

# The “PHOENIX ACCORD” An Historic Document – Presentation & Commentary

Most Christian groups experience profound adjustments following the departure of their founder. This is true even in the Lord’s recovery over the centuries. The passing of Martin Luther, Count Zinzendorf and John N. Darby are examples in Church history. In our own case, the passing of Brother Witness Lee in June, 1997 ushered in a new era in the Lord’s recovery. Respected brothers and senior co-workers began to grapple with the question of how the Lord’s recovery and the local churches should proceed. At some future date, scholars may analyze this transition. Although any such examination is premature, we wish to present and comment upon one document -- The (so-called) “Phoenix Accord” -- which should form part of any future study.

## Background

In February, 2003 fourteen senior co-workers and respected brothers from among the local churches in North America came together in Phoenix, AZ. Five of these brothers were from the “Great Lakes area” –Bill Barker and Jim Reetzke from Chicago, IL and Titus Chu, Paul Neider and James Yang from Cleveland, OH. Nine brothers were from the South West (Texas and S. California) -- Minoru Chen, Ron Kangas, James Lee, Albert Lim, Ed Marks, Benson Phillips, Dick Taylor, Dan Towle and Andrew Yu.

This was a North American gathering. The Far East, Europe, Africa and S. America were not represented at this gathering. Some brothers who might be expected to attend such an assembly were absent for reasons unknown to us – Francis Ball (S. Cal.), Benjamin Chen (NYC) and Silas Wu (Newton, MA) for example.

The weekend meeting took place from Friday, February 7 to Lord’s day, February 9, 2003. Reports indicate that much discussion took place on topics ranging from “the ministry” and “oneness” to publications. Divergent viewpoints were expressed. Nevertheless, a document was produced, the “Phoenix Accord,” expressing points upon which all 14 brothers were in unanimity. It was “signed<sup>1</sup>” by the participants. This significant document is reproduced below:

## The Document:

### THE “PHOENIX ACCORD” February, 2003

----- Document begins here -----

**We, the brothers who attended the fellowship in Phoenix, Arizona on February 7-9, 2003, want to express some principles and applications that came out of our fellowship. We consider these as working guidelines for our living, service, and fellowship. These are humbly presented to the other saints for the help they can render. We have no intention for this to be taken as a final pronouncement nor as something to bind others.**

## Principles

1. We honor and exalt the Lord Jesus Christ as the Head of the Body.
2. We honor and regard the Bible as the unique divine revelation and foundation for all teaching and practice.
3. We acknowledge and respect all the local churches as expressions of the one Body.
4. We love the Lord, we love the Lord’s recovery and we love one another as brothers in Christ.
5. Our top priority is to keep the oneness of the Spirit.
6. In the Lord’s recovery we hold to the speciality and generality of the church life without expecting uniformity.

7. We acknowledge Watchman Nee and Witness Lee as our spiritual fathers in the Lord whose ministries constitute the basis for the teaching and leading in the recovery today.
8. We should respect, honor, and appreciate one another's portion and function in the New Testament ministry.

### **Applications**

1. In whatever fellowship we have, we should exercise forbearance, love, meekness, and forgiveness as we work through problems that confront us.
2. In all of our speaking-privately, publicly, and globally-we should refrain from indictments and innuendos.
3. At all times we should find ways to keep open lines of fellowship among the brothers.
4. We should let go of the negative and, in turn, emphasize the positive.
5. Direct communication is imperative in all our relationships.
6. We should look for resolution of problems through constant, personal, face-to-face fellowship.
7. We should try not to misunderstand one another but to understand by giving each other the benefit of the doubt.
8. We should endeavor to help the saints and those with whom we serve to keep the oneness of the Spirit and to speak well of all the churches, saints, elders, and co-workers.

<b>Bill Barker,</b>	<b>Minoru Chen,</b>	<b>Titus Chu,</b>	<b>Ron Kangas,</b>
<b>James Lee,</b>	<b>Albert Lim,</b>	<b>Ed Marks,</b>	<b>Paul Neider,</b>
<b>Benson Phillips,</b>	<b>Jim Reetzke,</b>	<b>Dick Taylor,</b>	<b>Dan Towle,</b>
<b>James Yang,</b>	<b>Andrew Yu</b>		

----- Document ends here -----

### **Commentary**

This writer was not present at the sessions in Phoenix<sup>2</sup>. Nevertheless, I would like to offer some personal observations based upon this document.

