

US Local Church's Links with Eastern Orthodoxy

Most current “Local Church” members are unaware of the past links between the “Local Church” and Eastern Orthodoxy in the US. Given Witness Lee’s belated adoption of Orthodoxy’s “deification” [i.e., “man becomes God”] and LSM’s defense of this dogma via its *Affirmation & Critique* journal, it is interesting to trace the “intersecting paths” of the “Local Church” and Eastern Orthodoxy in the US.

Consider the following entry from Wikipedia on the *Evangelical Orthodox Church* (EOC):

“The [US] Evangelical Orthodox Church (EOC) [traces]...its origins in the Jesus People movement, particularly as an amalgam of Jack Sparks' 'Christian World Liberation Front' and a component of **Watchman Nee's 'Local Church,'** that came to embrace an Eastern tradition of Christianity.” [Wikipedia]

What's the Back Story?

This suggests one source of the Evangelical Orthodox Church’s membership was the “Local Church,” of Watchman Nee and his protégé, Witness Lee. This raises the question—what is the back story? How did “a component of Watchman Nee’s 'Local Church'” come “to embrace an Eastern tradition of Christianity,” represented by the Evangelical Orthodox Church (EOC)? The present author does not have the answer; our purpose is to point out a few facts in the hope that others can add their insights.

The quote above explicitly mentions “*Watchman Nee's 'Local Church;*” in a US context that likely refers to the Local Church movement of W. Lee. It also names LSM’s nemesis, Jack Sparks, author of *The Mind-Benders: A Look at Current Cults* (Thomas Nelson, 1977). There are other names too.

The path of another EOC principal, **Peter (‘Pete’) E. Gillquist** is recounted by Wikipedia:

“The *Campus Crusade* missionary Peter E. Gillquist (1938-2012)...established in 1973 a network of house churches throughout the US, aiming to restore a primitive form of Christianity. Peter Gillquist, Jack Sparks (1928-2009), Jon Braun, & J.R. Ballew stood in a circle and self-ordained each other while creating an entity called the New Covenant Apostolic Order (NCAO).”

Note the major players behind the New Covenant Apostolic Order (NCAO) which morphed into EOC, and later still into the Antiochian Orthodox Christian [AOC]--Peter Gillquist (1938-2012), Jack Sparks (1928-2010), Jon Braun, and J.R. Ballew. These people desired to ‘recover’ the early church; their quest led them on a particular trajectory which intersected with the ‘Local Church’:

“Researching the historical basis of the Christian faith, Gillquist and his colleagues found sources for this restoration in the writings of the early Church Fathers. This led the group to practice a more liturgical form of worship than in their previous evangelical background. In 1977, first contact with the Eastern Orthodox Church was initiated through...(Karl) John Bartke, who introduced them to Fr. Alexander Schmemmann, Dean of St. Vladimir’s Orthodox Theological Seminary. In 1979, the Evangelical Orthodox Church (EOC) was organized...The belief [in]... apostolic succession led most members of the EOC to join the Antiochian Orthodox Christian [AOC] Archdiocese of North America in 1987...” [Wikipedia]

Tracing common Roots—the Jesus People & Campus Crusade

Let’s try tracing the roots of this US branch of the Orthodox Church [NCAO, EOC & AOC] and their interactions with the “Local Church” of W. Nee & W. Lee.

1. Both the Local Church & the ‘Evangelical Orthodox Church’ had roots in the “Jesus Movement”

Witness Lee (*Lǐ Chángshòu*, 1905-97) arrived on the US West coast in 1962 during the “Jesus People Movement.” Some “Jesus People” converts joined the Local Church. Witness Lee liked to point out “Big George” as an example; recounting that he first attended meetings wearing a blanket and sandals (or was it bare feet?).

2. Leaders of both the Local Church & the EOC Church came out of Campus Crusade.

According to reports heard over the years, some current ‘Local Church’ leaders (e.g. Dan Towle & others?) were engaged in Christian work on US campuses in the late 1960s—with para-church organizations like *Campus Crusade for Christ* (CCC) [“*Campus Cru*”]. Significantly, during that same era (~1966-68), Peter Gillquist, Jack Sparks, Jon Braun, etc worked with Campus Crusade [CCC]. Some of these CCC workers’ trajectory led them into Orthodoxy. Reportedly, during that era, some of these CCC workers were colleagues &/or associates of current LSM leaders, like Dan Towle & Co. [Exact details are unclear; can anyone supply more details on the *Campus Crusade* years?]

