

Zealous and Misled, I Once Lost My Way

by Arthur M. Casci

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Our Lord Jesus said, "**If you continue in my Word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free**". This verse still rings in my mind when I think of my experience more than 10 years ago.

It all began when a friend shared the Gospel with me. Though raised in a church-going family, I had rejected Christianity at age 18. When Jeff told me about the forgiveness of sins, I said, "Flake off." But a few weeks later I attended a Bible study and the Holy Spirit put faith into my heart. I repented and believed the Gospel. After 21 years of 'living', my new life began.

The "Jesus People" movement was at its peak, and I enjoyed the informal atmosphere of sitting on the floor, singing, and studying the Bible. I attended different churches but felt that they were dead and had abandoned Jesus. Like many my age, I was rebellious and distrusted any organization run by comfortable, middle-class adults. Zealous for Jesus, I could not understand why others were not as enthusiastic. This attitude, combined with my lack of a Biblical foundation, left me wide open to false doctrine.

One evening I stopped to visit a Christian friend who had some unusual visitors. They were young, "on fire", roving evangelists from an organization called "The Children of God". They did not believe that a Christian should hold a normal job, but rather should leave job, home, family, and goods to preach on the streets.

The next thing I knew, I had quit my job and prepared to leave with these young street preachers for Dallas, Texas, one of their outposts. Fortunately, some dear Christian friends I visited stopped me from going, thus preventing me from joining a cult (at least for the moment). But I was still plagued with a burning desire to serve Jesus wholeheartedly - and now I had no job.

Another friend, Randy, invited me to go with him to Akron, Ohio, to introduce me to another zealous organization. So, once again, I packed my few belongings and left. This time no one stopped me.

I will never forget my first encounter with this organization. In a meeting, they sang loudly, shouted out verses of Scripture, danced, and one by one gave strong testimony about what Jesus meant to them. I saw young and old, black, white, and Oriental people.

I immediately joined in the singing and shouting. Mentally I maintained a few reservations, but emotionally I was caught. The love, unity and volume of the service overwhelmed me. I thought to myself: Here are people who truly love Jesus and are not afraid to show it.

That night after the meeting, Randy introduced me to many of them. They immediately welcomed me and showed great concern. I asked to stay for a week or two as a trial period, and was housed in a large duplex with about 10 members, who said I could stay until I decided whether to join the group.

Nobody forced me to join. Nobody needed to. I was ripe for the picking.

The organization is known as "Living Stream Ministry", often better known as "The Local Church". If such a group were in St. Louis, they would call themselves "The Church in (or of) St. Louis." They take the name of their locality.

The organization is led by an elderly Chinese man, Witness Lee. Lee brought the movement to America in the early 1960's. Lee's co-worker, Watchman Nee, had started the movement in China. When the communists took over, Lee fled to Taiwan. Nee stayed behind and, after nearly 20 years in prison, died.

In its first decades, the movement stayed in the mainstream of "fundamentalism." They believed that the Bible was the Word of God. They believed in the blood atonement of Jesus for the sins of the world, his resurrection, his second coming, and the necessity of faith in Christ for salvation. However, shortly before coming to America, Lee changed some teachings. Lee claims that when he crossed over to America, he dropped his doctrines in the Pacific Ocean and found a new way.

The foundation of Lee's doctrine is his understanding of the Trinity! Lee teaches "modalism", the idea that there is one God who reveals Himself in three different modes or stages. In one of his analogies Lee teaches that prior to Christ, God was like "raw wheat". At the incarnation, the raw wheat became "flour". Finally, when Christ returned to heaven, God became the "loaf of bread,"

or the Holy Spirit. This runs counter to orthodox statements of faith such as the Athanasian Creed, which teaches that God is one in substance, but three in persons. Lee's teaching destroys the Biblical distinction of persons in the Godhead.

Lee's teaching on the person of Christ is also contrary to historic Christianity. Lee teaches that the incarnation "mingled" together Jesus' humanity and divinity. The Definition of Chalcedon teaches that the two natures of Christ form one person but are distinct and not to be mingled together. Lee makes the divine nature something less than God but more than man and the human nature something more than man and less than God. Lee forms a 'new creature', a 'God-man'.

Thus, to "be saved", Lee teaches that God's intention for man is to be "mingled with God" in the way Christ was "mingled with God". To accomplish this, one must "call" on Jesus' name literally. If one says the name of Jesus out loud, one becomes a believer and can begin the process of becoming "mingled with God".

Lee teaches a simple "technique" whereby one can be mingled with God: "calling on the Lord" and "pray-reading". "Calling on the Lord" means chanting Jesus' name over and over in private and in group services. Using the mind is not encouraged; one should block out thoughts. I did this for periods of 15 minutes or more. "Pray-reading" involves reading the Scripture out loud; repeating the same verses but with a different emphasis each time, also individually or in the group. As in chanting, one is encouraged not to think but merely to 'just do it'.

