



A DEFENSE OF THE GOSPEL

An Open Letter  
Concerning  
*Misrepresentations*  
*of the Ministry of*  
*Brother Witness Lee*

DCP  
PRESS

No part of this work may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means—graphic, electronic, or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or information storage and retrieval systems—without permission from the copyright holders.

© 2018 DCP Press. All rights reserved.

1<sup>st</sup> printing, May 2018

DCP Press is an imprint of:

*Defense and Confirmation Project (DCP)*

P. O. Box 3217

Fullerton, CA 92834

DCP is a project to defend and confirm the New Testament ministry of Watchman Nee and Witness Lee and the practice of the local churches.

Phil. 1:7 – Even as it is right for me to think this concerning you all because you have me in your heart, since both in my bonds and in the defense and confirmation of the gospel you are all fellow partakers with me of grace.

Editors' note: The *gospel*, as used in the series title of this book (*A Defense of the Gospel*), has a broader meaning than may be familiar to some readers. The fullness of the good news announced in the New Testament encompasses the entire operation of God to accomplish His purpose. The complete gospel therefore includes all of the truths unveiled in the apostles' teaching through "the word of the truth of the gospel" (Col. 1:5; Eph. 1:13; Acts 2:42; Titus 1:9).

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

An Open Letter Concerning Misrepresentations of the Ministry of Brother Witness Lee.....	5
Introduction.....	5
The Bible.....	7
Salvation .....	13
The Church.....	23
Conclusion.....	29



# An Open Letter Concerning Misrepresentations of the Ministry of Brother Witness Lee

## Introduction

In recent years a group of six Burmese Christian congregations in the United States have issued public declarations opposing the teaching of Dr. Thein Htay, which they equate with the teaching of Witness Lee and the local churches, whom they also condemn. They imply that they have “deeply reviewed and studied” the ministry of Witness Lee; however, it is clear that they have not because they use the same arguments others did years ago and some of the same quotes. We answered these arguments then and showed that the quotes were taken out of context.<sup>1</sup> Those who have made thorough and unbiased studies of Witness Lee’s ministry, including Fuller Theological Seminary and the Christian Research Institute, have publicly affirmed the orthodoxy of his teaching and the orthopraxy of the local churches that receive his ministry.<sup>2</sup>

As we will show, in some cases the teachings the signers oppose are biblical and should not be denounced by professing Christians; in other cases the cited teachings are serious misrepresentations of Witness Lee’s teaching. Having not studied Dr. Htay’s publications and spoken messages, we will not address those parts of the declarations.

---

<sup>1</sup> See, for example, *A Defense of the Gospel: Responses to an Open Letter from “Christian Scholars and Ministry Leaders,”* volumes 1 and 2 (Fullerton: DCP Press, 2010), and <https://an-open-letter.org>, which offers many resources for further study on the points in question.

<sup>2</sup> See <https://an-open-letter.org/en/testimonies/> for testimonies of Christian scholars and ministry leaders who have affirmed the orthodoxy of Witness Lee’s teaching and the practice of the local churches.

We offer this open letter both to affirm the biblical orthodoxy of Witness Lee's teaching on points contested in the declarations and to correct the misrepresentations of his teaching in those public criticisms. It is our hope that this response will be received prayerfully and that it will foster respectful Christian dialogue with the congregations that signed the declarations and with any fellow believers who may have been stumbled by the charges therein.<sup>3</sup>

In what follows we will address the congregations' charges that Witness Lee and we are in error concerning our view of the Bible, salvation, and the church.

---

<sup>3</sup> We welcome fellowship and questions from all fair-minded believers. To facilitate fellowship, please first write to us at one of the following email addresses: [myanmargospelbookroom@gmail.com](mailto:myanmargospelbookroom@gmail.com) (for Myanmar); [openletterfellowship.ok@gmail.com](mailto:openletterfellowship.ok@gmail.com) (for the United States).

## The Bible

The signers of the declarations state their belief that the entire Bible—the Old and New Testaments—is the divinely inspired Word of God, and despite their suggestion to the contrary, we believe the same. In a statement of faith published by the local churches and Living Stream Ministry, the publisher of Watchman Nee and Witness Lee, the first point attests to our firm conviction that the Bible is indeed the inspired Word of God:

The Bible is the Word of God, written under His inspiration word by word (2 Tim. 3:16), and is the complete and only written divine revelation of God to man (Deut. 4:2; 12:32; Prov. 30:5-6; Rev. 22:18-19).<sup>4</sup>

Witness Lee deeply revered the Bible and studied it diligently for more than seventy years, saying, “The entire Bible originates from God; every word and every sentence, every iota and every tittle (Matt. 5:18), are God-inspired. Hence, men should neither add to or take away anything from the Holy Scriptures (Rev. 22:18-19).”<sup>5</sup> Contrary to the signers’ accusations against us, we firmly believe and teach that the Bible is God’s inspired revelation to man.

