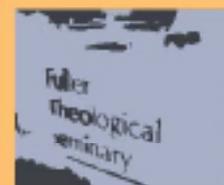
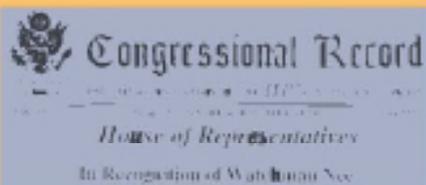


# Voices of Confirmation Concerning

Watchman Nee, Witness Lee &  
the Local Churches



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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.

“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.” Philippians 1:7

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# S Statement of Faith

Holding the Bible as the complete and only divine revelation, we strongly believe that God is eternally one and also eternally the Father, the Son, and the Spirit, the three being distinct but not separate. We hold that Christ is both the complete God and the perfect man. Without abandoning His divinity, He was conceived in the womb of a human virgin, lived a genuine human life on earth, and died a vicarious and all-inclusive death on the cross.

After three days He resurrected bodily and has ascended to the heavens. He is now in glory, fully God but still fully man. We look to His imminent return with the kingdom of God, by which He will reign over the earth in the millennium and in eternity. We confess that the third of the Trinity, the Spirit, is equally God. All that the Father has and is, is expressed by the Son; and all that the Son has and is, is realized as the Spirit. We further believe that mankind is in need of God's salvation. Though we were absolutely unable to fulfill the heavy demands of God's righteousness, holiness, and glory, Christ fulfilled all the requirements through His death on the cross. Because of Christ's death, God has forgiven us of our sins, justified us by making Christ our righteousness and reconciled us to Himself. Based on Christ's redemption, God regenerates the redeemed with His Spirit to consummate His salvation, that they may become His children. Now possessing God's life and nature, the believers enjoy a daily salvation in His Body in this age and the eternal salvation in the coming age and in eternity. In eternity we will dwell with God in the New Jerusalem, the consummation of God's salvation of His elect.



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hen Witness Lee came to the United States in the early 1960s, he and those meeting in the local churches were met with interest by some and skepticism by others within the evangelical community. By the mid-1970s a number of countercult ministries had come into contact with the local churches. Many of the local churches' teachings were then misinterpreted and misrepresented, resulting in allegations of heresy, aberrance, and even cultism. Contemporary critics have chosen to repeat these same judgments without affording the local churches the opportunity to speak for themselves. Thus, it was the countercult ministries that defined Witness Lee and the local churches to contemporary Christianity.

Today, however, there has been a shift in attitude toward the local churches. Early critics are now speaking out to correct misperceptions created 30 years ago. This booklet presents the testimony of these and other leading evangelical voices.

Most striking is the testimony of the Christian Research Institute (CRI), a widely respected apologetics ministry best known for its radio program *Bible Answer Man*. Under the leadership of President and radio host Walter Martin, CRI was among the first to disseminate criticism of Witness Lee and the local churches. In 2003 representatives of the local churches approached Martin's successor, Hank Hanegraaff, to address previous charges of heresy. This was the first time in history that representatives of the local churches were given opportunity to explain their own beliefs and practices to past critics.

As a result of this dialogue, CRI initiated a six-year research project culminating in a reassessment of its earlier negative evaluation. These findings were published in a special issue of the *Christian Research Journal* entitled "We Were Wrong." There, Hank Hanegraaff, Elliot Miller (the journal's editor-in-chief), and Gretchen Passantino (director of Answers in Action) strongly affirmed the orthodoxy of the local churches. Excerpts from that publication, as well as other writings, are provided here.

Influential voices across the evangelical world have confirmed this change in view. Fuller Theological Seminary, among the largest and most respected seminaries in the world, conducted a two-year study of the local churches and the teachings of Watchman Nee and Witness Lee. This process resulted in a definitive statement endorsing the orthodoxy of the local churches later echoed by the leading evangelical newsmagazine *Christianity Today*.

Three major voices—leaders in Christian apologetics, theological education, and evangelical journalism—now share a new and positive view. We hope that these testimonies will help you have a true and accurate understanding of our beliefs and practices.

