

Chapter 3

Church Life Beyond “Men”

...you are still fleshly. For since there is jealousy and strife among you, are you not fleshly, and are you not walking like mere men? For when one says, 'I am of Paul,' and another, 'I am of Apollos,' are you not mere men?

(1 Cor. 3:3-4)

Although Witness Lee remains a controversial figure, I count him as one of the first serious influences in my Christian life. He passed on to me (without having known me) a love for the Bible and key concepts of the historic Christian faith. In many ways, he demonstrated through his approach to the Bible how to trace these central themes into depths not routinely touched by others. And in large part, he successfully preserved within his own ministry the Brethren Bible-study ethic that both drew me and continued for many years to hold my attention.

Personal appreciation notwithstanding, I must also admit that over the decades a flawed system grew up around W.Lee. Just as a vine winds around a tree trunk, it hugged him so tightly that, today, it is difficult to tell man and system apart. As daunting as it may seem, I will attempt to critique the one without touching the other. So, this chapter will not be, as some fear, an assessment of W.Lee as an individual. Such final verdicts can never fairly be reached until the Judgment

Seat of Christ. Rather, I will attempt in part to dismantle some of the unscriptural mystique that has come to surround W.Lee and his immediate successors—the self-styled “Blending Brothers.”

The Unhealthy Situation in the Local Church Movement

Anyone who has spent time in the Local Churches should be familiar with the famous declaration that Witness Lee made toward Watchman Nee. He reportedly told his mentor, “Even if you would not take this way, I will continue to take it.” “This way,” as loosely interpreted, meant the way of leaving denominations, practicing the local church pattern, keeping scriptural truth, choosing spiritual life, and accepting the cross of Christ in daily situations. W.Lee’s boldness at the time was an admirable resolve not to allow himself or his life’s work to become part of a man-following culture. Unfortunately, his noble ethic was not transferred to those who came after him. In a very strange twist, “this way” gradually became inseparable from W.Lee himself—his personal revelation, convictions, decisions, and directions.

While W.Lee’s confident words to Watchman Nee became an oft-quoted bit of lore in the Local Church Movement, it would lose all meaning to the typical followers who later congregated around him. The possibility of W.Lee himself straying from established spiritual blueprints or patterns never seriously crossed the minds of typical members. After all, how could W.Lee depart from “this way” when everything he said and did was “this way”? Once such logic found subconscious acceptance in the minds of church members, it served to elevate their appraisal of W.Lee to dizzying heights.

Nowhere was this more obvious than in the public forum, where speakers made constant references to W.Lee. According to one observer who conducted

random counts, these outnumbered references to Jesus Christ four to one. Yet, name-dropping was not where it ended. In a greenhouse of Witness Lee fervor, stranger concepts and habits were free to roam about safely, some of them aired by W.Lee's senior coworkers themselves. Stories were heard of one praying at Witness Lee's tomb and of another receiving messages from him in dreams. Often, ministry aficionados weirdly spoke of the deceased W.Lee in the present tense, as though he had never died. Others expressed concerns over what W. Lee would say to them in the next age, as if in the resurrection of the dead they would give an account to him of their life and service.

Not far behind these attitudes were teachings. Church members began to hear from the Living Stream podium that, without dominant input from W.Lee's ministry (through his lieutenants), divine blessings such as sanctification would all but cease in their lives. Eventually these and many other intemperate opinions found expression in the "One Publication" policy—a legislative measure denouncing all Christian ministries except those specifically approved by Living Stream. With the exception of some Midwest churches, the document was inaugurated without so much as a murmur of protest. Instead, enthusiastic sub-leaders carried it in on their shoulders, oblivious to the fact that this newest measure, which alleged to prevent division, was itself a fatal error. As these men endorsed the policy, thus eliminating any potentially competitive ministries, they also at the same time gave assent to the Movement's final step into sectarianism.

