

The Divine Trinity in the Teaching of Witness Lee

Introduction

In a ministry that spanned seven decades, Witness Lee (1905-1997) consistently taught that the God of Scripture is the Triune God. Affirming the orthodox understanding that there are “three persons in the Godhead,”¹ he taught that the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are eternally “distinct but inseparable”² hypostases who operate indivisibly, yet still distinctly, to carry out the divine economy in time. In his view the simultaneous co-working of the three was a matter of transcendent beauty, and he imparted to his audiences a deep appreciation for the work of the Triune God to accomplish the divine intention according to what He is in His Trinity. “The divine revelation of the divine economy,” he wrote, “shows us the Divine Trinity in all His excellencies, beauties, and virtues. These excellencies, beauties, and virtues are seen in the divine coordination in the Godhead.”³

Although Witness Lee consistently condemned modalism as heresy, he was at times accused of propounding a modalistic view of the Trinity. Because he affirmed the scriptural identifications of the Son with the Father (Isa. 9:6) and the Lord, the resurrected Christ, with the Spirit (2 Cor. 3:17; 1 Cor. 15:45), some early critics of his ministry charged him with heresy, or at least heterodoxy, claiming that the identifications destroy the eternal distinctions in the Godhead. Some of those critics have since rescinded their earlier charges, but others have not, and old misrepresentations continue to flourish on the Internet and among intractable detractors who refuse to fairly evaluate Witness Lee’s ministry.

¹ Witness Lee, *Life-Study of Genesis* (Anaheim: Living Stream Ministry, 1987), 61. All titles by Witness Lee as cited in this paper are published by Living Stream Ministry, Anaheim, CA. All subsequent references will be cited as LSM followed by the year of publication.

² Witness Lee, *The Revelation and Vision of God* (LSM, 2000), 35.

³ Witness Lee, *Living in and with the Divine Trinity* (LSM, 1990), 53.

What his critics do not recognize, or what they are unwilling to admit, is that Witness Lee upheld the orthodox understanding of coinherence (perichoresis), which, as Allan Coppedge defines it, is “the mutual indwelling of each person with the other” so that “when one member of the Trinity acts, the whole Godhead is involved.”⁴ Coinherence is evident in the New Testament, and theologically the concept, if not the term, goes back at least as far as Athanasius (296-373).⁵ Furthermore, Witness Lee taught that the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit coexist eternally, indicating distinction among them, just as coinherence indicates their inseparability. By affirming the coinherent relationships of the three, and by holding to their eternal coexistence, Witness Lee affirmed the essential oneness of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit and their identifications with one another without compromising their eternal distinctions in the Godhead.

In his later ministry Witness Lee enriched the notion of coinherence by employing the term *incorporation* to describe the mutual indwelling of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit and their working together as one. Denoting mutual existence, mutual indwelling, and mutual operation, *incorporation* indicates a reality in the Godhead by which oneness and distinction are preserved both in the immanent existence and in the economic activity of the three persons. Thus, when one person acts manifestly (e.g., the Son in His human living), He incorporates the operations of the other two in His distinct action, so that the eternal distinctions yet inseparable operations of the three are preserved in all that they are and do. *Incorporation*, therefore, maintains a proper and

⁴ Allan Coppedge, *The God Who Is Triune: Revisioning the Christian Doctrine of God* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2007), 95. The definitions of terms such as *coinherence* and *perichoresis* may vary slightly from one writer to another, so it is important to understand the meaning a particular writer attaches to them. For example, Coppedge uses *coinherence* and *perichoresis* synonymously to denote mutual indwelling and mutual operation, whereas Witness Lee employs *coinherence* to denote the mutual indwelling of the three persons and *incorporation* to denote their coinherence and their working together as one.

⁵ Coppedge, 95. J. Scott Horrell notes, “Although the idea appears in Gregory of Nazianzus and is developed in Maximus the Confessor, it is John of Damascus who popularizes the term *perichoresis* to describe the coinherence or mutual indwelling of the members of the Trinity.” J. Scott Horrell, “The Eternal Son of God in the Social Trinity,” in *Jesus in Trinitarian Perspective*, Fred Sanders and Klaus Issler, eds. (Nashville: B&H Publishing Group, 2007), 58-59.

balanced understanding of how the three persons in the Godhead exist in relation to each other and act in relation to each other.

In what follows we will explore the foregoing matters in more detail, beginning with a brief presentation of Witness Lee's orthodox Trinitarianism. We will then assess the charges of heresy against him, consider more finely his particular perspective concerning the Divine Trinity as an incorporation, and offer some concluding thoughts on his assertion that the truth concerning the Divine Trinity is not for mere doctrinal understanding but for the believers' experience of the God who is triune. We believe that by properly evaluating Witness Lee's teaching, scholars will find a clear counterwitness to old misrepresentations of his ministry and a rich contribution to Trinitarian studies that is both orthodox and practical.

Witness Lee's Trinitarian Orthodoxy

A particularly concise yet substantial statement of Witness Lee's Trinitarian orthodoxy can be found in Lesson 2, "The Triune God," in volume one of *Truth Lessons*,⁶ a series he developed for teaching biblical truth to new believers. Referring to a number of verses, including 1 Corinthians 8:4 and Isaiah 45:5, Witness Lee emphasizes that God is one. Yet he points out that there are intimations of plurality in God in the Old Testament, as in Genesis 1:26 and Isaiah 6:8, where the plural pronouns "Our" and "Us" are used in reference to Him. The plurality is more specifically revealed by the Lord Jesus in Matthew 28:19, where He charges the disciples to go forth and make disciples of all the nations, "baptizing them into the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit." The singular name of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit indicates not only plurality but, more specifically, triunity in God, as Witness Lee explains:

The Lord here clearly speaks of Three—the Father, Son, and Spirit. But when He speaks here of the name of the Father, Son, and Spirit, the name which is used is in the singular number in the original text. This means that though the Father, the Son, and the Spirit are three, yet the name is one. It is really mysterious—one name for Three. This, of course, is

⁶ Witness Lee, *Truth Lessons, Level One, Volume 1* (LSM, 1985).

what is meant by the expression three-one, or triune....This name includes the Three—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—and tells us that God is triune. Although God is only one, yet there is the matter of the Three—the Father, the Son, and the Spirit.⁷

Following his affirmation of the triunity of God, Witness Lee demonstrates that there are eternal distinctions among the Father, Son, and Spirit. First, each is said to be God, as, for example, in 1 Peter 1:2, which speaks of “God the Father”; Hebrews 1:8, which applies Psalm 45 to the Son, saying, “Your throne, O God, is forever and ever”; and Acts 5:3-4, where Peter confronts Ananias for deceiving the Holy Spirit and thereby not lying to men but to God. Furthermore, Witness Lee affirms that each of the three is eternal, as in Isaiah 9:6, which identifies the “eternal Father”; Hebrews 7:3, where the Son of God, typified by Melchisedec, is without “beginning of days nor end of life”; and Hebrews 9:14, which says that Christ offered Himself to God “through the eternal Spirit.” In his teaching Witness Lee recognized a strong testimony of distinction among the Father, Son, and Spirit in their each being God and each being eternal, a testimony that speaks also to their simultaneous, eternal coexistence.

In *Truth Lessons* Witness Lee further focuses on three portions in the New Testament that reveal the simultaneous coexistence of, and therefore the distinctions among, the three, which forbids their being successive modes of an undifferentiated monadic deity. One passage he cites is Ephesians 3:14-17, the apostle Paul’s prayer for the believers to experience the Triune God. Of these verses Witness Lee writes, “This portion of the Word shows that the Father hears the prayer, the Spirit strengthens the saints, and the Son—Christ—makes His home in our hearts. By this we can also see clearly that all Three coexist simultaneously.”⁸ He writes further:

⁷ Ibid., 16.

⁸ Ibid., 18.

Therefore, we do not believe that the Father ceased to exist and was replaced by the Son, then after another period of time the Son was replaced by the Spirit. We believe that the Three—Father, Son, and Spirit—are eternal and co-existent.⁹

By virtue of their eternal coexistence, as Witness Lee recognized, the three hypostases are eternally distinct. Coexistence, however, is only one aspect of their eternal, mutual relationship in the Godhead.

