

## **AN OPEN LETTER FROM JOHN SMITH**

April 18, 1989

Dear Brothers and Sisters in San Diego,

It is now more than 17 years since I came to San Diego for the church life. There have been days of happiness and days of sadness, days nearly free of problems and days of struggle. I remember with special joy 1971-1976. Literally hundreds (especially from the Navy) were saved. We had a marvelous family church life and spontaneous blessing. I could never forget those wonderful love feasts with many saved and baptized. The quality and the degree of the blessing of those years have never returned; except perhaps during the 18 months we spent on the offerings. No doubt those 18 months were so blessed because saints were developing an exciting personal relationship to the Lord with extra-local direction held to a minimum. Some extra-local people did criticize us for continuing 18 months along that line instead of jumping to do the latest thing that came from brother Witness Lee's ministry. I never told you, but much of what I shared in those days did not come from brother Witness Lee. And I only tell you now because there is a false belief that there are little riches elsewhere. I had enjoyed many writings before I met brother Witness Lee. I gave up these writings through the years more than I should have, but the profit and joy I them was so great that I never stayed exclusively with Living Stream publications. I appreciate the love and care I received from you all during the 17 years. Some among the Chinese-speaking saints extended themselves to the uttermost to take care of me during my long illness. Others also helped much; the other leading ones did their best to keep me from stressful situations; and all of you prayed very much. For this I am grateful. I have written this letter out of love for you all and responsibility to you.

Up to this point I have fellowshiped my standing in the present situation mainly with those who have come to see me. Recently I have realized the need to make a statement to all of you. Some have been asking, "Why doesn't John tell us where he stands?" At the judgment seat of Christ I do not want to be responsible for not telling you the truth.

I wish to say that this letter is not subtle. I am stating my realization concerning the situation among those who follow Witness Lee. I am not suggesting that brothers who differ from me are violating their conscience. That is for them to settle with the Lord just as it is for all of us. This letter will not attempt an exhaustive treatment of the matters concerned. However, as my health is considerably improved I open the door for you to come and fellowship with me if you desire.

According to my spirit, my conscience, my understanding of the Word, and the present practices, I can no longer follow brother Witness Lee. If you choose to do so that is up to you. I will love you just the same. I have no personal problems with anyone. Everyone should know the facts and be "fully convinced in his own mind" (Rom. 14:5). It is a dangerous thing for one to play the conscience for another. We are not dealing with problems of a single locality, but with serious matters of truth and practice. I believe the deviation has brought the churches following brother Witness Lee into denominationalism and sectarianism.

The points I present will be very similar to what other brothers (such as Albert Zehr, John Ingalls, etc.) have said. I have a deep realization that our practices are not according to the truth and the vision that captured me years ago: a vision of dynamic, organic, living church life unhindered by the matters explained in the following points.

## 1. Deputy authority and the oracle of God

I would like to preface this point by saying that the teaching concerning deputy authority is based principally on example (as opposed to the direct command of God); much from the Old Testament. It is true that "these things happened as examples for us....upon whom the end of the age has come" (1 Cor. 10:6,11).

However, in scriptural interpretation one can easily go off track if he makes biblical examples equal to the commands of God. It is obvious from brother Witness Lee's sharing that he feels that he is the primary deputy authority on the earth. In the recent Pasadena conference he said "who (meaning whoever) has the deputy authority has the oracle of God." We begin with this matter because it pervades the whole conduct and atmosphere in the churches that follow Witness Lee.

Spiritual authority is endowed upon a person by the Lord. It is perceived and realized in the saints and substantiated by the Lord. As stated by Watchman Nee "we should never say so much as one word on behalf of our own authority. Rather, let us give people the liberty. The more God entrusts to us the more liberty we grant people" (Spiritual Authority pg. 121). It seems in these days there is virtually a campaign by brother Witness Lee and some others to establish his deputy authority.

