

APPENDIX

THE LOCAL CHURCH OF WITNESS LEE ★

It should be mentioned at the outset that the Local Church and its leader, Witness Lee, are different from the other groups we are dealing with in this book in that by and large the Local Church is composed of Christians who have been confused about major areas of doctrine and Christian practice. We must be sure to distinguish between the *doctrines and practices* of this group, which are not in harmony with the Bible, and the *members* of the Local Church, who are confused Christians. Technically speaking, the Local Church of Witness Lee cannot be called a non-Christian cult, but it has strong elements of cultism in some of its theology and practices.

HISTORY

The Local Church sect, under the direction and leadership of an elderly Chinese man, Witness Lee, has a 30-year history which began in the Orient and came to the Western world in the early sixties.

Lee began his religious career in China, under the direc-

★ Researched by Cal Belsner and Robert and Gretchen Passantino.

tion of the Chinese Christian mystic, Watchman Nee. Nee headed what he called "the Little Flock Movement," a Christian pietistic movement with roots starting in 1923 in China. During the time that Lee worked in the churches under Watchman Nee, he rose through the ranks to become the senior worker in Shanghai and the Philippines.¹

Lee was born in 1905 in the Chefoo region of China. He was raised under both Christian and Buddhist influences, and he made his public decision for Christ in 1925.² In 1927, Witness Lee began studying the magazine published by Watchman Nee's group, and later began preaching for the movement. For several years after that time, Lee presided at the "Little Flock" in Chefoo, until he was asked to move to Foochow to help Watchman Nee in the work there in 1946.³ According to the well-known Watchman Nee biographer, Angus Kinnear, Witness Lee—

...is energetic and authoritarian, thriving on large numbers, and has a flair for organizing people.... Witness Lee was careful, of course, to disown the concept of "organization"... But he exhorted everyone in the church to be submissive. "Do nothing without first asking," he urged. "Since the Fall, man does as he pleases. Here there is order. Here there is authority. The Church is a place of strict discipline."⁴

Some differences in doctrine and practice led to a split between Witness Lee and other leaders of the "Little Flock" after Watchman Nee was imprisoned. Lee finally struck out on his own, in the early 1950s, taking with him many of the Church members from Taiwan and the Philippines.

Witness Lee patterned his movement after the Little Flock movement plan used in China by Watchman Nee and his followers. The churches are based on the idea that the body of Christ can only be expressed in one gathering of believers in each city. This is often referred to as a "locality" doctrine, and is the trait by which the name "Local Church"

was acquired.

In 1962 Lee founded the first American Local Church, in Los Angeles. Since then the movement has grown steadily but not dramatically, until some membership was lost in 1978 in a split.* Some Local Church spokesmen have claimed worldwide membership of 60,000, but the more likely figure is closer to 20,000. We know that there are 7000 members in Taiwan and the Philippines, 5000 members in the United States, and an additional 8000 members in other parts of the world.

The founding of the Local Church in Los Angeles was called "a new move of the Lord,"⁵ and marked the Americanization of Lee's movement. For the first time, active recruitment was attempted with non-Chinese people. The individual churches call themselves after the name of the town in which they meet. The Church in Anaheim is considered the worldwide headquarters, and it is from there that Lee presides as leader. † Living Stream Ministries is the publishing arm of the movement and is also located in Anaheim.

Problems between the Local Church and other Christians were slight and scattered until 1974. In 1974, the churches following Lee began to proselytize much more openly than before, and to make their disdain of "organized Christianity" much more plain. Church members in the Southern California area began to disrupt other church's services, and to call other Christians members of "Babylon."⁶ These practices soon spread to the other Local Churches.

During the summer of 1974, Robert and Gretchen Passantino (researchers with Christian Research Institute and Christian Apologetics: Research and Information Service) researched the teachings and practices of the Local Church and lectured on their findings. Spiritual Counterfeits Project (in Berkeley, California) and indepen-

* More about the split later in this chapter.

† Although the churches claim no "leadership," "headquarters" or even "membership," such is not the case.

dent researcher Jack Sparks also produced material critical of the movement. In addition to the Passantino lectures, CARIS devoted several radio programs to discussions by the Passantinos on the Local Church. Jack Sparks's book *The Mindbenders* and Spiritual Counterfeit Project's book *The God-Men* later dealt with the erroneous teachings of the group.

Christian Research Institute published a booklet on the teachings of the Local Church and followed that up with a longer written treatment in 1978. All of these efforts by Christians to expose the errors of the movement were quickly attacked by members of the Local Church.

The debate erupted into the media in October 1977, when the Local Church published large advertisements in major newspapers throughout the country, challenging the allegations of Prof. Walter Martin, whose own allegations had been made in a lecture at Melodyland Christian Center on the first Sunday in October. The first advertisements spawned additional ones, until some observers estimated that over \$50,000 had been spent by the Local Church in advertising solely for the purpose of denying the claims of Martin, the Passantinos, Sparks, and SCP, CRI, and CARIS.

