

A Response to the *Christian Research Journal's* Recent Defense of the “Local Church” Movement

Norm Geisler and Ron Rhodes

The Background of the Christian Research Institute Defense of the Local Church

The Local Church (LC), known for its litigious activity in threatening to sue (and actually suing) individuals and groups that call them a “cult,”¹ has been successful in forcing many organizations to retract the word “cult” in reference to them, as even the recent *Christian Research Journal* (published by CRI) admits (page 45).² Noted cult researcher Eric Pement has listed numerous examples of Christian groups that were threatened or sued by the LC, most of which CRI did not even attempt to refute in its *Journal* articles (45). It is a fact that the litigations of the LC drove a major countercult movement called Spiritual Counterfeits Project (SCP) into bankruptcy. The list of other groups threatened with lawsuits include Christian Literature Crusade, Christian Herald Books, Moody Bible Institute, Salem Kirban, *Eternity* Magazine, InterVarsity Press, Tyndale House Publishers, Jim Moran and Light of Truth Ministries, Berean Apologetics Research Ministry, and Daniel Azuma (45). Most recently they sued John Ankerberg and John Weldon in reference to their *Encyclopedia of Cults and New Religions* (ECNR), along with their publisher (Harvest House), for \$136 million. Had the suit been successful, it would have bankrupted both organizations. Pement rightly commented, “I doubt that the Mormons and the Jehovah’s Witnesses combined have issued as many lawsuits and threats of lawsuits against evangelical Christians” (45).

In the wake of this, “a long list of evangelical theologians, apologists, and leaders” (7) sent an “Open Letter” protesting the aberrant teachings of the LC (15), urging them to recant their unorthodox statements “that appear to contradict or compromise essential doctrines of the Christian faith” (15).³ Further, they asked the LC to “disavow and cease to publish these and similar declarations” (15). In addition, they requested that the LC desist their litigious activities against evangelical groups that do not

¹ Our use of the word “cult” in this document is not intended to be taken as an inflammatory or pejorative term. Defined theologically, a cult is “a group of people, which claiming to be Christian, embraces a particular doctrinal system taught by an individual leader, group of leaders, or organization, which (system) denies (either explicitly or implicitly) one or more of the central doctrines of the Christian faith as taught in the sixty-six books of the Bible” (Alan Gomes, *Unmasking the Cults* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995], p. 7).

² Unless otherwise noted, all page numbers are from the *Christian Research Journal* (No. 32, Number 6).

³ The term “aberrant” literally means “departing from an accepted standard.” In the context of this document, a doctrine is said to be aberrant if it undermines or is in significant tension with the orthodox beliefs of the historic Christian faith as based in the Bible and expressed in the early Christian creeds.

believe that their doctrines and practices measure up to the standards of evangelical beliefs and practices.

No apologies have been forthcoming by the LC, nor have they retracted the unorthodox statements. Instead, the Supreme Court of Texas disagreed with their charges against Ankerberg and Harvest House. The LC appeal to the U.S. Supreme Court also failed. This was a great victory for the countercult movement and all who seek to preserve evangelical orthodoxy, as we pointed out in our article titled “The Local Church Movement and the Supreme Court of Texas: A Big Victory for the Countercult Movement” (see “Articles” at www.normgeisler.com).

It is surprising to us that: 1) in spite of the final decision of the High Court against the LC, and 2) in spite of the majority view in the countercult movement against them, and 3) in spite of the failure of the LC to respond affirmatively to specific requests in the Open Letter from numerous evangelical leaders, and 4) in spite of my (Norman Geisler) personal plea to Hank Hanegraaff in my living room not to go this route, and 5) in spite of the fact that for years CRI admits to calling the LC “aberrant,” and “cultic,” if not “heretical” (49), and 6) in spite of the fact that CRI admits to being in possession of the basic material *then* which they *now* use to justify the LC—in spite of *all* this, CRI has launched a full-scale defense of the LC, going so far as to call them “solidly orthodox” (47) and in many ways “an exemplary group of Christians” (29)!

Evaluation of CRI’s Defense of the Local Church Movement

Not only does CRI no longer believe the LC is a cult, as they once did, but they do not even believe they are an “aberrant Christian group” (47). They now call the LC “a *solidly orthodox* group of believers” (47, emphasis added). Moreover, they say, members of the LC are in many ways “an exemplary group of Christians” (29). All this has come as a great surprise to the majority of countercult ministries and apologists who have studied the matter and have come to the opposite conclusion.

CRI not only now charges that the vast majority opinion in the countercult community on the LC (which goes against their minority view) is incorrect, but suggests that among LC critics, “animus drives ministry decisions” (47), seeming to imply that many who stand against LC doctrines may be motivated by animus. In light of the following evaluation, the reader can judge for him- or herself whether this conclusion is justified.

What CRI Admits about the LC

Even what CRI admits about numerous unrecanted statements of the LC is, in our view, cause for great concern. Consider the following as examples—all listed in the *Christian Research Journal* (15-16). The *Journal* concedes that such statements in the past provided sufficient fodder for knowledgeable cult researchers—including themselves—to come to the conclusion that the LC was an aberrant, if not cultic, group. Indeed, the *Journal* affirms: “We were convinced some of their teachings on essential doctrines were at best contradictory, at worst heretical” (49).

Controversial and Contradictory Statements

Statement # 1

“The Son is called the Father; so he must be the Father. There are some who say that He is called the Father, but He is not really the Father. But how could He be called the Father and yet not be the Father?”

Statement # 2

“The traditional explanation of the Trinity is grossly inadequate and borders on tritheism... they think of the Father as one person, sending the Son, another person, to accomplish redemption, after which the Son sends the Spirit, yet another person.”