A Simpler Proposal

In earlier days, Witness Lee's status received considerable boosts by followers who claimed that he had never made a mistake in handling the Bible—another reason why church members tend to validate

their personal beliefs by prefacing them with “Brother Lee said....” “Brother Lee said....” The legacy of this reckless credit can easily be seen in the skirmishes swirling around today’s Local Church Movement, where it is assumed that the arbitrator of all disputes should be the words of W.Lee. Dozens of quotes can be marshaled, however, for either side of any issue. Since they were originally delivered in differing times and contexts, and since W.Lee himself could be found saying things at various times that reflected his own understanding (or lack thereof), often these excerpts hopelessly contradict one another.

The idea of W. Lee’s doctrinal infallibility goes hand in hand with the belief that he and Watchman Nee were successive “ministers of the age.” Like Elisha inherited Elijah’s mantle in Old Testament times, W.Lee was portrayed as W.Nee’s successor. The term “minister of the age” has therefore been used by the Movement to designate God’s specially chosen vessel who has a unique word for the entire present generation of believers. It is the common hope among those in the group that outsiders will recognize W.Lee’s superiority over all other ministers and come into “the Lord’s Recovery.” Much money and manpower has been put toward this end.

In the midst of all the passion, however, I submit a far simpler proposal: Watchman Nee and Witness Lee were only two men among many who taught the Bible and sought to raise up New Testament churches. That’s all. Whether they were apostles or not rests upon the personal sentiment of individuals helped by them; but as far as any position of truth goes, they were two Christian workers. Nothing more.

Yet, remove the lionized propaganda heaped upon these two men, and the Movement itself would immediately begin to lose orientation. Many members would find themselves cut loose from moorings that they have held onto for decades. They would be forced to

question numerous things that they had passively received over the years.

Despite any personal discomfort that might be involved, we must face the fact that there is no such revelation in the New Testament as the unique minister of the age. Unfortunate works like *The Vision of the Age* have interpreted redemptive history to suggest that the long line of God's work has funneled down to W.Lee himself. It is a brazen inference, and one that has helped fuel the man-honoring system in the local churches. Though moderates have sought to defend W.Lee by saying that certain coworkers unfairly utilized the book, the thesis itself seems indefensible regardless of its original context. *The Vision of the Age* was simply not one of Witness Lee's shining moments.

No matter what conclusions a Bible teacher might draw from Old Testament notables such as Noah, Moses, David, etc., the clear proposition of a minister of the age (as espoused by LSM) is missing in the New Testament. We would expect to find something so seemingly important to the health of the church resting on plainly written divine commands. Yet we find none. Instead, like many other popular views that have found a home in the Local Church Movement, the claim of a minister of the age owes its existence only to an elaborate system of extrapolations.

The idea of a "special man" is not a new one. Ecclesiastical systems that have at their core "The Prophet," "The Apostle," "God's Man for Our Time," or (more recognizable to our study) "the Minister of the Age" have been recycled endlessly down through church history with lackluster and occasionally disastrous results.

We do find many examples of influential men at key points in history, such as Martin Luther, who possessed revelations that beneficially affected the church at large. But wherever believers attached themselves to these men and eliminated all other

ministers and ministries, serious spiritual decay set in, and the group itself eventually withered away. It is true that a number of larger sects fitting this description have managed to remain for centuries. But their survival has not been due to inward spiritual vitality or a fresh move of the Spirit. Rather, it has been due to the fact that money, management, traditions, and human resources have succeeded in keeping them afloat.

Even among some very respectable church legacies, there emerged a “minister of the age” ethos. For instance, the sunset of Plymouth Brethren glories saw its fragmentation into splinter sects. The largest and most notable followed a man named James Taylor, Sr. (1870-1953). The central feature of the group was Taylor himself, an unofficial yet powerfully endorsed leader. This man was esteemed by all as releasing a progressively unfolding revelation to the true church (represented by the Taylorite faithful). Roger Shuff in *Searching for the True Church* gives a contemporary analysis of that particular group:

Among Taylor Brethren there was a[n]... expectation of forward movement through the unfolding of truth by a single leader, in whom was embodied implicitly the cumulative authority of scripture and the contemporary voice of the Spirit, and whose teaching was therefore self-vindicating.

Indeed, as spoken by a Taylorite teacher, it was vital to obtain ministry from Taylor in order to be “spiritually up-to-date,”² an utterance curiously mirroring the same talk as in the Local Church Movement concerning Witness Lee.