The relationship among the three persons of the Divine Trinity, as Witness Lee points out, “is not only that they simultaneously coexist, but, even more, that they indwell one another mutually,”¹⁰ or coinhere. This coinherence indicates their inseparable oneness. Relying particularly on the Gospel of John for textual evidence of coinherence, Witness Lee shows that the Son is in the Father and the Father in the Son, so that when the Son comes, He comes with the Father (14:10); that the Son and the Spirit come not only *from* but also *with* the Father (6:46; 15:26), as indicated by the dual denotations of the Greek preposition *para*; and that as the Son comes in the Father’s name (5:43), so the Spirit comes in the Son’s name (14:26), indicating that the Son’s coming is likewise the Father’s coming and that the Spirit’s coming is likewise the Son’s coming. Such identifications among the three are possible because all three coinhere and thus are inseparable. Witness Lee writes:

The Scriptures clearly indicate that when the Son comes, the Father comes with Him; similarly, when the Spirit comes, both the Son and the Father come with Him. Furthermore, when the Son comes, the Father does not come with Him outwardly; rather the Father comes with Him inwardly and subjectively.

The Triune God has never been separated. When One moves, the other Two also move with Him. When One is sent, the other Two also come with Him. When the Son comes, He comes in the name of the Father; when He comes, the Father comes. When the Spirit is sent, He is sent in the name of the Son; His being sent is the Son’s being sent. Hence, the Son’s coming is

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid., 19. Fred Sanders uses the memorable phrase “mutual insideness” to describe the perichoretic relationship among the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. See Fred Sanders, “The Trinity in Gender Debates,” *Patheos*, October 30, 2012, <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/scriptorium/2012/10/the-trinity-in-gender-debates/>.

the Father's coming, and the Spirit's being sent is the Son's being sent. The Three—the Father, Son, and Spirit—are one. They cannot be separated for eternity.¹¹

By teaching coexistence and coinherence, Witness Lee affirmed that the three of the Divine Trinity are each fully God, yet he maintained, as the Christian church has long held, that there are not three Gods but one God in three hypostases. Indeed, our God is the Triune God.

As should be clear from this brief presentation,¹² Witness Lee's teaching on the Trinity is entirely orthodox. But despite the clear enunciations of Trinitarian orthodoxy found throughout his ministry, some critics have persisted in denouncing him for teaching heresy. The ostensible reason for those charges, as noted earlier, is that those critics recoil at any identifications between the Father, Son, and Spirit for fear that the distinctions among the three are compromised by the identifications. But when Witness Lee made the identifications, he did so with full reliance on the Scriptures and with the orthodox understanding that while the three are eternally distinct, they are never separate, that is, they exist in an eternal relationship of coexistent coinherence.

The Charge of Heresy Answered

Modalism Defined and Repudiated

In the mid-1970s some critics in the countercult community began to accuse Witness Lee of teaching modalism. That charge is still in circulation despite having been answered thoroughly and repeatedly over the years.¹³ More recently, he has been faulted for saying that God is "one person," which critics have flaunted as evidence that modalism was indeed at work in his teaching. Witness

¹¹ Ibid., 19-20.

¹² This brief presentation focuses on *Truth Lessons* to present the basic points in Witness Lee's Trinitarian orthodoxy, but for more from Witness Lee on these points, see also *Concerning the Triune God—The Father, the Son, and the Spirit* (LSM, 1973); *The Revelation and Vision of God* (LSM, 2000), 26-40, 70-77; *The Crucial Points of the Major Items of the Lord's Recovery Today* (LSM, 1993), 5-15; *Elders' Training, Book 3: The Way to Carry Out the Vision* (LSM, 1985), 68-73, 75-85; *The Conclusion of the New Testament, Messages 1-20* (LSM, 1985), 22-32.

¹³ See, for example, *The Truth Concerning the Trinity: Two Answers by Witness Lee* (LSM, 1976); Ron Kangas, *Modalism, Tritheism, or the Pure Revelation of the Triune God according to the Bible* (LSM, 1976); *A Defense of the Gospel: Responses to an Open Letter from "Christian Scholars and Ministry Leaders,"* vols. 1 and 2 (Fullerton: DCP Press, 2009).

Lee understood well the heresy of modalism and taught his listeners concerning its errors, but here it may be helpful to turn to Harold O. J. Brown, a respected authority on heresies in the early church, to define the heresy, both historically and theologically, before further demonstrating that Witness Lee's teaching was not modalistic.

According to Brown, the heresy of modalism (or modalistic monarchianism¹⁴) began with Praxeas, who arrived in Rome at the end of the second century and taught "not merely that Jesus Christ revealed the Father, but that he actually was the Father."¹⁵ Praxeas was followed in Rome and in the teaching of modalism by Noëtus, Epigonus, and Cleomenes. They, like Praxeas, "taught that the Father himself had suffered and died, and then resurrected himself."¹⁶ In other words, these first modalists taught simply that there is one God, the Father, and that Christ is identical to Him, since, allegedly, there is only one person and not a distinction of persons in the Godhead. Consequently, in their zeal to preserve the oneness of God, these teachers forsook the distinct personhood of Christ and, implicitly, of the Spirit, and thus denied the genuine triunity of God.

Under Sabellius, who was in Rome in the early third century, the doctrine took on its more developed form, now known as Sabellianism. In this more sophisticated form of the doctrine, Sabellius held that God is "one Person (*hypostasis*), three names."¹⁷ For Sabellius the names of Father, Son, and Spirit "merely describe different forms of revelation; the Son revealed the Father as

¹⁴ Harold O. J. Brown, *Heresies: The Image of Christ in the Mirror of Heresy and Orthodoxy from the Apostles to the Present* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1984), 96. In his highly regarded work *Early Christian Doctrines*, J. N. D. Kelly similarly addresses the genesis and early history of modalism in a section titled "Modalistic Monarchianism." See J. N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, Revised Edition (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1978), 119-123.

¹⁵ Brown, 101. Kelly notes that it is unclear who Praxeas actually was and that this Praxeas has sometimes been identified with Noëtus and Epigonus. Kelly writes further, "Whoever he was, he seems to have taught that Father and Son were one identical Person (*duos unum volunt esse, ut idem pater et filius habeatur*), the Word having no independent subsistence and being a mere *vox et sonus oris*, and that consequently it was the Father Himself Who entered the Virgin's womb, so becoming, as it were, His own Son, and Who suffered, died and rose again. Thus this unique Person united in Himself mutually inconsistent attributes, being invisible and then visible, impassible and then passible." (Kelly 121)

¹⁶ Brown, 101.

¹⁷ Brown, 103. Kelly observes that Sabellius gave modalism "a more systematic, philosophical shape" and that this more sophisticated version of the doctrine "tried to meet some of the objections to which the earlier brand was exposed." (Kelly 121-122)

a ray reveals the sun. Now the Son has returned to heaven, and God reveals himself as the Holy Spirit.”¹⁸ In this teaching the one God reveals Himself in successive stages, or “modes,” of Father, Son, and Spirit in time, but the modes, though genuine manifestations of the one God, are not eternal realities. As in its simpler form, this more developed modalism, while seeking to preserve the oneness of the Trinity, denies the eternal, simultaneous coexistence of the Father, Son, and Spirit and, therefore, is heretical.

In the following excerpt, one of many similar passages in his ministry,¹⁹ Witness Lee demonstrates his understanding of modalism and why a modalistic view of the Trinity must be repudiated as heresy:

Modalism is another heresy, resulting from taking an extreme position. Its leading exponent was Sabellius, who claimed that the Father, the Son, and the Spirit were not eternally co-existent. In modalistic thinking the Three are merely three successive manifestations of the divine Being or three temporary modes of His activity. Passages like Isaiah 9:6, where the Son is called the everlasting Father, and John 14:9, where the Lord says, “He who has seen Me has seen the Father,” are used to support modalism’s position.

Just as tritheism pushed the matter of the three Persons too far and ended up with three Gods, so modalism pushed the oneness of the Godhead too far and taught that when the Son came the Father was over, and when the Spirit came the Son was over.

This teaching we cannot accept.²⁰

¹⁸ Brown, 103. Kelly elaborates: “Sabellius, we are told, regarded the Godhead as a monad (his name for it was *υιοπάτωρ*) which expressed itself in three operations. He used the analogy of the sun, a single object which radiates both warmth and light; the Father was, as it were, the form or essence, and the Son and the Spirit His modes of self-expression. He may also have exploited the idea of the expansion or ‘dilation’ (*πλατυσμός*) of the divine monad, the Father by process of development projecting Himself first as Son and then as Spirit. Thus the one Godhead regarded as creator and law-giver was Father; for redemption It was projected like a ray of the sun, and was then withdrawn; then, thirdly, the same Godhead operated as Spirit to inspire and bestow grace.” (Kelly 122)

¹⁹ Other examples of Witness Lee’s repudiations of modalism include *The Revelation and Vision of God* (LSM, 2000), 26-27, 34-36, 43-44; *What a Heresy—Two Divine Fathers, Two Life-giving Spirits, and Three Gods!* (LSM, 1976), 3-5; *The Conclusion of the New Testament, Messages 1-20* (LSM, 1985), 28-30; *The Conclusion of the New Testament, Messages 221-239* (LSM, 1988), 2466-2467; *Young People’s Training* (LSM, 1976), 74-76, 84; *Christ in His Excellency* (LSM, 2000), 54; *Elders’ Training, Book 3: The Way to Carry Out the Vision* (LSM, 1985), 33, 68-69, 78; *The Central Line of the Divine Revelation* (LSM, 1991), 22; *The Economy of God and the Mystery of the Transmission of the Divine Trinity* (LSM, 2001), 150; *The Full Knowledge of the Word of God* (LSM, 1987), 71-72; *The Basic Revelation in the Holy Scriptures* (LSM, 1984), 24; *Vessels Useful to the Lord* (LSM, 2003), 157-158; *Life Messages*, vol. 1 (LSM, 1979), 269-270, 272-273; *The Crucial Points of the Major Items of the Lord’s Recovery Today* (LSM, 1993), 13-15.