Statement # 3

“THE SON IS THE FATHER, AND THE SON IS ALSO THE SPIRIT...and the Lord Jesus who is also the eternal Father. Our Lord is the Son, and He is also the Father.”

Statement # 4

“The Father, the Son, and the Spirit are not three separate persons or three Gods; they are one God, one reality, *one person*” (emphasis added). Note: While the three persons in the Godhead are not “separate” but rather distinct persons, nonetheless, they certainly are not “one person” as the LC declares.

Statement # 5

Witness Lee, the revered leader of the LC movement, stated clearly that “the entire Godhead, the Triune God, became flesh.” This same belief is repeated and defended by Ron Kangas, Editor-in-Chief of the LC journal (*Affirmation and Critique* [April, 2008. p. 6]) when he speaks of “the Triune God who passed through the process of incarnation...”

In spite of attempted explanations found elsewhere in LC literature (including the doctrine of coinherence, which we will address below), this statement flies in the face of the orthodox doctrines of the Trinity and the Incarnation which affirm that *only the Son*, the Second Person of the Triune God, became incarnate. It was not of the Father, but of the Son, that Scripture affirms: “The Word became flesh and dwelt among us...” (Jn. 1:14). Nowhere in Scripture or the early creeds is it ever claimed or suggested that the Father or “the entire Godhead” (via coinherence) became incarnate in human flesh. This is clearly an unorthodox statement. Yet, incredibly, CRI defends the LC’s orthodoxy in spite of this statement.

Doctrinally Careless Statements

At best, many of the LC statements are careless and lend to a modalistic understanding. CRI admits, “to be sure, Lee should have stated his concern more carefully” (20). And “the LC certainly could have and should have taken greater care to

explain the nuances of their controversial teachings...” (20). But if CRI was “sure” and has “certainty” that the LC has made unrecanted statements that “should” not have been made, then why are they still defending the LC when it refuses to change these statements which most knowledgeable people in the countercult community do not believe are orthodox statements? Even cult expert and former CRI employee, Gretchen Passantino Coburn, admitted that some LC teachings are “still confusing to many, especially outsiders” (49).

One has to ask why any group would *continue* to maintain careless, confusing, and uncorrected statements on crucial doctrines—even when urged by some of their friends (such as Hank Hanegraaff) to change them.

Apparently Unorthodox Statements

Interestingly, CRI admits that many statements by the LC *appear* to be unorthodox. Indeed, they admit that, given the statements on God by the LC, “one could reasonably surmise that Lee was affirming modalism” (25)—that is, *unless one had done the recent research that they have*. However, we now have seen the results of the same research and have come to the same conclusion, namely, that if the LC has made admittedly unorthodox-sounding statements, then *why does the LC continue to refuse to repudiate them?* Why not reword these statements to more accurately reflect their claimed intended meaning? And why does CRI defend them without demanding that they repudiate them? CRI even goes so far as to admit that their original conclusion that the LC was unorthodox was based on a “pattern” of “hot button words associated in our minds with heresy or cultism...” (34). But one must ask *why*—if there is a repeated pattern of unorthodox expressions which the LC *refuses to change*—should one so completely exonerate them as CRI has done, affirming that they are “solidly orthodox” (47)? Even CRI is forced to admit that “strong modalistic-sounding language [is] often found” in LC writings (21).

Admittedly Regrettable and Harsh Statements about Other Religious Groups

Strangely, CRI’s current devotion to the LC movement includes an almost blanket acceptance of them despite the fact that CRI admits they have uses “harsh,” “loaded,” and “regrettable” terms against other religious groups, such as “Babylon,” “spiritual fornication,” and “satanic system.” It is simply insufficient to counter this by producing an admission from the LC that there are true believers in others churches (35). Even in their very statement they claim that “the local church, so defined, is the only genuine and proper expression of the one universal church...” (35).

Not only does the LC believe they are the only proper and genuine local expression of the universal church, but they are unrepentant about making libelous statements about the rest of Christendom. In their Appeal to the Texas Supreme Court to reconsider their case, the LC ironically included an appendix containing Chapter Three from a book by Witness Lee titled, *The God-Ordained Way to Practice the New Testament Economy* in which he engages in a slanderous attack on “all of Christianity,” “all Christians,” “today’s Christendom” “all Christianity,” and “today’s Catholic Church.” He calls organized Christianity “deformed and degraded,” containing “false

teachers,” who are “in their apostasy.” The Roman Church is infested with “Satan’s evil spirits” and “full of all kinds of evils. Evil persons, evil practices, and evil things are lodging there.” It is an “adulterous woman who added leaven (signifying evil, heretical, and pagan things).” It is “the Mother of the Prostitutes” and an “apostate church.” Again, it is “full of idolatry,” “against God’s economy,” and “saturated with demonic and satanic things.” If ever there were grounds for religious libel, this would be it. Yet the LC objects strongly and litigiously when someone else calls them a “cult.” This is a classic example of the kettle calling the pot black!

The language of this attack on the rest of Christendom is not only “regrettable” and “harsh,” as even CRI admits, it is lamentable and inexcusable. In view of this, it is inconceivable that CRI can conclude of the LC that “it is therefore, once again, both unreasonable and unrealistic to call on them to renounce these statements by their late leader” (37) and to claim that they are “an exemplary group of Christians” (29). If LC members are in agreement with Lee’s statements above, how can this be said to be “solidly orthodox” and “exemplary”?