Defense and Confirmation Project

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he LC as a movement can be traced to the conversion of a bright and promising seventeen-year-old, Nee To-sheng (1903–1972), in Fuzhou (or Foochow), Fujian Province, China. “Watchman” Nee (as he became known) wholeheartedly committed his life to the service of the Lord. What Nee lacked in formal training he made up for by voracious reading of as much Christian literature as he could get his hands on, and by hands-on experience in evangelism and church planting. Nee developed a reputation for profound insight into the inner Christian life and the New Testament church life, which he expressed through books and magazines he published after moving to Shanghai in 1927.

One of the earnest Chinese Christians who benefited from Nee’s publications was a young man named Lǐ Chángshòu (1905–1997), who came to be called Witness Lee. Lee had been raised as a Southern Baptist<sup>1</sup> and personally accepted Christ as his Savior in 1925. Lee arranged for Nee to come and speak in 1933 to a church he had planted in his home town of Chefoo, and, desiring his ministry to be fully coordinated or “one” with Nee’s, he moved to Shanghai later that year.

In the following years Nee wrote many books and held regular conferences and trainings for church workers. Nee, Lee, and other workers planted churches up and down China and in Southeast Asia that numbered at least six hundred by the time of the Communist Revolution in 1949. A truly indigenous Chinese movement that came to be known by outsiders as the “Little Flock” (because they sang from a Plymouth Brethren hymnal called *Hymns for the Little Flock*), they emphasized an experiential knowledge of Christ, the consecrated life, and the recovery of the New Testament pattern for the local church.



Elliot Miller is an ordained minister with pastoral experience and a Bible teacher. He holds a B.A. in ministry from Anaheim Christian College and an M.A. in apologetics from Simon Greenleaf University. He has served as editor-in-chief for all of Christian Research Institute’s (CRI) publications and has been featured with CRI President Hank Hanegraaff on the nationally syndicated *Bible Answer Man* radio program.



## Roots in the Plymouth Brethren

Many of the movement’s ideas, such as the plurality of elders as the collective “pastor” of the local church, the abolition of the clergy-laity distinction, and worship centered on the Lord’s Table, were derived from the Exclusive (Plymouth) Brethren, to which both Nee and Lee had ample exposure. However, Nee considered the divisiveness he observed among the Brethren to be unbiblical, and so, seeking the New Testament ground for the unity of believers, he developed the concept that there should be only one church per city, autonomous from all other local churches, denominations, mission boards, and so forth. Although conceived for the purpose of unity, this has proved to be the most controversial element about the LC, for it is essentially anti-denominational and rejects the legitimacy of any church that meets on any other basis than locality—although the LC embraces all Christians as genuine children of God.

When the Communists came into power, severe persecution was unleashed on the LC and Nee was imprisoned in 1952, where he died twenty years later. Nee sent Lee to Taiwan to help ensure that the movement, and the New Testament truths they had “recovered,” would survive.

In Taiwan the movement grew to sixty-five churches with twenty thousand participating “saints” (the LC’s preferred term for believers) by 1955.<sup>2</sup> Lee assumed the mantle of leadership, although certain leaders and churches that were part of Nee’s “Little Flock” movement never “became one” with Lee as Lee had become one with Nee, and it was from some of these people that the charge of heresy was first raised against Lee.<sup>3</sup>

### Lee Further Shapes the Movement

During this period Lee more fully developed several teachings that were present in Nee’s ministry, such as the mingling of God and man,<sup>4</sup> Christ as the life-giving Spirit (which brought on the charge of modalism), and the understanding of the church as the New Jerusalem, as well as devotional practices such as pray-reading and calling on the name of the Lord. All of these were presented as new revelations, not in the sense of a new truth that goes beyond the Bible, but rather in the sense of a biblical truth that had been lost sight of but that the Spirit has *uncovered* and that the church has *recovered*.<sup>5</sup> Hence, the movement often refers to itself as “the Lord’s recovery,” since they see themselves as part of a continuing restoration of biblical truth to the people of God that can be traced from the pre-Reformation period through the Protestant Reformation and all the way to the ministries of Watchman Nee and Witness Lee.<sup>6</sup>

*“...they emphasized an experiential knowledge of Christ, the consecrated life, and the recovery of the New Testament pattern for the local church.”*

### East Meets West

In 1958 Lee traveled to the United States and met with a group of believers in Los Angeles who were hungry to experience the New Testament church. Lee stayed in touch with them and in 1962 he moved to Los Angeles, believing that the Lord was directing him to spread the “recovery” into the United States.