Eventually, two men held by their respective followers as the unique minister of the age—James Taylor (and his successors) in one group and Witness

Lee in another—lived at the same time and were lauded in much the same way by enthusiasts. They also were aware of one another's existence (Watchman Nee and ninety local churches had for a short time fellowshipped with the Taylor Brethren in the 1930's before being shunned by them). James Taylor Sr. died in 1953 and was succeeded by his son, James Jr. Their current leader, "God's elect vessel" is a man named Hales in Australia. From our perspective, the followers of these two men are left with one of several possibilities: 1. There is no such principle as a single "minister of the age." 2. There is a single "minister of the age," but one of the two Movements in question was sadly mistaken about their "man." 3. Neither Movement got it right and the correct "minister of the age" was in another group altogether.

Of course, the comparison between W. Lee and Taylor is not the only possible one. There are likely dozens of other Protestant and Brethren splinter sect leaders who are held by their followers as the contemporary voice of the Lord to the true church (i.e., their group, of course). Most of them continue in an isolated assurance that their leader is "it." They do not know about other groups who also try to use the Bible, church history, and every form of religious logic to champion their own unique "oracles."

Lessons from Corinth

In view of the foregoing critique, we should at least attempt to define an acceptable level of appreciation toward ministers. Otherwise, as a result of overcompensation in the opposite direction, the saints may neglect their respect, honor, and legitimate zeal for those who bring spiritual riches to them. The ministers themselves could very well be driven into false humility, fearing that any appreciation shown them is inappropriate or even idolatrous.

Happily, the Bible provides considerable latitude when it comes to esteeming ministers. Paul spoke of the Galatians receiving him “as an angel of God, even as Christ Jesus” (Gal. 4:14). He reminded them that “if possible, you would have plucked out your own eyes and given them to me” (Gal. 4:15). Paul also acknowledged that the believers had a zeal for him (2 Cor. 7:7), and that he and the other workers were their boast (2 Cor. 1:14). When Paul met the Ephesian elders for the last time, “They all wept freely, and fell on Paul’s neck and kissed him, sorrowing most of all for the words which he spoke, that they would see his face no more” (Acts 20:37-38). All of these points form a precedent for the believers to value and love the ministers who enrich them.

When enthusiasm, however, goes overboard for ministers (as it sometimes did in the Bible), there are scriptural examples of apostolic deportment in those situations, as well. On different occasions, eager parties tried to worship Peter, Paul, and Barnabas (Acts 10:25-26; 14:14-15). In each case, the apostles kept a humble and realistic bearing, something that many Christian workers find hard to maintain. Having been told by an adoring entourage that they are God’s unique gift to the Body of Christ, some workers succumb and begin believing and even teaching it. Thus, aberrant religious systems often develop out of a dance between the dynamics of a leader’s ego and the accolades of his followers. Having observed this tendency at work in certain Christian groups, an old seasoned brother once warned me with a sardonic grin, “Never believe your own press.”

There is, however, another point (short of worshipping someone) where appreciation for ministers ceases from what is acceptable and crosses the line into something fleshly. A perfect example of this occurred in Corinth, where the believers appreciated ministers to

the extent that they began to make them the basis of their fellowship.

Naturally, accompanying such ministerial preferences is always a sense of “belonging” to that person and to his group. Outsiders can easily identify this hallmark of sectarianism. For instance, it has long been obvious to mainstream audiences that the Local Church Movement belongs to Witness Lee’s ministry. That is why the Christian community at large describes it as “the Local Church of Witness Lee.” Though this description is offensive to members, the label is hard to disprove. The Living Stream imprimatur is everywhere, and now according to official policy, it is the only one allowed.

Paul wasted no time in disavowing those who claimed that they were of him. He said that such an honor should only be given to the One who had died for them—hence his question, “Was Paul crucified for you?” (1 Cor. 1:13). In the same verse, he also asked the confused Corinthians, “Is Christ divided?” It was clear to him that ministry-based fellowships were divisions, regardless of their appetite for topics like “the Body.” A group can sound the trumpet a million times for the “one Body,” but when it demeans all other God-given ministries except for its select favorite, then the group itself becomes a contradiction in terms. It speaks the language of inclusiveness but practices exclusiveness. The only outcome a man-centered oneness can produce is a group that speaks in high spiritual prose while “walking like mere men” (1 Cor. 3:3-4).