#### **The “Principle” --- “Spiritual Children” of Watchman Nee and Witness Lee**

Item #7 under “Principles” states: “*We acknowledge Watchman Nee and Witness Lee as our spiritual fathers in the Lord whose ministries constitute the basis for the teaching and leading in the recovery today.*”

This principle, accepted by all 14 senior brothers, has implications for our current situation. The brothers all recognize Brothers Nee and Lee as their “*spiritual fathers in the Lord.*” They acknowledge themselves and each other as “spiritual children,” in relation to these brothers, belonging to the “next generation.”

#### **‘Fatherhood’ is not Bequeathed or Inherited**

Perhaps we can press this “family analogy” further. The passing of the “father” does not bequeath the “fatherhood” to any sub-set of children. No group of sons can declare to the other children, “*We have the fatherhood now. Previously you listened to our father. Now you must listen to us!*” It doesn't work that way. Fatherhood is neither bequeathed nor inherited. Members of the next generation are siblings to each other. No doubt some are older, others younger. But none succeeds to the position of “father” in relation to the rest.

Why do I say this? Because it seems (to me at least) that the situation just described corresponds to the present state of affairs among senior co-workers in the Lord's recovery. A group of senior brothers – “the blended co-workers” – claims they are the continuation of Brother Lee's ministry. However, this entity includes some, **but not all**, of the senior brothers. The “blended co-workers” are a sub-group of the senior brothers in the Lord's recovery. Despite public utterances referring to “*an open group of the being-blended brothers*,” the fact remains that **not all** the 14 brothers present in Phoenix are included among the “blended co-workers.”

The “blended co-workers” reason along the following lines – Some people talk about a successor to Brother Lee. There is no succession. Nevertheless there is the continuation of Brother Lee's ministry. Words to this effect were spoken in the 2005 LSM Winter Training<sup>3</sup>, “*In every generation God only has one wise master-builder who oversees (supervises) God's building work over the entire globe. That's just the way it is. In our generation it was Brother Lee. **There is no successor to Brother Lee, but there is an open group of the 'being-blended brothers' who are continuing Brother Lee's ministry.***”<sup>4</sup> Regardless of the terms employed – whether successors, inheritors or continuation— the fact remains that the “blended co-workers” claim the position to do what Brother Lee did. In their view, Brother Lee, as the wise master builder, supervising God's building work on the entire globe. Today, the “blended co-workers” assume the same role. Moreover, since Brother Lee exercised oversight regarding the work of the co-workers, they presume to do the same. The implicit assumption appears to be: “whatever Brother Lee could do, we can also do.”

### **Has the “Principle” of “Spiritual Children” been Applied?**

This appears to be the logic underlying the “blended co-workers” request to one senior brother – “*we appeal to you to stop your publications in all languages.*”<sup>5</sup> The “blended co-workers” rationale is as follows. After the turmoil in the late 1980's Brother Lee was asked how certain gifted brothers involved could have been kept, along with their work. Brother Lee replied that the only way would have been for these brothers to stop their own work and join Brother Lee in his work with no special region or task of their own. They should have simply done the work assigned to them by Brother Lee. The “blended co-workers” then apply this advice to their brother, substituting themselves for Brother Lee<sup>5</sup>: “*In our present case, it would mean that you would join yourself and those co-workers loyal to you to the blending co-workers, with the continuation of your previous work left to their coordinated oversight.*” Clearly this directive rests upon the supposition “what Brother Lee could do, we can also do.” But is this presumption valid?

It seems to me this assumption is invalidated by the declaration, contained in the “Phoenix Accord,” by all the brothers involved that “*We acknowledge Watchman Nee and Witness Lee as our spiritual fathers in the Lord...*” By this pronouncement all 14 brothers recognize that they (and each other) are “spiritual children” of Brother Lee. They all acknowledge belonging to the “next generation” as spiritual descendents of Brothers Nee and Lee. Their relationship to one another differs significantly from Brother Lee's relationship to them. None has inherited the position of “father,” in relation to the others. Therefore none can presume to possess the right, incumbent with that position, to direct the others. None has the right to claim, “what Brother Lee could do, we can also do.” **None is the “acting Brother Lee!”** The Lord told His disciples, “*you are all brothers.*” (Matt. 23:8). The apostle Paul had the position to direct his younger co-workers. However, after his departure, Timothy could not declare to Titus and the others, “I am ‘Today's Paul,’ now you must obey me!”

