lee voiced? It is simply not accurate to give the impression that Witness Lee was alone in decrying the errors of Christendom and lamenting its degraded condition and is therefore to be condemned. It is also misleading to advance a suggestion that he shunned fellow believers in Christ and vilified them to others. Unfortunately, however, it is these impressions that the open letter gives.

As we turn our attention to the quotes themselves, we intend to keep our focus squarely where Witness Lee kept his, that is, on the building up of the church as the one Body of Christ. If the statements of Witness Lee cited as Quotations 12-17 are to be properly understood within the context of the publications from which they were extracted and within the broader scope of his ministry, they must be understood according to this view. The particular situation in Christianity that Witness Lee decried was

⁴³ For similar passages, see also, for example, *The Wonderful Christ in the Canon of the New Testament*, 172-173; *Life-study of Revelation*, 621; *The Spirit and the Body*, 13.

almost always the pervasive divisions that characterize Christianity today.⁴⁴ Of course, the many divisions are not without concrete bases—the various teachings and practices that divide—and though in themselves these are often proper, to make them the basis for dividing the Body of Christ is not. Witness Lee did not take exception to any of the proper teachings, but he did denounce, boldly and rightly, the making of divisions and causes of stumbling in the Body of Christ (cf. Rom. 16:17), and when he identified impure and unclean elements in Christianity, he was not hesitant to speak out against them as well.

QUOTATION 12

Quotation 12 is from one of Witness Lee’s study notes on Matthew 16:18, a well-known verse that records the Lord’s own words: “And I also say to you that you are Peter, and upon this rock I will build My church, and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it.”

⁴⁴ In many ways what Witness Lee taught on this point echoes the great Christian scholar Philip Schaff, who in 1845 said:

Paul exhorts all the Corinthians in the name of Jesus Christ that they should all speak the same thing and that there should be no divisions among them, but that they should be perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment. They must not call themselves after Paul, or Apollos, or Cephas, or Christ in the way of party or sect. For Christ was not divided; and Paul had not been crucified for them; and no one had been baptized into the name of Paul, but all into the name of Christ. The entire view taken by this apostle of the nature of the church, as the one Body of Christ, whose members all partake of the same lifeblood and are set for mutual assistance; having one hope of their calling, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all; endeavoring to keep the unity of the one body and one spirit in the bond of peace; this view, I say, inflicts a death blow, with one stroke, on the whole sectarian and denominational system.

Philip Schaff, *The Principle of Protestantism*, ed. by Bard Thompson and George H. Bricker (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2004), 152.

Quotation 12

The Lord is not building His church in Christendom, which is composed of the apostate Roman Catholic Church and the Protestant denominations. This prophecy is being fulfilled through the Lord's recovery, in which the building of the genuine church is being accomplished. (*The Holy Bible Recovery Version*, note 18⁴, Matthew 16:18)

We believe that the inclusion of Quotation 12 is intended to inflame fellow Christians by giving them the impression that Witness Lee denied that those in Christendom are members of the one true church of God. Actually, however, Witness Lee was quite forthright to declare that, according to the Scriptures, all of Christ's redeemed compose the church and are, therefore, members of the church. He states this fact in *The Holy Bible Recovery Version*, the same source from which Quotation 12 was drawn:

Here this book [Ephesians] uses the term *church* for the first time, pointing out the main subject of this book. The Greek word for *church* is *ekklesia*, meaning *the called-out congregation*. This indicates that the church is a gathering of those who have been called out of the world by God. As such, the church is composed of all the believers in Christ. (*The Holy Bible Recovery Version*, note 22⁴, Ephesians 1:22)

In Quotation 12, however, Witness Lee is not commenting on the existence of the church, composed of all the genuine believers, but on the building up of the church into its proper and genuine expression. In the foregoing portion of the footnote from which Quotation 12 was separated, Witness Lee points out that the building of the church "began on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2:1-4, 41-42)" but that the Lord's prophecy in this verse "still has not been fulfilled, even up to the twentieth century." Thus, in his view, the building up of the church which began at Pentecost is still in process and has not yet reached its completed state. He maintains that it never can be completed in Roman Catholicism and the Protestant denominations because, by implication, the division that characterizes the denominations

(as indicated by their self-appropriated labels “Roman,” “Lutheran,” “evangelical,” for example) is contrary to the condition of oneness that characterizes the church so built up that the gates of Hades cannot prevail against it (Matt. 16:18). There exists, therefore, the very valid need for a return to oneness and to the pure basis or ground upon which oneness and, therefore, the building of the church can be properly realized. In his *Life-study of Matthew*, which incorporates the footnotes of *The Holy Bible Recovery Version* into its extensive commentary, Witness Lee writes concerning Matthew 16:18:

The Lord told Peter that He would build His church upon “this rock.” The words “this rock” refer not only to Christ, but also to this revelation of Christ, which Peter received from the Father. The church is built on this revelation concerning Christ.

Roman Catholicism claims that the rock in verse 18 refers to Peter, whereas most fundamental Christians say that it refers to Christ. Although it is correct to say that the rock denotes Christ, not even this understanding is adequate. The rock here refers not only to Christ, but even the more to the revelation concerning Christ. In this chapter the Father reveals something from the heavens to Peter. This heavenly revelation from the Father is the rock. It is not an insignificant matter that the church is built both upon Christ and upon the revelation concerning Christ. The denominations are not built upon this rock. For example, the Southern Baptist denomination is built upon the revelation of baptism by immersion, not upon the revelation of Christ. In the same principle, the Presbyterian denomination is built upon the doctrine of presbytery. Likewise, the charismatic churches or groups are not built upon this revelation concerning Christ; they are built upon their knowledge of the charismatic things and on their experience of them. Thus, the Foursquare denomination is built upon the revelation of the foursquare gospel, not on the revelation of Christ.