By 1969 there were “local churches” in California, New York, and Texas, but most of the country was untouched by the movement. Lee began to teach that in the Book of Acts the church life was spread through migration, and so groups of LC members began moving to different parts of the country and establishing churches there. With the explosion of the Jesus movement in the 1970s many idealistic young people, as well as spiritually hungry older people, were seeking a greater experience of Christ and also of the New Testament church, and so the ranks of the LC swelled and they became a known quantity at least among Christians in many cities across the United States. Churches were also planted in Canada and on every continent.

“And day by day, continuing steadfastly with one accord in the temple and breaking bread from house to house, they partook of their food with exultation and simplicity of heart.”

Acts 2:46

1 It is important to note that neither Lee nor Nee came from a Buddhist background. The mystical leanings in their writings are not traceable to Eastern religions, as has been alleged, but to Western Christian inner life teachers such as Jessie Penn-Lewis, Andrew Murray, and Madame Guyon.

2 The Lord’s Recovery of Experiencing Christ and Practicing the Church Life in Oneness, History, “The Present Recovery—One City, One Church (A.D. 1937–Present),” 2, <http://www.lordsrecovery.org/history/iv.html>.

3 The first theological critic of Lee was James Chen, who had been appointed by Nee as one of two elders in Hong Kong. Interestingly, his charge was one that we have never heard in America, that Lee was teaching Arianism. He based this on the fact that Lee called the incarnate Christ a creature. Lee did indeed teach that Christ is a creature with respect to His humanity, but he also taught that, with respect to His deity, Christ is the Creator of the universe. This pattern, in which Lee makes radical statements and balances them elsewhere in his teaching, only to have his critics seize on his radical statements without factoring in the balancing statements, has continued to the present day. In fact, this theme pretty well sums up the balance of this article, insofar as it deals with theology.

4 The LC has been careful to define *mingling* in a way that does not suggest a change in the essential nature of God or man. See the sidebar, “‘Mingling’—Was There Ever a Better Word?” *Affirmation and Critique* 1, 3 (July 1996): 31, 62.

5 “The Present Recovery—One City, One Church (A.D. 1937–Present),” 19.

6 For a thorough explanation of their beliefs in this regard, see the entire History section at the Web site, The Lord’s Recovery of Experiencing Christ and Practicing the Church Life, <http://www.lordsrecovery.org/history/index.html>.

The biblical bases cited in LC literature for their identification of the persons of the Trinity with each other will be explained in detail shortly, but to state them succinctly, they are (1) the *activity* of the three persons in the *economic* Trinity and (2) the *coinherence* of the three persons in the *essential* Trinity. The *purpose* for their emphasis on this identification of the three persons is to provide a corrective to what they view as rampant tritheism in the West.

I for one knew of no other group classified as modalistic that made similar detailed confessions of Trinitarian orthodoxy. The thought crossed my mind more than once that perhaps we were missing something in the LC's teachings that would clarify this seemingly blatant contradiction. Indeed, we at CRI *were* missing something, and so were virtually all of our colleagues in the countercult community!

### "It's the Economy, Stupid!"

You may remember the catch phrase coined by Bill Clinton's political strategist James Carville in the 1992 presidential race to keep the campaign on message: "It's the economy, stupid." In a different sense the same rebuke might well be addressed to those of us who missed a distinction frequently made in LC literature between the *essential* Trinity (also called the *ontological* Trinity or the *immanent* Trinity) and the *economic* Trinity. These terms refer to a distinction that is widely made in orthodox theology; one that we at CRI have always embraced and taught. It is a distinction between the eternal nature and interrelationship of the three divine persons and the temporal (i.e., time-related and situated) roles that they assume in their relationship with creation.<sup>1</sup> It is therefore the case that much of the LC's identification of the Son with the Father and the Spirit is stated in the context of the operations of the economic Trinity, and is based on a similar identification that is made in Scripture.