However, the media blitz of the Local Church was less than successful in assuring its members of the truth of Witness Lee's teachings. In September 1978, Max Rapoport, then reputedly the number two man in the Local Church (and considered by some as most likely to succeed Lee in the event of Lee's death), defected from the Local Church. This powerful blow to Lee's authority was followed by the defections of two other trusted leaders, Gene Ford and Sal Benoit. In leaving, the three church officials convinced quite a few local members to follow them. Sal Benoit, former leader of the Boston Local Church, declared, "You don't know how insidious it is until you come out, and then you are amazed you could have been in it and not seen through it."⁶

Today, although the sect has suffered severe damage from internal problems and from the loss of so many members through defection, the Local Church is still run personally by Lee, and still disseminates mountains of literature and tapes to its members.

CHURCH STRUCTURE

As we said earlier, one of the cardinal tenets of the Local Church is the idea that the body of Christ can only be expressed in one gathering of believers in each city. This "locality" doctrine caused problems when Watchman Nee first promoted it in a mild form in China,⁷ and the problems continue today under Witness Lee.

When the Local Church says that there is only one expression of the Body of Christ in any locality, it is not saying that there are many gatherings in one city that are harmonious. There is *no other meeting* of God's people in a city, in essence, except for the Local Church meeting. Lee states that his followers are the only ones in a given city who are representing the body of Christ. He says, "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 [the Local Church]."⁸

[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.⁹

... Thus, two cities, Babylon and Jerusalem, are opposed to each other. These two lines continue to the present day. The [Local] church is today's Jerusalem, and the Roman Catholic Church is today's Babel, Babylon... Only the pure, genuine local churches are in the line of Jerusalem today.¹⁰

What is this great Babylon? It is the mixture of Christianity. The great Babylon is a harlot mother with many harlot daughters. The Roman Catholic Church is the mother, and the denominations are the daughters.¹¹

...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 [the Local Church].¹²

Do not be cheated by today's Christianity. In Christianity there is a great deal of vain talk, especially regarding the church, but little of this talk is practical....If you do not have the local church, you do not have the church. God is expressed in Christ, Christ is expressed in the church,[†] and the church is expressed in the local churches.¹³

...Consider all the denominations. They only have division and confusion. Every denomination is a deviation from God's center lane. Some denominations are larger and others are smaller, some are farther away and some are closer, but none of them is in the center lane.¹⁴

Judaism is Satanic, Catholicism is demonic, and Protestantism is without Christ. They teach Christ's name, but He is not there. Do you really believe that today the living Lord Jesus is in the Protestant churches? Whether you believe it or not, the Lord says that He is outside the door.

We must all realize that there are four things on the earth today: Satanic Judaism, worldliness, demonic Catholicism, and Christless Protestantism....

...We must be saved from Satanic Judaism, demonic Catholicism, Christless Protestantism, and worldliness.¹⁵

This divisiveness is not the biblical teaching. The most obvious contradiction to localism found in the Bible is expressed in Romans 16:5. Paul, writing to the church in Rome,

[†] Further comments later about the Local Church doctrine that the church is becoming God.

asked the members there to greet the church which was meeting in the home of his friends, Aquila and Priscilla. Although they too lived in Rome, they evidently had a church that was meeting independently from the one Paul was writing to, since he specifically asked his readers to greet the two laborers. If Priscilla and Aquila had been members of that church, or even if their congregation had been in subjection to it, they would have been present at the reading of the letter. There would have been no need to send someone to them with Paul's greetings.¹⁶

The Local Church teaches that the ground of unity is localism, but Jesus said that the ground is Himself. Matthew 7:24-27 says:

Therefore everyone who hears these words of mine and puts them into practice is like a wise man who built his house on the rock. The rain came down, and the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house; yet it did not fall, because it had its foundation on the rock. But everyone who hears these words of mine and does not put them into practice is like a foolish man who built his house on sand. The rain came down, the streams rose, and the winds blew and beat against that house, and it fell with a great crash.

In other words, if our "ground" of faith is a living faith in Jesus Christ, we cannot fail. But if our "ground" of faith is anything else, even localism, we will not be able to last.

Matthew 16:16,18 confirms this by saying, "Simon Peter answered, 'You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.'" Jesus replied, "On this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it."

Lee would have us believe that the Church is only represented in one gathering in any given locality. In other words, since there is a Local Church of Witness Lee in Los Angeles, there cannot be any other church in Los Angeles.

Jesus refutes this in Matthew 18:15-20. He is talking about dealing with a problem between brothers. He tells how to solve the problem within the context of the church.

That the context of this entire section is the church is evident from verse 17, which says, "If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, treat him as you would a pagan or a tax collector." Then, in verses 18 and 19, Jesus gives the source of the authority for the judgment of verse 17. He states that the church has God's blessing from heaven for this judgment. Finally, Jesus defines just what the church is, so that concerned Christians can discern whether they have the authority to make such judgments. Jesus' definition of the church is clear (v. 20): "For where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them."

The great church historian of the last century, Philip Schaff, noted the form of the early Christian church in Volume 1 of his monumental *History of the Christian Church*.

