

WATCHMAN NEE (1903 -1972) A BIOGRAPHICAL STUDY

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Watchman Nee is considered one of the most important indigenous church leaders and thinkers in the history of Chinese Christianity. There are few leaders in the history of Chinese Christianity whose influence is as prevalent as Watchman Nee's.

Nee produced more than 40 volumes of devotional, sermonic as well as theological works. His writings were translated into many Eastern languages such as, Japanese, Korean, Indonesian, Tagalog as well as Western languages, such as English, French and Spanish. His books continue to influence many Christian groups ranging from charismatic renewal groups to mainline churches all over the world.

He is the founder of the "Little Flock", the largest Protestant Christian denomination in China at the time of the Communist regime in 1949. The "Little Flock" began in 1923 with a few members and in less than 20 years grew to become more than 700 congregations with 70,000 members. At that time some estimated that out of the 700,000-1,000,000 member Protestant church community in China, the "Little Flock" had 100,000 members. Regardless of the numbers, this 20-year-old Christian movement proved to itself to be a tremendous achievement. Even under Communist oppression and persecution during the 50's and 60's, the "Little Flock" continued to grow. And today, the movement is still active throughout China. Moreover, the distinctive "Little Flock" theology, practice and spirituality is rooted in many Chinese Christian circles whether in China or overseas.

BRIEF BACKGROUND OF COLONIAL CHRISTIANITY IN CHINA

By the 1800's, China was once again closed to Christianity. During the early decades of Protestant missions in China, Western colonialism and imperialism coincided with the work of the gospel. Christianity was identified with opium due to the fact that many missionaries traveled along the coast on opium carrying merchant ships.

As western aggression increased, anti-foreign sentiments rose. Nationalistic sentiments surfaced to form a series of anti-imperial aggression movements. By the 1920s, even though the Protestant Church had missionary growth, the anti-foreign and anti-Christian disposition was aroused by the

growing Communist movement. It is during this time that the rise of indigenous church movements in China was prominent. This movement was an expression of a nationalistic yearning to be independent from Western missionary domination. The time until 1939 was significant for the development of higher education, church organization and for the rise and increasing importance of Chinese leaders. Up until the victory of the Communist in 1949 Christianity seemed to be increasingly influential.

Subsequently, Christian churches and institutions were taken over by the state. Churches were forcibly closed and Christians were forced to conform to the requirements and teachings of Communism. Those who disobeyed the 'Communist doctrines' were persecuted or fled. It is with this political and social background that shaped Watchman Nee's life, ministry and martyrdom.

LIFE OF WATCHMAN NEE

Watchman Nee was born into a family with a Christian heritage. His grandfather, U Cheng Nee, was the one of the first ordained Chinese ministers of the Congregational missions in the Fukien Province of China. Nee was the third child of nine, but the first male child. Since Chinese tradition favors sons, relatives despised families with no male children. When Nee's mother was expecting the third child she prayed to God earnestly asking for a son and dedicated this third child to God similar to Hannah in 1 Samuel 1:1-20. God heard her prayer. On November 4, 1903, Nee Shu-Tsu (later known as Watchman Nee) was born. Nee later changed his name to "Duo Sheng" ("Watchman" in English) meaning, "sound of the gong," or a watchman to raise the people of God for service.

Throughout his youth, Nee attended schools founded by the Church Missionary Society in Fuzhou, China. And in all areas he showed extraordinary intellectual promise. When he was 18 years of age, Nee dedicated his life to Christ through the preaching of Miss Dora Yu, an ex-medical student, who forfeited a lucrative occupation and dedicated her life to the preaching of the word of Christ. Nee, at that time, knew it was all or nothing. When he was baptized, he declared, "Lord, I leave my world behind. Your cross separates me from it forever, and I have entered into another. I stand where you have placed me in Christ!"¹

Nee and other students who had a common zeal for the spreading of the gospel among the young people in their town and local schools and colleges gathered in prayer and Bible study. They set up their own meetings and engaged

¹ Angus Kinnear, The Story of Watchman Nee, Against the Tide, (Wheaton, Ill., Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., 1978), p.64

in vigorous street evangelism. Between the years 1923-1928, Nee published the magazines *Revival* and *Christian*, as well as the book *The Spiritual Man*. Nee was instrumental in the spiritual revival among students at that time.