Apparently or Actually Contradictory Statements

CRI offers what they admit are apparently contradictory statements of the LC in an attempt to exonerate them from heresy.⁴ One such statement is that “although the Father and Son are one, between them there is still a distinction of *I* and *the Father*” (17). At best, however, this would show that the LC has made contradictory statements about God. It is noteworthy that the LC *still* refuses to repudiate their statements that the Father and Son are really the same (cited above). Merely appealing to the doctrine of coinherence does not alleviate our concerns (see below). As well, they refuse to accept the orthodox creedal statements on the Trinity.

After they cited me (Norm) in an article in their journal, I gave them an opportunity to clearly distinguish their view as orthodox *and they refused* (see Appendix below). So, despite the claim that they are open to dialog, and even after citing me in their journal, they were not open to any scholarly exchange with me.

Likewise, the LC’s alleged repudiation of patripassianism (the heresy that the Father suffered on the cross—17) is unconvincing since they also claim (and CRI apparently supports) the view, based on the doctrine of coinherence, that both the Father and the Son are involved in each other’s activities. They say, “no person of the Trinity goes anywhere or *does anything* apart from the presence and *involvement* of the other two persons” (23, emphasis added). If this were true, then the Father would have been involved in the suffering of Christ on the cross, which even they admit is the heresy of patripassianism. God was certainly present in His omnipresence, but God the Father is not God the Son, and the Father certainly was not involved in the experience of Christ’s suffering on the cross. CRI claims that “what is distinctly the Son’s actions... is likewise

⁴ Our use of the word “heresy” (or “heretical”) in this document is not intended to be taken as an inflammatory or pejorative term. Based on biblical usage, the word heresy refers to a divisive teaching or practice that is contrary to the historic Christian Faith as based on the Bible and expressed in the early Christian creeds. It involves a teaching or practice which compels true Christians to divide themselves from those who hold it.

the Father's operation." They cite with approval the statement that "there is an intercommunion of persons and an immanence of one divine person in another which permits the peculiar work of one to be ascribed...to either of the other..." (22). But, again, this confuses the different roles and actions of different members of the Godhead. For example, the Father did not die for our sins, nor does the Father eternally proceed from the Father, as the Son does from the Father.

There is a big difference between claiming that each member of the Trinity dwells *in* the others and claiming, as the LC does, that each member *is* the other. For the LC affirms that "the Son is called the Father; so he must *be* the Father. There are some who say that He is called the Father, but He is not *really* the Father. But how could He be called the Father and yet not *be* the Father?" (Statement # 1 above, emphasis added). Clearly, this is not an orthodox way to express the Trinity.

What is more, the LC affirms that there is only one "Person" in the Trinity (Statement # 4 above), while at the same time claiming there are "three distinct" persons in the Trinity. So, at best, the LC has both orthodox and unorthodox statements about the Trinity—which involves a contradiction. Hence, they are duty-bound to renounce the unorthodox elements of their theology.

Now, if CRI believes that the LC has made unrecanted statements that are *controversial, careless, apparently contradictory*, and which are unorthodox expressions as such, then how and why do they claim: "I believe that sufficient evidence has been provided to exonerate the LC from the charges of heresy, aberration, duplicity, and self-contradiction as regards the Trinity" (23)? This incredible conclusion does not match the evidence that even they admit.

A Response to the CRI Arguments for the LC

Many arguments are used by CRI to defend the LC. Two of the more substantive arguments are: 1) LC critics have taken the unorthodox-sounding statements of the LC out of context. If they understood the context, they would not pronounce them unorthodox. 2) These statements are explainable in the light of the orthodox doctrine of coinherence in the Trinity, and the distinction between the ontological Trinity and the economic Trinity.

We will examine these arguments below. First, however, we will briefly address some of the supportive arguments CRI offers in defense of the LC.

The Fear of Potential Persecution

The president of CRI, Hank Hanegraaff, argued in his Amicus brief to the High Court that calling the Local Church a cult will bring persecution on it and other Christian groups in religiously intolerant societies. He claimed that the word *cult* "can have dramatic and dangerous ramifications. This could be particularly harmful to any group, such as the Local Church, with large constituencies in religiously intolerant societies" (8.7/06 "Brief of Amicus Curiae Hank Hanegraaff," p. 2).

The Court rightly saw no merit in this pragmatic argument and for good reason. While we personally abhor all forms of religious persecution, and are not insensitive to the plight of those who do suffer such persecution, the fact remains that truth and legality

are not determined by what its possible social misuse may be. Further, in view of the libelous things the LC has uttered against the rest of Christendom (mentioned above), by this same argument, the Local Church has endangered all other Christian groups and denominations in China, who are now vulnerable to persecution by the Chinese government for the same reason. So, it is surprising that the otherwise thoughtful Gretchen Passantino Coburn is supporting such a poor argument—an argument that even her own brother, Cal Beisner, a sophisticated theologian, has had to rebuff her on.

The Approval of Fuller Seminary

It is noted by CRI that Fuller Seminary, after an allegedly thorough examination of the doctrines of the LC, has pronounced (in a letter on behalf of the Local Church of January 5, 2006) that “the teachings and practices of the local churches and its members represent the genuine historical, biblical Christian faith in every essential aspect.” But given Fuller’s own well-documented deviation from orthodoxy on the doctrine of Scripture, this is hardly a compliment. After several years of examination of one of its professors, Paul Jewett—who had said (in his book, *Man as Male and Female*) that the apostle Paul was wrong in what he affirmed as true (in 1 Cor. 11)—the seminary concluded that he was orthodox and retained him on their faculty. But if “whatever the Bible affirms, God affirms” is so (as B.B. Warfield and the ICBI “Chicago Statement” affirm), then their professor Paul Jewett denied inerrancy. It is not a surprise, then, that Fuller removed inerrancy from its founding doctrinal statement. Fuller Seminary is scarcely known as a bastion of orthodoxy, and neither is it known for its sophisticated discernment on cults and aberrant religions. One would be more likely to listen if seminaries such as Dallas, Denver, Grace, Masters, Trinity, or Westminster had exonerated the LC movement. The truth is that the one class of Christians that is most accustomed to doing this kind of analysis—the countercult movement—has spoken out loudly against the LC movement.