The signers also accuse us of interpreting the Bible according to our “feeling and experience,” stating that for us the Bible is “not absolute correct truth that guide[s] to spiritual life.” But Witness Lee taught us to “interpret the Bible by the Bible,”<sup>6</sup> that is, to keep the principle that “a particular verse in the holy Word requires the rest of the Bible to

---

<sup>4</sup> Available at <https://an-open-letter.org/en/our-faith/>.

<sup>5</sup> Witness Lee, *Truth Lessons, Level 1, Vol. 1* (Anaheim: Living Stream Ministry, 1985), 4. All the books by Witness Lee quoted in this letter can be accessed for free online at <https://ministrybooks.org>.

<sup>6</sup> See, for example, *The Fulfillment of the Tabernacle and the Offerings in the Writings of John* (Anaheim: Living Stream Ministry, 1991), 24.

define it.”<sup>7</sup> In a ministry that spanned more than seventy years, he never once suggested that one’s subjective feeling supersedes the authority of Scripture or that the Bible does not convey absolute truth for the believers’ spiritual life. On the contrary, he affirmed the believers’ subjective experience of Christ but also taught that any subjective experience must be according to the teaching and principles of Scripture, or else that experience is not reliable.

In his book *The Knowledge of Life*, which has been translated into Burmese, Witness Lee writes that believers can know God by the inner sense given by the law of life (Romans 8:2) and the teaching of the anointing (1 John 2:27). Nonetheless, the inner sense—a genuine subjective experience—given by the law of life and the teaching of the anointing must be confirmed by the Word of God in order to keep the believer from going astray into extra-biblical spiritual extremes:

The inner sense given to us by the law of life and the teaching of the anointing enables us to know God. Yet, even though this inner sense may be absolutely real and true, still it needs to be proved by the teaching and the principles of the Scripture. If the consciousness we have within is not in accord with the teaching and principles of the Scripture, we should not accept it. In this way we can guard against being deceived or going to an extreme, and we can be accurate and stable.<sup>8</sup>

We believe that to have the proper knowledge of the Scriptures, and thus to be guarded from straying into spiritual excesses, a Christian must diligently study the Bible. Regrettably, however, the signers of the declarations say that we do not “read, study and pursue” the Bible

---

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Witness Lee, *The Knowledge of Life* (Anaheim: Living Stream Ministry, 1973), 157.



“according to the standard.” But Witness Lee strongly exhorted the believers under his ministry to pursue the truth in the Word of God through diligent study, and he provided innumerable opportunities for training in how to study the Bible and how to speak forth the revelation contained therein. The following passages from his ministry—just two among many examples—make this point:

Second Timothy mentions three important matters: pursuing the truth, growing in life, and being diligent. You cannot read these things and then quickly disregard them. Paul told Timothy, “Be diligent to present yourself approved to God, an unashamed workman, cutting straight the word of the truth” (2:15). Cutting straight the word of the truth cannot be accomplished by casually reading the Bible. Rather, you need to study the truth in depth. For example, a surgeon needs to develop good surgical skills in order to be a good surgeon. He needs to study the human body in depth and to practice doing surgery many times. In the same way, if you are going to cut straight the word of the truth, you need to spend time and energy to get into the truth. This cannot be accomplished in one or two days.<sup>9</sup>

In the future many of us will be able to give messages according to the Bible. The way to give a message that will stir up people’s interest is to speak according to the Bible, that is, to speak by expounding the Bible. This is the most powerful way to speak. There is no book that can meet the standard of the Bible. Therefore, the best way to give a message is to expound the Bible, but this requires a thorough knowledge of the Bible. Gaining

---

<sup>9</sup> Witness Lee, *Vessels Useful to the Lord* (Anaheim: Living Stream Ministry, 2003), 96-97.

such knowledge takes extensive training. Hence, we must spend the next four years to lay a good foundation in the New Testament. We can begin with Paul's fourteen Epistles and read them in sequence, starting from Romans. After the fourteen Epistles, we can read the Gospels, Acts, and James through Revelation.<sup>10</sup>