The church that is built upon the revelation concerning Christ is the genuine church, and it is not sectarian. The problem today is that Christians like to form groups or so-called churches according to their concept and viewpoint. But

their concept is not the revelation concerning Christ. The church must be built upon “this rock,” that is, upon the revelation of Christ. If we see this, we shall be saved from division. Only one thing is built upon the revelation of Christ, and that is the church. Any group that is built upon doctrines, views, practices, or concepts is not the church built upon the revelation concerning Christ. The revelation concerning Christ is the rock upon which the Lord Jesus is building His church. (*Life-study of Matthew*, 567-568)

It was Witness Lee’s desire that Christians would not continue to allow their favored doctrines, views, practices, and concepts to become factors of division and that all could be recovered to the genuine ground of oneness for the building up of the church as the one Body of Christ. In desiring this, however, he did not intend that any of the essential truths of the faith⁴⁵ would be compromised or overlooked in any way. Rather, he distinguished between the essentials of the faith and the many doctrinal disagreements over non-essential matters that, regrettably, have resulted in the many divisions that exist among the believers today. He understood very well that not all would drop the things that cause division and that some, like the signers of the open letter, would criticize us for our stand, but he certainly was not exclusive of other believers, even those who would criticize. The following excerpt testifies of his broad inclusiveness of other Christians and his view concerning the necessity of a practiced oneness in the Body of Christ upon the proper ground of locality. The impression here stands in stark contrast to the false impression created by the mosaic of improperly excised quotes in this section of the open letter:

What is our ground? The ground from the very beginning of the Christian era, from the time of the apostles, is the unique oneness of the Body of Christ, kept and expressed in each local church at its locality (Rev. 1:11). This means we Christians, in whatever locality we are, come together to be the church

⁴⁵ For a review of the essentials of the faith, see *A Brief Response to “An Open Letter to the Leadership of Living Stream Ministry and the ‘Local Churches’*,” available at www.lctestimony.org/ResponseToOpenLetter.html.

there. We have no other ground than that of the unique oneness of the Body of Christ. A local church is an expression of the universal church. The church universally is one, and this one Body of Christ is expressed in many localities. In every locality where there are a number of saints, these saints should come together as the church there, not to take the ground of baptism by immersion, tongue-speaking, the presbytery, a method, the Episcopal system, or any ground except that of being one with all others meeting there as a local expression of the Body of Christ.

This unique oneness should be the ground on which we are being built. We should not be sectarian; we should not be exclusive. We must be all-inclusive, open and loving to all the dear saints. As long as they are Christians, they are our brothers. Our brothers have been scattered to many denominations. In spite of this, we still love them. We should not have an attitude or spirit of fighting, opposing, or debating. That is wrong. We should always hold a spirit and an attitude of loving all Christians. As long as they bear the name Christian and believe in the Lord Jesus, they are our brothers and sisters. In the local churches we do not have any wall. We have no fence. We consider all the dear Christians our brothers. (*The Basic Revelation in the Holy Scriptures*, 72-73)

QUOTATION 14

I am afraid that a number of us are still under the negative influence of Christendom. We all have to realize that today the Lord is going on and on to fully recover us and bring us fully out of Christendom. (*The History of the Church and the Local Churches*, 132)

In the context of Quotation 14, the “negative influence of Christendom” to which Witness Lee refers, and which we believe the signers of the open letter must find particularly grating, includes both division and the mixture of evil things with the things concerning Christ. Christendom is plagued by these twin evils, as Witness Lee forthrightly taught from the Scriptures, and we certainly agree that Christendom as a system of compromise is something to be recovered out of. We also respect that many feel differently than we do, and these we

afford the courtesy to practice as they feel they must. However, before any judgment can be made concerning Witness Lee's statement in Quotation 14, we feel that it is again imperative that the context of that statement be faithfully represented here since the signers of the open letter failed to provide any context for their readers. In its immediate context, Witness Lee's statement is concerned with the necessity of oneness versus the damages of division, the purity of the Lord's testimony, and the condition of the church as the bride of Christ (John 3:29; Rev. 21:2, 9; 22:17). We offer here the quote in its proper context, with the portions not included in the open letter set off in brackets:

[In books such as Romans and Ephesians, there are many teachings, but in Revelation, there is just the spirit—the sevenfold intensified Spirit of God (1:4; 4:5; 5:6) and the human spirit (1:10; 4:2; 17:3; 21:10). John was in spirit and he saw the golden lampstands—one lampstand for one city (1:10-12). He did not see thousands of believers. He saw only one lampstand for one city. This is so simple. The many believers in a city should be just one lampstand in one accord, without disputation, different opinions, or different concepts and divisions. Thank the Lord that we are here today standing in oneness, but in our hearts we may still hold on to something of ourselves and something other than Christ. In God's eyes, a local church must be so simple. It should be a lampstand of pure gold without mixture—so simple, single, and pure.

To each of the seven churches in Revelation 2 and 3, the Lord says, "He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches" (2:7, 11, 17, 29; 3:6, 13, 22). This is so simple—the Spirit speaks to the churches. Eventually, the entire Bible consummates with the Spirit and the bride (Rev. 22:17a). By God's work throughout the ages, all the saints and the Spirit speak the same thing. All the many saints are one bride. Are we one bride today? In a sense we are, but we may still be holding on to our concepts and opinions that damage the one accord. We are still in a situation in which we need the

Lord’s rescue, the Lord’s recovery.] I am afraid that a number of us are still under the negative influence of Christendom. We all have to realize that today the Lord is going on and on to fully recover us and bring us fully out of Christendom. The Lord desires something fully in the spirit.

[The book of Revelation is a book of the Spirit and the bride. The church is something absolutely in the Spirit. We need to turn to our spirit and stay in our spirit. In the spirit we are one. Nothing is as important or as strategic in the New Testament as the oneness of the believers. The Lord Jesus prayed that we all would be one (John 17:21). Some maintain that they want to be scriptural, but in their exercise to be scriptural, they divide the saints. Nothing is more unscriptural than to divide the saints.] (*The History of the Church and the Local Churches*, 132)

In their collective zeal to denounce Witness Lee’s teaching as unscriptural, these “evangelical Christian scholars and ministry leaders” have publicly exposed their own unscriptural tendency toward division by standing so adamantly upon their evangelical basis for denominating themselves. It is, after all, they who define themselves by the term “evangelical,” and it is they who use this terminology either to include or exclude even those who are received by God (cf. Rom. 14:1—15:13). Over against this divisive tendency, Witness Lee, in the context from which Quotation 14 was drawn, urges a oneness in spirit, that is, in the spirit of the regenerated believers, where the Lord Himself dwells and in which they are His living dwelling place (1 Cor. 6:17; 2 Tim. 4:22; Eph. 2:22). That the signers of the open letter have concealed Witness Lee’s actual statements concerning the damages of division versus the paramount necessity of oneness is, in our estimation, further evidence that they recognize the veracity of his claims and are in turn condemned by them. Why would they, practitioners of the Christian faith that calls for truthfulness in testimony concerning others (Matt. 19:17-18; Mark 10:18-19; Luke 18:19-20), not make available to their readers the few sentences that offer the proper context to the portion that they chose to isolate in their open letter?

