



**CORPORATE STATEMENT**  
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Questions and Answers

**Questions and Answers about The Local Church's Lawsuit Against Harvest House Publishers and Authors John Ankerberg and John Weldon**

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### Introduction

On December 31, 2001, The Local Church, The Local Churches, and Living Stream Ministry filed a \$136 million defamation lawsuit against Harvest House Publishers and authors John Ankerberg and John Weldon. In their suit, The Local Church claimed that the book the *Encyclopedia of Cults and New Religions* was libelous in regard to them. Through the course of the legal proceedings, Harvest House and the authors have firmly stated the language of the book does not at all defame The Local Church. The case has been reviewed by Judge Kent Sullivan of the 80<sup>th</sup> Judicial District Court of Harris County in Houston, Texas, and on March 9, 2004, Judge Sullivan declined a motion for summary judgment, which is not a ruling against Harvest House and the authors, but simply allows the case to continue forward. (At this level of the legal process, the judge is not required to explain the reasoning behind his ruling.) Consequently, Harvest House Publishers, Ankerberg, and Weldon are taking this ruling to the Texas court of appeals. We have great confidence in the fairness of our legal system, and we truly believe that the appellate court will completely vindicate us.

For those who desire to know more about the case, we have created this question-and-answer document that provides an overview of the lawsuit. Please know, as you read this, that our desire is simply to explain the facts about the suit and other issues related to it, and to do so in a gracious manner that speaks the truth in love. For the sake of making sure we represent The Local Church and Living Stream Ministry with complete accuracy, all quotes excerpted from their publications and websites are fully documented.

Who are the parties involved in this lawsuit against Harvest House Publishers and its authors?

**The Local Church/The Local Churches**—According to The Local Church website [www.contendingforthefaith.org](http://www.contendingforthefaith.org), The Local Church is an “unincorporated association of Christian congregations”<sup>1</sup> throughout the United States and world, and “each of these congregations is also known as the local church in their respective city.”<sup>2</sup> There are 96 congregations in the United States that are part of this lawsuit. The Local Church promotes the teachings of Watchman Nee and Witness Lee. Witness Lee founded Living Stream Ministry (which has long served as the publishing arm of The Local Church) in Southern California in 1965. Lee taught that The Local Church’s history “is a history of the Lord’s recovery,”<sup>3</sup> which explains why it refers to itself as being part of what they call “the Lord’s recovery” in this age. The Local Church teaches this recovery is necessary because Christianity as a whole has spiritually degenerated.

**Living Stream Ministry**, based in Anaheim, California, is a “not-for-profit publication and radio broadcast outreach associated with the Local Church.”<sup>4</sup> Among their hundreds of publications is The New Testament Recovery Version, which includes extensive commentary from Witness Lee’s teachings. (This New Testament Recovery Version is also distributed by an organization called Bibles for America.<sup>5</sup>) Living Stream Ministry also offers “Full-Time Training” for members of The Local Churches worldwide, with training centers in Anaheim, California, and several countries.<sup>6</sup>

**Harvest House Publishers, Inc.**, based in Eugene, Oregon, is an evangelical Christian publishing house established in 1974. It is one of the founding members of the Evangelical Christian Publishers Association (ECPA) and publishes approximately 160 books a year that affirm the essential teachings of biblical, orthodox Christianity.

**Dr. John Ankerberg**, coauthor of more than 60 books, is president and host of the award-winning *John Ankerberg Show*, and has three earned degrees: a Master of Arts in church history and the philosophy of Christian thought, a Master of Divinity from Trinity International University, and a Doctor of Ministry from Luther Rice Seminary.

**Dr. John Weldon** has authored or coauthored more than 80 books. He has a Ph.D. in comparative religion from what is now Pacific International University and a D.Min. with emphasis in contemporary religious movements from Luther Rice Seminary, as well as master's degrees in divinity (Luther Rice Seminary) and Christian apologetics (Simon Greenleaf University/School of Law).

What is the lawsuit about?

The Local Church claims that *The Encyclopedia of Cults and New Religions* (from here onward, referred to as the *Encyclopedia*), published by Harvest House Publishers and authored by John Ankerberg and John Weldon, defames The Local Church, The Local Churches, and Living Stream Ministry by accusing them of criminal and immoral conduct. The Local Church, on their website [www.contendingforthefait.org](http://www.contendingforthefait.org), states that the *Encyclopedia's* Introduction "clearly labels all of the groups in the book as being guilty of the most deplorable, illegal and immoral acts."<sup>2</sup>

However, much to the contrary, the book does not attribute such activity to The Local Church or its followers, nor to "all of the groups in the book." In fact, a reading of the *Encyclopedia* clearly shows that a large percentage of the groups do not have criminal or immoral conduct attributed to them. As is the case with almost all of the groups in the book, The Local Church was included on the basis of their significant theological deviations from biblical, orthodox Christianity—deviations found in their written and published materials that have to do with key essential doctrines about God, Jesus, the Holy Spirit, the Trinity, the future state of the believer, and so on.

