

Introduction

In the 1950s, in American Christianity, there were a few inter-denominational churches but no Bible Churches as today, and a home meeting was a rare phenomenon. Nearly all Christian congregations were a part of a ritualistic formal denomination or one that was a guardian of a particular Bible truth or the legacy of an historical person. There was some focus on evangelism and mission work. Billy Graham was unique. When he held a crusade, he invited all believers and churches in a metropolitan area to join together in the labor. This was unusual, because in those times most Christians referred to themselves first as Baptists, Methodists, Catholics, etc, and second, as Christians. In fact, the average Baptist might be suspect of the faith of any of the other denominations and vice versa. In my small home town, Baptists sought to shop and do business with Baptist merchants, Methodists with Methodist, etc. The young people in my denomination, Southern Baptist, were discouraged from dating a non-Baptist or having too many close friends who were not Baptist. This was taught in the Sunday night "Training Union" classes.

Many of the so called church members were in fact "cultural Christians." They almost never read the Bible, rarely prayed except for a rote blessing at a meal, and left spiritual matters to the paid professionals. An hour on Sunday AM and honesty during the week constituted a very good Christian. There was a famine in the land, and many were hungry for the real thing.

Among the Lord's children who were hungering for more, Billy Graham was a blessing and hope. Thousands upon thousands attended his crusades and attended the myriads of mini-crusades held throughout the land where films of Graham would be shown and invitations given to receive Christ. Other evangelists appeared on the scene and were greatly used by the Lord to water and feed His people as well as to preach the gospel. In these gospel campaigns it was very common for so-called life-long Christians to receive Christ and to experience a new birth. In addition, there were a few great men of God who were exceptional preachers. Television began to allow many hungry Christians to avail themselves of their supply.

A few servants of the Lord began to appear from other lands. Ian Thomas of England, the leader of the Torch Bearers, brought the message of Christ as Life. His tapes and booklets were eagerly devoured by seeking Christians and he was responsible for many developing a yearning for more. Some publishing works such as Christian Literature Crusade bridged the denominational walls and began to awaken the Christian community to more than what they had known.

The works of Andrew Murray, William Law, and others from previous times were republished. The writings of Watchman Nee, published by CLC, began a stirring among Christians to know and serve the Lord in a more Biblical and living way that continues to this day.

Amongst the Roman Catholics, God was also moving in fresh and unexpected ways. The tremendous changes brought about by the Second Vatican Council were a blessing to many, while the spiritual writings of devoted men of God like Thomas Merton met the hunger of seeking Catholics everywhere.

The general populace of the USA had become immersed in materialism after World War II. There was a rising discontent, especially among the young people. Many asked, "Is this all there is to life?" Then came the Viet Nam war.

I was a college student at the time. By 1964-5, hardly a day went by that I did not see a girl weeping as she walked across campus. Why? She had received a letter from home telling of a local boy who had been killed. I received many such letters. A few years ago, I visited the Viet Nam War Memorial in DC. Never have I felt such an atmosphere of despair and grief. I can never forget my emotion as I read the names of boyhood chums engraved on the wall. As I type this, my hands tremble as my memory takes me back to those days.

This book is to be a history of the local churches and the work of Witness Lee, but unless the reader understands the times he may not be able to appreciate what God was doing in His mercy to meet the need of so many and in so many ways. Witness Lee, at that time, was also used by the Lord. In this book, we will consider the blessings experienced by the local churches, the errors, the warnings and the fruit produced - both good and bad.

As young people began to reject the culture of materialism and the nation entered the tremendous dislocation caused by the war, the young people turned to many escapes. Drugs, sex, and the hippy movement were prevalent. Suddenly the "Jesus People" appeared. Tens of thousands of disaffected youth came to Christ. But most did not meet Him in a traditional church or regular Evangelical Crusade. It was one-on-one, in small groups, spontaneous and full of the power of the Spirit. Where could they go to be shepherded, nurtured and cared for? They did not care for traditional Christianity, and traditional Christianity did not care for them. Thus non-traditional churches, seeker groups meeting in homes, and ministry from non-professionals appeared everywhere.

CHAPTER ONE

THE LOCAL CHURCH MOVEMENT IN THE USA IN THE SIXTIES

There were many prevailing works of God during this time; but, as shared in the introduction, this book will focus on Witness Lee and the work of God in the local churches in the United States. I was there from September, 1965, until the summer of 1989. I knew Witness Lee personally and considered him to be a spiritual father and good friend. We never had a cross word, and he always treated me with dignity and respect. I have no personal axes to grind or offenses to even up. I will endeavor to give credit where credit is due, but will also seek to bring to light the failures among us, including my own.

This kind of treatment [of our history] corresponds to the Bible, which is a most unique book in that it exposes the major characters where they failed and came short of God's call, as well as their victories and faithful deeds. In the Old Testament, the failures of Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses, David, and Solomon are not ignored or covered over, but are brought to light. Likewise, in the New Testament, the mistakes of Peter, John and James, Philip, Thomas, Barnabas, James the brother of the Lord and Paul are all exposed. This should tell us that the same should be done among us. If there have been significant failures, they should not be treated in a light manner and covered over; rather, they should be made clear to all the saints, publicly, for our learning and profit. Only the Lord Jesus Christ is without blemish in any way. All believers should be warned not to fall into any hero worship or to develop a loyalty to a man or a ministry. The old hymn, "Loyalty to Christ" should indeed be a theme for us all.

In 1962, there was a World's Fair in Seattle, Washington. (The Space Needle was built on this occasion.) Witness Lee and his son, Timothy, had an exhibit at the fair. They displayed and attempted to sell manufactured goods from Taiwan. They had raised funds from members of the local churches in Taiwan. The endeavor was a failure and the products stored in a warehouse. The problems created by this business failure made it difficult for Witness Lee to return to the churches in Taiwan in good graces. But I believe this human failure opened the door for a blessing for many of the seeking Christians in the USA in those early years (since Witness Lee remained in this country as a result of the problem, and ministered.)