Our practice has been that in nearly every conference or training we observe a declaration of authority. Old Testament cases of disobedience are cited. Often the case of Miriam's leprosy has been mentioned. But why is it not mentioned that Uzziah, Eli, and others lost their deputy authority. Furthermore, David was rebuked and chastened for the misuse of his deputy authority. No doubt Aaron lost his entrance into Canaan by being one with the disobedience of Moses when Moses struck the rock. In much of the Old Testament deputy authority was divided between priests, kings, and prophets.

In the first place deputy authorities in the Old Testament are types of Christ. Now Christ has come and Christ is the head of every man (1 Cor. 11:3). Other than Christ Himself in the Gospels the New Testament does not indicate that there will always be one chief deputy authority on the earth. Peter, Paul, and John are very prominent in the New Testament record. But we must not forget that no one today is writing Scriptures as they did. It is also plain that Paul acknowledge other groups of apostles laboring where he did not and respected their spheres of labor, although the spheres were not fully exclusive (2 Cor. 10:15 and Rom. 15:20). To say that, because in the New Testament record Peter was prominent, then Paul, and finally John, means that at all times there will be one chief deputy authority on the earth is an excessive extrapolation of New Testament examples. If brother Witness Lee considers himself to be the successor to Watchman Nee, then there must be another successor and, in principle, you have an apostolic succession similar to Roman Catholicism.

Regarding the matter of the oracles of God, Watchman Nee states, (A Table in the Wilderness For February 15) "It is our privilege to preach the Word, but no single one of us is God's oracle. We cannot utter his words without bringing to them something personal of our own. Many of us can preach a good message, but one spontaneous sentence of our has the power to confirm or overthrow it all." I would call your attention especially to 1 Pet. 4:11 which says "If any man speaks let him speak as the oracles of God" (KJV). Whether you take this as Christian teachers or anyone in an assembly, it is a plurality of believers. I will not use the space to develop this matter further in this letter.

The manner in which deputy authority has been applied, including the external standards to which all are expected to conform, has brought legality and fear into the churches. The liberty of the Holy Spirit and the freedom of the human will have been undermined. Many saints have become afraid to follow their own conscience and spirit. Also many saints have become condemned, defeated, and depressed.

2. The teaching and attempted practice of "deputy authority" and "the oracle of God", have issued in a system of control and organization of the churches. Much of the control is indirect, but nonetheless very strong. Control and organization are publicly denied but constant pressure is applied through elders' trainings, videos, conferences, and publications to push churches and brothers and sisters to conform. Surely this is strong organization. Whatever the intention, the result of this surely hinders the organic relationship of the saint to his Lord. We have seen a great change of emphasis from "the ministry for the churches" to "the churches for the ministry." Thus the "work" or "ministry" is built up more than the local churches. Any church that would build up and exalt "the ministry" has been virtually incorporated into "the work."

Since control is denied, why is honest fellowship not received? I have personally had the experience of honest fellowship not being received.

3. In recent years efforts to unite saints and churches all over the earth around a physical leader and organization have become increasingly apparent. I believe this is not scriptural. Plurality of apostles and different companies of apostles working in various areas is no longer our concept or practice. The New Testament does not present one apostle governing all the rest. Here I wish to present some notes from the Taipei Elders Training June 1989:

a. p.2 "...Don't teach differently from the minister, from Paul." But the passage in 1 Timothy does not say do not teach differently from Paul but don't teach differently from God's dispensation (or stewardship or administration), which is in faith (1 Tim. 1:4).

b. p.4 "So our burden is to pick up Brother Lee's teaching and way to make us all Witness Lees, like a Witness Lee duplication center." This should be said of no one but Christ Himself.

c. p.6 "Without this fellowship no church can be produced, built, or completed." The context of the Taipei notes implies that today this is Witness Lee's fellowship. I fully disagree with this.

d. p.13 "It may be that the number one sin in the Lord's recovery today is the improper relationship with the ministry office. It is a sign of blindness. The practical carrying out of this ministry is practically with Philip Lee." "...We love brother Lee's ministry but he has a way to do things; he does things thru the ministry office; he doesn't trust anyone else on the whole earth, so brother Lee put him (Philip) there" (p.14). Such a thing has no valid precedent in the New Testament, either by example or teaching.

