



TALBOT
SCHOOL OF THEOLOGY

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Dear Rev. Ankerberg,

This letter is in response to your request for me to examine some selected quotations from the literature of the Local Church on the question of the Godhead. You asked that I render a theological opinion as to the orthodoxy of the views expressed in these citations. I have gone through the materials you sent and will tell you what I can based on that sample.

First, I thought it might be helpful for me to say a few words about my background and qualifications to analyze this material. Then, I must state some limitations of what I am able to do given the materials provided to me.

I hold three degrees in biblical/theological studies: the Master of Divinity (Talbot School of Theology, 1982), the Master of Theology (Talbot School of Theology, 1984), and the Ph.D. in Historical Theology (Fuller Theological Seminary, 1990). Since 1987 I have taught at Talbot School of Theology, where I am currently an Associate Professor of Historical Theology. My main area of teaching has been historical and systematic theology. I have also taught courses on religious movements, and have published widely in this area. I am the series editor for the *Zondervan Guide to Cults and Religious Movements* (15 vols.), in which I edited all of the books in the series and authored three of them. I have also published both in academic and in popular journals on subjects in theology, the history of Christian doctrine, and contemporary religious movements. I currently serve as the Department Chair for the Department of Theology at Talbot.

I think it would be helpful for me to indicate the limitations of what I am able to provide you in terms of my analysis. First, although I have a significant background in the study of religious movements, the Local Church/Living Stream Ministry has never been a research interest of mine. Most of what I had known about the group to this point was based on secondary source treatments, and even my knowledge of these is minimal. I have never undertaken an independent study of Local Church literature, whether the writings of Witness Lee or of the

current theologians in the church. Therefore, I do not possess a broad knowledge of the Local Church in which to set these quotations. Second, and related to the first point, the critique that follows must be understood as based strictly on the samples you chose to send me. What you provided were quotes abstracted from the Local Church literature, with footnotes indicating the source of the quote. I do not have access to these original sources so I was not in a position to verify the accuracy of your abstraction/transcription with respect to the original sources. Furthermore, without having the actual sources in my possession I cannot set the citations in a larger context.

Thus, the analysis that follows is based strictly on the excerpted material that you sent me, apart from any possible larger contextual considerations.

I have divided the primary source quotations you sent me into two main categories: those of Witness Lee himself (the founder of the movement), and those of the current theologians of the Living Stream Ministry (such as Kangas, Robichaux, and Marks). I shall deal with these in turn.

Citations by Witness Lee

If I had to classify the citations attributed to Witness Lee, I would describe them as teaching a view of the Godhead called modalistic monarchianism, known also simply as modalism. Other designations for the teaching, based on the names of ancient proponents, are Sabellianism and Praxeanism. The teaching is also sometimes called “patripassianism.” This teaching denies the orthodox doctrine of the Trinity, which is that within the nature of the one God there are three eternal persons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. In contrast, modalists teach that there is a one person God who manifests himself successively as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Thus, the “persons” of the Godhead are in reality merely three different ways in which the one uni-personal God reveals himself to his creation *ad extra* (i.e., outside of himself).

I draw this conclusion based on a straightforward reading of what is attributed to Lee in the abstracted quotations that you have provided. Lee makes statements where he declares that the Father, Son, and Spirit are “one person.” He states that the Father is the Spirit, that Jesus is the Spirit, that the Son is the Father, that the Son is the entire triune God (i.e., Father, Son, and Holy Spirit), etc. Such statements appear to me to teach modalism.