²⁰ Witness Lee, *Life Messages*, vol. 2 (LSM, 1979), 269-270.

Coinherence, Incorporation, Economy: Witness Lee's Basis for Understanding the Mutual Identifications in the Divine Trinity

At this point some may wonder, "If Witness Lee taught orthodox Trinitarian doctrine and eschewed the error of modalism, why was he accused of teaching heresy?" The question is legitimate, and we can best begin to answer it more thoroughly by first referring to three verses that Witness Lee made frequent reference to in his ministry:

For a child is born to us,
A Son is given to us;
And the government
Is upon His shoulder;
And His name will be called
Wonderful Counselor,
Mighty God,
Eternal Father,
Prince of Peace. (Isa. 9:6)

So also it is written, "The first man, Adam, became a living soul"; the last Adam became a life-giving Spirit. (1 Cor. 15:45)

And the Lord is the Spirit; and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. (2 Cor. 3:17)

In these verses the Son is called "Eternal Father"; the last Adam, Christ, is said to have become "a life-giving Spirit"; and the Lord, Christ, is said to be the Spirit. Some expositors have relied on linguistic or interpretive devices to explain away the identifications of the Son with the Father and of Christ with the Spirit in an effort to guard against modalism,²¹ but Witness Lee did not, choosing instead to affirm the simple declarations of the Bible, though not to understand them simplistically. Rather, he understood that the identifications rely on the oneness of essence in the Divine Trinity and on the coinherence and incorporation of the three persons. Concerning essence, coinherence, and incorporation he writes:

²¹ For a brief review of some of these interpretations, see *A Confirmation of the Gospel: Concerning the Teaching of the Local Churches and Living Stream Ministry* (Fullerton: DCP Press, 2009), 15-16.

We may say that the Triune God has three persons but only one essence; the persons should not be confounded and the essence should not be divided; the Father, the Son, and the Spirit are three in person, but They are one in essence.²²

Among the three of the Divine Trinity, there is distinction but no separation. The Father is distinct from the Son, the Son is distinct from the Spirit, and the Spirit is distinct from the Son and the Father. But we cannot say that They are separate, because They coinhere, that is, They live within one another. In Their coexistence the three of the Godhead are distinct, but Their coinherence makes them one. They coexist in Their coinherence, so They are distinct but not separate.²³

The three of the Divine Trinity are an incorporation by coinhering mutually and by working together as one. This means that the three of the Divine Trinity are an incorporation by what They are and by what They do.²⁴

Because the three are an incorporation “by what They are and by what They do,” when one of the three acts distinctly to carry out the divine economy, He incorporates the operations of the other two in His manifest action, so that the Bible frequently identifies one with the other without compromising the eternal distinctions among them.

The words of the Lord Jesus in John 14 provide testimony to the reality of incorporation and mutual identification: “Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in Me? The words that I say to you I do not speak from Myself, but the Father who abides in Me does His works” (v. 10). Here the Son manifestly acts (“the words that I say to you”) and the Father operates distinctly in Him (“the Father who abides in Me does His works”); thus, the Son does not speak from Himself but from the Father who abides in Him. Therefore, the Son could say, “He who has seen Me has seen the Father” (v. 9), because in His distinct and manifest action He incorporated the operations of the Father and thus was identified with the Father. Isaiah, then, could rightly prophesy that the Son would be called “Eternal Father” (Isa. 9:6). Nevertheless, the eternal distinction between the Son and the Father is not jeopardized by their mutual identification. Witness Lee writes:

We can say that the Father and the Son are one because the Lord Jesus said, “I and the Father are one” (John 10:30). However, although the Father and the Son are one, between

²² Witness Lee, *The Revelation and Vision of God* (LSM, 2000), 19.

²³ Witness Lee, *The Crucial Points of the Major Items of the Lord's Recovery Today* (LSM, 1993), 10.

²⁴ Witness Lee, *The Issue of Christ Being Glorified by the Father with the Divine Glory* (LSM, 1996), 26.

Them there is still a distinction of *I* and *the Father*. We must not disregard this point, because if we do, we would become modalists.²⁵

As the Son incorporates the Father and thus can be called “Eternal Father,” so the Spirit incorporates Christ and makes Him real and practical in the living and experience of the believers. It is, therefore, in the realm of the believers’ experience that Christ is said to have become “a life-giving Spirit” and even to be “the Lord Spirit” (2 Cor. 3:18), for it is through the Spirit’s incorporation of Christ that Christ comes to the believers to work out the full effect of God’s salvation in them. In other words, a transfer of manifest action occurred in the resurrection of Christ, whereby the Spirit now acts manifestly to bear Christ, whose hidden operations the Spirit incorporates in His manifest activity, to the believers. It is in this experiential and economical sense that Witness Lee understood the various titles of the Spirit that indicate His coinherence with the Father and with the Son, including “the Spirit of God” (Rom. 8:9; 1 John 4:2); “the Spirit of your Father” (Matt. 10:20); “the Spirit of the Lord” (Acts 5:9; 2 Cor. 3:17); “the Spirit of His Son” (Gal. 4:6); “the Spirit of Christ” (Rom. 8:9; 1 Pet. 1:11); “the Spirit of Jesus” (Acts 16:7); “the Spirit of Jesus Christ” (Phil. 1:19); and “the Lord Spirit” (2 Cor. 3:18). The Spirit, therefore, incorporates the operations of the Father and the Son, and He acts to make the Son, the embodiment of the Father, an experiential reality in the believers. Thus, “the Lord,” Paul says, “is the Spirit” (2 Cor. 3:17).

Witness Lee was not the only Bible teacher to recognize the identifications among the Father, Son, and Spirit or to apply them to the believers’ experience. A number of scholars have written on this matter, but here a few examples will suffice to make the point.

Writing in the early twentieth century, the noted Baptist theologian Augustus H. Strong, referencing also Charles Gore, offered this remarkably clear description of the identifications in the Godhead based on “the oneness of essence” and the “intercommunion” of the three persons:

²⁵ Witness Lee, *The Revelation and Vision of God* (LSM, 2000), 34.

This oneness of essence explains the fact that, while Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, as respects their personality, are distinct subsistences, there is an intercommunion of persons and an immanence of one divine person in another which permits the peculiar work of one to be ascribed...to either of the others, and the manifestation of one to be recognized in the manifestation of another. The Scripture representations of this intercommunion prevent us from conceiving of the distinctions called Father, Son, and Holy Spirit as involving separation between them...

This intercommunion also explains the designation of Christ as “the Spirit,” and of the Spirit as “the Spirit of Christ,” as 1 Corinthians 15:45: “the last Adam became a life-giving Spirit”; 2 Corinthians 3:17: “Now the Lord is the Spirit”;...

[Charles] Gore, *Incarnation [of the Son of God]*, 218—“The persons of the Holy Trinity are not separable individuals. Each involves the others; the coming of each is the coming of the others. Thus the coming of the Spirit must have involved the coming of the Son.”²⁶

New Testament scholar James D. G. Dunn identifies the risen Jesus with the life-giving Spirit and affirms that in the believers’ experience there is no distinction between the two:

If Adam is the type of psychic existence, then Christ, the risen Christ, is the type of pneumatic existence....In short, verse 45b constitutes proof because Paul’s experience of the [life-giving Spirit] convinces him that the exalted Jesus has a spiritual somatic existence and that in that mode of existence he is the pattern and forerunner of a new humanity.

...the life-giving Spirit they all experience is the *risen* Jesus, the *last* Adam...