Campus Crusade Workers’ Quest for the Church

God was stirring among Campus Crusade workers producing a quest for the Church. For Dan Towle (& others) this led to the Local Church. Others’ path was different. Jon Braun recounts: “The next summer (1968?) Jon Braun resigned from Crusade staff, as did Dick Ballew, Pete Gillquist, Gordon Walker...& scores of others within the next few months. This startled the UCSB group. At the Crusade conferences held in Arrowhead Springs [CCC Conf. Center in the San Bernardino Mts.] that summer, several students drove up the mountain...each evening to meet with Jon [Braun] at his home. There they heard about the grace of God and Jon's concept of house churches, based on the model of communities in the New Testament. This was the passion of those who had resigned from Campus Crusade.”

Braun recalls “a conference at UCLA held over Christmas break [Dec. 1968?). At this gathering students and ex-Crusade staff from all over the West Coast came to hear Jon Braun, Dick Ballew, Pete Gillquist & others... Speaker after speaker urged a return to the life and practices of the New Testament Church. They promised exciting new alternatives to the ‘establishment’ and boring denominational order of Christendom.”

Their desire was echoed in other “seekers” who flocked to hear Witness Lee & check out the “Local Church life.” Again Jon Braun writes: “We began the process of examining our purposes, our motives and our goals. *We became enthralled with the writings of Watchman Nee who had fomented an alternate-church movement in China. We tried to copy the methods he & his followers espoused.* Eager to be involved, others on this same journey moved to Santa Barbara [CA]. Jon & Mary Ellen Braun, Dick & Sylvia Ballew, & many other families arrived along with numerous single people. Christians came from as far away as Atlanta, but mostly from various points in California. The goal was to experience together what we thought to be the New Testament Church. It was based on a model of free expression along with strong leadership.” [Jon Braun]

That influx of “seekers” was matched within the “Local Church movement.” Evidently the two movements tapped into the same move of the Holy Spirit; both coalesced in California (Santa Barbara vs. LA/Anaheim). Both movements sought to re-discover the ‘original church’ and both drew inspiration from Watchman Nee’s writings.

The link with Watchman Nee is evident in the Wikipedia entry saying: “The *Evangelical Orthodox Church* [traces]...its origins in the Jesus People movement, particularly as an amalgam of Jack Sparks’

'Christian World Liberation Front' and a component of *Watchman Nee's 'Local Church'...*
[Wikipedia]

It would be unsurprising if some EOC principals interacted with the Local Church in the early days. Braun says, "*We tried to copy the methods [Watchman Nee] & his followers espoused.*" And that statement also describes the endeavor of Local Church members in that era. One would expect some interaction between the two groups. [Again, we don't have information; maybe some readers do.]

We ask:

- Did any of these people--Peter Gillquist, Jack Sparks, Jon Braun, etc.—attend Witness Lee's conferences or join in meetings of the "Local Church" during these early years?
- If they did attend Witness Lee's conferences &/or Local Church meetings (as seems likely) were Peter Gillquist, Jack Sparks, Jon Braun, etc considered as "good material," "potential leaders" or "effective workers" who ought to "see the vision" & joined or remained in the Local Church?
- Were there any feelings of rivalry/competition between the Local Church and the EOC?
- Were Peter Gillquist, Jack Sparks, Jon Braun & Co., responsible for leading some Christians *out of the Local Churches* and into Eastern Orthodoxy? This possibility is suggested by the statement: "*The Evangelical Orthodox Church [traces]...its origins in...a component of Watchman Nee's 'Local Church'...*"
- Did Local Church leaders (at the time) feel some potential members of the Local Church were "diverted" from the Local Church into (what became) the Evangelical Orthodox Church (EOC)?

It seems likely that there were feelings of rivalry/competition between these two "trajectories," which resembled each other (despite their differences). Perhaps this rivalry produced "bad blood" on both sides—as evidenced (in part) by Jack Sparks' book: "*The Mind-Benders*," vilifying the Local Church. If Jack Sparks' "*The Mind-Benders*" was motivated (in part, perhaps) by jealousy &/or competition, those same feelings were likely echoed in some corresponding sectors of the Local Church movement.

