

## The Teachings of Witness Lee and the Local Church

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### Introduction

The Local Church is composed of groups of people in cities around the United States and parts of the Orient who follow the teachings of Witness Lee. Lee is an Oriental who once was among the leaders of the movement begun by Watchman Nee. The name of the group is derived from the teaching of “localism,” which in this form says that there is only one true church, one true representative of the Body of Christ, in any locality.

We love the people in this movement. It is because of this deep love that when serious errors are presented to them as the teachings of Scripture, we must respond by earnestly contending for the faith once delivered to the saints (Jude 3). We do not attack the persons in the Local Church, but we must identify and correct the heretical teachings they have received.

We desire the unity of the Church, but unity is never to be taken at the expense of the essential truths of the Word of God. Paul wrote, “No doubt there have to be difference among you to show which of you have God’s approval” (1 Corinthians 11:19). We must be followers of the One who said, “I am the way, the truth, and the life” (John 14:6), and to do so, we must not sacrifice the truth of His Word. It will be seen below that it is the Local Church that is dividing the Body of Christ by its errors. Its false teachings challenge the Body of Christ, and we must answer that challenge with Scripture (Jude 3: 1 Peter 3:15; Isaiah 8:20).

### The Teachings of the Local Church Compared with Scripture

The Local Church has distinctive teachings that set it at variance to the Body of Christ, and it is our purpose to survey and compare these teachings with the Bible. It is important to understand first the attitude of the Local Church toward all the denominations, both Catholic and Protestant, so that we will see just how important these teachings are. Witness Lee writes, “Do not try to be neutral. Do not try to reconcile them. . . . You know the denominations are wrong, yet you still remain because you are afraid of what others will say.”<sup>1</sup> For Lee and the Local Church, then, all denominations are wrong. (We shall return to this subject later.) What sets the Local Church apart from the denominations? The primary points are teaching and practice. Since the practices of the Local Church stem from its teachings, the two can, for practical purposes, be treated together.

We shall discuss five primary areas of teaching in the Local Church and compare them with the teaching of the Word of God: (1) the nature of God, particularly the doctrine of the Trinity; (2) the way of salvation; (3) the Church, focusing on “localism” and the relation of the Church to God; (4) the nature and use of the Bible; (5) the nature of sin and Satan.

### The Nature of God

The doctrine of the Trinity is usually stated essentially thus: “In the nature of the one true God, there are three eternally distinct Persons, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. All three are the same God, all fully God, yet the Father is neither the Son nor the Spirit, the Son is neither the Father nor the Spirit, and the Spirit is neither the Father nor the Son.”<sup>2</sup> The Local Church, however, teaches contrary to this.

*Successive Modalism.* The Local Church teaches that the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are all the same Person as well as the same God, and that each is a successive step or stage in the revelation of God to man. Witness Lee writes:

Thus, the three Persons of the Trinity become the three successive steps in the process of God’s economy.<sup>3</sup>

Likewise, the Father, Son, and Spirit are not three Gods, but three stages of one God for us to possess and enjoy.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Witness Lee, *The Practical Expression of the Church* (Anaheim: Stream, 1974), 92, 111.

<sup>2</sup>For more detailed statement and scriptural proof, see Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, 3 volumes (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1973), 1:442 ff.

<sup>3</sup>Witness Lee, *The Economy of God* (Los Angeles: Stream, 1968), 10.

<sup>4</sup>Witness Lee, “Concerning the Triune God” (Los Angeles: Stream, n.d.), 31.

In the heavens, where man cannot see, God is the Father; when He is expressed among men, He is the Son; and when He comes into men, He is the Spirit. The Father was expressed among men in the Son, and the Son became the Spirit to come into men. The Father is in the Son, and the Son became the Spirit—the three are just one God.<sup>5</sup>

Formerly it was impossible for man to contact the Father. he was exclusively God and His nature was exclusively divine. There was nothing in the Father to bridge the gap between God and man. . . . But now He has . . . become incarnate in human nature. The Father was pleased to combine His own divinity with humanity in the Son.<sup>6</sup> After death and resurrection He [the Son] became the Spirit breathed into the disciples.<sup>7</sup>

. . . the Son became the Spirit for us to drink in as the water of life.<sup>8</sup> The Father, as the inexhaustible source of everything, is embodied in the Son.<sup>9</sup>

In the place where no man can approach Him (I Tim. 6:16), God is the Father. When He comes forth to manifest Himself, He is the Son. . . . We know the Lord is the Son and that He is also called the Father. . . . Now we read that He is the Spirit. So we must be clear that Christ the Lord is the Spirit, too. . . . As the source, God is the Father. As the expression, He is the Son. As the transmission, He is the Spirit. The Father is the source, the Son is the expression, and the Spirit is the transmission, the communion. This is the triune God.<sup>10</sup>

We can see in these passages the clear teaching that the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are three successive stages in the revelation of God to mankind. Thus the Son is not really a Person distinct from the Father, but is the Father “come forth to manifest Himself.” Neither is the Holy Spirit a Person distinct from the Father and Son, but “the transmission,” the “communion”; He is in fact the Father and the Son in a different stage of expression to man. As former Local Church member Bill Freeman put it in “Witness Lee and Local Church’s Reply to the ‘Bible Answer Man’”:

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<sup>5</sup>Ibid., 8-9.

<sup>6</sup>Lee, *The Economy of God*, 11.

<sup>7</sup>Lee, “Concerning the Triune God,” 8; brackets added.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid., 8.

<sup>9</sup>Lee, *The Economy of God*, 11.

<sup>10</sup>Witness Lee, *The All-inclusive Spirit of Christ* (Los Angeles: Stream, 1969), 4, 6, 8.