The signers of the declarations target the Holy Bible Recovery Version published by Living Stream Ministry, calling it the "handbook Bible" of the local churches and saying it is "the composition of the interpretation of Witness Lee." By doing so, they aim to discredit the Recovery Version as being a channel for disseminating false doctrine. But the Recovery Version is a fresh translation from the original languages, taking as its sources for the New Testament the Nestle-Aland Greek text as published in the 26<sup>th</sup> edition of *Novum Testamentum Graece* and for the Old Testament the revised 1990 edition of *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia*. Eminent biblical scholar F. F. Bruce commented on the Recovery Version, saying, "The user of this version will get a precise impression of what the sacred text says."<sup>11</sup>

To aid readers in their study of the Bible, Witness Lee wrote extensive study notes for every book of the New Testament, and the editorial section of Living Stream Ministry compiled study notes from his ministry for every book of the Old Testament. This should not be strange or disconcerting, as other Bible expositors have produced study Bibles, including John Nelson Darby, C.I. Schofield, and Charles Ryrie, to name a few. In his ministry Witness Lee received much help from the studies produced by these expositors and others, including Marvin Vincent, W.E. Vine, and Henry Alford, and the influence of these studies is seen in

---

<sup>10</sup> Witness Lee, *The Proper Aggressiveness of the Lord's Serving Ones* (Anaheim: Living Stream Ministry, 2008), 25.

<sup>11</sup> Letter from F.F. Bruce, November 23, 1982.

the Recovery Version. All of the notes written by Witness Lee and compiled from his ministry “stress the revelation of the truth, the spiritual light, and the supply of life more than history, geography, and persons,”<sup>12</sup> and this focus sets the Recovery Version apart from other study Bibles that may take matters such as history, geography, etc., as their primary points of emphasis. Far from being an esoteric publication of a suspect group, the Recovery Version is a work of scholarship that came to fruition after nearly three decades of labor and is a treasure for all of God’s people who love His holy Word.<sup>13</sup>

The signers claim that Dr. Htay has taught that the revelation of God contained in the Bible has become less clear as the Bible has been handed down from generation to generation. They accuse him of thus referring to the Bible as a “downgraded” book. We do not know if Dr. Htay actually said such things, but we believe that our defense of the Bible as the inspired Word of God demonstrates that we do not hold such a view. In conclusion, we echo Witness Lee’s own words: “We would die for the Bible. We believe that the Bible is God’s divine word.”<sup>14</sup>

---

<sup>12</sup> “A Brief Explanation,” New Testament Recovery Version (Anaheim: Living Stream Ministry, 1991).

<sup>13</sup> The Holy Bible Recovery Version can be obtained from Living Stream Ministry at <http://lsm.org>. For readers in the United States, a free softbound edition of the Recovery Version New Testament can be obtained through <http://biblesforamerica.org>.

<sup>14</sup> Witness Lee, *Christ versus Religion* (Anaheim: Living Stream Ministry, 1971), 155.



## Salvation

In their critical statements concerning our teaching on salvation, the signers of the declarations strongly imply that we do not believe, as they do, “that God sent His Son to be incarnated in the world, and make Him die for redemption for those who are dying in sin, and to make them God’s children.” But our published Statement of Faith affirms all of these points:

**Christ, the only begotten Son of God (John 1:18; 3:16), even God Himself (John 1:1), became a genuine man through incarnation (John 1:14),** having both the divine and human natures (Rom. 9:5; 1 Tim. 2:5), the two natures being combined in one person and being preserved distinctly without confusion or change and without forming a third nature;

**Christ died for our sins** and was raised bodily from the dead (1 Cor. 15:3-4; Acts 4:10; Rom. 8:34), has been exalted to the right hand of God as Lord of all (Acts 5:31; 10:36), and will return as the Bridegroom for His bride, the church (John 3:29; Rev. 19:7), and as the King of kings to rule over the nations (Rev. 11:15; 19:16);

Salvation is by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone (Eph. 2:5, 8) and in His completed work, resulting in our justification before God (Rom. 3:24, 28; Gal. 2:16) and in **our being born of God to be His children (John 1:12-13).**<sup>15</sup>

As our Statement of Faith attests, we firmly believe that Christ died on the cross for man’s sins. Moreover, by shedding His precious blood, Christ has accomplished an

---

<sup>15</sup> Available at <https://an-open-letter.org/en/our-faith/>. Emphasis added. There is also a statement of faith at the website of Living Stream Ministry affirming these same truths. See <http://lsm.org/lsm-statement-faith.html>.

eternal redemption, opening the way for sinners to be forgiven, justified, and reconciled to God, as Witness Lee makes clear in the following passage:

According to God's righteousness and law, sinners are condemned to die. No sinner can pass through the judgment of God's righteousness and law without suffering the punishment of death. For our sins to be forgiven, someone had to die and shed blood on our behalf in order to fulfill the requirement of God's righteousness and law. The Bible says, "Without shedding of blood there is no forgiveness" ([Hebrews] 9:22). Thus, the Lord died and shed His blood on the cross to fulfill the righteous requirement of God's law so that our sins may be forgiven. Since the Lord's blood was shed through His death in fulfillment of God's righteous requirement, His blood can cleanse us of our sins....

