

E. Calvin Beisner
13004 NW 13th Street
Pembroke Pines, Florida 33028
954-538-9502 (voice & fax)
ebeisner@aol.com

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Dr. John Ankerberg
Dr. John Weldon
The Ankerberg Theological Research Institute
P.O. Box 8977
Chattanooga, Tennessee 37414-0977

Dear Brothers,

Grace and peace to you in Christ Jesus. It was a pleasure talking with you Thursday, First John (1). I received yesterday the materials you sent regarding Witness Lee and the Local Church. It is rather interesting to look back into that controversial group and its teachings over twenty years after I was among its early critics. What you sent me, supplemented by a little bit that I looked at on the Internet, convinces me that the Local Church continues to teach essentially what it did in the late 1960s and throughout the 1970s, on the basis of which I then categorized it as embracing a heretical understanding of God that denies the Biblical doctrine of the Trinity as expressed in the historic creeds of Christendom.

You asked a specific question, to which I am prepared to give a specific and unambiguous answer: (1) "Do you think that these statements [the LC quotes you included in your packet of information] represent an orthodox or unorthodox view of God?" They represent a decidedly unorthodox view of God.

You also asked me to write two or three paragraphs explaining why I think the statements of Witness Lee and the Local Church are not orthodox—assuming, of course, that I do. The assumption, as I have just said, is correct. Below I explain why.

The most serious error in Witness Lee and the Local Church's teaching about God is the insistence on equating Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, each as the other two. Note that I did not say the insistence on equating Father, Son, and Holy Spirit with God. Orthodox Trinitarianism affirms that the Father is God, the Son is God, and the Holy Spirit is God; it equates Father with God, Son with God, and Spirit with God. But it not only does not equate Father with Son and Spirit or Son with Father and Spirit or Spirit with Father and Son but denies their equation; that is, it denies that the Father is the Son, that the Father is the Spirit, that the Son is the Father, that the Son is the Spirit, that the Spirit is the Father, and that the Spirit is the Son. This Witness Lee and the Local Church *will not do*.

Lee and Local Church writers make a big show of affirming that Father, Son, and Spirit are

three in some sense, though they hesitate to define that sense. (Hence, e.g., “A Statement of Faith”¹ on the *Affirmation & Critique* website affirms “that God is eternally one and also eternally the Father, the Son, and the Spirit, the three being distinct but not separate.” One begs to ask, “the three what?” The “Statement” will not answer. Orthodox Trinitarianism will: “three Persons.”) They also make much of the doctrine of *perichoresis*, or mutual interpenetration. All of that, however, serves little purpose other than to obscure the simple fact that, in contradiction to Biblical, orthodox, historic Trinitarianism, the Local Church insists that the Father is the Son and the Son is the Spirit.

Appropriate questions to put to a Local Church member would be, “Do you affirm that Jesus is *not* the Father?” and “Do you affirm that Jesus is *not* the Holy Spirit?” A Biblical Trinitarian will, without hesitation or qualification, answer “Yes” to both questions. A Local Church member cannot answer “Yes” without contradicting Witness Lee, who wrote, e.g., “. . . at the end in heaven He is the Father, and at the end on the earth He is the Son; at the end in heaven He is the One who listens to the prayer, and at the end on earth he is the One who prays. He is both the One who prays on earth and the One who listens in heaven”;² “The Son who prays is the Father who listens”;³ “the Son is the Father, and the Son is also the Spirit. Otherwise, how could these three be one God?”;⁴ and “The Lord Jesus is the Holy Spirit.”⁵

Not only is the Local Church’s doctrine of God heretical relative to the doctrine of the Trinity, but also it is heretical relative to the doctrine of the incarnation. Although the Local Church tries to equate its teaching at this point with the Eastern Orthodox doctrine of *deification*, or *theosis*, the two are quite distinct. The Eastern Orthodox doctrine affirms that through regeneration God deifies His children in one very specific sense but not in another: God imparts to man His intellectual and spiritual attributes or *energeia* (knowledge, righteousness, holiness, goodness, etc.) to a limited degree, but He does not impart to man His divine substance or *ousia*.⁶ But here are some quotations from the Local Church on the matter: “The Church—The Manifestation of God in the Flesh. . . . This Church is the continuation and the multiplication of God manifest in the flesh. . . . We are then the increase, the enlargement, of the manifestation of God in the flesh. God manifests Himself again in the flesh, but in a wider way. . . . In other words, God is mingled with human beings, not in an outward way, but in an inward way.”⁷ “Eventually God will become us.”⁸ “This Christ has expanded from one Person to thousands and thousands of persons. He was

¹This statement is a classic example of studied ambiguity in creed writing and reminded me instantly, as I read it, of Arius’s statement of faith offered at the start of the First Council of Nicaea. Everything Arius said in it was consistent with orthodoxy, but he said in it nothing that distinguished his own theology from orthodoxy. It simply avoided the distinctions. It was only when the orthodox insisted on using language in their creed that Arius could not redefine to suit his needs that Arius left the Council. Similarly, this statement is heretical not for what it says but for what it hides: that the Local Church equates Father, Son, and Spirit as identical each with each other.

²Witness Lee, *Concerning the Triune God* (Los Angeles: Stream, n.d.), 28.

³*Ibid.*, 25.

⁴*Ibid.*, 17, repeated on 23.