Movement Reasonings That Won’t Fly

Strong, undeniable similarities exist between what the Corinthians did with their favored ministers and what the Local Churches have done with Witness Lee. Members attempt to side-step the issue with their

own brand of logic, but it staggers the imagination for unscriptural reasoning, if not for sheer naivete.

For instance, there is a thought that having more than one ministry would confuse people. Therefore, as the reasoning goes, it is better to allow only one. At the risk of being facetious, this sounds like a solution to the Baskin Robbins 31 Flavor dilemma. In order to make things simple for everyone, eliminate all those other “confusing, troublesome” flavors. Just have vanilla.

Recently a man, who believes that people are supremely confused with anything more than “vanilla,” spoke of what might happen if a new person entered their meeting hall and saw Witness Lee’s books sitting next to someone else’s. “Wouldn’t that confuse him?” he asked. I knew the man who said this and his church situation. My first response was to ask when was the last time he saw a genuinely new person enter his meeting hall. My second was to ask whether that newcomer could have cared less that all the author names on the books matched each other. Actually, negative concerns from newcomers are usually expressed over the fact that they do match each other. A shelf packed with books that have only one name on their spines might be delightful to Movement hard-liners, but to outsiders it will seem strange. Given these times of heightened cult phenomenon, it will also look very suspicious.

A long-running claim that further bolsters an LSM-only environment is the idea that the need for other ministries has been annulled. W. Nee and W. Lee, it is often said, harmonized all the riches of church history and have now presented them in one integrated package. Upon closer inspection, though, this is certainly not an unprecedented feat. The exercise of surveying all the prominent ministries of church history and presenting them as spiritual food is the normal duty of any church leader or teacher. W. Nee certainly

did it, and we have stories of his literally sleeping in between rows of books. It seems more than a little strange, however, that the very group originally owing so much to such inquisitive searching should then turn around and prohibit all those other books and ministries. I submit that a young Watchman Nee could not be produced nor even survive in today's Local Church environment.

An honest Nee would no doubt credit the Bible for his personal revelations. Yet, he would just as quickly add that he had been immeasurably helped by the many ministers whose student he had become. Contrast this to the recent "One Publication" policy and it will seem likely that Nee would not even recognize the church of the "Blended Brothers" that he is often credited with founding. Neither does it seem probable that he would desire any association with it at all.

Another way the Movement has justified its partisan approach is by presenting ministerial variety as a bewildering and hazardous trail, hardly worth the risks of exploring. Their simplistic solution: "Why not just have the best?" The question itself is terribly presumptuous. Those who ask it cannot see how much bias lies in believing that Lee's ministry is "the best." In fact, many Christians feel it is "the worst," in the sense that it completely fails to engage them. Unfortunately, Movement zealots equate this type of disinterest with being unspiritual, dull, or blind. It is the old Pharisaical assessment of "this crowd that does not know the law is accursed" (John 7:49). Now, just the fact that a man's ministry doesn't stimulate a reader doesn't mean that the particular ministry in question is no good. It just indicates that God must reach that person through some other avenue, which is why, as my overall thesis states, it is a good thing that ministry comes in all shapes and sizes. The Lord knows that one man with one approach cannot possibly meet the needs of all His children.

Another view meant to validate polarization around Witness Lee comes from the Movement's official trump card—the idea that many ministries create division. It is true that divisions have occurred in the Local Churches; however, almost none of them (contrary to popular analysis) were due to different ministries. In fact, the defective attitude of the Movement itself has probably been the single greatest culprit in its own history of disturbances (“storms,” as they are called). Programmed within the very fabric of the group is a powerful dogmatism against ministerial variety. This means that trouble will be certain, at least where members grow in gifts and service not officially approved by the Living Stream Ministry. The biblical pattern provides for many ministers with many ministries carrying out the unique New Testament work of Christ. Whenever and wherever the Holy Spirit has sought to introduce this standard among Local Churches, a “storm” has predictably broken out. Ironically, this track-record shows that the Local Church Movement is not an environment that is very friendly to authentic local church life.

