

LSM's FALLACY OF IDENTITY

"All the churches should be the same"—W. Lee

"The need...today is for all the churches to be identical"—W. Lee

Readers of the New Testament are struck by the diversity it portrays. Diverse people—Jews and Gentiles, Greeks and barbarians, Africans and Europeans, high and lower class people—all experience God's salvation. Despite their differences, they gather as the *ekklesia* in each city to worship Jesus, God's incarnate Son, as Lord and Christ. The early pattern of one church per city contrasts with the plethora of churches in today's urban areas. Yet, at the same time, readers find correlation between modern manifestations of "Church" and New Testament descriptions. To contemporary observers the Corinthian Church appears Pentecostal in its emphasis on miracles, prophesy, tongues and healing. Thessalonica's focus on rapture and end-time prophesy might remind some of the popular¹ *Left Behind* series of novels and movies. In contrast, Roman believers got a healthy dose of sound theology, while the seven Asian churches received abundant apocalyptic prophecies. Varieties of form and freedom are also found in the New Testament. The Pastoral Epistles (Timothy & Titus) highlight ecclesiastical offices and roles, while other epistles emphasize gifts more than government. James and Jude endorse an ancient version of "Jews for Jesus," while Colossians suits the ancient "New Age" movement. Viewed from this perspective, diversity characterized both New Testament churches and believers. Certainly they are united in their core beliefs concerning God, Christ, Spirit and salvation; ministry, prayer, charity and bread-breaking are common practices. Yet, abundant variety coexisted with that unity.

"There are many different expressions of Christianity within the New Testament."

"A marked degree of diversity within first-century Christianity"—Prof. James Dunn

This picture of unity with diversity is not merely the first impression of Bible-readers. Eminent Bible scholars concur with this view. Professor James D. G. Dunn studied the unity and diversity of first-century Christians and their church-life as portrayed in Scripture. He affirms that² "there is a fundamental unifying strand running through earliest Christianity and the New Testament...that unifying strand [is] Jesus himself." Yet this "unifying strand" is matched by plentiful variety. "Our study has...forced us to recognize a **marked degree of diversity** within first-century Christianity. We can no longer doubt that there are many **different expressions of Christianity within** the New Testament," Dunn says.³ Moreover, that variety is not incidental. Dunn describes it as⁴ "wide-ranging diversity" with "minimal unity." "The distinctive unifying strand running through the New Testament and first-century Christianity is narrow, the surrounding diversity is broad," declares Dunn.⁵ The Christian faith described in Scripture is not "one size fits all;" uniformity did not characterize first-century Christians. "*There was no single normative form of Christianity in the first century,*" Professor Dunn concludes.⁶ This observation also applies to the first churches portrayed in Scripture. "Even when we looked at individual churches," he says,⁷ "the picture was the same—of diversity in expression of faith and life-style..." In fact, Dunn suggests⁸ the range of diversity among the earliest churches exceeds that between New Testament documents. This scholarly study confirms Bible-readers' impressions—wide-ranging diversity characterized the earliest churches, even as they shared common core beliefs.

"Erroneous teaching...local churches could be different from one another"—Bro. Lee

Against this background Scripture readers, Bible scholars and Christians in general would be jarred by the assertion that all differences among New Testament churches are "negative" and "abnormal." This position is the polar-opposite of that just described. Yet this proposition forms a central plank of Bro. Witness Lee's teaching. In calling for all the churches to be identical, he labels the concept that local churches could differ an "erroneous teaching." Bro. Lee states dogmatically,⁹

"There is no hint left in the Bible that anyone can find to justify the erroneous teaching that the local churches could be different from one another. This teaching...does not have any base at all in the New Testament. The need in the Lord's recovery today is for **all the churches to be identical."**

This view is echoed by LSM's "blended brothers," Bro. Lee's presumed successors. Thus, in contrast to everyone else, LSM's expositors allege that all local churches ought to be the same, identical in all significant aspects. We term this LSM's "doctrine of identity."¹⁰ Church-members who for decades sat exclusively under Bro. Lee's ministry tacitly accept this proposition. After years of inculcation, a negative view of church differences and the ideal of identical churches are firmly imprinted in their minds. This doctrine has gone unchallenged for decades. Consequently it has exerted a powerful conforming influence on the local churches. Moreover, the teaching of "blending," that church-differences ought to be "blended away," has reinforced the tendency to uniformity. The ideal of identity is accepted as self-evident by LSM's federation of local churches. They congratulate themselves¹¹ on achieving identity under the "blended brothers'" leadership. Yet this doctrine contradicts the majority view of Bible scholars and expositors. What explains this striking disparity? Have other Christians and Bible-scholars been misled? Is this some "further light" they have failed to see? Or is this doctrine based on *eisegesis*—reading an extraneous meaning into the text? Is Scripture serving as a "ventriloquist's dummy," articulating a man's concept? Here we re-examine LSM's doctrine of identity--that local churches ought to be the same, identical in all significant aspects and that any church differences reflect "negative" abnormalities.

From Symbol to System—7 Golden Lampstands, 7 Local Churches

Bro. Witness Lee derives his doctrine of identical churches from the initial vision in Revelation where the Apostle John was told, "the seven lampstands are the seven churches" (Rev. 1:20). Based on this Bro. Lee asserts,¹²

"The seven golden lampstands, symbols of the seven local churches in Asia, are all identical in essence, nature, shape, color, appearance, function, and expression. In all these aspects the seven lampstands are identical. **This signifies that all the local churches should be the same** in essence, nature, shape, color, appearance, function, and expression. The seven lampstands were identical to the point that if they were placed side-by-side before our eyes, we could not discern which is which."