Lee calls this "exercising the spirit" or "eating and drinking the Lord". Since he teaches that one becomes what one eats, so, when one is "eating Christ", one is being "mingled with God". The aim is to do away with one's own self-life and to be transformed into this new God-man creature.

To be sure, Lee teaches that all this is not necessary if one merely wants to enter heaven; however, he believes that going to heaven is not "full salvation". Lee asserts that a select few (a "remnant") will receive something more. Those who have mingled themselves thoroughly with God will be "overcomers" and enjoy 1,000 years with Jesus on earth, while those believers who were not mingled must stay in the grave until after the Millennium. Lee claims that, although it is not impossible for someone to become an "overcomer" outside his organization, it is, in fact, highly unlikely. Thus, if one wants to experience God's full salvation, Lee's organization is the only way; only his method offers success.

Another teaching central to Lee's system is submission and authority. Members must obey without question Lee's teaching

and directives. I was told that even if I was given directions contrary to the Word of God, I was to obey. God would honor my submission to the leaders, it would not be wrong.

Lee labels as "Satanic Christianity" all churches that are not under his rule. Lee assures members that outside the movement all are deceived. If one leaves the movement, it is unlikely that one could lead a proper Christian life. I was told of some who had left and how their lives had consequently fallen apart. This created an even greater psychological dependence on the group. Outsiders were feared, because they might seek ways to remove one from the group.

My zeal for Lee's teaching catapulted me into responsible positions. Within six months, I headed a house of single men. I fervently recruited new blood and never missed one of the four to six weekly meetings I was expected to attend. Weekends were devoted to bringing in new converts and on public holidays there were conferences in various places. These demands, plus a 40-hour-a-week job, kept me busy and exhausted.

The life style is semi-communal. Members do own private property; however, a strong sense of community and sharing of material goods is encouraged. Once one is in the organization, basic needs are met. Now, with no anxiety for material needs, members are freed to better obey the hierarchy.

I recall that nearly 100 people were moved from California to Virginia in order to form a new group there. The organization cared for these members until they could reestablish themselves in the new locale. Moves such as these were common. Yearly, the leaders would ask for a certain number of members to move to a different city. Some were asked and others volunteered. It was expected that every few years one would be relocated.

At Christmas time, 1972, I faced the dilemma of choosing between going home to my parents or going to Detroit for a conference. I wanted to go home, but I was strongly encouraged to go to Detroit. An unspoken law of the group was that one should forget family and be committed to "the cause". I remember my mother crying when I called to say I would not be home for Christmas for the second year in a row. I went to Detroit for another wild weekend of singing, shouting, and teaching.

But through God's providence, this seemingly wrong choice turned around my life and my commitment. A middle-aged man came and taught us about King David's repentant and teachable heart before God. The teacher encouraged us to have a similar disposition. Of course, the teacher meant that we should be willing to be taught

by the movement and to do what we were told by our leaders. But what he said, the Lord used for good.

I returned from that weekend with a different attitude. I still had a strong commitment to the movement and did not then think about leaving. But I was determined to allow Scripture to speak to me and wanted to repent of anything in my life that was not in line with Scripture. This new change of heart, wrought by the Holy Spirit, provided the impetus for my leaving the group.

During the next six months, I continued to be zealously active in the movement. I became one of the teachers in the young adults group. These teachers listened to taped lectures by Witness Lee, sent from our Los Angeles headquarters, and they repeated the contents during our teaching periods.

I listened to the tapes, but simultaneously spent more private time in the Word. I would rise early to pray, to read, and to seek the Lord. As I did so, doubts would surface about what I was being taught. I began to see that I was to obey God rather than men, and that, contrary to Lee, using my mind was good, that God wanted to renew and use it. The chanting and pray-reading now seemed strange to me in light of the Scripture's teaching about God's good order and the right use of reason.

The lot was soon cast. One April morning, while living in Cleveland, I left. During the next two weeks, I nearly had a mental breakdown. I was paranoid and exhausted, not knowing what to do or where to go, yet holding on to the promise that the Lord was my Shepherd and that He would never abandon me.

I went to a local community center to sort things out. The people there led me to a large old church where Christians helped college-age men and women. I attended some of their meetings – it was the informal type that I had become used to.

One evening a young man read Romans 5:1-2, ***“Therefore, having been justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom also we have access by faith into this grace in which we stand, and rejoice in hope of the glory of God”***. He emphasized that peace with God was possible by grace alone. Our striving to please God couldn't do it. Those words told me everything. All my zest and dedication had been attempts to please God and to win His approval. As my tears flowed, at last I found peace in “the grace in which I stand”.

Arthur M. Casci is open and willing to discuss his personal experience with “The Local Church”. He may be found on Facebook.