One thing I found particularly bizarre, at least from an orthodox Trinitarian perspective, is Lee’s query, “Why is there one God in three Persons”? Even to ask such a question suggests a modalistic view of the Godhead – an impression that is not at all allayed when one reads his answer. An intelligent orthodox Trinitarian would not ask such a question anymore than he or she would ask, “Why does God know everything?” or “Why is God eternal?” The form of the question suggests that God might be otherwise – as if his Triunity were a matter of the Divine decree. Lee suggests just this in his answer to the question: “Why is there one God in three Persons? Simply for the purpose of dispensing and applying God to us.” No intelligent orthodox Trinitarian would speak in such terms. God exists in three persons because he is God, and because God is Triune. He is not “Triune” *so that* he can accomplish some work *ad extra*. The

fact that God's triunity has implications for how he accomplishes his purposes *ad extra* is an altogether different matter so far as orthodox Trinitarianism is concerned. Now, from a modalistic perspective the question is not bizarre but makes perfect sense. Since, for the modalist, "Father," "Son," and "Holy Spirit" designate simply the modes of operation in which God chooses to engage his creation, the number and kinds of these modes *are* a matter of the divine will. That is, God could, if he wished, reveal himself, e.g., in one mode or five modes. For the modalist, the question "why three modes?" becomes a natural one to ask.

Now, you asked whether the view espoused in these citations is "orthodox." Let me just say that since these citations teach modalism (given the qualifications I have noted above), the view espoused in these citations is unorthodox. Stated simply, modalism is an unorthodox view of the Godhead. It contradicts the clear teaching of the Bible on the nature of God. It is, in my view and in the view of the church historically, a *heresy*, which is an essential deviation from one of the constitutive credenda of the Christian faith. Thus, any group that would embrace a modalistic doctrine of the Godhead, implicitly or explicitly, would not be Christian in my view. Rather, such a group would be, as my book *Unmasking the Cults* defines it, "a cult of Christianity."

Citations by Modern Living Stream Theologians

The theology of the Local Church becomes muddier as represented in the citations you sent me from their current theologians. Some of the citations contain orthodox sounding language (e.g., affirming the simultaneous, eternal coexistence of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit). Other statements appear to be modalistic. Yet other statements could possibly be interpreted as teaching some *tertium quid* that is neither Trinitarian nor, strictly speaking, modalistic. And finally, certain citations seem to espouse contradictory views even within the very same statement.

Before examining the specific statements a word of terminological clarification is in order. A thread running through these more recent quotes is the distinction between the ontological and economic Trinity. This is a well-established distinction in historic discussions of the doctrine, though the usage made by the modern Local Church writers is not always clear. In the historic usage of these terms, the ontological Trinity looks at God in terms of the internal, intra-Trinitarian distinctions *ad intra*, or within the Godhead itself. In contrast, the economic Trinity refers to the offices or functions performed by each of the three members. The economic Trinity concerns the roles that each member performs in terms of the created order *ad extra*, or outside of himself.

First, consider some recent Local Church statements that bear an orthodox sounding form. Robichaux states, "According to the Scriptures, God is triune both essentially – in His inner being – and economically – in the outworking of His purpose with His chosen and redeemed people." Likewise, Kangas declares that the Father, Son, and Spirit "coexist" and "coinhere" eternally.

Other statements by their modern theologians appear to teach modalism. Consider Kangas' description of the economic Trinity as "being carried out in these three successive steps." This is an unorthodox way of viewing the economic Trinity. Certainly the baptism of Jesus is an *economic event* in salvation history, and here the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are in evidence not successively but simultaneously. Likewise, Onica and Pester state, "If we accept the identification of the persons of the economic Trinity with the persons of the essential or immanent Trinity, then we must also be willing to accept the consideration that the relationships between the persons of the economic Trinity are rooted in the same ontological principles of coexistence and coinherence, as exhibited in the essential Trinity. As such, we readily and willingly should declare *that the last Adam (an economic appellation for the second of the Trinity) is the life-giving Spirit (an economic appellation for the third of the Trinity) by means of their mutual, economic coexistence and coinherence*" (emphasis added). Note that, according to this quote, the second person of the Trinity *is* the third person of the Trinity, not only in terms of his operations *ad extra* but also based on the internal Trinitarian relations *ad intra*. Here they draw upon, and misrepresent, the patristic doctrine of *perichoresis* (also known as *circumincession*), according to which the divine essence in its entirety inheres in each of the three persons. This doctrine was expressed by some of the fathers as an interpenetration or indwelling of the persons in one another. However, unlike in the modalistic version presented here, the early fathers did not teach that this interpenetration amounted to either an *identity* or *conversion* of one person into the other. Indeed, for one person to coinhere in another assumes the continuing and distinct personhood of each of the three Trinitarian persons.