The relationship between the Father and the Son is one of mutual indwelling. That is, each Person interpenetrates and coinheres the Others. This mutual indwelling and interpenetration reveals the distinction within the Godhead of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and also preserves the fact that the Triune God is uniquely One. The second type of Scriptures showing the relationship between the Persons of the Trinity is the verses that specifically state that one Person of the Triune God is Another.<sup>11</sup>

Systematic theologian and historian of doctrine Louis Berkhof described Sabellianistic modalism thus:

. . . Sabellius . . . distinguished between the unity of the divine essence and the plurality of its manifestations, which are represented as following one another like the parts of a drama. Sabellius indeed sometimes spoke of three divine persons, but then used the word ‘person’ in the original sense of the word, in which it signifies a role of acting or a mode of manifestation. According to him the names Father, Son and Holy Spirit are simply designations of three different phases under which the one divine essence manifests itself. God reveals Himself as Father in creation and in the giving of the law, as Son in the incarnation, and as Holy Spirit in regeneration and sanctification.<sup>12</sup>

Systematic theologian Abraham Kuyper wrote of Sabellianism:

Sabellius . . . came to the conclusion that the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost were after all but one Person; who first wrought in creation as Father, then having become the Son wrought out our redemption, and now as the Holy Spirit perfects our sanctification.”<sup>13</sup>

Historian of theology William Kelly wrote:

Taking its name from the third century Sabellius, this . . . reduced the three persons of Father, Son and Holy Ghost to three characters,

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<sup>11</sup>*Santa Ana Register*, Saturday, October 22, 1977, D.

<sup>12</sup>Louis Berkhof, *The History of Christian Doctrines* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1975), 79; cf. 78-79.

<sup>13</sup>Abraham Kuyper, *The Work of the Holy Spirit* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975), 45.

modes or relations of the Godhead assumed for the purpose of the divine dealings with man. Thus God is eternally and essentially one, but economically, i.e., for specific purposes, he takes the form of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. . . .<sup>14</sup>

Systematic theologian Augustus Strong wrote:

Sabellius and Schleiermacher hold that the One *becomes* three in the process of revelation, and the three are only *media* or *modes* of revelation. Father, Son, and Spirit are mere names applied to these modes of the divine action, there being no internal distinctions in the divine nature. This is modalism, or a modal Trinity.<sup>15</sup>

Church historian Philip Schaff wrote:

While the other Monarchians confine their inquiry to the relation of the Father and Son, Sabellius embraces the Holy Spirit in his speculation, and reaches a trinity, not a simultaneous trinity of essence, however, but only a successive trinity of revelation. He starts from a distinction of the monad and the triad in the divine nature. His fundamental thought is, that the unity of God, without distinction in itself, unfolds or extends itself in the course of the world's development in three different forms and periods of revelation, and, after the completion of redemption, returns into unity. The Father reveals Himself in the giving of the law or the Old Testament economy . . . ; the Son, in the incarnation; the Holy Ghost, in inspiration.<sup>16</sup>

Remember the teaching of Lee: "Thus, the three Persons of the Trinity become the three successive steps in the process of God's economy."<sup>17</sup> There can be no doubt that this aspect of Lee's teaching is modalistic in the Sabellian sense: that is, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are three successive modes (hence the name "modalism") or stages in the manifestation of God to man, rather than three internally, essentially distinct

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<sup>14</sup>William Kelly, "Sabellianism," in *Baker's Dictionary of Theology*, edited by Everett F. Harrison (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1975), 465.

<sup>15</sup>Augustus Strong, *Systematic Theology* (Old Tappan, NJ: Revell, 1976), 327.

<sup>16</sup>Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, 8 volumes (USA: Associated Publishers and Authors, n.d.), 2:262.

<sup>17</sup>Lee, *The Economy of God*, 10.

Persons.

This doctrine was declared heretical in the third century (A.D. 263 under Bishop Dionysius of Rome), and has since crept into the teaching of the Church from time to time, always to be rejected in favor of the Scriptural teaching of the essential Trinity. Scripture affirms that Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are not three successive steps, for they are eternal and simultaneous. Hebrews 9;14 tells of Christ offering Himself through the "eternal Spirit." They both existed at the same time, and Christ was not the Spirit. Yet Lee wrote, "the Son became the Spirit for us to drink in as the water of life. . . ."<sup>18</sup> John 17:5 shows that the Father and the Son existed simultaneously "before the world was." Yet Lee wrote, "But now [the Father] has . . . become incarnate in human nature. The Father was pleased to combine His own divinity with humanity in the Son."<sup>19</sup>

The concept of the Father becoming the Son and the Son becoming the Spirit is contradicted in other ways in Scripture. Malachi 3:6 tells us that God does not change; yet modalism would entail changes in God. In Isaiah 44:6 we have the Father (Jehovah, the King of Israel) and the Son (His Redeemer, Jehovah of Hosts) speaking simultaneously, affirming at once that they are the same God, yet presented clearly and directly as distinct Persons. In Luke 22:42 Christ prays to the Father, "not my will, but thine be done." there is a clear distinction between the Father and the Son, yet they exist simultaneously. They have separate (though never conflicting) wills, and hence must be separate Persons, yet are the same God.

In John 14:26 we find that the Father will send the Holy Spirit; in 15:26 we find that Jesus will send the Spirit (see also 16:7); and in 17:8 and 20:21 we find that the Father has sent Jesus. We see a complete distinction among the Persons of the Trinity. None of them becomes another, none is another. All are eternally distinct, not successive stages in God's revelation of Himself to man. All relate to each other as one Person to another Person.

*Static Modalism.* The Local Church also teaches another view of the Trinity, also modalistic. For the purposes of this booklet, we shall call this "static modalism," because in this form there is no succession of one becoming another. Father, Son, and Spirit are presented as separate but simultaneous modes or aspects of the revelation of the same One to man. Lee writes:

Although he is one God, yet there is the matter of three-foldness, that is, the threefold Person—the Father, the Son, and the Spirit.<sup>20</sup>  
He [the Father] is the One hidden within, and the Son is the One

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<sup>18</sup>Lee, "Concerning the Triune God," 8.

<sup>19</sup>Lee, *The Economy of God*, 11.

<sup>20</sup>Lee, "Concerning the Triune God," 11.

manifested without; yet the One who is manifested without is the One who is hidden within—the two are just one.<sup>21</sup>

Thank the Lord, He also has two ends: 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.<sup>22</sup>

The Son who prays is the Father who listens.<sup>23</sup>

Therefore the Bible clearly reveals to us that the Son is the Father, and the Son is also the Spirit. Otherwise, how could these three be one God?<sup>24</sup>

The Son is the Father, and the Son is also the Spirit.<sup>25</sup>

The Lord Jesus is the Holy Spirit. . . .<sup>26</sup>

It is clear that Lee also teaches that the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are simultaneously each other. At one and the same time, the Son is the Father and the Holy Spirit. The statement concerning the Father and the Son that “the two are just one” is actually unclear: we are forced to ask, “One what?” Lee’s answer is that they are the same Person, for we are told that the threefoldness in God is the “threefold Person.”<sup>27</sup> This implicates the Holy Spirit in this one person as well. The fact that this teaches simultaneous, non-successive modalism cannot be denied, regardless of the fact that it is therefore in direct contradiction to Lee’s teaching, shown above, of developmental modalism.