Watchman Nee had visited the USA in the late 1930s and had received a poor impression due to the extreme materialism. He told Witness Lee that the USA was Egypt and he had little hope that the Lord would do much there. On the other hand, Witness Lee had grown up under the care of American Southern Baptist missionaries from Texas. He had a great appreciation for the USA. He came for a visit in 1958. He visited Brother Nee's brother-in-law and former business partner, Samuel Chang, in Southern California. He also visited a co-worker of Brother Nee named Stephen Kaung in New York City. He spoke to some Christian groups during these visits.

In Los Angeles, at Westmoreland Chapel, he met a young man named John Ingalls. John would become a pioneer in the local church movement, and a minister of the truth concerning the experience of the indwelling Christ and of the vision of a practical authentic New Testament Church Life. In the spring of 1962, Samuel Chang and John Ingalls were in fellowship one evening with Eugene Gruhler Sr., of New York City. Brother Gruhler encouraged them to go ahead, as they were so clear in their desire to practice the church life as taught by Watchman Nee. That night while driving home, John Ingalls had a deep and clear impression from the Lord that they should begin. On May 27, 1962, John Ingalls began with about 20 others to gather in the Lord's name to practice the church life as revealed in the book, The Normal Christian Church Life by Watchman Nee. John urged Witness Lee to join him and the few others who gathered. Witness Lee joined them on November 30, 1962.

FIRST CONFERENCE

In December of 1962, Witness Lee, John Ingalls, and Paul Ma began to pray for a conference which was to be held at the end of December. They prayed every morning for three weeks. Then Witness Lee held his first conference in Los Angeles on 23rd street in the home of Samuel Chang. There were around 40 attendees. The highest number was 70 and the saints crowded the sitting room and stairways. Don Morsey of Sacramento testified that the Spirit was so prevailing that "they all sat three inches above their chairs." Witness Lee released a set of messages which became the book, The All-inclusive Christ, based upon verses in Deuteronomy. The saints who attended those meetings heard things they had never heard before, which opened their eyes to Christ as our Good Land, so vast and immense that we could labor on day by day. Songs issued forth from that conference that were used often in church meetings in the ensuing years, inspiring the saints to experience Christ. Lines from those songs such as, "Laboring on

Jesus yields reality....” and “Oh what a rich abundant Christ....” were often sung, which helped keep the saints’ vision fresh for enjoying Christ in their daily lives.

Witness Lee was traveling during those days and would minister wherever people would receive him. While traveling, and during his times in Los Angeles, he wrote hundreds of hymns. Many of them are rich in light and life. You can find the best of these hymns in the hymnal, simply entitled, *Hymns*, published by the Living Stream Ministry. John Ingalls was Witness Lee’s collaborator in compiling and producing this original hymnal of 1080 hymns. During these days of great spiritual exercise on the part of many dear believers, hymns of all sorts were pouring out. Within the Body of Christ, the writing of hymns hit a peak between 1968 and 1972. Among the various local churches, countless hymns were written, and among the Jesus People and many other Christian works and ministries, hymns poured forth. “Psalms and hymns and spiritual songs” were a sign and expression of the overflow of the rich experience of Christ among the members of His Body.

BILL MALLON

In the summer of 1963, Bill and Barbara Mallon joined with the saints meeting in Los Angeles. Bill and Barbara Mallon had recently returned from New Guinea. They had served the Lord as a missionary and nurse deep in the mountains of New Guinea. They served among the tribes which had killed one of Rockefeller’s sons in 1955. Through their ministry, over 6,000 were brought to Christ, and Bill was able to reduce their language to written form in order for the Bible to be put into their language. In spite of the success they had experienced, they were not content within and were seeking to serve the Lord in a more perfect way. They were driving across the country and Barbara read aloud from the The Normal Christian Church Life, as they drove. Bill and Barbara attended the first training given by Witness Lee in the summer of 1963 in Altadena, California. Bill would become one of Witness Lee’s closest co-workers. Witness Lee, Samuel Chang John Ingalls, Bill Mallon, and James Barber met together nearly every day for many months.

INITIAL SPREADING

During Witness Lee’s travels, he visited Tyler, Texas in late 1963. There he met Gene Edwards, James Barber, Harry Goyer and Gene DeBerry, among others. Some later became

pillars in the work and ministry under Witness Lee and some would adopt the teachings and concepts of Lee while developing their own ministry.

In Texas, Ian Thomas was an unwitting forerunner to Witness Lee. His message of “Christ as Life” stirred many including myself. He visited Wayland Baptist College in Plainview, Texas in 1962. The director of religious activities at this college was James Barber, who was a man in his late 20s. James was an ardent Christian who desired to serve the Lord without reservation. He was a gifted teacher and speaker.

There was also a group of young believers at Wayland Baptist who were on fire for the Lord. Out of this group would come many of the early and current leaders of the Local Church Movement. Benson Phillips was the leader and driving force of the group called the Mission Band (not musical.) They visited Baptist Churches and sought to set the young people afire for the Lord and to bring in a rededication to Christ among the church members.

James Barber, who had read the book, The Normal Christian Life by Watchman Nee, received a call from a brother who attended Witness Lee’s Tyler Conference. He urged James to come to Tyler to hear from a co-worker of Watchman Nee.

James went to hear Brother Lee and afterwards decided to give up his career in the Southern Baptist denomination. Upon his return to the college, he collected many of the young people to whom he ministered and shared with them what he had heard. The message he heard from Brother Lee was regarding the personal and practical experience of Christ and the oneness of the Body of Christ

THE EARLY FOCUS

For the next ten years, Witness Lee focused on these matters—the practical experience of Christ, the practice of oneness in the Body of Christ, and the building up of the local expression of the Body of Christ. Many, including myself found in Witness Lee’s ministry a key to unlock our experience of Christ in a consistent daily way. The help we received on the parts of man, the indwelling anointing, maintaining a good and healthy conscience and practical daily sanctification produced transformed lives and rapid growth in grace. There was continual criticism and opposition from religious figures, but friends and family gave many positive assessments of the changed lives they witnessed - changes which reflected Christ.

