

## **Report for Gospel for Asia Board Concerning Accusations**

Fulfilling this assignment to examine and judge the claims presented by J. D. Smith, a former employee at GFA, became the most difficult assignment I have ever had, especially in light of my nearly 30 years on the Board of GFA. Having this long relationship creates an automatic sympathetic bias and makes honest investigation much more difficult. However, I determined to fulfill the assignment in the most complete and ethical way that I could. For that reason, there will be much discussion and presentation of evidence including personal observation and theology, a theology and approach for which I was invited to be on the Board. I present it now to GFA leadership and the Board and leave it for your judgment.

**PREAMBLE:** The years of my relationship with GFA have been joyous years. Upon every visit to the headquarters buildings in Carrollton, TX, the workers surrounded me with welcome, love, servanthood and respect. During the years of relationship, I have not missed a single Board meeting, and from the reports given at the meetings, have returned home rejoicing at God's goodness. I have cherished the friendship of K. P. Yohannan and his family as well as the other leaders.

I have actively defended GFA through the years from predatory activists and untruthful former workers. I am in full agreement with the basic theology of GFA and its goals of evangelism. Forgive the preponderance of the "I's" in this writing, but it is necessary for you to understand my heart, and, thus, the bias and difficulty of this examination. Let us begin.

Here is my approach:

### **Questions:**

1. Is there independent evidence that the accusations might be true?
2. Do the plaintiffs have a standing from which to speak?
3. Can any complaints be totally dismissed because of untruthfulness?
4. If there are arguments from both sides, can an element of truth still be gained?

### **Here are the areas of complaint presented in the originating documents:**

1. Requirement of absolute submission and obedience without questioning to GFA leadership and without resorting to personal prayer.
2. The practice of shunning for perceived or suspected lack of submission and abuse of workers in conjunction with shunning.
3. Misrepresentation of the use of contributions.
4. Developing a cult or cultish mentality.
5. Withholding the truth about organizational and hierarchical practices at the headquarters of GFA/Believers Church in India.

In spite of the threats, accusations and manipulateness (as I viewed it) of J. D. Smith, which, at the outset, caused me to resist any acceptance of his views and sources, I determined to be an honest investigator and realize, if the accounts were true, it just might take such an aggressive personality to bring necessary information to our attention.

Criticism and disagreement from both sides about this report are expected and I accept that without defensiveness. When it comes to certain observations and personal opinions, whether agreement and consensus are reached or not, I long for a thorough

and definitive discussion.

In reading the individual letters included in J. D. Smith's original and secondary report, several things seemed apparent to me:

1. These letters did not seem to be vindictive in every case. Most letters were well written and thoughtful.
2. The writers maintained, by and large, a love and respect for the goals and activities of GFA.
3. The most frequent thread running through the letters was a hurt produced by the teaching and practice of GFA leaders of requiring submission and obedience to the leadership without question. This requirement included statements similar to this: "If we tell you to do it, you do not need to pray about it."

## **POINT #1 - Absolute Obedience**

Here are my findings relative to the question of obedience/submission as expressed in point #1: *Requirement of absolute submission and obedience without questioning to GFA leadership.*

**A.** This complaint appears to be true and is the main source of the problem. If this were to be settled, we would be almost finished with the problem.

**B.** The evidence for this is overwhelming. First there was tacit admission that this is true and the defense was not to refute the charge but to cast doubt on the claimant's truthfulness or motive.

**C.** In a book by K. P. entitled "*Guiding Principles of Believers Church*," and under a page titled "Loyalty," he writes "What is loyalty? One aspect is obedience. If I am loyal, then as long as my leaders do not ask me to do anything that against God's Word, I will do whatever they ask without grumbling and murmuring. I will not betray the team, the organization, or the leadership even if my personal reputation is on the line. Loyalty is an absolutely essential part of God's plan because the chain of command He has set up to fulfill His plan on earth is sacred."

**D.** In K. P.'s book, "*Touching Godliness*," an excellent book, written entirely to promote and prove submission as the basis for Christian life, I quote this, "Our submission to authority rests on faith. Likewise, our rebellion stems from a lack of faith."

Everything needs definition and who the authority is and what rebellion means can become a slippery slope.

Unfortunately, the obvious catch in all this is that whatever the leaders tell you to do is God's word (so you must submit) and there is no need for you to pray about it (because that is rebellion).

If our leadership is to be by example, then the example the students or workers see is "lording it over."

Jesus demolished worldly designed leadership masquerading as God's authority with these words from Matthew 20:25b-28 *You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to be great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave—just as the Son of Man did not come to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.* (emphasis is mine.)

The Truth of Jesus offers freedom. Jesus never demanded though he was the

ultimate authority. The common people, who heard him gladly, would not have done so had Jesus demanded submission. They heard a better story: “The Truth shall set you free.” “Whom the Son sets free shall be free indeed.”

At one point, when some close to Jesus had left, Jesus asks the apostles, “Will you leave me also?” They were not threatened or commanded. They were free.

A major problem of establishing any sort of structure that promotes a system of absolute authority is that it always ends up forcing you to do what you don’t want to do—the very same thing demons do.