We have no reason to suppose that it was at once fully organized and consolidated into one community. The Christians were scattered all over the immense city [of Rome], and held their devotional meetings in different localities. The Jewish and the Gentile converts may have formed distinct communities, or rather two sections of one Christian community.¹⁷

...In larger cities, as in Rome, the Christian community divided itself into several such assemblies at private houses, which, however, are always addressed in the epistles as a unit.¹⁸

Even Witness Lee's predecessor, Watchman Nee, did not go as far in his exclusivism as the Local Church does today. Nee declared:

It is not my desire here to attack denominational Christianity as wrong. I only say again that, for the Body of Christ to find effective local expression, the basis of fellowship must be a true one. And that basis is the life-relation of the members to their Lord and their willing submission to Him as Head. Nor am I pleading for those who will make a fresh sect of

something called "localism"—that is, the strict demarcation of churches by localities. For such a thing could easily happen. If what we are doing to-day in life becomes to-morrow a mere method, so that by its very character some of His own are excluded from it, may God have mercy upon us and break it up!¹⁹

AUTHORITARIAN RULE

Part of the Local Church structure concerns the authoritarian system rigidly administered by Lee. This authoritarianism produces negative psychological results in many Local Church members.

Local Church members are taught to put the church before anything else in their lives. As is common to most cults, denial of self and exaltation of the organization are rampant.

...The church should be our only interest. What is your interest today—school? business? family? My only interest is the church. We all need to be such "drunkards" for the church.²⁰

In the Local Church, members are kept so busy with church functions that they have almost no time for their families and, of course, no time to reflect on what they are taught. §

We all need to devote more time for contacting people. One evening out of the week should be used for your personal affairs, three nights for the church meetings, and the three remaining nights for contacting people. In addition to these three nights, I hope that you will use every lunch hour for this purpose. Make an appointment with people to have lunch or dinner with them.²¹

Of course, as the head of the Local Church, Witness Lee is regarded as the church's supreme commander. He is considered specially led by God and to be obeyed implicitly. Lee

§ See this topic in Chapter 1.

once described the proper attitude toward himself by Local Church members:

Let me tell you the secret to being solidly perfected to be a strong pillar for the Lord's move. Brothers like Benson Phillips and John So have been perfected because they have had no concepts of their own. Recently, Brother Benson declared strongly that he only knows to follow the ministry of Brother Lee. When John So stayed with us in Los Angeles, he knew nothing except to absorb everything of this ministry.... Even when they saw mistakes, they forgot about them, having no time to waste discussing them.²²

Lee expects his teachings to be followed as if they were from God Himself. He is confident that his years as a leader in God's organization have given him the necessary credentials to demand the obedience of his followers.

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.²³

Concerning the whole concept of the Local Church and Lee's direction of it, Lee said, "Do not think this is my teaching; it is the Lord's revelation."²⁴ We see, then, that the structure of the Local Church is completely authoritarian, with the wishes of the Church, determined by Witness Lee, the all-important goal toward which every Local Church member should strive.

LOCAL CHURCH MEMBERS

The Local Church attracts all types of individuals—simple, intellectual, emotional, depressed, joyful, etc. However, as diversified as those are who attach themselves to the movement, there is one basic psychological common

²³ Contrary to this claim, Lee contradicts himself numerous times in his writings.

denominator among the members: all seem to have some emotional need in their own lives that was not previously met. Often this need is simply a desire to feel needed and loved.

Through the many Local Church functions, this need often appears to be met. However, many people outside the group, especially the families of the ones involved, notice a very *unhealthy* change. Not only does it appear to them that the emotional need has not been met, but it appears that the member has been presented with a whole new set of problems. Several families have contacted us that had seriously contemplated obtaining professional therapy for these family members who were in the Local Church, since the members now seemed unable to cope with reality as they had been able to do before joining the Local Church.

From the outside, the Local Church appears very loving and considerate of its members. This is true. It is considerate of its own members, as long as those members are cooperative. However, we have already seen the Local Church attitude toward nonmembers, and the group's complete rejection of any other churches. However, if one tries to leave the Local Church, he is often told that God will punish him, that he has committed the unforgivable sin, or that he might die by God's judgment. The authors have on file testimonies from ex-Local Church members to whom these "divine threats" were made.

One of the characteristics of the cults that we discussed in Chapter 1 of this book is the inculcation of a paranoia in the individual members—a fear of persecution. This is true in the Local Church. Members are taught that all who are not in "the Lord's Recovery," another name for the Local Church, are "tools of Satan."

However, before we go further, we should point out one important difference between the Local Church and the other groups discussed in this book. At this time in its development, the majority of the members of the Local

Church are born-again Christians who have been swept into this group because they have not critically thought about what they have joined. Partly responsible for this phenomenon is the fact that most of the evangelism done by the Local Church is to people who are already Christians. Comparatively little is done to evangelize non-Christians.

The members' concentration on the Church sometimes even seems to obliterate their relationship to Christ. For example, when Gene Ford was still a leader in the Local Church, he gave his "testimony" twice in a small booklet which was published in response to the first CRI booklet exposing the group. These "testimonies" are *not* about Jesus: they are about the "the Church life." Each member talks about how empty his life was before he found the church, before he joined "the Lord's Recovery."

