

(Appendix VI) What Is Wrong with the "Local Church"

(Shouters)? (Caleb Huang)

1. Definition of the "Local Church"

The "Local Church" is also known as the "Shouters" (or *Huhanpai*); the former is the name they use for themselves, while the latter is the term generally used by other Christians to refer to a specific sect within China. They exalt Witness Lee and accept and practice his teachings. The author is not deeply familiar with the "Shouters" within China, having had contact with only a small number of them. Therefore, the term "Local Church" or "Shouters" as used here encompasses Christian groups—whether domestic or overseas—that look to Witness Lee as their leader, as well as splinter groups that have broken away from his organization's direct control yet continue to adhere to the majority of his teachings.

2. Brief Introduction to the Author

The author came to the Lord in the early 1950s within the "Church Meeting Hall" (or "Assembly Hall"), the predecessor to the "Local Church" (or "Shouters"). He once served in the core ministry team under Witness Lee at the U.S. headquarters, personally experiencing many events and interactions unknown to outsiders. In the late 1980s, he experienced a profound realization and withdrew from the organization.

Later, he discovered that the church groups that had withdrawn alongside him—as well as other churches with which they maintained fellowship—had nominally broken free from the control of the so-called "Ministry Station" but remained heavily influenced by Witness Lee in terms of practice and doctrine. It was a case of "changing the soup but not the medicine" (superficial change without substantive difference); aside from the explicit mention of Witness Lee's name and a very small number of his heretical teachings, the vast majority of their practices and beliefs were identical to those of the Local Church—even their terminology was almost exactly the same. To the author's knowledge, the factions led by Zhu (USA/UK), Su (Europe), Zheng (Southeast Asia), and Tang (South America) are all essentially the same, with only minor differences. Therefore, this article includes them within the scope of the discussion.

3. My Assessment of the "Local Church"

To be fair, while a very small number of the Local Church's teachings contradict biblical truth (constituting heresy), the vast majority of their teachings are consistent with biblical truth. Many Christian preachers attack the "Shouters" movement but lack a proper understanding of the teachings of the Local Church; they indiscriminately label any view they disagree with as heresy. The author finds this unfair, which explains why their criticisms are not accepted by members of the Local Church. Of course, it is also a fact that the thinking and concepts of many Local Church members have—unconsciously—become set in a specific mold (the author hesitates to use the word "brainwashing," as it is too extreme), making it difficult for them to accept outside criticism. In short, the author believes the group cannot be classified as a heretical cult; at most, it might be viewed as an extreme sect. The vast majority of its members are, in fact, saints who have truly received grace and salvation.

Since it is termed an "extreme sect," there are naturally many doctrines and practices that ordinary Christians cannot endorse. Furthermore, because the leading figures (co-workers and elders) in various locations hold differing understandings and leadership styles, the situation varies from place to place; this distinction must be made clear to the reader at the outset.

4. My Expectations for Local Church Members

The purpose of this article is not to call upon Local Church members to leave their respective congregations, but rather to point out significant errors within the Local Church. If they can recognize and correct these mistakes, it would be a truly excellent thing! May the Lord lead the way.

5. The Greatest Error: Exalting Witness Lee

Most Local Church members are well-versed in the Bible. Although they know full well that Scripture condemns the exaltation of any individual (see 1 Corinthians 4:6), they offer various rationalizations to soothe their consciences, claiming: (1) We are not exalting Witness Lee, but merely respecting him; (2) He is more spiritual than others; it is under his leadership and teaching that we have come to better understand and obey the truth, and to love the Lord more deeply; (3) He has left us such a vast spiritual legacy—who else compares to him? ...

No matter how grand or appealing their reasons may sound, they cannot deny the fact that they

exalt an individual beyond what is written in Scripture, nor can their position withstand the test of biblical truth. In recent years, they have ostracized Witness Lee and his followers (specifically, the "Lee faction" in the U.S.) on the grounds that they failed to adhere to Lee's legacy; instead, they unilaterally conducted training sessions and published literature, thereby undermining unity. If such control over speech within the church does not stem from the cult of personality, then what does it stem from? One might ask: is this not akin to the infamous "burning of books and burying of scholars" orchestrated by Qin Shi Huang in Chinese history?

6. The Harm Caused by Exalting an Individual

(i) No one dares to oppose anything Witness Lee taught. Although some fellow workers and elders found certain statements by Lee problematic, they dared not reject any part of his teachings—fearing that the younger generation would oppose them and jeopardize their future in ministry. Consequently, an atmosphere of blind conformity prevailed, and the system of checks and balances was lost. A senior co-worker in Taiwan once privately admitted: "One is caught in the system; one has no choice but to go along with it."