The deduction this "signifies that all the local churches should be the same" relies entirely on Bro. Lee's interpretation of the symbolism. Significantly, the Apostle John did not explicitly state this; he does not even say the lampstands are identical. Therefore, we ask—is this inference the Apostle John's intended meaning? Did the original readers understand Revelation in this way? It seems Revelation's symbolism is being over-interpreted. The main point is that (rather than a single lampstand) seven lampstands are God's testimony. Hence instead of one lampstand representing Israel, John was shown seven, symbolizing seven city-churches. Did the Apostle John (and the Spirit) really intend us to analyse the "essence, nature, shape, color, appearance, function, and expression" of the lampstands? Moreover, since the lampstand is a symbol, these aspects—"essence, nature, shape" etc—are also symbolic of some "spiritual" qualities. These qualities are spiritual and abstract; they are not directly observable. How then can anyone compare two local churches in terms of the "shape" of their respective lampstands? Yet, Bro. Lee declares,¹³ "I seriously question whether all the churches have the same appearance." and¹⁴ "I also have a question concerning the churches bearing one expression." However, these are *not* observable matters, despite Bro. Lee's use of terms like "appearance" and "expression." Hence, assuming the symbolic lampstands are identical, this does not necessarily imply the churches should be identical in tangible, observable terms. That inferential leap is a *non sequitur*. Yet that unjustified leap is routinely made and accepted without question. For example, LSM's "blended brothers" say,¹⁵ "God's Word reveals that the churches are lampstands...If you put them side by side, you cannot tell the difference. The church in Long Beach and the church in Oklahoma City are the same." This kind of statement is fallacious. It is based on the implicit assumption that the abstract, symbolic qualities of the lampstands can be directly translated into physical, observable church traits.

The transition from intangible to tangible is worth examining. Bro. Lee relates the lampstands to the Triune God. He says,¹⁶

"In the lampstand we can see the Father as the gold substance with the essence, the Son as the embodiment with a definite form...and the seven Spirits as the seven lamps. The lampstand is a very complete consummation of the Triune God. Every local church must be such an expression." According to Bro. Lee the lampstands' "essence, appearance and expression" represent the Trinity.

These, he asserts, ought to be identical in all local churches. Yet does this imply local churches should be the same outwardly? It does not! In fact the New Testament itself teaches that the Triune God's operation can produce diverse manifestations. In 1 Cor. 12 the Apostle Paul emphasizes diversity in the believers' gifts, based on the same Triune God. He recognizes there are varieties of gifts, ministries, and operations, yet the underlying source of each is the same Spirit, the same Lord, and the same God (vv. 4-6). Paul enumerates the Spirit's diverse manifestations--the word of wisdom, the word of knowledge, faith, prophecy, etc. The outward gifts differ, but the same, one Spirit is the source (vv. 7-11). This means we should not expect identical expressions of believer's gifts or ministries. Rather we should ask: "Is this from the one Spirit?" We should not look for outward uniformity among believers but rather for the same inward cause--the one Spirit. The tangible expressions differ, but the intangible source is the same. Surely the same principle applies to local churches, particularly since each church has believers with diverse gifts. The Triune God, the lampstands' "substance, embodiment and expression," is the same, yet churches' outward expressions can be diverse. We see no basis for denouncing the "*teaching that the local churches could be different from one another*" as "*erroneous*." Hence, we reject as unfounded LSM's doctrine that identical symbolic lampstands imply churches ought to be identical in tangible terms.

"Normal Differences among the churches...only in the Business Affairs"—W. Lee

Bro. W. Lee deduces from the lampstands' identity that churches should be the same. When he asserts, "local churches need to be one in essence, appearance, expression," some might consider this an innocuous statement implying merely for some vague similarity. But, it is far from innocuous. Based on this concept Bro. Lee asserts¹⁷ "**the normal differences among the churches can be only in the business affairs of their administration.**" This implies all other differences between churches are "abnormal." In LSM's view, the category of "business affairs" includes only incidental items,¹⁸ such as the meeting schedule, buying or renting meeting facilities and the means of baptism. The areas where, according to Witness Lee, variety among local churches is acceptable are trivial matters of little consequence. This means concerning all important aspects, diversity is not tolerated; rather uniformity is mandated. For example, the option of ministry by a few prophet-teachers, instead of LSM's practice of "everyone prophesying" during the Lord's day gathering, is excluded. Alternative styles of worship—"contemporary worship" rather than the traditional (using LSM's *Hymns*) are not acceptable. Having electric guitars and drums in young peoples' gatherings is anathema. In practice this means only one style of church-life, the LSM-approved style, is sanctioned. This imposes a straight-jacket of uniformity upon local churches not found in Scripture. We affirm that (according to the New Testament) churches may differ in their tangible dimensions, yet be identical their underlying spiritual aspects ("essence, nature, shape" etc.) derived from the Triune God. The scope of "normal differences" transcends business affairs.

"Differences among the Seven Churches...are all...Negative"—W. Lee

The book of Revelation provides LSM with another reason for identical local churches. Enshrined in LSM's *Recovery Version* is Bro. Lee's claim that the¹⁹ "**differences among the seven churches...are all...negative**" While, "**positively...they are absolutely identical.**" He asserts that²⁰

"The differences among the seven churches recorded in [Revelation] chs. 2 and 3 are all of a negative nature, not a positive one. Negatively, in their failures, the churches are different and separate from one another; but positively, in their nature, shape and purpose, they are absolutely identical and are connected to one another."