## Were the “Applications” in the “Phoenix Accord” Applied?

The “Applications” section of the “Phoenix Accord” includes the “guidelines”:

#2 ***“In all of our speaking- privately, publicly, and globally- we should refrain from indictments and innuendos.”***

#5 ***“Direct communication is imperative in all our relationships.”***

#6 ***“We should look for resolution of problems through constant, personal, face-to-face fellowship.”***

One “problem” which existed at the time of the Phoenix gathering and since is the matter of “one publication.” One senior brother from Chicago expressed his personal convictions against “one publication,” at Phoenix. Based upon the “guidelines” enunciated above, one would expect the “blended co-workers” to seek a “*resolution of [the “one publication” problem] through constant, personal, face-to-face fellowship.*” One would also expect them also to “*refrain from indictments and innuendos*” in their “*speaking- privately, publicly, and globally.*” This, we would expect should include messages given from the podium and published materials. Unfortunately, this has not occurred.

## “One Publication” & “the Freedom of Speech”

Less than two years after the “Phoenix Accord,” at the 2004 LSM Winter Training, one of the “blended co-workers” addressed the matter of publications. He said<sup>6</sup>, “*Whenever we have many different publication works, it means that there are many trumpet sounds. These many different trumpet sounds cause the army of God to be confused. It is not a matter of right or wrong, biblical or non-biblical...*” He then went on to criticize the idea that this is a matter of the freedom of speech, saying<sup>7</sup> “*One strong characteristic of this country is **the freedom of speech**, which means the freedom of opinion ...However, the Lord’s Body is the place with the least freedom.*”

We are aware that “freedom of speech” was strongly argued in co-workers’ meetings in Phoenix, by a senior and respected brother from Chicago who disagreed with “one publication.” In December, 2003, this brother wrote a short article surveying the impact of the printing press on God’s recovery since the Reformation. He concluded<sup>8</sup> “*Since the time of Luther, mass reproduction of literature and its widespread distribution have worked together for the recovery of the truth and the advance of God’s economy.*” The role of the “freedom of speech” in the US constitution was specifically mentioned. This particular point was publicly attacked by the “blended co-workers” at the 2004 LSM Winter Training, saying, “***the freedom of speech, which means the freedom of opinion ...However, the Lord’s Body is the place with the least freedom.***” This was subsequently published in ***The Ministry*** magazine. In this instance the “blended co-workers” used the “power of the podium and the printing press” to promote their own “one publication” view. Simultaneously, they depreciated the view expressed by one of the senior brothers present at the Phoenix gathering. May we ask, in this case did the “blended co-workers” apply the statement endorsed in Phoenix: “***In all of our speaking-privately, publicly, and globally-we should refrain from indictments and innuendos***”? May we inquire, is it ethical for the “blended co-workers” to publicly attack views which were expressed, in confidence, in a “private” co-workers’ meeting in Phoenix? Had the “blended co-worker” who gave this message previously engaged in the “***direct communication [which] is imperative in all our relationships***”? Had the “blended co-workers “***look[ed] for resolution of [these] problems through constant, personal, face-to-face fellowship [with this brother]***”? In this case, how did the “blended co-workers” apply the guidelines, they endorsed in Phoenix?

***A brother sets up his own publishing house. This will cause trouble. This is like Saul***

The question of publications was also addressed at the LSM Elders' Training in Anaheim CA. April, 2005. This was just over 3 years after the Phoenix gathering. On that occasion, another "blended co-worker" said<sup>9</sup> *"To do a work within the work, to carry out another ministry within the one ministry, is a very serious matter. Suppose a brother decides to set up his own publishing house in order to send out his messages to the recovery and to develop his own ministry. This will cause trouble. This is like Saul setting up a monument for himself. This is serious."* The brother then went on to claim *"Please understand that this is simply an illustration and is not directed at anyone in particular."* May we ask, do the "blended co-workers" think the saints are that naïve? They know how to "connect the dots." This "illustration," stigmatizing others as "Sauls," engaged in building up their own kingdom, potentially applies to only a few people in the recovery. It was surely applied by some saints to those particular brothers. Isn't this word, spoken from the podium, both an "indictment" and an "innuendo"? Yet this was uttered by one who agreed in the "Phoenix Accord" to *"refrain from indictments and innuendos."* Again, may we ask, did this "blended co-worker" previously engage in the *"direct communication [which] is imperative in all our relationships"*? Had he *"look[ed] for resolution of [these] problems through constant, personal, face-to-face fellowship"* with the brothers to whom his "illustration" might be applied? Again, were the "Applications" of the "Phoenix Accord" applied?