(ii) While members of the Local Church oppose the doctrine of "Papal Infallibility," they have unwittingly embraced a doctrine of "Witness Lee Infallibility," accepting everything he taught without question. A relative of the author once privately pointed out hundreds of serious errors in Lee's writings to a senior co-worker in Taiwan. Taiwan Gospel Book Room has been quietly correcting these errors in reprints, fearing that publicizing the issue would cause outsiders to stop purchasing their publications.

(iii) Teaching is restricted to what Witness Lee taught; in meetings, one frequently hears, "Brother Lee said this" or "Brother Lee said that." They endlessly rehash the same old material, prioritizing loud, lively, and spirited gatherings over seeking new spiritual light or revelation. As a result, they stagnate, unable to grow, and their future prospects are bleak.

(iv) They adopt Witness Lee's conscience as their own; if a spiritual giant like him saw no issue, who were they to dare suggest otherwise? Consequently, they lose their spiritual discernment, merely parroting the views of others and living in a daze, adopting the group's definition of right and wrong as their own. However, when we stand before the Lord's judgment seat in the future, each of us must give an account individually. The Lord's words—"If the blind lead the blind, both will fall into a pit" (Matthew 15:14)—are entirely applicable to those who follow so blindly.

7. The most prominent heresy is the doctrine of "man becoming God"

The doctrine of "man becoming God" is clearly heretical; even Witness Lee himself once stated: "If I were to teach 'deification' (man becoming God), I would be preaching heresy" (quoting from early *Life-study* messages). Yet, not only did he reverse his position, but he also offered flimsy excuses to justify it: (1) sheep beget sheep, and God begets God; (2) the Lord Jesus Himself said, "Those to whom the word of God came were called gods" (John 10:35). Note: Those individuals were unjust judges; although called gods, they were condemned by the true God (see Psalm 82); (3) when we say man becomes God, it does not imply possessing the Godhead. Later, co-workers and elders in some local churches added: "When we say man becomes God, it is for the pursuit of holiness." ... In reality, "claiming to be God" is the behavior of Satan (2 Thessalonians 2:4); it is truly baffling that believers would adopt this as a slogan and even take pride in it. What we are depends not on what we say with our mouths, but on the reality within our spirit.

8. The most outrageous teachings emerged during the promotion of the "Knock-on-Door Movement"

In their effort to train all members to follow Witness Lee's teachings like "robots"—hoping to achieve their predetermined goal of evangelizing the entire world (Note: according to their target, the entire global population should have become church believers by the year 2000)—they actually proclaimed the following heresy at training conferences:

(i) The "Four-in-One" doctrine: Witness Lee had entered into such intimate fellowship with the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit that they could be considered one; therefore, what Witness Lee taught was precisely what the Triune God intended to teach. (II) The "Uselessness of Prayer" Argument: Since everything taught by Witness Lee supposedly aligns with the will of the Triune God, there is no need to pray to the Lord regarding how to implement "knocking on doors" for evangelism; one simply needs to obey Witness Lee's words.

(III) Later, they shifted the blame for these erroneous teachings onto the individuals who had originally voiced them. In reality, the vast majority of leaders at the time had "amened" these very statements. Today, it is these same figures who hold authority and control within the Local Church movement.

Furthermore, some of their practices were entirely worldly—such as the award ceremonies for "results"—featuring scenes that were truly appalling. One might ask: after years of such high-profile activity, how many of those baptized at the time actually remained?

9. The "Church Ground" They Zealously Exalted and Promoted Is, in Fact, the

Ground of a Unified Administrative System

According to the biblical record, the principle is indeed "one city, one church"; thus, the fundamental argument regarding the church ground was not incorrect. The error lay in the *implementation* of this "one city, one church" concept:

(I) The aim of the local church ground was to restore the state of unity that existed among Christians in various localities during the early days. However, what the Local Church movement actually restored was merely an administrative system of "one place, one church," while completely disregarding the most crucial principle of unity—brotherly love. They showed almost no brotherly affection toward those outside their own church system; at times, even blood relatives who held differing views on the church would find their relationships severed to the point of total estrangement. It is no wonder critics have remarked: "The Local Church exhibits a sectarian spirit even more intensely than the denominations do."

(II) In fact, many church groups today acknowledge the "one city, one church" principle, yet they differ in their interpretations of it. Issues such as geographical boundaries, the existence of apostles in the present day, which group established a non-denominational local church in a specific location first, and who would serve as elders in the event of a merger—on these matters, no consensus has been reached.