The term applied to this teaching in the history of Christian doctrine is generally Patripassianism (from *patēr*, Father, and *patior*, to suffer), because it logically implied the suffering of the Father on the Cross as Christ. Schaff wrote of this class of thinkers:

The second class of Monarchians, called by Tertullian “Patripassians” . . . together with their unitarian zeal felt the deeper Christian impulse to hold fast the divinity of Christ; but they sacrificed to it his independent personality, which they merged in the essence of the Father. They taught that the one supreme God by His own free will, and by an act of self-limitation became man, so that

<sup>21</sup>Ibid., 8.

<sup>22</sup>Ibid., 28.

<sup>23</sup>Ibid., 25.

<sup>24</sup>Ibid., 23.

<sup>25</sup>Ibid., 17.

<sup>26</sup>Ibid., 20.

<sup>27</sup>Lee, “Concerning the Triune God,” 11.

the Son is the Father veiled in the flesh. They knew no other God but the one manifested in Christ, and charged their opponents with ditheism.<sup>28</sup>

William Nigel Kerr wrote:

Patripassianists . . . with the modalists confused the persons of the Trinity and denied the union of the two natures in the one person of Christ. Defending monotheism they held that since God was one essence there could not be three persons but instead three modes of manifestation. Thus the Son was the Father appearing in human form. Noetus taught that Christ was the Father and so the Father was born, suffered and died upon the cross, hence the name patripassian.<sup>29</sup>

One of the most famous early teachers of this doctrine was Praxeas, of whom Schaff wrote:

Praxeas, constantly appealing to Isaiah Is. 45:5; Jno. 10:30 . . . , as if the whole Bible consisted of these three passages, taught that the Father Himself became man, hungered, thirsted, suffered, and died in Christ.<sup>30</sup>

Two other early thinkers taught this doctrine, bishops of Rome Zephyrinus and, with some modifications, Callistus: “Zephyrinus (201-219) and Callistus (219-223) held and taught (according to the “Philosophumena” of Hippolytus, a martyr and saint) the Patripassian heresy, that God the Father became incarnate and suffered with the Son.”<sup>31</sup> Louis Berkhof wrote of Praxeas and Noetus, the two most prominent teachers of this doctrine:

Praxeas . . . seems to have avoided the assertion that the Father suffered, but Noetus did not hesitate at this point. To quote the words of Hippolytus: “He said that Christ is Himself the Father, and that the Father Himself was born and suffered and died.” According to the same Church Father he even made the bold assertion that the Father

<sup>28</sup>Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, 2:260.

<sup>29</sup>William Nigel Kerr, “Patripassianism,” in *Baker’s Dictionary of Theology*, 396-7.

<sup>30</sup>Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, 2:260.

<sup>31</sup>Philip Schaff, *The Creeds of Christendom*, 3 volumes (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1977), 2:177.

by changing the mode of his being literally became His own Son. The statement of Noetus referred to runs as follows: “When the Father had not yet been born, He was rightly called the Father; but when it pleased Him to submit to birth, having been born, He became the Son, he of Himself and not of another.”<sup>32</sup>

While we can see the beginning of successionism in Noetus’s doctrine, the primary teaching represented in these and other quotations is the simultaneous identity of one Person as Father and Son, which Witness Lee also propagates.

Like Sabellianistic (or successionalistic) modalism, static modalism also fails to conform to Scripture. The presentation of distinction among the Persons of Father, Son, and Spirit in Scripture is unmistakable: Father and Son have separate, though never conflicting, wills (Luke 22:42; the Father sends Jesus (John 17:8; 20:21); Jesus and the Father send the Spirit (John 15:26; 16:7; 14:26). Even the Hebrew word that tells us that God is one (Deuteronomy 6:4; *echod*) has implicit within it the concept of plurality.<sup>33</sup> In Luke 3:22 the Father addresses the Son, saying, “Thou art my beloved Son”; if Father and Son are the same Person, this makes no sense. John 1:1, which reads, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God,” gives a perfect presentation of the unity of Father and Son as the same God (third clause), and yet also of their personal distinction, since the Word was “with God” (second clause; the Greek *pros*, here translated *with*, is usually held to be, in contexts like this, an abbreviated form of *prosōpon pros prosōpon*, the Greek phrase for *face to face*). Even John 10:30, where Jesus says, “I and the Father are one,” carries within it their personal distinction, since the verb is plural and may be translated “we are.”

With such scriptural evidence against both successionalistic and static modalism, it is easy to understand the conclusion of theologian W. H. Griffith Thomas in regard to modalism in general:

Sabellianism both ancient and modern has always proved impossible in the long run. Modalism even without Successionalism is wholly inadequate to the Scripture testimony. There is scarcely anything more significant in the history of the Church than the recurrence and also the rejection of Sabellianism, for it is at once apparently easy, and soon seen to be utterly impossible to consider the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit as mere aspects or manifestations of one

<sup>32</sup>Berkhof, *History of Christian Doctrines*, 79.

<sup>33</sup>William Gesenius, *Hebrew and Chaldee Lexicon to the Old Testament Scriptures*, trans. and ed. S. P. Tregelles (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974), 28-29.

God.<sup>34</sup>

Lee’s two doctrines of modalism are no exception to this conclusion. They disagree with the testimony of Scripture. They are revivals of two ancient heresies. They are contradictory not only to Scripture but even to each other. Thus they must be rejected by all Christians, since Malachi 3:6 declares the unchangeableness of God.

*The Extension of the Incarnation: The Church as God Manifest in the Flesh.* As a result of these heresies, we expect more errors, and the primary one we find in Lee’s teaching is that God becomes the Church, or *vice versa*. For most Christians such a teaching is so incredible that we tend to refuse to believe that anyone could seriously teach it. Yet it has actually been taught, and rejected, time and again throughout the history of Christianity and has sometimes been referred to as the doctrine of the “extension of the incarnation.”