...let me tell you a little about myself. I graduated from a fundamental Presbyterian college and from the School of Theology of Drew University. I was a minister in the Methodist Church from 1949 to 1958. In 1958 I became an Episcopalian for doctrinal reasons and was ordained to the priesthood of that denomination.... Through the testimony of Father Dennis Bennett of Seattle, I was introduced into the charismatic revival in 1962 and was active in the so-called "Pentecostal Revival" for several years. At the end of 1968, through the gracious mercy of God, my eyes were opened to see the Lord's up-to-date move on the earth today. Since that time I have been fully given to the Lord's recovery.²⁵

Allow me to give a word of personal testimony.... I was not born yesterday. I am forty-six years old, with a certain amount of experience. I have a respectable amount of education. I have also spent a number of years in Christian work. Also, I am reasonably well acquainted with the Word of God. I saw the truth of the Lord's Recovery in 1968, and when I saw it, I took this way. Since being under the ministry of Witness Lee, I have enjoyed riches of Christ I never knew existed. Do you think I would be so foolish as to give up my future in the ministry if I had not found something worth giv-

ing it up for?²⁶
Paul's testimonies in the New Testament are a striking contrast to Local Church testimonies. In 1 Corinthians 2:2 he said, "For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified."

THE LOCAL CHURCH AND THE MIND

Local Church members have been taught not to be "in the mind" or to question anything they are taught, since to do so would be to act like the pagan world. The Local Church does not have any individualized Bible study. All study is exactly in harmony with what Witness Lee says. The Local Church "Bible studies" are actually studies of Local Church teachings, with the Bible used as backup material. Individuals studying the Bible have no need of any study books or even any thinking. Instead of using the intellect which God gave us to understand His Word, Lee tells us to "close our minds" when we approach the Bible.

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 [spiritually] feasting.²⁷

...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.²⁸

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 that you read.... It is better for us to close our mind!... 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 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.²⁸

The Bible completely condemns this practice. Matthew 6:7 declares, "And when you pray, do not keep on babbling like pagans, for they think they will be heard because of their many words." Second Timothy 2:15 exhorts all Christians, "Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a workman who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the word of truth." In Acts 17:11 the Bereans are commended for their diligent study: "Now the Bereans were of more noble character than the Thessalonians, for they received the message with great eagerness and examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true."

Unfortunately, members of the Local Church act as though *experience* is the test for truth and the way to sure knowledge. Reasoning, logic, and intellect have nothing to do with knowledge; if one's reason contradicts one's experience in the Local Church, his reason must be wrong.

The Local Church structure and organization fits the criteria of a cult in several respects. However, we should be careful to reiterate that many of the members of the Local Church are Christians who have been drawn away from their original Christian churches and into the false system of the Local Church. Let us now look at the doctrines of the Local Church, which also conform to the characteristics of cultic doctrines.

DOCTRINE

Several cardinal doctrines of the Bible have been changed by the Local Church. While claiming to be representing biblical Christianity, the Local Church at the same time con-

fuses the biblical doctrine of the Trinity, the nature of Jesus Christ, the nature of man, the biblical process of salvation, and the doctrine of the church. Although most of the present members of the Local Church are Christians (and, we believe, can have assurance of their faith), we must not forget that the doctrines they promulgate are not biblical and cannot in themselves draw a person to biblical faith. The majority of Local Church members are Christians, not because of the Local Church, but because they came to a saving knowledge of Christ *before* they became members of Witness Lee's movement.

The Trinity

The doctrine taught by the Local Church on the Trinity is known generally in church history as monarchianistic modalism. This doctrine arose in the third century A.D. as the result of the teachings of a man named Sabellius. Sabellius was not the only man who believed in a modalistic Trinity. Before him were Noetus, Praxeas, Epigonus, Cleomenes, Calistus, and Beryllus. Philip Schaff, noted church historian, observed that these forerunners of Sabellius were properly called Patripassians (meaning that they believed the Father suffered on the cross) rather than classic modalists. As he said, the Patripassians were embryonic modalists. Sabellius was the one who logically complicated the doctrine.

Although the Local Church does not believe everything that Sabellius taught in exactly the same way that Sabellius believed it, its understanding of the Trinity comes under the general category of what is known theologically as "Sabellianism" or modalism, which identifies the Person of the Father with the Person of the Son (and identifies the Person of the Holy Spirit with the Persons of the Father and the Son). The modalist generally describes God as one Nature and one individual Person who projects Himself in three distinct modes or aspects of His Being. Although a

modalist may say that he believes in three Persons, he has merely redefined the word "persons" and still has an "economic" Trinity rather than the genuine biblical Trinity.

There are two major types of modalists. There are the "logical" ones, who claim that God cannot be both Father and Son and Holy Spirit at the same time and who therefore say that God was first the Father, became the Son, and then became the Holy Spirit. The illogical modalists recognize that often the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are spoken of at the same time. These modalists try to say that the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit somehow exist at the same time and yet are each other.