(III) The issue of geographical boundaries is particularly problematic; earthly administrative divisions are constantly shifting, yet the heavenly church is expected to adjust in accordance with these earthly changes, inevitably leading to many unreasonable situations. For instance, civil administration might merge several towns and cities into a single large municipality, yet the original towns and cities remain distinct administrative units; consequently, some argue for the "one city, one church" model, while others advocate maintaining the churches of the original towns and cities.

(IV) The Local Church movement is aware that many other church groups also subscribe to the principle of "one city, one church." To prevent these other groups from using the name "The Church in [Place Name]," the Local Church movement has preemptively registered these names with state governments (in the U.S.) across various locations. They have even registered "The Church in So-and-so City" for places where no actual congregation yet exists, forcing other church groups to register under names like "Church Assembly in So-and-so City" or "The Assembly of God in So-and-so City." Does the stance of "one city, one church" truly hinge merely on a name?

10. Emphasis on certain practices that devolve into mere formalism

The practices most emphasized by the Local Church movement include the following:

(I) "Calling on the name of the Lord": Just as the saying goes, "In extreme pain one cries out for one's mother; in dire straits one cries out to Heaven," it is entirely appropriate and scriptural for believers to naturally call upon the Lord's name when facing dilemmas, crises, or deep emotional stirrings. However, the Local Church movement calls upon the Lord's name casually—or even flippantly—at the slightest provocation, raising concerns that they might be taking the Lord's name in vain (cf. Exodus 20:7; Deuteronomy 5:11). Often, when they hear remarks in a meeting that displease them, they collectively shout the Lord's name to drown out the speaker, forcing them into silence. This behavior runs counter to their stated intention that "calling on the name of the Lord" serves to immediately return one to the spirit.

(II) "Pray-reading the Word of the Lord": Reading the Bible with a prayerful heart, or transforming a passage that has deeply moved one into a prayer—such practices have long been advocated by spiritual figures throughout church history and are particularly suited for private, personal devotion. However, the Local Church evolved this practice into the public "reading aloud" of scriptures or lyrics during meetings; while labeled "prayer-reading," it was effectively just "reading aloud." This encouraged saints who were otherwise uncomfortable with public prayer to speak up, but it produced an unintended side effect: while meetings appeared lively on the surface, many saints effectively "turned prayer into mere reading," and during the Breaking of Bread meeting, many would simply read the lyrics rather than offer actual prayers.

11. Categorizing Biblical Truths into "High-Grade" and "Low-Grade"

To demonstrate the superiority of his teachings, Witness Lee introduced concepts such as "high-grade gospel" and "747-era messages":

(i) He ridiculed mainstream Christianity for focusing solely on the doctrine of "Christ's substitutionary atonement," while designating his own message as the "high-grade gospel"—featuring concepts like "Christ passing through a process of compounding to become the life-giving Spirit." Such categorization effectively treated certain divine truths as mundane, which was truly blasphemous.

(ii) In an effort to promote a simple method for "releasing the spirit," he once mocked the doctrine of the Cross as akin to an old ox pulling a broken-down cart; he argued that since we live in the age of the 747 jet, one need only shout "Oh Lord, Amen, Hallelujah" to release the spirit, without the need for arduous, slow spiritual lessons. Surprisingly, this rhetoric appealed to young people, making it particularly popular among the superficial.

(iii) The consequence of disparaging the doctrine of the Cross was predictable: the church became filled with the "flesh." Acts of soulish venting were mistaken for the release of the spirit; while the atmosphere was lively, the true spiritual reality remained untouched.

12. The Local Church Using Litigation to Silence Critics

The Local Church justified its actions by citing the example of the Apostle Paul—arguing that just as he appealed to Caesar (see Acts 25:10–11), the church could also turn to secular courts to resolve disputes. Consequently, they filed lawsuits repeatedly; the final case was dismissed by the U.S. Supreme Court, a definitive ruling that the author believes served as a stern wake-up call from the Lord. In fact, their situation is vastly different from that of the Apostle Paul when he appealed to Caesar:

- (1) The Apostle Paul sought earthly administrative protection out of sheer necessity to save his life when it was in imminent danger—much like how, if a wicked person threatened to kill you today, you might seek police protection.
- (2) The Apostle Paul never sought earthly administrative intervention for the sake of the doctrine he preached, nor for his own reputation. What the Local Church does today is merely an attempt to prove they are right; yet, the more they sue others, the more they expose the fact that their underlying motive is flawed.
- (3) I am personally aware of individuals who were repeatedly threatened with lawsuits by the Local Church headquarters. On the final occasion, the threat was: "Even if we don't succeed in defeating you in court, we will sue you until you are financially ruined." They boasted of a monthly litigation budget of \$100,000 USD and the backing of prominent lawyers, intending to force submission through intimidation.
- (4) This litigious approach of the Local Church has also spread to some of its followers; family members have sued one another over a deceased father's estate—with the plaintiffs being leaders within the church—a truly sad and pitiable state of affairs.

