THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO

“THE SPIRITUAL HUMAN IS DISCERNED BY NO ONE”: AN INTELLECTUAL BIOGRAPHY OF WATCHMAN NEE

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For Laura

我妹子, 我親婦, 你奪了我的心

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Introduction

A network of congregations quietly rings the globe, comprised of Christians meeting in homes and unassuming buildings, which usually bear little resemblance to traditional "churches." A few outward characteristics are obvious. The local gatherings are of varying sizes, from two or three to two or three thousand. Frequently the members share meals together, often before or after services which can be boisterous and participatory. Generally, no pastor, priest, or designated religious officiant presides. As the Spirit leads, different members stand to call hymns, declare verses from the Bible, give personal testimonies, or shout praises to God. But, for all their openness about their beliefs and their tireless attempts at outreach, it can be hard for outsiders to understand who these Christians are. Why do they not join existing Christian denominations? What is the basis for their identity and the institutions they create?

When asked, congregants readily and happily acknowledge their fellowship and unity with other likeminded groups from around the world, but they may seem canny and evasive when asked for the name of their local church or the name of the church network as a whole. An inquirer may be told that the church has no name, that it is simply named with the local city, or that it is the same church to which all Christians belong. A visitor may even be treated to an extemporaneous bible study, explaining the generic naming customs of the church in the New Testament.

All of these individuals and congregations speak of familiar Christian doctrines with a similar accent. From Nigeria to the Philippines, from Canada to Chile, visitors will hear talk of releasing the spirit, denying the self, building up the Body of Christ, and loving Christ as the bridegroom. Furthermore, all of these Christians will also share complex or indirect explanations

for who they are and what they represent. If pressed in the right direction, however, most members will readily acknowledge their indebtedness to and respect for the ministry of "Brother Nee."

As a matter of fact, the ways in which these Christians discuss their cardinal beliefs and the unique practices that embody their faith can largely be traced to the influence and ideas of a single man, Watchman Nee (1903-1972). Nee was an unconventional Christian minister who spent nearly his entire life in China. His prolific writings and church leadership have left an impressive legacy. Nee has millions of followers within China and hundreds of thousands in the rest of the world, putting him in rare company among Chinese thinkers. It is likely that Nee's popularity outside of China is exceeded only by Confucius, Laozi, and Mao Zedong. As a result, secular scholars, Christian admirers, and critics within and outside the church have repeatedly engaged with various aspects of his life and theology. Nevertheless, he remains something of a mysterious figure.

Someone who is interested in the broad outlines of Nee's story can pick up any one of a number of popular biographies, which are generally accurate in recounting the basic facts of Nee's life. Confessional, theological reflections about his adaptations of Christian doctrines are also available, largely in the many unpublished dissertations and theses that deal with his work. Recently, scholars have also begun to pay closer attention to Nee using broader frameworks of research. Historian Lian Xi has emphasized the common elements between modern Chinese Christians, including Nee, and indigenous Chinese religious traditions. In particular, Lian highlights their shared apocalyptic and millenarian themes.[1] Theologian Alexander Chow has

[1] Lian Xi, *Redeemed by Fire: The Rise of Popular Christianity in Modern China*.

suggested that Nee propounded a fundamentalist or legalistic theology, while also reflecting a particularly Chinese interest in the unity between heaven and humanity.[2]

Most scholars, however, have understood Nee to stand almost entirely aloof from larger trends in Chinese society and history. According to historian Daniel Bays, "In 1926-1927, at the height of national political drama in the 'Nationalist revolution', Nee barely paid attention. He was busy refining some of his basic ideas, applying the fruits of extended reading in works of the mystic Jessie Penn-Lewis and, holed up in Shanghai, writing the longest book he ever wrote, *The Spiritual Man*."[3] Similarly, Sinologist and theologian Chloë Starr suggests that Nee's writings assume "a universal truth and universally applicable Christianity." His writings "are peppered with Chinese examples and cases, but he uses these primarily to illustrate Christian truths, rather than to determine them." She adds, "If we were to strip Ni Tuosheng's [Watchman Nee's] Chinese examples away, his point would almost always still stand," in contrast to other Chinese Christians for whom the "particular lens or narrative frame" of the Chinese "literary or philosophical traditions" and "social environment" were more directly relevant.[4]

In between these very different characterizations of Watchman Nee's relationship to Chinese culture, society, and thought lie the subtle—sometimes almost imperceptible—ways in which Nee's life and thought actually reflected his environment. Nee himself occasionally tried to define this relationship, but his explicit references both to universal truths and to colorful, local Chinese anecdotes, have, in a way, occluded the most significant effects of China on his ideas. Nee's Chinese context and heritage can be seen more clearly in implicit assumptions than in open declarations. His ideas mirrored broad thematic currents in both contemporary and

[2] Alexander Chow, Theosis, *Sino-Christian Theology and the Second Chinese Enlightenment*.
[3] Daniel Bays, *A New History of Christianity in China* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), 132-133. L
[4] Chloë Starr, *Chinese Theology: Text and Context* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2016), 4-5.

classical China, even when he was not purposefully echoing them. The legacy of his teachings, practices, followers, and institutions is shaped by Chinese history in ways that the participants themselves may not have realized.

In fact, one of the most significant ways in which Nee's life and teachings were clearly marked by his societal context was, paradoxically, in his choice of Western Christian influences. Nee's ideas on the church were deeply influenced by the Plymouth Brethren, while his concepts of spirituality were heavily indebted to writers from the Keswick Convention. Nee's thorough and detailed absorption of these Western influences was astounding. He understood their theologies and attitudes so completely that his work is still appreciated by contemporary forms of both movements. No doubt, this deeply "Western" voice is also a reason that scholars such as Bays and Starr have argued that Nee eschewed specifically Chinese influences.

Upon closer examination, however, Nee's attraction to both the Brethren and Keswick schools of thought follows an interesting pattern. On the one hand, the Plymouth Brethren's ecclesiology was deeply pessimistic. The Brethren indicted virtually all Western Christian churches, denominations, and associations (even, to some extent, their own) for their divisiveness, artificiality, connections to local governments and politics, lack of holiness, and independence from God. On the other hand, despite its warm, devotional, and ecumenical tone, the Keswick Convention also judged Western Christians harshly. Keswick teachers assumed that very few Christians were actually living up to the biblical standard of holiness. Instead, these holiness writers supposed that most Christians were generally defeated in their Christian lives, beholden to sin, fleshly desires, their own egos, and the vanities of the world.

In other words, Nee based his own thought upon two of the most self-critical strands of Western Christianity. Much of Nee's active ministry took place in Republican China, when the

prevailing sentiment was fiercely patriotic and anti-Western. Chinese Christians had to fight off bitter accusations that they were foreign lapdogs, collaborating with imperialists. In such a context, it may seem odd that Nee chose to learn from Westerners at all. Nee's choice of these particular Western influences, however, gave him access to some of the most subtle and scathing critiques that Western Christians had lodged against each other. If Nee had to be associated with Western Christian thought, the Brethren and Keswick theologies had the potential to gain him significantly more interest than almost any others.

Because of their unfavorable judgements of other Christians, both the Brethren and the Keswick teachers were embroiled in controversies in the West, and these controversies would follow Nee throughout his career. In China, however, to be controversial among Westerners, was, if anything, a sign that one had maintained one's nationalistic integrity. Although Nee could have easily traded on this anti-Western reputation, he took a more careful route. By taking many of his cues from the West's own critics, Nee claimed to be following a *more* universal, pure version of Christianity than that practiced by the vast majority of Western Christians.

Instead of being a simple champion of China, Nee was a champion of the idea that Chinese could engage in some of the most demanding forms that the Christian tradition had to offer. They could live rigorous lives of self-denial, forsaking their natural inclinations, preferences, and human affections, representing God in unified, holy congregations that pointed toward the truth of the mystical body of Christ. If Nee believed that this testimony was rather lacking in the West, he was confident that it could be vibrantly represented in China.

By positioning himself in this way, Nee opened up a significant space for Chinese to become serious, devoted Christians, while escaping the ignominy of association with the West. Those Chinese who followed Nee maintained especially strong links to certain parts of the

Western tradition. They prided themselves, however, on taking these rather elevated claims of the Christian tradition more seriously and following them more exactly than most of the Westerners themselves. In so doing, they understood themselves to be returning to the unadulterated practice of New Testament simplicity. They had become more Biblical than the Western fundamentalists and more spiritual than the Western mystics.

Of course, such a position contains an inherent check. It only "works" so long as the claimant continues to earnestly and genuinely maintain her position of spiritual zeal. If it is nothing but a smokescreen for latent nationalism, the purity of the position is compromised and the argument collapses on itself. Thus, even if adherents to Nee's teachings were initially attracted by the example of a Chinese leader who could out-Christianize the missionaries, the long-term appeal of his ministry was that it slowly stripped away their own chauvinism and brought them to care only for a transcendent Christ, discarding their parochial preferences in favor of the universal church.

This has led to a self-contradictory dilemma. Nee may have attracted followers with an implicit appeal to nationalism, that is, the example of a Chinese Christian who outshone the Westerners. Nee also propounded a system of theology that was more complex, subtle, and ambitious than that of any other Chinese Christian of his generation. For a number of reasons, then, Nee made for an ideal exemplification of Chinese theology. Nevertheless, neither Nee nor his followers would have acknowledged Nee's thought as particularly "Chinese" in any way. Nee's system only made sense and retained its vibrancy inasmuch as Nee was *not* seen to be particularly beholden either to Chinese society or to Chinese thought. Paradoxically, it seemed that Nee could only be a viable representative of a living tradition of Chinese thought to the extent that he shunned the specifically Chinese character of that thought.

This paradox also holds true with respect to Nee's relationship with other Chinese religions and philosophies. There are many ways in which Nee's patterns of ideas and behaviors seem obviously Chinese. Nee certainly knew and read some of the Chinese classics. He also kept abreast of political developments and adapted to them. Later in life, he read Marx and studied Communism. Nevertheless, he rarely spoke of Chinese thought, whether classical or contemporary, except to contrast it disparagingly with the truth of the Christian Bible.

Even the ostensible rejection of Chinese religion, however, can be read as a feature of the larger influence of Republican China. Throughout the Republican Period, "superstitious" elements within Confucianism, Daoism, Buddhism, and other indigenous traditions were under strenuous attack both by religious reformers and by atheists. The most prominent legacy of this skepticism is the Chinese embrace of Marxist philosophical materialism. Thus, Nee's open hostility toward Chinese religion, itself a reflection of his contemporary society, must be carefully unpacked. As with the rest of his work, it is possible to look past his direct comments to see a world of assumptions and proclivities that unmistakably mirror other forms of Chinese thought.

This dissertation is organized both chronologically and thematically, and each chapter suggests some of the confluences that restore Nee to his Chinese context. The first chapter records how Nee's initial conversion and earliest Christian experiences were influenced by important currents that defined much of Republican Chinese society. Besides doubts about spiritual forces, Nee's life was clearly touched by the rise of patriotism and changing conceptions of romantic love and human emotions.

