

GREAT LAKES BROTHERS' RESPONSE TO "AN OPEN LETTER" BY 60 EVANGELICAL SCHOLARS

Recently, more than 60 evangelical Christian scholars and ministry leaders from seven nations issued an "Open Letter"¹ to leaders of the "local churches" and Living Stream Ministry (LSM). The authors summarize the letter's contents as follows:

This letter is a public appeal to disavow and withdraw controversial statements made by their founder, Witness Lee, on the doctrine of God and the doctrine of man. The letter also asks the "local churches" and Living Stream to renounce statements made by Lee that denigrate evangelical Christian denominations and organizations. Finally, the letter appeals to the leadership of the "local churches" and Living Stream to discontinue their use of lawsuits and threatened litigation against Christian individuals and organizations to answer criticisms or resolve disputes.

Moreover, the 60 writers say,

We decry as inconsistent and unjustifiable the attempts by Living Stream Ministry 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

The 60 scholars' concerns can be categorized under 4 headings:

- (1) Witness Lee's "controversial statements" on "the doctrine of God and the doctrine of man."
- (2) "Statements . . . that denigrate evangelical Christian denominations and organizations."
- (3) The "use of lawsuits and threatened litigation against Christian individuals and organizations"
- (4) The inconsistency of LSM's "membership in associations of evangelical churches and ministries while . . . denigrating . . . such churches and ministries"

GREAT LAKES BROTHERS' RESPONSE:

Dear brothers,

Your letter is addressed to "the leadership of the 'local churches' and Living Stream Ministry." We must indicate that it is inappropriate to address a single leadership encompassing both LSM and the "local churches." Not all the local churches are affiliated with LSM and its leadership. In fact, a significant number of churches have distanced themselves from certain extreme positions adopted by the LSM leadership. However, since your letter of concern is addressed to the local churches (including those with which we are associated), we feel compelled to respond.

Concerning LSM, it is a registered non-profit corporation with a president (Benson Phillips), officers (Ron Kangas, Andrew Yu, etc.), and a 15-member board of directors. As such, they can respond on their own behalf.

Concerning the "local churches," our longstanding position has been: "Each local church is autonomous in its administration. Therefore, there is no central headquarters."² Given this situation, a unified response from all the local churches is unlikely, if not impossible. Nevertheless, as brothers serving various local churches in the Great Lakes area of North America, we want to offer a response to your letter. Our response follows the four headings indicated above.

- (1) Witness Lee's "controversial statements" on "the doctrine of God and the doctrine of man."

The believers who meet as the local churches have repeatedly declared our beliefs, which we understand to be orthodox. For example, we have stated the following:

*"We believe that God is the only one Triune God – the Father, the Son, and the Spirit – coexisting equally from eternity to eternity" and "We believe that the Son of God, even God Himself, became incarnated to be a man by the name of Jesus"*³

Moreover, we have categorically rejected the heresies of Modalism and Tritheism, saying, *"Modalism is heretical. . . . We believe according to the Bible that God is essentially three in one and one in three. We surely recognize eternal distinctions within the Godhead."*⁴

To express the profound mysteries of the Trinity and the person of Christ is challenging and even beyond human capacity to explain. These issues cannot be adequately addressed in this short response. We would be happy to fellowship with you (based upon the Bible) our teaching concerning the Triune God and the person of Christ and our understanding of Witness Lee's own teaching on these topics.

Witness Lee (1905-1997) was a gifted minister of Christ, an inspirational speaker and devotional writer, rather than a systematic theologian. Some of his statements at first sight may appear extreme. Yet, when read in context and generously interpreted in the light of his homiletic style, we believe Witness Lee's teachings concerning the Trinity, taken as a whole, do not violate the bounds of accepted orthodoxy. Indeed, several important evangelical bodies have recognized this fact (e.g., Fuller Theological Seminary).

Moreover, we understand that among evangelical, Bible-believing Christians there is not a single, unified, orthodox position. Rather, it seems to us that there is scope for diverse interpretations within the realm of accepted orthodoxy. In our judgment, Witness Lee's teachings fall within these bounds.

For our part, we are willing to engage in a meaningful dialogue on these issues with a view to arriving at a common understanding.