**When was the "Phoenix Accord" annulled?**

Perhaps some will respond that the "Phoenix Accord" was abrogated some time after the document was circulated. If so, when was it annulled? Moreover, may we ask, was it cancelled by mutual consent of all the parties? Or was it suspended unilaterally by one sub-group of the signatories? In this latter case, were all parties notified that its principles and applications would no longer be observed? Certainly, it appears unethical for some parties to abrogate an agreement which others are seeking to uphold, without even notifying them. Moreover, don't many of the "applications" simply express ethical principles taught in the Scriptures. Surely, according to Matthew 18, the first step in dealing with any offense is personal, face-to-face contact seeking resolution (Matt. 18:15)? But, isn't that exactly the Phoenix statement, *"We should look for resolution of problems through constant, personal, face-to-face fellowship"*? If the "Applications" in the "Phoenix Accord" embody the basic tenants of Christian ethical behavior, **how can they be cancelled, annulled or abrogated?** Shouldn't these guidelines be practiced among us regardless of the "Phoenix Accord"? Moreover, the "blended co-workers" appeal to Matthew 18 as the norm in their litigation with Harvest House publishers saying<sup>10</sup>, *"Living Stream Ministry and the local churches responded in a Christian manner based on the biblical admonition put forth in Matthew 18, requesting a face-to-face meeting to resolve the problem. This offer was repeated to the authors and publisher at least six times in writing and twice in telephone messages over an eleven-month period."* If the *"biblical admonition put forth in Matthew 18"* is the basis for LSM's appeal to Harvest House, shouldn't it also be the norm for relations between senior brothers in the Lord's recovery? Shouldn't this be the case independent of the "Phoenix Accord"?

Nigel Tomes,

April 2006

## NOTES:

1. The document did not bear the actual signatures of the brothers. Nevertheless, (according to our understanding) the brothers agreed that their names would appear on the document which was circulated informally. Hence, in this case we have actual names, rather than a nebulous group designation, such as the “blended co-workers” or the “S. California co-workers.”
2. The present writer was not present and had not expectation of participating. I reject the (potential) accusation that the comments which follow are motivated by ambition, “sour grapes” or any other motive. The author’s non-participation perhaps affords a degree of objectivity not possessed by the 14 participants.
3. What follows is based upon the writer’s notes from the spoken message. Much of this does not appear in the published message. The printed version contains the statements: “[Paul] was the wise master builder overseeing the work in the Gentile world, which was most of the inhabited earth. Anyone who would do the work of the divine building today must be one with the wise master builder. ... In principle, in the Lord’s recovery our brother Lee was the wise master builder. If we want to do the work of building, we need to be one with him.” *The Ministry*, vol. 10, No. 1, (Jan./Feb. 2006) p. 213. It was in this context the above was spoken.
4. Presumably, the reference to “*an open group of the ‘being-blended brothers’*” is an attempt to deflect criticism that “the blended co-workers” is perceived as a closed group of brothers who have achieved the state where they are already “blended.”
5. These quotes are from unpublished documents. Perhaps a precedent is provided by *Publication Work in the Lord’s Recovery*, which quotes from unpublished documents: “*Brother Lee said, “...I am the continuation of Brother Nee; I would like to have a continuation of me, and this needs a corporation...The Living Stream corporation will continue this ministry.” (from unpublished notes ...)*” “Blended Co-workers,” *Publication Work in the Lord’s Recovery, LSM, 30 June, 2005, p. 5*
6. *The Ministry*, vol. 9, No. 1, Jan. 2005, p. 186
7. *The Ministry*, vol. 9, No. 1, Jan. 2005, p. 186
8. James Reetzke, “*The Impact of the Printing Press*” in *Fellowship Journal*, vol. 2, No. 12 (December, 2003). Also reprinted as *Printing and God’s Economy – Johann Gutenberg to the Present*, in “*God’s Economy through History*” series p. 10 (no date). Brother Jim Reetzke’s essay was an historical survey of the impact of the printing press on God’s move. In contrast to the “blended co-workers,” he did **not** address the current issue of “one publication.”
9. *The Ministry*, vol. 9, No. 6, June 2005, p. 152
10. [www.contendingforthefaith.com](http://www.contendingforthefaith.com)