Witness Lee’s ministry on the Oneness of the Body of Christ flew in the face of the common practice of the day. He urged all believers to receive one another in Christ and to lay

aside any and all non-essentials which could cause division. He urged us to seek out our brothers and sisters and if we found any group of believers who desired to simply gather in the Lord's name and receive all whom the Lord had received, then we should strive to join with them and not to contend for our own work or meeting. Whenever we happened to meet another Christian, we sought to give and receive Christ without any agenda of recruiting them for our gathering. Witness Lee on many occasions declared that we could not be the only Christians who desired to meet in the Lord's name alone.

The practical local church was often referred to as "an expression of the Body of Christ." This term was used so much that often members would refer to churches in various places as "the expression in that city." During one conference, this term was used quite often and once Witness Lee made the comment, "But what is the expression? The expression of the local church should be Christ." That little comment made a deep impression on me. We were not seeking to develop and spread a type of Christian work or style of meeting. Our mission was to spread the wonderful expression of Jesus Christ regardless of local particulars.

BEGINNING IN WACO TEXAS

Actively Seeking Other Believers

In September, 1965, I began meeting with the church in Waco, Texas, where Benson Phillips was in leadership. The church there began in the fall of 1964 on a park bench. There were three saints, Herman Massey, Kathleen Corley and Barbara Kratzer. Benson Phillips moved there in the spring of 1965. Don Looper left his position in the Southern Baptist denomination in the summer of 1965 and joined the Waco Church along with his fiancée, Judy Heathcote.

In Waco, we attended many a free group and small peculiar meeting looking for someone with whom we could join. In 1969, we moved to Houston, Texas and there also, Benson Phillips was very conscientious in carrying out Witness Lee's fellowship to seek out Christian groups with whom we might join. For example, in the fall of 1969, we came into contact with a Pentecostal group called "The Gospel Assembly." Some of us from the church in Houston went faithfully at least once a week for many weeks. Finally, on one Sunday evening when Benson, his wife Barbara and I were there, Barbara and I urged Benson to give up the endeavor with this group. They were non-denominational but were exclusive, truly only receiving believers who had spoken in tongues. Benson was very reluctant as he truly wanted to follow Witness Lee's admonition regarding being open to join with other believers.

EARLY DAYS IN THE CHURCH IN LOS ANGELES

Bi-annual conferences and trainings were a time of rich fellowship and mutual encouragement in the local churches. The saints in Los Angeles had a tremendous supply of grace to host complete strangers for days and weeks at a time. I was impressed over and over again with the phenomenon of finding myself in a room full of strangers who all happened to know Christ. After an hour or two of flowing fellowship, you felt as if you knew these people better than many of your relatives or old school mates. Many visitors to the conferences and trainings testified that the fellowship in the hospitality was even better and more enlightening than the messages in the conference meetings.

By 1968 the rich flow of spiritual life was so prevailing that meetings would start 45-60 minutes before the scheduled time. Many of the members of the church in LA lived within a 10-15 minute walk of the Elden Avenue Hall. Often a few saints would begin walking to the hall and as they walked they would begin to sing and praise the Lord. As they came closer to the hall, others would join the group and enter into the singing and praising. As you came closer to the hall, more small groups would appear and join the singing and praising. It was as if the tribes of Israel were going up to Jerusalem for a feast and began to sing the Psalms of Assent. The meeting had in fact started in the homes, continued on the way and culminated at the hall far before the scheduled time.

After the meetings, restaurants and homes would be full of brothers and sisters sharing and building up one another. Occasionally the fellowship would go on into the night or become a little too loud making a joyful noise, and the police were called. But the police would tell the complainers that the church people had turned a crime infested downtown neighborhood into one of the most peaceful districts in LA. Thus, they were not going to interfere with them. On the other hand the older saints did urge the young people to respect the neighbors, and usually all was well.

THE EXPERIENCE OF CHRIST AS LIFE AND THE PRACTICAL PRIESTHOOD

During 1965-66, Witness Lee gave many messages from 1 Peter 2: 1-11, John chapter 6, Jeremiah 15:16 and other passages regarding taking daily spiritual nourishment. He gave many inspiring messages regarding the Manna, of the wilderness time, as a type of Christ as the heavenly food for us to enjoy daily. He also stressed the passage in 1 John regarding the anointing and gave messages on the type of the anointing oil in Exodus. This laid a foundation

for many to begin every day with the Lord in the Word of God and to care for the Lord's speaking during the day, especially through their conscience. I personally was deeply impressed with the godly behavior and sincere humility of Christ that was so evident with most of the brothers and sisters who gathered in the church in LA as well as other places. Many of the testimonies given and encouraged were regarding the Lord's work of practical righteousness, keeping a clear conscience and making things right with anyone who had been slighted or wronged.

Another emphasis was on the functioning of the members of the Body of Christ as revealed in Romans chapter twelve and 1 Corinthians chapter fourteen. On Tuesday night, they held what was known as a practical or practice meeting. In Waco, Texas, where I met, we practiced praying and testifying each Tuesday. We said, since it was just practice, we need not worry about making mistakes. This was a help to get out of our self-consciousness. But in spite of much emphasis, there was little break-through. We had more liberty than most Christian meetings or services, but still about 10-15% of the attendance did nearly all of the praying, testifying or hymn calling.

PRAY-READING

In 1966, Witness Lee gave a series of messages on the Priesthood as shown in type in the writings of Moses. These were classics that caused a year-long seeking and striving to see the Lord produce a practical functioning Priesthood among us that would include all the members. Eventually this ministry began to be realized. A key on the practical side was the development of "Pray-reading" and "Calling on the Name of the Lord."

In those early years, Witness Lee was committed to letting the Spirit lead the churches and not to impose any personal preferences. Thus many peculiar practices as well as peculiar persons were tolerated. On many occasions, Witness Lee spoke against setting up standards of behavior or dress codes; or methods of praying and testifying.