The second chapter suggests that Nee's earliest years of church leadership in Fuzhou were defined by a desire to make a communal form of Christianity practicable, with an emphasis

on ethics and sociability in close quarters that, in the West, have rarely been found outside the convent and the monastery. Especially when compared to his most immediate Western intellectual progenitors, it is obvious that Nee was much more interested in how theology affected the actual life of the church and the local congregation.

The third chapter chronicles Nee's creation of a spirituality that proceeded by articulating a detailed internal map of the human being. As with many indigenous Chinese religions, this esoteric knowledge led the seeker to a ground of union with the infinite. It also implied an ethical and, to some extent, ontological holism that insisted that good and evil were, at some level, inseparable and indistinguishable. In other words, Nee's spiritual teachings idealized a kind of oneness with God that transcended rational discernment and evaluation. This meant that, for him, a normative Christian life was spontaneous and effortless. Although the process of arriving at such a state might be difficult and arduous, eventually the Christian automatically expressed the highest virtues of Christ and was able to seamlessly adapt to all the unpredictable vicissitudes of human life without artificiality or exertion. This system had clear parallels to the important Chinese concept of *wuwei*, or "lack of intentionality," a core principle of Chinese ethics.

The last chapter shows Nee's attempt to add eschatological punishment and reward based on ethical practice to a Protestant framework that traditionally held to salvation by faith alone. Nee also tried to square the circle of sectarianism and universalism, two conflicting impulses that can be found in both other Chinese religions and Christian history. He thus proposed a form of remnant theology in which the victory of a chosen remnant stood in for the victory of the whole church. Both Nee's idea of eschatological reward and his teaching of remnant theology spurred his followers to do their utmost, even risk their lives to accomplish God's will. Their own millennial bliss and God's victory over Satan hung in the balance. Nee joined his intellectual

productivity to a firm grasp of current events, giving his co-workers concrete plans for spreading their network of local congregations on the eve of the Second Sino-Japanese War.

If Nee cannot be understood apart from his Chinese context, neither does his work make sense outside of its grounding in the Christian tradition. Nee's life and work stood in conversation with currents of Anglo-American evangelicalism that have proven to be fertile ground for many other Christian movements outside the West. He drew from holiness traditions, with their emphasis on immediate experiences of the Holy Spirit, from 19th century primitivism, with its quest to draw directly from the example and authority of the first apostles, and from the basic impulse of Protestant Christianity, with its constant reforms and ecclesial fractures in the name of the Bible.

The way in which local, indigenous cultures and universal Christian claims interact is a major concern in the study of World Christianity. Historian Andrew Walls, one of the pioneers in the field, opens *The Missionary Movement in Christian History* with a reflection on two conflicting principles that can be found at the heart of Christianity.[5] On the one hand, the earliest Christians accepted indigenous cultures as they found them. They read their scriptures in the Gentile language of Greek. They also refused to impose the most significant markers of Jewish tribal identity, circumcision and Kosher, upon their new non-Jewish converts. In other words, they "baptized" a multiplicity of nationalities, customs, and social norms. On the other hand, Christians also insisted on a universal, transcendent truth, in the full light of which no culture could wholly be sanctified. Christianity thus retained a radical, critical edge, judging every people in the light of the New Jerusalem. With respect to the modern world, missiologist Lamin

[5] Andrew F. Walls, *The Missionary Movement in Christian History: Studies in the Transmission of Faith* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2007), 7-9.

Sanneh has argued for a distinction between a "World Christianity" that faithfully represents indigenous cultures and a "Global Christianity" that mimics Western, foreign ideas.[6]

The case of Watchman Nee suggests the difficulty involved in untangling these principles and ideal types in a concrete instance. How is one to understand both Nee's explicit rejection of Chinese chauvinism and his probably unconscious embrace of ideas that reflected Chinese concerns? When Nee explicitly tried to adapt to changing circumstances on the ground, like the war with Japan or the fall of the Nationalist government, should his concerns be understood as "indigenizing" or "Chinese"? Nee argued for Christian salvation to be understood in purely universal terms, but his own experience of that salvation was conditioned by Chinese modernity. Similarly, Nee was convinced that God had to be the proper object of his romantic affection, a conclusion shaped by rapidly changing Chinese notions of love and emotion that were affected by currents from the West. When Nee indicted and adapted the concept of romantic love between partners then, was he critiquing his own culture from a universal standpoint, an indigenous standpoint, or a foreign one?

In some ways, the fixation on labels such as "foreign" or "Chinese" and "universal" or "indigenous" are more reflective of the various stakeholders involved in the controversies that surround Nee than they are of Nee himself. Chinese and American Christians, their governments, and their various civic and church institutions all have vested interests in defining Nee in particular ways. To some extent, they are all correct. Nee partook of both Western and Chinese influences, he was both a universal Christian and an indigenous one. It is this hybrid character that makes his thought both malleable and difficult to grasp.

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[6] Lamin O. Sanneh, *Whose Religion Is Christianity?: The Gospel beyond the West* (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans, 2003).

Many of Nee's informal addresses and sermons have been lost, but what remains is still formidable, a testament both to Nee's own prolificacy and the diligent earnestness of his followers. The sixty-two volumes of his collected works are taken from a variety of media, ranging from Nee's own written, self-edited, and self-published monographs to edited transcriptions of shorthand notes taken by his followers during intimate, informal talks. Generically, the works are just as varied. To give only a few examples, Nee engaged in biblical interpretation, theological analysis, and extensive correspondence. He tinkered with the mundane details of church organization and practice, he conducted intense, incisive trainings of his spiritually mature co-workers, and he also wrote messages for new Christians, explaining concepts like baptism and prayer in a simple way.

The combination of this corpus's variety and volume have made it difficult to understand and assess Nee's ideas as a whole. While scholars have often emphasized different aspects of Nee's thought, many of Nee's followers have also selectively engaged with his ideas according to their own tastes and motivations. Thus, it is fair to say that at least for some of Nee's followers, especially his earliest Chinese ones, he was mainly relevant as someone who pointed out the unscriptural nature of Western denominations and taught that baptism should be conducted by immersion. Other followers, especially in the West, have considered Nee to basically be a teacher of individual, devotional piety, helping them to appreciate Christ more and, subsequently, to conduct their daily lives in a more holy, victorious manner.

Both of these alternatives represent common, minimal understandings of Nee's work. Certainly, one of the reasons for his writing's long-lasting, broad-based appeal is its ability to be distilled into such readily accessible forms. Nee's millions of followers attest to his popularity. He is one of China's more influential thinkers, and certainly one of its most widely-received

intellectual exports. Furthermore, while other Chinese thinkers have received significant support from the Chinese state, Nee's influence has grown despite the indifference and sometimes the open hostility of the Chinese government. If the fact that Nee's thought can be reduced to simple slogans helps to explain the breadth of his audience, it is necessary to dig deeper to understand the loyalty of some of his followers.

The minimal or partial interpretations of Nee's work have stood, in part, simply because there is so little consensus about whether Nee's work even has a center, much less what that center might be. Certainly, Nee wandered over a vast, heterogeneous terrain, not unexpected, given that most of his works were addressed to specific questions, persons, and situations. He also had the preacher's gift of making his topic of the moment seem crucially important or relevant, which means that, without context, a partial reading of his works might convince a reader that any one of a number of themes, ideas, or practices was Nee's central concern or hermeneutic.

Reviewing Nee's biography and body of work as a whole, however, suggests that very early on in his Christian life, he had already come to the conclusion that God's goal for his Christian ministry was for him to establish local churches, and that only a demanding form of spiritual self-denial could make this vision of the local churches practical.

This basic synthesis held true for the rest of his life. Even when he did not spell out his ecclesiology, Nee meant for all of his work on spirituality to cause actual congregations to flourish. Though Nee's writings on the church could be used to discredit other Christian groups and practices, it is clear that his ideas were influenced by the Plymouth Brethren. His reading of the Brethren convinced him not only that church practice was largely lacking, but even more that there was an ideal of church unity and purity to which all Christians should aspire. He was more

interested and influenced by this positive vision than by the Brethren's negative appraisals of other Christian groups. When he became known to other Chinese as a critic of the denominational system, he responded almost immediately, urging his followers to seek more substantial truths and experiences and not to use his writings as propaganda simply to cause others to leave their home congregations.

The fact that Nee had to repeat this admonition over the years suggests that the misuse of his writings was a persistent or recurring problem. Nevertheless, Nee consistently maintained his position. He would always believe that any Christian group that had a name, body of teachings, and membership that included only a subset of the whole invisible, universal church was sectarian and divisive. Nevertheless, he also understood this critique to be propounded in the service of unity on both a theoretical and a practical level. He did not want his criticisms of the church to represent his whole message, nor to further divide Christians from one another. As the years went on, the most significant changes in his thought were related to his developing, constructive understanding of what the church was, how it fit in God's plan, and how it could be practiced. All of these changes only strengthened his initial conviction that his particular commission from God was to establish local churches.

Thus, it is clear that Nee's thought does, in fact, have a core message, even if that message must be defined synthetically. In 1934, Nee had formulated the most concise answer that he would ever give to the question of what he saw himself to be doing. In a special message during a conference, he claimed that each previous generation of Christians had been defined by a particular truth, which was their commission from God. He and his followers were responsible for the "present truth," which was to uphold the supremacy and centrality of Christ.

Obviously, for a Christian to exalt Christ was not a novel development. But Nee clarified that this particular Christ was to be defined in contrast to the human ego and lived out in local churches that were practical manifestations of the one universal church. This internal, composite, and corporate Christ was the center of Nee's message and was his principal biblical and theological hermeneutic, that is, his standard for understanding the Bible and evaluating other Christian teachings and practices.

This core message could be unpacked in a vast array of different directions. A Christian's struggles to overcome her own ego were addressed by Nee's copious writings on the internal parts of the human being and the secret to realizing an inner unity with God. His ideas on the church eventually spelled out a mystical ideal grounded in very concrete practices. The church was the final goal of God's work in human history, and the church's production of a victorious testimony would end the current age, bringing in a millennium of rest and reward to God's faithful ones. Eternity's heavenly delights could be tasted in local churches, which would be unified both locally and globally, and which would not be marred with the distinction between clergy and laity. Instead, all the members would lovingly and willingly exercise their own gifts to preach the gospel, teach the truth, and establish more churches.

The breadth of this theological system explains the fact that many of Nee's followers have become committed students of his thought. In congregations that espouse his teachings, it is common to find members who have read hundreds of pages of Nee's writings, and those among them who are more inclined toward literary production have even edited, translated, published, and circulated his writings in dozens of languages.

A recent monograph on Chinese religion has suggested that a set of "basic characteristics" ties together a broad swathe of Chinese religions stretching from the late Empire

to the modern day. Historian David Ownby writes that "At the most fundamental level, many of these groups appear to have been organized by and around charismatic masters, who generally claim independence from other recognized religions (or 'cultivation systems') and from one another."[7] This claim does not mean that one must adopt a traditional "top-down" understanding of influence and organization. The importance of charismatic masters in Chinese religions only suggests that for many of the followers themselves, the virtue of the master is often an important component in their own religious identity and self-understanding.