## Point #2 Shunning

However you define shunning--isolating, ignoring, quarantining--this appears to have actually happened, often without explanation, in order to keep “poison” from other workers. In some cases, this kept people from the only fellowship they had. Along with required obedience without questioning or praying, this was a great source of pain for some and fueled some complaints we have facing us.

In no way does this mean there were no reasons for discipline or dismissal of individuals, but there were families involved and much confusion. Jesus authorizes this, but only under specific circumstances and with due process, in Matthew 18:15-17:

*If your brother sins against you, go and show him his fault just between the two of you. If he listens to you, you have won your brother over.*

*But if he will not listen, take one or two others along, so that every matter may be established by the testimony of two or three witnesses.*

*If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, treat him as you would a pagan or a tax collector.*

**K. P. claims that GFA is not a church, which, one could understand, frees it from obeying Biblical positions.**

I know how shunning works in hierarchical organizations because I have been the object of shunning in such a situation. After working for four years in the headquarters of a denomination creating a youth magazine that won frequent awards even “magazine of the year” in Christian circles and providing some new programming and a new name for the youth organization that is used to this day, the top leaders informed me, without any discussion that the magazine must now be completely changed from what had made it great. This was a direct violation of my agreement with them when I was brought on staff. Knowing that these were requirements beyond those agreement and my skills, I gave them a three-month notice, because it would take three months to find someone with the skills to produce youth publications.

From that point on, though I was a favorite for college groups whom I had helped form, when they asked to have me speak at their conferences, they were told that they could not have me. When they asked why, they were told, “We can’t tell you.” All of this with no discussion and with no charges against me. I was in good standing but shunned. So I know that shunning can be subtle and denied and devastating.

## Point #3 Misrepresentation of the Use of Contributions

This is not true. A case could be made for use of contributions for more than what was stated, but not wrongly used. Plus, K. P. says that 60% of the needs are now met from the field—they are that close to independence—so some things are domestically funded that may appear to those at a distance as misuse. I considered this a speculative claim with no true basis. (This now appears to be true.)

## Point #4 Cultism

Developing a cult or cultish mentality is a claim for which evidence exists.

**A. Obedience and shunning** are tactics that every cult uses.

**B. Isolation.** When KP decided to build the compound in Wills Point, Texas, the reasoning was not that the Carrollton, Texas location was inadequate, but that it would save money (from \$1 million to \$3 million a year) and, when I asked if disrupting the lives of the workers was a consideration, the answer was “We will find out who is committed.” Those were the only two reasons I heard given.

**C. Spurious demands.** Head covering is expected of all the girls though “it is not required.” It is taught by KP because he firmly believes it, although the 1 Corinthians 11 recording of Paul makes it clear that a girl’s hair is her covering and that, if anyone is contentious, “We have no such custom.” You could expect any girl who chooses not to add a cover to be under heavy pressure and have to constantly explain her choice—a great difficulty when the interpretation is questionable.

**D. Praying is discouraged** about decisions concerning their personal life. A common cult tactic. This is ironic since prayer is such an emphasis.

**E. Secrecy.** These expectations are never listed in the advertising. Nor was the secrecy in which the compounds and practices in India ever admitted or explained.

## Point #5 Withholding Information About Organizational Structure

Adopting an Eastern Orthodox organizational style and clothing style without letting it be known in North America is true and represents a vulnerability that may be costly.

**A.** KP has taken upon himself the title of “Metropolitan,” a title in Orthodox circles equivalent to “Pope” in Catholic Churches.

**B.** Dramatic robes and long white cassocks are worn at church events by bishops and others in authority. The most dramatic robes are used in ordinations, they explain. The explanations for the most ornate robes and authority symbols is that these are necessary for ordinations so the government will recognize them as such, since to claim ordination falsely will subject you to jail. I have no evidence that this ornateness is necessary to validate ordination.

**C.** Two visits ago to India, as I was brought to the new headquarters, the first

image I saw was a large stone “cathedral” building of British/European design. I was in shock for two reasons: First, the cost of something like that, copied from a failed system, could have sponsored many evangelists. My thought was, “How many souls did this cost us?” Second, why had I not heard of this before? Also, during a break, I wandered to a side room of the platform and read a book outlining service orders more from episcopal type churches than from evangelical ones. These old orders may provide a spectacle but they are borrowed from failed and failing systems.

D. In my last visit, on a Sunday, I was carefully kept from observing the service. It was a troubling moment.

E. Though admitting the Orthodox style and system, KP maintains that the theology remains evangelical.

**This concludes my observations and comments but leaves me with certain significant questions:**

1. Why did all of this come as a surprise to me, a 30-year board member?
2. How can we apologize to our accusers without being self-serving?
3. Can anything be successfully changed to make our training systems free from traditions and more like the example and teaching of Jesus?
4. If no changes or apologies are made, how can we handle (or can we) the public relations disaster of the revelation of the Orthodox system to our largely evangelical supporters?
5. What is our role as a board?
6. Were any of these actions of GFA (KP) necessary for the success of GFA?
7. Were we not succeeding before the imposition of new systems?
8. Are there any surprises yet awaiting us?

Sincerely and Painfully Submitted,  
Gayle D. Erwin