

April 25, 2003

Living Stream Joins ECPA

When the Evangelical Christian Publishers Association (ECPA) welcomed Living Stream Ministry (LSM) into its voting membership in July of 2002, it might not have anticipated the reaction among theologians and doctrinal apologists. But a reaction has occurred.

Why? Because LSM is the publishing arm of the “Local Church,” a sect long led by the late Witness Lee, whose writings contained many statements that some theologians and apologists suspect of being unorthodox or even heretical.

ECPA is not unique among evangelical trade associations that have welcomed LSM. The publisher has been a member of the Christian Booksellers Association (CBA) for years, and it recently joined the Evangelical Christian Credit Union (ECCU) as well. All of these associations have statements of faith, and LSM’s leaders have satisfied the associations’ doctrinal membership requirements by affirming those statements.

So why the fuss?

Because some critics of the Local Church think that, no matter how sincere LSM’s leaders might be in signing the associations’ doctrinal statements, those statements are incompatible with express statements by Witness Lee included in books that LSM publishes and that its leaders have never repudiated as mistaken.

Take, for example, ECPA’s Statement of Faith, which affirms, among other things, that “there is only one God, eternally existent in three persons: Father, Son and Holy Spirit.”¹ It may not be very sophisticated, but it is an attempt to express ECPA’s commitment to the historic, orthodox doctrine of the Trinity expressed, for example, in the Nicene Creed and the Athanasian Creed.

LSM’s own Statement of Faith affirms “that God is eternally one and also eternally the Father, the Son, and the Spirit, the three being distinct but not separate.”² Sounds like the two fit together nicely.

But this is where theologians and historians of theology might raise an eyebrow and say, “Not so fast! Let’s look a little more closely.”

At the Council of Nicaea, in A.D. 325, one group arrived with a draft creed that said, “We believe in One God, the Father Almighty; and in the Lord Jesus Christ, his Son, who was begotten of him before all ages, the Divine Logos, through whom all things were made . . . And in the Holy Ghost.”³ Sound okay?

It didn’t to the orthodox theologians at Nicaea, because although what it said was true as far as it went, it evaded the crucial issue in debate: were the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit all one God? That draft creed had been submitted by the Arians, who taught that in whatever sense Christ might properly be called god He was not the same God as was the Father.

The orthodox knew that what the Arians’ creed *didn’t* say was more important than what it *did*. Athanasius reported that, during later debate in the Council, the Arians actually winked back and forth with each other, making hand signals and facial gestures, letting each other know of

¹Bylaws of Evangelical Christian Publishers Association, Article XI, “Statement of Faith.”

²*Statement of Faith* of Living Stream Ministry, at <http://www.livingstream.com/faith.html> on April 19, 2003.

³Cited in E. Calvin Beisner, *God in Three Persons* (Wheaton: Tyndale House, 1984), 85-6.

different ways they could interpret phrases of a creed submitted by Eusebius of Caesarea (better known as author of the first major *Ecclesiastical History*), so that they could retain their belief that Christ was less than the one true God and yet sign the creed and so retain their offices in the church. The problem was solved when the orthodox introduced into Eusebius's draft one word on which the Arians couldn't equivocate: *homoousios*, "of one substance." When it became clear that *homoousios* was in to stay, the Arians walked out.

So, what's wrong with LSM's saying "that God is eternally one and also eternally the Father, the Son, and the Spirit, the three being distinct but not separate"? Look closely. Notice that it doesn't say *what* the three are as "distinct"? What are the Father, the Son, and the Spirit? Cabbages? Angels? Compact discs?

Extensive reading in Witness Lee's writings discovers considerable hesitation to affirm what Christianity has affirmed through the ages: that the Father, the Son, and the Spirit, though they are one God, are distinct *Persons*. Not that Lee never calls them Persons; he does. In *The Economy of God*, he wrote of "the three Persons of the Trinity . . ." Surely that should be reassuring, shouldn't it?

