

Answers in Action's
"Apologetics Conclusions Reconsidered..."
A Case in Point: The Local Churches & Living Stream Ministry

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After 3 years of careful research, dialog, examination, & theological analysis, veteran apologist Gretchen Passantino, co-founder & director of Answers In Action (AIA), in conjunction with colleagues Hank Hanegraaff (president) & Elliot Miller (Editor-In-Chief of the *Christian Research Journal*), of the Christian Research Institute (CRI) have concluded that the churches affiliated with the teachings of Watchman Nee & Witness Lee & with the Living Stream Ministry (LSM) embrace & teach orthodox Christian theology, are a Christian movement of brothers & sisters in Christ, & should not be labeled theologically heretical nor as a "cult," even if the use of the term "cult" is restricted to a purely theological use as is defined in the late Dr. Walter Martin's *The New Cults* or in the late Robert Passantino & Gretchen Passantino's *Answers to the Cultist at Your Door*.

The re-evaluation comes more than 2 decades after their initial research & is far more commendatory than the initial observations made by the Passantinos & Martin. Although the Passantinos & Martin originally said the movement was not a non-Christian cult, & that at best Nee & especially Lee's writings were contradictory, they were strongly critical of the movement's theology as they understood it from examination of published materials. Although neither the Passantinos nor Martin wrote on the movement subsequent to 1981, for many years CRI offered a fact sheet on the movement that repeated the main criticisms from the Passantinos & Martin.

More than 3 years ago, Gretchen Passantino (who has directed AIA since her husband's death in 2003), Hank Hanegraaff (who has directed CRI since Martin's death in 1989), & Elliot Miller (who has edited the *Journal* since its inception), responded positively to a request by Living Stream Ministry, the publishing support for the movement, to begin a dialog & re-evaluation of its teachings & theology.

In the years since the initial critiques, the Passantinos, Miller, & Hanegraaff had increasingly appreciated the importance of understanding what people mean by their words through direct dialog, observation, & interaction, not merely or even sometimes best through their published words. Both CRI & AIA in recent years

adopted policies mandating direct interaction with controversial individuals & groups as a pre-requisite to formal published criticisms. Passantino explains, "Our ground-breaking work in such areas as satanism & neo-paganism, as well as concurrent work with others in apologetics on the Worldwide Church of God and other movements & issues reinforced this principle & made us very open to re-evaluate this movement, whose written materials had always been problematic & open to divergent analysis among apologists."

Over the past 3 years, CRI & AIA have had unlimited access to the local churches' written materials, hundreds of hours of direct dialog with leadership, and unrestricted access to rank-and-file members. CRI & AIA have also devoted hundreds of hours to theological analysis & research, including consultation with leading theologians & bible scholars from multiple graduate institutions. "Not only do we have a far better, more comprehensive understanding of the beliefs of the movement," noted Passantino, "we also see clearly how our criticisms, even though they were among the mildest from the apologetics community, misunderstood & misrepresented its core of orthodoxy."

In the 1970s and early 1980s the Passantinos (in 2 small booklets) characterized Lee's teachings as at best contradictory & at worst heretical, & along with Martin (in *The New Cults*) strongly criticized their theology while stating they were not a non-Christian cult. Other researchers beginning in the 1970s branded the movement a cult & warned of psychological, sociological, & criminal errors attributed to the movement as well as charges of theological heresy. As recently as 1999 authors John Ankerberg & John Weldon included the movement among groups that were dangerous, destructive, & criminal in their behavior as well as heretical in their theology in their *Encyclopedia of Cults & New Religions*.

Since the movement had its origins & a strong contingent of believers in mainland China, the atheistic communist Chinese government made use of the negative reports as partial justification for criminal charges & convictions against Chinese Christians associated with the movement. The egregious charges made in Ankerberg & Weldon's book, echoing those made in earlier decades (such as in *The God-men* by Neil T. Duddy) have been

seen by the movement as extremely dangerous for its members in mainland China, who continue to face government restriction, charges, & convictions for their church work. As part of countering this threat, key local church teachers (they reject a formal leadership hierarchy but obviously defer to certain members as especially important resources for leadership & teaching) approached a variety of apologetics leaders seeking dialog & reassessment. AIA & CRI welcomed the opportunity & joined together to pursue the process.

In recent years the churches & LSM have made progress in receiving recognition in wider Christian circles in America. Fuller Seminary conducted a similar dialog & examination to that of AIA & CRI & concluded, "the teachings and practices of the local churches and its members represent the genuine, historical, biblical Christian faith in every essential aspect" (Fuller Statement). LSM was accepted into full voting membership in the Evangelical Christian Publishers Association (ECPA).

In dialog with local church leaders & LSM, they & AIA & CRI agreed that the initial strongly critical evaluations of the earlier decades by the Passantinos & Martins were due to a combination of factors that did not include deliberate misrepresentation or sinful intention on either side. Rather, the inadequate criticisms had much more to do with factors such as the lack of direct interchange; the cultural, linguistic, & ecclesiological differences between Christianity in China & America; & the relatively immature status of analytical religious analysis on both sides.

"A good example," Passantino offered, "is the similarities between some of Nee & Lee's teachings & those of some of the early church fathers & some expressions of eastern orthodoxy today." She continued, "Neither Nee nor Lee claimed that their teachings about personal sanctifying transformation came from a familiarity with or adoption of the patristic or eastern orthodox teachings of *theosis*. With the comprehensive knowledge I had in the 1970s about heretical teachings

on the subject from western aberrational groups, it was far more likely that I would identify Nee & Lee's teachings with those rather than with patristic & eastern orthodox theology with which I was far less conversant."

Revisiting the controversial teachings after a hiatus of more than 2 decades, AIA & CRI were able to more fairly evaluate the pertinent passages in their wider context & in complementary comparison with a wider body of orthodox theology. "We concluded," Passantino said, "that one of the reasons we repeatedly encountered what we thought of as contradictions in Nee & Lee's teachings so long ago, was that they really did not mean the heretical view, but meant to be understood as well within orthodoxy." Direct dialog was key to unlocking the conundrum. Passantino, Hanegraaff, & Miller knew after their first meeting that these representatives were their fellow Christians. "As they affirmed orthodox theology, rejected heresy, & explained to us their theology," Passantino offered, "I knew direct interchange was essential to fairly evaluate them."

AIA & CRI affirm that the essential doctrines of Nee, Lee, the local churches, & LSM are fully within orthodoxy. AIA & CRI are fully aware that there are a number of secondary teachings & practices that distinguish them from many American evangelical Christian churches.

AIA & CRI will publish their analysis of local church teachings in the *Christian Research Journal* later this year. A lengthy doctrinal exposition published by LSM, *A Statement Concerning the Teachings of the Local Churches & Living Stream [Ministry] in Response to Dialog with Fuller Seminary*, clearly shows the central doctrinal orthodoxy of the churches while also acknowledging & explaining those peripheral teachings that are the most troublesome to other Christians.

[Note: Both the "Fuller Statement" and *A Statement Concerning the Teachings of the Local Churches & Living Stream Ministry in Response to Dialog with Fuller Seminary* are available online at <http://lctestimony.org>.]