

An Open Letter from the Local Churches and Living Stream Ministry Concerning the Teachings of Witness Lee

Introduction

Over the past nine decades the ministry of Watchman Nee and Witness Lee has edified believers in Christ and produced local churches on all six inhabited continents. The ministry of these two servants of God, which is published by Living Stream Ministry (LSM), stands upon the shoulders of the many great Christian teachers of the past to present both the broad span and the spiritual depths of the New Testament truths, particularly from the perspective of the believers knowing and experiencing Christ as their life for the building up of the church as the Body of Christ. The resilience of the churches produced through their ministry is exemplified by the believers in China, who have proven steadfast and have flourished in the face of decades of extreme persecution, as well as by hundreds of local churches in North America that have faithfully persevered and spread despite nearly forty years of intense opposition.

Our Faith

The faith affirmed by the local churches is the faith common to all believers, namely that:

- 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);
- There is one God (Deut. 6:4; 1 Cor. 8:4b; Isa. 45:5a), who is triune—the Father, the Son, and the Spirit (Matt. 28:19), co-existing (Matt. 3:16-17; 2 Cor. 13:14) and coinhering (John 14:10-11) in three persons, or hypostases, distinct but never separate, from eternity to eternity;
- 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);
- 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 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); and

- All the believers in Christ will participate in the divine blessings in the New Jerusalem in the new heaven and new earth for eternity (Rev. 21:1—22:5).

These seven items broadly represent what we hold as “the faith once for all delivered to the saints” (Jude 3). Although our teachings on other, secondary items are also grounded in Scripture, we acknowledge that genuine believers have historically held to many differing interpretations on these matters and continue to do so today. Therefore we diligently practice to receive all those whom the Lord has received (Rom. 14:3; 15:7).

The Lord’s Recovery—The Life, Function, and Practical Oneness of the Believers

We believe that the Lord is moving today to recover the proper testimony of the church in this age based upon the truths revealed in the New Testament. To this end He is working to recover the genuine experience of Christ as life, the function of all the members of His Body, and the practical oneness among the believers.

In *The Conclusion of the New Testament* Witness Lee provides a helpful explanation of the concept of “recovery”:

When we speak of the recovery of the church, we mean that something was there originally, that it became lost or damaged, and that now there is the need to bring that thing back to its original state. Because the church has become degraded through the many centuries of its history, it needs to be restored according to God’s original intention. Concerning the church, our vision should be governed not by the present situation nor by traditional practice but by God’s original intention and standard as revealed in the Scriptures. (*The Conclusion of the New Testament, Messages 221-239, 2447*)

In 1948 Watchman Nee spoke of the need for the recovery of the proper testimony of the Body of Christ that would match Ephesians 4:

Brothers and sisters, we believe that there will be a day when God’s recovery will reach the fulfillment of Ephesians 4. God is doing a recovery work everywhere. The ultimate work among all these works may very well be the recovery of the Body testimony. God’s leading today is to bring us back to the beginning and to recover us to the condition at the beginning. (*The Collected Works of Watchman Nee, Volume 57: The Resumption of Watchman Nee’s Ministry, 221*)

The Experience of Christ as Life

One vital item of recovery to which we are committed is the experience of Christ as life. In the writings of John there are many striking statements that reveal the Lord Himself as life and His intention that His believers know Him as life: “I am the way and the reality and the life” (John 14:6), “I am the resurrection and the life” (11:25), “I have come that

they may have life” (10:10), and “He who has the Son has the life” (1 John 5:12), to cite just a few. The “life” spoken of by both John and the Lord Jesus is the very uncreated, divine life of God (Eph. 4:18), the eternal life of the Triune God (John 3:15-16), that is embodied in Christ and was lived out through Him while He was on the earth. It is life of another kind, of a source other than our mere human life. It is the life that is imparted into all believers at their regeneration, that is, when they are born again (v. 6). It is the life meant to be experienced and enjoyed by God’s people for their full salvation (Rom. 5:10). It is only by this life and the experience of the unsearchable riches of Christ that the church can manifest and express Christ as a living reality (Eph. 3:8, 10). In the ministry of Watchman Nee and Witness Lee, this life is the basis for all genuine Christian experience. Throughout their writings the eternal, uncreated life of God is made known, made practical, and made experiential. There is no greater need among God’s people, and no matter more crucial, than the experience of Christ as life.