The Bible tells us that “there are differences of ministries, but the same Lord” (1 Cor. 12:5). We trust that this “same Lord” knows what is best for the building up of His body. He knew that a design incorporating differences would incur risks, such as confusion, false teaching, and unspiritual workers. Yet, He decreed a multiplicity of ministries, anyway. Obviously to Him, the benefits of a potentially confusing diversity far outweigh those of the one-man, global approach. True ministries do not damage the New Testament church, although they greatly disturb the tranquility of a sect.

Wisdom in Diversity

Ministerial diversity is not only normal but necessary for the healthy growth and development of congregations. The Corinthians missed this point by choosing their favorite ministers and excluding those who didn't fit their particular "taste" and "smell." In the line up of 1 Corinthians 1:10, Paul represents the minister who has great depth and spiritual understanding. Apollos, being eloquent, is the gifted minister. Peter represents the ministry of foundational things. Christ exemplifies those who promote spirituality, raw and pure. The key to meeting the combined need of the entire Church lies in receiving all these God-given ministries; not in adopting any one exclusive approach. What church can say that it has no need of depth, gift, foundation, or spirituality?

The eventual losers in any sect are the members themselves, who, while seeming to excel in the domain of their specialized camp, become appallingly poor in other areas. For instance, in the Pauline circle we would expect to find superior revelations. However, separated from Apollos' approach of an attractive, understandable gift capable of reaching the common man, superior revelation breaks down into incomprehensible jargon. Who can understand the extremes of a Pauline sect except those devoted few who belong to it and are thoroughly initiated into its mysteries? Furthermore, eliminate Peter from the "Paul fellowship," and the Pauline believers will suffer in their ability to handle the earthy, foundational things of the Christian life. Pauline radicals are high people, profound, and knowledgeable, but they become complex and theoretical without Peter and his simple fisherman's theology of "Jesus Christ the Son of God." Finally, subtract the emphasis on a "Christ-only" spirituality, and Paul's deep revelations will dry into a

hard-leather sole. (Die-hard Pauline believers will still recommend that sole as “food,” though.)

The Apollonian camp will similarly have its share of issues, once it decides that “We only follow the ministry of our dear Brother Apollos.” On the positive side, this gathering will be very appealing to outsiders with truths eloquently expressed. Eliminate Paul, however, and the group will appear to be an inch deep and a mile wide for content. Take away the Petrine foundational thoughts of Christ, and the Apollos-group will drift from redemptive certainties into philosophical banter. Discourage genuine Christian spirituality in the group, and everything becomes mere entertainment, a religious alternative to a night at the movies. (“But at least our man attracts people,” say the Apollonians.)

The Petrine group has the distinction of following a man who was directly appointed by Jesus as one of “the Twelve” (Acts 6:2), the original Apostles. Group-members could reassure one another that absolutely no one could go astray in this group as they followed such a person. They would find it safe to say, “Peter is the one who has the ministry.” But wherever believers are confined to such foundational propositions and are not exposed to further revelation such as Paul’s, they tend never to soar to new heights in their realization of God. Nor, being denied Apollos’ gift of reasoning from the scriptures, will they ever learn how to skillfully enunciate what they believe. Finally, subtract the spirituality of the Christ-only approach, and Petrine fundamentals of the faith shrink into historical truisms that have little or no relevance in daily life. (“Still, our man knew the Man,” this group maintains.)

Novice readers of 1 Corinthians are often puzzled that the Christ group, who declare “I am of Christ,” is judged equally sectarian as the other ones. This group is assumed to be closest to the ideal. Indeed, unlike their denominated brothers, believers here can say that they take no name but Christ’s. Yet they have only

succeeded in meeting sectarianism with a sectarianism all their own. These “Christians” claim to exclusively follow Christ, but reject the fact that the Lord has sent “apostles, prophets, evangelists, shepherds, and teachers” (Eph. 4:11), through His entire body and to His entire body. They therefore miss the profit of all the Lord’s servants and their depth of revelation, special gifts, and foundational understanding. Needless to say, spirituality of the Christ-only ilk will almost always fall into weird and damaging extremes (“However,” this group proudly says, “we stand apart from divided Christianity.”)