That Lee teaches this is clearly seen in many of his writings:

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. The Church is the manifestation of God not the manifestation of doctrines or gifts.<sup>35</sup>

This Christ has expanded from one Person to thousands and thousands of persons. He was once the individual Christ, but in Acts He has become a corporate Christ.<sup>36</sup>

[Speaking of the Church and Christ:] In number we are different, but in nature we are exactly the same.<sup>37</sup>

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.<sup>38</sup>

With the Incarnation a dispensation began in which God and man,

<sup>34</sup>W. H. Griffith Thomas, *The Holy Spirit of God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976), 129.

<sup>35</sup>Lee, *The Economy of God*, 199.

<sup>36</sup>Witness Lee, “Life-Study in Matthew, Message One” (Los Angeles: Stream, n.d.), 3.

<sup>37</sup>Witness Lee, *The All-inclusive Christ* (Los Angeles: Stream, 1969), 103.

<sup>38</sup>Lee, *The Practical Expression of the Church*, 43.

man and God were blended into one.<sup>39</sup>

The first creation, though brought into being by God Himself, is by God Himself suffered to pass into death that it may emerge in resurrection as a creation of dual nature, i.e., combining the natures of God and man.<sup>40</sup>

The resurrection followed the crucifixion. The resurrection recovered and uplifted the standard of humanity created by God and brought the human nature into God. By incarnation the divine nature was brought into man; by resurrection the human nature was brought into God. Now it is possible for man to have more than a created human nature. . . . God mingled with man and man mingled with God. . . . God in His three Persons mingles Himself with us.<sup>41</sup>

Then the day will come when the Triune God and the resurrected man will be one expression. . . .<sup>42</sup>

“Eventually God will become us.”<sup>43</sup>

“Christ will be increased through us because He is reproduced in us.”<sup>44</sup>

As Local Church member Ron Kangas wrote, “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.”<sup>45</sup>

We are left with no doubt that the Local Church teaches that the Church becomes God, and *vice versa*. This is stated not only by Lee, but also by one of the apologists of the Local Church, Bill Freeman, who wrote of the “mystery of Christ and the Church as one entity.”<sup>46</sup> Another Local Church apologist, John C. Ingalls, wrote that “Christ is not only the Head, but also the Body [i.e., the Church].”<sup>47</sup>

<sup>39</sup>Witness Lee, *The God of Resurrection* (Los Angeles: Stream, n.d.), 4.

<sup>40</sup>Lee, *The God of Resurrection*, 12.

<sup>41</sup>Lee, *The Economy of God*, 206-7. Note that while Lee here speaks of “three Persons” in God, this does not excuse him from the charge of modalism. It merely makes clear that he must redefine the word *person* so that it bears little resemblance to the true meaning of the word. Berkhof (*History of Christian Doctrines*, 79) wrote that “Sabellius indeed sometimes spoke of three divine persons, but then used the word ‘person’ in the original sense of the word, in which it signifies a role of acting or a mode of manifestation.” It is apparent that Lee has done the same thing.

<sup>42</sup>*Ibid.*, 113.

<sup>43</sup>*Life-Study in Genesis, Message 10*, 121-2.

<sup>44</sup>“Christ as Life (23) Christ’s Increase—His Bride,” excerpt of *Life Study in John* (Stream, 1977), on John 3:29-30.

<sup>45</sup>“A Response to False Teachings,” *Santa Ana Register*, date unknown.

<sup>46</sup>Bill Freeman, *The Testimony of Church History Regarding the Mystery of the Mingling of God with Man* (Anaheim: Stream, 1977), 5.

<sup>47</sup>John C. Ingalls, “The Truth Concerning God manifest in the Flesh,” in “The Response of

Such an idea as this necessarily involves a change in the very nature of God. God must become the Church, and every time someone is added to the Church, God must increase. Indeed, when Lee writes of the Church as the “increase, the enlargement, of the manifestation of God in the flesh,” in the context of the other writings quoted above, he clearly implies an increase in God Himself. But such a teaching is impossible in the light of Malachi 3:6, where God proclaims, “For I am the LORD, I change not. . . .”

Paul commented on others who confused God with His creation: “For the invisible things of him [God] from the creation of the world are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even his eternal power and Godhead; so that they are without excuse: Because that, when they knew God, they glorified him not as God, neither were thankful; but became vain in their imaginations, and their foolish heart was darkened. Professing themselves to be wise, they became fools, and changed the glory of the uncorruptible God into an image made like to corruptible man. . . .” [Romans 1:20-23]

Colossians 1:18 declares that Christ is “the head of the body, the church,” where the word for head is *kephalē*, used metaphorically to mean the One preeminent over, but not a part of, the Church.<sup>48</sup> He is not, then, the Body, but the Head of (or “over”) the Body.

The Local Church doctrine of God, therefore, is contrary to the Word of God. It teaches that God is changing, first, from Father to Son to Spirit, then to the Church itself. It denies the real, distinct personalities of the Father, the Son, and the Spirit, speaking instead of these as stages in the manifestation of God to man. By so doing, it really denies the Father, the Son, and the Spirit. It must be rejected by Christians.

### The Way of Salvation

The Local Church’s beliefs in regard to salvation are complex and even appear contradictory. Lee first teaches that salvation is simply and only a matter of calling on the name of the Lord. But in other literature he strongly implies that it is impossible to be saved unless one attends the Local Church. It is helpful to see how he states both positions:

We have seen that to reach the unbelievers, no preaching is necessary. If we help them say “O Lord” three times, they will be saved. If they open the window, the air will get in. All they have to do is to open their mouths and say, “O Lord, O Lord.” Even if they have no intention of believing, still they will be caught. Regardless of whether they have the intention or not, as long as they open the window, the air will get in. It is not a matter of teaching; it is a matter

Witness Lee and Local Church To a Recent Meeting Held at Melodyland,” *Santa Ana Register*, October 8, 1977.