Some of the statements by the modern writers appear, on the face of them, to be somewhat different from classic modalism but still heretical. The statements in question seem to imply ontological trinality but a kind of "economic modalism." For example, Robichaux states that because the third person of the Trinity "applies the accomplishments of the second," the second person of the Trinity, "*from this economic perspective, has become the third*" (emphasis added). Though not clearly stated, the implication may be that God is ontologically triune (contrary to classic modalism) but economically modalistic. Regardless, Robichaux's qualifier "from this economic perspective" does not salvage this quote for orthodoxy, whatever else it may do. According to orthodox Trinitarianism, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are distinct, whether viewed ontologically or economically. Stated simply, the Son is not the Spirit, and there are no qualifications that would make such a statement comport with orthodox Trinitarianism.

Certain Local Church statements seem to affirm a contradiction within the very same quotation. For example, a citation from the *Young People's Training*, 2nd ed., pp. 109-110 states that the Son is the Father and that Jesus is the Spirit. But in the very next sentence the source affirms that they also believe "the other side" of the Triune God, namely, that "all Three of the Godhead exist at the same time." The quote concludes by saying that "we cannot reconcile these two aspects of the Trinity." Indeed.

Are the modern spokespersons for the movement modalists? As I stated at the beginning of this section, the more recent quotes seem less clear and even contradictory. I do note that included in the quotes you provided me are direct repudiations of modalism by current spokespersons

for the church. Their repudiation of modalism as a “heresy” is based on the claim that modalism “denies the fact that the Father, Son, and Spirit are eternally coexistent,” in contradistinction to their position that God is triune in his inner being. Assuming that these modern teachers do indeed hold to God’s ontological trinality as understood in the orthodox sense, they would be correct in eschewing the label “modalism” to describe their position. An essential characteristic of modalism is that it denies the Trinity ontologically. On the other hand, that would still leave what appears to be an unbiblical understanding of the economic Trinity, which becomes a kind of “modalism” in practice. Are they saying that God is, in himself, Triune, but *reveals himself* (economically) according to a modalistic pattern? This seems to be one possible interpretation of their meaning, but I am not sure because of the obscurity of the way in which these writers express themselves. If this is their meaning, then such a view is certainly at odds with orthodox Trinitarianism, and is fraught both with biblical and with epistemological problems.

I think it is worth noting that the modern theologians for the Local Church write on this subject in a very confusing way. I dare say that the confusion lies on their side and not with the reader. I am well acquainted with the history of the doctrine of the Trinity, and with the doctrine as treated in systematic theologies, ancient and modern. I am no stranger to reading recondite and abstruse theological writings. While I realize that sometimes a line of argument is difficult to follow because of the technical character of the subject matter, I also know that a discussion may be difficult to follow because it is muddled and possibly even incoherent. I believe that in this case the difficulty in synthesizing a clear view lies in the muddled character of the content and neither in the loftiness of the matter itself nor in the subtlety of their presentation of it. I therefore think that few people would be able to make sense of their discussion on the Godhead – assuming that such is even possible. I certainly can see how a reasonable reader could conclude that these modern writers hold to modalism. Likewise, *depending upon which quotes are selected for consideration*, a reader could possibly conclude that they hold to orthodox Trinitarianism. Personally, I suspect that most readers would simply throw up their hands in confusion.

The foregoing is the most accurate conclusion I know how to draw based on the body of evidence that I was provided.

Sincerely,

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