## On Christ and the Spirit

As this is one of the topics that has drawn the greatest amount of criticism concerning Witness Lee's teaching, we feel that it is important to add a few quotations from others on the subject. At least one notable contemporary scholar worth mention is James D. G. Dunn, who addresses some of the same scriptural passages that Witness Lee has given frequent attention to:

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

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

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

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

The Spirit in its working was found to be in effect the equivalent of Jesus Christ...where the possession of the Spirit of Christ is clearly regarded as tantamount to an indwelling of Christ Himself...."the Lord the Spirit," (i.e. Christ in the power of His glorified life) are viewed as being in practice the same. (*The Holy Spirit in the New Testament* [London; New York: Macmillan, 1912], 306)<sup>2</sup>

Turning the Trinitarian Tables:  
What Evangelicals Can Learn from Witness Lee

As we have seen among the quotations supplied in the Open Letter to the LC, Witness Lee has already stated the problem: “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....”

From even the limited material provided in the Open Letter it should be evident, however, that Lee’s real concern was tritheism, which makes it ironic that the Open Letter includes this quotation as evidence of Lee’s unorthodox teaching. Do the drafters and signers of the Open Letter really want to say that when the Spirit comes into believers the Father and Son are left on the throne? Do they really contend that splitting the Godhead into three *separate* persons is the revelation of the Bible? If so, then conscientious Christians should be concerned about *their* beliefs on the Trinity.

A careful effort to understand LC writings on their own terms is bound to discover that the strong modalistic-sounding language often found therein is a reaction to, and an attempt to correct, the tritheistic tendencies that Lee and his compatriots believed they were encountering in the West. Indeed, some Western theologians have made the same observation about modern evangelicalism,<sup>3</sup> and the very fact that the distinction between *separate* and *distinct* is not recognized even by theologians and countercult apologists involved with the Open Letter would seem to corroborate this concern.

Of course, the vast majority of Western Christians are not full-blown tritheists (believing that the Trinity is composed of three separate gods). However, many of them do seem inconsistently to hold beliefs about God that imply tritheism.

There is clearly a sense biblically in which the three persons of the Trinity share a singular *personal* identity: Yahweh, the covenant-keeping God, who we appropriately refer to as “He” or “Him.” To affirm this is not to confuse the eternal and economic distinctions that exist between Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. It is rather to safeguard the equally important biblical truth that they comprise one eternal Being, a truth that describing them as three *separate* persons compromises. Those of us who have used the word *separate* to distinguish the persons of the Trinity owe a debt of gratitude to Witness Lee for pointing this out.

I believe that sufficient evidence has been provided to exonerate the LC from charges of heresy, aberration, duplicity, and self-contradiction as regards the Trinity. Just as we at CRI admitted that we had wrongly charged the LC with modalism, I am confident that other evangelical critics of the LC who are fair minded and open to correction will reach a similar conclusion.

A careful contextual reading of LC literature forces the exact same conclusions on the other alleged theological errors identified in the Open Letter.

**Editor’s Note:** In January 2007 a group identifying themselves as “Christian scholars and ministry leaders” published an open letter calling on Living Stream Ministry and the local churches to disavow certain statements made by Witness Lee. The statements, arranged under the general rubrics “On the Nature of God,” “On the Nature of Man,” and “On the Legitimacy of Evangelical Churches and Denominations,” were taken out of context and created a distorted impression of Witness Lee’s teaching. In December 2009 Christian Research Institute devoted an issue of its *Christian Research Journal* (CRI) entitled “We Were Wrong” to address the concerns expressed in the open letter. The preceding four pages are slightly edited extracts from “A Reassessment of the ‘Local Church’ Movement of Watchman Nee and Witness Lee,” written by CRJ Editor-in-Chief Elliot Miller. These extracts have been reviewed by the author.

1 By *relationship* I refer to every aspect of the Triune God’s activity as creator, preserver, judge, and redeemer of the world.

2 *A Statement concerning the Teachings of Living Stream Ministry Prepared for Fuller Theological Seminary*, January 20, 2007, 12–14. (This document is posted at <http://www.lctestimony.org/StatementOfTeachings.pdf>.)

3 See, e.g., Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1995), 248; Phil Gons, “Are You a Practical Modalist?” *PhilGons.com*, Thoughts on Theology and Technology, January 19, 2009, <http://philgons.com/2008/01/are-you-a-practical-modalist/>; and Rev. James Hastings, M.A., ed., *The Expository Times*, vol. 7: October 1895–September 1896 (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, n.d.), 153.