This is a strong assertion; if correct, it has far-reaching implications. LSM's "Blended Brothers" echo this--²¹ "**The churches are the same normally, but they are different abnormally.**" But, is this correct? Certainly the seven churches differ; but are all the differences "negative"? As far as I know, LSM is alone in making this bold claim. Bible scholars overwhelmingly disagree with LSM's claim. It is counter-intuitive. The Ephesian Church is praised for discerning genuine apostles from false (Rev. 2:2); other churches are not. Is this difference²² "negative"? Both Pergamos and Philadelphia are commended for "holding fast" ("not denying") the Lord's name (2:13; 3:8). Other churches are not. Is this difference "negative"? Bible expositors conclude the seven churches exhibit *both* positive and negative differences. The Lord appraises their unique positive traits ("I know your works..."); yet, He condemns the negative ("I have this against you..."). As Watchman Nee states,²³ "Each Church stood on its own merits...each had its own special commendation, or

exhortation or rebuke.” Bro. Lee has not presented a compelling case, which proves all inter-church differences are negative. Neither does this principle apply generally in the New Testament. For example, the church in Philippi was marked by a fervent evangelistic zeal (Phil. 1:5, 27). Other churches were not outstanding in this attribute. The Apostle Paul told the Philippians, “no church had fellowship with me...except you only” (4:15). In this matter they were unique, differing from other churches. Again, is this divergence from the norm “negative or positive”? According to LSM’s principle it is “negative”! We reject, as unsubstantiated, the claim all inter-church differences are negative. We also reject the assertion that “positively all the churches are absolutely identical.”

Does One New Testament Canon imply Uniformity?

“The churches...should be the same because they...all received...the same New Testament”—W. Lee

Bro. Lee presents other arguments why the churches should be the same. However, several of those reasons can be subsumed under one point²⁴—the claim that, because all the churches received the same New Testament canon, therefore, they ought to be the same. Bro. Lee asserts,²⁵

“All the churches on the whole earth...have received the same New Testament. The Lord did not write one New Testament to one church and a different New Testament to another church...This indicates that **all the churches on this earth should be the same, because they have all received...the same New Testament.**”

The Bible is “the unique standard,” the “canon” (measuring rod) for evaluating truth and practice. However, Bro. Lee’s argument implicitly assumes only one manifestation of the Church is valid according to Scripture. It presumes the New Testament canon endorses one unique pattern of local church. But, is this correct? Obviously accepting this axiom leads to uniformity. *If* only one church-form is divinely approved then every church should conform to that model. Then (and only then) Bro. Lee’s statement is justified—“The churches...should be the same because they...all received ... the same New Testament.” However, if more than one church-form is sanctioned by Scripture’s canon, then Bro. Lee’s statement is false, it is a *non sequitur*.

Is LSM’s position scriptural? Certainly the identity of local churches is not explicitly taught in the Bible; Scripture does not prescribe a uniform expression of the Church in every place. Again this is LSM’s inference.²⁶ Does the New Testament portray the churches as uniform in every place? How many Bible-readers reach this conclusion? Don’t they typically conclude exactly the opposite? The Jerusalem Church is distinctly Jewish, meeting in the Temple precincts, and with James (like Moses) presiding over a leaders’ council. The Church in Corinth resembles modern Charismatic churches. Even stripping away their problems, Corinth is still strikingly different from other churches. The churches in Philippi and Antioch look like evangelical churches with a gospel and/or mission focus. While Thessalonica was interested in end-time events and the rapture, Ephesus had the ability to receive profound truths. Yet, despite each church’s distinctive traits, Scripture recognizes each one as a *bona fide* local church. These examples illustrate the diversity among churches evident in the New Testament. The Bible does not approve a single expression of the church matching God’s ideal standard; it does not condemn all the others. Scripture allows a multiplicity of church-expressions. LSM’s position flies in the face of this portrait of diversity.

“The New Testament...bears witness to diversity...recognizes the validity of diversity...it canonizes the diversity of Christianity”—Professor James Dunn

LSM assumes Scripture validates only one expression of the Church. Hence Bro. Lee states dogmatically that the teaching²⁷ “local churches could be different from each other...does not have any base in the New Testament.” This extreme position is contradicted by eminent Bible scholars. Professor Dunn concludes that²⁸ “The New Testament...bears witness to a diversity...within Christianity more or less from the first.” He classifies early expressions of the Christian faith into four broad categories,²⁹ each represented within the canon of Scripture. Significantly this means diverse church expressions were not merely tolerated, they were recognized and endorsed by the New Testament canon. As Professor Dunn states³⁰ “The canon of the New Testament... *recognizes the validity of diversity*; it canonizes very different expressions of Christianity...It canonizes the unity of Christianity, but also...*it canonizes the diversity of Christianity*.” This conclusion directly contradicts LSM’s position that³¹ “The churches ...should be the same because they...all received... the same New Testament.” Since the New Testament canon neither prescribes nor describes a

uniform pattern for the local church, LSM's doctrine of identity contradicts the Bible. Rather the New Testament describes and canonizes diversity among local churches. "If we take the canon of the New Testament seriously...we must take seriously the diversity of Christianity," says Dunn.³² Instead of an iron-clad mould forcing every local church into a uniform pattern, the New Testament allows churches considerable scope for variety. In Dunn's words,³³ "To recognize the canon of the New Testament is to affirm the diversity of Christianity" and (we would add) the diversity of the local churches.

Genuine local churches are not uniform, they differ by locality—Watchman Nee

LSM assumes that one form of church has a monopoly on the divine approval. Bro. Lee declares "all the churches on this earth should be the same." We ask—the same as what? Which church matched God's ideal standard? Which church is the "Model Church," providing the pattern to which every other church should conform? Is it a church existing when the New Testament was being written? If so, which one—Jerusalem (Acts 1-4), Antioch (Acts 13), Philadelphia (Rev. 2), Philippi or Ephesus (at Paul's time)? Or was the "Model Church" a 20th-century church raised up by Bro. Nee in Shanghai, China or by Bro. Lee in Taipei, Taiwan; LA or Anaheim in the US? Or is today's LSM-Church in Anaheim the model? Or is it a hypothetical LSM-Church embodying Bro. Lee's "high-peak truths," but which has never yet been seen on the earth?

