

FACTS CONCERNING THREE LIBEL LAWSUITS

Many saints do not know the story behind the libel lawsuits filed in 1980 and 2001, and some may be troubled because they do not know the facts surrounding those actions. The following factual account provides a very broad historical sketch of what occurred based on publicly available documents, including those from legal proceedings.

In 1967 Campus Crusade for Christ (which is Cru today) sent 600 staff and students for a weeklong campaign at UC-Berkeley, the epicenter of campus radicalism. The "Berkeley blitz" brought a good number to the Lord, but Crusade staff members were disappointed with its lack of long-term impact. Two men in particular came to different conclusions as to why and embarked on radically divergent paths. Jon Braun, Crusade's national field coordinator, had read *The Normal Christian Church Life* by Watchman Nee, as had many staff and students in Crusade. He and several regional directors concluded that the problem was that Crusade was not the church, the building up of which is the goal of the New Testament. They left Crusade to try to establish house churches. Jack Sparks, a former statistics professor, decided that to reach radicals he would have to dress like them, talk like them, and act like them. He moved to Berkeley, grew a beard, donned overalls, became "Daddy Jack," and started the Christian World Liberation Front (CWLF).

Braun had come to know Gene Edwards, a freelancing evangelist who provided automated mailing equipment to Crusade. At Braun's suggestion Edwards went to hear Witness Lee speak in Los Angeles, after which Edwards began to meet in the local churches. He moved to Los Angeles in 1965 but left in 1969 after his ambition for leadership was not realized. In Santa Barbara he tried to implement his own idea of what the church should be with a group of former Crusade members. When Braun hit a rough patch in his life, he went to Santa Barbara and joined Edwards. Over time, the ex-Crusade members gravitated towards Braun, who was a good speaker and a charismatic leader. A conflict erupted between Edwards and Braun, resulting in mutual recriminations and an acrimonious split. Even though Braun knew that Witness Lee disapproved of Edwards' work, Braun blamed Watchman Nee and Witness Lee for Edwards' treatment of him, which Braun considered to be abusive.

In the early 1970s, Braun, Sparks, and the former regional directors began to chart a new course. They concocted a peculiar mixture of authoritarian practices that they extrapolated from Shepherding Movement teachings with elements of evangelicalism and Eastern Orthodoxy. They founded the New Covenant Apostolic Order (NCAO) with themselves as the leading apostles (and later the Evangelical Orthodox Church (EOC) with themselves as bishops). Sparks, whose CWLF was losing members to the church in Berkeley, enlisted Braun to make a tape recording of comments that attacked the teaching of Witness Lee. Sparks adapted Braun's comments to use in CWLF meetings to discredit Witness Lee and the local churches. In 1975, Sparks gave a young CWLF member, Alan Wallerstedt, the task of writing a monograph criticizing the teaching of Witness Lee. Wallerstedt incorporated Braun's comments nearly verbatim without checking whether they were accurate or balanced.

When Thomas Nelson, a Christian publisher, hired NCAO president Peter Gillquist in 1976 as its new books editor, the first book he commissioned was *The Mindbenders*, by Jack Sparks. "The Local Church" chapter in it was not written by Sparks but by Braun, who based it primarily on his experience with Gene Edwards. Meanwhile, the Spiritual Counterfeits Project (SCP), a CWLF spinoff, was developing Wallerstedt's manuscript into a second book, *The God-Men*. SCP's author never checked the accuracy or balance of Wallerstedt's manuscript. Both books accused Witness Lee and the local churches not only of theological error but also of consequential antisocial practices and behaviors. Such accusations incited kidnapping and assaults of local church members and in repressive countries were used to justify imprisonments and even executions. After the tragedy at Jonestown, Guyana, involving the mass death of members of the People's Temple led by Jim Jones, second editions of both books expanded upon the earlier accusations with the goal of further damaging the local churches and the ministry of Witness Lee. The books' inflammatory misrepresentations were repeated in nearly three hundred other publications. Almost four hundred letters of protest from local churches and their members received no substantive response. After much prayer, study of biblical precedent, and fellowship, libel lawsuits were filed against both books.

