

CORPORATE STATEMENT
June 20, 2007

CONTACT: Dave Bartlett
PHONE: 877-307-0662
EMAIL: dave.bartlett@harvesthousepublishers.com



**A Call to Keep Theological Disputes
Out of the Courts**

On June 18, 2007, the U.S. Supreme Court brought an end to The Local Church's contentious and unsuccessful six-year, \$136 million legal battle against Harvest House Publishers and two of its authors, John Ankerberg and John Weldon. The Local Church and its publishing arm, Living Stream Ministry, alleged they had been wrongly accused of criminal conduct in Ankerberg and Weldon's book *Encyclopedia of Cults and New Religions*.

The high court's refusal to hear the case is The Local Church's fourth appeal to be denied since January 5, 2006, when a [Texas appellate court ruled](#) in favor of Harvest House and its authors, and stated unequivocally that the *Encyclopedia* did not defame The Local Church. The court wrote,

If a statement *does not concern appellants*, it cannot defame them, nor can it injure their reputations...*nothing in the book* singles out [The Local Church] as having committed the "immoral, illegal, and despicable" actions alleged in [The Local Church's] petition (emphasis added).

The Texas Supreme Court upheld that ruling, and now the U.S. Supreme Court has done the same.

A Summary of the Case

The Local Church crafted its case by cherry-picking words in the *Encyclopedia* that had nothing to do with the group and attempted to make those words part of the authors' definition of the word *cult*. Armed with this altered meaning of the term *cult*, they then constructed faulty arguments to support their claim that they had been defamed.

That The Local Church's unmerited lawsuit was repeatedly rejected by the Texas appellate and Supreme courts—and ultimately by the U.S. Supreme Court—means their troubling theory of defamation liability has no credence. A subjective reader's misinterpretation of a spoken or written statement cannot trump the objective, actual words of a speaker or author. This is good news for all broadcasters and publishers, for it is frightening to imagine a society in which speakers and writers could be sued for things they never said.

The Local Church complains that the Texas appellate court has set a dangerous precedent that now *protects* libelous language when it appears in the context of religious speech. They claim the court placed a protective shield of immunity over the language at issue simply because those statements appeared in a theological work.

But the court of appeals *never* concluded that defamatory statements of fact are immune from liability simply because they appear within religious discourse. To the contrary, the court wrote *eight full pages* of fact-specific analysis on the language at issue in the *Encyclopedia*. And it ruled that *none* of that language is attributable to The Local Church.

A Call to Discernment

Over the six-year span of this lawsuit, many Christians who at first were unfamiliar with The Local Church and its premier teacher, Witness Lee, have come to know of its unorthodox beliefs and joined in the vigorous theological debate over the group's teachings. So much so that, in January 2007, a group of 71 Bible scholars and ministry leaders signed an Open Letter (www.open-letter.org) expressing deep concern over some of the group's doctrines and its history of silencing critics through legal threats and lawsuits.

The gist of The Local Church's response to the Open Letter is the same one it has given its critics for several decades: We've been misunderstood and our words have been taken out of context. If you would just give us a chance to explain ourselves, you would understand us better and see that our teachings are biblical.

But the problem many have noticed is that much of what The Local Church has said in recent years to clarify Witness Lee's aberrant teachings is at odds with literally hundreds—if not thousands—of statements in Witness Lee's books. This raises a crucial point about apologetic methodology. When it comes to determining a group's orthodoxy, shouldn't that group's printed word stand on its own and always supersede any kind of qualifiers—written or spoken—that are given by that group in an attempt to explain away its controversial teachings?

Very recently, a few former critics and others have announced that with the help of face-to-face dialogue, they have arrived at the conclusion that Witness Lee's teachings are, in fact, orthodox after all.

But Harvest House, authors John Ankerberg and John Weldon, and a host of respected Bible scholars and apologists contend otherwise. If the written word is insufficient to effectively and accurately communicate a group's teachings, then that written word needs to be changed rather than explained away.

Ankerberg and Weldon have based their conclusions about The Local Church on years of extensive research and careful analysis of many of Witness Lee's books and Living Stream Ministry's publications. After the lawsuit was filed, both the authors and Harvest House conducted additional detailed research involving many more Witness Lee books, current Local Church websites, and the newest Living Stream Ministry journals and periodicals. The result? Our original concerns about The Local Church's problematic theology became even more magnified. They have *not* merely been misunderstood.