The trouble is what he went on to say: "the three Persons of the Trinity become the three successive steps in the process of God's economy."⁴ A page or two before, he had written, "In the heavens . . . 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 is in the Son, and the Son became the Spirit."⁵ Farther along he wrote, "the Father, Son, and Spirit are . . . three stages of one God."⁶ And in *Concerning the Triune God*, Lee wrote, "The Son is the Father, and the Son is also the Holy Spirit"; "The Lord Jesus is the Holy Spirit"; "the Son is the Father, and the Son is also the Holy Spirit. Otherwise, how could there be one God?"; and "The Son who prays is the Father who listens."⁷

For orthodox theologians, such statements imply that whatever Lee might have meant by "the three Persons of the Trinity," he can hardly have meant by *Persons* what orthodox Trinitarianism means.

Thus, for example, Dr. H. Wayne House, distinguished professor of Biblical studies and apologetics at Faith Seminary in Tacoma, Washington, asked to comment on those quotations for this article, opined that they "express a modalistic view of God." Of Lee's statements, "The Son who prays is the Father who listens" and "The Son is the Father, and the Son is also the Spirit," he said that they reject "the distinction between the Father and Son as distinct Persons" and "the historic creedal and confessional views of the church" in, e.g., the Nicene and Athanasian creeds.⁸

House is not alone in this opinion. Dr. Alan W. Gomes, chairman of the department of systematic theology at Talbot School of Theology in La Mirada, California, and general editor of the multi-volume ZONDERVAN GUIDE TO CULTS AND RELIGIOUS MOVEMENTS, asked for his opinion whether these statements were consistent with the historic, orthodox doctrine of the

⁴Witness Lee, *The Economy of God* (Los Angeles, Stream, 1968), 10.

⁵Ibid., 8-9.

⁶Ibid., 31.

⁷Witness Lee, *Concerning the Triune God* (Los Angeles: Stream, n.d.), 17, 20, 23, 25.

⁸E-mail from H. Wayne House to E. Calvin Beisner, Monday, April 21, 2003, 10:39 a.m.

Trinity as defined, e.g. in the Nicene Creed, the Athanasian Creed, the Augsburg Confession, and the Westminster Confession, replied, “In Trinitarian theology [as defined in those creeds], Father, Son, and Spirit are three eternal *persons*, who *are* the one God. Though it is not clear to me what is intended by the word *stages*, a *stage* is certainly not a person. If *stages* means ‘stages in the revelation of God’s plan,’ then such an understanding certainly conduces toward modalism.”

In response to Lee’s statement, “In the heavens . . . God is the Father; when He is expressed among men, He is the Son; and when He comes into men, He is the Spirit,” Gomes opined, “This quote certainly admits most naturally of a modalistic interpretation. [In it] Father, Son, and Spirit refer to the way in which God expresses himself *ad extra*, i.e., to his creation outside of himself.”⁹

Dr. Ronald Nash, professor of philosophy at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Kentucky, agreed, saying, “It is my strong conviction that the quotes are totally incompatible with historic Christianity and are heretical.”¹⁰

Richard Abanes, a researcher and writer on cults and aberrant Christian movements, head of the Religious Information Center, and author of *Defending the Faith: A Beginner’s Guide to Cults and New Religions* (Baker, 1998) and *Cults, New Religious Movements, and Your Family* (Crossway, 1998), expressed the opinion that Lee’s statement “the Son is the Father, and the Son is also the Holy Spirit. Otherwise, how could there be one God?” was “classic modalist thinking, not understanding the relationship between, or the distinction between, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit”¹¹

The charge of modalism stretches back at least to the publication in 1978 by the Christian Research Institute of *The Teachings of Witness Lee and the Local Church*, by this author and Bob and Gretchen Passantino.¹² The booklet presented these and a variety of other quotations as evidence that Lee taught modalism. It pointed out that in some statements Lee expressed Sabellianism, or successive modalism (that the Father *becomes* the Son and the Son *becomes* the Spirit) while in others he expressed patripassianism, or static modalism (that the Father *is* the Son and the Spirit, the Son *is* the Father and the Spirit, and the Spirit *is* the Father and the Son).