<sup>48</sup>J. H. Thayer, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament* (Wheaton: Evangel, 1974), 345.

of touching the seven Spirits of God.<sup>49</sup>

The implications of this are clear. All that is necessary for salvation is that one say, “O Lord, O Lord, O Lord.” Nothing else is necessary. Is it truly not necessary to believe, or eve to intend to believe? Does salvation have nothing to do with the belief of the individual, but just with words he says?

On the other hand, there is clear indication in the writings of Lee and the Local Church that they believe that one cannot be saved if he is not in the Local Church. *Finding Christ by the Living Star* tells of three kinds of stars: the “Living Star,” which is Christ Himself; the “living stars,” which are members of the Local Church; and the “wandering stars,” which are all those who are outside the Local Church. Lee writes:

If we follow the wandering stars, eventually our portion will be the same as theirs—the blackness of darkness forever.

. . . . If anyone comes to you without a definite standing and certain course, avoid him. The proper standing is the local church, and the right course is to go on in the Spirit in the local church.<sup>50</sup> Never be a wandering star, and never follow a wandering star.

. . . . Today the only way for you and me and for anyone to find Christ is to see the living star. Hallelujah! Today the star is not far from us—it is with the local churches. . . . Today the living star and the living stars are in the local churches. Let us follow them and let us be one of them.<sup>51</sup>

Lee and those in the Local Church consider all those outside the Local Church “wandering stars.” And the destiny of these “wandering stars” is “the blackness of darkness forever.” Apparently only by being in the Local Church can one be saved. This contradicts his teaching that all one need do to be saved is to say “O Lord, O Lord, O Lord.” Which, then, is true?

According to the Bible, neither is true. The belief that all who say “O Lord, O Lord, O Lord,” regardless of belief, will be saved, is not true. Christ says: “Not every one that saith unto me, Lord, Lord, shall enter into the kingdom of heaven; but he that doeth the will of my Father which is in heaven. Many will say to me in that day, Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in thy name? and in thy name have cast out devils? and in thy name done many wonderful works? And then will I profess unto them, I never knew you:

<sup>49</sup>Witness Lee, *Stream Magazine* 8:1 (February 1, 1970), 6.

<sup>50</sup>Note that Lee never uses the phrase *local church* in a general sense as denoting any local congregation of Christians; rather, in his use it always denotes specifically the one local congregation of believers who follow his teachings.

<sup>51</sup>Witness Lee, *Finding Christ By the Living Star* (Los Angeles: Stream, 1970), 27-28.

depart from me, ye that work iniquity” (Matthew 7:21-23). The context of this statement shows that it is not simply the doing of good works, or the calling on the name of the Lord, that saves one. What is necessary is belief, or faith (John 6:29; John 8:24; Acts 16:31). Without faith it is impossible to please God (Hebrews 11:6).

Since the Local Church has also a false doctrine of God, it cannot be true that one must be in the Local Church to be saved. We see that both aspects of Lee’s teaching on salvation are contrary to God’s Word. Yet even if the Local Church did have a true belief about God, instead of the false belief it has, and a true belief about salvation, instead of its false belief, it would not be the only group in which one could be saved, for Scripture opposes such exclusivism (1 Corinthians 1:12-13ff). The exclusivism of the Local Church divides the true Body of Christ and is contrary to the Bible.

### The Church: The Belief in Localism

In accord with the teaching that one must be in the Local Church to be saved, Lee teaches the doctrine of “localism,” that is, that there is only one true representative of the Body of Christ in any city. This, of course, is said to be the Local Church. The Local Church alone is alleged to be the true representative of the Body of Christ, and all other churches are false:

If you get into anything other than the local church of the city, you get into a division; if you get into the church of that city, you get into unity.<sup>52</sup>

[Satan] has taken another step by creating all the sects, denominations and divisions in the Body of Christ. . . . God is moving in these days to recover. What is the way of His recovery? . . . the recovery of the proper unity. Not until these three things are recovered among us will we have a proper and adequate church life.<sup>53</sup>

Through all the centuries since then, religious people have followed in their steps, persecuting the genuine seekers and followers of the Lord in spirit and life, while still considering themselves to be defending the interests of God. Roman Catholicism and Protestantism, as well as Judaism, all fall into this category, becoming an organization of Satan as his tool to damage God’s economy.<sup>54</sup>

. . . the church life must be practiced today and there is no other way

<sup>52</sup>Witness Lee, *The Vision of the Church* (Los Angeles: Stream, n.d.), 9.

<sup>53</sup>Witness Lee, *Satan’s Strategy Against the Church* (Los Angeles: Stream, n.d.), 6, 8.

<sup>54</sup>Witness Lee, *The Recovery Version of Revelation* (Anaheim: Stream, 1976), 17.

but the local churches.<sup>55</sup>

Judaism is satanic, Catholicism is demonic, and Protestantism is Christless.<sup>56</sup>

*Localism.* There are two primary aspects to this teaching. First, Lee teaches a doctrine called *localism*. This, however, is refuted in the Word of God when Paul writes in Romans 16:3-5a: “Greet Priscilla and Aquila my helpers in Christ Jesus: Who have for my life laid down their own necks: unto whom not only I give thanks, but also all the churches of the Gentiles. Likewise greet the church that is in their house.” Paul wrote to a church in Rome, yet he asked that group of saints to greet the church that was in Priscilla and Aquila’s house. There were therefore at least two churches in Rome, even at that early time. Church history shows that it was common to have more than one church in a city, even in apostolic times. Schaff wrote of early churches:

The first traces of special houses of worship occur in Tertullian, who speaks of going to church, and in his contemporary, Clement of Alexandria, who mentions the double meaning of the word *ekklēsia*. About the year 230, Alexander Severus granted the Christians the right to a place in Rome against the protest of the tavern-keepers, because the worship of God in any form was better than tavern-keeping. After the middle of the third century the building of churches began in great earnest, as the Christians enjoyed over forty years of repose (260-303), and multiplied so fast that, according to Eusebius, more spacious places of devotion became everywhere necessary. . . . Rome is supposed to have had, as early as the beginning of the fourth century, more than forty churches.<sup>57</sup>

It is clear that the number of churches in a given community simply increased proportionate to the number of Christians in the community, as they had need. If there were forty in Rome by A.D. 300, surely there were more than a few during and shortly after the apostolic age.