The Local Church has attempted to argue that a small number of general statements in the *Encyclopedia's* Introduction and Doctrinal Appendix—statements about the characteristics and activities of various cults—apply directly to them. But in actuality, there was never any intent for the general statements in question to ascribe misconduct to any specific group, and the language of the *Encyclopedia* does not at all support their contention. Thus the book does not defame The Local Church.

Particularly noteworthy is the fact that The Local Church, in its lawsuit, does not dispute the accuracy of the *Encyclopedia* chapter that comments on their beliefs. This chapter is only 1¼ pages in length and includes fully documented quotes taken directly from publications produced by The Local Church and Living Stream Ministry.<sup>8</sup> Neither does The Local Church dispute the accuracy of any of the more than 1,350 fully documented quotes in the rest of the 731-page *Encyclopedia*.

Why did the authors include The Local Church in the *Encyclopedia*?

While The Local Church professes to adhere to scriptural Christian beliefs, a look at their books and

resources, published by Living Stream Ministry, reveals that both biblical and unbiblical teachings appear within the volumes. A primary purpose of the *Encyclopedia* is to identify religious groups that claim compatibility with Christianity, yet adhere to teachings that stray seriously from the Bible. Our encouragement to interested readers is to carefully evaluate the writings of Witness Lee and the publications produced by Living Stream Ministry and compare their teachings to the light of God's Word, and arrive at their own conclusion about whether or not serious discrepancies exist. We especially emphasize the need to review The Local Church's current *written* materials (including their books, newsletters, The New Testament Recovery Version, etc.), because many of their websites generally seem orthodox while their theology as a whole contains numerous unorthodox teachings. A few examples of some of their unorthodox teachings are cited here, and full documentation for each quote is provided so readers can examine them in their original context, if they wish. Our purpose here is merely to make readers aware of what The Local Church teaches.

For context, it is important to know The Local Church views itself as part of "the Lord's recovery" and teaches that Christianity as a whole has degenerated. Witness Lee, in his book titled *The History of the Church and the Local Churches*, said, "We are still in a situation in which we need the Lord's rescue, the Lord's recovery. I am afraid that a number of us are still under the negative influence of Christendom. We all have to realize that today the Lord is going on and on to fully recover us and bring us fully out of Christendom."<sup>9</sup> According to various current Local Church publications, including the New Testament Recovery Version, Witness Lee also taught:

- ☉ "Christianity is just the expression of dead religion...."<sup>10</sup>
- ☉ "The Lord is not building His church in Christendom, which is composed of the apostate Roman Catholic Church and the Protestant denominations. This prophecy [in Matthew 16:18, where Jesus said He would "build My church"] is being fulfilled through the Lord's recovery, in which the building of the genuine church is being accomplished."<sup>11</sup>
- ☉ "The only way to follow the Lord absolutely is to go the way of the local church."<sup>12</sup>
- ☉ "We must stay away from the practice of the deformed and degraded Christianity and come back to the divine revelation for the Lord's recovery.... The traditional way of [church] meeting...builds up something satanic and demonic."<sup>13</sup>
- ☉ "Christianity is not focused on the divine economy but is a human religion saturated with demonic and satanic things."<sup>14</sup>
- ☉ "Roman Catholicism and Protestantism, as well as Judaism, all...[have] become an organization of Satan as his tool to damage God's economy."<sup>15</sup>

Especially revealing is Witness Lee's following statement, which also appears in the New Testament Recovery Version:

The reformed church, though recovered to the Lord's word to some extent, has denied the Lord's name by denominating herself, taking many other names, such as Lutheran, Wesleyan, Anglican, Presbyterian, Baptist, etc. The recovered church not only has returned in a full way to the Lord's word but also has abandoned all names other than that of the Lord Jesus Christ. The recovered church belongs to the Lord absolutely, having nothing to do with any denominations (any names). To deviate from the Lord's word is apostasy, and to denominate the church by taking any name other than the Lord's is spiritual fornication.... the church in the Lord's recovery has the revelation

and presence of the Lord and expresses the Lord in a living way, full of light and with the riches of life.<sup>16</sup>

With reference to Witness Lee's own words, it is clear that The Local Church, which sees itself as part of the Lord's recovery, claims it has "returned in a full way to the Lord's Word" and "has the revelation and presence of the Lord," while Christendom is "degraded" and has committed "spiritual fornication."