Leaders of the Local Church are familiar with the charge and seek to rebut it. LSM media spokesman Chris Wilde told *Charisma Online News Service* late last year that the Local Church denies modalism, which he defined as the view “that the Father became the Son and ceased to be the Father, and that the Spirit became the Son and ceased to be the Spirit.”¹³

But Wilde’s definition of modalism is idiosyncratic. Standard definitions do not suggest that

⁹E-mail from Alan W. Gomes to E. Calvin Beisner, Monday, April 21, 2003, 10:06 p.m.

¹⁰E-mail from Ronald H. Nash to E. Calvin Beisner, Saturday, April 19, 2003, 5:55 p.m.

¹¹Telephone interview by E. Calvin Beisner with Richard Abanes, April 25, 2003.

¹²Cal Beisner and Bob and Gretchen Passantino, *The Teachings of Witness Lee and the Local Church* (Anaheim, CA: Christian Research Institute, 1998). CRI renewed copyright on the booklet in 1996 and continues to make it available as CRI Statement DL075, available online at www.equip.org/free/DL075.htm.

¹³“Publishing Group Endorses Controversial Church,” *Charisma Online News Service*, December 2, 2002, at www.charismanews.com/online/printarticle.pl?ArticleID=6935. The article appeared in the print version of *Charisma*, January 2003, 18-19. The last clause in the quote seems to have been a mistake either in Wilde’s expression or in the reporter’s transcription. It is more likely that the last part of Wilde’s definition of modalism was that “the Son became the Spirit and ceased to be the Son.” As of Thursday, April 24, Wilde had not responded to an e-mail sent to him on Monday, April 21, 2003, asking his comments for use in this article.

modalism means that on becoming the Son the Father ceased to be the Father, or that on becoming the Spirit the Son ceased to be the Son.

Asked to evaluate Wilde's definition of modalism, Nash called it "hardly what any serious theologian means by the term. Modalism is synonymous with Sabellianism and is an unqualified heresy. It is the belief that the Father, Son and Holy Spirit are three different ways in which the one God manifests Himself."¹⁴

Gomes called it "an incorrect definition of modalism," adding,

Modalism is the teaching that the one God reveals himself successively as Father, then Son, and then Holy Spirit. It is not the teaching that the Father ceased *being* the Father and *became* the Son (in any ontological sense of "being" or "becoming"), nor that the Son *ceased being* the Son and *became* the Spirit (in any ontological sense). In modalism it is solely a question of how the one God *reveals* or *manifests* himself; it has nothing whatever to do with any change in him ontologically speaking. Thus, it would be quite possible for one to be a genuine modalist (according to the correct definition of the term) and still issue the denial that Wilde gave to the *Charisma* reporter. According to a looser use of language, though, Wilde's definition could describe modalism if "become" is taken in the sense of "reveals himself as/to be." In that case, the Father "becomes" the Son as far as God's creation *ad extra* is concerned. As to whether Wilde's definition can serve as a defense of LC doctrine: If we grant Wilde's definition of modalism (i.e., for the sake of argument), the Local Church would qualify as modalistic on the grounds of some of the quotations [from Lee above in this article].¹⁵

Lest it be thought that these comments were merely fashioned for the occasion, consider that a standard theological reference work of the late nineteenth century—long before Lee was born or the Local Church was founded—defined *modalism* as "a term applied to the heretical views regarding the Trinity first espoused by Sabellius, a presbyter of Ptolemais, who flourished about the middle of the 3d century. Adopting the notions of the earlier *Monarchians*, he maintained, in opposition to the doctrine propounded by Origen and his school, that the appellations of Father, Son, and Holy Ghost were only so many different manifestations and names of one and the same divine being. He thus converted the objective and real distinction of persons (a trinity of essence) into a merely subjective and modalistic view (the trinity of manifestation)."

Similarly, this source defined patripassianism as the view of followers of Praxeas, a second-century heretic who denied "the distinct personality of the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost," adding, "there can be no doubt that Praxeas believed, as the Sabellians did after him, that Father, Son, and Holy Ghost were merely names for the different modes under which one and the same person operated or was manifest. . . . The followers of Praxeas were also called *Monarchians*, because of their denying a plurality of persons in the Deity; and Patripassians, because they believed that the Father was so intimately united with the man Christ, his Son, that he suffered with him the anguish of an afflicted life, and the torments of an ignominious death."¹⁶

¹⁴E-mail from Ronald H. Nash to E. Calvin Beisner, Saturday, April 19, 2003, 5:51 p.m.