Because of sin, we had a problem with God and were His enemies. The Lord's death redeemed us from our sins and restored our relationship with God; as a result, we were reconciled to God. Today, if anyone is willing to believe in the Lord, the Lord's death will reconcile him to God and appease God on his behalf.<sup>16</sup>

Witness Lee also taught that there are two aspects to God's salvation, the judicial aspect and the organic aspect, as indicated in Romans 5:10: "For if we, being enemies, were reconciled to God through the death of His Son [the judicial aspect], much more we will be saved in His life [the organic aspect], having been reconciled." In the judicial aspect of God's salvation—what Witness Lee called "judicial redemption"—Christ satisfied the requirements of God's righteous law on sinners that they may be forgiven, justified, and

---

<sup>16</sup> Witness Lee, *Crucial Truths in the Holy Scriptures, Vol. 1* (Anaheim: Living Stream Ministry, 2007), 20-21.

reconciled to God (Col. 2:13; Acts 13:39; Rom. 5:10). In the organic aspect of God's salvation—what Witness Lee called “organic salvation”—the life of God enters into man by regeneration and operates to sanctify, renew, transform, conform, and glorify the believers (2 Cor. 4:16; Eph. 4:23; Col. 3:10; Rom. 12:2; 2 Cor. 3:18; Rom. 8:29, 17, 30). Witness Lee's ministry has helped us to see from the Scriptures that judicial redemption is the procedure by which God qualifies and positions the believers to enjoy His organic salvation, and it is by His organic salvation that God accomplishes His purpose in man by His life.

God's organic salvation is carried out in man by Christ as the “life-giving Spirit,” a term that the signers say Dr. Htay has used and that “express[es] the local church movement's belief.” While we do not know what Dr. Htay has taught about this term, Witness Lee did indeed teach that Christ became a “life-giving Spirit.” The teaching itself, however, did not originate with Witness Lee; it is the teaching of the apostle Paul in 1 Corinthians 15, a chapter on resurrection: “So also it is written, ‘The first man, Adam, became a living soul’; the last Adam [Christ in the flesh] became a life-giving Spirit” (v. 45). As the life-giving Spirit, Christ can be joined to the believers as “one spirit” (1 Cor. 6:17). As the life-giving Spirit, Christ can be in us (2 Cor. 13:5), be with our spirit (2 Tim. 4:22), and make His home in our heart (Eph. 3:17). As the Word of God, Christ “became flesh” through incarnation (John 1:14), and as “the last Adam,” He became a life-giving Spirit in resurrection. By teaching that Christ became a life-giving Spirit through His resurrection from the dead, as the apostle Paul taught, Witness Lee affirmed that Christ is in the believers and that He is life to them.

The signers of the declarations say they oppose Witness Lee's teaching concerning salvation, but a close reading of their complaints shows that they really oppose any notion that man can receive and experience Christ as his life (Col.

3:4). They plainly deny that man receives the life of God through regeneration. This denial is starkly at odds with the New Testament. For example, Ephesians 4:18 says that the Gentiles are “alienated from the life of God,” but Acts 11:18 testifies that the Gentiles have been given “repentance unto life.” In a study note on Acts 11:18, Witness Lee offers the meaning of the Greek word for *life* in the phrase “repentance unto life” and, following the principle of interpreting the Bible by the Bible, references a host of verses that demonstrate what that life is:

Gk. *zoe*, referring to the life of God (Eph. 4:18), the eternal life (1 John 1:2), the uncreated, indestructible life (Heb. 7:16), which is Christ Himself (John 14:6; 11:25; Col. 3:4) as the life-giving Spirit (1 Cor. 15:45), of which life the Spirit is (Rom. 8:2). This life is received by the believers through their believing into Christ (John 3:15-16) after repentance, and issues in their full salvation (Rom. 5:10). The gospel preached by Peter comprises the divine blessings not only of forgiveness (5:31; 10:43) and salvation (2:21; 4:12) but also of the Spirit (2:38) and life. Forgiveness deals with people's sins, and life, with people's death (John 5:24; 1 John 3:14; 2 Cor. 5:4). (Holy Bible Recovery Version, Acts 11:18, note 1)

What makes the believers distinct from the unbelievers, then, is that the believers are *not* alienated from the life of God; rather, they have received the eternal life, which is Christ Himself, through regeneration.