#### *Examples of The Local Church's Teaching on the Deification of the Believer*

One example of The Local Church's serious departure from biblical Christianity is Witness Lee's teaching on the deification of the believer: "Sooner or later, you have to be made God.... All of God's redeemed people will eventually become gods as the very God in life, in nature, and in appearance but not in the Godhead."<sup>17</sup> In the October 2002 issue of *Affirmation & Critique*, a journal published by Living Stream Ministry, an article titled "Becoming God" states, "Because we have been born of God, we have the life and nature of God, and in this sense we are God."<sup>18</sup> The Local Church goes to great lengths to clarify that "there are permanent boundaries to our deification: In Christ we become God in life and in nature for God's expression, but we do not become God in the Godhead or as an object of worship."<sup>19</sup>

But no matter how The Local Church explains their perspective, it simply is not found within biblical, orthodox Christian doctrine. Christian theologian Millard J. Erickson states, "There will always be a difference between God and man.... Even when redeemed and glorified, we will still be renewed human beings. We will never become God. He will always be God and we will always be humans, so that there will always be a transcendence."<sup>20</sup>

According to The Local Church, God has a specific goal for deifying believers: "If God did not become man, and if the believers do not become God, then God's economy will not have a consummation. God's ultimate goal is the New Jerusalem, and for this He became man. Our ultimate goal is also the New Jerusalem, and for this we must become God."<sup>21</sup> The New Jerusalem is then explained in this way: "The New Jerusalem is not a material city, it is not heaven, and it is not a place; the New Jerusalem is a corporate person, the processed and consummated Triune God and His redeemed, regenerated, transformed, and glorified tripartite elect becoming one entity. In God's economy, both God and the believers must become the New Jerusalem."<sup>22</sup>

#### *Examples of The Local Church's Teaching on God Mingling with Man*

Another deviation is The Local Church's teaching that God "mingles" with redeemed man. On their website [www.mingling.info](http://www.mingling.info) The Local Church quotes 1 Corinthians 6:17 ("He who is joined to the Lord is one spirit") and then goes on to explain, "This mysterious declaration implies that the Lord's believers are mingled with Him in life and are thus *organically blended* with Him."<sup>23</sup> In one of his books, Lee expands on what is meant by the term "mingled" when he says, "Every saved person is a hybrid of divinity and humanity mingled together. The dual nature of this hybrid is the divine with the human. Though we are human beings, we have God within us. Since God and man have become one entity, we are the God-men."<sup>24</sup>

To suggest that Christians are a hybridization of the human and the divine so as to become "god men" and are one entity with God goes well beyond what biblical, traditional Christianity teaches—namely, that God is always perfectly and uniquely God, and that humans have always been and always will be created creatures who will never have the nature of God, even in their future

glorified bodies. Bible doctrine teaches that God and man will always be distinct entities.

### *Examples of The Local Church's Teaching on the Trinity*

One of the more significant examples of serious doctrinal deviation relates to The Local Church's teachings on the Trinity, and this is especially evident in their current publications and from a very careful reading of some of their websites.<sup>25</sup> Biblical Christianity has long taught that there is only one God, who is comprised of three persons. These three persons of the Trinity are the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, and are co-eternal and always co-existing. In other words, all three persons of the Trinity are *distinctly* co-existent *at all times*. The Father is *always and only* the Father, the Son is *always and only* the Son, and the Holy Spirit is *always and only* the Holy Spirit. By contrast, notice what Witness Lee taught about the members of the Trinity:

- ☞ "...the *entire* Godhead, the Triune God, became flesh."<sup>26</sup>
- ☞ "The Father was expressed among men in the Son, and the Son became the Spirit to come into men. The Father is in the Son, and the Son became the Spirit."<sup>27</sup>
- ☞ "...the Lord Christ is the Spirit and the Spirit is the Lord Christ...."<sup>28</sup>
- ☞ "The Father is not only the Father, but is also the Son."<sup>29</sup>
- ☞ "...God the Father is also the Spirit (John 4:24). Hence, all three Persons of the Godhead are the Spirit."<sup>30</sup>
- ☞ "...the Lord Jesus who is the Son is also the Eternal Father."<sup>31</sup>

