

Former Local Church Critics Change Stance



Several former critics of the late Witness Lee, a disciple of Chinese evangelist Watchman Nee, are now calling his followers orthodox Christians—a decision that has sparked controversy among evangelicals.

Nee, who had a major following in the charismatic community, died in a Chinese prison in 1972. After his death, Lee became the most prominent teacher of the movement Nee founded. Lee died in 1997.

Numerous apologists have criticized Lee for his alleged embrace of modalism, a view of the Father, Son and Spirit as three modes of being, which they say denies the Trinity. Among the teachings they cite as aberrant are the ideas that God and man are organically one and that Christ is the Holy Spirit.

During the 1970s, Pentecostal scholar Walter Martin, founder of the Christian Research Institute (CRI), labeled the group heretical. But current CRI President Hank Hanegraff is among a list of scholars who now endorse Lee's Local Church.

Gretchen Passantino, an editor and researcher for Martin from 1974 to 1989, has joined Hanegraff, noting it is one of the few times in 35 years that she has changed a professional opinion. Fuller Theological Seminary has also endorsed the church, which estimates it has 30,000 adherents in the U.S.

Local Church spokesman Chris Wilde said it has been gratifying that some believers are willing to admit past mistakes. "Gradually, people are realizing that to really know what we believe and teach they have to look deeper than merely reacting to a few seemingly problematic quotes lifted from our writings," Wilde said.

However, such evangelicals as Kevin Lewis, a professor at Talbot

School of Theology, still don't accept the church as an authentic expression of New Testament Christianity. "I have not discovered any compelling arguments that warrant a de novo consideration of the conclusion that Lee's teachings are heretical," said Lewis, one of more than 70 scholars who have signed an open letter calling on followers to renounce unorthodox statements by their founder.

Harvest House Publishers, which two years ago prevailed in a \$136 million libel lawsuit the church filed over its inclusion in the 1999 book, *Encyclopedia of Cults and New Religions*, also doesn't accept it as orthodox. "Until hundreds—if not thousands—of clearly unorthodox assertions by Lee are withdrawn or corrected ... our assessment of his teachings will remain unchanged," the company said in a statement.

James Walker, president of the Alabama-based Watchman Fellowship, said Lee's view of the triune nature of God can't be overlooked because it is a fundamental doctrine. "It's one thing to say you don't fully understand it; no one does," Walker said. "But it's another thing to deny it."

However, Passantino said a three-yearlong dialogue with church officials and further study persuaded her that her original critique was based on incomplete information. She said just as some of author C.S. Lewis' statements sound heretical when taken out of context, at first some Local Church statements sound modalistic when they aren't.

"There's an enormous amount of information available that wasn't available then," said Passantino, a one-time Pentecostal church member who is part of a conservative Lutheran denomination. "Their explanation of the doctrine of the Trinity is more similar to an Eastern Orthodox explanation, which is based more on subjective experience than on strict, logical [reasoning]."

Passantino is working on a detailed explanation of the reasoning behind her stance, which she hopes to post this fall on the Web site of her apologetics group Answers in Action. CRI's *Christian Research Journal* expects to release a lengthy article early next year. In a statement released last fall, Hanegraaff noted he had fellowshipped

with Local Church members overseas and did not consider them a cult from a theological or sociological perspective.

Charismatic author Kurt Van Gorden, who worked under Martin during the original Local Church debate, decried Hanegraaff's switch. He said Hanegraaff had "unwound the clock" on Martin, who after his Spirit baptism taught at Melodyland School of Theology.

A contributor to several editions of Martin's *The Kingdom of the Cults*, Van Gorden also questions Hanegraaff and Passantino's filing a legal brief on behalf of the Local Church during its dispute with Harvest House. "I couldn't understand why they would do that," said Van Gorden, whose *The Kingdom of the Occult*, co-authored with Martin and his daughter, was released last year. "John Weldon [co-author of the Harvest House encyclopedia] should be able to call any group a cult when it fits his theological definition."