QUOTATION 13

Quotation 13 is taken from another of Witness Lee's study notes in *The Holy Bible Recovery Version*, this time commenting on the Lord's words to the church in Philadelphia in Revelation 3:8.⁴⁶

Quotation 13

The apostate church has deviated from the Lord's word and become heretical. The reformed church, though recovered to the Lord's word to some extent, has denied the Lord's name by denominating herself, taking many other names, such as Lutheran, Wesleyan, Anglican, Presbyterian, Baptist, etc.... To deviate from the Lord's word is apostasy, and to denominate the church by taking any name other than the Lord's is spiritual fornication. (*The New Testament Recovery Version*, note 8³, Revelation 3:8)

The epistles to the seven churches in Revelation 2 and 3 have been interpreted by many, including Witness Lee, as referring both to seven literal first century churches in Asia Minor and to the history of the Christian church in seven stages. Revelation 3:8 concerns the Lord's commendation of the church in Philadelphia, the church recovered to the Lord's original purpose, with which He was well-pleased and for whom He had no words of rebuke. In the sequence of the seven epistles, the epistle to the church in Philadelphia is preceded by the epistle to the church in Thyatira, which many identify with the apostate Roman Catholic Church, and the epistle to the church in Sardis, which many identify with the reformed church, both of which incurred severe rebukes from the Lord for their respective degrees of degradation.⁴⁷ Because the signers of the open letter

⁴⁶ "I know your works; behold, I have put before you an opened door which no one can shut, because you have a little power and have kept My word and have not denied My name."

⁴⁷ Among those who subscribe to this prophetic interpretation of the letters to the seven churches are John Gill, John Nelson Darby, Andrew Miller, Robert Govett, C. I. Scofield, Arno C. Gaebelein, H. A. Ironside, Lewis Sperry Chafer, William R. Newell, Louis Talbot, Lehmann Strauss,

have taken obvious offense to Witness Lee’s characterization of Protestant Christianity, we again wish to offer here the insights of others within the Protestant tradition who have also identified the church in Sardis, whose works the Lord declared to be incomplete and whose condition he decried as dead (Rev. 3:1-2), with Protestantism. In stating that there is “a spiritual application, in addition to the historical interpretation”⁴⁸ of Revelation 2 and 3, long-time Dallas Theological Seminary faculty member J. Dwight Pentecost, in his well-known book *Things to Come*, commends to his readers Walter Scott’s interpretation of the church in Sardis:

The Reformation was God’s intervention in grace and power to cripple papal authority and introduce into Europe the light which for 300 years has been burning with more or less brilliancy. Protestantism with its divisions and deadness shows clearly enough how far short it comes of God’s ideal of the Church and Christianity—*Sardis* (3:1-6).⁴⁹

In also commenting on the church in Sardis under the heading “Dead ‘Protestantism,’” William R. Newell, former assistant superintendent at Moody Bible Institute, employs considerably more strident language than Scott:

CONDITION KNOWN: “Thou hast a name that thou livest, and thou art dead.” Nothing could describe “Protestantism” more accurately! As over against Romish night and ignorance, she has enlightenment and outward activity: the great “state churches,” or “denominations,” with creeds and histories, costly churches and cathedrals, universities and seminaries, “boards,” bureaus of publication and propaganda, executors of organized activities, including home and foreign missions, even “lobby” men to “influence legislation” at court! You and I dare compare the Church with no other model than the Holy

John F. Walvoord, J. Dwight Pentecost, J. Vernon McGee, Donald Grey Barnhouse, and W. A. Criswell.

⁴⁸ J. Dwight Pentecost, *Things to Come: A Study in Biblical Eschatology* (Grand Rapids: Academie Books, 1958, 1964), 151.

⁴⁹ Walter Scott, *Exposition of the Revelation of Jesus Christ* (London: Pickering and Inglis, 1948), 55-56. Quoted in Pentecost, 152.

Spirit gave at Pentecost in Paul's day! And compared to *that*—it has a *name*, but is *dead*—not to speak of being “filled with the Holy Spirit,” “admonishing one another with psalms and hymns and spiritual songs.”...“Thou art dead.” Awful state! Given to recover the truth at the Reformation in the most mighty operation of the Spirit of God since the days of the Apostles, Christendom has sunk into spiritual *death!*⁵⁰

Lehman Strauss (1911-1997), a widely respected Bible teacher who was known for his nationally broadcast radio program on *The Biola Hour*, also identified Sardis with Christendom, and his assessment of Protestantism within Christendom is striking:

Protestantism today is an effete power and a spent force. Surely the most optimistic among us cannot deny that the Protestantism of the last three hundred and fifty years, with its confidence in human scholarship and intellectualism, has not yielded to the Person and power of the Holy Spirit. The enormous toleration which is shown to Satan's growing ecumenical church is alarming, to say the least....

The words addressed to the church at Sardis apply prophetically to Christendom. The churches are waning in spiritual power and are defective in quality because the personality of the Holy Spirit and His relation to the Church in general and to individual believers in particular are subjects which are but dimly comprehended.⁵¹

Though not specifically commenting on the church in Sardis, acclaimed evangelical writer A. W. Tozer (1897-1963), in his remarkable pamphlet “The Waning Authority of Christ in the Churches,” lamented the same tendency decried by Strauss:

Let me state the cause of my burden. It is this: Jesus Christ has today almost no authority at all among the groups that call themselves by His name. By these I mean not the Roman Catholics, nor the Liberals, nor the various quasi-Christian

⁵⁰ William R. Newell, *The Book of the Revelation* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1935, 1981), 62-63.