Pray-reading was a great help to many as it allowed them to drop trying to be "spiritual" according to some supposed standard. Praying and testifying with the word of God put everyone on a level playing field. Anyone could now have a good time with the Lord in the morning. No more did anyone try to pray as some of the mature ones prayed. Nor was eloquence or a spiritual prayer vocabulary or tone an issue. One could simply pray: "Lord thank you that you are my shepherd." Then repeat, "The Lord is my shepherd." "May I know you as my shepherd today." "Be brother and sister So and So's shepherd today." "I shall not want." "Thank you Lord you

meet all my need.” This type of devotional prayer (not a formula to be repeated in a rote manner) strengthened many of the members. Some found the practice helpful as part of small group fellowship. A passage would be selected by one of the participants. As the pray-reading would proceed, often an excellent devotional message was developed via the contributions of many.

In a short time, this practice became so enlivening that the church in LA changed their Friday night Bible study meeting to a pray-reading meeting. They took a chapter in a New Testament book each week in a sequential way. For example, Philippians would take four weeks to cover. The entire church would pray-read the chapter together. This lasted about 30-45 minutes and then there would be another 45-60 minutes of testimonies and sharing from the chapter. The meeting would conclude with a short summing up by one of the leading brothers. These meetings were extremely lively and dominated by the young people. All found it easy to jump in and pray-read by ones or twos or threes and most found the stage was set for just about anyone to give a short testimony regarding what impressed them from the chapter.

I do not know who coined the phrase “pray-reading.” It was a translation from Chinese regarding a new practice in Taiwan. News came to the ears of the churches in San Francisco and LA regarding a practice in the church in Tainan, Taiwan. The church had internal problems. The elders could not give messages in the meetings without being shouted down. To meet as the church was nearly impossible. The church in Tainan had the practice of gathering several mornings a week for a corporate morning watch. They began out of desperation to read and pray passages of the Bible. They were “pray-reading” the Scripture. A reviving came in and the unity of the church was restored.

When the reports came to the USA, some in San Francisco and LA picked up on this morning watch practice. In these two churches, many practiced a corporate morning watch two or three times a week. In Waco, Texas, the church had two corporate morning watch meetings per week. These times were good but again were dominated by a few more mature and bold saints. No instructions or ministry had ever been given on pray-reading but some on the West Coast began to try to practice what they surmised was happening in Taiwan. There was immediate benefit. This new practice gave many a way to lay hold of the substance of the ministry regarding feeding on the word. Many were freed from self consciousness. The practice was a help to strengthen their daily life and functioning in the church meetings.

Shortly after the beginning of the practice of pray-reading, in 1967, John Ingalls and James Barber went on their first trip for ministering to various local churches. They would make many trips in the future and were a great blessing to the churches they visited. They brought the fellowship on taking the word by means of all prayer. In the recent past, much has been made of

expressions such as “get out of your mind.” It is helpful to consider from where this came. What was the original application? What did it eventually come to mean? Pray-reading has been linked to this expression as an alleged means to control the congregation.

Originally, when we began to attempt to practice meetings according to 1 Corinthians chapter 14, many of the members would find themselves consumed with self-consciousness, worry and fear. Anxiety was written on many faces. To “get out of your mind” was often used to refer to the need to get out of self-consciousness. Another application was regarding the thoughts of a member being occupied with the cares of the day and family life, rather than what was happening in the meeting. I personally have always had to deal with this phenomenon. While someone is reading a passage of scripture or giving a testimony or while we are singing a hymn, I could journey halfway around the world or close three business deals in my mind. While this was going on, who knows what wonderful things of Christ I was missing. Thus, I needed to shut down the wandering thoughts and turn my attention, my mind, to the things of the Spirit and what was happening at that time. A third common application of the term applied to someone who was overly analytical, wanting to know why this or why not that, etc. This is a true problem in almost any human endeavor as well as in spiritual things. Perhaps you have heard the expression “paralysis of analysis.” Too much analysis can stop healthy progress.

CALLING ON THE NAME OF THE LORD

Calling on the Lord” did not originate with Witness Lee. The first person among us to practice calling on the name of the Lord was a sister, Donna Martin of LA. Donna, a local member, was working during the day and attending the training meetings in the evening. Witness Lee did have an unsuspecting hand in her practice.

During an evening training session in Los Angeles in December of 1967, Witness Lee was ministering on the members praying and speaking in the meetings. Suddenly he exclaimed in frustration, all can at least say four words. Then, (he later reported), I asked myself, “what four words?” Then he replied to the congregation, “Well at least you can say ‘O Lord, Amen, Hallelujah’”. Then without any further explanation of the four words, he hurried on with his message. The full time attendees had a double session in the mornings and a time of review in the afternoons in small groups.

Witness Lee continued the following morning with two messages and did not mention the four words. When the full-time attendees returned that afternoon, Donna Martin, who usually only attended the evening session during the week, was able to leave her work and join the

review session. I was in the group that Donna Martin joined. She was glowing and overflowing with the joy of the Lord. She shared with us how she had applied Brother Lee's fellowship. We had no idea of what she was speaking. She demonstrated how she had been calling out to the Lord while she typed. It was a spark that lit all our spirits. One by one we too called out with a true heart to the Lord. Then we began to call together. There were several groups besides ours gathered in the hall. Suddenly others joined in the calling.

That night the hall was a buzz. Testimonies about calling on the Lord came in rapid fire succession. When Lee and the elders joined the meeting, we were already launched into the third heaven. He inquired, "What is happening?" Someone related how we were enjoying the four words. Not until he was reminded did he realize what four words he had mentioned, as he witnessed the power of "O Lord, Amen, and Hallelujah".

At that time, Witness Lee did not relate this practice to the verses in Acts regarding Saul having authority to persecute "those who called on the Lord's Name." He was not aware of Genesis 4:26, "then men begin to call on the name of the Lord." Immediately after the initial experience, I began to search the Scriptures for confirmation. I introduced most of the verses from the Bible to the Local Church for "calling on the Name of the Lord." I wrote the first booklet "Calling on the Name of the Lord." Benson Phillips urged me to submit it to the Stream publisher and allow Witness Lee's name to be attached. It meant nothing to me to be recognized and it was fine with me if that was required for something to be published. Others researched the Greek word "call" and found it to definitely mean to utter or even to cry out. (Many years later, I was studying Greek at the University of North Carolina. UNC, at the time, had the number two rated classics department in the USA. I asked my professor regarding the Greek word *kaleo* as used in the New Testament. He said it could refer to a student calling out to someone across the quad. He was quite surprised to discover such a practice in the New Testament.)