LSM's position contradicts Watchman Nee's teaching concerning the local church. He recognized there would be legitimate differences between local churches. Brother Nee asserts,³⁴

"The churches have their local situations, and there is no way we can unify their conditions ...The more sectarian a group is, the more uniform its members are. **But the more a local church is according to God's standard, the less uniform it will be. If the churches are churches at all, they are different from locality to locality.**"

Watchman Nee decisively rejected the concept of one model church embodying God's unique standard for all local churches. Yet, LSM seeks to rehabilitate that view, contradicting Bro. Nee. According to W. Nee's teaching, on one hand, the local churches are shining lampstands composed of gold, the divine nature (Rev. 1). But, on the other hand, they are also constituted of regenerated human beings. In Thessalonica it was "the church of the Thessalonians" (1 Thess. 1:1). The human element remains even after transformation. Do we expect the local churches in a fishing community, a rural farming town, and a high-tech metropolis to be the same in outward expression? Will their prayers and prophecies be equally eloquent? Will their utterance and appearance before their respective communities be identical? Surely there will be differences, yet the same golden, divine nature and shining Spirit can be seen in each church by those with spiritual sight. This realization underlies Watchman Nee's statement that the churches are "intensely local." He declares³⁵ "When God's people throughout the earth really see the local character of the churches, then they will appreciate their oneness as never before. **The churches of God are local, intensively local. If any factor enters in to destroy their local character, then they cease to be scriptural churches.**" Bro. Lee's assertion the churches should be the same world-wide, identical in all significant aspects is the polar opposite of Watchman Nee's declaration that "the churches of God are local, intensively local." These positions are diametrically opposed to one another; they are irreconcilable. Despite "assuming Watchman Nee's mantle," clearly by the 1980s Bro. Lee had departed from Watchman Nee's teaching on the local church.

Sisters as Pawns—All the Churches identical in Custom and Practice

Bro. Lee also appeals to custom and practice when arguing that churches should be identical. Interestingly both cases he cites relate to the role of sisters. It seems sisters have become "pawns in this chess game." Witness Lee says,³⁶ "All the churches were the same in their customs. In 1 Cor. 11:16, after instructing the saints concerning the matter of head covering, Paul said, 'But if anyone seems to be contentious, we have no such custom, neither the churches of God.' **This indicates that all the churches were the same in their customs.**" Elsewhere, he says,³⁷ "concerning head-covering...all the churches should be one in the same kind of unique practice." Rather than arguing about interpretations, we simply inquire—Are LSM's local churches identical in the "custom" of sisters' head-covering? They are not. In LSM-churches, among "typical North Americans" a minority of sisters wear a head-covering. In contrast, in the Oriental local churches,

most sisters do. On this issue LSM's churches do not have (in W. Lee's words) "the same kind of unique practice." Since sisters' head-covering is *not* the same in the East and West, Bro. Lee's argument is contradicted by the facts. Other customs also differ. Local churches in the Far East typically practice gender segregation--brothers and sisters are separated in church meetings--e.g. sisters sit on the left, brothers on the right. In the West segregation isn't practiced, except perhaps by "Chinese-speaking" local churches. We ask--why the different customs regarding gender? LSM-churches do *not* have the same unique custom and practice world-wide. This proves this argument is purely theoretical; in practice it is unworkable even in LSM's churches.

The other case of a common practice cited concerns sisters' speaking. Bro. Lee declares,³⁸ "All the churches should be one also in their practice. In 1 Cor. 14:33-34, concerning women being silent in relation to teaching with authority, Paul said, 'As in all the churches of the saints,' indicating that **all the churches should be the same in not permitting the sisters to teach with authority**...it is a practice in the church. In such a practice, all the churches should be one."

Bro. Lee refers to "women being silent in relation to teaching with authority." However, this is *his* interpretation of the Apostle Paul's word; Paul's own words are, "women should be silent in the churches for they are not permitted to speak" (14:34). On this topic there are a variety of interpretations. So we ask--what is **the** practice mandated by Scripture? Bro. Lee says this means women should not teach *with authority*; other expositors interpret it differently. The Plymouth Brethren are more literal; they don't allow sisters to pray (audibly), testify or prophesy in their meetings, based on this verse. Watchman Nee and the local churches in China initially adopted this Brethren practice. However, later Watchman Nee questioned this tradition which condemns the majority of church-members (i.e. sisters) to be silent observers. Watchman Nee changed this practice to sisters being "silent in relation to teaching with authority." Thus, the Recovery's own history shows that practices change. Based on this, we ask--what was the original practice at Paul's time? What is **the** practice all churches should adopt, the previous Brethren practice or the current one? Moreover, since the protocol regarding sisters' speaking, was modified once, why shouldn't it change again? Is the Recovery's current code of conduct "cast in stone"?

Given the strategic role of sisters in the Recovery's history, how can "not permitting the sisters to teach with authority" be mandated for all time and all local churches? In his biography of Watchman Nee, Bro. Lee himself testified that³⁹ "four sisters were vital to Watchman Nee in his life and work. He was saved through the preaching of Dora Yu, perfected under Margaret Barber, and sustained by two elderly co-workers, Ruth Lee and Peace Wang." Bro. Lee also highly appraised the Norwegian revivalist Marie Monson⁴⁰ [1878-1962] who labored in China for 30 years. Reaching further back in history, Mrs. Jessie Penn-Lewis [1861-1927] was greatly used in the early 20th century. Bro. Lee even designates the Roman Catholic, Madame Guyon [1648-1717] as the unique "Minister of the Age" for the 17th century!⁴¹ Did none of these sisters "teach with authority"? If they did not, how were they able to preach, perfect and sustain Watchman Nee and others? Given the Recovery's history, this dogmatic stand restricting sisters' functioning is not justified.