Witness Lee and the Local Church teach *both* kinds of modalism. They teach that God was the Father, became the Son, and then became the Holy Spirit (and even that the Holy Spirit is becoming the Church—a topic we will deal with later). Witness Lee says:

Thus, the three Persons of the Trinity become the *three successive steps* in the process of God's economy.^{#30}

In the heavens, where man cannot see Him, 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.³¹

Likewise, the Father, Son, and Spirit are not three Gods, but *three stages of one God* for us to possess and enjoy.³²

The Father as the inexhaustible source of everything is embodied in the Son.... In the place where no man can approach Him (1 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

All emphasis is ours.

Spirit. The Father is the source, the Son is the expression, and the Spirit is the transmission, the communion. This is the trine God....³³

Such views are clearly unscriptural. They present a changing God, contrary to Malachi 3:6 ("I the Lord do not change") and Hebrews 13:8 ("Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever"). Even the Holy Spirit is called the "eternal Spirit" in Hebrews 9:14. The three Persons of the Trinity are eternally coexistent, and no one of them becomes another Person at any time.

Shortly after the first booklet by the Passantinos on the Local Church appeared, in which this error was pointed out, the Local Church tried to avoid the label of Sabellianism by indicating that Lee did not believe in successionism, but that he believed that all three Persons existed at the same time. The Local Church, however, did not change any of its previous statements, and Lee did not retract any of the quotes which were used by Christian researchers to prove that he believed in successionism. Both sets of statements continued to deny a real distinction among the Persons, teaching that the Father in His Person was the Person of the Son, and that the Person of the Son was the Person of the Holy Spirit.

Although He is one God, yet there is the matter of threefoldness, that is, the threefold Person—the Father, the Son, and the Spirit....³⁴

The Son who prays is the Father who listens....³⁵

...the Son is the Father, and the Son is also the Spirit. Otherwise, how could these three be one God?³⁶

The Son is the Father, and the Son is also the Spirit.³⁷

While Lee thus tried to escape the charge of Sabellianism (without denying his previous assertions), he merely affirmed his support of another modalistic heresy, Patripassianism, which taught (as Lee does) that the Father and the

Son are actually the same Person at the same time. (Few Patristians of the third and fourth centuries said much about the Spirit; one who did, Marcellus of Ancyra, taught the personal identity of the Spirit with the Father and Son, just as Lee does.)³⁸

Even in this form, Lee's teaching is clearly unscriptural. That the Father, the Son, and the Spirit are distinct Persons is obvious in Scripture. They have separate, though never conflicting, wills (Luke 22:42; 1 Corinthians 12:11). Jesus is sent by the Father, and He and the Father send the Spirit (John 17:8; 15:26; 16:7; 14:26; 20:21). The Father speaks to the Son employing the second-person pronoun "you": "You are my beloved Son..." (Luke 3:22). Jesus offered Himself to the Father through the Spirit (Hebrews 9:14). We should remember Jesus' words when He said that He came *not* to testify of Himself, but of Him who sent Him.

It is true that the Local Church and Witness Lee say that they somehow believe in the "three-and-one" God. This is their attempt to say that they believe as we do; yet they believe in the merging of the Persons of the Trinity, too. Gene Ford, a former Local Church spokesman, said, "We say unequivocally that God being three is one, and that God being one is three."³⁹ However, the word "unequivocal" means "admitting of no doubt or misunderstanding; clear." The Local Church's position on the "three and one" is anything but unequivocal. They have used the terms "one" and "three" without defining what they mean. God is one. One what? One Person? One God? One body? One principle? God is three. Three what? Mary Baker Eddy, the founder of Christian Science, believed that "God is three." Her problem was that she believed that "three" referred to the "three divine principles" of "love, truth, and life." The Local Church means by three "the matter of threefoldness, that is the threefold Person..."⁴⁰ Notice that they believe that the one Person has "threefoldness"—not that there are three eternal and distinct Persons, as the Bible teaches.

Fortunately, the great early-church theologian, Augustine, did not suffer from such ambiguity.

But when it is asked three what, then the great poverty from which our language suffers becomes apparent. But the formula "three persons" has been coined, not in order to give a complete explanation by means of it, but in order that we might not be obliged to remain silent.⁴¹

But on the other hand it could not say that they were not three somethings (*tria quaedam*), since by denying this Sabellius fell into heresy. From the Scriptures we learn with absolute certainty that which we must piously believe, and the eye of the mind perceives it with its unerring perception, namely, that there is the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, that the Son is not the same as the Father, and that the Holy Spirit is not the same as the Father and the Son. When asked to explain what these three were, it answered substances or persons.⁴²

The biblical Trinity may be defined as follows: within the nature of the one eternal God are three distinct Persons—the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. These three Persons are the one God.

How can we demonstrate from the Bible that the Trinity is not an "economic" Trinity but a Trinity of three eternally distinct Persons in the one essential Being? The easiest way is to demonstrate each part of our definition in order to substantiate the definition as a whole.

The Bible teaches that there is only one God. We can see this from countless verses, such as Isaiah 43:10, Deuteronomy 6:4, 1 Corinthians 8:4-6, and 1 Timothy 2:5.