These statements from The Local Church and current Living Stream Ministry publications are in stark contrast with the biblical Christian view of the Trinity, which teaches that while there is only one God, all three members of that Godhead are eternally distinct entities. While all three members are God and all three are eternal, one member does not equal another member, as The Local Church teaches. Respected Christian theologian Wayne Grudem states, "The fact that God is three persons means that the Father is *not* the Son; they are distinct persons. It also means that the Father is *not* the Holy Spirit, but that they are distinct persons. And it means that the Son is *not* the Spirit."<sup>32</sup>

What was said about The Local Church in the Introduction of *The Encyclopedia of Cults and New Religions*?

Absolutely nothing.

What makes this defamation lawsuit peculiar is that The Local Church is *never named* in the Introduction of the *Encyclopedia*, nor does the group dispute anything said about them in the chapter on The Local Church. In their suit, The Local Church alleges that, in the Introduction, a general list of characteristics of cults and a brief statement about criminal behaviors that have been exhibited by some cult leaders or gurus<sup>33</sup> might give readers the impression that The Local Church exhibits immoral characteristics or participates in criminal activity. However, before these traits are mentioned, the *Encyclopedia's* Introduction very clearly says "not all groups have all the characteristics."<sup>34</sup> The only way a reader of the *Encyclopedia* can possibly determine the

characteristics or activities of any particular group is to go to the specific chapter that discusses that group rather than look at the Introduction (and, in fact, people know that's how an encyclopedia is used). Of significant note is the fact that a large percentage of the chapters in the *Encyclopedia* deal only with theological deviations, and make no mention of criminal or immoral conduct whatsoever.

The normal purpose of an introduction to any reference work is to provide readers with an overview of general facts or observations related to the subject matter at hand. Indeed, the 16-page Introduction to the *Encyclopedia* provides readers with a big-picture look at cults and new religions, discusses the impact they have on our society, and encourages readers to develop discernment with regard to what such groups teach.

What about The Local Church's claim that the *Encyclopedia* promotes religious intolerance?

The Local Church, on their website [www.contendingforthefaith.org](http://www.contendingforthefaith.org), alleges the Introduction of the *Encyclopedia* "promotes religious bigotry of the worst sort, extolling 'intolerance' as a 'virtue'..."<sup>35</sup> Yet a simple reading of the Introduction reveals the very opposite. In actuality, the authors affirm that their readers have full freedom to think for themselves and that "anyone who wishes can be tolerant of the kinds of things described in this encyclopedia."<sup>36</sup> They also state, "It is not intolerant to have exclusive views in religious matters and therefore to reject other views....especially if the other views can be demonstrated to be false, harmful and destructive."<sup>37</sup> In other words, it's perfectly legitimate to use the teachings of orthodox Christianity as a standard against which to measure various religious groups and offer a cautionary warning to others about those groups known to exhibit unbiblical teachings or harmful behaviors.

Also, far from promoting religious bigotry, the authors state that "responsible religious freedom must be defended, vigorously, *including* the responsible religious freedoms of cults and new religions."<sup>38</sup> So the *Encyclopedia* does not deny the right of cults or new religions to adhere to teachings that differ from those of biblical Christianity. In fact, the *Encyclopedia* clearly states, "Barring illegalities, or perversions, Christians are certainly willing to accept the beliefs and practices of others and to respect their right to hold them; after all, this is a God-given right."<sup>39</sup> A very key distinction is made here by the authors: Religious freedoms should be handled in a responsible manner that doesn't cross the line of destructive, illegal, or immoral behavior. If a group engages in practices that cross this line, they are no longer exercising responsible religious freedom, and it is at this point that intolerance becomes a virtue. Many governments and legal systems worldwide have laws that protect their citizens from destructive and criminal acts, and these laws are rightfully intolerant toward those who impose any kind of harm upon individuals. The intolerance spoken of in the *Encyclopedia*, then, is that of Christians not tolerating illegal or harmful conduct in the same way a government or legal system would not tolerate such conduct.

Now, there are some world governments that go too far—that clearly deny freedom of religion and/or freedom of speech and persecute religious groups or individuals under the guise of governmental and societal protection. This, obviously, is extreme and wrong. Thankfully, in the United States, we have the freedom to believe and practice our choice of religion as well as the freedom to discuss and debate religious topics and differences without fear of governmental intervention, harassment, or worse. Harvest House and the authors contend these freedoms need to continue being protected.