The second aspect of the teachings quoted above is that of the condemnation of all denominations other than the Local Church.<sup>58</sup> Protestantism and Roman Catholicism are

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<sup>55</sup>Witness Lee, *The Churches* (Los Angeles: Stream, n.d.), 12.

<sup>56</sup>*Stream*, vol. 4, no. 4.

<sup>57</sup>Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, 2:93.

<sup>58</sup>It is interesting that those in the Local Church do not consider the Local Church a denomination. A denomination is simply a group (usually religious) with a name. This description fits the Local Church.

called organizations of Satan. This can only be seen as extreme divisiveness in the Body of Christ. This teaching opposes Christ’s prayer on behalf of the Church, the Body of Christ, that “they all may be one; as thou, Father, art in me, and I in thee, that they also may be one in us: that the world may believe that thou hast sent me” (John 17:21). The Local Church’s divisiveness is against Christ, and because of this it is harder for the world to see that Christ truly is sent of the Father.

The Local Church claims that it, and it alone, is the true Church in any community; that all others are organizations of Satan; that it is impossible to be in a right standing, or on correct ground, outside the Local Church. Because of this it is imperative that the Body of Christ respond strongly and quickly by showing the errors in the Local Church, warning others against it, and helping those in the Local Churches to understand Lee’s errors and return to Biblical truth. We must not meet their condemnation by condemning them personally. We must point out the heresies taught by the group, correct them lovingly according to the Word of God, and help members of the Local Church to understand the true teachings of Scripture so that they will no longer be confused by false teachings.

### The Bible and Reason in the Local Church

While the Local Church teaching recognizes the Bible as the inspired and inerrant Word of God, the Bible does not seem to govern the beliefs of most Local Church members. Their beliefs apparently are governed by their experiences, not by a study of Scripture. With this in mind, we can more easily understand the inner contradictions in the Local Church. Members of the Local Church are told not to research, understand, or learn the Word. This rejection of the mind and thought explains the confused nature of much Local Church teaching.

The Local Church approaches the subject of teaching, or doctrine, negatively. Lee writes, “Doctrine only works divisions among the Lord’s children.”<sup>59</sup> (But Lee, as he does so often, contradicts himself. He writes, “. . . we can certainly receive help from doctrine. . . .”<sup>60</sup>) This attitude makes it hard for Local Church members to consider seriously the importance of their own beliefs and compare them carefully with Scripture. It is an attitude contrary to the teachings of the Word of God, which says, “Preach the word; be instant in season, out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort with all longsuffering and doctrine. For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine . . . and they shall turn away their ears from the truth, and shall be turned unto fables” (2 Timothy 4:2-4).

There is a general emphasis in the Local Church against teaching, knowledge about the Bible or God, and study of the Word:

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<sup>59</sup>Lee, *The Economy of God*, 23.

<sup>60</sup>*Ibid.*, 24.

As long as [Jesus] is with us, we need no regulations, no rituals, no doctrines or forms. . . . Do you come to the meetings for teaching or for learning? We must come to the meetings for feasting.<sup>61</sup>

Suppose in the meetings of the local church we did not do anything but say: “O Lord, Amen, Hallelujah! O Lord, Amen, Hallelujah!” If the Lord were to lead us to do this for two hours, I believe we would all be set on fire. Everyone would be burned. This is much, much better than any kind of prevailing message. Why is this? It is because when we say these four words we are touching the seven Spirits of God which are before the throne. Try it and see if the seven Spirits will not burn you.<sup>62</sup>

Lee’s attitude toward studying the Bible is significant, in that it explains much of the confusion and misunderstanding of the Bible prevalent among members of the Local Church. It is connected with a doctrine called “pray-reading” the Word, which Lee explains:

. . . there is no need for us to close our eyes to pray. It is better for us to close our mind! . . . Do not try only to learn the Bible. We must realize that this is a book of life, not a book of knowledge. This book is the divine embodiment of the living Spirit, and He is life.<sup>63</sup>

Simply pick up the Word and pray-read a few verses in the morning and in the evening. There is no need for you to exercise your mind in order to squeeze out some utterance, and it is unnecessary to think over what you read. . . . It is better for us to close our mind! For example, n pray-reading Galatians 2:20 simply look at the printed page, which says, “I am crucified with Christ.” Then with your eyes upon the Word and praying from deeply within say: “Praise the Lord, ‘I am crucified with Christ!’ Hallelujah! ‘Crucified with Christ.’ Amen. ‘I am.’ Oh, Lord, ‘I am crucified.’ Praise the Lord! ‘Crucified with Christ.’ Amen! ‘I am crucified with Christ.’ Hallelujah! Amen! ‘Nevertheless.’ Amen. ‘Nevertheless.’ Amen! ‘I live.’ Oh, Lord, ‘I live!’ Hallelujah! Amen! ‘Yet not I but Christ,’ etc.” . . . There is no need for you to compose any sentences or create a prayer. Just pray-read the Word. pray the words of the Bible exactly as they read. Eventually, you will see that the whole Bible is

<sup>61</sup>Witness Lee, *Christ vs. Religion* (Los Angeles: Stream, 1971), 14-15.

<sup>62</sup>*Stream Magazine* 8:1 (February 1, 1970), 5.

<sup>63</sup>Witness Lee, *A Time with the Lord* (Los Angeles: Stream, n.d.), 10, 11.

a prayer book! You can open to any page of the Bible and start to pray with any portion of the Word. . . . There is no need to explain or expound the Word, simply pray with the Word. Forget about reading, researching, understanding, and learning the Word. You must pray-read the Word.<sup>64</sup>

Such a teaching discourages careful study of the Word by Local Church members, and therefore encourages them to accept without questions the group’s teachings. This implication alone would be contrary to 1 Thessalonians 5:21: “Test all things, hold fast that which is good.” But there are further difficulties.

The dislike for knowledge is contrary to Paul’s prayer that we “might be filled with the knowledge of his will in all wisdom and spiritual understanding . . . and increasing in the knowledge of God” (Colossians 1:9-10). The advice that we “forget about reading, researching, understanding, and learning the Word” is against 2 Timothy 2:15, which says to “show thyself approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth.”