To be regenerated is to be “born anew” (John 3:3), that is, “born of the Spirit” (v. 6) to receive the divine life in addition to the created human life. But instead of affirming regeneration as a divine birth, the signers of the declarations insist that believers are adopted into God’s family and that they do not receive the divine nature, despite the apostle Peter’s declaration that through the “precious and exceedingly great promises” of God, the believers “become



partakers of the divine nature” (2 Pet. 1:4). The signers take away from the Scriptures (Rev. 22:18-19) and thus annul any organic relationship between God and the believer, thereby negating the believers’ standing as actual sons of a begetting Father. Consequently, they believe the Recovery Version of the New Testament is wrong to translate Galatians 4:5 as “that we might receive the sonship” rather than “that we might receive the adoption as sons.” They maintain that we believe the word “adoption” is a “wrong translation,” and thus they give the strong impression that we have changed the Word of God to fit with our understanding. But concerning the use of the word *adoption* in Eph. 1:5, Witness Lee wrote, “Although this rendering is not wrong, it is easily misunderstood.”<sup>17</sup> In his *Life-study of Galatians* he explained, “Therefore, we can declare with assurance that we are not God’s sons-in-law, nor merely His adopted sons; we are God’s sons in life, sons born of Him.”<sup>18</sup>

Living Stream Ministry’s journal *Affirmation & Critique*, which has been published continuously since 1996 and is available for free online<sup>19</sup>, has addressed the matter of sonship and adoption a number of times<sup>20</sup>. The following passage from the April 1996 issue demonstrates the distinction between sonship and adoption in their historical and theological contexts and how the right of inheritance indicated by the word *adoption* does not negate the divine begetting but, on the contrary, “enhances it.”

The Bible clearly and unequivocally states that the believers in Christ are “partakers of the divine nature”

---

<sup>17</sup> Witness Lee, *Basic Training* (Anaheim: Living Stream Ministry, 1978), 30.

<sup>18</sup> Witness Lee, *Life-study of Galatians* (Anaheim: Living Stream Ministry, 1984), 391.

<sup>19</sup> See <http://affcrit.com/archives/index.html>.

<sup>20</sup> See, for example, Roger Good, “Glossa: Sonship or Adoptions as Sons?” *Affirmation & Critique* V:4 (October 2000): 39-40.

(2 Pet. 1:4) and have been “begotten of God” (John 1:13). We are not merely adopted by God to have a legal relationship with Him positionally; we are begotten of God, “born anew,” to have a personal relationship with Him organically.

The Greek word which some translated “adoption” is *huios* (a son) plus *thesis* (a placing). It is more accurately translated “sonship” (see Vine, Vincent, Wuest, et al.). It [i.e., the Greek word *huiiothesia*] is a particular Roman legal term referring to the bestowal of all the rights and privileges of sonship upon one who previously did not possess them. For this reason it is never applied to Christ, who is the only begotten Son of God from eternity. But because we believers, before our regeneration, were under God’s judicial condemnation, we needed the Holy Spirit both to beget us and to bestow on us the legal status of “sonship.” We were begotten by God in order to receive the divine nature, and we were given the divine sonship in order to receive the rights of inheritance. “Adoption” (sonship) does not annul this begetting; rather, it enhances it. As those begotten of God, we enjoy an organic relationship with God based on the imparting of the divine nature; we also enjoy the full positional rights bestowed on sons. We are sons of God (positionally) and children of God (by the divine nature). It is for this reason that the Bible uses both terms. In Romans 8:14 we are told, “For as many as are led by the Spirit of God, these are sons of God.” Then in verse 16 we are told, “The Spirit Himself witnesses with our spirit that we are children of God.”...According to the Bible, the value of our vital position as children of God appreciates by virtue of our legal position as sons of God....<sup>21</sup>

---

<sup>21</sup> “Misaimings: Misaiming concerning ‘Sons by Adoption,” *Affirmation & Critique* 1:2 (April 1996): 61. Note that Witness Lee wrote hymns in which

The transformation of sinners into mature sons of God is a process commonly called *deification*, a concept that the signers unfortunately and unwisely oppose. *Deification*, or *theosis*, was universally recognized as the goal of God's salvation by the early church fathers beginning in the second century A.D. This doctrine has always maintained a prominent place in Eastern Orthodoxy and Roman Catholicism and was affirmed by many of the Reformers, including Martin Luther and John Calvin, and it is enjoying a renaissance in modern times, as noted by theologian Roger Olson<sup>22</sup>. In 2015 a representative of Living Stream Ministry presented a paper on Witness Lee's teaching of deification to a session of the Evangelical Philosophical Society at its joint annual meeting with the Evangelical Theological Society.<sup>23</sup> We gladly commend that paper to readers who would like a fuller account of Witness Lee's teaching on the subject, but here we offer a brief word on the matter in response to the signers.