The Argument from More Research

One argument used by CRI is that their conclusions in favor of the LC should be believed because they have done better and more research on the topic (50). First of all, as we all know, *more* does not necessarily mean *better*. So, we can concentrate on what really matters. Gretchen Passantino Coburn claims she has done more research on this topic than most others and that she has been doing it for a longer time (50). However, it is clear that truth does not always reside with the persons who have read more or studied longer. Rather, it rests with those who can reason best from the evidence.

Further, there is really no new evidence available since CRI did its first research and found the LC to be aberrant, if not heretical. Even Passantino speaks of “reexamining” the evidence rather than discovering really new evidence. True, she speaks of looking at a “wide body of material” (50), but there was really nothing new. It was just more of the same basic facts they had known before. Elliot Miller speaks of it as “reassess-”ing (7), but confessed that they knew back then the kind of passages that are now being used to justify the LC (16). So, why CRI’s sudden reversal? It is not really new evidence. Is it that they now think that contradictory statements can both be true?

Apparently not. It is because they were prompted for some unknown reason to “reassess” and “reexamine” the same basic evidence and come to the opposite conclusion that the LC was really orthodox all along. In response, we recall Elliot Miller’s statement about the CRI staff raising the possibility that their leader Walter Martin softened his view toward the LC as a result of being “taken in” by Witness Lee after he met with him (11). One could ask whether Walter Martin would not now believe his successors at CRI have been “taken in” by the current LC leaders.

Further, as to the implied claim of truth-by-longevity-of-study argument, Gretchen Passantino claims she has “30 years in professional countercult apologetics” (letter in support of the LC, 8/18/06). If that has any weight, then my (Norm) view would have twice the weight since I have been doing apologetics for nearly 60 years now! Further, I have carefully examined CRI’s new recent reversal on the LC, and I am still convinced that they are unorthodox in many of their statements about God.

The Doctrine of Coinherence in God

CRI attempts to exonerate the LC from heresy on the Trinity by invoking the doctrine of coinherence in God. They claim that this means that it is legitimate to speak of one Person of the Trinity as being the other Person because there is an “interpenetration [of] one another” (22). However, this, in our view, is a serious misunderstanding of coinherence.

One evangelical theologian from Dallas Theological Seminary recently observed that “for much of the Eastern Orthodox tradition, as for an increasing number of scholars in the West, the unity of the Trinity is to be found in *perichoresis*, the inner habitation (or *coinherence*) of each divine person in the other. That is, each member of the Godhead in some sense indwells the other, without diminishing the full personhood of each. The essential unity of the Godhead, then, is found both in their intrinsic equality of divine characteristics and also in the intensely personal unity that comes from mutual indwelling” (Scott Horrell, “The Self-Giving Triune God,” www.bible.org). However, we can observe that those who hold to this particular understanding of coinherence are careful to retain the distinction between the three persons. Yes, the three Persons have *unity*, but they forever remain actually *distinct*. In this view, to say that the three Persons mutually indwell each other is *not* the same as saying that the three Persons *ARE* each other. That is, to say that the Father and the Son mutually indwell each other is not the same as saying that “the Son is the Father.” The latter is modalistic language.

One does well to recognize that, more foundationally, each of the three distinct Persons of the Trinity coinhere in the same divine essence. In this view, what they share in common is not their distinct personhoods—though they are indeed “intensely personal” with each other—but their common nature.

However one understands the doctrine of coinherence, it is illegitimate to conclude that the doctrine allows for referring to one Person in the Trinity as being another. That is, it is unorthodox to say “the Son is the Father” or “the Son is also the Holy Spirit.”

Appealing to “Everlasting Father” in Isaiah 9:6

Appealing to Isaiah 9:6, in our view, does not provide the scriptural support for this idea that the LC apparently hopes for (“For to us a child is born, to us a son is given; and the government shall be upon his shoulder, and his name shall be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, *Everlasting Father*, Prince of Peace”). First, when used of the First Person of the Trinity, the term “Father” is a distinctly New Testament term. That fact alone ought to clue the reader in that the term “eternal Father” in the Old Testament is being used in a different, unique sense of the Second Person of the Trinity (Isaiah 9:6). Moreover, in the New Testament, we must not forget that the Father is considered by Jesus as someone other than Himself over 200 times in the New Testament. And over 50 times in the New Testament the Father and Son are seen to be distinct within the same verse (see, for example, Rom. 15:6; 2 Cor. 1:4; Gal. 1:2-3; Phil. 2:10-11; 1 John 2:1; and 2 John 3). These facts set interpretive parameters regarding our understanding of Isaiah 9:6.

Based on the original Hebrew, the phrase “eternal Father” is better rendered into English, “Father of eternity.” In reference to Jesus this phrase can mean one of several things:

Jesus is Eternal. Some believe the phrase is here used here in accordance with the Hebrew mindset that says that he who possesses a thing is called the father of it. For example, the *father of knowledge* means intelligent, and the *father of glory* means glorious. According to this common usage, the meaning of *Father of eternity* in Isaiah 9:6 is “eternal.” Christ as the “Father of eternity” is an eternal being. In keeping with this, the ancient Targums—simplified paraphrases of the Old Testament Scriptures utilized by the ancient Jews—rendered Isaiah 9:6, “His name has been called from of old, Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, *He who lives forever*, the Anointed One (or Messiah), in whose days peace shall increase upon us.” A strong case can therefore be made that the term simply indicates the eternity of the divine Messiah, not that the Son (the Second Person of the Trinity) is the Father (the First Person of the Trinity).