The idea of closing our minds when reading Scripture and praying is against the Word of God when Paul writes, “I will pray with the spirit, and I will pray with the understanding also: I will sing with the spirit, and I will sing with the understanding also” (1 Corinthians 14:15). It is completely contrary to the spirit of the psalmist, who wrote:

Thy testimonies are wonderful: therefore doth my soul keep them. The entrance of thy words giveth light; it giveth understanding unto the simple. I opened my mouth, and panted: for I longed for thy commandments. order my steps in thy word: and let not any iniquity have dominion over me. . . . Make thy face to shine upon thy servant; and teach me thy statutes. . . . The righteousness of thy testimonies is everlasting: give me understanding, and I shall live. [Psalm 119:129-131, 133, 135, 144]

This certainly presents a contrast to the one who says, “Forget about reading, researching, understanding, and learning the word!”

Furthermore, the constant repetitions and exclamations that mark the practice of “pray-reading” the Word are comparable to what Paul taught against when he wrote, “But shun profane and vain babblings: for they will increase unto more ungodliness. And their word will eat as doth a canker . . .” (2 Timothy 2:16-17). it is refuted by Jesus’ statement about prayer: “But when ye pray, use not vain repetitions, as the heathen do: for they think that they shall be heard for their much speaking. Be not ye therefore like unto them . . .” (Matthew 6:7-8).

It is clear that the Local Church method of using the Bible and of prayer is contrary

<sup>64</sup>Witness Lee, *Pray-Reading the Word* (Los Angeles: Stream, n.d.), 8-10.

to Scripture. It can contribute to a general confusion about the Word of God itself, about what it teaches, about God Himself, and about the individual's relationship to God and others. But furthermore, it can contribute to an unquestioning acceptance of Local Church teachings over all others, including those of the Bible. This is coupled with Lee's claims about his own teachings:

These words are not merely a teaching but a strong testimony to what I have been practicing and experiencing for more than 35 years. I have been captured by this vision. By the mercy of the Lord I have never changed my way or my tone. And I have seen truly local churches raised up in many cities as an incontrovertible testimony that this is the way of the Lord.<sup>65</sup>

Do not think this is my teaching; it is the Lord's revelation. The Lord is going to recover it, and He is doing it now. We must have a change. Repent! Change your concept! Be buried! Enjoy Jesus as the Bridegroom!<sup>66</sup>

These high claims about Lee's teaching, plus the discouragement of serious study and thought about the Bible, lead to unswerving allegiance to the Local church. Such claims are a source of great difficulty in communicating with members, yet they are completely nonscriptural. Not only are these teachings wrong about God, salvation, and the Church, but also they are contrary to Scripture concerning prayer and the study of God's Word, and encourage the practice of accepting beliefs without questioning them, contrary to 1 Thessalonians 5:21. There is nothing that should not be tested in relation to any religious belief. We encourage members of the Local Church to be like the noble Bereans "received the word with all readiness of mind, and searched the scriptures daily, whether those things were so" (Acts 17:11). Here Luke shows that the Bereans were "noble" because they tested even the gospel Paul preached by the Scriptures. Certainly if the Bereans were "noble" for testing the preaching of Paul by Scripture, members and those interested in the Local Church should test the teachings of Witness Lee also.

### The Local Church Belief About Sin and Satan

When we approach the teachings of the Local Church about sin and Satan, we strike at the root of Lee's doctrine, and perhaps find the stem from which all his doctrines naturally flow. Lee begins with Paul's references to the "flesh" as the sinful nature in man and literalizes them so that sin actually is the flesh of man. We see the flow of Lee's thinking from this point in *The Economy of God*:

<sup>65</sup>Lee, *The Vision of the Church*, 10-11.

<sup>66</sup>Lee, *Christ vs. Religion*, 13.

Man's body as originally created by God was something very good, but it has now become the flesh. The body was pure, since it was created good, but when the body was corrupted by Satan, it became flesh.<sup>67</sup>

It was God's intention for this neutral, innocent man to take God into himself, that God and man, man and God, would be mingled together as one. . . . Another possibility, however, was that man would be induced to take the second tree, the source of death. As a consequence, man would then be mingled with the second tree. Oh, that our eyes might be opened to see that in the whole universe it is not a matter of ethics and of doing good, but a matter of either receiving God as life or Satan as death.<sup>68</sup>

The significance of Adam taking the fruit of the tree of knowledge was that he received Satan into himself. . . . Satan grew in Adam and became a part of him.<sup>69</sup>

The body simply became the residence of Sin, which is the embodiment of Satan. . . . This corrupted, transmuted body is called the "body of sin," and the "body of death," because this body became the very residence of Satan.<sup>70</sup>

[After the fall] Satan was joyful, boasting that he had succeeded in taking over man. But God, who was still outside of man, seemed to say: "I will also become incarnated. If Satan wrought himself into man, then let Me enter man and put man upon Myself."<sup>71</sup>

The body is something satanic and devilish, because Satan dwells in this body. All the lusts are in this corrupted body which is called the flesh. . . . Satan, from the time of the fall, dwells in man. This is what happened when man partook of the second tree. . . . Since Satan and man became one through the second tree, Satan is no longer outside of man, but in man.<sup>72</sup>

Christ is the embodiment of God, but sin is the embodiment of Satan. . . . Sin can be lord over us; hence, Sin must be the evil one, Satan. Through the fall, Satan came into man as Sin, and is ruling, damaging, corrupting and mastering him. In what part? Satan is in

<sup>67</sup>Lee, *The Economy of God*, 108.

<sup>68</sup>Ibid., 106-7.

<sup>69</sup>Ibid., 107.

<sup>70</sup>Ibid., 109.

<sup>71</sup>Ibid., 109.