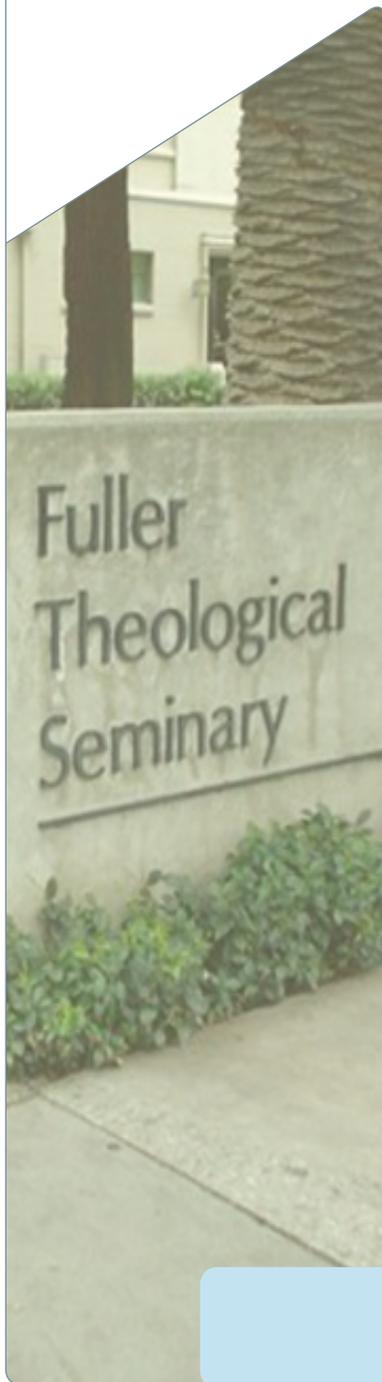
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uller Theological Seminary (Fuller) and leaders from the local churches and its publishing service, Living Stream Ministry (LSM), have recently completed two years of extensive dialog. During this time Fuller conducted a thorough review and examination of the major teachings and practices of the local churches, with particular emphasis on the writings of Witness Lee and Watchman Nee, as published by Living Stream Ministry. This process was undertaken in an attempt to answer many of the questions and accusations that are often associated with this group of churches and to locate the teachings and

practices of these two men and the local churches in light of historical, orthodox Christianity. Participants in the dialog from Fuller included Dr. Richard Mouw, President and Professor of Christian Philosophy; Dr. Howard Loewen, Dean of the School of Theology and Professor of Theology and Ethics; and Dr. Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, Professor of Systematic Theology. Representing the local churches were Minoru Chen, Abraham Ho, and Dan Towle. Representing LSM were Ron Kangas, Benson Phillips, Chris Wilde, and Andrew Yu.

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

It is the conclusion of Fuller Theological Seminary that the teachings and practices of the local churches and its members represent the genuine, historical, biblical Christian faith in every essential aspect. One of the initial tasks facing Fuller was to determine if the portrayal of the ministry typically presented by its critics accurately reflects the teachings of the ministry. On this point we have found a great disparity between the perceptions that have been generated in some circles concerning the teachings of Watchman Nee and Witness Lee and the actual teachings found in their writings. Particularly, the teachings of Witness Lee have been grossly misrepresented and therefore most frequently misunderstood in the general Christian community, especially among those who classify themselves as evangelicals. We consistently discovered that when examined fairly in the light of scripture and church history, the actual teachings in question have significant biblical and historical credence. Therefore, we believe that they deserve the attention and consideration of the entire Body of Christ.



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

Our times together were characterized by sincere, open, transparent, and unrestricted dialog. There were several topics that we at Fuller approached with particular interest, such as the Trinity, the mingling of divinity and humanity, deification, modalism, their interpretation and practice of the “local” church, the divine and human natures of Christ, and their attitude toward believers outside their congregations. We were given unlimited freedom to explore each of these areas. In every instance we found the public perception of some to be far removed from the actual published teachings as well as the beliefs and practices of the believers in the local churches.

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

Dated: January 5, 2006

“And they continued steadfastly in the teaching and the fellowship of the apostles, in the breaking of bread and the prayers.” Acts 2:42



**Hank Hanegraaff** serves as president and chairman of the Christian Research Institute, based in Charlotte, North Carolina. He is the author of several books, including *The Prayer of Jesus* and *Christianity in Crisis*, and is best known as the host of the *Bible Answer Man* radio program. Widely regarded as one of the world's leading Christian apologists, Hanegraaff also travels extensively as a conference speaker and itinerant preacher.