So, contrary to the claims of The Local Church, the *Encyclopedia* does not promote religious bigotry. It supports religious freedom and respects the rights of others to hold to beliefs and

practices that differ from those of biblical Christianity. At the same time, the *Encyclopedia* does encourage readers to become fully informed before they get involved with any religious group. Indeed, the authors say they wrote the *Encyclopedia* “for [people] to try to help them. We wrote it for people on the outside who are unknowingly misled by the claims of these groups.... We also wrote it for Christians who may unsuspectingly join these groups, or be introduced to them and confused by their claims to be compatible with Christianity.”<sup>40</sup>

What did the *Encyclopedia* actually say directly about The Local Church?

On their website [www.contendingforthefait.org](http://www.contendingforthefait.org), The Local Church makes this claim about the *Encyclopedia*: “The book ascribes many evil traits to us as a ‘cult.’...the book twists our teachings beyond recognition....”<sup>41</sup>

Again, keep in mind The Local Church is never named in the Introduction, and none of the general comments about immoral or criminal conduct that appear in the Introduction are ever applied to The Local Church. In the 1¼–page chapter on The Local Church on pages 211–212, absolutely no evil traits, criminal activities, or immoral behaviors are ascribed to the group. In fact, the chapter is entirely theological in nature, and examines some of the serious doctrinal aberrations taught by The Local Church. More specifically, the chapter provides brief summaries of The Local Church’s views on God, Jesus, the Holy Spirit, the Trinity, salvation, man, sin, Satan, the Fall, the second coming, the Bible, heaven, and hell. And far from twisting The Local Church’s teachings beyond recognition, the chapter includes five quotes excerpted directly from Living Stream Ministry publications, and every quote is accompanied by full and accurate documentation. In fact, The Local Church, in its lawsuit, does not dispute any of the information in this 1¼–page chapter.

How do Harvest House and its authors respond to The Local Church’s claims that their numerous reconciliation efforts were ignored for a year prior to The Local Church/Living Stream Ministry filing their lawsuit?

In a news release dated June 20, 2003, Local Church spokesman Dan Towle stated, “Harvest House Publishers and its authors chose to ignore our year–long efforts to resolve this issue.”<sup>42</sup> And on their website [www.contendingforthefait.org](http://www.contendingforthefait.org), in an article titled “Facts about Pending Litigation with Harvest House Publishers and Authors,” The Local Church claims Harvest House Publishers and authors Ankerberg and Weldon “utterly disregard[ed their] letters” and that there was an “aggressive refusal to give timely consideration” to their appeals.<sup>43</sup>

These allegations are seriously misrepresentative, for in fact, every letter from The Local Church received a timely and courteous response from Harvest House and Ankerberg and Weldon. For the sake of setting the record straight, here is a detailed chronology of what happened:

**January 11, 2001**—*The Local Church Writes to Harvest House*: The Local Church sent their first letter of complaint, which was only one page long, general in nature, and did not point to the specific problems they alleged were in the *Encyclopedia*. In a clear reference to a previous lawsuit filed by some Local Churches, they closed their letter with these words: “We hope you know that this kind of writing has been ruled as libelous concerning us in the past.”

**January 19, 2001**—*Harvest House and Authors Respond to The Local Church*: Because of The Local Church’s reference to libel, and because of Harvest House’s desire to maintain the highest of integrity in any matter in which libel might possibly be involved, Harvest House answered through one of its attorneys and asked for “written information” that would help us to evaluate The Local



Church's concerns and provide them "with a meaningful response." Response time: 8 days.

**May 16, 2001**—*The Local Church Writes to Harvest House*: Surprisingly, The Local Church took almost four months to respond to Harvest House's January 19 letter. In this one-page letter The Local Church indicated a desire to meet to discuss the book, but again, never provided specific explanations that would help Harvest House and the authors to know which statements in the *Encyclopedia* were allegedly problematic. In the letter, The Local Church referred to "preparing to answer" via lawyers, and cited a 1985 lawsuit filed by the Local Churches. (In that suit, The Local Church obtained a default judgment—a judgment in which the losing party "defaults," or is unable to or does not defend itself. The ministry that The Local Church sued had to declare bankruptcy because it could no longer afford the cost of defending itself.)