Bro. Lee says,⁴² "all the churches should be the same in not permitting the sisters to teach with authority." In his hands, that verse (1 Cor. 14:34) has been tempered, weighed against related Scriptures (e.g. 1 Tim. 2:12). Other expositors give more weight to other relevant scriptures (e.g. Acts 2:17-18; 21:9). As a result, they give greater scope to sisters to function as prophets (Acts 2:17-18; 21:9,) worship leaders etc. Given the range of interpretations--why should Bro. Lee's interpretation dictate the practice of all the local churches? Does his interpretation correspond to the original practice at Paul's time? What if some local churches are led to adopt a different protocol regarding sisters? Do they have the liberty to do so? Must they be restricted by the straight-jacket of the Recovery's *latest* tradition? Whatever happened to the "generality" in the motif—"In essentials unity; in non-essentials liberty; in all things love"?

"Grasping at Straws"—the Gentile Churches Imitating the Jewish Churches

In marshalling arguments for his doctrine of identity, it seems Bro. Lee resorted to "grasping at straws." He argues that⁴³ "In 1 Thessalonians 2:14 Paul wrote, 'For you, brothers, became imitators of the churches of God which are in Judea in Christ Jesus.' This indicates"

Witness Lee says,⁴⁴ "that the Gentile churches imitated the Jewish churches. **This imitating...made all the churches the same...**" However, this verse does *not* give a general principle; it makes a specific, qualified statement. In context, the Thessalonians' imitation consisted of suffering persecution from their countrymen just as the Judean churches did from their Jewish kinsmen. In this one aspect they were imitators. However, Bro. Lee generalizes this specific point into a general principle of imitation. Yet, did the Apostle Paul, really want the Gentile churches to imitate the Jewish churches as a general rule? Surely he did not! Paul repeatedly warned the Gentiles against succumbing to the "Judaizing" influence of Judean Christianity. Surely the original Thessalonian readers would not have understood Paul's words as a general principle. Paul's is a qualified statement. This one verse is merely a "straw being grasped;" it certainly does not provide sufficient basis for comprehensive imitation resulting in identical churches. Bro. Lee's deduction—"This imitating...made all the churches the same..."—is surely unjustified. Rather than being the same, the New Testament shows marked differences between Judean and Gentile churches. Elsewhere, Witness Lee acknowledges this, saying⁴⁵ "I have the full assurance that in the early days the churches in Judea were *quite different* from the churches in the Gentile world."

Does Reciprocity imply Identity?

As an added basis for identity, Bro. Lee appeals to Paul's request, asking local churches to exchange letters. He refers to Col. 4:16 where Colosse and Laodicea were asked to read each others' letters. He says,⁴⁶

"The epistle to the church in Colosse was also for the church in Laodicea, and the epistle to the church in Laodicea was also for the church in Colosse. Thus, every epistle was written not only for the receiving church but also for all the other churches. **This indicates that the Lord wants all the churches to have the one accord.**"⁴⁷

Along the same lines he argues concerning Rev. 2 & 3 that⁴⁸ "Each epistle was written to a particular church in a certain locality, yet all...[are] the Spirit's speaking to all the churches. This means that **each epistle was written to all the churches, and it indicates that all the churches should be the same.**" Yet, does reciprocity really imply identity? Does the fact churches were asked to read letters addressed to other churches, imply all churches should be the same? This is an exaggerated claim. Logically, it only proves a church derives some benefit from reading letters addressed to other churches. Rather than implying identical churches, it means churches are not totally dissimilar. Given some resemblance between churches, reciprocal reading is beneficial. Again Bro. Lee has failed to prove his case. Taken as a whole, LSM's arguments for identity are not convincing. They are a "house of cards." Either they are based on inferring some "deeper, hidden meaning" to Biblical symbols (e.g. lampstands) or they extrapolate from Paul's specific charge to an (unstated) general principle. The undeniable fact remains—Scripture never charges churches to conform to a uniform pattern. Neither does the New Testament depict this.

LSM's Developing Doctrine—Decreasing Diversity, Institutionalizing Identity

LSM's doctrine of identity was not invented overnight; it evolved gradually over several decades. When the church-life began in Los Angeles, CA, forty-five years ago, the stated goal was to express the oneness of Christ's Body, a unity with variety and without uniformity. A public statement issued on May 19, 1963, declared,⁴⁹ "[We] came to meet together on the church ground in Los Angeles in the beginning of March 1963. **We...intend to...practice the unity of the Spirit, a unity with variety, and the variety versus uniformity,** in the way of a local church." This declaration appeared in the first issue of *The Stream* magazine. Bro. Lee taught "speciality" in the essentials, but "generality" in the non-essentials of the Christian faith. The first local churches practiced this. Non-essentials were a non-issue; "We don't care for doctrines," was an oft-repeated phrase.

Nevertheless a decade later, as the *Life-study* trainings began, the seeds of uniformity were sown. Bro. Lee's teaching about the identity of the lampstands in Revelation and his assertion all differences between the 7 Asian churches were "negative," laid the foundation for what was to come. A decade later, in the 1980s, Bro. Lee felt his leadership in the Recovery was being⁵⁰ challenged. In his view, this threat involved a teaching⁵¹ "being promulgated...encouraging the churches to be different from one another." He responded by vehemently attacking the⁵² "erroneous teaching that local churches could be different from one another." He denounced those

who⁵³ "may feel that the churches in Brazil should remain different from the churches in the United States...[who may think] Every local church is free to take the leading of the Spirit." "This sounds very good," Bro. Lee declared ominously,⁵⁴ "but it is actually subtly dissenting and a real poison." In 1986 he spoke to over 400 elders giving four major arguments for⁵⁵ "The Need of All the Churches to be Identical." A "take-no-prisoners" attitude of combat, rather than compromise, pervades his polemic responding to this perceived threat. He declared emphatically,⁵⁶ "the genuine church life is altogether, absolutely, wholly, and ultimately one in teaching, in practice, in thinking, in speaking, in essence, in appearance, and in expression." Four years later, in 1990, he spoke again to the elders, giving eight reasons for⁵⁷ "The Identity of the Churches," four more than before. Clearly his position became more entrenched, his teaching more dogmatic.