13. The Erosion of Moral Standards

There are many rumors regarding Witness Lee's own moral conduct and financial dealings; however, as these matters require concrete evidence (such as witness testimony and physical proof), I will not comment on them here. The conduct of his family members is plain for all to see and requires no further elaboration. The real issue lies with the leaders of the local churches; many appear outwardly pious and upright, yet their mindsets and behaviors render them utterly

unfit to lead others. A few examples follow:

(1) A Western brother, known as Witness Lee's ghostwriter, was once transferred to another state to lie low after having an affair with a married woman; yet, a few years later, he returned to headquarters to serve as a spokesperson.

(2) An elder in the city of AN divorced and remarried; because his new wife had been instrumental in "protecting" the leadership, he was promoted to the position of elder—in direct violation of the biblical mandate that "an overseer... must be the husband of but one wife" (1 Timothy 3:2).

(3) An elder in City CE, known for his habitual sycophancy, went so far as to publicly declare: "Even if the man were a murderer, I would still follow him."

(4) A fellow worker in Taiwan took a certain individual (whose name is withheld) to visit prostitutes; when this was witnessed by brothers and sisters, the excuse offered was that he was burdened with a multitude of responsibilities and needed to unwind.

(5) An elder in City RM argued: "We didn't see the act of sexual immorality with our own eyes, so we cannot take disciplinary action." One might ask: would anyone actually dare to commit such an act openly?

(6) They misapply Scripture to counter critics—for instance, citing the verse: "Jesus straightened up and said to them, 'Let any one of you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her'" (John 8:7). The implication is that since we are all sinners, no one has the right to criticize others for their sins.

With moral issues being avoided and left unaddressed at every level, one can easily imagine the true state of their spiritual reality.

14. A Deeply Ingrained Sense of Hierarchy

Many co-workers and elders (including those who have since left) have—under the influence and teaching of Witness Lee—unconsciously developed a deeply ingrained sense of hierarchy. While outwardly humble and courteous, they inwardly view themselves as superior; only those of their own rank are deemed worthy to deliberate on major matters. As for ordinary believers, "submission" is the expected spiritual response, and any dissent is dismissed as evidence that the dissenter is living in the flesh. Meetings are reserved for singing praises to the leadership; dissenting voices are absolutely intolerable and are liable to be shouted down with cries of "Oh! Lord!"

15. "Morning Revival" Materials

Morning Revival materials were published and sold to followers everywhere for use in morning devotions and gatherings. Although the content included Bible verses, the vast majority consisted of summaries from Witness Lee's "Life-study" series. By placing Lee's words alongside Scripture—and allowing human words to outweigh God's—followers were subtly led to mistake his words for God's. They became so steeped in his teachings that the situation eventually seemed entirely normal to them.

16. Instigating a "Cultural Revolution" within the Church

A younger relative of Witness Lee, who had immigrated overseas from China and come to faith through the author's evangelism, later personally admitted that Lee's actions within the church reminded him of the "Cultural Revolution" back home. Consequently, he resolved that it was best to distance himself from the church. Upon reflection, his observation proved to be quite insightful. For instance, *Morning Revival* materials effectively replaced *Quotations from Chairman Mao*; furthermore, massive special gatherings—drawing thousands or even tens of thousands of people—were frequently held. Local churches were encouraged to send their "elite" members to attend, mirroring the networking of the Red Guards, thereby bolstering one another's momentum and influence.

17. Coining Unique Church Terminology

Witness Lee introduced a host of "spiritual terms" not found in mainstream Christianity—such as "the Spirit," "the sanctifying Spirit," "marked out," "God's economy," "the *ecclesia* / *zhaohui*" (mimicking the Assemblies of God), "processed," "person" (as in *personhood*), "permeated," "saturated," "blending," "propitiation," "sonize" (becoming sons), "prophesying" (speaking for God), and "prophesier" (prophet). These terms served to distinguish the group as a unique entity, thereby maintaining internal cohesion ("centripetal force") while framing all Christians outside this "church" as incompatible outsiders.