Our second step in testing our definition is to see if the Bible teaches that there is an eternal Person called the Father who is distinct from the Son, who is called God. Second Peter 1:17 calls the Father "God" and clearly distinguishes Him from the Son. First Corinthians 8:6 emphatically states that there is "one God, the Father."

After we have determined that there is an eternal, distinct

Person called the Father, we must see if there is a Person who is called the Word or Son in Scripture who is also called God and is distinguished from the Father. John 1:1 states of the Son, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." Hebrews 1:8 quotes the Father speaking to the Son, showing a distinction between the two and yet calling the Son "God." Hebrews 13:8 says, "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever."

Finally, the Bible also teaches that there is an eternal and distinct Person called the Holy Spirit who is neither the Son nor the Father, but who is called God. Hebrews 9:14 talks of the eternal Spirit who worked in offering up Christ for our sins. In John 14:16 Jesus, speaking of the Holy Spirit, called him "another Comforter," which according to the original Greek word means another Person of the same nature or kind.

After careful study of these and many other passages, we can clearly see that there are three *distinct* Persons within the nature of the one God. We are forced by the Bible to the conclusion that these three distinct Persons are the one God. In Jesus' baptism, we see this distinctness illustrated: the Son came up from the water, the Holy Spirit descended as a dove, and the Father spoke from heaven.

Regardless of our reasoning, if the Bible teaches a certain doctrine, then as Christians we must believe it. We should discard our presuppositions and see what the Bible teaches. If the Bible teaches the doctrine of the Trinity as outlined above—that there are three eternally distinct Persons within the nature of the one God—then that is what we must believe as Christians. We cannot try to simplify this doctrine or try to make it easy to understand. We see what the Bible teaches and we believe it because it is the Word of God. We must never base our faith in God on experience alone, because experience can lie. We can only fully trust the Word of God.

Christ

The Local Church doctrine of Christ has been covered to some extent in the preceding section on the doctrine of the Trinity. We have seen that the Local Church has taken away Christ's unique existence as the beloved of the Father and the sender of the Comforter. He becomes, in Local Church theology, merely one of three aspects of the one Person of God.

However, the Local Church also misinterprets other aspects of Christ. They teach the error that, when the Word of God was incarnated, He "mingled." His two natures and became neither distinctly man nor distinctly God but a new nature, a mixture of God and man.

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.⁴³

With the Incarnation a dispensation began in which God and man, man and God were blended into one.⁴⁴

This doctrine can be answered by many passages of Scripture, but one is sufficient. The clearest teaching on the two natures of Christ, known as the hypostatic union, is found in Philipians 2:5-7:

Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus: Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness....

This clearly teaches that Christ was both man *and* God, not a strange mixture of the two. He was truly God, according to verse 6, and, since we know from Malachi 3:6 that God never changes, we know that when He emptied himself and

became a man, He could not have stopped possessing the nature of God. He assumed an *additional* nature—that of a human. The Christian church has consistently taught that Christ had two natures, human and divine, which were in submission to one Person, the eternal Logos or Word. These two natures were *never mingled*.

Romans 9:5, speaking of all the blessings that Israel has had, culminates by declaring that Christ was the greatest blessing they had ever received: "...from [the Jews] is traced the human ancestry of Christ, who is God over all, forever praised!"

Mankind

The Local Church doctrine of mankind is affected by the Church's doctrine of Christ, already discussed, and its doctrine of the church, which will be discussed later.

Man as He was Created

At the very beginning of the Scriptures, God is seen creating man as the center of the whole creation for the purpose of expressing Himself. In His economy God intended that man should express Himself as the center of His whole universe.⁴⁵

Lee also teaches that "flesh" is bad in itself. This is known as asceticism and is also related to "docetic gnosticism." (That ancient heresy taught that Jesus had no flesh, since flesh was bad; Jesus, being good, was pure spirit.) Lee says:

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.⁴⁶

Nowhere does Lee clarify what he means by "Flesh" as opposed to a "body," although he does refer to becoming flesh as obtaining a damaged, ruined body.

The Local Church doctrine of man (as it concerns man

after the fall in Eden) is closely affiliated with the Church's strange doctrine of sin (and Satan). For this reason, we will suspend discussion of the doctrine of man for a short space and deal with the doctrine of sin.

Sin

Sin, to the Local Church, is nothing more or less than "the embodiment of Satan." After we define the Local Church concept of sin, we will discuss its doctrine of the fall of man and how sin affected that event.

The body simply became the residence of Sin, which is the embodiment of Satan.... Sin is the embodiment of Satan and death is the issue or effect 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.⁴⁷

According to the Local Church, the original sin of man was *not* a matter of ethics or doing good, but was a matter of choosing to be mingled with either God or Satan. The tree of life represented God (see *The Economy of God*, pages 105-06) or Christ (who is nothing more than the embodiment of the Father). The tree of knowledge represented Satan, with the result of death from mingling Satan with man. Man chose the tree of knowledge (that is one reason knowledge is so disparaged in the group today) and thus became mingled with Satan, also known as Sin.