¹⁵E-mail from Alan W. Gomes to E. Calvin Beisner, Monday, April 21, 2003, 10:06 p.m.

¹⁶John McClintock and James Strong, edd., *Cyclopedia of Biblical, Theological, and Ecclesiastical Literature*, 12 vols. (1895; reprint edition, Grand Rapids, Baker, 1992), s.vv. *modalism* and *patripassians*.

So modalism may be either Sabellian or patripassian. Some of Lee's statements appear to affirm one variety, others both. They do not, however, appear consistent with the orthodox Trinitarian belief that Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, though only one God, are distinct Persons. As Gomes opined of Lee's statement, "the Son is the Father, and the Son is also the Holy Spirit. Otherwise, how could there be one God?":

This statement is explicitly modalistic. . . . Because [for modalism] God is only one person and not three, ontologically speaking, the terms *Father*, *Son*, and *Holy Spirit* are just three names to express the three different modes in which the one God reveals himself. Consequently, modalists say that the Son *is* the Father, and the Son *is* the Spirit because these are simply different labels for the different ways in which the one God reveals himself.

In February, 2003, *Christianity Today* published an article by Mark Kellner on LSM's entry into the ECPA and the lawsuit against Harvest House. Kellner rehearsed some of the history of the Local Church's litigation against critics and quoted experts friendly toward and critical of the Local Church. He concluded by quoting James Bjornstad, professor of philosophy at Cedarville College in Ohio and longtime writer on cult apologetics as saying, "I don't refer to them as a cult. I refer to them as brothers in Christ."¹⁷

Bjornstad later told this reporter that he had called Kellner to protest that the quote and its placement misrepresented him. He also said he had e-mailed a correction to *Christianity Today* that never got published.

"The context in which he [Kellner] was speaking [when he interviewed me] was with regard to people I had met, and some leaders of the Local Church that I certainly regarded as Christians. But I didn't mean that as a blanket statement about the whole movement," Bjornstad said. Putting it at the end of the article, he said, made it seem as if he was "totally for them. No, I think they've got to clarify some things and buy some things back and reject some things, and they've got to say that Witness Lee made some mistakes in his wording. I'm willing to accept that many of them are probably brothers in Christ. I can't speak for all."

Asked about some of the quotations from Lee above, Bjornstad expressed his opinion that "A lot of the stuff you mentioned in there really exceeds the bounds of evangelicalism."

Bjornstad said he thinks the Local Church says contradictory things, some orthodox and others not. That makes evaluating the movement all the more difficult.

"If they were to make a statement like this, and others," he said, "it would clarify things: 'Jesus is not the Father, and Jesus is not the Holy Spirit, and Witness Lee was mistaken when he said the opposite.' See, I don't want the contradictions. I don't want them to say one statement in one place, and then elsewhere say the opposite."¹⁸

According to *Charisma*, ECPA President Doug Ross said that LSM officials, faced with questions from ECPA staff about its beliefs, had "answered all our questions satisfactorily." In a telephone interview, Ross told this reporter that it had not been staff but members of the ECPA board's executive committee, including Lillian Miao of Paraclete Press, Mark Taylor of Tyndale House Publishers, Bob Fryling of InterVarsity Press, Randy Scott of Standard Publishing, and

¹⁷Mark A. Kellner, "Local Church fights for evangelical ID card: Witness Lee group sues for \$136 million over Harvest House cults article," *Christianity Today*, February 2003, 24-5, at 25.

¹⁸Telephone interview by E. Calvin Beisner with James Bjornstad, Friday, April 25, 2003.

Bruce Ryskamp of Zondervan, who had met with LSM leaders.

Asked what questions had been asked and how LSM's leaders had replied, Ross said, "I wouldn't even know how to answer that kind of question. . . . They signed our Statement of Faith, and according to the website, and according to the information they've released on www.defendingthefaith.com, . . . those kinds of questions we felt were answered to our satisfaction. . . . It's our opinion that they, much like *Plain Truth* [i.e., the Worldwide Church of God, which in the 1980s made the transition from heretical and anti-Trinitarian to orthodox Trinitarian], are moving to a much more solid position of orthodoxy and we felt that welcoming them to ECPA would encourage that."