**June 4, 2001**—*Harvest House and Authors Respond to The Local Church*: Harvest House and authors Ankerberg and Weldon answered directly, and for the second time, asked for specific details instead of general complaints: "we are requesting that you provide us with a written explanation of your specific objections....we shall thoroughly evaluate it, approaching the evaluation with an open mind." This letter also stated, "If we feel that there would be any benefit in having a meeting as suggested in your letter, we shall certainly contact you to arrange for it." That hardly constituted an "aggressive refusal" to The Local Church's attempts to resolve the issue. Response time: 19 days.

**November 20, 2001**—*The Local Church Writes to Harvest House*: Nearly a year after The Local Church sent its first complaint letter and more than five months after Harvest House sent its second request for their specific objections about the text of the book, The Local Church finally sent a lengthy written explanation of what they viewed as errors in the *Encyclopedia*. Ironically, while The Local Church took *10 months* to supply the information Harvest House and the authors had originally requested back on January 19, The Local Church firmly demanded that Harvest House respond to the lengthy compilation of allegations in a mere *two weeks*. The Local Church also closed the letter by emphatically stating, "Your failure to do so will give us little alternative but to pursue legal action against you."

**November 29, 2001**—*Harvest House and Authors Respond to The Local Church*: Once again Harvest House replied immediately, explaining that the company "has just moved its offices, and we are currently in the process of completing our transition. In addition, as I'm sure you realize, during the holiday season, it is extremely difficult to devote the time necessary to a project such as this in order to truly do it justice." Still, Harvest House promised to provide a response, and stated that "the points made in your letter will be carefully reviewed and evaluated." Response time: 9 days.

Contrary to The Local Church's claim that Harvest House "utterly disregard[ed their] letters," in every case, Harvest House sent a gracious and timely response. More importantly, because The Local Church waited until November 20, 2001 to detail their complaints, Harvest House and the authors were left for nearly a full year in the awkward position of not knowing how they should evaluate The Local Church's undefined complaints about the *Encyclopedia*. All the complaints in The Local Church's first two letters (January 11 and May 16) were very vague and never pinpointed which statements in the *Encyclopedia* were supposedly defamatory. While waiting for this information from The Local Church, authors Ankerberg and Weldon had, in fact, carefully reevaluated the *Encyclopedia's* chapter on The Local Church to ensure it was accurate, and confirmed that indeed it was.

How do Harvest House Publishers and its authors respond to The Local Church's accusation that Harvest House Publishers was the first to file a lawsuit?

Harvest House and its authors did not receive a written explanation of The Local Church's allegations against the *Encyclopedia* until November 20, 2001. Nine days later, Harvest House promised to respond to those allegations, and said it would need time to do so. While Harvest House and authors Ankerberg and Weldon were evaluating the complaints, the attorneys representing The Local Church and Living Stream Ministry sent a letter to Harvest House's attorneys, saying, "Conditioned upon Harvest House's and the Author's execution and return (receipt by us) of the tolling agreement enclosed herein by Tuesday, December 18, 2001, Mr. Hawkins [the president of Harvest House Publishers] will be afforded up to and including Wednesday, January 15, 2002 in which to respond to our clients. If he fails to provide an adequate response within that time, The Local Church will have exhausted its efforts to settle this matter without recourse to the courts and will proceed accordingly."

What was this "tolling agreement" The Local Church wanted Harvest House to sign? The purpose of the tolling agreement was to get the statute of limitations extended so that The Local Church could preserve its right to sue in court. What's more, the tolling agreement proposed by The Local Church's attorneys was completely one-sided. It stated that if there were a breakdown in negotiations, The Local Church could immediately file a lawsuit, while Harvest House and its authors would be required to wait for a prescribed period of time to pass before being able to take any defensive action. Also, the Local Church's attorneys continuously made it clear The Local Church would file a lawsuit if Harvest House and its authors did not acquiesce to The Local Church's demands.

To protect itself from this very real threat, Harvest House's attorneys filed a legal action for a declaratory judgment in Lane County, Oregon. The purpose of this was for a judge to establish that the *Encyclopedia* was not defamatory in regard to The Local Church. Harvest House and the authors were simply assuming a *defensive* posture in the face of an imminent lawsuit. The action, then, was *protective* in nature, and more importantly, it did not ask for any money or civil retribution whatsoever. By stark contrast, the lawsuit that was filed by The Local Church demands \$136 million from Harvest House and authors Ankerberg and Weldon.

Did Harvest House and its authors attempt to resolve this dispute out of court?

Absolutely, yes.

Harvest House Publishers and its authors tried several times, through different avenues, including the use of a Christian mediation service, to meet with representatives of The Local Church, discuss their allegations, and hopefully resolve the issues at hand. After several failed attempts to meet with The Local Church, an Oregon court required the parties to meet, and unfortunately, even then an agreement could not be reached.