The Functioning of All the Members of the Body of Christ

Another item being recovered by the Lord today is the crucial matter of the functioning of all the believers to build up the Body of Christ. According to Ephesians 4:11-12, the specially gifted members given to the Body by the Head do not accomplish the building up of the Body directly. Rather, they perfect all the believers to carry out the work of the ministry. Through the functioning of the gifted members as the joints of the rich supply and the operation in the measure of each perfected member, the Body of Christ builds itself up in the divine love organically and in mutuality (Eph. 4:16).

Watchman Nee taught the importance of perfecting, or equipping, all the believers to function as members of the Body rather than limiting the Lord’s service to the work of a few:

In the church no member should be left out. This is not the way taken by the Lord. Today, if the Lord is going to recover His testimony, He must make all the one-talented ones rise up. All who belong to the Lord are the members of the Body. Everyone must rise up and be in his function. (*The Collected Works of Watchman Nee, Volume 51: Church Affairs, 57-58*)

Witness Lee labored to work out the way to practice this. In the principle of “each one has” (1 Cor. 14:26), everyone in the local churches is encouraged and equipped to be an active participant in the meetings of the churches. Witness Lee laid out the biblical premise:

In the present advance of the Lord’s recovery, He is also moving to recover the church meeting in mutuality (1 Cor. 14:23a, 26). In a big meeting with one person speaking and the rest listening, there is no mutuality. We have to meet as the church in the way that is revealed in 1 Corinthians 14:26— “Whenever you come together, each one has....” For every meeting we should get ourselves exercised to have something ready to share in the meeting. Then day after day, week after week, month after month, and year after year, we all will be exercised for the building up of the Body of Christ organically. (*The Present Advance of the Lord’s Recovery, 15*)

If you visit a Lord's Day meeting of a local church, you will likely find such a meeting in mutuality: not one speaker, but many—perhaps twenty or thirty—each sharing their portion of Christ from their study of the Word, their contact with the Lord through prayer, and their day-by-day enjoyment and experience of Christ. This, indeed, is a striking characteristic of the churches raised up by this ministry.

A Practical Testimony of Oneness

According to Matthew 16:18, the church is first revealed in the New Testament as universal. Then, in Matthew 18:17, the church in its practicality is revealed as local. Since the universal church includes all believers, so also should its practical expression in a particular locality. Therefore, we hold the conviction that the biblical model for the church as practiced in the first century is more than adequate for the believers today. Since the church is God's goal in this age and is woven into the very fabric of the gospel (Eph. 1—4), we dare not tamper with, adjust, or add to the blueprint unveiled in Scripture any more than we would tamper with, adjust, or add to the truth of the gospel. That blueprint identifies the church in a given place as being bounded by its geographical location, the city (Acts 14:23; Titus 1:5; 1 Cor. 1:2), and is inclusive of all the believers in that city. Hence, we meet only as the church in Los Angeles, the church in London, or the church in Hong Kong, according to the revelation of the New Testament (Acts 8:1; 13:1; Rev. 1:11; 2:1, 8, 12, 18; 3:1, 7, 14). All believers possess the “oneness of the Spirit” (Eph. 4:3), and by meeting on the ground of this oneness, they seek to testify to that oneness, the oneness of the entire Body of Christ. We respect that every believer should be persuaded before the Lord as to how to meet and identify himself. Thus we make no distinction between those who meet with us and those who do not (Rom. 15:7; 1 Cor. 1:9). We feel compelled by conscience to maintain the testimony of oneness for the sake of the entire Body of Christ.

How precious it is simply to take the Word of God by faith. It is our testimony that it is possible to practice the biblical revelation concerning the experience of Christ as life, the building up the Body of Christ by the functioning of all the members in mutuality, and the testimony of the oneness of the Body of Christ in local churches. We believe that what the Lord desires to recover is for the benefit of the entire Body of Christ, and we treasure fellowship in mutuality with our fellow believers in Christ.

History

Both Watchman Nee and Witness Lee were raised in Christian homes in the early twentieth century. As young men they began to serve the Lord in the 1920s in their respective hometowns in the south and north of China. Both diligently studied the classic Christian writers, and both had ministries that bore the unmistakable sign of God's blessing. In 1932 Witness Lee joined Watchman Nee in Shanghai to carry out one work emphasizing the experience of Christ as life and the building up of the church. What followed was a remarkable move of the Holy Spirit. The depths of the truths in the Bible poured forth through their ministry as they labored diligently to bring the believers into a personal and corporate living that matches the New Testament. Their work attracted tens of thousands of followers among native Chinese, most of whom were newly saved.