(2) *"Statements . . . that denigrate evangelical Christian denominations and organizations."*

We now realize that in the past we have not adequately distinguished between standing *"apart from organized religion"*⁵ and denigrating evangelical denominations and organizations. We endeavor to recover the original church-life, as depicted in the New Testament, for the profit of all believers. However, our desire to be distinct and separate from "organized religion" does not necessitate engaging in an overt attack on other Christian groups. Moreover, we feel that our past attitude contributed to our being misunderstood by our fellow believers. It also conveyed the impression that we had an attitude of pride and superiority.

At the end of his ministry, Witness Lee reevaluated his attitude toward denominational believers. In his final public speaking (Feb. 1997), Witness Lee said, *"Concerning the matter of receiving [believers] . . . we all made mistakes in this matter in the past, I myself included; I confess that I had . . . a very painful repentance. I am really sorry . . . not only toward the brothers and sisters among us, but even to those in the denominations, also really sorry toward them"*⁶ We whole-heartedly agree with these sentiments and wish to apply this word in our interactions with other believers.

We confess that on occasion our past attitude toward other believers had been improper. We sincerely apologize to our brothers and sisters whom we have offended. Rather than condemning the Christian associations within which our fellow-believers serve the Lord, we wish to belatedly express our appreciation for their efforts to bring the gospel to the world.

Brothers, we repudiate LSM's sweeping statements of denunciation, like, *"Degraded Christianity is filled with unscriptural teachings and practices."*⁷ Rather than malign others, we desire to humbly examine ourselves before the Lord, asking, "Are we guilty of unscriptural teachings and practices?"

(3) The "use of lawsuits and threatened litigation against Christian individuals and organizations"

LSM and the "local churches" have earned the dubious reputation of being a "suing Church," on account of legal action taken against fellow-believers. This contradicts the Apostle Paul's injunction against believers resorting to secular law-courts (1 Cor. 6).

LSM's first major case (against *The God-Men*) was justified based upon Apostle Paul's appeal to Caesar to prolong his active ministry (Acts 25:11). After Witness Lee's decease, however, subsequent cases (e.g., *The Encyclopedia of Cults*) involve the *posthumous* defense of his legacy. We regard the latter case as substantially different from the former and its justification on scriptural grounds as tenuous, at best.⁸

We feel the practice of resorting to the legal system is now yielding bitter fruit among us in the form of groups of local church members suing other members. Surely, this is a shame to the Lord and a defeat to us. This is wrong. Therefore, we echo your call to LSM and those local churches involved to cease their legal action against Christian publishers and other local churches. We also exhort all believers in the local churches to forsake the use of lawsuits and threats of litigation against individual believers, local churches, and Christian organizations.

(4) The inconsistency of LSM's "membership in associations of evangelical churches and ministries while . . . denigrating . . . such churches and ministries"

We agree that there is a basic inconsistency in LSM's position. On the one hand, brothers holding senior positions within the LSM organization continue to issue denigrating statements about evangelical churches and ministries. On the other hand, LSM is a member of Christian organizations such as the Evangelical Christian Publishers Association (ECPA); the Christian Booksellers Association (CBA); the Spanish Evangelical Publishers Association (SEPA); the Union de Liberias y Editoriales Cristianas, A. C. (UNILEC); and the Evangelical Christian Credit Union.

A senior LSM editor has stated¹⁰ "*The Lord's recovery is not a part of Christianity*" and¹¹ "*There is an unbridgeable gap*" between the two. In that case, LSM stands self-condemned as long as it remains in any such association. To terminate this untenable position, we join with you in calling on LSM to either publicly renounce its membership in all Christian organizations or apologize for its public denunciations.