While "pray-reading" may easily be implied from the Bible as a way to apply various passages, "Calling on the Name of the Lord," is clearly taught and demonstrated in Scripture. Of course, "calling on the Lord" is not merely restricted to reciting, "O Lord, Amen, and Hallelujah." It means to invoke the Lord Jesus. I will share more on this teaching later in the book.

A TIME OF RAPID GROWTH

These two devotional practices were critical for the door of the local churches to be open to the flood of new believers about to descend upon them. The ground was now level. No one

had a superior spiritual status. Any believer could pray-read, call on the Lord and sing from the rapidly-expanding new song book. If anyone desired to regulate or control the brothers and sisters, they would find no tolerance. A common retort was “Don’t be so religious.” Song after song was written about the freedom in Christ enjoyed in the church life.

Starting in 1968, fresh new believers began to appear in Elden Hall, LA. Then there was a flood. During the months of September – October, 1969, 200 new members were added to the church in LA. Within a little over a year there was a six-fold increase. I wish I had time and the resources to compile a record of the wonderful works of God during those days. Miraculous stories of the Lord arranging “Divine Appointment” resulting in marvelous salvations or encounters of members with other seeking Christians were a staple of the day. By 1972, the church in LA had exploded into four halls and had over a thousand burning saints.

Similar blessings were pouring out on the churches in Texas, the Midwest, the Northwest and East Coast. For a while a publication came out called “News of the Churches.” Each month we eagerly waited for the latest copy. There we would read and rejoice over the wonderful works of God.

I attended my first conference and full time training in 1966. There were about 140, including the local members at the conference and exactly 70 full time at the training. By 1976, nearly four thousand attended the Hebrews Training in Anaheim, CA.

TEXAS EXPERIENCE AND THE FIRST MIGRATION

To understand the history and current condition of the Local Church movement, it is vital to know the history and character of many individuals. What has transpired has much to do with not only Witness Lee, but also with many others.

Benson Phillips

In Texas, some of the most influential past and current leaders were developed. The most prominent was Benson Phillips, the current president of LSM and the de facto leader of the (so called) “Blending Brothers,” the world-wide leaders of the Local Churches. Benson is the strongest and most determined individual I have known in any endeavor. At 23, shortly after his marriage, he developed Multiple Sclerosis. Yet during my 23 year history with him, he never complained or shrank back from a full involvement in the church life or Christian work we were endeavoring to carry out. I

cannot count the number of times he laid aside his own comfort and needs to serve the need of the church or some needy member.

As previously mentioned, Benson attended and graduated from Wayland Baptist College. He became the most prominent student leader and headed up a group called the "Mission Band." During my direct time with Benson from 1965-1986, he was always concerned for the spreading of the gospel. Whether the location was Waco, Houston or Dallas, he constantly was seeking to help the church and the members to be fruitful in the gospel and in the care for new believers.

In Waco, there were six junior high teachers among us, two at each of three junior high schools. In the fall of 1968, Benson shared with us all that he wanted to share the gospel with the students. We prayed furiously for a few weeks that the Lord would open the doors. The teachers at each school approached the principals and were given permission to invite the students to a Christian meeting for junior highers on a Saturday night if the teachers first contacted the parents. More prayer was offered to open the parents. Each Saturday evening we gathered with students from the three junior highs. Before the year was over about 50 junior highers were saved and given a good start in their Christian life.

Benson was not an eloquent speaker but was very effective in the gospel whether it was in a group setting or one on one. Once in Dallas, at a Saturday night gospel dinner, I witnessed the power and anointing that a simple plain spoken man could possess. Our original hall in Dallas would hold about 150 for a dinner. We sat in circles while we ate and visited and fellowshiped with one another and with any guests in the circle. This night the hall was packed. There were about 15 guests. I was sitting in a circle with a post doctoral student at the University of Texas at Dallas. She was a very refined lady from Hong Kong. There was a business man of about 40 also in my circle. Benson was sharing the gospel message that evening. He was speaking on the vanity of life. He began to say over and over that such and such is nothing without Christ. Suddenly the lady stood up and began to argue with Benson. She shouted, "What about love?" Benson declared that love without Christ is nothing. She would then shout what about this and that. Benson would reply that without Christ it was nothing. Then the business man stood up and began to berate Benson. Benson never backed down but continued to declare Christ and that the need of every man is Christ. The man became so disruptive the ushers had to remove him. Eventually things settled down and Benson asked all who

wanted to receive the Lord to stand up. Seven young men in their 20s stood up and all became vital members of the church.

On another occasion, we were in Austin visiting. Austin was a new church. In those days, often a few car loads would travel from the more established churches to help a newer church over a weekend. The church in Austin was very burdened for the gospel. Austin, in those days, was like Berkeley, California - full of hippies and street people - as well as the thousands of college students at the University of Texas. On this occasion, we held a gospel dinner. The brothers and sisters spent the afternoon inviting all they could find. The rented store front was packed wall to wall. After the meal, we had the gospel message. I had been asked to share. I was a little overwhelmed at the group. As I began to proclaim Christ and His salvation, a young man rose to his feet and declared he had tried what I was sharing and it did not work. Then another and another spoke out against the gospel. I was very confused and turned to Benson for direction. He leaped to his feet and shouted that those people had spoken lies from the Devil to keep you from receiving the wonderful salvation of Christ. After a few more words, he asked for those who wanted to receive the Lord to stand. People stood up all around the room. It was truly a glorious night of many genuine salvations.

I learned so much from those two times. When the Devil is throwing up a lot of dust, it probably means the Lord has prepared some for the gospel. Consider Paul and Silas' experience in Philippi.

During the first ten years in the church life, Benson's maturity and leadership were vital to the churches in the Texas region and a great help to me even though he was only four years older than I.