By that time the countercult had become a cottage industry with many self-appointed experts who had little background and narrow understandings of biblical truths. Some, desiring greater credibility, sought advanced

degrees through degree mills. One such person was John Weldon, who “earned” two master’s and two doctoral degrees, all in fields related to religion, in the span of a little over two years through one institution run by an Australian archaeologist with whom Weldon had written a sensationalistic book on UFOs. In the process Weldon wrote a sprawling manuscript, which he called an encyclopedia, that included a chapter on the local churches drawn primarily from *The God-Men*. His manuscript included ten pages of quotes from *The God-Men* and many other references to it. Weldon, who performed work for SCP, shared his manuscript with them.

As *The Mindbenders* case progressed, Thomas Nelson’s president learned that the NCAO leaders had used Gillquist’s position as new books editor to push their private agenda to damage the local churches and the ministry of Witness Lee. It also came to light that the publisher had received strong objections to the inclusion of the local churches before and after the book was published from third parties and even from among the publisher’s own staff. In April 1983 Thomas Nelson and Jon Braun, Jack Sparks, and their fellow NCAO “apostles” signed an agreement that stipulated both a cash settlement to offset some expenses of the litigation and publication of a statement of apology and retraction in major newspapers and Christian periodicals across the country.

Much evidence and testimony were gathered in *The God-Men* case. The day that the parties were to appear to schedule a trial, SCP announced to the court that they had just declared a preemptive bankruptcy. The case proceeded against the other two parties—the principal author of the second edition and the publisher of a German translation of that edition. The author had fled to Europe, and neither party appeared in court. The evidence previously gathered, along with testimony from five highly qualified experts, was presented in a five-day hearing before a judge. After the hearing was complete, the judge issued a written ruling in which he found *The God-Men* and its German translation to be “in all major respects false, defamatory and unprivileged, and, therefore, libelous.” He awarded the plaintiffs \$11.9 million dollars, which at the time was the largest award ever in a libel case, though in the end the plaintiffs received less than 0.3% of that amount.

In 1988 John Ankerberg, a Christian talk show host, hired Weldon as a researcher. Pieces of Weldon’s “encyclopedia” were carved off for use in many books, most published by Harvest House Publishers. Though its founder, Robert Hawkins, Sr., declined to publish the encyclopedia in the mid-1980s, a decade later his son and successor decided to proceed. By then Weldon had left Ankerberg’s employ and was in Hawaii. Harvest House wanted most chapters shortened significantly, so Weldon sent his typist instructions to find the “most damaging quote,” “the most damning citation,” and “to concentrate on ... the founder or leader’s demonization.” Based on these instructions, the typist shortened the chapter on the local churches by 98%. What was left was a gross mischaracterization of our teaching and practice. Weldon incorporated the kind of sensationalistic claims his books were known for in new introductory material and an appendix. In them he characterized the groups in the book—*Encyclopedia of Cults and New Religions*—as not only heretical doctrinally but also sociologically pathological and even criminal.

Representatives of Living Stream Ministry (which was named in the book), the local churches, and the co-workers of Brother Lee wrote several times to the authors and to Harvest House pointing out some of the book’s errors, Weldon’s association with SCP, and how the book falsely attributed accusations of gross misconduct and crimes to the local churches. Each letter sought a time to sit down for Christian fellowship. While they were waiting for a response, Harvest House filed suit in Oregon to get a declaratory judgment that the book was not libelous. They characterized the requests for Christian fellowship as harassment. The court quickly dismissed the case. On the last day of 2001, which was the last day known to be within the statute of limitations, LSM and over ninety local churches filed suit.

Throughout the court proceedings, the authors and publisher admitted that the local churches did not practice the heinous things described in the book. The district court consistently ruled in the favor of plaintiffs, consisting of LSM and over ninety local churches. Before the case could go to trial, however, Harvest House and its authors took the case to the Court of Appeals. After a thirty-minute hearing the court ruled that the book was protected from libel litigation because of its theological content, despite clear language in the book stating that its concerns were with criminal and antisocial practices as well as beliefs and an admission by the defendants’ lead attorney that the book’s criticisms encompassed conduct as well as teaching. The court did not rule that the book was in any way true or accurate.