How does The Local Church and Living Stream Ministry's lawsuit against Harvest House and the authors endanger the freedom of speech?

Before we answer this question, keep in mind that The Local Church and Living Stream Ministry have alleged in their lawsuit that some *general* statements in the Introduction of the

*Encyclopedia*—statements that do not point to any group in particular and were never intended to—could lead readers to conclude that those general statements relate specifically to The Local Church and Living Stream Ministry and to all the other groups in the *Encyclopedia*. Their lawsuit does not point to any actual errors of fact, and does not challenge what the book states in the chapter on The Local Church. The claims in the lawsuit are based entirely upon unfounded speculation about how a reader might somehow misinterpret some brief and select portions of the *Encyclopedia*'s Introduction clearly meant to address cults and new religions in general.

Having said this, if The Local Church and Living Stream Ministry actually prevail in this lawsuit, then media organizations everywhere would become dangerously vulnerable to lawsuits filed merely on the basis that an isolated reader or listener might somehow connect two totally unrelated portions of a book or broadcast that were never intended to be connected. They would not have the freedom to publish or air legitimate and factually based differences of opinion without the fear that readers or listeners might misconstrue them and file costly yet unsubstantiated lawsuits. Freedom of expression, as protected by the First Amendment, is designed to allow for healthy debate. For a *writer* to be declared guilty of defamation simply because of a *reader's* misinterpretation is to severely inhibit freedom of speech. It also punishes the writer for an imagined crime he or she never committed. This would change the face of publishing and broadcasting forever, for in such a climate, the threat of unmerited lawsuits would be so great as to have a chilling effect on the free expression of ideas and opinions.

ECPA publishers would be especially affected, for within the realm of religion, there are a wide variety of opinions on any given topic—opinions that ought to be freely shared and discussed in a responsible manner. While Harvest House Publishers and its authors may disagree with the teachings of The Local Church, we have no desire whatsoever to inhibit their freedom of speech. Their beliefs are their prerogative. Likewise, publishers should not be inhibited by fear of legal retribution when they openly and responsibly discuss religious topics.

Why don't Harvest House Publishers and its authors just give in to The Local Church's demands in order to get out of this suit?

It deeply saddens us to have to defend ourselves in this lawsuit—an unwarranted lawsuit that has no basis whatsoever. Indeed, it is contrary to the Bible's admonishment in 1 Corinthians 6:1–8. Furthermore, there's no question that to acquiesce to The Local Church's demands would be to compromise the truth.

We are ever aware that, according to Romans 14:12, there is coming a day when "each one of us will give an account of himself to God." When the Lord questions us about how we handled the matters pertaining to this lawsuit and our awareness of what The Local Church teaches in their writings, we must be able to say we took a stand for His truth (because the Bible requires no less), and we did not fail to encourage our fellow believers to "examine everything carefully; [and] hold fast to that which is good" (1 Thessalonians 5:21). Isn't it only right—and more importantly, a biblical admonition—for us as Christians to alert others when someone or a group is distorting key teachings from the Word of God?

How can you pray for us?

Through the many months since The Local Church filed their unmerited lawsuit, our constant prayer has been that we will wholeheartedly accept and follow God's will in this situation. While we firmly believe that defamation did not occur in the *Encyclopedia* and that key teachings of The

Local Church are clearly unbiblical, we are also aware that sometimes God works in ways we don't understand. Our desire is to possess a complete and unwavering confidence in the fact that God's plans and purposes are absolutely perfect. We know He is fully sovereign and that no person can overrule Him, and that He will work through this situation in a way that continues to advance His kingdom and brings glory to Himself.

We would certainly appreciate your prayers that the desire we've expressed above would be constant within our hearts and would serve as a testimony to other Christians who may find themselves in the midst of similarly difficult circumstances.