Another practice he had was to never be discouraged or downhearted. When we were in Waco, we would from time to time have a stretch of poor meetings or be in a down time. Benson told me he would tell the Devil that he may have won this round but he would not win the war. I have applied that principle over and over both corporately and individually. Maybe my flesh, a body of sin, won out in a particular incident. But I would declare that God has His plan and calling and has prepared good works for me to walk in and that this is my destiny, not this temporary defeat or setback. I see things in the same way for people in my life and for the saints with whom I now gather.

Benson was very generous with his money and his possessions and his time. He never shirked from pulling his share of the load and then some. This was in spite of his physical limitations. At one point in the first few months in Houston, a brother learned of

some box cars that needed to be loaded. Benson heard of it and realized this was an opportunity to raise money for some of the needy among us. We had just moved there from the small churches in Waco, Lubbock and Denton. Benson had no thought that any of the money would go into his pocket. Only Ray Graver could keep up with him as he labored furiously night after night loading the box cars. We were paid by the box car not by the hour. He became the acknowledged leader among us because of his character and ability to inspire others by his example.

Benson shared with me that when he was in high school he had received a special call from the Lord. One evening he went out to a golf course and lay on a green as he prayed. The Lord showed him that he would head a world-wide religious organization. He also shared with me that he had had a desire to reform the Southern Baptist Convention. When he read the The Normal Christian Church Life by Watchman Nee and then heard Witness Lee, he was clear that this was what his call was all about. He also shared that he used to lay out two maps on a table, one of the USA and one of the world. He would lay his finger on each state one by one and pray “Lord use me in California, use me in Oregon”, etc. Then he would turn to the world map and put his finger on each country and pray “Lord use me in France,” etc.

Benson had an intensity that far exceeded any of the other brothers. He was always considering what was needed to establish and to build up the local churches.

OTHER EARLY BROTHERS AND SISTERS

When I was new to the local churches, the character, sincerity and love for Jesus Christ among the participants deeply impressed me. Not only was Benson an exceptional young Christian, but so were nearly all. During my first year in Waco, I met many of the young brothers and sisters from Wayland Baptist College who had served with Benson in the “Mission Band.” They were all outstanding. Tim House, who had been president of the Baptist Student Union, would impress you with the presence of Christ without his saying a word. I felt like meeting him was like meeting Nathaniel, a man in whom was no guile. Bud and Judy Philley, Bobby Allen, Ben and Anita McPherson, Rodney Philips and Jim and Sharon Coleman were all truly men and women of God, and their devotion and faithful service was vital to the churches in Texas going from less than 30 in 1965 to over 1,500 by the mid-late 70s.

HERMAN MASSEY

I was most familiar with the brothers and sisters who came from Waco and Baylor University. Herman Massey was the most sold out burning young believer I had ever met. I met him when I was a freshman at Baylor. I was standing with an acquaintance overlooking an intramural sports field as Herman ran by. The acquaintance pointed out Herman and warned me that he would surely bring up Christ if I was in his presence. Sure enough, not long after, I was hanging out in the dorm room of some buddies when Herman stopped by to see one of them. Within five minutes he was speaking of Christ and our need for him. I was convicted by his presence as well as his speaking, and I wanted to be a Christian like him. Herman was the key person in bringing Witness Lee and the local church to Waco.

JAMES BARBER

In 1964, Herman, his fiancée Kathleen Corley, and his twin brother Thurman were in the Washington D.C. area for a summer of Navigator training. In the spring of 1964, James Barber had returned from the Witness Lee conference in Tyler, Texas. He and about 20 students at Wayland Baptist College had left the Southern Baptist denomination and began to seek the Lord and to meet in the Lord's name as simply the church in Plainview. Witness Lee accepted an invitation to meet with James Barber and the seeking saints in Plainview.

MORE ON BENSON PHILLIPS

Witness Lee traveled from Plainview to Dallas. Phillips was now a student at the Southwestern Baptist Seminary in Fort Worth. Benson Phillips' friends from Wayland Baptist College urged him to hear Witness Lee when he came to Dallas. In Dallas, Benson Phillips heard Witness Lee speak for the first time. He then began to study the book The Normal Christian Church Life by Watchman Nee and the New Testament regarding the proper practical practice of the church. Phillips made the decision to spend the summer with the fledgling local church in Los Angeles. His fiancée, Barbara Kratzer,

a student a Baylor, joined him in Los Angeles. Barbara knew Herman and Kathleen and knew they were in the D.C. area.

Witness Lee was traveling that spring and summer. After the Tyler conference, Gene Edwards began to follow Witness Lee on his speaking trips. Lee traveled to D.C. to speak. Edwards went to the Navigator facilities and met Herman and invited him to come and hear a co-worker of Watchman Nee. Herman and Kathleen went and met Lee. They were very impressed. When Lee returned to Los Angeles, he gave a report and mentioned he had met two young people from Texas in D.C. and though he could not remember their names he asked for prayer for them. Barbara believed it must be Herman and Kathleen. She called them and invited them to cut short the Navigator training and come to LA. Herman asked the Navigator leaders for permission and they granted it. On their last night he and Kathleen sang a duet. They sang "He's in My Heart." According to reports the Lord's presence was very strong. They were to fly out the next morning as there were only two open seats for three weeks. The reservation was first class and way beyond their means to pay. Herman put all his and Kathleen's money in a sock and prayed. The next day he was waiting in the airport lobby hoping someone would walk up with the money. No one came. The last call was made. Herman ran to the counter and emptied the sock. The agent counted the money. It was the exact amount needed. Herman thinks that probably while he slept some of the other young navigator trainees slipped into his room and put the money in the sock. At any rate, they made it for four weeks in the church in LA and time with Witness Lee. That fall the church in Waco began on a park bench with three, Herman, Kathleen and Barbara (Benson's wife to be).