Witness Lee affirmed Athanasius's well-known aphorism that "God became man that we might be made God" but clarified the meaning by saying that "God became man to make man God in life and nature but not in the Godhead." The refinement is crucial, for it explicitly says that believers do not become God in the Godhead but in life and nature and, as Witness Lee also explained, that they never become objects of worship. The signers of the declarations simply

---

he used the words *sonship* and *adoption* in the senses described in this passage. For example, he wrote, "By divine regeneration / We the sons of God became, / But we must mature to fullness, / Thus the birthright to obtain. / Born and fully grown to manhood, / God's adoption we may share; / By the measure of full stature, / We God's sonship will declare." See #741 in *Hymns* (Anaheim: Living Stream Ministry, 1966, 1980).

<sup>22</sup> Roger E. Olson, "Deification in Contemporary Theology," *Theology Today*, 64 (2007): 186-200.

<sup>23</sup> "In Life and Nature but Not in the Godhead: Witness Lee's Contribution to a Biblical Understanding of Theosis," available at <https://an-open-letter.org/en/ets-eps-papers/>.

say that we believe we “become God” without offering any of the qualifying statements that Witness Lee was careful to include.

The signers further argue that our teaching of deification leads us into error concerning justification, but we believe that their understanding of justification falls far short of the biblical revelation. They condemn us for believing that we are not merely regarded as righteous but that we “become righteous in real[ity]...that is, [as] righteous as God.” This does not accurately represent our teaching. On the one hand, we certainly believe that a sinner is justified by faith alone and not out of the works of law (Rom. 3:28; Gal. 2:16). On the other hand, we affirm the Bible’s testimony that Christ Himself is righteousness to us from God (1 Cor. 1:30) and was “made sin on our behalf that we might become the righteousness of God in Him” (2 Cor. 5:21). The Christ *who* is the righteousness of God received by the believers is an experiential, justifying reality. The faith that justifies, then, is not to believe merely in an objective doctrine but in a person who Himself is the righteousness of God. This is the justification that is “of life” (Rom. 5:18), that is, the justification “by which we have come up to the standard of God’s righteousness and correspond with it, so that now He can impart His life to us.”<sup>24</sup>

Because God desires that man receive His life and grow in that life unto maturity, He created man as a vessel in the image of Christ to contain Christ, but the signers contest this point as well. Here again, though, the teaching is on solid scriptural ground, and it may be that the signers are not aware of key verses that make these points. Most Bible readers are familiar with God’s resolution to make man in

---

<sup>24</sup> Holy Bible Recovery Version, Romans 5:18, footnote 2. For a more theological explanation, see Kerry S. Robichaux, “Justification of Life,” *Affirmation & Critique* VI:1 (April 2001): 27-45; Ron Kangas, “Christ, Our Righteousness,” *Affirmation & Critique* XV:2 (Fall 2010): 89-91.

His image and according to His likeness (Gen. 1:26), and Christian readers in particular understand that the image of God, according to which man was created, is Christ (2 Cor. 4:4; Col. 1:15). Moreover, Christ is in the believers (Gal. 2:20; Col. 1:27; 2 Cor. 13:5), who were created as vessels (Acts 9:15; Rom. 9:22-23; 2 Cor. 4:7; 2 Tim. 2:20-21), and thus man contains Christ, according to whose image he was created. Now the believers “are being transformed into the same image” (2 Cor. 3:18), that is, “conformed to the resurrected and glorified Christ, to be made the same as He is (Rom. 8:29).”<sup>25</sup> Therefore, it is altogether scriptural to teach that man was created in the image of Christ to contain Christ, as Witness Lee did. That the signers of the declarations deny such a fundamental point of biblical truth calls into question their understanding of the Scriptures.