#### Notes

1. "Living Stream Ministry & The Local Church: Background Information," in the opening paragraph, at <http://www.contendingforthefait.com/summary/defamation/ministry.html>.
2. Ibid.
3. Witness Lee, *The History of the Church and the Local Churches*, third printing, 2003 (Anaheim, CA: Living Stream Ministry, 1991), p. 129.
4. "Living Stream Ministry & The Local Church: Background Information," in the second paragraph at <http://www.contendingforthefait.com/summary/defamation/ministry.html>.
5. See the Bibles for America website at <http://www.biblesforamerica.org/aboutBfA/>.
6. See the Full-Time Training website at <http://www.full-timetraining.org/>.
7. "Questions and Answers," see the answer to question #1, at <http://www.contendingforthefait.com/summary/defamation/questions-answers-litigation.html>.
8. John Ankerberg and John Weldon, *The Encyclopedia of Cults and New Religions* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House Publishers, 1999), pp. 211-12.
9. Witness Lee, *The History of the Church and the Local Churches*, third printing, 2003 (Anaheim, CA: Living Stream Ministry, 1991), p. 132.
10. Witness Lee, *Christ Versus Religion*, fifth printing, 1999 (Anaheim, CA: Living Stream Ministry, 1971), p. 184.
11. The New Testament Recovery Version, note 18<sup>4</sup>, third printing, 2001 (Anaheim, CA: Living Stream Ministry, 1991), p. 99.
12. Witness Lee, *The Practical Expression of the Church*, fourth printing, 2001 (Anaheim, CA: Living Stream Ministry, 1970), p. 89.
13. Witness Lee, *The God-Ordained Way to Practice the New Testament Economy* (Anaheim, CA:

Living Stream Ministry, 1987), p. 35.

14. Ibid., p. 29.

15. The New Testament Recovery Version, note 9<sup>5</sup>, third printing, 2001 (Anaheim, CA: Living Stream Ministry, 1991), p. 1247.

16. Ibid., note 8<sup>3</sup>, p. 1256.

17. Witness Lee, *The Practical Points Concerning Blending*, fifth printing, 2001 (Anaheim, CA: Living Stream Ministry, 1994), p. 46.

18. Ron Kangas, "Becoming God," *Affirmation & Critique* (October 2002), p. 20. This entire issue of *Affirmation & Critique* can also be accessed online at [http://www.affcrit.com/archives/ac\\_02\\_02.html](http://www.affcrit.com/archives/ac_02_02.html).

19. Ibid., p. 8.

20. Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1983), pp. 317–18.

21. Ron Kangas, "Becoming God," *Affirmation & Critique* (October 2002), p. 21. This entire issue of *Affirmation & Critique* can also be accessed online at [http://www.affcrit.com/archives/ac\\_02\\_02.html](http://www.affcrit.com/archives/ac_02_02.html).

22. Ibid.

23. <http://www.mingling.info/believers/index.html> (emphasis added).

24. Witness Lee, *A Thorough View of the Body of Christ* (Anaheim, CA: Living Stream Ministry, 1990), p. 28.

25. Local Church websites that contain unorthodox statements about the Trinity include <http://www.triunegod.org/quotes/index.html>; <http://www.contendingforthefaith.org/summary/booklets/revelation.html>; and <http://www.contendingforthefaith.org/summary/booklets/triune.html>.

26. Witness Lee, *God's New Testament Economy*, fifth printing, 2002 (Anaheim, CA: Living Stream Ministry, 1986), p. 230 (emphasis added).

27. Ibid., p. 9 (emphasis added).

28. The New Testament Recovery Version, note 18<sup>11</sup>, third printing, 2001 (Anaheim, CA: Living Stream Ministry, 1991), p. 775.

29. Witness Lee, *The Economy of God*, seventh printing, 1997 (Anaheim, CA: Living Stream Ministry, 1968), p. 47.

30. Ibid., p. 14.

31. Witness Lee, *Concerning the Triune God*, third edition, 1994 (Anaheim, CA: Living Stream Ministry, 1973), p. 19.

32. Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1994), p. 231 (emphasis added).

33. John Ankerberg and John Weldon, *The Encyclopedia of Cults and New Religions* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House Publishers, 1999), p. XXV.

34. Ibid., p. XXIII.

35. "Facts about Pending Litigation with Harvest House Publishers and Authors," see second paragraph at <http://www.contendingforthefaith.org/summary/defamation/facts.html>.

36. John Ankerberg and John Weldon, *The Encyclopedia of Cults and New Religions* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House Publishers, 1999), p. XX.

37. Ibid.

38. Ibid., p. XXVIII (emphasis added).

39. Ibid., p. XXVI.

40. Ibid., p. XX.

41. "Questions and Answers," see the answer to question #2, at <http://www.contendingforthefaith.org/summary/defamation/questions-answers-litigation.html>.

42. Cited from "News Release" dated June 20, 2003 and prepared by A. Larry Ross Communications, Inc.

43. "Facts about Pending Litigation with Harvest House Publishers and Authors," see the last paragraph at <http://www.contendingforthefaith.org/summary/defamation/facts.html>.