The above statements from the Taipei Elders' training and more that could be presented are shocking and not according to the New Testament. The exaltation of man and chin-of-command stand out. Since authority is ascribed and practiced in a very inorganic, organized manner, it becomes no longer spiritual authority.

4. In centralizing the work and having training centers we are going the way denominations have historically gone.

5. There has been much pressure that all the saints in the churches would conform to the burden of brother Witness Lee's ministry and carry it out in full uniformity of practice. Actually the local administration together with all the saints should go directly to the Lord for His leading in the church where they are. A proper fellowship with other saints, churches and servants of the Lord should be maintained without infringing on the proper independence of the local church. The following quotes from pages 16 to 19 of The Beliefs and Practices of the Local Churches, published in 1978 by the Living Stream ministry, are surely little practiced by the churches following brother Witness Lee. Page 16 states, "Our unique leader is Christ. We have no

official, permanent, organized human leadership. Furthermore, there is no hierarchy of any kind and no world-wide leader. We regard no person as infallible, and we do not follow anyone blindly." (But blind following has been promoted among us.) "Each local church is autonomous in its administration." Page 19 states, "...in all administrative affairs the local churches are autonomous and locally governed."

6. One church one city implies that we are open to receive and accept all genuine believers. We should not demand certain practices of those with different feelings. Our attitude has been that those who have reservations concerning our practice are "unclear" and basically remain "outsiders." Those with different views are regarded as "pouring cold water", "blowing cold winds", "negative", "old", etc. These labels have characteristically been given no matter how honest a person was in the feeling he expressed. I am sorry to say that in the past I have used some of these terms regarding dear brothers and I am well aware that some of them are being used of me now.

7. The biblical truth is that the saints meet in the name of the Lord with all having freedom to share as the Spirit gives them utterance. But our practice has been to measure everyone by whether they speak "the ministry." Truth lessons, life studies, and footnotes are promoted as the most proper ways to express anything. In some instances reading with little or no comment has been promoted. Surely this is control and must offend the Headship of the One in Whose name we meet.

8. Ministry is to dispense Christ into people for the building up of the church. All who do so have a part in God's New Testament ministry. According to our practice and our vocabulary "the ministry" is Witness Lee, and not only what he says or writes but the way he says it. Anything else has "another flavor." Surely this attitude and practice is exclusive and unscriptural.

9. On what is our oneness based? Our oneness is uniquely Christ. Ephesians admonishes us to keep the oneness of the Spirit. Romans 14 admonishes us to receive one another solely on the basis of Christ, not according to any uniformity of practice. However, if one does not conform in practice, it would be a rare person who could remain comfortable among us. Furthermore, to a great extent our oneness has become based on a spiritual leader and his teaching. Brother Witness Lee and his ministry have been made a great issue and factor of division among us. At this moment some brothers and sisters might be uncomfortable in fellowship with me; because my relationship with them, to a great extent, depends upon their estimate of my relationship with Witness Lee. In Chapter 4 of *The Normal Christian Church Life*, Watchman Nee states that this is a failure to realize the local character of the church. The genuine ground of oneness has been replaced with other things, such as a spiritual leader, teachings, uniformity of practice, etc. In *The Normal Christian Church Life* (pages 92-93) Watchman Nee says, "Whenever a special leader, or a specific doctrine, or some experience or creed or organization, becomes a center for drawing together the believers of different places, then its center is other than Christ and its sphere is other than local; and whenever the divinely-appointed sphere of locality is displaced by a sphere of human invention there the divine approval cannot rest. The believers within such a sphere may truly love the Lord, but they have another center apart from Him, and it is only natural that the second center becomes the controlling one. Christ is the common center of all the churches, but any company of believers that have a leader, an experience, a creed, or an organization as their center of fellowship, will find that that center becomes the center, and it is the center by which they determine who belongs to them and who does not." Surely this has become our case.