FORMATION OF LITTLE FLOCK

In 1928, Nee changed his name to Watchman and settled in Shanghai. During that time, he had a good measure of disdain for denominational churches of that day. In the magazine, *Revival*, he expressed that he believed the church was hindering the purpose of God. According to Nee, many ministries done "for the Lord," "in the name of God," "for the kingdom of God," "for the Church of Christ" were being done in the flesh. People are not seeking for God's will but the will of their own². He was seeking "an answer to the imported problem of denominational divisions whose history and value were, he felt, nearly impossible for a new convert to appreciate. By afflicting the potential Church in China with their sectarian differences, the missions were tending only to divide it."³ In his struggle to find an answer, he returned to what he deemed simple New Testament obedience suggested by the writings of John Nelson Darby and C. A. Coates. He saw that churches in China should be self-governing, self-supporting, and self-propagating. This "three-self" concept was reminiscent of a missions strategy adopted by Henry Venn and Rufus Anderson in the 19th century which later was used by the Chinese Communist Party. It was at this time Nee set up the first independent assembly at Hardoon Road in Shanghai. He was the main speaker at the first Shanghai conference of this new movement, which was later known as the "Little Flock." In 1939, Nee published a hymnal entitled "A Collective Hymnal of the Little Flock". Thus, the movement acquired the name the "Little Flock." Nee and his followers, however, call themselves, "A Local Gathering of Believers in the Lord's Name", or "(City name) Christian Meeting Place." The movement spread throughout China, experiencing genuine revival. By 1936, there were 30 assemblies.

"One of the strengths of Nee's movement was that every believer was an unpaid worker. As believers moved to new communities, their homes became Christian centers."⁴ Each church is an autonomous unit lead by elders. However, Nee also commissioned full-time workers, he called 'apostles', to move about without restraint to evangelize as well as establish new churches. The works of

² Leslie Lyall, *Three of China's Mighty Men*, (Overseas Missionary Fellowship [Great Britain], 1973), Chinese edition, p.34

³ Angus Kinnear, *The Story of Watchman Nee, Against the Tide*, (Wheaton, Ill., Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., 1978), p.112

⁴ Bernard Erling, *The Story of Watchman Nee*, *The Lutheran Quarterly*, p.144

the “apostles,” however, were organized centrally. They were trained, advised, and found financial support by Nee and his associates.

Nee's concept of the "Little Flock" was very much influenced by the writings of the Plymouth Brethren. After the formation of "Little Flock," six London Brethren (exclusive Brethren) representatives from UK, USA and Australia went to Shanghai to meet with Nee. They were impressed with Nee, especially his knowledge of the Scriptures. The London Brethren were considering having Nee's churches in China be a part of their mission church work. However, even for Nee, the London Brethren were too exclusive in their practice of communion fellowship. Thus, in 1935, the London Brethren terminated the fellowship between themselves and the Shanghai brethren.

NEE'S LATER LIFE

As the Chinese civil war continued, Nee's work was affected more and more and in 1942, Nee, together with his brother, a research chemist, established China Biological and Chemical Laboratory (CBC) to support the financial needs of his 'apostles.' The profits of this company were being used to support his work. However, the Shanghai church elders disapproved of Nee's involvement with this company and asked him not to preach in their church. With Nee's involvement, CBC became one of the foremost pharmaceutical importers and manufacturing wholesalers in China. In 1945, nonetheless, Nee began to disengage himself from CBC and later turned the entire CBC enterprise to the church. This action brought prosperity to the church yet later became the subject of criticism by the Communist Party.

On October 1, 1949, the People's Republic of China was established. Despite others' entreaties, Nee and his wife returned again to Shanghai from overseas. Nee wanted to be with his brothers and sisters in Christ. For the first two years of the Communist rule, Nee was still able to do ministry, bringing 3-4,000 people every Sunday, in the Shanghai church. But on April 10, 1952, Nee was arrested. He was accused of espionage, counter-revolutionary activities, financial and even moral irregularities. The indictment running 2,296 pages against Nee was made public in January 1956. Many Little Flock believers were arrested and churches throughout the country were closed by force. The Shanghai assembly was eventually closed and made into a factory.

Nee was sentenced to fifteen years imprisonment, however, he was not released in 1967, when his sentence was complete. It was common for prisoners who were considered 'unreformed' to be given an additional five to seven years of sentencing and on June 1, 1972, soon after he was moved from the Shanghai prison to a rural work camp, Watchman Nee died at age 69.