DON LOOPER

Don Looper was a close friend of Herman. Don and I were both freshmen together and both scholarship baseball players. Male college athletes are probably the most self-centered men on earth. I had heard of Don Looper within a day of arriving at Baylor and of what a great player he was. When I met him, I could not believe that this was Don Looper the great ballplayer. He was the godliest man I had ever met. He was truly a great baseball player and would have had an excellent chance of being in the Major Leagues. Yet, he cared nothing for that. He loved Christ with all his heart and only wanted to please and serve Him. He was extremely kind and gracious to all. No one

would guess who he was without being informed of his reputation. Wherever Don went the Spirit of God worked in the hearts of men.

He and two others began to pray in his dorm room. Within a few weeks, twenty athletes - baseball, football and basketball - began to come for prayer. I saw men pray and open to the Lord that I would never have suspected of having any interest in the things of God. Several of the ball players were saved through Don. By the end of his sophomore year he was holding frequent week-end revivals and was the youth pastor of a Waco Baptist Church of about 500. Baylor students began to flock to this church which was on the far side of Waco from the University. When he was scheduled to speak on a Sunday night, word would begin to spread around the campus that "Looper was preaching." Men and women would make plans to go, not just to hear Don but to meet God.

Don began to fellowship with Herman concerning what Herman was seeing regarding the church and the experience of Christ as Life. (Don introduced me to Ian Thomas and to the teaching of Christ as Life.) In the spring of 1965, Witness Lee came to Waco for a week. Don attended every meeting and had much private fellowship with Lee. That summer Don visited the church in LA. When he returned, Don resigned from the Baptist ministry and enrolled in the school of education. Immediately the negative rumors began to fly. I was told that Don had left the ministry and was meeting with Herman. The report was very negative. I knew the tale bearer and I knew Herman and Don. I made a note to myself that I must learn more about this.

DON RUTLEDGE

I will share a little about my own history. I was far below the spiritual stature of any of the Texas brothers and sisters I have mentioned. I was actually just a peasant from rural Eastern Arkansas. I managed to escape through sports. My only ambition was to be a professional baseball player. Somehow I had become the best ballplayer in Lee County, Arkansas. Nobody passes through Lee County. You have to be going there to find it. We used to say that it was not the end of the world but you could see it from there. But in spite of the isolation, I was being pursued by eight different major league teams. This was before the baseball professional draft, and a young man could sign with the highest bidder. Before age 21, only the approval of a parent was required. I had no intention of going to college but of only going pro. The Lord rescued me one May evening. A scout

from the San Francisco Giants was pursuing me. His name was Skinny Walker. He had been a major league pitcher in the 1930s. He came to one of our games and as soon as he arrived he found my dad and asked him to go and to get something to eat. He asked my father, "Mr. Rutledge, why do you think I am doing this job? It is because it is all I can do. I have no education and only know baseball. If you really love your son you will insist he go to college. I will help him get a scholarship, but if he has to play pro ball I will sign him." Three months later I found myself at Baylor University. Many times I have thanked the Lord for sending Skinny Walker to Lee County.

I grew up a cultural Christian. We went to church just about every Sunday and I tried to be honest and not curse. At sixteen, I was saved. The sky had never been so blue nor had the birds sung so sweetly. The Bible became so living and was the most interesting book. My view of people changed. I found a surprising love in my heart for others. Being a forgiven man is a relief beyond imagination. I loved the Lord and believed He had arranged for me to go to college and that there I would find His purpose for me. And that is what happened. The men I have mentioned set me on the course of seeking to know Him and the power of His resurrection. I have failed many times and those around me have failed at times, but the Lord has never failed. I have absolutely no complaints toward the Lord. Rather, I can only tell of the joy of knowing Christ and must declare: Great is His faithfulness and His mercies are new every morning.

On the third Sunday in September, 1965, I attended my first meeting. There were only eight young people there. As I listened to the prayers, I realized that Jesus Christ was surely there. Benson Phillips shared on the two trees in Genesis. The Lord spoke through Benson's word. I saw why my efforts to do good had not resulted in a victorious Christian life and that Christ Himself could supply not only salvation but daily salvation by His life.

My personal theme verses had been Isa 40:30-31: "Though youths grow weary and tired, and vigorous young men stumble badly, yet those who wait for the LORD will gain new strength. They will mount up with wings like eagles. They will run and not get tired. They will walk and not become weary." During the meeting, I had such an overwhelming sensation that I was about to realize these verses in my Christian Life.

After the meeting, Thurman Massey (Herman's twin brother) asked if I knew I had a human spirit. Suddenly I knew. Yes, I had found the Lord within me on occasion and realized that must surely be my human spirit. From that day to the present, I can

testify that I have had daily fellowship with the Lord and have come to appreciate the indwelling Christ beyond anything I could have imagined.

During the spring of 1966, when Don Looper and I also to some extent were being harassed for being in the church, being able to deliberately, on purpose, draw grace and mercy from the indwelling Christ made all the difference. Perhaps my next book will be a compilation of experiences of discerning soul from spirit and of putting to death the practices of the body of sin by the spirit. Of whatever I learned in the local church, the practice of walking and living by the spirit is among the top.

MORE ON DON LOOPER

Don Looper was a real star on the Baylor campus. He was the ideal young Baptist minister. He was an extremely attractive person. He was very intelligent and personable, as well as being a great athlete and full of sincere love for the Lord, for His people and for mankind. The Lord had gifted him in understanding the scriptures and in the ability to teach the Word of God. The religious leaders of the university, (Baylor was sponsored by the Texas Baptist Convention which covered 75% of the University's expenses), began to oppose him and to defame him. I and two other ball players had begun to meet with the church in Waco. Thus, the religious leaders feared that Looper would lead many away from the Baptist denomination and harm their position. It was similar to what took place in John 11:48, where the Jewish leaders feared that due to the resurrection of Lazarus, they may lose their position. At one point, the baseball coach, who was not a Baptist, felt he had to give an ultimatum that we either had to leave our "cult" or we were off the team and would lose our scholarship. For me that would be devastating. I would not be able to afford to stay in school and by then to not be in college probably meant a fast trip to Viet Nam.