“While we have significant doctrinal differences with the local churches on nonessentials such as aspects of eschatology, when it comes to essential Christian doctrine—the very doctrines for which the martyrs spilled their blood—we stand shoulder-to-shoulder.”

“We Were Wrong,” *Christian Research Journal* (CRJ), vol. 32, no. 6, p. 4



“...I stand shoulder to shoulder with the local churches when it comes to the essentials that define biblical orthodoxy. 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.”

*The Local Churches: “Genuine Believers and Fellow Members of the Body of Christ,”* p. 10



“Finally, the local churches *are* an authentic expression of New Testament Christianity. Moreover, as a group forged in the cauldron of persecution, it has much to offer Western Christianity.”

*The Local Churches*, p. 11



“Furthermore, when leaders in the LC testified to their belief in one God, revealed in three Persons who are eternally distinct; to the reality that human beings can never ontologically attain Godhood; and to the fact that they are ‘only the church’ as opposed to being ‘the only church,’ Christian charity alone compelled me to give them the benefit of the doubt. After a six-year primary research process, I am fully persuaded that the LC is innocent—rather than guilty—of compromising essential Christian doctrine. Moreover, it has become apparent that the Holy Spirit has moved in their midst to recover New Testament principles and practices widely neglected in the modern church.

Finally, what is true from a theological perspective is true sociologically as well. After meeting thousands of LC adherents and personally interacting with hundreds, I am not only convinced that they are innocent of the charge of cultism from a sociological perspective, but I can testify that they are among the finest Christians I have encountered in life and ministry.”

“D-I-S-C-E-R-N,” CRJ, vol. 33, no. 3, p. 12

**Gretchen Passantino** is the co-founder and director of Answers in Action, a prolific author, and an adjunct seminary professor. She and her husband, Bob Passantino, co-authored several books. She holds a B.A. in Comparative Literature from the University of California, Irvine, and an M. Div. with an emphasis in apologetics from Faith Evangelical Lutheran Seminary in Tacoma, Washington.

“If you are a young person who is experiencing your own spiritual epiphany, let me encourage you that your spiritual life will be enriched and enhanced as you join yourself to a true work of God, whether that is with the brothers and sisters of the local churches or in some other fellowship where God is working. God really is interested in capturing your heart for his service and he really will empower you to make your world a better place through Jesus Christ. If you are a parent, proud of your young adult offspring’s seemingly overnight spiritual blossoming, but afraid that he or she is going to crash and burn in spiritual chaos, let me reassure you. The local churches are a legitimate, theologically orthodox, spiritually faithful involvement by means of which your offspring can develop genuine Christian commitment and maturity. They are not a dangerous ensnarement of the devil.”

*The Local Churches: “Genuine Believers and Fellow Members of the Body of Christ,”* p. 14



“A Christian believer who joins the local churches will find sound theology, enriching worship, challenging discipleship, and enthusiastic evangelism opportunities. After 40 years of Christian faith, I have not lost my ‘first love’ of Jesus Christ. I recognize that same vibrant Spirit in the local churches.”

*The Local Churches,* p. 28



“Some other apologetics colleagues continue to insist that the teachings and practices of the local churches are heretical and outside Christian orthodoxy. Surprisingly, these particular apologists base their insistence on the very same incomplete work my late husband Bob and I initially produced between 1975 and 1980, despite the fact that today I and others can demonstrate the insufficiency in breadth, depth, and analysis of that former inadequate research here. The current more adequate assessment of myself and other colleagues necessarily carries greater weight than did that first unfortunately incomplete former research base. Unless and until some of my colleagues join with others who have been willing to engage in the much larger body of documentation, they will be left behind, outside robust Christian research. Those who have followed Hank, Elliot, and me in this better research have had their research enhanced by a deeper application of the study of the wider diversity of the Christian world, a greater understanding of Christian worship as it has diversified over the centuries, and augmented their Christian experience by greater interaction and communication with Christians from differing cultures and centuries.”

*The Local Churches,* p. 20, edited by the author



# Congressional Record

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## House of Representatives

### In Recognition of Watchman Nee



Mr. SMITH of New Jersey.