CONTROVERSIES AND DISCUSSIONS ON HIS THEOLOGY

Although Nee had terminated his formal education around the junior college level, he proved to be a powerful thinker and continued to study all his life. Nee's theology and the development of many of his thoughts were deeply influenced by Miss Margaret E. Barber. Through her, Nee was exposed to western theological formulations and thoughts which help shaped his thinking. Although Nee read and was exposed to a wide variety of western Christian theological formulations, his influences can be summarized as follows:

Mysticism: Nee's mystical influences were from the writings of Madam Jeanne de la Motte Guyon (1648-1717). Nee was deeply influenced by Madam Guyon's search for the "deep union with Christ."⁵

Keswick Theology: Again through Miss Barber, Nee had read widely the writings of the Keswick holiness authors, including Jessie Penn-Lewis, Andrew Murray, Evan Roberts, T. Austin Sparks, F.B. Meyer, Otto Stockmayer, etc. Nee's emphasis on themes such as the crucifixion and his trichotomistic view of man were forcefully expounded in the writings of Jessie Penn-Lewis'⁶.

Brethren Theology: Among the writings of different scholars and authors, the Brethren Scholars' works were the most influential. They include C.A. Coates, John Nelson Darby, George Muller, C.H. Mackintosh, William Kelley, Charles Stanley, George Cutting, etc. In his book, *The Orthodoxy of the Church*, Nee shows his indebtedness to the Brethren Scholars as well as where his system of Theology was formulated from:

They showed us how the blood of the Lord satisfies the righteousness of God; the assurance of salvation; how the weakest believer may be accepted in Christ, just as Christ was accepted; how to believe in the Word of God as the foundation of salvation. Since church history began, there never was a period when the gospel was clearer than in their time. Not only so, it was also they who showed us that the church cannot gain the entire world, that the church was a heavenly calling, and that the church has no

⁵ Jian An Lee, Theological Critique of the Contemporary Chinese Church- A Study of Watchman Nee's Theology (Reformed Institute, Washington D.C., 1998), p7

⁶ Jessie Penn-Lewis, *The Centrality of the Cross* (Dorset, England: The Overcomer Literature Trust, n.d.) and *The Cross of Calvary* (Dorset, England: The Overcomer Literature Trust, n.d.).

worldly hope. It was they who also opened up the prophecies for the first time, causing us to see that the return of the Lord is the hope of the church. It was they who opened the Book of Revelation and the Book of Daniel and showed us the kingdom, the tribulation, the rapture and the bride. Without them, we would have known today a very small percentage of future things. It was also they who showed us what the law of sin is, what it is to be set free, what it is to be crucified with Christ, what it is to be raised with Christ, how to be identified with the Lord through faith and how to be transformed daily by looking unto Him. It was they who showed us the sin of the denominations, the unity of the Body of Christ, and the unity of the Holy Spirit. It was they who showed us the difference between Judaism and the church. In the Roman Catholic Church and the Protestant churches, this difference could not be readily seen, but they made us see it anew. It was also they who showed us the sin of the mediatorial class, how all the children of God are priests, and how all can serve God. It was they who recovered for us the principle of meetings in I Corinthians 14, showing us that prophesying is not one man's business, but the business of two or three, and that prophesying is not based upon ordination, but upon the gift of the Holy Spirit. If we were to enumerate one by one what they recovered, we may as well say that in today's pure Protestant churches there is not one truth that had not recovered or recovered more.⁷

Dispensationalism: Authors who had influenced Nee's dispensational interpretations include G.H. Pember, Robert Govett and D.M. Panton.⁸

Nationalism: The Little Flock movement was started in the midst of China's struggle for full independence. It was a time when anti-foreign and anti-Christian sentiment ran high. The Chinese people had linked Christianity closely to Western imperialism.

Nee was aware of ways in which the Christian missionary movement was compromised by its entanglement with Western imperialism and denominational controversies. He was also keenly aware of the inability of the church in general to satisfy the spiritual need of the people. Against such a background, Nee developed a wholly independent Chinese Christian movement by returning to a more simple, New Testament model of Christianity. Therefore, the movement was the combination of old biblical principles and the new ardent nationalism.

⁷ Watchman Nee, The Orthodoxy of the Church (Los Angeles: The Stream Publishers, 1970), pp. 73-74.