The nearly universal importance of "charismatic masters" means that Nee's own life story, personal ideas, and writings take on an outsized significance. Another historian, Lian Xi, has organized his monograph on Chinese Christianity largely as a prosopography. Most of Lian's descriptions of indigenous Chinese Christian movements are centered around the biography of a founder, pastor, or preacher who started and sustained a following. In almost every case, the charisma and authority of the movement's leader, usually a single, paramount figure, was an important source of institutional legitimacy and identity. As a result, the actual histories of these "charismatic masters" are hotly contested, since their followers' organizations, worldviews, scriptures, and concepts of salvation are so deeply invested in their relationships with their guides. The polarizing biographies of Chinese Christian leaders, which tend to be either unstintingly laudatory or darkly vitriolic is an almost inevitable result.[8]

If some of Nee's followers saw in him the archetype of the "charismatic master" who had led the way to their salvation, Nee once again tried to guard against their excesses. He spoke

[7] Ownby, *Falun Gong*, 26.
[8] In regard to Nee, there are positive portrayals such as Lee, *Watchman Nee: Seer*; Chen, *Meet Brother Nee*; Kinnear, *Against the Tide*, and Chen Zhongdao's *Wo de jiu fu Ni Tuosheng* and negative ones such as Dana Roberts, *Secrets of Watchman Nee* (Alachua, FL: Bridge-Logos, 2005); Lily Hsu, *My Unforgettable Memories: Watchman Nee and Shanghai Local Church* (Maitland, FL: Xulon Press, 2013).

clearly against the danger of following human beings, writing that "the church should not be controlled by human wills, it should be led directly by the Holy Spirit."[9] Similarly, he inveighed against the clerical system because it meant that some "servants have been placed on a high pedestal and have been assigned the oversight of a congregation or a chapel."[10] Nee thus welcomed his own defamation, and was upset when his followers treated him with special deference.[11]

Still, many of Nee's growing body of followers continue to pay him homage as a master of Christian spirituality. To various extents, they have intertwined their own religious stories with his own. Thus, a thorough, scholarly appraisal of Nee's life is needed now more than ever, to understand it for all of its attractions, contradictions, and legacies.

Additional Notes on Names and Sources

One of the difficulties of writing about Nee and his followers is his reluctance to attach a name to the congregations that followed his ministry. As was the case for so much of his thought, his wariness about names had both Western and Chinese antecedents. The Plymouth Brethren had also refused to adopt a name for themselves, seeing extra-biblical names as one root of sectarianism. Nee's emphasis on the importance of names, however, also had important resonances in Chinese culture. The importance of proper names is one of the enduring themes of Chinese philosophy. Although Chinese thinkers have disagreed on the desirability of ascertaining correct names and have also differed in their opinions concerning how accurately names reflect

[9] NTSWJ 11, 157.
[10] CWWN 4, 396-7.
[11] CWWN 42, 447-8; CWWN 61, 51-2.

things, they have generally agreed that names are important means for maintaining social order and control.

Thus, one of Nee and his followers' contributions to the ongoing development of the Christian tradition is their persistent resistance to the adoption of any name beyond Christ and Christian. Nevertheless, as Nee's followers took on an increasingly distinctive and cohesive identity, outsiders began to refer to them with a number of different names and, for ease of reference, this work also follows suit, referring to them primarily as the "Christian Assembly" (*Jidutu Jiaohui*) and the "Little Flock (*Xiao Qun*." These were two of the earliest names by which Nee's followers were known and both of them were based on his early publications. Nee first made a name for himself during the mid-1920s with a periodical called *The Christian*, which was disseminated throughout China. In the mid-1930s, as his Shanghai congregation grew, he printed a hymnal that took its name from a Brethren publication, *Hymns for the Little Flock*.

The fact that Nee and his followers used different terminology from most Christians to refer to their houses of worship gave rise to another moniker, the "Assembly Hall (*Juhuisuo* or *Juhuichu*." This nondescript naming custom also followed Brethren traditions. Today, his followers within China are primarily known as the Little Flock and the Assembly Hall.

This dissertation relies heavily on the English and Chinese compilations of Nee's works. These are, respectively, the *Collected Works of Watchman Nee*, henceforth referred to as CWWN and *Ni Tuosheng Wenji*, henceforth referred to as NTSWJ. For a more detailed discussion of my evaluation of these sources, see the Appendix.

Chapter 1

Republican China

It is October of 1935 in the bustling metropolis of Shanghai, China's most famous and notorious city. For many Chinese, Shanghai is the archetype of the modern city, and as such, it serves as a placeholder for countless dreams and fears. Shanghai represents commerce, technology, wealth, and cosmopolitanism. At the same time, it also stands for the West, new moral codes, decadence, and corruption. In Shanghai, the trends that have just begun to remake traditional Chinese life elsewhere, already flourish in dramatic fashion. For a group of Christians scattered throughout the country, however, the city holds another kind of immense symbolic value.

To understand these particular hopes and values, one must travel about three miles west of the Bund, Shanghai's iconic waterfront. There, on Wendeli Lane, a small street in the International Settlement, near what is today Tongren Road, is a set of three consecutive houses, which have been converted into what their inhabitants call an "assembly hall." About four to six hundred can be seated in the main meeting area, which is composed of the first floor and the outside courtyard spaces in which temporary chairs are frequently set up.[1]

On this evening, a young man stands and approaches the podium. It is Watchman Nee (1903-1972). He is barely thirty years old, tall, and lanky. He is wearing formal, Western attire—a suit and a tie. His hair is unfashionably long but neatly combed.[2] The audience waits expectantly. Many of its members represent the bright future of a new China—there are doctors, businessmen, military officers, university staff and students. An American doctor, Thornton

[1] Kinnear, *Against the Tide*, 197-8. Interview with Zhu Rukai, March 2013.
[2] LS Mark, 466.

Stearns, formerly head of the Medical Committee of the American Presbyterian mission to Shandong, is seated prominently in the front row along with other leaders in the church community.[3] A few months ago, some of these elders joined Nee in writing a final response to a branch of the so-called Plymouth Brethren, explicating their differences of opinion. As a result, the young network of Chinese churches has been peremptorily cut off from the Western movement. Both Stearns's wife, Carol, and Nee's wife, Charity Chang, are also in the audience. Nee's marriage to Charity in the previous year set off an ugly firestorm when her wealthy aunt, who disapproved of the union, publically denounced Nee through a newspaper advertisement.

None of this recent turmoil seems to weigh on Nee, who approaches the dais with serene authority. From the podium, Nee begins to speak about the "sound" of a Christian life. He argues that the Christian life should have a certain musical tone, or pitch. That tone is triumphant, like a shout of victory. Christians should not be distracted by their apparent weaknesses, trials, temptations, adversities, and difficulties. Even in the midst of the greatest of human sufferings, a Christian can be a model for other human beings, displaying exultant joy and strength. Christians do not endure silently and for a limited period of time. Rather, by participating in Christ's victory, they "more than conquer"—endlessly, if necessary. They do not barely scrape by; instead, their cups run over.[4]

[3] *Minutes of the Delegated Mission Meeting of the Shantung Mission of the Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A. and of the First Annual Meeting of the Shantung Christian Provincial Council*. 1929. Stearns place on the front row and that of the other elders from a conversation with Zhu Rukai, March 2013.

[4] *Desheng de shengming*. *The Overcoming Life*, CWWN Vol 24, Chapter 10. Nee uses the evocative and memorable example of a woman whose daughter had "died within a matter of hours, and her husband was away in a distant place. When the daughter died, the brothers and sisters went over to comfort her. Although her eyes were full of tears, her face was full of joy. She said, 'Thank and praise the Lord. Although I do not understand why my child is dead, I am still full of joy.' The brothers and sisters tried to comfort her; instead she comforted them. Such joy cannot be fabricated. Victory is maintained by this kind of tone. One can still praise the Lord joyfully in the midst of trials."

For a growing number of Chinese Christians, Shanghai's greatest significance is that it is the home of Watchman Nee and his publishing house. From Shanghai, Nee's transcendent messages on the power and promise of the Christian life ring out, filling distant corners of China with the confident tone of victory. Although the church in Shanghai is one of the largest, there are congregations of Nee's followers in many of China's provinces and major cities.

Who is this young man? How has he captivated the attention of so many? What is the source of his otherworldly boldness?

When he preached these sermons, Watchman Nee was not quite thirty-two years old, but his writings and teachings had already gained a formidable reputation throughout China. Within a few years, his works would be translated into a number of non-Chinese languages and begin to be widely disseminated in other countries. Many older, more experienced, and apparently better qualified Christians admired Nee, and they frequently travelled long distances to come and learn from him.

This chapter will explain some of the causes of Nee's fame and authority by weaving together his personal biography with the development of his ideas in relationship to currents of Chinese thought at the time. In particular, this narrative focuses on Nee's early life, his conversion, and the beginning of his Christian work, which were informed by three major social and intellectual themes in Republican China: romantic love, religious doubt, and patriotic nationalism.

Family Background

Watchman Nee was born in Fuzhou, the provincial capital of Fujian and "one of the earliest and in numerical terms more successful centers of Protestant missionary work in

China."[5] His family history was signal proof of the missionaries' successes. Nee's paternal grandfather, Ni Yucheng (倪玉成 1840-1890) had enrolled in a school opened by the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions (ABCFM), a largely Congregationalist body. In 1857, Yucheng was among the first Chinese natives to be baptized among by the foreign missionaries.[6] In 1876, he became the first Chinese person to be ordained by the ABCFM.[7]

Watchman Nee's father, Nee Wenxiu (倪文修 1877-1941) was the fourth of Yucheng's nine sons. According to Angus Kinnear, Nee's biographer, Yucheng was among the last group of students to take and pass the province-wide examinations for government service, attaining the "second degree." Kinnear probably means to refer to the *juren* degree, which technically qualified its holder to advance to public office. By the turn of the century, however, many *juren* never received the coveted government posts. Thus, if Wenxiu was a *juren*, his position as an officer in the Fuzhou customs office may have owed more to his English language abilities and foreign connections than to his familiarity with the Confucian classics, another sign of the rapidly changing times.[8] In 1905, just two years after Watchman was born, the government

[5] Ryan Dunch, *Fuzhou Protestants and the Making of a Modern China 1857-1927* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), xvii).
[6] Carlson, Ellsworth, *The Foochow Missionaries 1847-1880* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1973), 66-67.
[7] Angus Kinnear, *Against the Tide* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 1978), 24 claims that Yucheng was the first ordained minister. The Hartwell papers that he cites do claim that he was the first ordained minister of the ABCFM. Charles Hartwell, *Jubilee Notes* (Fuzhou, China: Foochow College Press, ABCFM, 1904), 27 from the Hannah Louisa Plimpton Peet Hartwell Papers. MS 761. Mount Holyoke Archives and Special Collections, South Hadley, MA. Ryan Dunch, however, points out that the ABCFM was the last of the three missions to begin ordaining pastors because of its own theological preferences (Dunch, 18)
[8] Dunch, 41-2. Dunch focuses here on the accomplishments of the graduates of the Anglo-Chinese College. It is hard to ascertain the exact circumstances of Wenxiu's education. He is listed in the catalogue of graduates in neither Foochow College (ABCFM) nor Anglo-Chinese College (American Methodist). Wenxiu's father, Yucheng was certainly associated with the ABCFM and Wenxiu's son, Watchman, was baptized as a Methodist, but it is not clear when Wenxiu changed his denominational affiliation. In any case, during Wenxiu's generation, even a few years of education in missionary schools could set young men and women on a path toward professional success and government service.

abolished the imperial examinations, which had structured Chinese intellectual and political life for well over one thousand years.