Paul identifies the exalted Jesus with the Spirit – not with a spiritual being...or a spiritual dimension or sphere..., but with the Spirit, the Holy Spirit....Immanent Christology is for Paul pneumatology; in the believer’s experience there is *no* distinction between Christ and Spirit. This does not mean of course that Paul makes no distinction between Christ and Spirit.²⁷

Theologian Alister McGrath recognizes that the identifications bear particular significance for the believers’ “encounter” with the Divine Trinity:

It is also important to realize that the New Testament tends to think of the Holy Spirit as the Spirit of Christ as much as of God. The Spirit is understood to stand in the closest of possible relationships to Christ, so that his presence among the people of Christ is equivalent to the presence of Christ himself, just as the presence of Christ is treated as being that of God himself. In other words, to encounter the Son is really to encounter the Father and not some demigod or surrogate. To encounter the Spirit is really to encounter the Son and hence the

²⁶ A.H. Strong, *Systematic Theology: A Compendium* (c1907; repr., Old Tappan: Revell, 1960), 332-333.

²⁷ James D. G. Dunn, *The Christ and the Spirit*, vol. 1, *Christology* (Grand Rapids: W. B. Eerdmans, 1998), 164-165.

Father. The enormous importance of this is obvious: The believer of today can encounter the living God at first-hand, not through semidivine or created intermediaries.²⁸

It is important to recognize that the identifications among the three persons and the oneness of their presence in the believers do not negate the distinct agency of each person in His function to carry out the divine economy, and Witness Lee understood this well. He rejected the error of patripassianism and held firmly to the orthodox position that it was the Son who was incarnated, crucified, and resurrected from the dead, and not the Father or the Spirit, although the Father and the Spirit indwelt the Son as He accomplished the Father's plan and purpose. In the following excerpts, Witness Lee makes this point very clear:

The Father accomplished the first step of the plan, of the economy. He worked in choosing us and in predestinating us. The work of selection and the work of predestination were done by the Father, not by the Son or by the Spirit. We must be careful, though, to realize

²⁸ Alister McGrath, *Studies in Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997), 208.

In addition to the few examples offered here, others include the following:

Yet by virtue of the common essence, what one divine person performs each may be said to perform (the principle of perichoresis). Accordingly, the Son creates (1 Cor. 8:6; Col. 1:16) and the Spirit creates (cf. Job 33:4; Ps. 33:6); the Father redeems (2 Cor. 5:18-19; Eph. 2:4-5, 8) and the Spirit redeems (Rom. 8:4; Titus 3:5); and the Father sanctifies (Eph. 1:3-4; 1 Thess. 5:23) and the Son sanctifies (Eph. 4:15-16; 5:25-27). (Bruce Demarest and Gordon Lewis, *Integrative Theology*, vol. 1 [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1987], 267)

The Spirit in its working was found to be in effect the equivalent of Jesus Christ. Thus St Paul writes, If any has not Christ's Spirit, that man is not his (Christ's); but if Christ is in you, the body indeed is dead...but the spirit is life...; where the possession of the Spirit of Christ is clearly regarded as tantamount to an indwelling of Christ Himself. The same line of thought seems to be followed in the words, The Lord is the Spirit, but where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty. But we all...are being transformed...as by the Lord the Spirit, where 'the Spirit of the Lord' and 'the Lord the Spirit' (i.e. Christ in the power of His glorified life) are viewed as being in practice the same. (Henry Barclay Swete, *The Holy Spirit in the New Testament* [Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1910], 300-301)

17. Now the Lord is the Spirit: ...Paul elsewhere distinguishes between **the Lord** (i.e., Christ) and **the Spirit** (cf. 1 C. 12.4f; 2 C. 13.14), but dynamically they are one, since it is by the Spirit that the life of the risen Lord is imparted to believers and maintained within them (cf. Rom. 8.9-11; see also note on 1 C. 15.45b). (F.F. Bruce, ed., *New Century Bible* [London: Oliphants, 1971], 193)

When believers complain that they cannot distinguish between the separate activities in their lives of the Father, the Risen Lord, and the Holy Spirit, the matter is sometimes phrased in a way that obscures God's unity, a fundamental doctrine of both the Old and New Testament. Every action of any of the persons of the Trinity is an action of God, although in many actions the persons of the Godhead may be active in different ways. All authentic spiritual experience is an experience of the one God. (Carl F.H. Henry, *God, Revelation and Authority, VI:2* [Waco: Word Books, 1983], 400.

For more examples see *Brothers, Hear Our Defense (2): Concerning the Divine Trinity* (Fullerton: DCP Press, 2011), 55-59, 91-104.

that the Father did the selection and the predestination, but He did not do them alone. The Father of the Triune Godhead did the choosing and the predestinating in the Son and with the Spirit. If we say that the Father chose us and selected us alone, we jeopardize the coinherence and the coexistence of the divine Trinity. The coinherence and the coexistence of the Triune God are from eternity to eternity....

Also, in the second step of God's economy, the step of accomplishment, the Son did all the works. We cannot say the Father did the accomplishing work with the Son and by the Spirit. Neither can we say that the Spirit accomplished the Father's plan as the Son, with the Father. We can only say that the Son did all the works to accomplish the Father's plan with the Father and by the Spirit. Also, we cannot say that the Father became flesh and that the Father lived on this earth in the flesh. Furthermore, we cannot say that the Father went to the cross and died for our redemption, and we cannot say the blood shed on the cross is the blood of Jesus the Father. We must say that the blood was shed by Jesus the Son of God (1 John 1:7). We can neither say that the Father died on the cross nor can we say that the Father resurrected from the dead.²⁹

As these excerpts demonstrate, each person in the Divine Trinity has His respective function to carry out the divine economy in time, yet in the mutual coexistence, coinherence, and coworking of the three, that is, in their existence as a divine incorporation, their essential oneness is not compromised.

To this point we have encountered in Witness Lee's ministry an important distinction between God in His immanent existence (the immanent or essential Trinity) and God in His economy (the economic Trinity), a distinction that has long been recognized by theologians and is "[o]ne of the major issues animating contemporary discussions of Trinitarian theology" today.³⁰ Witness Lee explicitly defined the distinction and demonstrated why it is necessary for preserving the proper understanding of the Divine Trinity:

Whereas the essential Trinity refers to the essence of the Triune God for His existence, the economical Trinity refers to His plan for His move. There is the need of the existence of the Divine Trinity, and there is also the need of the plan of the Divine Trinity.

The Father accomplished the first step of His plan, His economy, by working to choose and predestinate us, but He did this in Christ the Son (Eph. 1:4-5) and with the Spirit. After this plan was made, the Son came to accomplish this plan, but He did this with the Father (John 8:29; 16:32) and by the Spirit (Luke 1:35; Matt. 1:18, 20; 12:28). Now that the Son has

²⁹ Witness Lee, *Elders' Training, Book 3: The Way to Carry Out the Vision* (LSM, 1985), 69-71.

³⁰ Chung-Hyun Baik, *The Holy Trinity—God for God and God for Us: Seven Positions on the Immanent-Economic Trinity Relation in Contemporary Trinitarian Theology* (Eugene: Pickwick Publications, 2011), 62.

accomplished all that the Father has planned, the Spirit comes in the third step to apply all that He accomplished, but He does this as the Son and with the Father (John 14:26; 15:26; 1 Cor. 15:45b; 2 Cor. 3:17). In this way, while the divine economy of the Divine Trinity is being carried out, the divine existence of the Divine Trinity, His eternal coexistence and coinherence, remains intact and is not jeopardized.³¹

Because Witness Lee focused on the believers' experience of the Triune God in the divine economy, he often emphasized the economic aspect of the Divine Trinity. Consequently, some critics accused him of confusing the persons by affirming their mutual identifications and of introducing change into the Godhead by saying that Christ became the life-giving Spirit. But when Witness Lee says that the Son is the Father and that the resurrected Christ has become the life-giving Spirit, he is not confusing the persons of the Trinity or admitting change into the Godhead; rather, he is recognizing the economic aspect of the Divine Trinity, according to which the three persons can be identified with one another in their mutual operation to carry out the divine economy. Moreover, in His economic activity God indeed passed through the process of incarnation, human living, death, and resurrection, and now indwells His believers as the life-giving Spirit. Thus, He has undergone change in His economy, yet He has not undergone, nor will He ever undergo, change in His essence.

Witness Lee writes:

The process through which the Triune God passed to become the life-giving Spirit is an economical, not essential, matter. Change with God can only be economical; it can never be essential. Essentially, our God cannot change. From eternity to eternity He remains the same in His essence. But in His economy the Triune God has changed in the sense of being processed. First, He who was merely God became a God-man. When He was merely God, He did not have humanity. But when He changed by becoming a God-man, humanity was added to His divinity. This does not mean, however, that God changed in His essence. On the contrary, He was changed only in His economy, in His dispensation. God has changed in His economy, but He has never changed in His essence.³²

Witness Lee held firmly to both the economic and the immanent aspects of the Divine Trinity, and thus he could rightly acknowledge the mutual identifications of the three while also recognizing that the Son is not the Father, that the Son is not the Spirit, and that the Spirit is not the Son or the

³¹ Witness Lee, *The Crucial Points of the Major Items of the Lord's Recovery Today* (LSM, 1993), 10.