"Living Stream is the member," Ross added, "not the Local Churches. And there undoubtedly would be, as is true of any of our members that serve churches, we might disagree with something that [one] Local Church believes or practices, but it isn't the church that is the member, it's the publishing house." LSM's willingness to sign the Statement of Faith was enough. "That's always our criterion," Ross said.

Asked about LSM's joining the Local Churches in a pending \$136 million libel suit against ECPA member Harvest House and authors John Ankerberg and John Weldon over their *Encyclopedia of Cults and New Religions*, Ross said, "On an ongoing basis we always are encouraging our members to settle their differences without going to court, and sometimes we've been successful and sometimes we're not. As a trade association we can't legislate how our members behave and how they cannot."

"I know this is a sticky issue," Ross said, "and I appreciate the different views, and I wish that some of the people who feel strongly about this would generate more light than heat. . . . Under the broad umbrella under which the ECPA operates as a trade association, we have a wide variety of companies that come together from all kinds of backgrounds, and probably somebody could find fault with this book or that book."

Tyndale House President Taylor, who said that though a member of the executive committee of ECPA's board he had not been available for the meetings with LSM officials, explained,

The issue of whether or not an organization qualifies for membership in ECPA is, I would say, partly subjective and partly objective [It is] objective in the sense that they have to be a publisher, they have to publish evangelical literature, objective in the sense that the literature they publish has to not be in conflict with the Association's Statement of Faith.

But it becomes subjective, he explained, when it comes to determining whether some of the literature published is in conflict with the Statement of Faith. ECPA and LSM representatives met to get a better understanding of what LSM is publishing, he said, and to assess whether it is in conflict with the Statement of Faith, and "obviously, by virtue of the decision, the recommendation of that committee was that LSM did qualify for membership under the bylaws, and subsequently the board did vote to accept LSM as a voting member."

Asked his opinion of several of the quotations from Lee cited above, Taylor was uncertain. "I'd be rather hard pressed to say whether or not [Lee's statement, "In the heavens . . . 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 is in the Son, and the Son became the Spirit"] fits within the Statement of Faith," adding, "Some would say this is inconsistent Others would say at least generally they seem to fit within the purview of evangelicalism."

When asked about Lee's statement, "Eventually God will become us,"¹⁹ Taylor responded, "Well, at least taking that snippet by itself, it doesn't sound to me like that fits within historic evangelicalism."²⁰

Should LSM be a member of the ECPA? Do some of Lee's statements contradict the association's Statement of Faith? Who's to say? Some of LSM and the Local Church's statements are consistent with it; others seem not to be. As Bjornstad says, "I certainly don't deny that they make the orthodox statements. It's the other ones that really bug me."

There is a difference between a church, a religious college, or a seminary, on the one hand, and a trade association, on the other. The ECPA, CBA, and ECCU are trade associations. Their statements of faith are broadly written, intentionally designed to make room for members of widely divergent viewpoints. Denominations, colleges, and seminaries are more likely to have more precise doctrinal statements, making it more difficult to pass muster by means of ambiguity or affirming mutually contradictory propositions. Membership in a trade association does not imply orthodoxy. *Caveat emptor*.

[E. Calvin Beisner, Ph.D., is national spokesman for the Cornwall Alliance for the Stewardship of Creation and former associate professor of interdisciplinary studies at Covenant College (1992-2000) and of historical theology and social ethics at Knox Theological Seminary (2000-2008) and the author of *God in Three Persons* (Tyndale House, 1984) and "*Jesus Only*" *Churches* (Zondervan, 1998), the latter including an extended critique of one type of modern modalism. He was a research consultant for the Christian Research Institute in the 1970s, when he first encountered and did research on the Local Church and Witness Lee's writings.]

¹⁹Witness Lee, *Life-Study in Genesis* (Los Angeles: Stream, n.d.), Message 10, pp. 121-2.

²⁰Telephone interview by E. Calvin Beisner with Mark Taylor, Monday, April 21, 2003.