The coach withdrew his threat and told us that he did not want to make us martyrs but that after the season we must resolve the problem. Don Looper was harassed by the coaches and began the season struggling to perform up to his previous level. I also was struggling. The entire team was playing poorly but Don was singled out to be the scapegoat. During the last third of the season Don and I caught fire. Neither of us had ever played so well before and the team tied for the Southwest Conference championship. This was the first conference championship of any kind that Baylor had won or tied for since 1921. Looper received no credit and was quietly removed from the team after the

season. I was named all conference and told by the coach that he would assure me I would be drafted high in the newly instituted major league draft if I would drop the church. I was given until the end of the summer to make a decision. I knew my baseball playing days were over and the Lord found a way for me to complete my education.

Don Looper married a wonderful young Christian woman, Judy Heathcote. They cared for me in many ways. After I lost my scholarship, I had to carry a full load and work full time. I had a full time job loading trucks from 1:00 PM until 9:30 PM. Everyday Don would faithfully drive me to work and pick me up at 10 PM as I had no car. Many times Judy asked me to a meal. Often that was my only meal for the day.

When they married, I was invited to their wedding. There, I realized for the first time that they were many grades above me in the social order, yet they treated me as their dear brother in Christ and were always ready to serve me and any of the brothers and sisters. Not only Don, but all the brothers and sisters in Waco had a heart to assist the poorer saints rather than care for their own lives.

During the summer of 1966, I was working a construction job building an eleven story high rise. One day I was smashed against the building by a building crane. My right calf muscle was smashed. This occurred late on a Friday afternoon. I was taken to the hospital and told it would be some time before I could walk. The next day Herman Massey came to my apartment. He shared that he had thirty minutes for lunch from his job and felt to pray for my healing. He knelt to pray and as he prayed I felt an incredible heat moving up and down my leg. Another brother, Willard Cox, who lived with me at the time then also prayed. While he prayed, Herman got up and went back to work. When the other brother stopped praying, I stood up and could walk. The next day I played tennis with a friend and was back at work on Monday. Were the bosses at the site shocked when I showed up!

SHERYL RUTLEDGE

During those days the Lord answered one of my most earnest prayers. Shortly after I was saved, I became very concerned regarding whom I would marry. A college athlete does attract girls. I did not trust any woman who was thus interested in me. I knew that my Christian life could rise or fall based on whom I married.

When I attended my first meeting of the church in Waco, there was a young woman, Sheryl Hays, from Shreveport, Louisiana. I spoke to her only briefly. The next

morning as I was praying, the Lord showed me that Sheryl Hays would be my wife. I kept this to myself and waited to see what the Lord would do. The next summer, 1966, she moved to Waco and brought six young women with her. Sheryl was an elementary teacher and she had saved most of her money that year. She and one other were the only two of the seven women who had a car. Her car was always available to them and she supported several of them until they could secure jobs. As I observed her, I knew she was the kind of Christian who could lift me up. That summer and early fall we got to know each other through the church activities. In September, I shared with her that I had strong feelings for her. She had never considered me but within just a few days the Lord put a love in her heart for me. She has been such a helpmeet for me that words fail. We have been married for 40 years and still love each other deeply and continue to walk with the Lord step for step.

Our number in Waco grew to 25 not counting any of the junior highers. But four of the brothers were drafted and all were in Viet Nam at the same time. We prayed much that the Lord would preserve them physically and also emotionally. They all returned safe after a year.

FELLOWSHIP WITH LUBBOCK AND DENTON

Because Plainview was such a tiny town of about 10,000, the brothers and sisters had moved to Lubbock in 1966-67. About every two months we would meet with the church in Plainview and then later Lubbock. Those were always blessed times. It seemed the Lord's presence and speaking was much more prevailing whenever we met with the saints from Lubbock. I assumed that it was due to their close walk with Christ.

GEORGE WHITINGTON

In 1967, our close fellowship expanded to a new city, Denton, Texas. Thurman Massey returned to North Texas State University, in Denton, to complete his degree. There he met a young former Assembly of God minister, George Whittington. George had begun a home meeting near the campus and he and his wife Cleo were true shepherds. George was very gifted academically and a man full of the Spirit. Yet he was very humble. He was 27 years old. That made him quite our senior. Though he was older and gifted he never assumed any position and was an immediate supply to us and to

whomever he contacted. We began to visit him and Thurman and those with them, and they began to visit us in Waco.

The Lord was with us and greatly encouraged us. Again, we in Waco assumed that the rich enjoyment of Christ during these times was due to the supply from the church in Denton. Later as we compared notes we learned that those from Lubbock and Denton thought it was the brothers and sisters from Waco that were the reason for the abundance of Christ in our corporate gatherings. Altogether there were about 70 young adults who gathered in these three small churches.

During the summer of 1969, there was a seismic shift for the churches in Texas. This shift would affect many throughout the country. A good number of saints from Texas had gone to LA for a conference and training with Witness Lee. While there, some of them began to talk about moving together. This was a completely new thought to everyone.

On a Monday evening toward the end of that time, Herman Massey and Ben McPherson arranged for Witness Lee to visit with them in the furnished apartment that they had rented for two months. After they ate, about 20 of the Texas saints began to gather at the apartment. Some of the brothers shared with Brother Lee the feeling that some had concerning moving together. He was quite shocked that we would consider such a thing. During the fellowship, the Lord's presence was very prevailing. We all, including Brother Lee, realized we had touched the Lord's heart. Then we began to consider where. Those from Lubbock said no to Lubbock. Those from Denton and Waco did not feel their city was the place. Suddenly, Judy Looper mentioned Houston. Everyone's spirit jumped. Witness Lee proposed Dallas. No one had a witness that the place was Dallas. By 9:00 PM we were all settled. We would move to Houston.

But what about those back in Waco, etc? Phone calls were made. The Lord had already gone ahead. As soon as each brother and sister heard the fellowship, all had a strong amen within. Not one had any contrary feelings. It was really quite amazing.

(There are many events and persons who are, no doubt, also worthy of inclusion, but time and space do not permit this account to be all-inclusive. I will leave the task of writing a history that would address issues or persons I omit to others.)

The next chapter will tell of the experience in Houston and the coming migrations to places such as Seattle, Chicago, Akron, Atlanta, and Dallas.