In 1990 Bro. Lee again referred to "unity with variety" and "variety versus uniformity." The phrases were the same; yet his exposition was drastically different from 27-years ago. He said,⁵⁸

"We must tolerate certain differences, such as differences in the way of baptism and in the observing of days (Rom. 14:15). This we consider as unity with variety. By tolerating this kind of variety, we annul uniformity. This is variety versus uniformity...Of course, we know that sprinkling as a means of baptism is not as scriptural as immersion, and that the keeping of the Sabbath is altogether not in God's New Testament economy, yet we tolerate these kinds of differences..."

Significantly the token diversity considered tolerable is now entirely in the realm of personal practice—the mode of baptism (sprinkling vs. immersion) and observing the Sabbath. Within the realm of the corporate church-life everything was to be uniform. According to Bro. Lee the⁵⁹ "practice of the proper one accord" requires "the identity of the churches." Even regarding diverse personal views, there is a condescending attitude ("Of course, we know...") which explains why even this token variety rarely occurs in LSM's local churches.

LSM's "Long March"

The Recovery has come a long way in the past 45 years; it has been on a "Long March." The vitality and diversity which once marked the local churches is a faint speck disappearing in the rear-view mirror. Today LSM's "blended Brothers" teach⁶⁰ and practice their doctrine of identity—the notion that local churches ought to be the same, identical in all significant aspects. LSM-President, Benson Phillips dismisses concerns, saying⁶¹ "Forget about uniformity; we do not have uniformity." Yet, in almost the same breath, he mandates homogeneity to the extent of dictating the use of LSM's *Holy Word for Morning Revival* (HWMR). He declares adamantly,⁶² "Should all the churches...be practicing differently in every place? No...Brother Lee's ministry is very clear on this. He expected that...we should...have the same practice." Applying this principle to the practice of prophesying, using HWMR, Bro. Benson says,⁶³ "Brother Lee's burden was that **all the churches** under his ministry **would practice the same way**. A good example of this is the matter of **prophesying...and the use of The Holy Word for Morning Revival.**" Hence, in Bro. Benson's view, prophesying, using LSM's HWMR is not optional; it is a mandatory practice for the churches. He even micro-manages the churches' prophesying with a three minute rule.⁶⁴ The uniformity among LSM's local churches is undeniable. They follow LSM's agenda of "seven annual feasts," review the latest "crystallization-study" of "Witness Lee Remixed," cut and pasted from Bro. Lee's past messages. Local churches world-wide PSRP and practice prophesying using HWMR, read LSM's *Recovery Version* replete with W. Lee's footnotes, sing songs from LSM's *Hymns*, and support LSM-approved projects with money and man-power [e.g. "Bibles for America," DCP's lawsuits, LSM's La Palma Campus construction projects and the "Lord's Move to Europe"]. The Full-time Training (FTT) has been franchised around the globe, churning out young people inculcated with LSM's systematic theology. The "blended brothers" serve as global leaders of a world-wide federation of churches, while local elders function as *de facto* clerks and caretakers. They celebrate the fact that LSM-churches are the same.⁶⁵ Yet "in the beginning it was not so" (Matt. 19:8). Diversity has been systematically eliminated in the name of "oneness and one accord." Uniformity has been established and institutionalized, including the practices listed above. While paying lip-service to token forms of variety, **LSM's local churches now practice uniformity without variety.** The spurious justification for this uniformity is Bro. Lee's teaching that the local churches ought to be the same, identical in all significant aspects. This doctrine is LSM's fallacy of identity.

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May, 2008

NOTES:

1. *Left Behind: A Novel of the Earth's Last Days* is the best-selling 1995 novel by Tim LaHaye and Jerry B. Jenkins which starts the *Left Behind* series. A film version appeared in 2000. It is based on J. N. Darby's teaching concerning the pre-tribulation rapture of the entire Church. Of course this doctrine is at variance with Bro. Lee's teaching of the overcomers' rapture. We are not discussing that issue here.
2. James D. G. Dunn, *Unity and Diversity in the New Testament: An Inquiry into the Character of Earliest Christianity*, (second edition) SCM Press, London, UK, p. 370. Dunn was (at the time of publication) Professor of Divinity at the University of Durham, UK.
3. James D. G. Dunn, *Unity and Diversity in the New Testament*, p. 372, emphasis original
4. James D. G. Dunn, *Unity and Diversity in the New Testament*, p. 374
5. James D. G. Dunn, *Unity and Diversity in the New Testament*, p. 374
6. James D. G. Dunn, *Unity and Diversity in the New Testament*, p. 373
7. James D. G. Dunn, *Unity and Diversity in the New Testament*, p. 374
8. Dunn's states the "opposite side of the coin"—"The diversity of the New Testament documents is narrower than the diversity of the earliest churches." [James D. G. Dunn, *Unity and Diversity in the New Testament*, (second edition) Foreword, p. xxi]
9. Witness Lee, *One Accord for the Lord's Move*, Elders' Training Book 7, LSM, 1986, p. 61, emphasis added
10. In this article we use the term "LSM's expositors" or "LSM's" to encompass both Bro. Witness Lee and the "blended brothers" associated with Living Stream Ministry (LSM). LSM publishes Witness Lee's books and the messages of the "blended brothers" (e.g. in *The Ministry* magazine). In the phrase, "doctrine of identity," the term "identity" is being used in the sense of "an instance of sameness" or "exact likeness in nature or qualities." (Dictionary)
11. Take for example Bro. Andrew Yu's report, "A short time ago a few of us visited some of the churches and were very happy to see them all going on in oneness in the apostles' teaching and practicing the apostles' fellowship." (AY., *The Ministry*, vol. 7, no. 6, Aug. 2003, p. 54). At the end of the message, he returned to this point, saying, "recently when we were visiting the churches, we were so impressed that **all the churches are now in the Crystallization-study of 1 Corinthians**. When we walked into one meeting hall, we saw a banner of the training. When we walked into another hall, we also saw the banner of the training. When we visited another church, a Chinese-speaking brother recited the banner to us in English." (AY., *The Ministry*, vol. 7, no. 6, Aug. 2003 p. 73, emphasis added)
12. Witness Lee, *The Intrinsic Problem in the Lord's Recovery Today and Its Scriptural Remedy*, LSM, 1990, p. 29, emphasis added. For a further discussion of the lampstands & local churches in Rev. chapters 1 to 3 see John Myer's E-book, *A Future & A Hope*, especially chapter 5, at <http://www.assemblylife.com/>
13. Witness Lee, *One Accord for the Lord's Move*, p. 38
14. Witness Lee, *One Accord for the Lord's Move*, p. 40
15. DL, *The Ministry*, Vol. 7, No. 6, (Aug. 2003) p. 110-1
16. W. Lee, *One Accord for the Lord's Move*, p. 48
17. W. Lee, *The Intrinsic Problem...* p. 29, emphasis added
18. Consider, for example, the following statements, "However, the normal differences among the churches can be **only** in the business affairs of their administration. Although the Lord did not touch business affairs in the seven epistles to the seven churches, as a rule, according to their practical needs, the churches should be different in the business affairs of their administration. These affairs include such matters as the times of the church meetings, and whether the church purchases property and builds a meeting hall or simply rents a room or a building for its meetings. In matters such as these, there is no need for the churches to be identical. To require all the churches to be identical in these matters would be very awkward." [W. Lee, *The Intrinsic Problem...* pp. 29-30, emphasis added] "The churches should be different **only** in business affairs. For example, whether a church buys a piece of land and builds a meeting hall should depend on the church's need and on the Lord's sovereignty. The churches should not be required to follow one another in affairs such as these...." [W. Lee, *The Intrinsic Problem...* p. 31, emphasis added] Later, W. Lee adds a caveat about differences in maturity, saying "Any difference among the saints or among the churches in the degree of maturity in life is normal and is needed according to God's economy."