The significance of Adam taking the fruit of the tree of knowledge was that he received Satan into himself.... When he took the fruit of the tree of knowledge into himself...he received Satan, who then grew in him...thus, Satan grew in Adam and became a part of him.⁴⁸

This doctrine actually takes away from the personality of Satan and makes him little more than a force. The Bible teaches clearly that Satan is a person and is distinct from man, even fallen man. In Matthew 4:1-11 Jesus was tempted

by Satan (he is even called the tempter), and there is dialogue between them. If both were merely forces, they could not communicate at all. If Satan were a mere force, Jesus could not hold a conversation with him. This shows that Satan has independent personality, apart from any personality that he may demonstrate through a person who is Satan-possessed.

The distinction between Satan and fallen man is clearly shown in Revelation 20:10, where Satan is cast into the lake of fire, but not until verse 15 do we find that fallen men are also cast there. This succession of events necessitates a distinction between Satan and unsaved men.

Lee's insistence that the "body" is corrupt because the Bible calls the "flesh" corrupt displays his complete ignorance of the Bible's use of the literary device called metonymy. "Flesh" is used biblically to mean "sin." It does not necessarily bear any relationship to the actual body that man possesses, any more than calling a king the "Crown" (a common example of metonymy) makes the king become the crown.

Before we return to the doctrine of man and see the different kinds of man that the Local Church envisions, we should deal with the Local Church doctrine of salvation, since that doctrine directly affects the doctrine of man held by the group.

Salvation

The doctrine of salvation in Local Church theology is closely linked with its doctrines of man and of the church. Since we need to return to our discussion of man, we will discuss only one aspect of the doctrine of salvation at this point and will discuss the other aspects and its ultimate implications under the section on church theology.

Lee teaches that in the same way that man fell, he was saved. He fell when Satan mingled with him, and he was saved when God mingled Himself, first in Jesus and then

subsequently in each man who becomes a Christian. This goes into the doctrine of the defication of the church, or the church becoming God. Lee said:

[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.'⁴⁹

...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.... through 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.⁵⁰

Since Lee has identified sin with Satan, he has detracted from the biblical value of the cross. We know that sin is disobedience to God—not Satan. According to the Bible, God did *not* mingle Himself with man in Christ (see the previous section on the doctrine of Christ), and it was *not* Satan who was put to death on the cross.

Romans 5:9,10 shows us that Christ died instead to *justify* us and to *reconcile* us: "Since we have now been justified by his blood, how much more shall we be saved from God's wrath through Him!... We were reconciled to [God] through the death of His Son...." Acts 20:28 shows us that it was God Himself who made the perfect sacrifice and who was sacrificed on the cross for our benefit—not some impersonal divinity mingled with a humanness: "...the church... which he bought with His own blood...." Finally, Hebrews 9:14 shows us that Christ's sacrifice was made *to God*, and not as some trick to trap and kill Satan: "...Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself unblemished to God...." Hebrews 10:10 tells us that the

cross sanctifies us:—"by [God's] will we have been made holy through the sacrifice of the body of Jesus Christ once for all."

The Natures of Man

The Local Church teaches that man, at various times, has different natures. It teaches that the first man, before the fall, was "neutral," containing only human elements, but was created for the purpose of expressing God throughout the universe if he chose to "eat God" as represented in the tree of life. If that had happened, God would have immediately mingled with man and this new manifestation would have expressed God to the universe. However, man chose to "eat Satan" by taking the fruit of the tree of knowledge, and therefore man and Satan (also known as Sin) were mingled and became one. When Christ was incarnated, this "Sinner" clothed the divinity of Christ, allowing God to "trap" Satan and kill him (it) on the cross. This enabled God to return to His original plan of mingling Himself with man. Since that time, men who have come to Christ have lost their mingling with Satan and are now mingled with God in the same way. We are now ready to discuss Witness Lee's complicated and confusing doctrine of the church.

The Church

The Local Church teaches not only that it is the only true church, but also that the church is of a nature not usually taught in history. We shall see that it is not taught in the Bible, either!

Witness Lee teaches that the church, the Body of Christ, is Christ, and is becoming more and more "full" of God, to the point where eventually the church is God manifest in the flesh, fulfilling God's original intention to "work Himself into man."

Prior to the Incarnation God was God and man was man... The two were quite separate... With the incarnation a dispensation began in which God and man, man and God were blended into one... the very nature of God may be wrought into the nature of man... the life of the creature is blended with the life of the Creator... He invariably chooses the lot of each [Christian] with this goal in view—an increase of the divine content in our lives.⁵¹

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.⁵²

Speaking of the Church and Christ: "In number we are different, but in nature we are exactly the same."⁵³

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.⁵⁴

Then the day will come when the Triune God and the resurrected man will be one expression....⁵⁵

Eventually, God will become us.⁵⁶

The Bible says that man can never become God or a part of God. There is only one God, who is eternally the same. He will not become one in essence with us. Isaiah 43:10 declares, "You are my witnesses, declares the Lord, and my servant whom I have chosen, so that you may know and believe me and understand that I am he. Before me no god was formed, nor will there be one after me."