Jesus Gives Us Eternal Life. A second viable view is that the first part of verse six makes reference to the incarnation of Jesus. The part of the verse that lists the names by which He is called expresses His relationship to His people. He is *to us* the Wonderful Counselor, the Mighty God, the Father of Eternity, the Prince of Peace. In this sense of the word “Father,” Jesus is a *provider of eternal life* for His people. By His death, burial, and resurrection, He has brought life and immortality to light (2 Tim. 1:10). Again, however, the verse does not give justification for saying that the Son (the Second Person of the Trinity) is the Father (the First Person of the Trinity).

Appealing to “The Lord is the Spirit” in 2 Corinthians 3:17

Nor is there any real support for saying the Son (the Second Person of the Trinity) is also the Spirit (the Third Person of the Trinity) from 2 Corinthians 3:17 (“Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom”). Many expositors view this verse as saying that the Holy Spirit is “Lord” not in the sense of being Jesus but in the sense of being Yahweh (the Lord God) (cf. v. 16, which cites Exod. 34:34). One must observe that just earlier in 2 Corinthians 3 (vs. 3-6) the apostle Paul clearly distinguishes between Jesus and the Holy Spirit (see vs. 3-6). More broadly, the whole of Scripture indicates that Jesus is not the Holy Spirit. Indeed, the Holy Spirit is said to be *another* comforter (John 14:16; cf. 1 John 2:1). Jesus *sent* the Holy Spirit (John

15:26; 16:7). The Holy Spirit *seeks to glorify* Jesus (John 16:13-14). The Holy Spirit *descended upon* Jesus at His baptism (Luke 3:22). Even if one holds to the doctrine of coinherence (affirming that the Son and the Holy Spirit mutually indwell each other), they are still distinct, and this doctrine should not be taken to mean it is acceptable to say that the Son (the Second Person of the Trinity) is also the Spirit (the Third Person of the Trinity), which is an unorthodox and modalistic way of expressing it.

Appealing to “I am in the Father and the Father is in me” in John 14:10

Support for the doctrine of coinherence is often sought in John 14:10, where Jesus states: “Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me?” Based on this verse, it is argued that because *Jesus is in the Father* and *the Father is in Jesus* that it is acceptable to say that “the Son is the Father.” If that is true, then when Jesus says in John 14:20, “In that day you will know that *I am in my Father*, and *you in me*, and *I in you*,” can I thus say that “I am Jesus Christ” since I am “in” Jesus and Jesus is “in” me (compare with John 17:21)? Obviously not.

Please do not misunderstand what we are saying. We grant that there is an intimate personal unity among the Persons of the Trinity. However, we also believe that it involves a leap in logic to say that simply because the Father is “in” the Son and the Son is “in” the Father (John 14:10) that it is therefore acceptable to say that “the Son (the Second Person of the Trinity) *is* the Father (the First Person of the Trinity),” which is a modalistic way of expressing it.

It should be emphasized that Jesus in the New Testament never says the Son is the Father or that the Father is the Son, which is what the LC holds. Remember, the LC affirms (see Statement # 1 above) that “the Son is called the Father; so he must *be* the Father. There are some who say that He is *called* the Father, but He is not *really* the Father. But how could He be *called* the Father and yet not *be* the Father?” (emphasis added). Notice that the LC claims that the Son “really” is the Father and vice versa; he is not simply “called” the Father.

To illustrate the absurdity of the LC position, one final citation from Witness Lee is necessary. He wrote: “Because the Father, the Son, and the Spirit are all one with the Body of Christ, we may say that the Triune God is now the ‘four-in-one’ God. These four are the Father, the Son, the Spirit, and the Body. The Three of the Divine Trinity cannot be confused or separated, and the four-in-one also cannot be separated or confused.” (Lee, *A Deeper Study*, 203-204). No amount of hermeneutical gyrations can untangle this theological absurdity. Clearly, Lee does not hold the orthodox view of the Trinity which allows no creature or creatures to be one with the members of the Trinity in the same sense that the Body of Christ (the Church) is one with God. Defending such a view is both senseless and useless.

The Distinction between the Ontological Trinity and the Economic Trinity

CRI also cites a distinction between “the activities of the three persons in the economic Trinity and the coinherence of the three persons in the essential Trinity” (16).

Witness Lee is quoted as affirming that in eternity, “we may say that the Triune God has three persons but only one essence; the persons should not be confused and the essence should not be divided” (16). But Lee elsewhere contradicts this by saying,

“Actually, to use the designation ‘three persons’ to explain the Father, Son, and Spirit is also not quite satisfactory because ‘three Persons’ really means three persons.... Like all human language, it is liable to be accused of inadequacy and even positive error. It certainly must not be pressed too far, or it will lead to Tritheism.... We dare not say that the Father, the Son, and the Spirit are three persons, nor do we dare say that they are not, because this is truly a mystery” (21). In response, we would point out that we dare not make statements that are *contradictory*. Nor, should we use unorthodox language that is modalistic. Even CRI admits that the LC uses “strong modalistic-sounding language” (21).

CRI admits that they knew from the beginning that the LC made contradictory statements about the Trinity (7). This is why CRI originally considered the LC “aberrant” rather than a “cult,” because the LC “add[ed] to those confessions of orthodoxy further affirmations that contradict, compromise, or undermine them” (16).