POSTSCRIPT:

We realize that some may seek to portray our above statements as a compromise with "organized religion" and a departure from the teachings of Watchman Nee and Witness Lee. We categorically reject such characterizations. We wish to stand as genuine, scriptural local churches apart from "organized religion." We also believe our stand, outlined above, is consistent with a balanced reception of the teachings of W. Nee and W. Lee, understood in the light of God's holy Word.⁹

Signed (by 95 Great Lakes brothers):

Nigel Tomes	Bob Duncan	Steven Chu	Wei Ren
Paul Neider	Roy Hudgins	Ryan Chin	David Chen
Norman J. Minahan	Raymond Hudson	Keith R. Miller	Douglas D. Schulz
Jonathon Lin	Steve Whitfield	Carl Paradis	Lidong Wang
Gary R. Armstrong	Dann Stapp	Vern Yoder	Gordon E. Doyle
Cyril Akakpo	James H. Yang	John Myer	Song-Tao Zhou
Kodjo Akakpo	Will Graphenreed	David Shields	Greg Updegrove
Jinyong Chen	Joseph Kuo	David R. Bixler	Dan Wells
Vincent K. Wong	Hornng-Long Chiang	Randolph Mann	John S-T Yu
Ping Chen	Peter Lung	Daniel D. Kim	Tony Shay
Merle E. Secriet	Peter Cheng	Wasi Tjan	John N. Schneider

Joseph C. Y. Wang	Ed Sterling	Ron Brubacher	Mark Jordan
Brian Bowman	Michael I. Samulak	David W. S. Wang	John Berglund
Scott D. Rocco	Johnson Fei	Wen-Li Fan	Claude St-Jean
Ken Stanislav	Dau-Sing Wang	Yu-Kang Yeh	Del Martin
Tom McNaughton	James J. Lin	Peng-Chen Kuan	Mike Puskas
Randall A. Heim	Michael Metros	Joseph Chai	Tim Savisky
Steve Pritchard	Robert Brenneman	James Gann	Cheng-Kuei Jen
Robin Lao	Michael Li	Bruce Konopinski	Richard (Jen- Chuan) Yeh
Ian Brinksman	James L. Ruffin	Steven D. Miller	Joshua (Chian-Hsi) Lee
John Ziamba	Yu-Kang Wang	Rick Coleman	
Joseph Pope	Szu-Hsien Wen	William Orsborn	
Ian S. McClellan	Scott Wood	Timothy H. Miller	
David S. Etzel	Wan-Li Lei	Gi-Ming Wang	
David M. Daily	Antipas Desai	Thomas J. Neill	

February, 2007

NOTES

1. "An Open Letter" from more than 60 Evangelical Christian Scholars, January 9, 2007 www.open-letter.org
2. From *Beliefs and Practices of the local churches*, (1978) p. 16
3. *Beliefs and Practices of the local churches*, p. 3
4. *Beliefs and Practices of the local churches*, pp. 17-18
5. *Beliefs and Practices of the local churches* p. 20
6. English rendering based on a translation of the Chinese transcript. For more discussion see: "Brother Lee's Spirit of Painful Repentance and Solemn Charge in his final public Message.." <http://www.concernedbrothers.com/repent/BroLeesRepentanceWhyMissedTheMark4.pdf>
We reject as inaccurate and biased the contention that Witness Lee was repenting for the local churches' failures and not for his own personal actions and attitude. This latter interpretation is offered by the LSM-brothers, who allege: "What Brother Lee said in the Chinese-speaking conference was his observation and realization before the Lord **that the churches receiving his ministry had at times failed** in the past to live up to that standard." Also, Brother Lee "shared with the saints his grieving **that the churches under his ministry had caused offence** through coming short in our practice of these truths." [Both quotes are found on the LSM-affiliated website: AFaithfulWord.org/articles/Offending.html]
7. The statement in context reads: "We stand outside of and apart from the degraded system of **Christianity, which is filled with unscriptural teachings and practices.**" "**An Appeal to the Young People in the Lord's Recovery,**" On the LSM-affiliated website: AFaithfulWord.org (July 10, 2006)
8. For more on this, see: "The God-Men Case & the Encyclopedia of Cults Case—The Same or Different?" http://www.concernedbrothers.com/Legal/TheGod_Man_EncyclopediaSameOrDifferent.pdf
9. This has been the stated position of the local churches for decades: "All teachings, inspirations, and guidance which claim the Holy Spirit as their source must be checked by God's revelation in His Word." *Beliefs and Practices of the local churches*, pp. 8-9
10. Ron Kangas, *The Ministry magazine*, vol. 8, No. 2 (February, 2004) p. 3, 9
11. Ron Kangas, *The Ministry magazine*, vol. 8, No. 6 (June, 2004) p. 10.