- God has arranged it so, and we should not attempt to make the saints or the churches uniform in this matter. [W. Lee, *The Intrinsic Problem...* p. 37] Despite this caveat, the overall thrust of W. Lee's message remains an argument for uniformity among local churches.
19. W. Lee, Rev. 1:20, (RcV) footnote 1
 20. W. Lee, Rev. 1:20, (RcV) footnote 1, emphasis added
 21. DL, *The Ministry*, Vol. 7, No. 6, (Aug. 2003) p. 112
 22. In fact W. Lee arbitrarily categorizes this as "negative," saying "The seven churches differ abnormally only in the negative things...These negative things include: in Ephesus, some calling themselves apostles and not being such." [W. Lee, "*The Intrinsic Problem...*" p. 30] But this is counter-intuitive. Note that the Spirit's word **commands** Ephesus saying "I know your works and your labor...and you have tried those who call themselves apostles and are not, and have found them to be false." (Rev. 2:2) It is only by arbitrary mental gymnastics that this positive commendation is turned into a "negative" critique.
 23. Watchman Nee, *The Normal Christian Church Life*, Collected Works, vol. 30, p. 61
 24. Bro. Lee argues for uniformity based upon the fact that "The seven epistles [in Rev. 2 & 3] being written as one book to the seven churches." [W. Lee, *The Intrinsic Problem...*, pp. 31-32] This is essentially the same as arguing that because all the churches received the same New Testament canon, therefore, they ought to be the same. The only difference between the two is a matter of "scale." Hence, here we deal only with the one argument.
 25. W. Lee, *The Intrinsic Problem in the Lord's Recovery Today and Its Scriptural Remedy*, pp. 35-6 emphasis added
 26. On occasion they claim that because all the local churches express Christ's one Body, they should be the same. Yet the Body is characterized by diversity, not by uniformity (1 Cor. 12). LSM's "blended brothers" assert that the local churches are "parts of the one Body of Christ." For example, Brother "DL" says, "Paul's way was to consider all the churches to be the same, to be **parts of the one Body of Christ.**" [DL., *The Ministry*, vol. 7, no. 6, Aug. 2003, p. 114] But, if indeed the local churches are "parts of the Body" (as the "blended brothers" assert) shouldn't we expect them to differ one from the other (like the head from the feet, the eye from the hand), according to Paul's word?
 27. W. Lee, *One Accord...*p. 61
 28. James D. G. Dunn, *Unity and Diversity in the New Testament: An Inquiry into the Character of Earliest Christianity*, (second edition) p. 374. Elsewhere Dunn says, "The major New Testament documents...were 'chosen,' canonized as they were in all their diversity, despite the range of their diversity. I do not hesitate to claim that it was the leading of the Spirit which enabled catholicism to acknowledge as canonical a range of documents, which so richly embody the diverse vitality..." [Dunn, *Unity and Diversity*, Foreword, p. xxxi]
 29. Dunn writes, "It is a matter of fact that in the second half of the second century, there were, in very simplified terms, **four main claimants** to the title 'Christian.' My question is simply, How did this come about? What does this tell us about the character of first-century Christianity? [Dunn, *Unity & Diversity*, Foreword, p. xxvii, emphasis added] He classifies these "four claimants" as [1] Jewish Christianity, [2] Hellenistic Christianity, [3] Apocalyptic Christianity and [4] Early Catholicism
 30. James D. G. Dunn, *Unity and Diversity in the New Testament: An Inquiry into the Character of Earliest Christianity*, (second edition) p. 376, emphasis original The quote in context reads: "The canon of the New Testament has a continuing function also in that it *recognizes the validity of diversity*; it canonizes very different expressions of Christianity...In other words the canon is important because it canonizes the unity of Christianity, but also because *it canonizes the diversity of Christianity.*"
 31. W. Lee, *The Intrinsic Problem in the Lord's Recovery Today and Its Scriptural Remedy*, pp. 35-6 emphasis added
 32. James D. G. Dunn, *Unity and Diversity in the New Testament*, (second edition) p. 377
 33. James D. G. Dunn, *Unity and Diversity in the New Testament*, (second edition) p. 377
 34. Watchman Nee, *Collected Works*, vol. 58, p. 161
 35. W. Nee, *Normal Christian Church Life*, in *Collected Works*, vol. 30, p. 61
 36. W. Lee, *The Intrinsic Problem...*, p. 33
 37. W. Lee *One Accord...* p. 47
 38. W. Lee, *The Intrinsic Problem...* p. 33
 39. W. Lee, *Watchman Nee: A Seer of the Divine Revelation...*, p. 101, emphasis added
 40. W. Lee *Truth Messages*, pp. 16-17. Marie Monsen is remembered as 'The Mother of the House Churches' by believers in Henan Province, China, see *ASIA HARVEST* (March 2002) pp. 4-5
 41. W. Lee, *The Vision of the Age*, p. 27

