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Dear John Ankerberg:

Here is my initial response to question one, as to whether I think the LC is in the historic orthodox Christian faith.

I am surprised that the Local Churches should be suing you. In my book, *Confronting the Cults* (Presbyterian and Reformed Pub. Co., 1966), I included a chapter on the Seventh-day Adventists did not conclude that it was a cult. You might use my book as an example of one with "cult" in the title that did not conclude that LDS is a cult. In the thirty-six years that it has been in print, I have not been even threatened with a suit. My chapter on SDA began with why some considered it a cult and others considered it evangelical. My chapter employed seven test questions based on explicit biblical statements of the gospel, or what a person must believe to be saved. On four of those seven questions, SDA literature seemed consistently evangelical. On three of my test questions, however, their published literature was not in agreement with itself, some more recent works appearing evangelical and some older ones not evangelical. Because of that ambiguity, my chapter did not come to a conclusion on the movement in general. It recommended that evangelicals needed to ask, especially the three ambiguous test questions of each individual Adventist they met to know whether to embrace him or her as brothers and sisters in the faith or to witness to the person as to an unbeliever.

As the result of a preliminary study of Local Church publications, I find that their published statements are not consistently in the orthodox Christian tradition. At several points they are involved in self-contradiction or contradiction of orthodox doctrine.

First, the LC literature claims that it does not hold "any traditional interpretation" of Scripture. "The local churches stand on the Holy Scriptures, *not according to any traditional interpretation*" (#7 Beliefs and Practices: "Our Standing" item one). Since the official Local Church publications headline its non-traditional stance, is it not inconsistent of its leaders to sue people for finding their views non-traditional?

Second, according to the LC statement of beliefs, "The local churches believe that the Holy Bible is the *complete* divine revelation verbally inspired by the Holy Spirit" (#7, "Our Beliefs" p.1). But Witness Lee affirms continuous revelation through him as God's oracle. He does not believe that "the facts in the Bible according to the black and white"

are God's oracle. But when he speaks as God's oracle, it "is always with new light, new revelations." (#4 line three) Again, "My speaking of these main new revelations in the past twenty-five years has been the oracle of God" (#4, paragraph 2). As one who has the oracle of God, he has "the deputy authority of God in his oracle." (#4, paragraph 2) On one hand, the Bible cannot both be the complete divine revelation and not the complete divine revelation, but one that needs to be supplemented by the "new revelations." On the other hand, if Witness Lee is using "oracle," not for revelations in addition to Scripture, but for the Bible's "hidden meanings" (one dictionary definition), then the orthodox church has not accredited "hidden," secret or occult meanings. For example, those in Unity's *Metaphysical Bible Dictionary* (Lee's Summit, Missouri: Unity School of Christianity, 1963) are not orthodox. On either hand, the authority of Witness Lee's writings seem to be related to the Local Church, much like the writings of Ellen G. White are related to Seventh-day Adventism. Some in each group say that they have the authority of God like the oracular statements of the biblical prophets, and some may finally deny that they are inerrant. But the distinctive teachings of Ellen G. White and of Witness Lee constitute the *raison d'être* of their respective movements.

Third, the LC statement of "Our Beliefs" on God fails to affirm the traditional, orthodox doctrine of the Trinity. No meaningful definition uses the word to be defined. The LC statement of its beliefs, however, defines its use of the word "God" by using the word God! And it defines the Father, Son and Holy Spirit by repeating those words. Hence its doctrine is not stated with sufficient clarity even to evaluate other than that it fails to affirm the orthodox doctrine. It does not affirm the respect in which God is eternally one or the respect in which God is eternally three. In the orthodox doctrine, God eternally is ontologically one *in essence or being* and ontologically three in respect to *persons* existing in the one essence or being.

The statement of "Belief" of the LC does not specify in what respect the eternal God is one or in what respect the Father, Son and Spirit is three. What is "co-existing equally from eternity to eternity?" From other statements, they appear to be merely three names for the one (who knows what?) in the OT, the (who knows what?) in the gospels and the (who knows what?) in Acts and the rest of the NT. One may be excused for misinterpreting that lack of clarity, but it is far from orthodox and appears to be much closer to a form of unorthodox modalism. The one God appears in history as the Father, then as Christ and subsequently as the Holy Spirit. The three names may co-exist eternally, but until they are defined, they are not affirmed as three personal distinctions within the Trinity who can eternally intercede and fellowship in love with each other. If the Father, Son and Holy Spirit are not three *persons* in eternity, then the LC is under obligation to explain three whats? The orthodox statement is not contradictory, because it does not affirm and deny the same thing at the same time and in the same respect. It affirms oneness in one respect and threeness in another respect. The LC statement of beliefs does not distinguish respects and so, if not contradictory, so unclear as to be unintelligible.

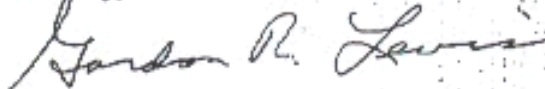
The LC statements on the Father, Son and Spirit in time also confuse ontological and functional categories and so are illogical and unintelligible. Since in orthodoxy, the three are one in essence, Jesus in human flesh is God without becoming the Father. Similarly, the Holy Spirit is one in essence with Christ without becoming Christ. But the

LC statements make God the Father becoming the Son and the Holy Spirit becoming the Son, confusing their temporal roles with their ontological personal distinctions. Again, the confusion of ontological and functional or administrative categories is illogical and unintelligible. If any sense can be made of them, they are closer to modalism. An orthodox statement affirms that each eternal Person has distinct, but harmonious ministries in the work of creation and redemption [See Lewis and Demarest, *Integrative Theology* (Zondervan, 3 vols in 1, 1996), 1:270-288].

Fourth, the interpretation of 2 Peter 1:4 is unorthodox. Insofar as it involves a mingling or fusion of the divine being with a human being ontologically, it contradicts Scripture so seriously as to be called blasphemy. In the OT Jewish union of religion and state, humans, who made themselves indistinguishable from God, were stoned to death. Jesus, who was one in essence with the Father, was charged with that blasphemy (John 10:30). However fully we are yielded to, and in fellowship with, the Holy Spirit, he remains distinct from our spirits. It is blasphemy to confuse ourselves with deity. There is a difference in being God who is holy, loving, true and just and in being like God in some respects, such as partaking in some measure in his holiness, love, truth, and justice. Peter lists the qualities he has in mind in the next verse, "make every effort to add to your faith goodness; and to goodness, knowledge; and to knowledge self-control; and to self-control, perseverance, and to perseverance, godliness; and to godliness brotherly kindness; and to brotherly kindness, love. For if you possess these qualities in increasing measure, they will keep you from being ineffective and unproductive" (2 Peter 5-7). Peter is speaking of growing in Godliness or Christ-likeness by reflecting God's shareable attributes, not merging with his incommunicable ontological being. Again, the LC references to mingling of natures confuses ontological and moral categories.

For at least the above reasons, I am unable to classify The Local Churches in the orthodox Christian tradition.

Sincerely,



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