A final point to address in this section on salvation is the signers’ contention that we have changed “the meaning of faith for salvation” by translating the commonly rendered “believe in” as “believe into” (e.g., in John 3:16, 11:25, etc.). That this criticism is misaimed is evident by comparing a footnote on the Greek word *eis* from the Holy Bible Recovery Version with one in the ESV Study Bible, a respected study Bible used by evangelicals. The footnote from the Holy Bible Recovery Version demonstrates the distinction between believing *in* Christ and believing *into* Him:

Believing into the Lord is not the same as believing Him (6:30). To believe Him is to believe that He is true and real, but to believe into Him is to receive Him and be united with Him as one. The former is to acknowledge a fact objectively; the latter is to receive a life subjectively.<sup>26</sup>

---

<sup>25</sup> Holy Bible Recovery Version, 2 Cor. 3:18, footnote 8.

<sup>26</sup> Holy Bible Recovery Version, John 3:16, footnote 2.

The ESV Study Bible makes the same distinction between believing *in* or *into* Christ:

Therefore **believes in me** implies personal trust in Christ. The preposition translated “in” (Gk. *eis*) is striking, for *eis* ordinarily means “into,” giving the sense that genuine faith in Christ in a sense brings people “into” Christ, so that they rest in and become united with Christ. (This same expression is found in 3:16, 18, 36; 6:35; 7:38; 12:44, 46; 14:12; 1 John 5:10.)<sup>27</sup>

Any sinner who repents of sin and believes into Jesus Christ receives the forgiveness of sins and is regenerated by the divine life to become a genuine child of God and a member of the Body of Christ. As believers, those who were once “apart from Christ” are now “in Christ Jesus” (Eph. 2:12-13) and are thus “a new creation” in Him (2 Cor. 5:17). Therefore, we receive all those whom Christ has received, and this to the glory of God (Rom. 15:7).

---

<sup>27</sup> ESV Study Bible, footnote on John 11:25.

## The Church

Despite our clear teaching that all those who are redeemed by the blood of Christ and regenerated by the Spirit are children of God and members of the Body of Christ, the signers of the declarations insist that we believe ourselves to be “God’s special chosen people,” “the real bride of God,” and “the only group of people who are preparing to rule with Jesus in the one thousand years.” Moreover, they accuse us of being spiritually proud, of not being able to have “real fellowship and respect with other churches’ members in Christ,” and yet of seeking fellowship with other Christians so that we may spread our beliefs in a secretive (and therefore dishonest) way. It is worth noting that the out-of-context quotes cited by the signers appear to have been taken from scurrilous Internet postings, which were answered in print and online years ago. The signers, then, have not come to these conclusions through their own study but have merely relied on the unprincipled work of others.

For example, the signers of the declarations object to the following statement from a footnote in the Recovery Version: “To deviate from the Lord’s word is apostasy, and to denominate the church by taking any name other than the Lord’s is spiritual fornication.”<sup>28</sup> We have responded to the misuse of this quote before, and our response has been freely available on the Internet considerably before the publication of the declarations. Our response reads in part:

But the stubborn fact remains...that *in the Bible* there simply are no denominations and no churches designated by denominational names. There are only local churches identified with the localities in which they reside (Acts 8:1; 13:1; Rom. 16:1; 1 Cor. 1:2; Rev. 1:4, 11). The word *denomination* itself means, simply,

---

<sup>28</sup> Holy Bible Recovery Version, Revelation 3:8, footnote 3.

“something distinguished from other things by virtue of a name.” Whose names do the denominational groups take to distinguish themselves from other Christians? They are typically names derived from their respective founders, for example, Lutheran and Wesleyan [1 Cor. 1:10-12], or from the practices or doctrines that make them distinct from others, for example, Baptist, Methodist, or Presbyterian. The only name that a chaste wife should have is the name of her husband alone and not the name of any other. The names themselves testify not of Christ as the church’s unique Husband but of the things that divide the groups from one another, such as a common history, practice, or doctrinal emphasis, and this is, as Witness Lee has stated, a kind of spiritual fornication. Further, the bearing of names other than the name of Christ is a deviation from the Lord’s word and is, in actuality, a form of apostasy, since the denominating of groups according to particular names is a practice that stands apart from the revelation of Scripture<sup>29</sup>.