Madam Speaker, I rise today to acknowledge the immense spiritual achievement of Watchman Nee, a great pioneer of Christianity in China.

*Christianity Today* magazine recently honored Watchman Nee as one of the 100 most influential Christians of the twentieth century. Watchman Nee died over thirty years ago but his life and work continue to influence millions of Protestant Christians in China. Today more than three thousand churches outside of China, including several hundred in the United States, look to him as one of their spiritual and theological founders.

Watchman Nee was an astonishingly devoted and energetic man, which I think can be seen from a capsule summary of his life. He became a Christian in 1922. In the 1930s, he traveled to Europe and North America, where he delivered sermons and speeches. Later his sermons were collected and published as books. By the late 1940s, Nee had become the most influential Chinese Christian writer, evangelist, and church builder. In 1952, the Chinese government imprisoned Nee and many other Christian leaders for their faith. Nee was never released, though during the 1960s and 1970s several of his books continued to grow in influence and popularity, particularly in the United States, and his best-known book, *The Normal Christian Life*, sold over one million

copies world-wide and became a twentieth-century Christian classic. In 1972 he died at the age of 71 in a labor farm; his few surviving letters confirm that he remained faithful to God until the end.

Madam Speaker, it is estimated that China has more than one hundred million Christians, and millions of them consider themselves the spiritual heirs of Watchman Nee. Millions more are rightly proud of the contribution Watchman Nee made to global Christianity—he was the first Chinese Christian to exercise an influence on Western Christians—and indeed of his contribution to world spiritual culture. It is sad that the works of Watchman Nee are officially banned in China—even as they are being discovered afresh by a new generation of Western Christians. It is my hope that Watchman Nee’s collected works can be freely published and distributed within China.

After Watchman Nee’s death, when his niece came to collect his few possessions, she was given a scrap of paper that a guard had found by his bed. What was written on that scrap may serve as Watchman Nee’s testament: “Christ is the Son of God Who died for the redemption of sinners and was resurrected after three days. This is the greatest truth in the universe. I die because of my belief in Christ. Watchman Nee.”

Hon. Christopher H. Smith

**Randall Balmer** is a professor of American religious history at Barnard College, Columbia University, and earned his Ph.D from Princeton University. In addition to teaching at Columbia, he has also been a visiting professor at Yale, Princeton, Drew, and Northwestern Universities, and at Union Theological Seminary (New York), where he is also an adjunct professor of church history.



“When I visited the Local Church in Newington, Connecticut, I found there a worship service that I would characterize as informal, good-humored, joyful, and friendly—with slight pentecostal overtones. In the low-keyed style of worship, I found elements of the house churches that were popular among many evangelicals in the 1970s. Members of the congregation addressed one another as ‘Brother’ or ‘Sister,’ a fairly common practice in evangelical circles. I was impressed by the interracial character of the congregation and the ease with which Anglos, Asians, and African Americans related with one another (this is still fairly rare among evangelicals—as it is rare among other religious groups in America).”

Unpublished statement

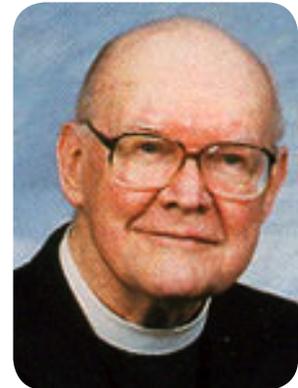


**J. Gordon Melton** is the director of the Institute for the Study of American Religion, a distinguished senior fellow at Baylor University, and a research specialist with the Department of Religious Studies at the University of California, Santa Barbara. He is a graduate of Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary and an ordained United Methodist minister. Melton has authored more than 35 reference works and scholarly texts on religious topics, including several encyclopedic works such as the *Encyclopedia of American Religions*.

“I personally have been unable to find a single point upon which it [the local churches] deviates on any essential doctrine of the Christian faith, though it has a number of differences on matters all of us would consider nonessential, i.e., doctrinal concerns upon which Christians can disagree without reading each other out of the Christian community, in particular, ecclesiology and piety.”