For some strange reason, CRI now argues that these once admitted contradictory statements are now *not* contradictory. What prompted the change of mind? Do these reputable cult apologists (such as Elliot Miller and Gretchen Passantino) now believe that the statements “God is only one Person” and “God is three distinct Persons” is now not a contradiction? In brief, strangely, the answer is *Yes*. How so? Because, we are told, the LC makes a distinction between the “essential Trinity” and the “economic Trinity.” The “essential” Trinity is the Trinity in itself from all eternity. The “economic” Trinity is the Trinity in operation in creation. In the “essential Trinity” there are three distinct Persons, but in the “economic” (operational) Trinity there is no difference between them. They are so co-mingled with each other in their activities that one member of the Trinity can be called the other. The Father is the Son; the Son is the Father, and so on.

In response, two points must be made. First, to clarify, there are not of course really two Trinities but only one. If there were two, then this would be a serious heresy of denying that there is only one God. Thus, at best, the distinction between an “essential” and “operational” Trinity is not an ontological (real) distinction since, in reality, there is only one Trinity. Thus, the “operational Trinity” is, at best, only a way of speaking about the one and only essential Trinity’s *activities*, not His essential *Being*. But even here when one member of the Trinity *acts* in the world, He is still *distinct* from the other members, *even if* they are co-acting with Him. For example, when co-authors such as ourselves mingle our minds and act together by co-authoring the same thoughts and words in the same book, we are still in this action *two different persons*. And no such co-action justifies anyone calling Ron “Norm,” or calling Norm “Ron.” We are two *really distinct* persons with different names.⁵

Ultimately, the problems for the LC view here (and CRI apologists) are that: 1) in the “essential Trinity” they either a) have a traditional modalistic heresy of not affirming three *really distinct* Persons in God, or else b) they have a *contradiction* (wherein God is both *one* Person and *not one* person but *three distinct* persons), and 2) in the “economical Trinity” they have a *heresy*, constituting a new sub-category of modalism—what we might call *operational modalism*. In either case, it should be rejected as not orthodox.

⁵ Of course, like most analogies, this is not a perfect one since, as human beings, we are not only *distinct persons*, but we are also *separate beings* from each other. Our point is that *co-acting* does not blur the distinction between *persons*.

With this in mind, we can see that the distinction between “economic” and “operational” Trinities does not eliminate the contradiction and does not preserve orthodoxy. Distinctions in God (like “economic” and “essential”) have been made by the LC where there are no such *real* differences in Him. This is not to say that there is no difference between God and His actions; there is. It is simply to say that there is no difference in the nature of God *prior to* His actions, *during* His actions, and *after* His actions. God does not lose His true identity of one nature and three distinct persons when He is acting in this world any more than we lose our distinct identities when we engage in the actions of co-authoring an article or a book.

However, Witness Lee used a traditional modalistic analogy for the Trinity when he spoke of God being one person in “three appearances.” He said, “If you could visit him [the man in his illustration] at his home in the early hours of the day, you would see that He is a father or a husband. After breakfast, he may go to the university to be a professor. Then at the hospital in the afternoon, you may see him in a white uniform as a doctor. Why is he these three kinds of persons?... [In God] There are three Persons, but only one name)... [Likewise] The father in the home, the professor in the university, and the doctor in the hospital are also three persons with one name” (Witness Lee, *The Practical Expression of the Church*, Living Stream Ministry, 1970, p. 8, inserts added for clarification). Such language is clearly modalistic, for one and only one person is performing three different roles, which Lee calls “three persons.” But these “three persons” are not really three *distinctly different* persons, as in the orthodox view of the Trinity. Rather, it is only one Person who performs three different roles. There is hardly a better illustration of modalism than this.

Further, a case can be made that the LC holds to a progressive form of modalism in which the one God expresses Himself in three stages or successive steps. Witness Lee affirmed: “In the heavens, where man cannot see, God the Father; when He is expressed among men, He is the Son; and when He comes into men, He is the Spirit” (Witness Lee, *Concerning the Triune God*, Living Stream Ministry, n.d., pp. 8-9). Lee also wrote, “Our God is the Triune God, and He has been processed so that He can be dispensed into us.... When a watermelon has become processed into juice, it can easily be taken into us to become our very element. God the Father has been processed through God the Son, and now He is God the Spirit.... Likewise, we can drink the Spirit, who is the ultimate consummation of the processed Triune God. Our God today is the ‘juice God’... Because God has been processed, He is drinkable” (Witness Lee, *The History of the Church and Local Churches*, p. 10). Lee wrote, “In eternity past God existed alone.... At a certain point in history, this creating God, the Creator of all, became man.... After His crucifixion, Christ was buried in a tomb.... After three days, Christ arose from the dead in His resurrection. Through the resurrection and in the resurrection He became the life-giving Spirit [the Holy Spirit]... Because God, after completing the work of creation, passed through incarnation, human living, crucifixion, resurrection, ascension, and descension, we may speak of Him as the processed God” (“What is the Process of God’s Economy?” *The Hearing of Faith: Living Stream Ministry Radio Newsletter*, Number 34, Feb. 2001, p. 2, insert added for clarification). So, “the Father who listens to the praying is the Son who prays; and the Son who prays is also the Father who listens to the prayer” (Witness Lee, *Concerning the Triune God*, p. 27).

In fact, Lee did not hesitate to distinguish his view from the orthodox view of the Trinity, calling the orthodox view “the traditional teaching concerning the Trinity... Now we believe that the Son is the Father and also that the Lord is the Spirit” (Witness Lee, *Young People’s Training*, Living Stream Ministry, 1989, p. 110). Lee adds, “I realize that this offends the theology of Christianity, but I have some verses from the pure Word as the ground to say this” (Witness Lee, *The Wonderful Christ*, Living Stream Ministry, 1989, pp. 23-24). Then he cites Isaiah 9:6 and John 14 (which were discussed above).