42. W. Lee, *The Intrinsic Problem*... p. 33
43. W. Lee, *The Intrinsic Problem*... p. 34
44. W. Lee, *The Intrinsic Problem*... p. 34
45. W. Lee, *The Life & Way for the Practice of the Church Life*, p. 119, emphasis added. Concerning the differences in practice between Jewish (Judean) and Gentile churches (especially in the light of the Acts 15, Jerusalem conference) have been dealt with at length in other articles e.g. "***The Jerusalem Council's Apostolic Decree (Acts 15)—Proof Text for Authority & Uniformity OR Blueprint for Diversity?***" posted at: http://www.concernedbrothers.com/Truth/Acts_15_Apostolic_Decree_Binding.pdf
46. W. Lee, *The Intrinsic Problem*... p. 32
47. The term, "one accord," according to Bro. Lee, is "strong and all inclusive;" [W. Lee, *One Accord*..., pp. 19-11] He says, "For us to be in the same one spirit with the same one soul, one mind, and one will is to have the one accord, which is the key to all the New Testament blessings..." (W. Lee, *One Accord*... p. 20).
48. W. Lee, *The Intrinsic Problem*... pp. 31-32, emphasis added. Expounding this point, Brother "DL" says, "All the seven epistles close with the speaking of the Spirit to all the churches (refs) ...The Spirit is speaking to all the churches, showing that all the churches should be the same. All the churches should be identical." [DL, *The Ministry*, Vol. 7, No. 6, (Aug. 2003) p. 113]
49. James D. Reetzke Sr., *Recollections with Thanksgiving*, Chicago Bibles & Books, p. 34, emphasis added
50. See W. Lee's statement, "Some may feel...they do not want to see that I am the unique leader to control the entire recovery." [W. Lee, *One Accord for the Lord's Move*, Elders' Training Book 7, p. 127].
51. W. Lee, *The Intrinsic Problem*..., p. 29 This word was spoken later, but it also describes the earlier situation.
52. W. Lee, *One Accord*..., p. 61
53. W. Lee, *One Accord*..., p. 61
54. W. Lee, *One Accord*..., p. 61
55. W. Lee, *One Accord*..., chp. 4, pp. 52-61
56. W. Lee, *One Accord*... p. 41
57. W. Lee, *The Intrinsic Problem*..., pp. 29-35
58. W. Lee, *The Intrinsic Problem*..., p. 38, emphasis added
59. W. Lee, *The Intrinsic Problem*... p. 29 Bro. Lee says, "The practice of the proper one accord in the church is based upon the following 8 items." This is followed by 8 items under the heading, "The Identity of the Churches"
60. See for example, "blended brother," "DL" *The Ministry*, Vol. 7, No. 6, (Aug. 2003) pp. 110-117 which essentially repeats Witness Lee's message in *The Intrinsic Problem*... pp. 29-35.
61. BP., *The Ministry*, vol. 7, no. 6, Aug. 2003, p. 37
62. BP, *The Ministry*, vol. 7, No. 1 (Jan./Feb. 2003) p. 268 The quote in context reads: "**Should all the churches** that have been raised up under one ministry **be practicing differently in every place? No.** This was not Paul's way, and neither was this Brother Nee or Brother Lee's way. **Brother Lee's ministry is very clear on this. He expected that** whether we are in the churches in Korea, in Taiwan, in Brazil, in the United States, or in Canada, we should all receive the same teaching and **all have the same practice.**" Emphasized words quoted in the main text above.
63. BP, *The Ministry*, vol. 7, No. 1 (Jan./Feb. 2003) p. 269
64. Benson Phillips directs, "Each church in principle is the same. Someone gives a short introductory word, and then the others stand up to prophesy for **no more than three minutes**...Perhaps the first one who speaks would speak five or seven minutes....and then all the **rest speak for three minutes or less.**" BP., *The Ministry*, vol. 9, No. 8, Sept. 2005, p. 74, emphasis added.
65. Take for example Bro. Andrew Yu's report, "A short time ago a few of us visited some of the churches and were very happy to see them all going on in oneness in the apostles' teaching and practicing the apostles' fellowship." (AY., *The Ministry*, vol. 7, no. 6, Aug. 2003, p. 54). At the end of the message, he returned to this point, saying, "recently when we were visiting the churches, we were so impressed that **all the churches are now in the Crystallization-study of 1 Corinthians**. When we walked into one meeting hall, we saw a banner of the training. When we walked into another hall, we also saw the banner of the training. When we visited another church, a Chinese-speaking brother recited the banner to us in English." (AY., *The Ministry*, vol. 7, no. 6, Aug. 2003 p. 73, emphasis added)