⁵*Ibid.*, 20.

⁶You will find enlightening discussion of this in the first two volumes of Jaroslav Pelikan’s *The Christian Tradition, A History of the Development of Doctrine*. My copies are at my office, not here at home where I write, so I cannot provide page references for you, but the indexes are excellent and should lead you quickly to relevant passages.

⁷Witness Lee, *The Economy of God* (Los Angeles: Stream, 1968), 199.

⁸Lee, *Life-Study in Genesis*, Message 10, 121-122.

once the individual Christ, but in Acts He has become a corporate Christ."⁹ Speaking of Christ and the Church, "In number we are different, but in nature we are exactly the same."¹⁰ "The Father is in the Son, the Son is in the Spirit, and the Spirit is now in the Body. They are now four in one: the Father, the Son, the Spirit, and the Body."¹¹ "With the Incarnation a dispensation began in which God and man, man and God were blended into one."¹² "The many brothers and the firstborn Son are the same in life and nature" and "Both the firstborn Son and the many sons are the same in the divine life and nature."¹³

I would comment briefly on Cheng Chye Lim's master's thesis. Although it includes some insightful analysis, Mr. Lim's treatment of the Local Church's doctrine is theologically and logically naive.¹⁴ He treats the Local Church's statements regarding *perichoresis* as if they somehow did away with its statements equating Father, Son, and Spirit. That the Local Church's doctrine of God is filled with logical inconsistencies is certainly true,¹⁵ but those inconsistencies do not nullify its clear affirmations that the Father is the Son, the Son is the Father, and the Son is the Spirit. He lets the Local Church off the hook much too easily. When he writes, in his conclusion, that "LC Trinitarian teaching is *not* heretical insofar as it respects the biblical tension between the unity and plurality of God" (79, emphasis added), he writes contrary to the evidence of quotations like those supplied above. It simply *is* heretical to write, "The Son who prays is the Father who listens";¹⁶ "the Son is the Father, and the Son is also the Spirit. Otherwise, how could these three be one God?";¹⁷ and "The Lord Jesus is the Holy Spirit."¹⁸ Further, Mr. Lim fails to deal adequately anywhere in the thesis with the Local Church's doctrine of deification, which goes far beyond the Eastern Orthodox concept. One cannot maintain this as a serious criticism of the thesis, since Mr. Lim made it clear that he intended to deal in detail only with the Local Church's Trinitarianism (so called), but having raised the issue he failed to subject it to adequate documentation and critique.

Also, I would advise against your saying, as you do in the proposed revised chapter for your *Encyclopedia*, "The dedication of Local Church members to the Lord is commendable. . . ." The Lord (Jesus Christ) either is or is not God the Father and God the Holy Spirit. According to orthodox Trinitarianism, He is not; according to the Local Church, He is. Either the Local Church is right and orthodox Trinitarianism has a false Christ, or orthodox Trinitarianism is right and the Local Church has a false Christ. Logically they cannot both be true. Therefore, assuming that you intend to continue to affirm orthodox Trinitarianism, you should not affirm that Local Church members are dedicated to the Lord. They are indeed dedicated; but they are dedicated to a false

⁹ Lee, *Life-Study in Matthew*, Message 1 (Los Angeles: Stream, n.d.), 5.

¹⁰ Witness Lee, *The All-Inclusive Christ* (Los Angeles: Stream, 1969), 103.

¹¹ Lee, *The Practical Expression of the Church*, 43.

¹² Witness Lee, *The God of Resurrection* (Los Angeles: Stream, n.d.), 4.

¹³ "A Response to False Teachings," *Santa Ana Register*, date unknown.

¹⁴ As a historian I would also note that it shows historical naivete. Mr. Lim's sources for information about Lee's relationship with Nee are almost entirely sources "friendly" to Lee (often Lee himself), particularly on the debatable question of the extent to which Lee took on Nee's mantle.

¹⁵ I, together with co-authors Bob and Gretchen Passantino, noted some of those in our booklet *The Teachings of Witness Lee and the Local Church* (Anaheim, CA: Christian Research Institute, 1978), demonstrating, e.g., that Lee and his followers in some passages teach successive modalism and in others static (patristic) modalism.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 25.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 17, repeated on 23.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 20.

Christ, "another Jesus," against which Paul warned so firmly in 2 Corinthians 11. This does not logically entail that they are all non-Christians; if it were not possible for Christians to be deceived temporarily into worshiping another Jesus, Paul would not have had to warn the Corinthian saints against that possibility. But their dedication to a Jesus who is the Father and the Holy Spirit is not to "the Lord" of Scripture.

Finally, since I am a professor not only of historical theology but also of Christian ethics, I cannot help commenting on the situation that led to your sending me the material. The Local Church's propensity to sue those who criticize its theology, ecclesiology, and practices is entirely out of keeping with the Apostle Paul's instructions in 1 Corinthians 6—in addition to its flying in the face of the U.S. Constitution's guarantees of freedom of religion, speech, and the press. I pray that God will give you, your publisher, and your insurer perseverance and sound legal counsel to resist and defeat this bullying tactic.

The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you.

In Christ's Joyous Service,

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read "E. Calvin Beisner", written in a cursive style.

E. Calvin Beisner
Associate Professor of
Historical Theology and Social Ethics
Knox Theological Seminary

Soli Deo Gloria!