<sup>72</sup>Ibid., 109.

the members of man's body.<sup>73</sup>

The problem for man, then, is sin. Sin, according to Lee, is Satan. Satan has come into man's flesh and masters him. In this way, Satan has taken complete control of man, and this control can only be broken by God coming into man in the same way Satan has come. We see the following step in Lee's teaching:

When the Lord Jesus incarnated Himself in flesh, He was "in the likeness of the flesh of sin." . . . When Christ was on the cross, He was a man "in the *likeness*" of the serpent. The serpent is Satan, the devil, the enemy of God, but when Christ was incarnated as a man, He had even the *likeness* of the sinful flesh, which is the likeness of Satan. . . . After God became a man and put that man with Satan within him upon Himself, He brought that man to the cross. Satan thought he had succeeded, but he only gave the Lord an easy way to put him to death. . . . By taking man, he [Satan] was caught and imprisoned in man. Subsequently, the Lord came and put man upon Himself to bring him to the cross. . . . At the same time, Satan within this fallen man was put to death also. . . . Christ brought man *with* Satan into death and the grave and brought man *without* Satan out of death and the grave. He left Satan buried in the grave. Now this resurrected man is one with Christ. . . . [T]hrough this resurrection man with God became one. By incarnation God came into man, and by resurrection man with God became one. Now God is in man's spirit.<sup>74</sup>

*Parallel Incarnations of God and Satan.* The line of thought here is clear: God first intended to create man for the purpose of manifesting Himself; Stan tempted man, so that man took of the tree of knowledge of good and evil; by so doing, man took Satan into himself, and so long as Satan is there, man cannot manifest God; God therefore purposed to put Himself into man, which He first accomplished through the incarnation in Christ (and later extends this incarnation to all believers); He then brought Christ to the cross so that the man and Satan died; finally He raised the man and Christ (Himself) from the dead, so that man could at last fully express God. Let us see how all of this stands in relation to Scripture.

Lee's teaching stems from his identification of sin with Satan. It is difficult to see whether Lee intends to personify sin in making it Satan, or to depersonify Satan by

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<sup>73</sup>Ibid., 108.

<sup>74</sup>Ibid., 109-112.

making him (it) sin. Whichever is the case, neither view is Biblical. The Bible shows a clear distinction between sin and Satan. Sin is revealed as the attitude or acts of disobedience and disloyalty to God and His Word (Romans 3:20; 4:15; 7:7-25, esp. 15-16). While sin is sometimes personified in Scripture, as if it had a will of its own, this can be easily seen to be figurative language. Satan, in contrast, is presented as a particular personal being, the fall angel (2 Corinthians 11:14-15; 1 Corinthians 5:5; James 4:7; 1 Peter 5:8). It is incorrect, therefore, to call sin Satan.

Yet this error leads to a more significant one. Because man became a sinner when he took of the forbidden fruit, Lee infers that he therefore took Satan into himself; his literal flesh then became the abode and embodiment of Satan. Man then became the manifestation of Satan. But again this is contrary to Scripture. It misinterprets Paul's use of *flesh* as a metaphor for the sinful nature of man, making the "flesh" itself actually evil. But Paul says no such thing of our literal flesh: instead he thinks of it as morally neutral and, because it is a creation of God, generally good. He sees the flesh simply as being under the bondage of sin (Romans 7:17, 18, 24) and therefore subject to corruption (Romans 8:18-23). This is what he calls the "natural body" (1 Corinthians 15:44). But flesh itself will become the "spiritual body" when it has been raised from the dead and has put on immortality (Luke 24:39; John 2:19-21; 1 Corinthians 15:44-54; Romans 8:11). The flesh is not evil and is not the manifestation of sin.

This error of believing flesh to be evil leads to another error, still more significant. Lee believes that Satan corrupted all men by becoming one with them, by being incarnated in them. It follows that he must believe that God can only save men by becoming one with them, which is what he wrote: "God . . . seemed to say: 'I will also become incarnated. If Satan wrought himself into man, then let Me enter man and put man upon Myself.'"<sup>75</sup> It follows logically from Lee's belief that Satan was incarnated in all men that God will become incarnated in all those who become Christians, and it follows that Lee would teach that the Church itself is God manifest in the flesh, as we saw before.

There are two parallel lines that run through Lee's teaching about God, man, salvation, the Church, sin, and Satan:

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<sup>75</sup>Ibid., 109.

First, sin and Satan are one and the same, Satan became incarnate in man at the fall, the flesh of all men is therefore Satan incarnate, the only means of redeeming men is for God to become incarnate in them instead of Satan, God first became incarnate in Christ, and through the Holy Spirit He becomes incarnate in the Church, the Body of Christ.

All of this is contrary to the Word of God, for it requires that God be changing, contradicting God's nature. It robs Christ of His uniqueness, contrary to John 3:16. It confuses sin with Satan and takes an unbiblical view of the physical body by calling it evil. It confuses saved men with God, contradicting Isaiah 43:10; Malachi 3:6; Numbers 23:19, and accepts the error proposed to Eve by Satan in Genesis 3:5.

#### **Conclusion**

Our conclusion can only be that the teachings of Witness Lee and the Local Church are heretical. We urge all Christians everywhere to pray for those in the Local Church and to help them see Lee's errors and return to the true gospel, the true Jesus, the true Spirit, and the pure Word of God, which is the lamp unto our feet. The teachings of the Local Church are false, and false teachings originate with Satan (John 8:44). Such teachings are darkness (Ephesians 6:12), and the Christian must not walk in darkness (1 John 1:5-7). Let us walk in the light as He is in the light (1 John 1:7).

#### **About the Author**

E. Calvin Beisner is associate professor of historical theology and social ethics at Knox Theological Seminary. He spent seven years as a researcher and writer on doctrinal and cult apologetics in the 1970s and early 1980s with the Christian Research Institute under the late Dr. Walter Martin and with CARIS (Christian Apologetics: Research and Information Service, the precursor to the present Answers in Action) in cooperation with cult apologists Bob and Gretchen Passantino. He contributed to Martin's *The New Cults* and wrote research reports published by CRI. Among his teaching responsibilities at Knox is a course on the theology of the cults. Among his eleven books is his *God in Three Persons* (Tyndale House, 1984), a study of the early history of the doctrine of the Trinity, and "*Jesus Only*" Churches (Zondervan, 1998), a refutation of the modalist theology of Oneness Pentecostalism, which is in some respects similar to that of Witness Lee and the Local Church. He earned a B.A. in interdisciplinary studies in religion and philosophy, *magna cum laude*, in 1978 from the University of Southern California, where his thesis on the early history of the doctrine of the Trinity was awarded highest honors; an M.A. in society with a specialization in economic ethics, *magna cum laude*, in 1983 from International College; and a Ph.D. in history in 2003 from the University of St. Andrews, in Scotland.