⁵¹ Lehman Strauss, *Prophetic Mysteries Revealed* (Neptune: Loizeaux Brothers, 1980), 197-198.

cults. I do mean Protestant churches generally, and I include those that protest the loudest that they are in spiritual descent from our Lord and His apostles, namely the evangelicals.⁵²

While these general assessments of Protestant Christianity are certainly incisive and correspond to Witness Lee’s statements, we must also consider what, more specifically, in Quotation 13 seems to have generated so vehement an opposition by the signers of the open letter. What seems to have particularly exasperated the signers is that Witness Lee has equated the denominations’ practice of assuming a name with infidelity to the Lord Jesus, the Husband of the church (2 Cor. 11:2; Eph. 5:23; Rev. 21:2). But the stubborn fact remains, despite how much clamor the signers of the open letter raise over it, that *in the Bible* there simply are no denominations and no churches designated by denominational names. There are only local churches identified with the localities in which they reside (Acts 8:1; 13:1; Rom. 16:1; 1 Cor. 1:2; Rev. 1:4, 11). The word *denomination* itself means, simply, “something distinguished from other things by virtue of a name.” Whose names do the denominational groups take to distinguish themselves from other Christians? They are typically names derived from their respective founders, for example, Lutheran and Wesleyan, or from the practices or doctrines that make them distinct from others, for example, Baptist, Methodist, or Presbyterian. Yet the only name that a chaste wife should have is the name of her husband alone and not the name of any other. The names themselves testify not of Christ as the church’s unique Husband but of the things that divide the groups from one another, such as a common history, practice, or doctrinal emphasis, and this is, as Witness Lee has stated, a kind of spiritual fornication. Further, the bearing of names other than the name of Christ is a deviation from the Lord’s word and is, in actuality, a form of apostasy,

⁵² A.W. Tozer, “The Waning Authority of Christ in the Churches” (Harrisburg: Christian Publications, n.d.), 6.

since the denominating of groups according to particular names is a practice that stands apart from the revelation of Scripture. Witness Lee further comments on the taking of names other than Christ's in another footnote to Matthew 16:18, which immediately follows the note from which Quotation 12 was drawn:

My church indicates that the church is of the Lord, not of any other person or thing; it is not like the denominations, which are denominated according to some person's name or according to some matter. (*The New Testament Recovery Version*, note 18⁵, Matthew 16:18)

Following is Witness Lee's footnote, in its entirety, from which Quotation 13 was unfairly excised with the portions not offered in the open letter set off in brackets:

[The Lord's word is the Lord's expression, and the Lord's name is the Lord Himself.] The apostate church has deviated from the Lord's word and become heretical. The reformed church, though recovered to the Lord's word to some extent, has denied the Lord's name by denominating herself, taking many other names, such as Lutheran, Wesleyan, Anglican, Presbyterian, Baptist, etc. [The recovered church not only has returned in a full way to the Lord's word but also has abandoned all names other than that of the Lord Jesus Christ. The recovered church belongs to the Lord absolutely, having nothing to do with any denominations (any names).] To deviate from the Lord's word is apostasy, and to denominate the church by taking any name other than the Lord's is spiritual fornication. [The church, as the pure virgin espoused to Christ (2 Cor. 11:2), should have no name other than her Husband's. All other names are an abomination in the eyes of God. In the recovered church life there are no teachings of Balaam (2:14), no teachings of the Nicolaitans (2:15), no teachings of Jezebel (2:20), and no mysterious doctrines of Satan (2:24); there is only the pure word of the Lord. The recovered church has no denominations (names); it has only the unique name of the Lord Jesus Christ. The deviation from the word to heresies and the exalting of many names other than that of Christ are

the most striking signs of degraded Christianity. The return to the pure word from all heresies and traditions and the exalting of the Lord’s name by abandoning every other name constitute the most inspiring testimony in the recovered church. This is why the church in the Lord’s recovery has the revelation and presence of the Lord and expresses the Lord in a living way, full of light and with the riches of life.]

QUOTATIONS 15 AND 16

Quotation 15

In every denomination, including the Roman Catholic Church, there are real, saved Christians. They are God’s people belonging to the Lord. But the organization of the denominations in which they are is not of God. The denominational organizations have been utilized by Satan to set up his satanic system to destroy God’s economy of the proper church life.” (*Life-study of Genesis*, 464)

Quotation 16

We do not care for Christianity, we do not care for Christendom, we do not care for the Roman Catholic church, and we do not care for all the denominations, because in the Bible it says that the great Babylon is fallen. This is a declaration. Christianity is fallen, Christendom is fallen, Catholicism is fallen, and all the denominations are fallen. Hallelujah! (*The Seven Spirits for the Local Churches*, 97)

What the signers of the open letter obviously find offensive in Quotations 15 and 16 are Witness Lee’s association of denominational organizations with Satan and Babylon, the charge that those organizations are “not of God,” and the declaration of victory that Christianity is “fallen.” It is a stark characterization and one that may not settle easily on the ears of those who feel affection for their denominational organizations. Nonetheless, the point that Witness Lee makes in the chapter from which Quotation 15 was excised, which is withheld from readers of the open letter, is that God’s people have been divided—by personal preferences, differing theological concepts and opinions, and territorial possessiveness—but the fulfillment of God’s original

purpose for man depends on oneness. The oneness of God's people is paramount, and it was for this that Witness Lee struggled in his ministry constantly. Sadly, however, God's people have been divided, and the church, whose oneness should be to the glory of God and to the shame of His enemy, has lost its testimony to the world because in its division it cannot properly testify of the indivisible God, who indwells it (cf. John 17:21-23). In our own day the number of divisions in the church can hardly be counted, so diverse and multitudinous are they, yet such a vast splintering did not happen overnight. It developed over centuries. In the same chapter from which Quotation 15 was severed, Witness Lee, like many expositors of Genesis, interprets the development of nations after the flood at Noah's time as prefiguring the development of the many denominations in the church age. Whereas the many nations consummated in Babel, the many denominations issue in the great Babylon.