⁸ Jian An Lee, Theological Critique of the Contemporary Chinese Church-A Study of Watchman Nee's Theology (Reformed Institute, Washington D.C., 1998), p.8

STRENGTHS OF HIS THEOLOGY

Christocentric: One of the strong points of Nee's theology is his emphasis on Christ. "Moreover, Nee's emphasis on Christ offers fresh hope, strength and vitality to Chinese Christians who live under difficult circumstances. It continually rejuvenates their strength that they might be able to carry on their Christian responsibility in the midst of a hostile environment."⁹

Sola Scriptura: During the age where the Bible was treated skeptically, Nee's sincere efforts to uphold the reformation principle of Sola Scriptura should be commended.¹⁰

Building up of believers: Nee greatly stressed upon the building up of believers, the training, nurturing and deepening of the Christian's spiritual life. As Stephen Chan wrote, "In my opinion, in the preaching work of my uncle, he stressed upon the building up of believers. His emphasis on training the Christian was equal to his evangelistic efforts. This was what he and his co-workers had brought forth in the revival of the Chinese Church, unlike the characteristics of other revivals. Other churches do not emphasize the nurturing of the believers (whether in truth or the spiritual life of a Christian)."¹¹

The priesthood of all believers: He emphasizes that even though the elders do rule, teach and shepherd the congregation, the ministry of the church is a spiritual coordination of all believers in the Holy Spirit. Nee Writes:

God intended that every Christian should be a "Christian worker,"...Elders are not a group of men who contract to do the church work on behalf of its members; they are only the ones who superintend affairs.¹²

Nee continued:

In the New Testament all the saved ones are priests; therefore, all the saved ones should serve. If in a church only a minority or a part is serving, there is something wrong with that

⁹ Peterus Pamudji, *Little Flock Trilogy: A Critique of Watchman Nee's Principal Thought on Christ, Man and the Church* (Madison, New Jersey, 1985), p. 183

¹⁰ *ibid*, p. 182

¹¹ Stephen C.T. Chan, *My Uncle, Watchman Nee*. Chinese edition. (HongKong: Golden Lampstand Publishing Society Ltd., 1999), p.23

¹² Nee, *The Normal Christian Church Life*, pp. 68-69.

church; it is still weak. Only when all are serving is the church strong.¹³

Finally, Nee said:

To be a Christian is to be a priest. Do not expect anyone to be a priest for you. You yourself are to so function. Since we have no intermediary class among us, no one will substitute himself for you in spiritual things. Let there not be a special class of such workers created in our midst....All will preach the gospel, all will serve God. The more prevailing the priesthood is, the better the church. If the priesthood is not universal, we have failed God; we have not walked uprightly.¹⁴

WEAKNESSES OF HIS THEOLOGY

Anthropology

According to J.A. Lee, an expert in theological structure of Watchman Nee, Nee's theology is systematic, with all aspects, even his unique ecclesiology, centering on his anthropology. If we accept this, then understanding his view of man is critical to understanding his major systemic errors.

Nee is a trichotomist. Throughout his writings, he has categorized man into three parts: body, soul and spirit. To Nee's understanding, the spirit has the highest value, the physical body has the lowest, while the soul is intermediary.

From the aspect of redemption, Nee explains that these three parts (body, soul and spirit) have "functional relationships". Namely, the spirit controls the soul and the soul controls the body. Not only is there a functional relationship among the three, there is also a hierarchical relationship. The spirit is higher than the soul, the soul is higher than the body. From these relationships, Nee determines his doctrines of the Fall, regeneration and sanctification.

According to Nee, God's original intention is for the spirit to control the body, through the soul. However, after the fall of Adam and Eve, this order is reversed. The Fall results in the body controlling man's soul, which in turn controls the spirit. Regeneration for Nee involves the spirit only, not the soul or the body, because "flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit" (John 3:6). Regeneration is thus not the completion of salvation but the beginning.

¹³ Nee, *Further Talks on the Church Life*, p.137.

¹⁴ Nee, *Love One Another*, p. 189.