³² Witness Lee, *The Conclusion of the New Testament, Messages 79-98* (LSM, 1996), 914-915.

Father. Critics who have routinely charged Witness Lee with error have not made sufficient inquiry into his ministry to see that he strongly affirmed the orthodox understanding of these two aspects of the Divine Trinity.

God as “One Person”

As mentioned earlier, some critics of Witness Lee have denounced him for saying that God is “one person,”³³ but we hope it is sufficiently clear that in doing so he did not annihilate the eternal distinctions among the Father, Son, and Spirit in the Godhead. When he said that God is “one person,” he referred to the fact that God is one divine, eternal Being,³⁴ as orthodox scholars and Christian leaders from Lewis Sperry Chafer to Alvin Plantinga have also done by calling God a (singular) person.³⁵ Therefore, just as we Christians recognize that the existence of eternally

³³ Witness Lee, *The Triune God to Be Life to the Tripartite Man* (LSM, 1996), 48. The full quote reads, “The Father, the Son, and the Spirit are not three separate persons or three Gods; they are one God, one reality, one person.”

³⁴ Interestingly, the context from which the above quote was excised makes this point quite well. Noting that there is one name for the three persons in Matthew 28:19, Witness Lee notes that the name “is the sum total of the divine Being, equivalent to His person.” He writes:

The revelation of the Triune God can be found throughout the New Testament. In Matthew 28:19, the Lord Jesus charged the disciples to baptize the nations “into the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.” In this verse, *name* is singular in number, yet the one name refers to three persons. This shows that there is one name for the divine Trinity (see notes 5 and 6 on Matthew 28:19 in the Recovery Version). The word *person* is often used to describe the Three of the divine Trinity, yet we must be careful in using such a term. Speaking of the term *person*, Griffith Thomas, one of the founders of Dallas Theological Seminary and a highly respected student of the Bible, said in his book *The Principles of Theology* (p. 31), “Like all human language, it is liable to be accused of inadequacy and even positive error. It certainly must not be pressed too far, or it will lead to Tritheism...While we are compelled to use terms like ‘substance’ and ‘Person,’ we are not to think of them as identical with what we understand as human substance and personality.”

The Father, the Son, and the Spirit are not three separate persons or three Gods; they are one God, one reality, one person. Hence, the Father, the Son, and the Spirit are denoted by one name. The name denotes the person, and the person is the reality of the name. The name of the divine Trinity is the sum total of the divine Being, equivalent to His person. God is triune; that is, He is three-one. In some theological writings, the preposition *in* is added between *three* and *one* to make *three-in-one*. However, it is more accurate to say that God is three-one. Being three-one, He is one God, with the Father, the Son, and the Spirit as His reality, His person. Thus, the name of the Triune God is Father, Son, and Spirit. Father, Son, and Spirit are not three different names; they are the unique name of the divine Trinity. Such a name is a compound title. Many of the divine titles in the Bible, such as “God the Father,” “the Lord Jesus,” and “the Lord Spirit” (2 Cor. 3:18), are compound titles. The compound name in Matthew 28:19 is composed of three parts—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. (Witness Lee, *The Triune God to Be Life to the Tripartite Man*, 48-49)

³⁵ Following are examples of scholars and Christian leaders, including Chafer and Plantinga, who have referred to God as a person in the singular sense:

distinct hypostases in the Godhead does not compromise our avowed monotheism, so we should recognize that the identification of God as “one person” does not jeopardize our cherished trinitarianism.

...the Scriptures proceed in the presentation of the nature and character of God. He is a Person with those faculties and constituent elements which belong to personality. (Lewis Sperry Chafer, *Systematic Theology* [Dallas: Dallas Seminary Press, 1947], 180)

The definition of a person—that is, a knowing, willing, acting I—can have the meaning only of a confession of the person of God declared in His revelation, of the One who loves and who as such (living in His own way) is *the* person. (Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics, II:1 The Doctrine of God* [Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1957], 284.

When Scripture ascribes certain works specifically to the Father, others specifically to the Son, and still others specifically to the Holy Spirit, we are compelled to presuppose a genuine distinction within the Godhead back of that ascription. On the other hand, the work ascribed to any of the persons is the work of one absolute person. (Cornelius Van Til, *An Introduction to Systematic Theology* [Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Theological Seminary, 1961], 228)

The following is a simplified account of the idea of “person” which may be helpful, although the reader must appreciate that simplifications are potentially dangerous. The word “person” has changed its meaning since the third century when it began to be used in connection with the “threefoldness of God.” When we talk about God as a person, we naturally think of God as being *one* person. But theologians such as Tertullian, writing in the third century, used the word “person” with a different meaning. The word “person” originally derives from the Latin word *persona*, meaning an actor’s face mask—and, by extension, the role which he takes in a play.

By stating that there were three persons but only one God, Tertullian was asserting that all three major roles in the great drama of human redemption are played by the one and the same God. The three great roles in this drama are all played by the same actor: God. Each of these roles may reveal God in a somewhat different way, but it is the same God in every case. So when we talk about God as one person, we mean one person *in the modern sense of the word*, and when we talk about God as three persons, we mean three persons *in the ancient sense of the word*. It is God, and God alone, who masterminded and executes the great plan of salvation, culminating in Jesus Christ. It is he who is present and active at every stage of its long history. Confusing these two senses of the word “person” inevitably leads to the idea that God is actually a committee—which, as we saw earlier, is a thoroughly unhelpful and confusing way of thinking about God. (Alister McGrath, *Studies in Doctrine* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997], 209)

If God is a living, conscious being who knows, wills, and acts—if, in a word, God is a person—then God is not a property or state of affairs or set or proposition or any other abstract object. (Alvin Plantinga, *The Analytic Theist*, James F. Sennett, ed. [Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1998], 239)

But there is a great deal of direct evidence for saying that God is a person. Have you noticed how the presence of God is always described in a personal way? Take the name of God that we have considered: ‘I am’, that is a personal statement, it is a person who can say, ‘I am,’ and God says that He speaks of Himself in this manner. Every single representative of God has declared that God is a person and not simply an unconscious force. (Martin Lloyd-Jones, *Great Doctrines of the Bible* [Wheaton: Crossway Books, 2003], 55-56)

Not only is God a spirit, but He also is a person—that is, He has personality, just as we do. Every trait we attribute to ourselves can be attributed to God. A person feels, thinks, desires, and decides—and so does God. A person enters into relationships—and so does God. A person acts—and so does God. God feels; God thinks; God sympathizes; God forgives; God hopes; God decides; God acts; God judges—all because He is a person. If He weren’t why pray to Him or worship Him? God is not an impersonal force or power; He is a *person*—the most perfect person imaginable. (Billy Graham, *The Journey: How to Live by Faith in an Uncertain World* [Nashville, TN: W. Publishing Group, 2006], 20)

The Christian Research Institute (CRI), a onetime critic of Witness Lee’s ministry that renounced its former stand, has affirmed the validity of referring to God as “one person” and, more notably, has expressed appreciation to Witness Lee for cautioning against describing the Father, Son, and Spirit as *separate* persons out of his concern that such a description compromises the very oneness of God’s being that Christians should seek to preserve. Elliot Miller, editor-in-chief of CRI’s *Christian Research Journal*, writes:

There is clearly a sense biblically in which the three persons of the Trinity share a singular *personal* identity: Yahweh, the covenant-keeping God, who we appropriately refer to as “he” or “Him.” To affirm this is not to confuse the eternal and economic distinctions that exist between Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. It is rather to safeguard the equally important biblical truth that they comprise one eternal Being, a truth that describing them as three *separate* persons compromises. Those of us who have used the word *separate* to distinguish the persons of the Trinity owe a debt of gratitude to Witness Lee for pointing this out.³⁶

Critics of Witness Lee have evidently seized on the term “one person” out of a determination to “prove” his alleged modalism,³⁷ and they may counter our defense of his position with accusations that we are ignorant of modalism’s actual dangers and that we unintentionally advance the modalistic error by defending Witness Lee’s teaching. But with all that we have seen of his teaching on the Trinity thus far, it is indeed difficult to impugn Witness Lee for holding an aberrant view or, we hope, to charge us with ignorance concerning modalism or with harboring a latent tendency toward it.

A Further Word concerning the Divine Trinity as an Incorporation

As we have noted, Witness Lee taught that the three of the Divine Trinity are an incorporation by coinhering mutually and by working together as one, and the Lord Jesus suggests the same in the Gospel of John:

³⁶ Elliot Miller, “Cultic, Aberrant, or (Unconventionally) Orthodox? A Reassessment of the ‘Local Church’ Movement,” *Christian Research Journal* 32:6 (2009): 21-22.