Out of the nations, Babel came up. This signifies that out of the denominations, Babylon came out. All the divisions and denominations will consummate in the great Babylon. Babylon is the Greek equivalent of the Hebrew word Babel. If you read the New Testament, you can see that from among the divisions of Christianity, that is, from among all the denominations, Babylon comes out. All the nations in ancient times issued in Babel, and all the denominations in Christianity eventually will consummate in the great Babylon. Once again we see that Genesis is a book of seeds, for here in Genesis 10 we have the seed of Babylon and in Revelation 17 and 18 we have the harvest of Babylon the great. (*Life-study of Genesis*, 463)

If the signers (and readers) of the open letter value their denominational affiliations even above the oneness of the Body of Christ, then it is understandable that they would take offense to their respective traditions being characterized in so negative a light. However, Witness Lee is not the only one to have made the characterization. Charles I. Scofield, in his enormously popular *The Scofield Reference Bible*, noted the same parallelism between

the history of Babel and the development of denominations that Witness Lee commented on in his *Life-study of Genesis*. Interestingly, however, after Scofield’s death, later editors removed the following footnote on Genesis 11:1 from subsequent editions of his work:

The history of Babel (“confusion”) strikingly parallels that of the professing Church. (1) Unity (Gen. 11:1)—the Apostolic Church (Acts 4. 32, 33); (2) Ambition (Gen. 11.4), using worldly, not spiritual, means (Gen. 11.3), ending in a manmade unity—the papacy; (3) the confusion of tongues (Gen. 11.7)—Protestantism, with its innumerable sects.⁵³

Witness Lee very much respected the work compiled in *The Scofield Reference Bible*, as evidenced in numerous places in his writings. Being raised up by the Lord in the early twentieth century, he often relied on the work of similar late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Bible teachers, who in their criticisms of the confused and divided situation in Christianity were usually more forceful than their counterparts today. However, the situation in Christianity, insofar as it relates to the oneness of the Body of Christ, has not improved over the past century or so, even if attitudes about denominational boundaries have indeed become more lax and more tolerant. The signers of the open letter, and sadly many of its readers, are now offended more by denunciations against division and less by division itself. In protecting their standing as “evangelicals” (instead of mere believers in Christ, as we all should merely be), the signers of the open letter have pulled these quotations out of context and placed them together for maximum offense to their readers. While we, of course, do not agree with it, they have made the choice to execute this kind of scholarship. But our hope is that our readers will rather lament the divided and confused situation in Christianity and that they will not be

⁵³ C.I. Scofield, *The Scofield Reference Bible* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1909), 18.

stumbled by Witness Lee's stark words, which do not fail to describe honestly the real situation in Christianity today.

It is certainly necessary to identify these deviations in Christianity, as Witness Lee and others have done, but it is even more imperative to recover the God-ordained pattern for maintaining the oneness of the church. We suspect that some of our readers may ask at this point, "Christianity may indeed be divided, and we lament that. But haven't you in the local churches simply formed yet another denomination, the 'local church' denomination, and added to the confusion?" The question is certainly reasonable and deserves an adequate response. We believe that the response given by Witness Lee in the context of Quotation 15 makes the point well, and we offer it here at length:

Every denomination, every naming, is a division. Do not say that our name is "the local church." We do not have a name. The moon, for example, has no name; it is just the moon. We should simply call the moon "moon." Some people have said that the American moon is brighter than the Chinese moon. But there is no such thing as an American moon or a Chinese moon. The most you can say is the moon in America or the moon in China. It is one moon. There is only the one moon. Likewise, the church is simply the church. The term "local church" is not our name; it is the designation of our nature. We are not the divisive and divided so-called churches; we are the church in a locality. Thus the term "local church" denotes our nature; it is not our name. Do not consider "the local church" as a name. The most we can say is the church in a certain locality, such as the church in Los Angeles, the church in Anaheim, etc....

During the 1930's I spoke a great deal on this matter of denominations. One day, upon returning to my hometown after a period of absence, some friends invited me to feast with a number of older Christian leaders who knew me quite well. When I went there, I discovered that I, a man of a little over thirty years of age, was surrounded by a group of old men, each one being more than sixty years of age. One of them, taking the lead to speak to me, said, "Mr. Lee, in the past years in your preaching you have condemned the denominations.

We wish to ask you why, since you have been preaching against the denominations, you yourself have formed another denomination?” They thought that they had already defeated me. I replied, “I am glad to be here with you all, for this is the best time for me to clear up this whole matter. The Apostle Paul rebuked the Corinthians for saying, ‘I am of Apollos,’ ‘I am of Paul,’ and ‘I am of Cephas.’ Some even said, ‘I am of Christ.’ The Apostle Paul rebuked all of those divisive persons at Corinth (1 Cor. 1:11-13). You all say that you are either Baptist, Presbyterian, or the Chinese Independent. Tell me from your sincere heart, if the Apostle Paul were here, would you be approved by the Apostle Paul?” They said, “No. Of course, Paul would never approve us.” They were honest. They had to be honest because I had pinned them down already. Then I continued, “Since you agree that it is not right to say, ‘I am Baptist’ or ‘I am Presbyterian,’ then where do you put me? Will you put me in your Presbyterian denomination, or in your Baptist or Chinese Independent?” They said, “We don’t put you anywhere.” Then I said, “But you have to put me somewhere. Shouldn’t I stay somewhere?” They were shocked. Then I proceeded, “By the Lord’s mercy and grace, I surely love Him. Since I love Him, I must preach the gospel to the unbelievers. Many have been saved through my preaching. Where shall I put them? To which denomination shall I send them—to the Baptist, Presbyterian, the Chinese Independent?” They had nothing to say. Then I said, “Do you see the situation? Now do you see why on the one hand I preach against divisions and why on the other hand, it seems to you that I form another division? We need to come together. We are not one with you because you force us into not being one with you. Now if you promise me that from tomorrow you will take down all of your signs and forget about all your different names, then I promise you that I will have fellowship with all the brothers tonight and that we will close our meeting hall immediately. Then we can come together as one church in this city. How about this?” At this point, they said, “No, we can’t do this.” I concluded, “Since you will not do this, then who is responsible for the divisions?” After that night until the day I left mainland China, none of them bothered me again. They had lost the case in the heavenly court. They wanted to keep

their divisive, denominational names. Some wanted to say, "We are the Chinese Independent. Nothing is better than this." Others would say, "We are third generation Presbyterians. How can we renounce this name?" Still others wanted to say, "We are Baptists. The Baptists are much better than Presbyterians. They only have sprinkling, which is not right, but we have immersion." We are all familiar with this kind of fighting. (*Life-study of Genesis*, 457-459)