The "New Covenant Apostolic Order" (NCAO) 1973

This endeavor to restore the "original historical church," took a path other than the "Local Church movement." Jon Braun tells us that "In 1973, Jon [Braun] & Dick [Ballew] announced a meeting... These men, who saw the need for a more historically-based approach...announced that we were going to be a full-fledged Church...This is really where we stopped being a 'fellowship,' & began to be a Church," Jon [Braun] recalls. At that time, the leaders, "Peter Gillquist, Jack Sparks, Jon Braun, & J.R. Ballew stood in a circle and self-ordained each other while creating an entity called the New Covenant Apostolic Order (NCAO)." Jon Braun continues, "our leaders along with Peter Gillquist, Jack Sparks, Gordon Walker, Ken Berven & Ray Nethery, pulled together to become the New Covenant Apostolic Order (NCAO)." No doubt the NCAO's basis was the Bible plus the Church Fathers, with the liturgy & practices of Orthodoxy—infant baptism, the Eucharist, altar, robes & icons, plus the deification dogma. LSM's Local Church leaders would also question their "self-ordination."

From "Apostolic Order" to "Evangelical Orthodox Church" (EOC) 1979

Jon Braun continues the saga, saying, "By 1979, being part of an "[Apostolic] Order" was not working ...We swallowed hard & became a denomination in Feb., 1979: the 'Evangelical Orthodox Church (EOC).' This bold move received wide newspaper coverage, including a piece in *The New York Times*. The NCAO days were over."

From "Evangelical Orthodox Church" to "Antiochian Orthodox Church" 1987

To complete the story, in 1987, the 17 parishes and about 2,000 people of the Evangelical Orthodox Church were received into the Antiochian Archdiocese of the Syrian Orthodox Church of N. America. His 2012 memorial recalls that “Peter Gillquist...infused evangelical fervor into the Antiochian Orthodox Church beginning in 1987, when he *led some 2,000 of his Protestant followers into Eastern Orthodoxy.*” “If he had not come into the church and brought those people in, our church would have atrophied to the point of near extinction,” recalls [North Park University professor Brad] Nassif. “Gillquist came along at the right moment in American Orthodox history,” Dr. Nassif said. Weston Gentry observed that “Gillquist...served as a critical bridge for relations between evangelicals and Orthodox, having spent the majority of his career on staff with Campus Crusade for Christ before his conversion [‘conversion’ to the Orthodox Church].” [Weston Gentry, “*Eastern Orthodox Lose Two Evangelical Bridges – Resignation of Metropolitan Jonah Follows Death of Peter Gillquist,*” Christianity Today, (originally posted 8/27/2012)]

Witness Lee lambastes the “return to the historic church.”

It is against this background of a rival restoration movement trending towards Eastern Orthodoxy, plus a history of altercations with the Local Church, that we ought to read Witness Lee’s denunciation of those who “return to the so-called historic church.” Witness Lee’s statements were not made in a vacuum; they were made against the backdrop of a “rival stream” or “competing movement,” based in California. Addressing the perceived threat posed by these “opposers,” Witness Lee declared:

“Some of the opposers have said that we should return to the so-called historic church and follow the traditional practices. Recently, *a group of so-called fundamental Christians* even published an article *appealing to Christians to return to the historic church.* But the historic church has adopted many regulations that are absolutely unscriptural, and it has made many decisions regarding things not found in the Bible.” [W. Lee, *Life-Study of Matt.*, Ch. 45, Sect. 1]

Given the time frame of the *Life-Study of Matthew* (late 1970s) we are almost certain that these “opposers” calling for a “return to the historic church” were the “New Covenant Apostolic Order” [NCAO] which would morph into “Evangelical Orthodox Church” [EOC] and then the Antiochian Orthodox Church [AOC]. The “group of so-called fundamental Christians” included Peter Gillquist, Jon Braun, Jack Sparks, Gordon Walker, Ken Berven & Ray Nethery, among others. Surely, as genuine believers, they ought not to be denigrated as “*so-called fundamental Christians.*”

Witness Lee continued by contending:

“We are accused of not following the historic church, that is, of not following the traditions. We answer that we must come back to the pure Word and not care for the traditions of the historic church. In the various councils and creeds of the historic church, there is no mention of the 7 Spirits. This means that if we follow the traditional concept of the Trinity, we shall neglect the 7 Spirits. Our critics say, ‘You don’t honor the ancient councils which formulated the creeds regarding the Trinity. ‘We respond, ‘We don’t follow the creeds. They are man’s teaching and tradition. Instead, we come back to the pure Word. In the Bible we find something more than what is included in the creeds...’ [There is a] gap between the Lord’s recovery and traditional Christianity. This gap exists because the recovery is based wholly upon the pure Word, whereas Christianity is filled with traditions.” [W. Lee, *Life-Study of Matt.*, Ch. 45, Sect. 1]

That was Then, This is Now

At that time, Witness Lee asserted that “we must come back to the pure Word and not care for the traditions of the historic church.” Plus he stated ‘We don’t follow the creeds. They are man’s teaching

and tradition. Instead, we come back to the pure Word.” In contrast to Peter Gillquist, Jon Braun & Jack Sparks’ “Apostolic Order”/”Evangelical/Antiochian Orthodox Church,” Witness Lee asserted there is a “gap between the Lord’s recovery and traditional Christianity.” Similar statements can be found; for example: “We in the Lord’s recovery *do not treasure theology, tradition, or the councils.* We honor, respect, and treasure the holy Word.” [W. Lee, *Life-Study of 1 & 2 Tim...*, Ch. 18, Sect. 2]

Witness Lee Appeals to the Creeds & Church Fathers

Fast forward a decade or so and we find Witness Lee appealing to the creeds and Church Fathers to support his deification dogma. In promoting deification and responding to critiques of this dogma, W. Lee and LSM do not mainly appeal to Scripture, but rather to later, post-apostolic writings of the church fathers. As W. Lee writes, “The high truth...that man might become God...was *discovered by the church fathers in the second century.*” [W. Lee, *Life-Study of 1 & 2 Chron...*, Ch. 26, Sect. 1, (emphasis added)] Who are these “church fathers”? LSM refers to Justin Martyr (c. 100-165 AD) as “one of the earliest witnesses,” supporting deification. He is followed by Irenaeus (early 2nd century to 202 AD), Clement of Alexandria (150--215), Athanasius (296--373), Origen (184/185–253/254), Hippolytus (170–235) and the Cappadocians—Basil the Great (329/330–379), Gregory of Nyssa (c. 335–c. 395), & Gregory of Nazianzus (c. 329–389/390). These are notable “church fathers” from the 2nd to 4th centuries; however, they are not first-century apostles. Moreover their writings do not constitute Scripture, neither are they on par with the Bible. It is hypocritical of Witness Lee, having lambasted the church Fathers’ creeds & traditions, to then cite them as vindication of his deification dogma. Earlier he denounced “opposers” who called for a “return to the historic church.” Yet, on this point—deification—W. Lee himself has “returned to the historic church”! Moreover, by adopting Orthodoxy’s deification dogma, Witness Lee has “followed the footsteps” of his “opposers” who initiated the “Apostolic Order”/”Evangelical/Antiochian Orthodox Church”--Peter Gillquist, Jon Braun & Jack Sparks.

In view of the above, we ask:

- How much of Witness Lee’s denunciation of Gillquist, Braun & Sparks’ “return to the traditional church” was merely rhetorical posturing, which served its particular purpose at the time?
- In propounding his deification doctrine has not Witness Lee “*returned to the historic church*”?
- When LSM’s Kerry Robichaux declares deification ‘an essential,’ “We in the local churches hold that man may become God in God’s salvation,” [*Truth Concerning the Ultimate Goal of God’s Economy*, Ch. 1, St. 10] isn’t he taking the same stand as the “Antiochian Orthodox Church”?
- When LSM’s K. Robichaux says “We are also confirmed by the ancient testimony of the church,” isn’t he appealing to the “historic church,” just like Peter Gillquist, Jon Braun & Jack Sparks?

Nigel Tomes,
Toronto, CANADA
April, 2016

Sources:

<https://www.stathanasius.org/about/our-history/>

<http://www.antiochian.org/node/22274>

[http://www.ancientfaith.com/podcasts/features/fr. jack_sparks - memory eternal](http://www.ancientfaith.com/podcasts/features/fr._jack_sparks_-_memory_eternal)

http://www.virtual-memorials.com/main.php?action=view&mem_id=18884

<http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2012/september/eastern-orthodox-lose-two-evangelical-bridges.html>