CONCLUSION

We have seen that Witness Lee and the Local Church teach error concerning the doctrines of God, Christ, man, sin, salvation, and the church. Witness Lee is *not* a sound Bible teacher, and the Local Church is cultic in many ways, both doctrinally and in structure, even though many of its members are Christians. One cannot be truly obedient to

APPENDIX NOTES

God and join or remain in the Local Church or support the teachings we have critically analyzed here.

The fact that many immature Christians have been deceived into joining this group does not mean that the Local Church is close to orthodoxy, but only that it has become a clever counterfeit of the truth. Although we cannot and will not pass judgment on the souls of Local Church members, we can pass judgment on a number of Local Church teachings, which are not biblical. The Book of Acts describes the type of situation we find in the Local Church: "Even from your own number men will arise and distort the truth in order to draw away disciples after them" (Acts 20:30).

1. Angus Kinnear, *Against the Tide* (Fort Washington, PA: Christian Literature Crusade, 1973), p. xiv.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 88.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 130.
4. *Ibid.*, pp. 132-33.
5. Witness Lee, *The All-Inclusive Christ* (Anaheim: Stream Publishers, 1969), p. 5.
6. John Dart, "Cult Defector Warns Parents," in *Los Angeles Times*, December 11, 1978.
7. Kinnear, op. cit., pp. viii, ix.
8. *Recovery Version of Revelation* (Stream Publishers, n.d.), p. 17.
9. *Satan's Strategy Against the Church* (Stream Publishers, 1977), pp. 6, 8.
10. *Life-Study of Revelation* (Stream Publishers, 1977), p. 608 (Message Fifty-three).
11. *The Stream Magazine*, Vol. 7, no. 4, November 1, 1969, p. 19.
12. *Recovery Version of Revelation*, op. cit., p. 17.
13. *Young People's Training, Message Eight* (Stream Publishers, n.d.), p. 103.
14. *Young People's Training, Message Two* (Stream Publishers, n.d.), p. 24.
15. *The Stream Magazine*, Vol. 14, no. 4, November 1976, p. 12.
16. See A.T. Robertson, *Word Pictures in the New Testament: Romans* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1931), p. 426.
17. Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, n.d.), p. 173.
18. *Ibid.*, p. 220.
19. Watchman Nee, *What Shall This Man Do?* (Christian Literature Crusade, n.d.), pp. 133, 134.
20. Lee, *Life-Study of Genesis, Message Eighty-nine* (Stream Publishers, 1977), p. 1157.
21. Lee, *Young People's Training, Message Four* (Stream Publishers, n.d.), p. 51.
22. Lee, *Life-Study of Genesis, Message Eighty-Eight* (Stream Publishers, n.d.), pp. 1144-45.
23. Lee, *The Vision of the Church* (Stream Publishers), p. 10.
24. Lee, *Christ Versus Religion* (Stream Publishers), p. 13.
25. Gene Ford, *A Reply to the Tract Against Witness Lee and the Local Church* (Stream Publishers, 1977), p. 2.
26. *Ibid.*, p. 40.
27. Lee, *Christ versus Religion*, op. cit., pp. 14-15.
28. Lee, *A Time with the Lord* (Stream Publishers), pp. 10, 11.
29. Lee, *Pray-Reading the Word* (Stream Publishers), pp. 8-12.
30. Lee, *The Economy of God* (Stream Publishers), p. 10.
31. Lee, *Concerning the Triune God* (Stream Publishers), pp. 8-9.
32. *Ibid.*, p. 31.

33. *The Economy of God*, op. cit., p. 111; Witness Lee, *The All-Inclusive Spirit of Christ* (Stream Publishers), pp. 4, 6, 8.
34. Lee, *Concerning the Triune God* (Stream Publishers), p. 11.
35. *Ibid.*, p. 25.
36. *Ibid.*, p. 23.
37. *Ibid.*, p. 17.
38. See Louis Berkhof, *The History of Christian Doctrines* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth Trust, 1975), pp. 78-79.
39. *A Reply to the Tract Against Witness Lee and the Local Church*, op. cit., p. 16.
40. *Concerning the Triune God*, op. cit., p. 11.
41. Augustine, *The Trinity*, Book V, pages 18-88.
42. Augustine, *The Trinity*, Book VIII, page 233.
43. *The Economy of God*, op. cit., p. 11.
44. Lee, *The God of Resurrection* (Stream Publishers), p. 4.
45. *The Economy of God*, op. cit., p. 105.
46. *The Economy of God*, op. cit., p. 108.
47. *Ibid.*, p. 109.
48. *Ibid.*, p. 107.
49. *Ibid.*, p. 109.
50. *Ibid.*, pp. 109-12.
51. *The God of Resurrection*, op. cit., pp. 12-16.
52. Lee, *The Practical Expression of the Church* (Stream Publishers), p. 43.
53. Lee, *The All-Inclusive Christ*, op. cit., p. 103.
54. *Life-Study in Matthew, Message One* (Stream Publishers), p. 3.
55. *The Economy of God*, op. cit., p. 113.
56. Lee, *Life-Study in Genesis, Message Ten*, pp. 121-22.

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