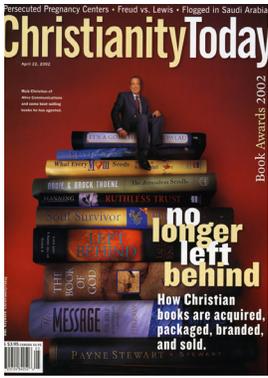
*An Open Letter Concerning the Local Church, Witness Lee and The God-Men Controversy*, p. 3

**Eugene Van Ness Goetchius** was a professor of biblical languages from 1963 to 1989, holding chairs simultaneously in the Episcopal Theological School and the Philadelphia Divinity School. He taught Greek and Hebrew and collaborated with colleagues from Harvard Divinity School and Weston School of Theology in teaching introductory courses in New Testament interpretation and exegesis.



“The ‘locality’ teaching does have real value, however, for every ecumenically inclined Christian will admit that there *ought* to be only one church in each city—not a single congregation, perhaps, for that could be unwieldy—but one body of Christians sharing one hope and one faith and one Lord, one God (cf. Ephesians 4:4f). The Local Churches may seem to be, and may develop into, ‘just another denomination’; but their doctrine of ‘locality’ makes them a witness to a genuine Christian ideal: the unity of Christendom.”

*The Experts Speak Concerning Witness Lee and the Local Churches*, p. 126



Billy Graham and Carl F. H. Henry founded *Christianity Today* in 1956 to represent the views of theologically conservative Christians. Today it is the leading evangelical newsmagazine and offers insight and commentary on a wide range of issues, trends, and current events.

“Just to be clear, the Local Church/Living Stream is not even close to being a cult—so their indignation is understandable. They loyally follow the teaching of Watchman Nee and Witness Lee. Lee’s writings can be confusing and (to our minds, anyway) contradictory at points. But [*Christianity Today*] editors have asked Local Church leaders doctrinal questions, and their answers were straightforward and satisfying. We agree with a Fuller Theological Seminary study that concluded the Local Church represents a ‘genuine, historical, biblical Christian faith in every essential aspect.’”

“Loose Cult Talk,” *Christianity Today*, vol. 50, no. 3, p. 27

**Michael Hyatt** is the chairman and CEO of Thomas Nelson Publishers and former chairman of the Evangelical Christian Publishers Association (ECPA). In 2007 Hyatt was in the process of reviewing the ECPA membership of Living Stream Ministry (LSM). Chris Wilde of LSM visited Hyatt to discuss the theology and practices of Watchman Nee, Witness Lee, and the local churches. The following is a letter from Hyatt to Wilde in response to that meeting and is reproduced here with the author’s permission.



Chris,

I thoroughly enjoyed our time together, too. I don’t meet many people (outside of Hank) who have such a comprehensive understanding of theology. I also love the fact that you understand the limits of theology and are willing to pause at the door of mystery. I read almost everything you left that same afternoon. It really helped me clarify some nuances in my own theology. I thought it was a very straight-forward exposition of what the Bible teaches—and, I might add, what historical Christianity embraces. I did not find anything with which to disagree. I also loved the tone. It was very matter-of-fact but gracious toward your detractors and adversaries. It’s encouraging to find someone who believes in both orthodoxy and orthopraxy.

I sent an e-mail to the ECPA executive committee the same afternoon we met. I gave a good report of our time together and told them I was personally satisfied with the outcome. I recommended that we drop the issue. They quickly replied with a collective “Amen.” After reading through your material, I do not think it is necessary to create a “talking points” memo. I think your open letter is sufficient. If someone objects to your theology—or should I say a *characterization* of your theology—and is unwilling to read the letter, then I simply don’t have time for them. Something other than theology is driving their behavior. I look forward to more fellowship in the future. I feel like I have made a good friend.

Warmest regards,

Mike



**Edwin S. Gaustad** is an Emeritus Professor of History and Religious Studies at the University of California, Riverside. He has also served as president of the American Society of Church History and has authored over a dozen books including *New Historical Atlas of Religion in America* and *Church and State in America*.

“From my observation, I conclude that the Local Church stands in the tradition of evangelical Christianity, of the Protestant emphasis on biblical authority, of the great Christian mystics’ and pietists’ concern for the inner life, of the millennia-old expectation of a New Age, and of born-again, experiential religion. They meet together, pray together, sing and study together, and grow together. They labor to be loyal to their particular vision of the Christian life. It seems enough. It also sounds very much like the free exercise of religion.”

*The Experts Speak Concerning Witness Lee and the Local Churches*, p. 200