In prudent ways and measures, believers need many ministries, because that is how the Lord grants them growth. Paul said, “I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the increase” (1 Cor. 3:6). Where planting is allowed but watering is ruled out (or vice-versa), there is no possibility for growth. But where the two activities complement one another, then God grants the blessing of true spiritual development.

Practical Considerations Related to Receiving

For those of us seeking church life beyond the Local Church Movement, we should not interpret openness to ministries as receiving everyone and everything. This summons up the image of saints impulsively running into Christian bookstores, reading and being influenced by every idea that they encounter. We still use the twin standards of the Bible and the anointing to measure the value of a work (“Try those who call themselves apostles,” the Apostle John would say. “Discern all things,” Paul would tell us). Some Christian books in recent days have become trendy, breaking sales records everywhere, but upon closer consideration, have been found weak in terms of scriptural fidelity. Others are questionable in their spirituality. (How many more books do we need telling

of forays into the afterlife? Judging by the rash of died-and-went-to-heaven/hell books, it seems that Paul's trip to Paradise is more common than what we formerly believed—now almost as routine as a trip to Pittsburgh.) No, being open to other Christians is not a call to mindless acceptance but a summons to discernment unto enrichment.

In considering other ministries, we have to take into account their differing functions. Previously many of us were under the impression that if a minister did not in some sense present "life," "God's economy," or "the Body" as his major topic, then what he had to say was worthless. (He was required to use the actual terms a certain number of times in his message for it to count.) This shallow assumption holds that all ministries should look and sound alike at every level.

Bias of this kind has led to almost unparalleled poverty in Movement churches. For, while all is well with family, children, health and finances, its brand of teaching will seem to be more than sufficient. But once these cardinal points of human life break down, only the most dogmatic members of the group will still agree that Living Stream ideology will solve everything. Unfortunately, such narrow individuals intimidate others who could benefit from the various services of the Christian community. They maintain that needy members should never seek aid apart from Local Church affiliations as that would be doing something "outside of God's economy."

As much as some have drawn the mystical conclusion that "life takes care of everything," hard evidence will testify that it often doesn't do so (at least, not in the simplistic way that has been touted). There are, in fact, hundreds of directives in the Bible, instructing us to do things and not simply to let them happen.

In order to better facilitate our understanding and obedience in these areas, the Holy Spirit has

provided thousands of ministries, composed of learning well beyond the borders of our own particular congregation or ministerial philosophy. For instance, when the Bible tells fathers how to treat their children, it does not present a companion volume of detailed information. Therefore, part of the help God provides are those who have mined the thought of these verses and have received wisdom that should become the common property of the church at large.

The great plurality of ministries available to us offers insights, skills, and helps that leave no Christian with an excuse to be spiritually poor. There are those of a poetic nature such as the writings of Max Lucado. Charles Spurgeon's works are full of an eloquence that captures glory like lightning bugs in a trap. Stephen Charnock hefted and offered dense, weighty thoughts, studded with Scripture. H.A. Ironside brought simplicity and truth couched in a common man's utterance. Philip Yancey questions, provokes, and challenges. The works of D.A. Carson bring reason to the table; T. Austin Sparks, revelation; Bill Hybels, practicality; Ravi Zacharias, thought; Charles Stanley, living; F.F. Bruce, scholarship; Albert Barnes, analysis; and Coneybeare, a vivid sense of history. We could obviously go on, but space will not allow. It is sufficient to say that the Lord has been and continues to be hard at work raising up ministries for the sake of His entire body. Appreciating particular contributions from these ministers does not obligate us to agree with every thought and attitude that they might entertain. The point is that believers ought to benefit from the larger Christian community and not be confined by ministerial monopolies.