10. There has been too much emphasizing of "methods" more than the inner anointing, and external "big success" more than the experience of the inner life. This deviates from the central lane of God's New Testament plan. I cannot imagine that

young people taking numbers in high pressure meetings to be "full time" is the real organic production of Christian workers according to the normal life of local churches as seen in the Scriptures. I have been deeply impressed with a paragraph in chapter 2 of *The Normal Christian Church Life* by Watchman Nee, "How grand it would be if there were no representatives of different earthly bodies, but only representatives of the Body, the Body of Christ. If thousands of local churches, with thousands of prophets and teachers, each sent out thousands of different workers, there would be a vast outward diversity, but there could still be perfect inward unity if all were sent out under the direction of one Head and on the ground of the one Body."

11. Because it has become such an issue among us, I must briefly address the matter of Philip Lee. Due to the position of influence he together with Living Stream exercised among, and to some extent, over the churches for many years, the problem of his behavior cannot be isolated to Anaheim. Neither can the problem be diminished by saying that Living Stream is merely Witness Lee's private publishing business. Through the years Living Stream has received much money in donations and multiplied thousands of dollars of free labor. Living Stream activities and influences became an integral part of the working of all the churches. Therefore, Philip's conduct and the years of failure to deal with it are matters which concern all the churches.

At the moment I have no intention of engaging in a running controversy. However, I am not afraid of argument. I believe I know already how the points given in this letter would be answered. No doubt I in the past I have used most of those arguments myself. For years many things both in our teaching and practice have troubled me. I used to defend and teach such things even when my conscience and my spirit testified to the contrary. Eventually I was forced to admit that I could no longer defend some crucial matters of the teaching and practice among us with a good conscience and a perfect spirit. There is ample substantiation for all of the above points. I do not feel it is practical to make this letter long enough to include all references. In fact, this letter is only a small part of what could be said. Rather than write pages and pages, I have opened the door for fellowship.

I write this letter to you to be faithful to the Lord. It would have been much easier to say nothing and just disappear. This the Lord would not allow me to do. This letter cannot by any means convey the clarity and fullness of thought which I have concerning these matters in these days. It may be said that to speak the things I this letter is "negative", not building up, etc. I do not accept this kind of argument. In the present situation, as I stated in the beginning of the letter, there is need to know the truth and realize the facts concerning our present teaching and practice. To use verses such as 1 Cor. 2:2, 1 Tim. 1:4, and 2 Tim. 2:23, to condemn and inhibit fellowship concerning serious deviations in truth and practice, is misapplication of the Scriptures. Everyone needs to exercise his own conscience and his own spirit. I certainly do not want to be your conscience. This is a dangerous thing to do. If I am accused of being unethical, I would remind you that the church does not belong to John Smith, Witness Lee, or any person or group of persons. It is the church of God, Christ and the saints.

I fully realize all kinds of derogatory judgments may be applied to me as a result of this letter. I am familiar with the manner in which this has been done and the terms used through the years. But as far as I know my heart is pure in these matters. I am not seeking a following or a kingdom. I am standing for what I believe to be the truth in doctrine and practice. Many of you may feel strongly to go in a certain direction with brother Witness Lee. I can neither go that way nor lead others that way. However, all of you still remain my dear brothers and sisters in Christ. My spirit is not contentious as I write; I hope yours will not be as you receive and read this letter.

Although I am saddened by the present situation, personally I am very happy in the Lord. I rejoice in renewed experience of the Headship of Christ, of reading a variety of rich material, and in thankfulness to the Lord for His great mercy upon me. My heart exults in Him. Truly His yoke is easy and His burden is light. I thank the Lord that doors of ministry are open to me here and elsewhere which, the Lord granting me more mercy, I will enter. In whatever service the Lord guides me I desire to give Him His organic way. And for myself, I like to say as Whitfield said, "Let the name of Whitfield (John Smith) perish. Let Christ be exalted."

In Christian love and concern,  
John Smith

Note: This letter is not restricted to San Diego. I hope you will all read John Ingalls' and Al Knoch's statement withdrawing as elders in Anaheim.