Has Witness Lee, then, gone too far by saying that the denominational organizations have been "utilized by Satan," as he does in Quotation 15, and for declaring that Christendom is "fallen," as he does in Quotation 16? Obviously the signers of the open letter believe that he has. What the signers do not offer to their readers, however, is the biblical support for Witness Lee's statements, which is very evident in the contexts from which each of those statements was drawn. The context of Quotation 16 makes this point particularly clear. In that chapter, Witness Lee demonstrates that the book of Revelation is a book of victory and that everything seen in it is considered by the Lord to have been accomplished already. For example, Witness Lee points out that the book of Revelation is a book testifying of the victorious Christ (5:4-5); the kingdom of the victorious Christ (11:15); the saints who have overcome the accusing devil and cast him out of heaven (12:9-11); the fall of the great Babylon (14:8), the great harlot (19:1-6); the marriage dinner of the Lamb (19:7); the casting of Satan, the beast, the false prophet, death, and Hades into the lake of fire (20:10, 14); and the preparation of the holy city "as a bride adorned for her husband" (21:2). The chapter concludes with Witness Lee's fellowship concerning the indispensability of praise as the way to enter into a victorious living. Of course, none of this is offered to readers of the open letter. But if Babylon the Great typifies not merely the Roman Catholic Church but Christendom generally, as Witness Lee and others contend, then is not the Lord's victory over Babylon a victory over that divisive system? In its immediate context, Quotation 16 is an interjection between verses from Revelation

that echoes the declarations in those verses. Again we offer the portions not included in the open letter in brackets here:

[“And there followed another angel, saying, Babylon is fallen, is fallen, that great city, because she made all nations drink of the wine of the wrath of her fornication” (Rev. 14:8). The great Babylon is fallen.] We do not care for Christianity, we do not care for Christendom, we do not care for the Roman Catholic church, and we do not care for all the denominations, because in the Bible it says that the great Babylon is fallen. This is a declaration. Christianity is fallen, Christendom is fallen, Catholicism is fallen, and all the denominations are fallen. Hallelujah!

[“And after these things I heard a great voice of much people in heaven, saying, Alleluia; Salvation, and glory, and honour, and power, unto the Lord our God: For true and righteous are his judgments: for he hath judged the great harlot, which did corrupt the earth with her fornication, and hath avenged the blood of his servants at her hand. And again they said, Alleluia. And her smoke rose up for ever and ever. And the four and twenty elders and the four beasts fell down and worshipped God that sat on the throne, saying, Amen; Alleluia. And a voice came out of the throne saying, Praise our God, all ye his servants, and ye that fear him, both small and great. And I heard as it were the voice of a great multitude, and as the voice of many waters, and as the voice of mighty thunderings, saying, Alleluia: for the Lord God omnipotent reigneth” (Rev. 19:1-6).] (*The Seven Spirits for the Local Churches*, 97-98)

As we have seen, Witness Lee was not alone in identifying Babylon the Great and the harlots she spawned with the degraded situation in Christianity, and if we accept the identification, then according to the prophecy in Revelation 14:8, we should understand that there will come a day when the degraded situation in Christianity will fall. Should any of us lament that? Should any of us defend the degraded situation in Christianity? Certainly Witness Lee is quite strong here in declaring that Christianity, Catholicism, and the denominations are fallen, but in the context he is referring to the negative aspects of Chris-

tianity. He is not declaring the fall of the Christian faith, the Christian church as the Body of Christ and His Bride, the believers in Christ, or even the entire proper Christian ethos. His ministry is everywhere an able and impressive defense of these matters in a breadth and volume that far outstrips the efforts of all the signers of the open letter combined. Rather, he is declaring the fall of that segment of Christianity which corrupts the earth with her fornication and the fall of those segments of Christianity that have splintered into the many daughters of that harlot. The history of the Christian church across the ages testifies clearly that these negative aspects of Christianity are just as real as the positive ones, and our own eyes today witness these negative aspects still in operation. Shall we then defend them as the signers of the open letter hope we will? No, we should not. Rather, we should look to and stand with the prophetic victory over Babylon the Great and the harlots she has spawned, as Witness Lee does in Quotation 16. Even further we should heed the cry from heaven concerning Babylon the Great and so do:

And I heard another voice out of heaven, saying, Come out of her, My people, that you do not participate in her sins and that you do not receive her plagues; for her sins have accumulated up to heaven, and God has remembered her unrighteousnesses. (Rev. 18:4-5)

QUOTATION 17

To know God is not adequate. To know Christ is also not adequate. Even to know the church is not adequate. We must go on to know the churches which are local. If we are up-to-date in following the Lord, we will realize that today is the day of the local churches. (*The Seven Spirits for the Local Churches*, 23)

We can only speculate as to why Quotation 17 was included in the open letter, but the impression given by its inclusion apart from its proper context is that Witness Lee esteemed the local churches above God, Christ, and the universal church. Because Quotation 17 comes under the general heading "On the

Legitimacy of Evangelical Churches and Denominations,” we assume that the signers of the open letter hoped also to convince their readers that Witness Lee taught that anyone who does not know the local churches is a second-class Christian at best. However, these impressions are grossly misleading. In the chapter from which Quotation 17 was taken, Witness Lee highlights four main items that are presented in the Bible: God, Christ, the church, and the local churches. While he emphasizes the progressive revelation in the Bible and stresses the importance of the local churches in the book of Revelation, he in no way minimizes the centrality of God, Christ, and the universal church, nor does he suggest that genuine believers in Christ who do not meet in local churches are somehow inferior to those who do. He writes:

All human beings know about God, but only a small number know both God and Christ, because Christ is a real mystery. He is God, yet He became a man. He was God, yet He was God in man. And I do believe He was a small man while He was on this earth in the flesh. Jesus was a small man, yet that small man was God. God was embodied in Him. Isn't this wonderful? So we see that to know Christ is not as easy as to know God. But those of us who are Christians know Christ as our God.

However, to go on from Christ to know the Church is even more difficult. Many Christians know Christ, but not so many know the Church. To know the Church is a greater improvement. We all need to be improved again and again. We need to know God first, we need to know Christ second, and then we must go on to know the Church. The Church is also a mystery. God is in Christ, and Christ today is in the Church. God is embodied in Christ, and Christ is realized in the Church.