³⁷ Critics who have charged Witness Lee with teaching modalism based on his use of the term “one person,” despite responses to that charge, include Norman Geisler (with Ron Rhodes) and Cal Beisner.

If I do not do the works of My Father, do not believe Me; but if I do them, even if you do not believe Me, believe the works so that you may come to know and continue to know that the Father is in Me and I am in the Father. (10:37-38)

Believe Me that I am in the Father and the Father is in Me; but if not, believe because of the works themselves. (14:11)

In these passages the Lord Jesus indicates that the works themselves testify that the Father and the Son mutually indwell each other. We can therefore understand that the Father and the Son—and, by implication, the Spirit—work together in the divine economy according to what they are in coinherence. The works manifest the mutual indwelling and mutual operation of the three, and therefore it is by the works that we see what kind of God He is and are compelled to believe in Him as He is, that is, as a divine incorporation. Referring to incorporation in John 14, Witness Lee writes:

The three of the Divine Trinity are incorporated by coinhering mutually. Concerning this, the Lord Jesus said, “Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in Me?” (v. 10a). In verse 11a He went on to say, “Believe Me that I am in the Father and the Father is in Me.” The Son is in the Father and the Father is in the Son by a mutual coinhering.

The three of the Divine Trinity are an incorporation also by working together as one. In verses 10b and 11b the Lord said, “The words that I say to you I do not speak from Myself, but the Father who abides in Me does His works....Believe...because of the works themselves.” Here the Lord seemed to be saying, “You have seen all the works which I have done. These works were not done by Me, for I never did anything of Myself. Whatever I did was the Father’s work. The Father and I work together mutually.” This working together as one reveals that the Divine Trinity is an incorporation.³⁸

Therefore, Witness Lee concludes, “The three of the Divine Trinity are an incorporation both in what They are and in what They do.”³⁹

The great teachers of the early church recognized this profound reality in God, although such an understanding does not seem to be commonly held by believers today. Noting that late-fourth-century “pro-Nicenes” used analogies to the human person to arrive at some understanding of the

³⁸ Witness Lee, *The Issue of Christ Being Glorified by the Father with the Divine Glory* (LSM, 1996), 24-25.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 24.

Trinitarian mystery,⁴⁰ Lewis Ayres avers that those teachers also recognized the limits of analogies and saw the need for an understanding that goes beyond what the analogies allow for. He writes:

[Augustine] does not, however, use the attributions of memory, understanding, and will to the divine persons to encourage us to think we can understand what it is like to be a divine person by analogy with our own experience of personhood. Because we accord these qualities to divine persons in their perfect form and within the context of the divine simplicity, we do not know what it is for divine persons to possess such qualities: as David Burrell says the analogy here is analogical. Thus for both Augustine and Gregory of Nyssa we will grow in understanding of the individual persons the more we understand their co-inherence and con-joint operation.⁴¹

Particularly germane here is Ayres's use of "co-inherence and con-joint operation," which parallels Witness Lee's "coinhering mutually and working together as one." By citing the importance of mutual indwelling and co-working for Augustine and Gregory of Nyssa, Ayres makes a point that is very much in line with Witness Lee's teaching, namely, that it is by "understanding" the persons in their "co-inherence and con-joint operation" that we can more fully know them as they are, even if they cannot be fully known by finite man.

Anne Hunt similarly observes that it is by their works that we can perceive, to some degree, the interrelationships among the three persons, and thus, echoing Karl Rahner, she contends, "the economic Trinity is the immanent Trinity."⁴² She comments further:

⁴⁰ Lewis Ayres, *Nicaea and its Legacy: An Approach to Fourth-Century Trinitarian Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 295-296. In his introduction Ayres writes, "By 'pro-Nicene' I mean those theologies, appearing from the 360s to the 380s, consisting of a set of arguments about the nature of the Trinity and about the enterprise of Trinitarian theology, and forming the basis of Nicene Christian belief in the 380s" (6). He refers to late-fourth century "pro-Nicene" theologians, such as Augustine and Gregory of Nyssa, as "pro-Nicenes."

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 296.

⁴² Anne Hunt, "Trinity, Christology, and pneumatology," *The Cambridge Companion to the Trinity*, ed. Peter C. Phan (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 370. Refuting modalism, Alister McGrath makes a similar point:

A helpful distinction may be introduced at this point to avoid a misunderstanding (technically, "Sabellianism"). We need to draw a distinction between God as he actually is, and the way in which God acts and reveals himself in history. In scripture, we find particular attention being directed to the way in which God acts in history—for example, in creation, redemption, and the giving of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. Now, this might give the casual reader the impression that God is Father at *this* point in time (for example, at creation), and is Son at *that* point in time (for example, on the cross of Calvary). In other words, to put it very crudely, the impression might be given that God is Father until the birth of Jesus, that he is Son until Pentecost, and that thereafter he is the Holy Spirit. In fact, the doctrine of the Trinity affirms

Here is the intrinsic connection between the immanent and economic Trinity. It is through knowledge of the missions *ad extra*, revealed in the life and especially the paschal mystery of Jesus Christ, that we glean, if but dimly, the mystery of the processions *ad intra*. So what is revealed *ad extra*—that is, the relationship between Son, Spirit and Father, and the interrelatedness of the missions of Son and Spirit—constitutes the basis for our appreciation, albeit ever so limited, of the mystery of the Trinity *ad intra*, and the interrelatedness of Father, Son, and Spirit *in se*.⁴³

For Hunt, it is as we know “the missions *ad extra*” (i.e., the works), and especially the life, death, and resurrection of Christ, that we can perceive, however “dimly,” what the Father, Son, and Spirit are in themselves.

To illustrate further the notion of incorporation as Witness Lee taught it, we will consider the following works recorded in the New Testament: the Son’s incorporation of the Father and the Spirit in His crucifixion and resurrection, and the Spirit’s incorporation of the Father and the Son in His function of giving life to the believers. By examining the splendid operation of the Divine Trinity in carrying out these steps in the divine economy, we see a glorious witness to the reality of mutual indwelling and co-working that is aptly described by the term *incorporation*.

Incorporation in the Crucifixion and Resurrection of Christ

Witness Lee understood that in the divine economy the three of the Divine Trinity work inseparably to accomplish what is distinct to one person alone, and he saw this unchanging principle in the crucifixion and resurrection of Christ. While Christ the Son, the second person of the Trinity, was crucified and resurrected from the dead, and not the Father or the Spirit, it is equally true that the Father and the Spirit were not separate from Christ but operated in Him as He was crucified for our redemption (Rom. 5:8; 1 Cor. 15:3; 1 Pet. 2:24) and raised for our justification (Rom. 4:25). Witness Lee writes:

that *all* of God’s actions reflect the fact that God is eternally what his revelation in history demonstrates him to be—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. It may be that certain actions emphasize that God is Father, just as others may emphasize that he is Son—but God acts as a Trinity throughout all his works. Thus even at creation itself we find reference to the Father, the Word, and the Holy Spirit (Gen. 1:1-3). (Alister McGrath, *Studies in Doctrine* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997], 213)

⁴³ Ibid., 372.

Hebrews 9:14 says that Christ offered Himself through the eternal Spirit. Jesus, in Himself alone, could not accomplish His crucifixion. To die on the cross as an offering to God, the Son needed the Spirit. Jesus did not die on the cross alone and separate from the Spirit. The Spirit was one with the Son. The Son died on the cross with the Father and by the Spirit. The Father, the Son, and the Spirit were all involved in the Son's crucifixion. The death of Christ was not only the death of the man Jesus but also the death of the Son with the Father and by the Spirit. Because Christ offered Himself through the eternal Spirit, His death is eternally effective....

Acts 2:32 says, "This Jesus [the Son] God [including the Father and the Spirit] raised up." The dead Jesus was raised up by God. Acts 10:40 and 41 show us that, on the one hand, God [including the Father and the Spirit] raised this One [the Son] on the third day; on the other hand, He [the Son] rose from the dead. Regarding the Lord as a man, the New Testament tells us that God raised Him from the dead; considering Him as God, it tells us that He Himself rose from the dead. Romans 8:11 refers to "the Spirit of Him [the Triune God] who raised Jesus [the Son] from among the dead." The "Spirit of Him" may also be translated "the Spirit of the One." The One who raised Jesus did the raising by the Spirit. These verses show us that the Divine Trinity was involved in the resurrection.⁴⁴

Based on this view, the crucifixion and resurrection of Christ are seen to be an operation of the entire Trinity as a divine incorporation and not the independent action of a separable individual sent forth on a lone and distant mission. In the man Jesus, Paul tells us, "dwells all the fullness of the Godhead bodily" (Col. 2:9).⁴⁵

⁴⁴ Witness Lee, *Living in and with the Divine Trinity* (LSM, 1990), 12-13. Brackets are in the original.