In seeming contradiction, Lee also states: “But we still believe the other side of the Triune God—that all Three of the Godhead exist at the same time, and among Them there is real coinherence for eternity.” He adds, “Although we cannot reconcile these two aspects of the Trinity, we absolutely believe them both” (Witness Lee, *Young People’s Training*, Living Stream Ministry, 1989, p. 110). Here again, what Lee calls a “mystery” he does not really distinguish from a logical contradiction.

Ron Kangas, editor-in-chief of the LC journal, expresses the same basic view, claiming that the Members of the Godhead are “distinct” and yet only one. He declared that “essentially, God is one, but economically He is three...” (*Affirmation and Critique*, vol. x111, No 1, April 2008, p. 5).

Further, Kangas goes on to claim that, although God in eternity (in his essential state) is unchangeable, nonetheless, God in time (in his economical mode) does change. God changes successively from Father (in the OT) to the Son (in the Incarnation) to the Holy Spirit (after the resurrection). This Kangas calls the “processed God—the Triune God who passed through the process of incarnation...” (ibid., p. 6). Of this process God undergoes, Kangas uses words like “changed,” “became,” and “entered upon a new stage existence” (ibid., p. 10). Yet somehow God in His essential nature remains unchanged through all this. Realizing the apparent contradiction here, Kangas here too appeals to Lee’s mysterious doctrine of the “Twofoldness of Truth.”

The Use of “Twofoldness of Truth” in Defense of the LC

CRI apologists attempt to justify Witness Lee and the LC by defending the belief in “twofold truth.” They ask, “What about Lee’s declarations that the Son is the Father and the Spirit?” (21)? And what about the LC claim that God cannot change in His essential nature, but that He did change in the incarnation? Are these not contradictory? Despite the fact that they admit that they have “advised the LC against making such declarations” (21), they insist that “when he [Witness Lee] affirmed that the Trinity is one person he was not engaging in boldfaced self-contradiction” (21).

In response, let us be clear: *There are no degrees of contradiction.* Either something is logically contradictory or it is not. Non-boldfaced contradictions are *still* contradictions. Nor can it be excused, as CRI attempts to do so, on “Western” (21) and “Aristotelian” (49) type thinking. Aristotle did not invent logic, nor is the law of non-contradiction limited to Western minds. Eastern minds can’t avoid the laws of logic either. Once one gives up on the law of non-contradiction, there is no basis for intelligible affirmations or denials, orthodox or unorthodox. It is simply not possible for God to be both only *one Person* and also *three Persons* at the *same time* and in the *same sense*. But Lee does not distinguish any different sense in which God is both only *one Person* and

three Persons in the ontological Trinity. Nor do LC leaders distinguish any real difference between claiming God is three Persons and yet only one Person in His essential Being.

The Use of Cornelius Van Til

The use of Cornelius Van Til to justify contradictions in LC thinking about God is questionable for several reasons. First, Van Til never denied the early Christian creeds which define God as having three distinct Persons in one essence. What he did was to say that in some sense God can be also designated as a Person, as well as defined as three distinct Persons. To give Van Til the benefit of the doubt, either his insistence on God as a Person should be taken to refer to the Godhead overall as a tri-personal being, or else we must understand that the term “Person” does not mean exactly the same thing when speaking of God *as one* as it does when speaking of God *as three*. If not, then Van Til would either be involved in a contradiction (namely, affirming that God is only *one* Person and also *three* Persons at the *same time* and in the *same sense*) or else it would be heretical. If Van Til is orthodox here, then he should not be used to support the unorthodox LC position. If he is unorthodox, then using one unorthodox view to support another unorthodox view is not a good way to defend orthodoxy.

The Use of Theologian Augustus Strong

CRI appeals to the noted Baptist theologian Augustus Strong in support of the LC view. But even the citation they use does not justify the LC belief that the Father is the Son and the Son is the Father and that the name Father can be used of the Son and vice versa. For Strong rightly says that “there is intercommunication of persons and an immanence of one person *in* another which permits the peculiar work of one to be ascribed...to either of the other...” (22, emphasis added). But he does not say that one person *is* the other; he merely says that one person is *in* the other. This is *indwelling*, not *identity*. God is *in* believers, but God and believers are not *identical*. In fact, Strong flatly affirms that “*as respects their personalities, [they] are distinct subsistences*” (22). This gives no support to the modalistic-sounding view of the LC now being approved by CRI.

Concluding Comments

CRI rejects the Texas Appellate Court decision regarding the constitutionality of calling the LC a cult both in a theological sense and in a sociological sense. In truth, the decision was a great victory for all orthodox, conservative, and evangelical Christians. For, as we pointed out in our amicus brief to the Texas Supreme Court (which upheld the Texas Appellate Court’s decision), this would be a violation of free speech, since it would deny us the freedom to define the limits of our own orthodox beliefs by distinguishing them from unorthodox beliefs. The LC rightly but reluctantly had to acknowledge that “it is nothing more than an expression of religious opinion that the Local Church is a ‘cult’ in a theological sense. *It is a type of religious opinion that is undisputedly protected by the Establishment Clause...*” (p. 9, emphasis added).

As for their residual charge that Ankerberg, Weldon, and Harvest House had libelously labeled the LC a cult in a sociological sense, the court rejected this as well, as

indeed it should have. For nowhere did they make false or libelous charges against the LC.

Indeed, the best CRI can produce in support of their contention is that Ankerberg and Weldon made “imprecise” statements that could possibly be construed as including the LC and that “imprecise allegations can still result in character assassination and should therefore be considered defamatory” (43). However, on this ground, most theologians and Christian writers I know (to say nothing of many hymn writers) should all be put in jail!