As part of the leadership team in a congregation that hopes to reach its city, I tend toward a utilitarian view of ministries. That means seeing them as tools and resources rather than as potential clubs for the church to join. I ask: "What will best help us to

cooperate with the work of the Holy Spirit at this time?” Church leadership ought to have this question at heart when considering ministries. By the same token, laying aside or not promoting a legitimate ministry will be a matter of expediency, not one of condemnation, and certainly not of ideology.

Over time, the church here has utilized a number of ministries—internally and externally—from Nooma videos to “Way of the Master” evangelism classes to the “Alpha Course.” We even pieced together a massive discipleship workbook of our own, composed of several ministries that we had investigated and found potentially helpful. All were considered as tools, but none as “lords of the realm.”

Post-Movement Attitudes Toward LSM Materials

What are we to do with Living Stream materials? This will become a vital question. The church in a post-movement situation may need an “Arabian wilderness” phase (however long that might be). During this time, the assembly will once again (or perhaps for the first time) establish itself as a sound, valid spiritual entity standing before Christ alone. This period could very well be marked with the use of nothing except the Bible itself. It may be necessary to reintroduce the saints to the Scriptures without reference to footnotes, outlines, commentaries, or any other material.

Even after a long “Arabian Wilderness” experience, the Columbus assembly has chosen not to publicly encourage the use of any LSM materials, regardless of the time period in which they were printed. This is partly due to the damage our church suffered at the hands of pro-LSM zealots. Neither do we wish to present our friends and relatives with a breadcrumb trail that might lead them back into the unprincipled, vindictive system from which we escaped. No one among us would deny that there were many

helpful points in Witness Lee's teachings, but any ministry known for congregational meddling should be handled with the utmost caution. It may be that sometime in the future select, edited versions of Witness Lee's works will become helpful to the Christian public. This is unlikely to happen, however, while a sectarian agenda uses whatever redeeming features are in W.Lee's books as "bait" to lure new members (or manipulate existing ones).

The Columbus "cold turkey" approach is only one of many possibilities. The leading of the Spirit and the discernment of local leadership will ultimately determine the best solution in other places. Some churches undoubtedly will still elect to utilize LSM books, at least on a very limited basis. There are, however, dangers in doing so, even in measured doses. For one thing, readers will still inadvertently be exposed to a broad-brush condemnation of other Christians, as well as to the heavy scent of elitism. Leaders should ask if this is desirable. Seasoned believers who join your assembly will find these attitudes immediately objectionable. Worse, novice Christians may find them agreeable and be encouraged to cultivate them. This would replenish within your church the very issues you found so distasteful to begin with.

Second, theological concepts that sound rather arcane will alert a reader that your group holds unusual, if not heretical views. It is better to err on the side of conservatively describing a truth than to sound clever and profound. I think it safe to say that no one will be found guilty at the judgment seat of Christ for confining himself to the clear wording of the Bible, however plain that it might have seemed (though some will be charged with going "too far"—2 John 9 NASB). Ask yourself what is to be accomplished by casually telling someone [that] "you are becoming God"? "But," you solemnly add, "not in the Godhead." Almost certainly the qualifier will not be heard and you will

have sent up a platoon of red flags in the mind of the person with whom you're talking. My advice: Stay with the truth the way the apostles described it. Leave inventive, daring, startling theologies at home.

In the meantime, a concern emerges about how new disciples in our churches will ever receive the solid food of deeper teachings. Indeed, Movement literature boasts of its profound revelations. How would we survive without them? This concern remains a stronghold in the minds of many ex-Movement people, especially those who have grown accustomed to "high peak" concepts in terms of the way Witness Lee packaged them.

As times change, there will be an increasing need among us to redefine shepherding and discipleship. It will no longer look like giving someone a book and then trusting that they will "get clear." Perhaps, the more accurate idea is a Watchman Nee-like approach where we filter and personalize the substantial spiritual things we have learned and present them to the flock. This exercise would of course, need to be free of gratuitous name-dropping and the overly deferential crediting of sources.

A new church life necessarily corresponds with new attitudes about ministers and ministries. Only under such clear skies will we progress toward being liberated from "men."

¹ Shuff, Roger. Searching for the True Church, (Paternoster, 2005) p. 130.

² Ibid., p. 104.