As another sign of Fuzhou's significant Christian history, Nee's mother, Nee-Lin Heping (倪林和平, 1880-1950) was also raised in a Protestant family. Her biological parents were poor peasants who maintained what she later called the *louxi*, or "ugly habit," of valuing males and belittling females (*zhong nan qing nü*). Her birth parents thus gave her up for adoption to the Lins, a wealthy merchant and his wife, who loved her "as life itself." When she was six, her adoptive father was stricken with a strange illness that doctors were unable to treat. His employer, the Methodist businessman Zhang Heling (張鶴齡, dates unknown), suggested having a pastor pray for the elder Lin's health. Upon his miraculous recovery, the family converted to Christianity, throwing out their idols and unwrapping Heping's feet, which had just begun to be bound.[9]

Watchman Nee's youth was profoundly influenced by his mother, who dominated his childhood family life.[10] Even the story of his conversion is tied to his relationship with his mother. This may have established a recurring pattern in his life. Both Kinnear and theologian Grace May have pointed out the importance of powerful women, including Heping, in shaping Nee's outlook and development.[11]

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[9] Lin's parents are never named in her account, but her father's employer is the same Zhang Heling whose generous donation of ten thousand dollars was pivotal in founding the Anglo-Chinese College, which later bore his Chinese name (*Heling Yinghua shu yuan*). Lin Heping, *Enai Biaoben*, accessed on October 10, 2015 at http://found-treasure.org/cht/94/page94.htm. While the story of Heping's adoption and her biological parents' "ugly habit" may seem shocking, such tropes are cliché commonplaces in Chinese narratives. Since women generally became part of their husband's families upon marriage, daughters were stereotypically understood to be financial burdens while sons were financial assets.

[10] Kinnear, *Against*, 36-7. Kinnear describes Nee's father as a retiring man who "could not utter a word in public." (41).

[11] Kinnear, *Against*, 193. And Grace Ying May, "Watchman Nee and the Breaking of Bread: The Missiological and Spiritual Forces That Contributed to an Indigenous Chinese Ecclesiology" (Th.D., Boston University School of Theology, 2000).

Heping's life story is recounted in significant detail in a remarkable document. In April 1943, when she was around sixty-three years old, Heping finished an extensive autobiographical manuscript of over 60,000 Chinese characters called *Enai Biaoben*, or "A Specimen of Grace and Love." *Enai Biaoben* is written as an evangelical testimony, with obvious religious motives. The text is interspersed with numerous thankful prayers and exclamatory praises to God. Likewise, the narrative of Heping's life is recounted as a series of human follies, mostly her own, mercifully ameliorated by God's gracious actions.

In *Enai Biaoben*, Heping borrows from biblical tropes to tell the story of Watchman's birth. Her sister-in-law had given birth to six daughters in succession. When Heping's first two children were also daughters, her mother-in-law spoke up, disdainfully suggesting that Heping, too, could give birth only to daughters. Once again, the "ugly habit" of belittling females and valuing males returned to haunt her. At first she was indignant, but when she became pregnant a third time, fears began to creep in. Desperate, she somehow remembered the story of Hannah, and "I poured out my fervent desire before the God who hears human prayers. In my heart, I also believed that he would surely answer my prayer and receive my consecration."[12] Her next child was Watchman, born Ni Shuzu (倪述祖, with the English name, Henry, which may have been bestowed upon his christening in the Methodist church). Lin would go on to have four more sons and two more daughters for a total of nine children.[13]

Despite their illustrious Christian heritage, the Nee family was not known for its religiosity during the early years of Nee's life, when the dominant theme of the home was patriotism rather than piety. In Heping's account, after the 1911 Xinhai Revolution that toppled

[12] Lin Heping, *Enai Biaoben*, accessed on October 10, 2015 at http://found-treasure.org/cht/94/page94.htm. Also, CWWN, Vol 37, 451.
[13] Kinnear, *Against the Tide*, 14.

the Qing Dynasty, she made a "supreme effort to help the patriotic movement." She continues, "At that time, the blazing fire raged, and I didn't care about my life, I made speeches everywhere." She sold her jewelry to donate money to the cause and involved herself in various political organizations. For her efforts, she received a medal of recognition and was chosen to be a part of the delegation that welcomed Sun Yat-sen on his visit to Fujian.[14] Her participation in these efforts offers further evidence for historian Ryan Dunch's claim that Fuzhou Protestants were often at the vanguard of political activity in the formation of the new nation.[15]

For Heping, however, this political ascent was also a spiritual descent. Her new relationships with non-Christians caused her to turn from even a nominal Christianity (*youmingwushi de jidutu*) to a total loss of her faith. Her new desires were "fame, position, power, clothing, etc."[16] Likewise, her oldest son was also consumed with secular pursuits and ambitions. One of Watchman's classmates later wrote that "During our junior and senior high school years, we were both nominal Christians." The young men had "some knowledge of the Bible," but in effect, they "loved the world and pursued the vanities of the world."[17]

Heping's Conversion

Things changed dramatically for both mother and son in February of 1920 when Heping learned that the famous independent revivalist, Dora Yu (余慈度 1873-1931), was coming to Fuzhou. One of Heping's great disappointments in life had been her thwarted ambition to

[14] Lin, *Enai Biaoben*.
[15]See Ryan Dunch, *Fuzhou Protestants and the Making of a Modern China, 1857-1927* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), 44-47. Dunch writes that "Some of the daughters of the first-generation Protestants had opportunities that would have been unimaginable in their mother's youth." As we will see, Lin herself was thwarted in her dream of a modern career as a doctor. Nevertheless, she supported political causes and raised children who were able to interact with the cutting edge of a modern, global culture. Especially in light of the paucity of firsthand accounts of Chinese Christian women of her generation, Lin's story is a fascinating and valuable account.
[16] Lin, *Enai Biaoben*.
[17] CWWN, Vol 26, 444.

become a doctor. Although she had excelled academically and had even made preliminary arrangements to study in the United States, her marriage had definitively ended those plans. Nonetheless, during her academic preparations, she had met Yu, who was on her way to Korea as a medical missionary. Even as an eighteen year-old, Heping had been deeply impressed. Although Yu had achieved Heping's dream of becoming a physician, the older woman was uninterested in material success and had openly devoted her life to God. By the time of her arrival in Fujian in 1920, she had already led successful revivals throughout China and had even founded an institution to train other evangelists and Christian workers. Heping thus had a complicated reaction to the news of Yu's coming. On the one hand, Heping had dropped "even the outward mask of being a Christian" and feared Yu's condemnation. On the other hand, "among Christians, she [Yu] was the one I respected the most."[18]

With a mixture of fear and eagerness, Heping began to attend Yu's meetings. She struggled with her decision, attending a few meetings, and then escaping to play mahjong. Eventually, on the fifth day of Yu's campaign, Heping was back in the congregation to listen to a sermon on "The Behavior of Nominal Christians." During her preaching, Yu frequently gestured at Heping, causing her no small amount of consternation and discomfort. And yet, inexplicably, Heping returned again and again until Yu spoke on "the love of God and how Jesus himself personally came to die on the cross for us." As Heping listened to a description of how Jesus bore the "highest pain, the shame that was most fearful, because of his love for people," her "stubborn, hard heart was unconsciously melted by this lovable Lord who had given up his life for me." She "wept bitterly" and offered herself to God, "even being willing to be a martyr to pay him back."[19]

[18] Lin, *Enai Biaoben*.
[19] Lin, *Enai Biaoben*.

When she returned home, she began confessing her sins to her bewildered husband, who at first protested that she had nothing for which to apologize. As she continued to enumerate all her faults and shortcomings in serving him and caring for him, Wenxiu was overcome with emotion. He, too, began to apologize and soon the both of them were weeping. Although Heping also felt compelled to apologize to her oldest son, Watchman, who was about sixteen years old, she resisted this impulse for a period of time.

One fateful day, Heping tried to hold her first worship service at home. With her new hymnal and Bible, she sat at piano to play, but suddenly she felt "the Lord's Spirit speaking with authority in my heart." She was forbidden to play until she had apologized to Watchman. As before, she resisted, saying, "'Oh God, I am the mother, how can I confess my sins to my son? From today on, how would I be able to live in this house?'" Nevertheless, God's voice was "most clear." Mystified, Wenxiu and Watchman watched as Heping sat frozen at the piano with tears welling up in her eyes. She turned, embraced her son and begged him to forgive her for beating him without cause. Her narrative continues, "Everyone was astounded that I spoke this way, but my oldest son said, 'That time you beat me without cause, my heart really hated you.' I said 'Please forgive me.' He did not open his mouth."[20]

The next morning, Watchman agreed to go to Dora Yu's revival meeting with his mother, and it is likely that he continued to attend these meetings until the end of Yu's program. According to Nee's account, this series of events sparked a critical internal conflict. Before the family revival, Nee had found Christianity to be despicable. To him, "it seemed that so many members in the church were merely nominal." Even the pastors were pathetic creatures, and "one did not ordinarily see them except when they came to ask for donations." Some pastors had

[20] Lin, *Enai Biaoben*.

apparently come to the Nee household and had thankfully accepted winnings that had been taken directly from the mahjong table, earning Watchman's lasting contempt.[21]

Thus, it had been easy for Nee to ignore Christianity in his "many grand dreams and many plans for the future," a future that seemed especially bright. Nee's "essays were frequently posted on the bulletin board for exhibition" and his native intelligence helped him to place "first in every examination."[22] In general, Fuzhou Protestants were perfectly positioned to take up leading positions in state and society because of their invaluable familiarity with English and their crucial connections with foreigners and modern institutions. Second- and third- generation Christians often moved into elite spheres of national influence.[23]

Watchman Nee's Conversion

For Nee, the question of conversion touched on an important aspect of his personality, one that he might call "absoluteness" or *juedui* (絕對), an unconditionality that insisted on sparing nothing in service of a worthy cause. He thus described the "mental conflict" regarding his conversion as something of a double problem. Nee wrote that "For most people, the problem at the time of salvation is how to be delivered from sin. But for me, being saved from sin and my life career were linked together." Thus, if he converted, "All my previous planning became void and was brought to nothing. My future career was entirely abandoned. For some this step might be easy, but for me, with many ideals, dreams, and plans, it was exceedingly difficult."[24]

Unfortunately, Nee was reticent about divulging personal details, especially with regard to his pre-Christian life. It is thus difficult to ascertain what "ideals, dreams, and plans" he

[21] CWWN 18, 304.
[22] CWWN 26, 453.
[23] Dunch, *Fuzhou*, 32-47.
[24] CWWN 26, 451, 453.

cherished as a young man. According to one of his former classmates, he "was pursuing scholastic attainment in the field of Chinese literature. He would frequently write articles for publication in the newspapers. The money he earned was spent on lottery tickets. He was also fond of the movies."[25]

Nee himself wrote that because of his good judgment and intelligence, he "could have had great success" in the world.[26] The evidence suggests that Nee hoped to contribute in some way to the greater good of the Chinese nation. He was young and educated. He had a Christian heritage, but little in the way of personal religious convictions. Nee himself speaks in terms of "ideals, dreams, and plans," and it is likely that he did not only mean find gainful employment and live a quiet family life as his father had. In the *zeitgeist* of Republican China, great works of literature always touched on political themes.