One final comment should be made about CRI’s justification of LC lawsuits. Despite the fact that they agree that the LC multimillion dollar lawsuit against Ankerberg was a “mistake” (44), they went on to justify LC lawsuits, claiming, “LC always took legal action as a last resort when the parties absolutely refused to meet with them as Christian brothers.” Despite factual evidence provided by Ankerberg and Harvest House to the contrary (which convinced the High Courts), one is hard-pressed to justify these kinds of lawsuits on biblical grounds. First Corinthians 6 is clear on these kinds of disputes among Christians. Matthew 18 sets the pattern to follow, and in it the last recourse is to take it to “the church,” (v. 17), not to secular courts. In 1 Corinthians 6, the bottom line is: “To have lawsuits at all with one another is already a defeat for you. Why not rather suffer wrong?” (v. 7). Further, CRI attempts in vain to show moral (or biblical) equivalence between this kind of theological and moral issue and other friendly and/or financial suits a corporation may take to get its rightful financial due.

The LC’s attempt to justify their lawsuits have a hollow sound, by claiming that “we did not do so lightly or without cause” (46), adding unconvincingly that they were “forced [to] file lawsuits in the United States when no other avenue was open to us” (46). In truth, no one forced the LC to do it. They did it of their own free will.

CRI’s use of Paul appealing to Caesar (46) in his own defense against false charges that involved his life is a desperate attempt to justify the biblically unjustifiable. There has always been another alternative that the LC refused to take, namely, to stop suing and threatening to sue other Christians, to admit and revise its false statements about the Triune God of Scripture, and to apologize for their harsh statements about Christian organizations, such as “spiritual fornication” and “satanic.”

Meanwhile, CRI needs to reexamine its own near-blanket justification of such an aberrant and unrepentant organization as “solidly orthodox” (47) and are in many ways “an exemplary group of Christians” (29). Indeed, their whole effort is more of a self-justification than a self-confession. We are still left with the mystery of explaining how my friends and otherwise good countercult researchers (like Elliot Miller and Gretchen Passantino Colburn) could be persuaded to use their considerable talents to over-defend a group which they once believed—and most countercult scholars *still do* believe—is unorthodox. Further, one is greatly disappointed that one of the foremost countercult groups in the country could sacrifice its once high credibility in their nearly unqualified justification of this aberrant and cultic group.

Appendix

The following letter was sent to Mr. Kangas, editor-in chief of the LC journal. He used my name (Norm) in his article “The Economy of God: The Triune God in His Operation” in the LC journal called *Affirmation and Critique: A Journal of Christian Thought*. So, I assumed (wrongly) that he was open to dialogue. Had he answered my questions, he could have clarified LC views. Not answering them leaves a shadow over their position. He included a “Statement of Faith” next to the article which affirmed that “...we believe that God is eternally one and also eternally the Father, the Son, and the Spirit, the three being distinct but not separate.” Noticing, among other things, his refusal to use the orthodox statement on the Trinity which speaks of three distinct “Persons,” I wrote him the following letter to which I never got a reply.

June 1, 2008
Editor-in-Chief Ron Kangas
Affirmation and Critique
Living Stream Ministry

Dear Mr. Kangas:

Thank you for the copy of your Journal. Since you mentioned me in your article, I thought I would take this opportunity to ask for some clarification of your views.

First, if you desired to be considered orthodox in your “Statement of Faith,” then why did you leave out the word “person” of the three members of the Trinity. To be orthodox you should have said “three [persons] being distinct” and “we confess the third [person] of the Trinity.” If it is not a triunity of persons in one essence, then what are the “three”? You rightly claim they are not “three separate gods.” Yet you deny they are merely three “modes” of one person. Then, what (or who) are the three?

Second, you speak of an “essential Trinity.” But again, who (or what) are the three in this essential tri-unity. The Word “Trinity” means, as you recognize, three in one. But if the one is the essence, then who (or what) are the three? There can’t be three essences in one essence.

Third, you claim your view is not “modalism,” but you never clearly affirm there are three distinct persons in the Trinity in distinction from modalism. If there is only one person, then this is modalism. And if there are three distinct persons in the one essence of the Godhead (which you do not affirm), then this is the orthodox view of the Trinity.

Fourth, what do you mean by “twofoldness” of truth. Can logical opposites both be true? You seem to say that Christ was both divine and human in one nature. For example, you affirm he is both “infinite God and a finite man.” You say that “God is infinite, and man is finite, yet in Christ the two became one.” This is not the orthodox doctrine of the Trinity, which never affirms that God (the infinite) became man (the finite). Rather, it asserts that the second person of the Godhead became man. Certainly, the Father and the Spirit did not become human. Only the Son became human. That is, he (who was the second person of the Godhead from all eternity) assumed another distinctly different nature and thus was both God and man united in one person (but not in one nature).

Fifth, what do you mean when you say that Christ's resurrection body is both a glorified body of "flesh and bones" and yet at the same time "the Spirit of reality." How can it be both material and not material (im-material) at the same time?

Sixth, how would you distinguish your view from the heresy called monophysitism which co-mingled the two natures of Christ? How can he be both finite and not-finite (in-finite) at the same time in the same sense?

Seventh, how would you distinguish your view from the Yin-Yang of Taoism where ultimate reality is beyond distinctions like true or false, and opposites can both be one? Your view of "coinherence" and "mingling" sounds very much like a denial that the Law of Non-contradiction applies to God. Do you believe that our statements about God must be non-contradictory in order to be true?

Eighth, you say God is "immutable" and yet is in process, calling Him the "processed God." This, too, sounds like a contradiction where the unchangeable actually changes. How can this be?

Sincerely awaiting your reply,
Norman L. Geisler