By the time the People's Republic of China (PRC) was established in 1949, several hundred local churches, often called the "Little Flock" by outsiders, had been raised up throughout the country. The local churches were able not only to survive persecution but also to thrive and flourish under it, because they strongly emphasized the need of every member to have a daily time with the Lord in His Word, to learn to serve Him in the gospel, and to have regular fellowship with other believers, including meeting from house to house (Acts 2:46). This pattern affected much of the "underground church" in China. Today it is estimated that there are between eighty and one hundred million believers there. Many of them offer much credit and gratitude to Watchman Nee for the survival of the church in China.

In 1949, prior to the establishment of the PRC, Watchman Nee, with the support of his co-workers, charged Witness Lee to go to Taiwan with the hope of preserving all that the Lord had revealed and established through their labor. This decision was shown to be under the sovereign hand of God. Nee was arrested two years later, along with many leading ones among the local churches. He was never released, and his direct ministry ended at that time.

The extent and reach of the work of these two men is remarkable. Five years after Watchman Nee's arrest, and totally unbeknown to him, notes were published from a series of messages he had given in Europe in the 1930s. These notes were published in 1957 in a book entitled *The Normal Christian Life*. Over the next ten years it became tremendously popular in Europe, North America, and eventually on every continent. It is widely considered a twentieth century Christian classic and is receiving renewed interest today. In ensuing years several other titles by Watchman Nee, including *Changed into His Likeness*, *Love Not the World*, *The Normal Christian Church Life*, and *Sit, Walk, Stand*, were also published in English. Each achieved great popularity, and by the mid-1960s Watchman Nee had become one of the most widely read authors among Christians seeking a deeper experience of Christ and a more satisfying and biblical approach to the church. Christians from an entire generation, across a wide range of theological orientations, acknowledge Watchman Nee as one of the major influences on their Christian life. Now a new generation is discovering the wealth of spiritual riches in the writings of both Watchman Nee and Witness Lee.

Upon his arrival in Taiwan in 1949, Witness Lee helped to bring about one of the most notable spiritual revivals of the twentieth century. From a modest beginning with five hundred believers, and in a country largely lacking the knowledge of Christ, tens of thousands soon embraced the Savior, and local churches were established in cities throughout the island. Within six years nearly fifty thousand believers were meeting in the local churches in Taiwan. Furthermore, the work spread throughout the Far East, with churches being established in the Philippines, Malaysia, Indonesia, Singapore, Japan, and Korea.

In 1962, following the Lord's leading and encouraged by a growing interest in Watchman Nee's writings in the West, Witness Lee moved to Los Angeles and established the work of the ministry in North America. As in Taiwan, local churches spread quickly throughout North and Central America. Churches then sprang up in South America, Europe, Australasia, and Africa. Following the end of the Cold War, this spread

continued into the Russian-speaking world. In recent years a number of local churches have been established in the Middle East. Today there are more than four thousand local churches outside of China. As there is no “headquarters” or formal affiliation, compiling the total number of members is difficult, but conservative estimates range from 1.5 to 2 million believers globally.

In addition to the extensive spread of the work that Watchman Nee and he began in China, Witness Lee left behind a remarkable breadth of written ministry. In total he published more than six hundred titles, many now available in more than fifty languages. His signature work, *Life-study of the Bible*, is an exhaustive expository commentary on the entire Bible with almost two thousand chapters and twenty-five thousand pages, all of which reveal and make practical the genuine experience of Christ as life and the proper Christian service for the building up of the Body of Christ. While he was ministering the *Life-study* series, he also wrote extensive outlines, footnotes, and cross references for a new translation of the New Testament called the *Recovery Version*. Many thousands of believers today, both within and outside the local churches, appreciate in Witness Lee’s writings the same spiritual quality and faithful, insightful development of the divine revelation found in Watchman Nee’s works. Most of the writings of these two servants of the Lord are available online at the LSM website ministrybooks.org.

Respectfully submitted
by various brothers representing the local churches
and by the editorial section of Living Stream Ministry
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