His mother's patriotic activities, his journalism, and his familiarity with English all show that Nee was deeply conversant with current events. If he was truly dreaming of "scholastic attainment in the field of Chinese literature," it is almost certain that his ambitious ideals, dreams, and plans had political and patriotic implications. It is impossible that Nee was unaware of the Treaty of Versailles and the Chinese reactions to it, commonly referred to as the May 4th movement. Young people across China had been outraged by the terms of the treaty, which granted Chinese territory in the Shandong province to Japan despite Woodrow Wilson's ideal of self-determination and Chinese participation in the war on the side of the Allies. Throughout 1919, spontaneous student protests erupted in large cities throughout the country, including

[25] CWWN, Vol 26, 444.
[26] CWWN, Vol 26, 453.

Fuzhou. In fact, Nee's own school closed its summer session that year "in order to prevent the schools from becoming merely centres for anti-Japanese propaganda."[27]

This period was an important watershed. Within the space of a few years, the mood and temper of Protestants in Fuzhou changed radically. In 1919, many Fuzhou Protestants still took the United States as a model of a Christian nation. They hoped for a cosmopolitan future in which Christians also led the way to a modern China. As China's relationships with Western nations continued to sour, however, the disappointment of young Chinese quickly turned into fury. As late as 1921, the Fuzhou YMCA was still "the leading public association in the city," but in 1923, its principal was stabbed on the street in broad daylight because of a perceived affront to Chinese nationalism.[28] The student-based Anti-Christian Movement would begin in April 1922.

In later years, Nee came to argue that it was critically important for Christians to deny any national chauvinism. In fact, even before his conversion, Nee already seems to have understood a life career with ultimately patriotic goals to be incompatible with Christian commitment. If he was truly a sinner, and if God was real, he would have to change all his values and choose a different direction for his whole life.

It is unclear if there was an immediate catalyst to Nee's final, climactic conversion experience. Certainly, his internal conflict intensified for a few months. His first trip to Dora Yu's revival meeting occurred in February, but the crisis came "On the evening of April 29,

[27] R. M. Gwynn, E. M. Norton, B. W. Simpson, "*T. C. D." in China: A history of the Dublin University Fukien Mission 1885-1935. Compiled for the Mission's Jubilee* (Dublin: Church of Ireland Printing and Publishing, n.d., 1935?), 56-7. Nee was not among the "'undesirable' boys" who were not "permitted to return" after that summer session, which suggests that he was not one of the more outspoken agitators.
[28] Dunch, *Fuzhou*, 184-9.

1920." Using the language of perception and sight, Nee claimed the authority both of an extraordinary visual manifestation and of an invisible spiritual recognition. He writes:

> My first inclination was not to believe in the Lord Jesus and not to be a Christian. However, that made me inwardly uneasy. There was a real struggle within me. Then I knelt down to pray. At first I had no words with which to pray. But eventually many sins came before me, and I realized that I was a sinner. I had never had such an experience in my life before that time. I saw myself as a sinner and I also saw the Savior. I saw the filthiness of sin and I also saw the efficacy of the Lord's precious blood cleansing me and making me white as snow. I saw the Lord's hands nailed to the cross, and at the same time I saw Him stretching forth His arms to welcome me, saying, "I am here waiting to receive you." Overwhelmed by such love, I could not possibly reject it, and I decided to accept Him as my Savior. Previously, I had laughed at those who believed in the Lord, but that evening I could not laugh. Instead, I wept and confessed my sins, seeking the Lord's forgiveness. After making my confession, the burden of sins was discharged and I felt buoyant and full of inward joy and peace.[29]

This account weaves together a number of striking visual, theological, and emotional claims. Nee's had a visceral recognition of his sinfulness, while gazing on the figure of the crucified Christ. The colorful imagery he evoked of filth, blood, and snow were all classic theological hallmarks. In particular, both Roman Catholicism and Protestantism had long focused on Jesus's sacrifice on the cross as the central moment in God's treatment of sin. Although some Western Christians were suspicious of apparitions and miraculous visions, they were a common theme in Chinese and other non-Western conversion stories. If Nee was unaware of the burgeoning Pentecostal movement in 1920, when he related this testimony in 1936, he had already established deep relationships with a number of Christians influenced by Pentecostal themes, including the British missionary Elizabeth Fischbacher and Witness Lee (1905-1997), a Christian leader from North China.

In the Chinese context, Nee's vision was rather tame. If anything, it is striking for its careful orthodoxy and strict adherence to biblical themes. In contrast, Hong Xiuquan (洪秀全,

[29] CWWN 26, 452.

1814-1864), the leader of the Taiping Rebellion, famously had a striking vision of celestial figures dressed in classic Chinese garb, whom he later interpreted as representing God the Heavenly Father and Christ the Son. Hong then claimed authority as God's own divine son, Jesus's younger brother.[30] Nee's vision also paled in comparison to the otherworldly experiences of Wei Enbo (魏恩波, 1877-1919), another founder of an indigenous Chinese Christian movement, the True Jesus Church. In the opening decades of the 20th century, Wei reported having "a series of miraculous experiences in which he was baptized personally by Jesus in a river outside the Beijing (北京) city gates, was girded with divine armor and weapons for the purpose of battling and subduing legions of demons, and was visited by Moses, Elijah, and the Twelve Apostles in order to receive inspiration in the task of 'correcting' Christianity and restoring Jesus' one true church."[31] One of Wei's associates received a vision in which he was instructed to call him "Little Jesus."[32]

Unlike Hong and Wei, who were first-generation adult converts, Nee described his conversion in terms that would have been familiar to Westerners in predominantly Christian countries. Western narratives frequently feature nominal Christians, or young people born into Christian families who come into personal experiences of faith from which they date their salvation, the beginning of their "real" Christian experience.

It is instructive to compare Nee's family history with other non-Western Christian histories. Historian Niel Gunson has described conversion in the South Pacific as following a roughly generational pattern. The first generation of Christian converts might have respected

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[30] Jonathan Spence, *God's Chinese Son: The Taiping Heavenly Kingdom of Hong Xiuquan*. (Princeton, NJ: W. W. Norton & Company, 1996), 46-50, 60-65.
[31] Melissa Wei-Tsing Inouye, "Miraculous Mundane: The True Jesus Church and Chinese Christianity in the Twentieth Century" (Ph.D. diss., Harvard University, 2011), 2.
[32] Inouye, "Miraculous," 52.

missionaries as tribal chiefs, but they showed little remorse for their pre-Christian sins such as ritual infanticide. They also reported mystical visions that did not conform to standard Christian tropes, and generally confounded the missionaries' hopes for ecstatic revival, although they did sometimes adopt the Christian religion. According to the missionaries' observations, the children of the first converts, the second generation, slid into a kind of formal religion. They had not committed infanticide and were relatively unconcerned with what they believed to be more mundane sins such as sexual immorality. With the passage of time, however, the Christian message could make an impact among these second-generation Christians and their children. Eventually, even if it took another generation or two, archetypal Christian revivals began to emerge. Congregants were emotionally overcome, repented of their sinfulness, and began to relish religious services and meetings.[33]

Though there were differences between conversion in China and the South Pacific, the arc of the Nee family experience almost perfectly tracks that of the South Pacific Protestants. The first generation experienced what appears to be a genuine, if relatively unemotional conversion. The second generation slid into what can be regarded as formal religion. Eventually, the second and third generation experienced archetypal revivals, with emotional repentance for sin and a visceral embrace of Christian theology and practices.

Nor was the Nee family alone. Liang A-Fa, a first-generation Chinese Protestant, wrote a five-hundred page "tract" that showed little evidence of deep emotion or powerful experiences, of the sort many missionaries desired. Liang's theology was not shallow: he emphasized the divinity of Jesus, and saw hope for the salvation of the world in Jesus's teachings, particularly. Yet even though Liang's conversion was earnest, and he rejected other gods in favor of the

[33] Niel Gunson, *Messengers of Grace: Evangelical Missionaries in the South Seas 1797-1860* (Melbourne; New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), 217-236

"merits of Christ," his Christian conversion did not produce an obvious, expressive "heart piety."[34]

Liang's experience can be contrasted with the effusive conversion narratives of Lin Heping, Watchman Nee, or their fellow Fuzhou revivalist John Sung (*Song Shangjie*, 1901-1944). During the Republican Era, Chinese religion was increasingly shaped by these second- and third-generation Christians who had internalized the Christian message at an almost instinctive level. Sung was a pastor's son who spoke about almost losing his faith to theological liberalism during graduate studies at Union Theological Seminary. Contemplating suicide, he was saved by a vision of Jesus, who commissioned him to become a herald of the gospel. Sung returned to China to preach a fiery message, denouncing sin and exhorting thousands of Chinese to make emotional, public confessions.[35]

The framework of the European Enlightenment shaped evangelical expectations regarding conversion and revival. One of the most cherished evangelical themes was the emphasis on personal experience. Evangelical missionaries hoped that individual, non-Christian Chinese would repent for their sins and experience conversion. The Chinese experience, however, complicates this standard narrative. Mirroring and confirming the experiences of the South Pacific, the Chinese case suggests that the process of Christian conversion cannot be limited to individual experience, or even to the span of an individual human life. While conversion can indeed occur on an individual level, some of the most stunning successes are only seen after a longer process of Christianization, when native daughters and sons have internalized Christian themes along with their indigenous cultures. Only then are they able to craft effective

[34] Jonathan Seitz, ed., *Liang A-Fa: China's First Preacher, 1789-1855* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2013), xx.
[35] Lian Xi, *Redeemed by Fire*, 140-144.

emotional appeals, re-working evangelical themes of sin, repentance, and conversion in ways that resonate with native ears and native hearts.

If Nee's conversion story reveals something of his deep roots in the Christian tradition, the emotional tenor of the story suggests another Western influence, one that had already spread widely throughout China, far beyond Christian circles. In Nee's account, the pathos of the story reaches its highest pitch when he said, "I saw the Lord's hands nailed to the cross, and at the same time I saw Him stretching forth His arms to welcome me." Coming immediately on the heels of his recognition of his own filthy sinfulness, he declares, "Overwhelmed by such love, I could not reject it."

On the one hand, the emotional invitation of a loving Savior beckoning toward sinners echoed classic evangelical themes. The American evangelist Dwight Lyman Moody (1837-1899) was famous for appealing to audiences with his use of sentimental anecdotes and examples, matched with stirring music.[36] On the other hand, Nee's appeal to his reader's sense of sympathy and his description of his overwhelming feelings also had significant interactions with developing Chinese conceptions about emotion, especially love. One fascinating facet of Nee's work is his careful balancing of different paradigmatic worldviews regarding the proper function and place of human emotions.