While we stand by our understanding of the Bible concerning the proper expression of the church in a locality and the deviations of denominationalism, we do not insist that others practice the way we do in order to have fellowship with us. On the contrary, we recognize all the believers in a given city as members of the church in that city, regardless of whether they meet with us or not, as our published statement of faith also attests:

The church as the unique Body of Christ, the issue of the work of Christ (Eph. 1:22-23), is composed of all genuine believers in Christ (Rom. 12:5; 1 Cor. 12:12) and, according to the New Testament revelation, is manifested in time and space in local churches, each of

---

<sup>29</sup> “A Defense of the Gospel: Responses to an Open Letter from ‘Christian Scholars and Ministry Leaders’ (2)” (Fullerton: DCP Press, 2010), 97-98.



which includes all the believers in a given city, regardless of where they meet or how they may otherwise identify themselves (1 Cor. 1:2; 1 Thes. 1:1; Rev. 1:11).<sup>30</sup>

The signers of the declarations condemn us for our alleged attitude toward the denominations, and their censure gives the impression that we reject fellow Christians for meeting in denominational groups. This is neither true nor fair. Witness Lee's attitude toward believers who do not meet with us, as evidenced in the following quotations from his ministry, was one of generality, and we continue to practice according to what he taught:

We must receive the saints according to God's receiving of them. Whomever God has received, we are compelled to receive. We have no choice. Consider a family with many children. Some of the children are good and the others bad; some are sweet and the others naughty. Perhaps in such a large family some of the children may not be happy with all of their brothers and sisters. However, the children must realize that it does not rest with them to determine who their brothers and sisters will be. That depends upon the parents. If one of the children in this family thinks that his brother is ugly and complains against him, his complaint should not be directed against his brother, but against his parents who brought him forth. Our heavenly Father has brought forth many children, many Christians, and He has received them all. Therefore, we also must receive them, not according to our tastes or preferences, but according to God's receiving.<sup>31</sup>

---

<sup>30</sup> Available at <https://an-open-letter.org/en/our-faith/>.

<sup>31</sup> Witness Lee, *Life-study of Romans* (Anaheim: Living Stream Ministry, 1984), 331.

In the church life we must be general, able to receive all genuine believers. However, it is not easy to learn this lesson, because we all want others to be the same as we are. Let us not make demands of others or require that they change their way for our sake. Rather, let us have unity in variety and variety without conformity. Even though there may be such variety, we still are one in Christ.<sup>32</sup>

The signers also give the strong impression that we secretly try to influence believers from the denominations to meet with us or to convince them that we are somehow better than they are. But again Witness Lee's own words contradict the impression the signers seek to give.

We stand before the Lord whom we serve, and we have no intention of drawing anyone to be with us...I have said, "You can meet wherever you choose as long as it is beneficial to you"...I especially beseech the brothers never to say to anyone, "It is best that you come here to meet with us."<sup>33</sup>

We should not reject Christians from other Christian groups, but we do not need to seek them out. I do not believe that the Lord wants us to seek out believers from other Christian groups. I believe that the Lord wants us to take the gospel to every place and to minister life to His many children. The Lord wants a situation among us that can influence His children.

Where people meet and how they serve the Lord are entirely between them and the Lord; we cannot intervene in these things. In this age we must minister life to others. When people contact us, they should touch

---

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 622.

<sup>33</sup> Witness Lee, *Three Aspects of the Church: The Course of the Church* (Anaheim: Living Stream Ministry, 2006), 81.

something in us that is unforgettable. The way they take or where they meet does not matter; we should not consider that our meetings are better than those in Christianity or that our meetings have the greatest number of people.<sup>34</sup>

Despite the signers' concerted effort to make us seem exclusive, the fact is that we receive all the believers in Christ as He has received them, although conscience will not allow us to affirm denominationalism, which serves to perpetuate division in the Body of Christ.

---

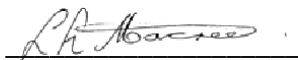
<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 217-218.



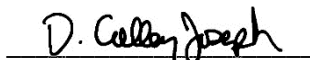
## Conclusion

The signers of the declarations have expressed their strong disagreement with the ministry of Witness Lee, a ministry from which millions have benefited immeasurably and have been helped to know the Bible and to grow in the love, knowledge, and experience of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. We are grieved that some who could have benefited richly from this ministry may have been turned away from it by critics who neither know nor have sought to know what Witness Lee actually taught and what the local churches believe. Nonetheless, we remain open to dialogue with those who signed the declarations in an effort to clear up misunderstandings and to be brought into genuine fellowship with them, as befits believers who profess the same Christ as Lord of all. May the Lord bless His saints “until we all arrive at the oneness of the faith” (Eph. 4:13).

*On behalf of the co-workers in the Lord's recovery:*



Ray Macnee



D. Colley Joseph

*Representatives of local churches in Myanmar and the United States:*



Noah Naw Aung

Myanmar



Haung Khaung (Howard)

Myanmar



Tumai Npawt

United States of America



James Kennedy

United States of America