⁴⁵ Concerning the mutual operation of the Three in the living and work of Christ, Thomas F. Torrance is particularly helpful:

It was, of course, not the Godhead or the Being of God as such who became incarnate, but the Son of God, not the Father or the Spirit, who came among us, certainly from the Being of the Father and as completely *homoousios* with him, yet because in him the fullness of the Godhead dwells, the whole undivided Trinity must be recognized as participating in the incarnate Life and Work of Christ. (Thomas F. Torrance, *The Christian Doctrine of God: One Being Three Persons* [London: T&T Clark, 1996], 108)

Since God's Being and Activity completely interpenetrate each other, we must think of his Being and his Activity not separately but as one Being-in-Activity and one Activity-in-Being. In other words, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit always act together in every divine operation whether in creation or redemption, yet in such a way that the distinctive activities of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, are always maintained, in accordance with the propriety and otherness of their Persons as the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. This may be called the 'perichoretic coactivity of the Holy Trinity'...

The primary distinction was made there, of course, for it was the Son or Word of God who became incarnate, was born of the Virgin Mary, was crucified under Pontius Pilate, and rose again from the grave, and *not* the Father or the Holy Spirit, although the whole life and activity of Jesus from his birth to his death and resurrection did not take place apart from the presence and coactivity of the Father and the Spirit. (Ibid., 197-198)

Millard J. Erickson sounds a similar note:

The Lord Jesus testified not only of His mutual indwelling and co-working with the Father but also that He and the Father are one (John 10:30; 14:9) and that He was never alone because the Father was always with Him (John 8:16, 29; 16:32). Likewise, Christ was conceived of the Holy Spirit (Matt. 1:18, 20; Luke 1:35), was led by the Spirit (Matt. 4:1; Luke 4:1), worked by the Spirit (Matt. 12:28), and therefore incorporated the operations of the Spirit in all His living and activity. Witness Lee rejected any idea that the Father and the Spirit were no longer in the Son or with the Son at His crucifixion and resurrection, for a separation among the three would indicate that God changed in His eternal being, which He did not. On the contrary, the divine incorporation was manifested in the man Jesus, and although He was the subject of the crucifixion and the resurrection, the three operated simultaneously to manifest His distinct action of being crucified and resurrecting from the dead.

The New Testament indicates that God was exceedingly active as Christ suffered on the cross, and again we should see in Christ's manifest activity the hidden operation of God to effect a victorious redemption through Him, which Witness Lee affirmed. In Christ's death, Paul tells us, God was operating:

Wiping out the handwriting in ordinances, which was against us, which was contrary to us; and He has taken it out of the way, nailing it to the cross. Stripping off the rulers and the authorities, He made a display of them openly, triumphing over them in it. (Col. 2:14-15)

Namely, that God in Christ was reconciling the world to Himself, not accounting their offenses to them, and has put in us the word of reconciliation. (2 Cor. 5:19)

While God was not apart from Christ but at work in Him crucifying "the handwriting in ordinances," conquering "the rulers and the authorities," and "reconciling the world to Himself," the Scriptures nonetheless testify that He forsook Christ to judge Him for our sins. Witness Lee points out,

Perichoresis means that not only do the three members of the Trinity interpenetrate one another, but all three are involved in all the works of God. While certain works are primarily or more centrally the doing of one of these rather than the others, all participate to some degree in what is done. Thus, while redemption is obviously the work of the incarnate Son, the Father and the Spirit are also involved. (Millard J. Erickson, *God in Three Persons: A Contemporary Interpretation of the Trinity* [Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1995], 235)

however, that God's forsaking of Christ was an economical matter, not an essential matter, so that God could forsake the dying Christ economically but could pass through death in Him essentially.

Witness Lee writes that

when the Lord Jesus died on the cross to accomplish redemption for sinners, God forsook Him according to God's economy. This was why He cried, "My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?" (Matt. 27:46). On the cross He bore our sins and even became sin for us, suffering the righteous judgment of God. At that moment, God forsook Him as far as God's economy is concerned. But as far as God's essence is concerned, God was passing through the death of the cross together with Him, for the essence of God was forever in Him; it never departed from Him.⁴⁶

The coinherence of the three persons is an aspect of God's intrinsic being, which is immutable, or unchangeable. Had Christ been alone at the cross, intrinsically separated from the Father and the Spirit, this would have necessitated a change in God's essential being. If one accepts the testimony of Scripture that the three of the Godhead coinhere essentially, then this intrinsic relationship in God's essential being would be unaffected by Christ's incarnation, human living, death, resurrection, and ascension.

As we have seen, Witness Lee observed that Hebrews points to a Trinitarian reality (we may say the reality of incorporation) at the cross that precludes us from thinking of Christ as having acted apart from the Father or the Spirit in accomplishing the work of redemption. It was, the writer of Hebrews testifies, "through the eternal Spirit" that Christ "offered Himself without blemish to God" (Heb. 9:14), so that by the hidden operation of the eternal Spirit in the distinct action of the Son, the redemption accomplished by Christ was infused with an eternal efficacy. Christ, therefore, did not act independently of the Father or the Spirit to accomplish the work of redemption; rather, He incorporated the operations of the Father and the Spirit in His distinct action of dying on the cross, and His mutual coinhering and working together as one with the Father and the Spirit was not

⁴⁶ Witness Lee, *Christ Revealed in the New Testament* (LSM: 1989), 16.

compromised by the Father's forsaking of Him at the cross. Indeed, Jesus the Son of God was crucified, but the blood shed by Him was, Paul tells us, God's "own blood" (Acts 20:28).

To be sure, the Father was not the subject of suffering in Christ's death on the cross,⁴⁷ nor was the Spirit the One who suffered, but an orthodox Trinitarianism must maintain that "in the visible death of Christ the three of the Trinity operated so as to make manifest the distinct activity of the Son on the cross."⁴⁸ Furthermore, we must hold that "redemption is of the Son, but in operation redemption is the activity of the entire Godhead, Father, Son, and Spirit."⁴⁹ In the crucifixion of Christ for our redemption, we see the glorious coordination of the Divine Trinity as a divine incorporation.

As we saw above, Witness Lee also recognized the splendid co-working among the three of the Divine Trinity in the resurrection of Christ, and again it should be understood that all three operate inseparably to make manifest the distinct action of one, in this case, the Son in His rising from the

⁴⁷ Augustine is helpful here:

The Son indeed and not the Father was born of the Virgin Mary; but this very birth of the Son, not of the Father, was the work both of the Father and the Son. The Father indeed suffered not, but the Son, yet the suffering of the Son was the work of the Father and the Son. The Father did not rise again, but the Son, yet the resurrection of the Son was the work of the Father and the Son. (Augustine, *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Series I*, vol. 6, "Sermon II: Of the words of St. Matthew's Gospel, Chap. iii. 13, 'Then Jesus cometh from Galilee to the Jordan unto John, to be baptized of him.' Concerning the Trinity," Philip Schaff, ed. [1887; repr., Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979], 261)

Thomas F. Torrance writes further:

Thus the atonement is to be regarded as the act of God in his being and his being in his act. That is not to say, of course, that it was the Father who was crucified, for it was the Son in his distinction from the Father who died on the cross, but it is to say that the suffering of Christ on the cross was not just human, it was divine as well as human, and in fact is to be regarded as the suffering of God himself, that is, as the being of God in his redeeming act, and the passion of God in his very being as God... While the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit are personally distinct from one another, they are nevertheless of one and the same being with one another in God, and their acts interpenetrate one another in the indivisibility of the one Godhead. (Thomas F. Torrance, *The Mediation of Christ* [Colorado Springs, CO: Helmers & Howard, 1992], 113)

It was not of course the Father but the Son who was incarnate and suffered on the cross, but the distinctiveness of the Persons of the Father and of the Son, does not imply any division in the oneness of their being, or in the oneness of their activity, for God's being and act are inseparable. (Ibid., 118)

⁴⁸ Kerry S. Robichaux, "The Divine Trinity in the Divine Economy," *Affirmation & Critique: A Journal of Christian Thought* IV:2 (April 1999): 40-41.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

dead. Here a simple review of some further New Testament evidence suffices to demonstrate the inseparable operation of the three in raising Christ from the dead, although, as with the crucifixion, it is imperative to affirm that it was distinctly the Son alone who resurrected. Witness Lee observed that while God is said to have raised Christ from the dead (Acts 2:32; 3:15; 10:40; Rom. 8:11), agency for the resurrection is also ascribed to the Father, the Son, and the Spirit, respectively. The Father, we are told, raised His Son Jesus from the dead (1 Thes. 1:10), and yet the Son foretold that He would raise Himself from the dead (John 2:19, 21; 10:17-18). Moreover, the Spirit was operating in the resurrection of Christ (Rom. 1:4; 8:11), and we can reasonably understand that the Spirit was the surpassing power that raised Christ from the dead (Eph. 1:19-20). All this is to say that while it was the distinct action of the Son to rise from the dead, He incorporated the operations of the Father and the Spirit in the economic process that He passed through, and the three are understood to have worked together to manifest the distinct action of the Son in His resurrection. Like the crucifixion, the resurrection of Christ was carried out by the incorporated operation of the entire Divine Trinity.