But this is not all. From the Church we must go on to see the churches. Comparatively speaking, it is easy to know the Church; but it is not so easy to know the churches. Some Christians know the Church, but they do not know the churches. They talk a lot about the Church, but they have not seen the churches. (Ibid., 22)

The book of Revelation begins with the local churches as golden lampstands (1:11-12, 20), among which Christ as the Son of Man walks and to whom He writes seven epistles (vv. 13, 19-20; chs. 2—3). The local churches represented as golden lampstands are, therefore, a central item in the book of Revelation, and inclusion of this prominent symbol in the last book of the Bible indicates its importance in the completion of God's plan for the church on earth. While Witness Lee emphasized the local churches in the publication from which Quotation 17 was extracted, it is in accordance with the book of Revelation that he did so. His emphasis was neither unscriptural nor un-Christian, as the signers of the open letter would have their readers believe. In fact, far from being unscriptural, his concern was for the proper and complete interpretation of and regard for the Scriptures. In the immediate context from which Quotation 17 was separated, this point is clear. Here is the larger context of Quotation 17, again with the portions not included in the open letter in brackets:

[In the past, some have said that they know God, they know Christ, and they know the Church. They are clear from Ephesians that the Church is the Body of Christ. But they will not agree to have the local churches. Therefore, they cut off so many epistles, especially the last book, from their Bible. Their Bible only has sixty-five books.

If we have sixty-six books in our Bible, we not only have God, Christ, and the Church, but we also have the local churches. In the Old Testament we have God. In the four Gospels we have Christ. In Acts and the epistles we have the Church and the churches. And in Revelation we have the churches, which are emphasized as being local. Therefore, to know the churches, the local churches, is the greatest improvement in knowing the four main figures revealed in the Bible.

BEING UP-TO-DATE

My burden is that we all must see the last book of the Bible. Revelation tells us about the local churches, not the one Church in the heavens.] To know God is not adequate. To know Christ is also not adequate. Even to know the church is

not adequate. We must go on to know the churches which are local. If we are up-to-date in following the Lord, we will realize that today is the day of the local churches. [In the last age of God’s dispensation, and in the last book of His Scriptures, the main thing is the local churches.] (Ibid., 23-24)

This particular instance of quoting out of context, the last of seventeen instances, is perhaps the most acute example of willfully distorting Witness Lee’s meaning so as to inflame others against him. Without the benefit of the larger context above, it may seem that Witness Lee denounces the knowledge of God, of Christ, and of the church, and exalts the local churches above all else. But the larger context provides a decidedly different meaning to the five sentences of Quotation 17. According to his fuller words here, we must know God properly, we must know Christ properly, and we must know the church as the Body of Christ properly. We must accept all sixty-six books of the Bible—the Old Testament, the Gospels, the Acts, the Epistles, and Revelation. Since the Bible, particularly in the book of Revelation, also reveals that the churches should be local, “we must go on to know the churches which are local.” Do we not all agree that to know only the God of the Old Testament is not adequate? Jesus Christ has come, and we must go on to know Him. Do we not all agree that to know only Jesus Christ in the Gospels is not adequate? The Holy Spirit has been poured out into our hearts, and Christ’s glorious church as His genuine one Body has been created, and we must go on to know the church in this way. Shouldn’t we then also agree that to know only the aspects of the church revealed in Acts and the Epistles is not adequate? Jesus Christ, the Son of Man as the High Priest, is standing in the midst of the local churches, ministering to them and tending to them to make them shine brightly (Rev. 1:11-20), an aspect not revealed in either Acts or the Epistles; therefore, “we must go on to know the churches which are local.” We certainly understand that most Christians today do not know this matter of the local churches. We realize how foreign it

sounds in the ears of many. But we are persuaded that “we must go on to know the churches which are local” because the Bible itself goes on to reveal the local churches. We do not expect everyone to agree with us in this matter, but we do expect that those who disagree will not twist the meaning of Witness Lee’s words to their opposite effect simply because they disagree, and we certainly hope that our readers will agree with us on this much.

Is the Implication of Hypocrisy Valid?

The signers of the open letter have implicitly charged that LSM and those who meet in the local churches are hypocritical for continuing to promote Witness Lee’s uncompromising statements concerning the errors of Christendom, which they have misrepresented as attacks on evangelicals, while seeking membership in “associations of evangelical churches and ministries,” which neither LSM nor the local churches has ever done. The charge is woefully uninformed, and as such, it should be invalidated without further concern; nonetheless, we believe that some may yet wonder if we are in fact hypocritical for seeking association with any Christians outside of the local churches while continuing to promote Witness Lee’s statements. We recognize this and do not wish to leave those who may be troubled by the charge without further response. The fact of the matter is that we have been greatly encouraged by the friendship of several evangelical parties who have thoroughly investigated Witness Lee’s writings and have engaged in extensive dialogue with us. Regrettably, however, their association with us has come at no small cost to themselves, as they have suffered criticism and worse for their stand. We are more than heartened by their Christian example of suffering with the truth rather than seeking relief from persecution by turning away from the truth. Notably, their primary interest has been to assess our stand on the essentials of the faith and, having determined that Witness Lee and we are firmly orthodox in our teaching of those essentials, they have publicly demonstrated a oneness with us as

fellow believers and have not allowed disagreement over non-essential matters to frustrate our mutual Christian harmony. For example, Hank Hanegraaff, president of Christian Research Institute (CRI) and host of the *Bible Answer Man* radio broadcast, has written:

While I personally have profound differences with the movement when it comes to secondary issues, such as the timing of the tribulation or the meaning of the millennium, I stand shoulder to shoulder with the local churches when it comes to the essentials that define biblical orthodoxy. (*The Local Churches: “Genuine Believers and Fellow Members of the Body of Christ,”* 10)

Significantly, he further notes as an example the doctrine of the Trinity, which has figured prominently in the open letter and our response to it. While the signers of the open letter have, as we have demonstrated, failed to conduct their own thorough research of the writings of Witness Lee, Hank Hanegraaff states that he “initiated a primary research project that included interaction with their publications as well as interaction with programs and people associated with their churches and Living Stream Ministry” (Ibid., 9). He was joined in his research by Gretchen Passantino, founder of the apologetics research organization Answers in Action, and Elliot Miller, Editor-in-Chief of the *Christian Research Journal*. Regarding our teaching concerning the Trinity, Hanegraaff states the following:

With respect to the Trinity, for example, we are united in the reality that there is one God revealed in three persons who are eternally distinct. Although we may disagree on the exegesis of particular passages, this premise is inviolate. It is significant to note that in interacting with members of the local churches over a protracted period of time, I have witnessed in them a keen interest in doctrinal precision sadly missing today in major segments of the evangelical community. (Ibid., 10)