The drastic changes in Chinese attitudes toward love can be seen in Nee's autobiography as well as his teachings. After his dynamic salvation, Nee set about pursuing the conviction that his conversion must change the whole course of his life. He briefly attended Dora Yu's Bible training institute before returning to Trinity College to continue his studies and finish his degree. Although he continued to excel academically, he had lost his ambition to reach "scholastic

[36] George Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 36.

attainment in the field of Chinese literature." Instead, he had "little interest in books. Others read novels in class, but I diligently studied the Bible."[37]

In a sign of the temper of the times, it is likely that many of the novels that Nee's schoolmates were reading in class were of the sentimental "Mandarin Duck and Butterfly" school. This was a label that was first used by critics of a small circle of popular authors in the late 1910s. The "mandarin ducks" and "butterflies" they referred to were classical Chinese tropes for pairs of lovers. Over the years, the scope of narratives that were covered under this label expanded, but love stories were always among the most popular, as the works adapted to the rapidly changing social norms around romantic love.[38]

At this critical juncture in Nee's life, he found a spiritual mentor in the independent English missionary, Margaret Emma Barber (1866-1930) whose influence on Nee touched almost every aspect of his thought and stretched over the course of his life. In March of 1921, she baptized both Nee and Heping.[39] At the time, Nee was trying ardently if ineffectively to convert his classmates. Under Barber's influence, he came to realize that the power of effective evangelism lay with being "filled by the Holy Spirit to receive power from above." For Barber, this process required that a person give herself or himself to God unreservedly and forsake any intervening sins. Thus, Nee "went to at least two or three hundred people to confess offenses… But despite further dealings in many ways, I still could not gain strength."[40] Finally, Nee realized that the problem was his love for a young woman, Charity Chang (張品蕙, 1902-1971), whom he would marry many years later.

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[37] CWWN 26, 444, 453.
[38] Perry Link, *Mandarin Ducks and Butterflies: Popular Fiction in Early Twentieth-Century Chinese Cities* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1981), 7.
[39] CWWN 18, *Notes on Scriptural Messages (2),* 305.
[40] CWWN 26, 458.

Nee and Chang had been childhood friends.[41] Their long acquaintance and the gradual nature of its change may account for the somewhat vague timeline Nee supplies regarding the development of his feelings for her. In any case, Nee dates the final resolution of this crisis of heart to early 1922, which suggests that he must have fallen in love with her while still in his teens.[42] In Nee's words, the confrontation opened with a passage of the Scripture:

> One day while seeking a theme from the Bible before delivering a message, I randomly opened the Bible and Psalm 73:25 appeared before my eyes: "Whom have I in heaven but thee? And there is none upon the earth that I desire besides thee." After reading these words I said to myself, "the writer of this psalm can say that, but I cannot." I discovered then that there was something between me and God.[43]

Nee began to question "whether she or the Lord would have first place in my heart." His feelings were all the more problematic because Charity was then decidedly uninterested in religious matters. She greeted his attempts to convert her with mocking laughter, much as he himself had treated Christians before his own conversion. Although their lives seemed to be heading in opposite directions, Nee rather understatedly remarks, "once young people have fallen in love, they find it very difficult to give up their beloved."[44]

In his own testimony, Nee narrates an intense back-and-forth between God and himself. He asked God to "be patient and impart strength to me until I could give her up." He tried to bargain and "considered going to the frontier of desolate Tibet to evangelize and suggested many other enterprises to God, hoping that He might be moved not to raise again the question of my giving up the one I loved." His language eventually evokes the languishing and struggling that characterizes so many romantic stories, albeit with a distinctly Christian cast.

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[41] On the Nee and Chang families' long friendship see Kinnear, *Against*, 37, 80-81.
[42] This confirms Witness Lee's account that these things took place "When Watchman Nee was a teenager" in *Watchman Nee: A Seer*, 97. Although Nee gives the 1922 date in his own account (CWWN 26, 459), he also claims that it was "About ten years before our marriage [in 1934]" that he was in love with Charity (CWWN 26, 458). The ten year span is best understood as an ambiguous frame for a gradual process.
[43] Nee, CWWN 26, 458.
[44] Nee, CWWN 26, 458.

> No matter how hard I prayed, I could not get through. I had no enthusiasm for my studies in school, and at the same time I failed to acquire the power of the Holy Spirit, which I was earnestly seeking. I was in great distress. I prayed constantly, hoping that my earnest supplication might change God's mind. Thank the Lord that all along He wanted me to learn to deny myself, to lay aside human love, and love Him with a single heart. Otherwise, I would be a useless Christian in His hand. He cut down my natural life with a sharp knife so that I might learn a lesson which I had never learned before.[45]

Once again, Nee's struggle seemed to arise, at least in part, from his own absolute temperament. Nee felt that God's calling required a "single heart" and he refused to compromise God's demand for the sake of his personal feelings. Similar struggles were recounted in evangelical narratives throughout the West, and in fact, Nee's crisis seems to have been provoked in part by Barber's sharing the testimony of an American Christian, who was called to give up a Ph.D. in order to receive the filling of the Holy Spirit even though the doctorate "seemed a sure thing" and was the goal that he had "cherished for thirty years, ever since childhood."[46] Barber's temperament matched Nee's, and her teachings posed a meaningful challenge that he understood and accepted.

Nee struggled for weeks before reaching a resolution, a date he seemed to remember as clearly as that of his initial conversion. Finally, he wrote that on February 13, 1922, "I was filled with [the Lord's] love and I was willing to lay my loved one down and loudly declare, 'I will lay her aside! Never will she be mine!'" Nee records that he experienced the joy of heaven "The world appeared smaller to me, and it was as if I were mounting the clouds and riding the mists." The very next week, "people began to be saved." Within the next two years, the number of those converted would grow to several hundred. With the sacrifice of his heart's desire, Nee's ministry was born.[47]

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[45] CWWN 26, 459.
[46] CWWN 26, 456-8.
[47] CWNN 26, 460.

The contemporary Chinese background of Nee's struggle lends it special poignancy. The importance of romantic love had significant practical consequences. As was the case for his father and grandfather, his parents arranged a marriage for him. Unlike his father and grandfather, he eventually rejected the engagement. More than twelve years later, to Nee's complete surprise, Charity would reappear in his life. Eventually, the two were finally married in a "love marriage" of their own choosing. Such a turn of events would have been shocking and scandalous in their parent's generation.

Nee's own marriage proves that he was influenced by the rapidly changing societal attitudes toward love and emotion around him. In fact, these changes would have complex and far-reaching effects on his work. Recent scholarship has carefully mapped the significant changes in Chinese cultural attitudes regarding emotions around the span of Nee's life. Within a few generations, Chinese intellectuals went from seeing *qing*, or sentiment, as a way to access cosmological principles of ethical action to esteeming voluntary, romantic love as itself the highest good of human life. [48]

This exalted view of romantic love would be challenged. Traditionalists fought to preserve a hierarchical family structure in which parents made marital decisions for their children. Revolutionaries saw romantic love as important only insofar as it furthered societal well-being, or as a private good to be sacrificed on the altar of national revival. Nevertheless, voluntary romantic love achieved a level of importance that it never fully relinquished. This change in evaluation was not limited to the elite, but was readily accessible and understandable

[48] Haiyan Lee, *Revolution of the Heart: A Genealogy of Love in China, 1900-1950* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2010). On the Confucian cosmology of *qing* see 33-35, and on the importance and Western influences of romantic love see 97.

even to otherwise marginal figures.[49] Chinese people increasingly paid attention to the inward feelings and judgments of individuals as authentic, valuable expressions of the self, corresponding to what philosopher Charles Taylor has suggested is a hallmark of modern, Western identity. Nee's own sensitivity to these concerns helps to mark his work as part of the modern Chinese conversation.[50]

The Emotional Complexity of Nee's Work

Both Nee's personal charisma and the enduring appeal of his work owe much to his remarkable emotional acuity. He adapted the changing Chinese conversation on love to a Christian rubric, which synthesized pre-modern and modern ideas on the value of individual emotions. His work strikes a careful balance between arguing for personal feelings as sources of meaning in an exalted interior space and arguing for feelings as subordinate parts of a larger system. Rhetorically and theologically, his solutions could be powerfully convincing to his audience.

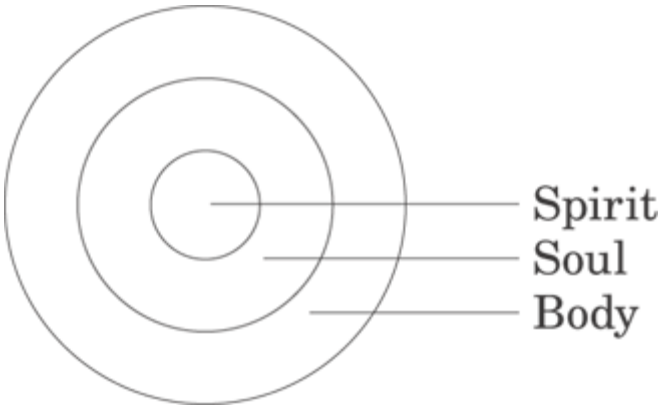
Nee's mystical, ascetic writings delve deeply into the internal structures that compose human consciousness. *The Spiritual Human*, first published in 1928, has frequently been referred to as Nee's *magnum opus*. The book is a theological anthropology that is almost entirely concerned with delineating his view of what comprises a human being. Nee himself refers to that work as a "biblical psychology," and academics who have studied Nee have occasionally followed suit.[51] Although Nee's thought extends far beyond his anthropology, it is still an

[49] Bryna Goodman, "'Words of Blood of Tears': Petty Urbanites Write Emotion" *Nan Nü 11 (2009) 270-301*. Goodman shows that during the 1920s, the poor clerk, Wang Shichang, understood romance to be a way to "uplift, exalt, and dignify his existence," quite apart from any other social goods and virtues (283).
[50] Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1989).
[51] CWWN 12, xv. Ken Pa Chin, "Watchman Nee's 'Biblical Psychology'" (倪柝聲的「聖經心理學」) in *Contemporary Christian Theology in 2011: An Academic Conference*, 19-34 and William Clyde Bassett, "The

excellent starting point for understanding the rest of his ideas and the place of human emotions within them.

Nee's understanding of the three parts of the human being is a consistent concern in many of his writings.[52] This consistency and his general orientation toward the interior workings of human beings owe much to his early acquaintance with Margaret Emma Barber. In the context of Nee's interactions with his contemporary Chinese context, it is helpful to use Nee's own words to briefly sketch out the complex terrain he envisioned for the place of human emotion and love, with the understanding that these ideas were often derived from other Christians and always grounded in careful scriptural exegesis.[53]

For Nee, the very shape of the human being suggested some of the limits and possibilities not only of emotions but also of human rationality and willpower. Drawing from various biblical texts, Nee argued that the entire Bible offered a consistent anthropology in which humans consisted of three parts, spirit, soul, and body. It is helpful to imagine the three parts as three concentric circles. The spirit, soul, and body are nested, like Russian dolls.