18. Vigorously Promoting Various Movements

In addition to the aforementioned measures, large-scale movements were launched almost every year or two during the 1970s and 1980s. Examples include: the "Shouting" movement; the "Repeated Baptism" movement; the "Breaking Bread to Enjoy the Lord" (rather than merely remembering Him) movement; the "Returning to the Spirit" (which mocked the Cross) movement;

the "Youth Rising Up to Bury the Old" (referring to the old leadership) movement; the "Nationwide Migration" movement; the "Establishing Chinese-speaking Meetings in North America" movement; the "Truth Lessons and Life Lessons" movement; the "Knocking on Doors" movement (also known as the "New Way" movement); and the "Vital Groups" movement. Ultimately, with the exception of a few that are still practiced today, most of these movements fizzled out without result and are no longer mentioned.

19. Claiming to be "The Lord's Recovery"

The Local Church claims to be "the Lord's Recovery" while regarding all Christian denominations and sects as "fallen Christianity." In reality, what the Local Church has "recovered" amounts to nothing more than certain "teachings" and "practices" regarding church life; it has utterly failed to recover the "spirit" of mutual love found in the early church. Within the Local Church, this so-called "mutual love" is extended only to fellow believers within the movement. As for other Christians, they are often treated worse than non-believers; at best, there is no interaction or fellowship, and at worst, members deliberately turn their heads away upon meeting them, refusing to acknowledge them as fellow believers. This so-called "Lord's Recovery" restores only outward practices rather than the inner spirit—a true case of prioritizing the trivial over the essential.

20. Regarding the Local Church Itself as "the Body of the Lord"

The Local Church teaches that "the Body of Christ" refers to the universal church, encompassing all believers across time and geography. However, in the subconscious minds and actual practices of many followers, only the congregations belonging to the Local Church are viewed as constituent members of the Body of Christ. Consequently, they refuse to allow anyone who does not accept Witness Lee's leadership to participate in their breaking-of-bread meetings, claiming that such individuals have already separated themselves from the Body of Christ. In this way, Witness Lee—rather than Christ—becomes the Head of the Body of Christ.

21. Building a Modern Tower of Babel

The misleading teachings of the Local Church have become deeply ingrained in the hearts and minds of the brothers and sisters within the group; while they believe they are building the New Jerusalem, in reality, they are building the Tower of Babel and the city of Great Babylon. They

center themselves around a modern-day Nimrod, using "brick for stone and bitumen for mortar" (bricks, made of clay, represent the untransformed soul-life of the old Adam; bitumen, or asphalt, represents the emotions within the soul-life) "to make a name for ourselves" (during the "Knock-on-Door" movement, a speaker even publicly declared that within a few years, the entire world would belong to "us").

22. Self-Reflection by Insiders of the Local Church

The following points represent self-reflections shared online by members within the Local Church in Taiwan: (1) meetings where speaking occurs merely for the sake of speaking; (2) the entire church pursuing the "gift of teaching"; (3) brothers and sisters having a superficial understanding of the Bible; (4) excessive veneration of Brother Lee; (5) a lack of actual experience of Christ; (6) the functions of elders being stripped away; (7) maintaining church unity through "artificial" means; (8) an inability to speak the truth during service meetings; (9) complacency and looking down on other Christian churches; (10) an inability to build together with brothers and sisters from other churches; (11) a lack of new spiritual light; (12) the church becoming like a denomination; (13) the church becoming elitist; (14) pursuing worldly glory; (15) morning watch sessions focused on Brother Lee; (16) meetings turning into mere book-reading clubs; (17) feeding all saints only with spiritual milk (rather than solid food); (18) a decline in the capacity for evangelism and shepherding; (19) few people willing to take the initiative in service; (20) the church lacking prayer and... A lack of teaching regarding the recognition of sin; (21) training the entire church to act as promoters of Brother Lee's expository works; (22) the ability to live the church life without the need for God; (23) disparaging other spiritual gifts while exclusively exalting the gift of "prophesying" (which is actually the gift of "teaching"); (24) the Ministry Station arranging standardized annual messages and requiring all churches to purchase and study them for use in meetings; (25) exalting the authority of Brother Lee's teachings and his name, while pursuing only his messages; (26) encouraging all saints to prophesy individually in meetings to build up the church; (27) charging copyright fees or costs for spiritual books and video training materials; (28) training prophets to preach (prophesy) using a "master-apprentice" method; (29) the church having only a single, unique ministry; (30) the Ministry Station leading churches worldwide—a practice lacking biblical basis and exceeding the boundaries ordained by God; (31) pursuing "peak truths," "high-quality gospel," and eloquent speech; (32) a clergy class receiving fixed salaries; (33) resolving disputes between brothers through litigation. — Huang Caleb