Nee also developed a theology of the "redemption of the soul", in accordance with Dispensationalism. The redemption of the soul occurs when people "loose their soul" by picking up the cross and suffering for the sake of the Lord. These Christians will be able to rule with Christ in the Millennium. Nee sees that there is a difference between "heaven" and the "kingdom." The redemption of the spirit will guarantee us a position in eternal life in heaven, and the redemption of the soul, by "loosing one's soul" will guarantee us a position in the kingdom in the future. The first depends on faith and the latter depends on our good works.¹⁵

Cosmology

According to Lee, Nee holds to ethicoreligious dualism.¹⁶ Nee polarized the kingdom of God and the world (cosmos). The world and God are in opposition, with the world controlled by Satan. Satan uses all activities, i.e., culture, business, and economy to lure Christians into his world system to be his slaves. Yet because the world is already condemned, Christians must be saved from the world. Thus, in Nee's teachings, Christians should separate from the world, cut off relations with the world. Even though the Christian is the light of the world, this only pertains to sharing the gospel and Christ to the world.

Lee also points out that Nee uses an allegorical exegetical method, which is non-historical. Due to Nee's exegetical method and his premillennial position on eschatology, his theology towards the world and culture was passive, especially during the turbulent time of the twenties in China. Nee was not active in his concerns with the current political and social situation at that time.

In his critique of Nee's cosmology, Lee asserts that Nee's position lacks the awareness of the Christian's cultural mandate to this world. All Christians must sing, at least in spirit, "This is my Father's world." We have the Great Commission as well as the cultural mandate to be actively involved in the world as we are salt and light, protecting and loving the world. We need to remain in contact with our culture and at the same time use the truth of the Bible to enlighten, challenge, and transcend our culture.

Lee points out that Nee's "spiritual man" is not one who is only concerned with the growth of his spirit but also his body; the concern for the whole person. Whether one divides a man into a trichotomy or dichotomy, a man is not complete if he lacks any part of his mind, emotions and thoughts. God does not only save one's spirit but He saves the whole person, including all aspects of a person.

¹⁵ Jian An Lee, *Theological Critique of the Contemporary Chinese Church- A Study of Watchman Nee's Theology* (Reformed Institute, Washington D.C., 1998), p.13

¹⁶ *Ibid*, p.17

Ecclesiology

His teaching on the church is very exclusive. Chan, Nee's nephew, pointed out three major areas:

He considers denominations as sinful, fallen organizations. Nee uses Galatians 5: 19-20, where Paul mentions the acts of sinful nature. He believes that "factions" are the denominations. If denominations are sinful organizations, Christians should come out of these filthy organizations and lead other believers to "come out".¹⁷

Nee believes that the church is established according to its locality. Every epistle in the Bible has addressed the church according to its location. The apostle established elders in each locality. Especially in Revelation, the seven churches mentioned each had its own lampstand; every church is autonomous and financially independent from each other.

Nee taught that the churches in our era have forsaken biblical principles. Therefore, we must come back to the Bible and serve God according to the principles laid out by the apostles. We must serve God "in the name of the Lord" without denominational churches.

In Nee's effort to search for the only possible biblical pattern to establish the church, the "Little Flock" was found. However, Nee's sincere search for the ideal way of establishing churches has not only been divisive, he knowingly or unknowingly created another denomination more restrictive than most.

CONCLUSION

Nee's influence on the Chinese Churches is not limited to Asia. His theological influences are alive and well to this day. No doubt that Nee was truly a dedicated Christian leader who "wanted nothing for himself and everything for his Lord, who sought throughout all his life to be a spiritual man even unto death". Yet, just like any Christian leader, he was not perfect. We should be deeply inspired by his love and devotion for Christ, and at the same time be keenly aware of the aspects of his teachings that are extreme to the point of being erroneous.

As Nee's nephew wrote:

Many spiritual leaders have failed and were weak. However, the Bible was always truthful without covering over the failures of

¹⁷ Stephen C.T. Chan, My Uncle, Watchman Nee. Chinese edition. (Hong Kong: Golden Lampstand Publishing Society Ltd., 1999), p.30

these people whom God used. The failures of Abraham, Moses and Gideon were recorded in the Bible. God did not put these events for us to see how great and successful and worthy of our worship these people were, but to allow us to see His marvelous works manifested through a bunch of useless vessels to accomplish His good will. Likewise, my uncle had failures. Yet those things will not deny the truth of how God has used him mightily. He is among the lowly, he is incomplete, yet he was truly used by God mightily and he was a vessel filled with precious treasure.¹⁸

¹⁸ Stephen C.T. Chan, My Uncle, Watchman Nee. Chinese edition. (HongKong: Golden Lampstand Publishing Society Ltd., 1999), p.83