Incorporation in the Giving of Life to the Believers

The reality of incorporation can also be seen in the work of the Divine Trinity to impart the divine life into redeemed humanity. In the New Testament the Spirit functions to regenerate the believers (John 3:6) and impart life to them (6:63; 2 Cor. 3:6), but He does not do this apart from the Father and the Son; rather, He incorporates the distinct operation of the Father to give life to the dead (John 5:21;), that is, to regenerate them (1 Pet. 1:3), and the distinct operation of the Son to give life to those whom the Father has given to Him (John 17:2). Concerning the oneness of the Divine Trinity in giving life to the believers, Witness Lee writes:

Both the Father and the Son have life in themselves [John 5:26]. So the Son can and does enliven people with life as the Father desires. In life's enlivening, the Son is truly one with the Father.⁵⁰

In verses 63 through 65 [of John 6], the fifth section, we see that Christ became the life-giving Spirit. At the beginning of verse 63 the Lord says, "It is the Spirit who gives life." At this point, the Spirit who gives life is brought in. After resurrection and through resurrection, the Lord Jesus, who had become flesh (1:14), became the Spirit who gives life, as is clearly mentioned in 1 Corinthians 15:45b. As the life-giving Spirit, He can be life and the life supply to us. When we receive Him as the crucified and resurrected Savior, the Spirit who gives life comes into us to impart eternal life to us. We receive the Lord Jesus, but we get the Spirit who gives life.⁵¹

Who then is the He in verse 11 [of Romans 8]? Actually, the verse should read "the One Who raised Christ Jesus from among the dead." Instead of "Him" it should be "the One." This verse twice refers us to the Trinity in a very practical way. The Spirit, the One who raised Christ Jesus from among the dead, that is, the Father, and Christ Jesus Himself are all three mentioned. According to letters you have the three: the Spirit of the One who raised Jesus from among the dead. But according to your experience there is only one. If then the three are one, whom do you experience? The Spirit? Or Jesus? Or the One?... It is the Three-one who gives life.⁵²

The three of the Divine Trinity therefore operate inseparably to manifest the Spirit in the one action of giving life, and in the life-giving action of the Spirit, all three are understood to be operating simultaneously. Thus, it is God—the *Triune* God—who has "made us alive" (Eph. 2:4-5) by imparting the divine life to the believers for their regeneration by the life-giving Spirit, the reality of Christ as the embodiment of the Father.⁵³ To be sure, the Spirit acts manifestly to impart life, but the giving of life is an operation of the entire Divine Trinity as a divine incorporation.

In the economical activity of crucifixion, resurrection, and life-imparting, the Divine Trinity acts according to what He is in His eternal being. As there can be no separation of persons in the Godhead, so there can be no separation between them in the divine economy, for the three act economically according to what they are immanently. The works themselves testify that the Father,

⁵⁰ Witness Lee, *Life-Study of John* (LSM, 1985), 174.

⁵¹ Witness Lee, *The Fulfillment of the Tabernacle and the Offerings in the Writings of John* (LSM, 1991), 182.

⁵² Witness Lee, *Perfecting Training* (LSM, 1983), 492.

⁵³ For Witness Lee's teaching on regeneration and the organic salvation that regeneration initiates, see "In Life and Nature but Not in the Godhead": Witness Lee's Contribution to a Biblical Understanding of Theosis," pp. 10-14, published by Defense & Confirmation Project and presented at the 2015 Annual Meeting of the Evangelical Philosophical Society in Atlanta, GA.

the Son, and the Spirit mutually indwell one another in all their activity, and the term *incorporation*, properly understood, conveys this truth quite appropriately. “God in His Divine Trinity,” writes Witness Lee, “is an incorporation, mutually coinhering and working together as one.”⁵⁴

Conclusion

Witness Lee’s teaching on the Trinity, though sadly maligned and misrepresented by some over the years, has been shown to be solidly orthodox. Contrary to accusations that he taught the heresy of modalism, Witness Lee’s writings affirm an understanding of the Divine Trinity that is in accord with passages of Scripture that may at first glance appear contradictory. On the one hand, he maintained that the distinctions among the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are genuine and eternal; on the other hand, he accepted the biblical pronouncements that the Son is called “Eternal Father” and that Christ is now the “life-giving Spirit.” To explain how both sides could be equally valid, he relied on the long-established notion of coinherence, and he held to the long-accepted proposition that there are both immanent and economic aspects of the Divine Trinity. By affirming these classic markers of orthodoxy, Witness Lee stood on the shoulders of those teachers whose labors the church has long regarded.

Witness Lee’s teaching of incorporation, whereby the three persons mutually coinhere and work together as one, provides a model for apprehending the immanent and economic relationships in the Divine Trinity and the perplexing issue of how one person can be identified with another without compromising the eternal distinctions between them. As the Son incorporates the hidden operations of the Father and thus can be identified with the Father and even called “Eternal Father,” so the Spirit incorporates the hidden operations of the Son and thus can be identified with the Son and even called “the Lord Spirit.” The Spirit, then, comes to the believers not as a deputized

⁵⁴ Witness Lee, *Crystallization-Study of the Humanity of Christ* (LSM, 1997), 46.

representative of the Son but bearing and communicating the Son Himself, the embodiment of the Father, to the believers for their experience of the Divine Trinity as a divine incorporation.

Throughout his ministry Witness Lee emphasized that the Divine Trinity is not for mere doctrinal understanding but for the believers' experience, and at times he was unfairly chided for denigrating biblical precision in favor of mystical subjectivity. As we believe this paper has shown, Witness Lee cared absolutely for biblical truth, and his teaching opened a door for a rich and full experience of the Triune God realized and imparted to man in the Spirit who gives life. Writing on 2 Corinthians 13:14 in a study note in the Recovery Version of the Holy Bible, Witness Lee demonstrates both a deep care for proper teaching and a concern that the Triune God not be taken as mere doctrine but would be rightly experienced and enjoyed by the believers. He writes:

The grace of the Lord is the Lord Himself as life to us for our enjoyment (John 1:17 and note 1; 1 Cor. 15:10 and note 1), the love of God is God Himself (1 John 4:8, 16) as the source of the grace of the Lord, and the fellowship of the Spirit is the Spirit Himself as the transmission of the grace of the Lord with the love of God for our participation. These are not three separate matters but three aspects of one thing, just as the Lord, God, and the Holy Spirit are not three separate Gods but three "hypostases ... of the one same undivided and indivisible" God (Philip Schaff). The Greek word for *hypostasis* (used in Heb. 11:1—see note 2 there), the singular form of *hypostases*, refers to a support under, a support beneath, i.e., something underneath that supports, a supporting substance. The Father, the Son, and the Spirit are the hypostases, the supporting substances, that compose the one Godhead.

The love of God is the source, since God is the origin; the grace of the Lord is the course of the love of God, since the Lord is the expression of God; and the fellowship of the Spirit is the impartation of the grace of the Lord with the love of God, since the Spirit is the transmission of the Lord with God, for our experience and enjoyment of the Triune God—the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, with Their divine virtues. Here the grace of the Lord is mentioned first because this book is on the grace of Christ (1:12; 4:15; 6:1; 8:1, 9; 9:8, 14; 12:9). Such a divine attribute of three virtues—love, grace, and fellowship—and such a Triune God of the three divine hypostases—the Father, the Son, and the Spirit—were needed by the distracted and confused yet comforted and restored Corinthian believers. Hence, the apostle used all these divine and precious things in one sentence to conclude his lovely and dear Epistle.

This verse is strong proof that the trinity of the Godhead is not for the doctrinal understanding of systematic theology but for the dispensing of God Himself in His trinity into His chosen and redeemed people. In the Bible the Trinity is never revealed merely as a doctrine. It is always revealed or mentioned in regard to the relationship of God with His

creatures, especially with man, who was created by Him, and more particularly with His chosen and redeemed people.⁵⁵

It is our hope that this presentation of Witness Lee's teaching on the Trinity will stimulate further inquiry into his ministry. We believe that scholars will find there a rich and valuable contribution to Trinitarian studies that encourages the believers to advance in their experience of the Triune God unto the fulfillment of His eternal economy.

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⁵⁵ Second Corinthians 13:14, note 1, Recovery Version of the Bible (LSM, 2003).