Gretchen Passantino has also written in support of us following her own professionally conducted and thorough research:

I have had full access to all of the printed and recorded materials of the movement. I have had full access to any members, whether neophyte converts or leading brothers who have served the local churches for decades. I have conducted careful, thorough research for many months. I am convinced that I have a much better, more accurate, better informed basis from which to conclude that this movement is a Christian movement whose teachings and practices are well within Christian orthodoxy. (Ibid., 19)

Fuller Theological Seminary has also conducted extensive research and has also interacted personally with us in fruitful times of dialogue, and they have warmly welcomed us as fellow believers in the faith. The Seminary has stated:

Fuller Theological Seminary (Fuller) and leaders from the local churches and its publishing service, Living Stream Ministry (LSM), have recently completed two years of extensive dialog. During this time Fuller conducted a thorough review and examination of the major teachings and practices of the local churches, with particular emphasis on the writings of Witness Lee and Watchman Nee, as published by Living Stream Ministry. This process was undertaken in an attempt to answer many of the questions and accusations that are often associated with this group of churches and to locate the teachings and practices of these two men and the local churches in light of historical, orthodox Christianity....It is the conclusion of Fuller Theological Seminary that the teachings and practices of the local churches and its members represent the genuine, historical, biblical Christian faith in every essential aspect. (Ibid., 29-30)

We treasure the gracious friendship shown to us by these Christians, who have made considerable investments of time and resources to seek out the truth concerning Witness Lee and us. To receive them, we do not require that they accept our views, and to receive us, they do not require that we change our views. They receive us based on our confession of faith in Christ as Savior and Lord and our agreement on the essentials of the faith. Each respects the other's liberty to practice as they feel led of the Lord, even though each may not agree with the other's

position concerning church practice. We find no incongruity and, therefore, no hypocrisy in this, and we will neither disavow nor cease to publish Witness Lee’s statements concerning the errors of Christendom in light of the oneness of the Body of Christ, as to do so would be tantamount to forsaking what we believe the Lord has delivered to us. We believe, rather, that the charge of hypocrisy fits the signers of the open letter, who promote their credentials as “Christian scholars and ministry leaders” and yet fail to adequately research the writings they publicly condemn and, therefore, lead others to false judgments concerning Witness Lee and us whom they have called into question.

CONCLUSION

In the many preceding pages we have gone to great length to show what Witness Lee actually taught on the issues of Christian truth raised by the open letter. We feel that we have done what the signers of the open letter should have done, that is, examine the full context of the isolated quotations as well as the larger ministry of Witness Lee on these issues before making conclusions about his teaching. We have repeatedly shown that the isolating of these quotations presents a false witness concerning the teachings of Witness Lee. Admittedly, our response has been lengthy, and we hope that we have not exhausted our readers with it. But for each misquotation in the open letter, we have provided ample proper quotation from Witness Lee's ministry to show his actual position on the issues at hand. The very length of this response testifies to the abundance of material in Witness Lee's ministry that counters the impression given by the isolating of quotations in the open letter. This wealth of material is not only abundant but easily available on the Internet⁵⁴ and in print.⁵⁵ The signers of the open letter, therefore, have no excuse for presenting these seventeen quotations out of context and at odds with the actual teaching of Witness Lee. We believe that this action makes clear what kind of scholars and ministry leaders they are. Obviously, there are good scholars and good ministry leaders, but we would be naive to rely on persons simply because they claim credentials as scholars and ministry leaders. Good scholars, by definition, do good research: that is, they look further, deeper, and more carefully at source material than the average person; they apply critical evaluative skills but are objective and fair; they examine all sides of an issue, not merely the side that corresponds to a bias or a hidden agenda; and the merit of their work is in their

⁵⁴ At <http://ministrybooks.org>.

⁵⁵ See <http://www.lsm.org/lsm-catalogs.html> for a catalog of books and tapes published by Living Stream Ministry.

method, not merely in their status. The signers of the open letter have provided no research at all and have presented only their credentials (actually only their affiliations with institutions whom they disclaim as being in agreement with them) as a basis for their claims against Witness Lee. They may wish to counter by saying, "The seventeen quotations speak for themselves. We need not say anything further." But taking quotations out of context and isolating them solely to give maximum shock to readers neither substantiates their claims nor absolves them from being false witnesses and abusing a public trust in scholarship.

Throughout our preparation of this and our other two responses, we have wondered, "Why would people whose professions depend on doing good scholarship or on taking a proper lead in their ministries sign their names to a document that demonstrates just the opposite?" If they had properly examined the writings of Witness Lee, they would have known that he does not mean what they claim he does, and they would not have joined in falsely accusing him. We are honestly puzzled by their lack of due diligence in the matter. It is difficult not to suspect that the signers have some sort of vendetta against Witness Lee and the local churches, but it is also possible that no malice was intended and that the signers suspended a proper examination of Witness Lee's ministry in deference to friends or colleagues who sought their signatures and whom they trusted. But to blindly put one's trust in others and sign off on a matter of this gravity without a more careful examination of the issues is irresponsible and below the integrity of true scholarship and true ministry leadership. Whatever their reasons, the signers of the open letter have left themselves open to grave condemnation, for they have abandoned the very practices which should commend them as proper scholars and ministry leaders.

In so many words preceding, we have tried to set the record straight concerning Witness Lee's teachings, and in so doing, we have tried to show the injustice of the open letter and the

impropriety of its signers. None of us can know the thoughts and intents of their hearts, but all of us can easily discern the inappropriateness of their actions. We are grieved that the hearts of many may have been turned against the ministry of Witness Lee and the members of the local churches through the action of these signers, but we lift our prayer to the Lord Jesus, the righteous Judge, that He would operate in those many hearts through our writing here and settle in them a right judgment of both Witness Lee and the signers. While we have endeavored by His grace to present our case fairly and fully, our trust is in the Lord Spirit's inner operation in our readers. We believe that likewise through His grace our readers will be at peace concerning Witness Lee's ministry and with us who accept it. This alone is ample vindication for us.

*Respectfully submitted
by various brothers representing the local churches
and by the editorial section of Living Stream Ministry
Lord's Day, November 28, 2010*