Formulation of a Basis for Counseling from a Christian Theory of Personality as Represented by C. S. Lewis and Watchman Nee." Ed.D., University of Arkansas, 1976.

[52] One of the Nee's earliest writings, possibly completed in 1922, is "The Distinction Between the Spirit, the Soul, and the Body" in CWWN 1, 7. In one of his latest writings, in 1950, he spoke at length on "The Quality of the [Human] Spirit", CWWN 62, 441-460.

[53] In the opening of *The Spiritual Man*, Nee admits that "The teaching of the difference between the soul and the spirit did not originate with me… Because there are so many places where I have referenced [others], I have not made specific reference to the sources." CWWN 12, xvi. The book begins with an exhaustive list of all the places where the Hebrew and Greek words for spirit, soul, flesh, heart, "nous", and mind are used, and much of the work is exegetical, taken up with careful explanations of Nee's scriptural insights and his attempts to reconcile various uses of these terms in the scriptural record.

The outermost circle represented the body, the simplest and most straightforward part of the human being. It included all the physical, visible aspects of the human person and was designed to contact the physical world. Within the body was the soul, which contains most of the functions and abilities that are commonly understood to be psychological. For Nee, this included primarily three elements, the emotion, mind, and will, roughly corresponding to the territory of feelings, thoughts, and choices. Finally, within the soul was the spirit, the deepest and highest part of the human being. It was in the human spirit that God could be joined to humanity. Once a person underwent the initial experience of salvation, which Nee called regeneration, he also "received a new spirit and, at the same time, received the Holy Spirit to abide in him forever." That is to say, the human spirit that had been deadened by sin became enlivened by Christ. From that point on, "the new spirit and God, who begot it, are eternally inseparable."[54] In short, one could say that "The body is the seat of 'world consciousness,' the soul is the seat of 'self-consciousness,' and the spirit is the seat of 'God-consciousness.'"[55]

Adopting Nee's rubric of consciousness clarifies some of the radical implications of this idea. Few people would claim to be conscious of God for more than, at most, a few scattered moments in the course of an entire human life. And yet, the Bible clearly commands Christians on multiple occasions to "walk by the spirit."[56] Nee argued that walking by the spirit "is a moment by moment matter in which we cannot be relaxed in the slightest."[57] In other words, God meant for all Christians to daily, constantly experience a consciousness of God that some might otherwise consider to be the rarefied province of spiritual virtuosos. In contrast, Nee argued that regeneration gave all believers God's own life, which included an "immense, cosmic

[54] CWWN 13, 225
[55] CWWN 12, 8. 體就是『世界知覺』的所在。魂就是『自己知覺』的所在。靈就是『神知覺』的所在。
[56] Romans 8:4, Galatians 5:16, 25.
[57] CWWN 13, 357. 這是時時該做的事，不可稍微放鬆的。

capacity, allowing the believer to advance continuously. From this time on, the Holy Spirit would be able to lead the believer forward until the body and soul were completely defeated."[58]

The possibility of a life spent in the presence of God was balanced by the concession that much of what passed for normal, daily life was, in fact, below God's standard—this included moral, or even explicitly Christian behavior. Nee had relatively little to say about sins and fleshly behavior—the uglier problems of lust, anger, gluttony, and the like. Since many people would readily agree that such vices should be avoided, there was no reason to belabor the point. He was concerned, instead, with the seemingly righteous acts in which "the strength of the self is used to fulfill God's demand."[59] In Nee's language, a soulish believer who performed such acts might think himself to be living an exemplary Christian life, not realizing that "all his work and life are merely centered on and motivated by his 'self.'"[60] This leads to an ugly hypocrisy, in which a person's piety masks his self-satisfaction, self-seeking, self-righteousness, and hidden pride. Conversely, when a Christian acted from his human spirit, he had no room for arrogance since the spirit was one with God. Even when the agent was human, God could claim credit as the ultimate source of moral action.

Nee believed that emotion "occupies the greater part" of the three parts of the soul to the extent that "nearly all the actions of soulish believers originate from their emotion."[61] His careful explication of a typical believer's emotional life show both that he maintained a modern notion of a "self" in which private feelings and experiences are constitutive of personal identity and that he understood the limits and challenges of self-definition in relation to such feelings and experiences.

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[58] NTSWJ 12, 63.
[59] CWWN 12, 143. 明言之，即藉著己的，去供應神的要求。
[60] CWWN 12, 173.
[61] CWWN 13, 423.

> The more we consider the function of our emotional life, the more we know its fluctuation and undependability. If believers do not live according to the spirit but according to their emotion, is it any wonder that their living undulates like the waves? Many believers feel sad about their living because their experiences are so unstable. Sometimes they seem to be in the third heavens transcending everything of the human life; at other times they seem to descend and share in the lot of ordinary men.[62]

Nee believed that his audience shared his assumption that people frequently lived their lives and evaluated their experiences according to their feelings. Nee also offered an alternative in which the emotions, rather than dominating a person's sense of self could be subordinated to the spirit as God had originally intended. He was careful to ward off conceptions of such a life as sterile and unfeeling, and his language hints at the common idea of love as an ultimate end of human life. He argues that the spiritual person is not "exceedingly hard, like iron or rock," a person "without affection." "On the contrary," he continues, "the most tender, sympathetic, merciful, and loving person is a spiritual one."[63]

In some places, Nee argues that love is of supreme value not only for human beings, but also for God. Nee suggests that "In the experience of a believer, perhaps the most difficult thing is to submit to the Lord in the matter of love. But the Lord pays attention to the believer's love more than anything else."[64] He argues for a strict, severe, and absolute standard—one in which God is loved above all, and the sacrifice of any other love may be demanded—a sacrifice that he himself had made when he renounced Charity. Thus, Nee writes:

> In the matter of a believer's love, God requires him to love Him fully. The Lord is not willing to share the heart of the believer with anyone or anything. Even if His share is the major portion. He still is not pleased. The Lord demands absoluteness. This is a deathblow to the believer's soul-life which is totally for the self. The Lord wants us to part with what we love and not have a divided heart. He wants us to love Him fully and to love according to Him. "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind" (Matt. 22:37). The word "all" means that every part of our being is for the Lord. The Lord does not want us to withhold any of our love so that we can love according to

[62] CWWN 13, 424-5.
[63] CWWN 13, 434-5.
[64] CWWN 13, 437.

> our wish. He wants absoluteness. He is a "jealous God" (Exo. 20:5) who will not allow anyone else to gain the love of His children.[65]

Such a standard could certainly be off-putting to many. Nee's works are not especially amenable to those who prefer less intense, less demanding forms of Christian practice. Still, the careful balance Nee strikes in this passage is apparent. Nee gives voice to the suspicion that emotions and love work in service of larger social virtues and causes, as Confucians and revolutionaries in China well understood. Here, however, the higher cause is God's own purpose and desire. Though God's purpose has cosmic dimensions and implications for human societies, God is portrayed as a person with feelings. Nee thus relies on modern presuppositions regarding emotional states as deeply constitutive of personalities, in this case, God's personality as defined by God's desire for love.

Nee's writing on this topic could be stirring and eloquent. The severity of God's standard was matched with the tenderness of God's wooing. Influenced by those who sought to enshrine romantic love as the preeminent end of human life, Nee boldly pressed into territory that other Chinese Christians approached with trepidation. There is no record of any previous Chinese Christian engaging in even a brief commentary on the Song of Songs, and for good reason. The famously poetic book may be unique in the Christian Bible for its apparently frank embrace of romantic and even sexual love. The narrative of the book is largely told in matching dialogue as a pair of lovers expresses their longing for one another and their appreciation for each other's attributes. With its evocative descriptions of breasts, bellies, and thighs, the book would have seemed pornographic to many Chinese readers.

[65] CWWN 13, 437-8. In Chinese, third person pronouns may be distinguished not only for gender but also for deity (他/她/祂). In the CWWN this difference is clarified with capitalization when it refers to a divine subject, which follows Nee's own practice in his English language works. I have continued the same practice here.

And yet, Nee not only referenced the Song of Songs repeatedly throughout the span of his ministry, in 1934 he also devoted an entire series of messages to expounding the Song of Songs, one of only three biblical books he ever attempted to explain in its entirety.[66] And for Nee, the Song of Songs was important because it was a book about romantic love *par excellence*. He introduces his commentary by describing the book as an exhortation to love the Lord for himself, not for his victory or even for his cross. Eschewing classic Christian interpretations which saw the female figure in the Song of Songs as a symbol of the church, Nee insists that it represented individual Christian instead. Thus, for Nee, the Song of Songs "does not refer to the church's corporate pursuit of the Lord. It begins with a person's yearning for the Lord and ends with his satisfaction in fellowship with Him." Thus, "this book shows that we are a wife to the Lord, who is our Husband."[67]

This emphasis on personal romantic love was popular with Nee's followers as well. A number of letters written to Nee invoke the Song of Songs. At least one of these letters suggests that Nee's followers had conducted their own Bible study on the Song of Songs, a topic that would have been unthinkable in any other Chinese Christian group.[68]

Beyond China as well, Nee's allusions to romantic love include some of his most popular and moving passages. Overseas, Nee's most widely read book is *The Normal Christian Life*, which ends with a chapter on "The Goal of the Gospel." The entire chapter focuses on the story of the woman who broke an alabaster flask filled with expensive ointment on Jesus's feet on the night before his crucifixion. Following other biblical interpreters, Nee conflates the various gospel accounts and identifies the woman as Mary, the sister of Martha.

[66] For a few among numerous examples of Nee's other references to the Song of Songs see CWWN 2, 206-7; CWWN 5, 641; CWWN 53, 246.
[67] CWWN 23, 6.
[68] CWWN 32, 486-7.

In his exegesis of this passage Nee first examines the question of "waste"—since Judas and the disciples criticized Mary for having purchased and poured out such costly material. They suggested that the money could have gone to the poor instead. Nee points out quite reasonably that waste is a question of value. A person wastes when they "give something too much for something too little."[69] He then interrogates the relative values that have been assigned.

> Have our eyes been opened to see the preciousness of the One whom we are serving? Have we come to see that nothing less than the dearest, the costliest, the most precious, is fit for him? Have we recognized that working for the poor, working for the benefit of the world, working for the souls of human beings and for the eternal good of the sinner—all these so necessary and valuable things—are right only if they are in their place? In themselves, as things apart, they are as nothing compared with work that is done *to the Lord*.
>
> The Lord has to open our eyes to His worth. If there is in the world some precious art treasure, and I pay the high price asked for it, be it one thousand, ten thousand, or even fifty thousand pounds, dare anyone say it is a waste? The idea of waste only comes into our Christianity when we underestimate the worth of our Lord. The whole question is: How precious is He to us now? If we do not think much of Him, then of course to give Him anything at all, however small, will seem to us a wicked waste. But when He is really precious to our souls, nothing will be too good, nothing too costly for Him; everything we have, our dearest, our most priceless treasure, we shall pour out upon Him, and we shall not count it a shame to have done so.[70]

Nee's perspective, and even his fixation on value as a concept, suggest similarities to other Chinese thinkers who have traditionally thought in axiological terms. Nee uses the concept of value to set up his rhetorical emphasis, the supreme and ultimate preciousness of Christ. On this point, Nee's use of romantic and axiological themes coincide easily. If, as historian Diarmaid MacCulloch suggests, "Christianity is, at root, a personality cult," then Nee focuses with great intensity on the crux of the Christian message.[71] The emphasis on the distinction between the spirit and the soul neatly and purposefully parallels the distinction between focusing on Christ alone instead of working out all the "necessary and valuable things" that are frequently

[69] CWWN 33, 186.
[70] CWWN 33, 193.
[71] Diarmaid MacCulloch, *Christianity: The First Three Thousand Years*, (New York: Penguin Books, 2011), 1

considered to be goals for Christian service. Here Nee certainly intends to indict both liberal and conservative Christian preoccupations alike with his dismissal of the relative value of "working for the poor, working for the benefit of the world, working for the souls of human beings and for the eternal good of the sinner."