The Local Church also cannot argue that their words have been taken out of context. If a statement in and of itself is heretical, it will remain heretical even when it is viewed in its original context. Hundreds of examples could be cited; here is just one:

...the entire Godhead, the Triune God, became flesh.¹

Though that is just part of a sentence, no amount of explanation or context can change the fact Witness Lee taught that the *entire* Trinity became flesh. He taught this repeatedly, making himself dogmatically clear when he said:

God was just God in eternity past, but one day the entire God, the complete God in the second person of His divine Trinity, became incarnated.... The Triune God entered into a human virgin's womb and stayed there for nine months.²

Such a teaching is utterly foreign to biblical Christianity.

The bottom line is this: Printed words have intended, discernable, and literal meanings. If the Local Church has constantly found it necessary to "clarify" their writings through verbal and written assurances, doesn't that indicate something is very wrong? If The Local Church is so concerned about acceptance into the evangelical Christian community, why hasn't it removed or changed the myriad of printed controversial statements that have caused alarm among theologians over the past 40 years?

The fact The Local Church, to our knowledge, has never changed or retracted any of the aberrational teachings that it has put into print—while continuing to give "lip assurance" that they are a biblically sound group—should cause *any* believer to ask hard questions. Discerning Christians will continue to challenge The Local Church as long as their texts contain teachings that are unorthodox.

An Encouragement to Bible Scholars and Christian Publishers

Not only have a succession of higher courts rejected The Local Church's disturbing theory of defamation liability, they have also confirmed that Bible scholars and apologists can continue to use the term *cult* in a theological sense when discussing the teachings of groups that deviate from historical, biblical Christianity.

The Local Church has complained long and hard that this case has never been about religious or doctrinal issues, but rather about false and defamatory accusations of moral and criminal misdeeds. But the courts have definitively stated that "as a matter of law," defamation did not occur. That subject is now closed.

Though The Local Church says otherwise, we believe the underlying issue in this lawsuit has always been that they do not like being called a cult theologically. In fact, they have a long history of attempting to silence those who question their orthodoxy. And it's tragic when the legal system is used to create a climate of fear that shackles people from speaking their spiritual convictions.

Our hope is that the courts' rulings will embolden Christian authors to continue to write responsibly about controversial groups and topics. We further hope that publishers will now feel legally fortified to courageously defend their authors' works when it is appropriate to do so, and to defend those works as if they were the authors themselves.

An Exhortation to The Local Church

The Local Church has said that according to Matthew 18:15-17, we should have met privately with them to hear their objections about being included in the *Encyclopedia*. But that often-misused passage, which gives instructions about approaching a believer who has sinned privately against another believer, does not apply here. Publicly proclaimed theological error calls for publicly proclaimed theological correction.

Why was The Local Church included in the *Encyclopedia*? Because some of the essential doctrines they teach deviate from those of orthodox, biblical Christianity. Obviously The Local Church disagrees with this assessment. Yet we disagree with The Local Church's description of Christianity as "a human religion saturated with demonic and satanic things."³ But we also recognize and even defend The Local Church's First Amendment right to hold to such an opinion. Freedom of speech isn't real unless all can participate in it equally.

In a now-famous opinion written in 1919, the great Supreme Court justice Oliver Wendell Holmes said, "The best test of truth is the power of the thought to get itself accepted in the competition of the market." If it's acceptance by the "market" of evangelical Christians that The Local Church wants, they should seek vindication in the arena of public debate, not through lawsuits clearly intended to destroy anyone who dares to hold their teachings up to the light of Scripture.

Yes, public debate can at times become sharp and painful. But it's only through open discourse that people can compare and evaluate competing ideas and weigh their truthfulness.

For that reason, and more significantly, for the sake of obedience to God's Word regarding lawsuits (1 Corinthians 6:1-8), we call upon The Local Church to once and for all cease resorting to the secular courts to resolve theological disputes.

¹ Witness Lee, *God's New Testament Economy*, fifth printing, 2002 (Anaheim, CA: Living Stream Ministry, 1986), p. 230.

² Witness Lee, *The Organic Building Up of the Church as the Body of Christ to Be the Organism of the Processed and Dispensing Triune God* (Anaheim, CA: Living Stream Ministry, 1989—second edition of 1996), p. 12.

³ Witness Lee, *The God-Ordained Way to Practice the New Testament Economy* (Anaheim, CA: Living Stream Ministry, 1987), p. 29.