Nee's mysticism has distinctly polemic and apologetic ramifications. A person in spirit may do any of these works or none of them, but her service is the only true service. Even if she seems to accomplish much less than the great deeds of other Christians, such a shortfall is a "waste" only in the eyes of Judas and the disciples. Jesus himself approves, proclaiming that "Wheresoever the gospel shall be preached…that also which this woman hath done shall be spoken of."[72] Nee clearly understands that his words may not gain wide currency. According to his explanation, Judas typifies the secular world, and the disciples, the religious world. Both despise Mary's actions and intentions as obviously "wasteful." Nevertheless, Nee continues to address those who are inspired by her actions. He concludes this passage and his book with the following:

> There must be something—a willingness to yield, a breaking and a pouring out of everything to Him—which gives release to that fragrance of Christ and produces in other lives an awareness of need, drawing them out and on to know the Lord. This is what I feel to be the heart of everything. The Gospel has as its one object the producing in us sinners of a condition that will satisfy the heart of our God. In order that He may have that, we come to Him with all we have, all we are—yes, even the most cherished things in our spiritual experience—and we make known to Him: "Lord, I am willing to let go all of this for You: not just for Your work, not for Your children, not for anything else at all, but altogether and only for Yourself!
>
> Oh to be wasted! It is a blessed thing to be wasted for the Lord. So many who have been prominent in the Christian world know nothing of this. Many of us have been used to the full—have been used, I would say, too much—but we do not know what it means to be wasted on God. We like to be always "on the go": the Lord would sometimes prefer to have us in prison. We think in terms of apostolic journeys: God dares to put His greatest ambassadors in chains…

[72] CWWN 33, 190.

> The Lord grant us grace that we may learn how to please Him. When, like Paul, we make this our supreme aim (2 Cor 5:9), the Gospel will have achieved its end.[73]

Nee here talks about the "heart of everything"—the passionate self-sacrifice that is constitutive of love. Although self-abnegation is related to many varieties of love, in Nee's mind, as in the gospel passage, romantic love is clearly the most appropriate analogy. Nee carefully and circumspectly follows the biblical record, but the sensuous undertones of the passage are unmistakable. Besides the concept of waste, the different versions of this story in the four gospels contain a number of other potentially scandalous details. In some accounts, Mary unbinds her hair in public and uses it to apply the ointment. In others versions, she repeatedly kisses Jesus's feet. Even in Nee's retelling, there is no way to escape his choice of a biblical narrative in which the main players are an adult woman and adult man whose love is misunderstood and undervalued by all those around them. Both the vehemence and the purity of this desire also suggest romantic love. For Nee, the singular object of the gospel is to "satisfy the heart of our God." God wants those who "may learn how to please Him." For this purpose, everything else may be cast aside—and the Christian should be not only "wasted for the Lord" but also "wasted on God."

The final power of Nee's plea for his readers to cultivate a "willingness to yield, a breaking and a pouring out of everything to Him" depends on the individual reader's taste for emotional appeals and preconceptions regarding the value of Christ, as Nee himself clearly recognized. Nevertheless, it is certain that both the appeal of Nee's work and its frequent classification as devotional literature owe much to the fervent heart-centered piety at its core. Although generally depreciated by serious academics and literary critics, both romantic and

[73] CWWN 33, 196-7.

devotional media are wildly popular in many cultures, contexts, and historical periods. This was as true in Nee's day as it is in the present.[74]

Another reason for the success of Nee's works, however, is the way his writing on such subjects carefully and subtly recognizes the limits of human emotion even while appealing to them. In times of crisis and great political endeavors, romantic language can seem superficial and extravagant. Nee is careful never to argue for emotional gratification for its own sake. And yet, in Nee's understanding, God, like Solomon in the *Song of Songs*, also seeks romantic fulfillment. Taken as a whole, Nee's writings both exalt human love and keep it carefully circumscribed. For Nee, true love is initiated by God and also finds its end in God. This is classically Christian, even as he carefully negotiates the conflicting registers of emotion prevalent in Republican China.

Furthermore, by locating God in the human spirit and arguing that the spirit is deeper than the soul, Nee places a mysterious shroud around the Christian relationship with God, hiding its essence from explanation and over-analysis, two obvious challenges to romantic ardor. This intellectual move conflates Christians' search for God with their recognition of their own true identity. Christians search for and find God in the core of their own being. While it is demanding, there is also much that is attractive in such a theological system. Its demand for total purity channels the tendency toward self-sacrifice inherent in love and claims universal significance for them, that is, the satisfaction of God's own heart.

The Beginning of Nee's Writing and Publication

Watchman Nee thus experienced two initial conversions. In 1920, he accepted Christ as his savior while in 1922, he rejected his love for Charity and accepted Christ as the paramount

[74] Link, *Mandarin Ducks and Butterflies*.

love of his life. These dual conversions set him on a journey that would define the rest of his life. Nee's first experience in practical church leadership appears to have started with his relentless and eventually successful evangelization of his schoolmates. By 1923, hundreds of believers had been gained and a core group of leaders had coalesced. This core was composed of seven young men, including Nee. Five of the others had been Nee's "schoolmates since childhood" and the other was Leland Wang (1898-1975), a naval officer who had resigned his post as the first mate of a small gunboat to preach as a revivalist. All of them were laboring as "co-workers" under the supervision of Margaret Barber, seeking to evangelize all of Fuzhou.[75]

This burgeoning success in the gospel caused Nee to consider publishing Christian writings as another avenue of ministry, one that would arguably prove to be even more far reaching and long lasting than his leadership of local Christians and congregations. By late 1922, Nee began to think about publishing *The Revival*, a periodical that would address the needs of the many new Christians he and his co-workers had converted.

Nee started his first publication while staying at the Wang household at Leland's request, caring for the family while Leland was on an evangelistic campaign. At the time Nee was "extremely pressed financially."[76] Nee had recently begun "living by faith," having told his parents that he would no longer accept their financial assistance.[77] Thus, Nee and Leland's wife, Ada, began to pray every day for a month for the funds to begin a publication. After a month of prayer, with no money in sight, Nee felt that insisting on further prayer would only manifest a lack of faith and he began writing instead. After the drafts were completed, Nee and Ada again got on their knees to pray, eventually praising God that their prayers had been heard.[78]

[75] CWWN 26, 463-4.
[76] CWWN 26, 465.
[77] CWWN 26, 482.
[78] CWWN 26, 465.

Nee writes that "The amazing thing was that we had no more risen to our feet than there was a knock at the door." There stood a "wealthy yet stingy sister" who had recently been bothered about her "excessive devotion to money." She asked Nee about the biblical principle of donation, and Nee turned her attention to 2 Corinthians 9:7 in which Paul suggests that the Corinthians give "not out of sorrow or necessity, for God loves a cheerful giver." The unnamed sister asked where she should donate this money. Nee responded, "Do not give it to churches which oppose the Lord, nor to people who do not believe the Bible or the redemption of the Lord's shed blood. If no one contributes to them, they will not be able to carry on their preaching. Pray before each donation; then give it either to the poor or to some work, but never to an improper organization." In the end, she gave Nee thirty dollars, "just sufficient for the printing of fourteen hundred copies of *The Revival*."[79]

The Significance of Doubt in the Republican Context

On the face of it, Nee's story appears to conform to a standard narrative of a certain kind of Christian mission. By the early 20th century, the so-called "faith principle" had been well-established in some evangelical circles. Barber herself was a faith missionary and Nee followed the same principle for most of his life. According to this principle, Christian ministers refused to explicitly solicit funds or establish regular sources of income. Instead, when they needed material support, they prayed and trusted only in God. Although the faith principle could be practiced with different degrees of rigor and consistency, in general, dependence on God functioned as palpable evidence of God's existence and trustworthiness. Cutting out human intermediaries could also prove the minister's standing before God. Whereas God would never

[79] CWWN 26, 465-6.

neglect a righteous person, a lack of support could point to deficiencies in faith or failures in one's spiritual life.

The importance of trust and dependence imply the possibility of wavering and disbelief. The faith principle was partly born of the anxiety to prove God's continued intervention in the world. In telling the story of *The Revival*, Nee also mentioned "churches which oppose the Lord" and "people who do not believe the Bible or the redemption of the Lord's shed blood." All of these themes point to another significant theme of Republican Chinese religion, that is, doubt.

In terms of the relationship between religion and the state, the Republican period marked a turning point in Chinese history. For the first time, power was defined as secular, independent from religious concerns and in some ways, superior to them.[80] These changes and the growing influence of Western powers gave new urgency to longstanding Western critiques of Chinese religions. In response, Chinese religious actors and institutions engaged in many projects of serious reflection, self-criticism, and reforms throughout the Republican Period. For instance, the introduction to the antisuperstition law of 1928 quoted the famous late-Qing reformer Kang Youwei (1858-1927), who wrote that "Foreigners come in our temples, take photographs of the idols, show these photographs to each other and laugh."[81] The mockery of idols was Protestant religious polemic, which thus introduced new categories and terms to the Chinese religious debate. Chinese religious reformers often relied on a vital distinction between two neologisms, superstition (*mixin*) and religion (*zongjiao*), where superstition stood for the misguided beliefs

[80] Vincent Goossaert and David A. Palmer *The Religious Question in Modern China* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011); Rebecca Nedostup, *Superstitious Regimes: Religion and the Politics of Chinese Modernity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009); Peter Gue Zarrow, *After Empire: The Conceptual Transformation of the Chinese State, 1885-1924* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2012).
[81] Goosaert and Palmer, *The Religious Question*, 73.

and practices that deserved mockery while religion preserved the essence of moral, beneficial beliefs and practices that deserved respect and state support.

Although Protestant Christians stood at the headwaters of many of these challenges, Protestant Christianity itself was also in the midst of a number of tumultuous internal debates that intimately involved both the Western missionaries and indigenous Chinese Christians.[82] The most basic of these controversies took place between the so-called modernists and the fundamentalists, a disagreement that would end up splitting a number of major American denominations.

Especially in his earliest works, like *The Revival*, Nee engaged directly with Christian modernists, whom Nee referred to as those who supposedly "oppose the Lord" and "do not believe the Bible or the redemption of the Lord's shed blood." In the context of his overall prodigious output, Nee did not spend much time combatting modernist thought. Nevertheless, in these earliest writings, Nee dealt directly with serious doubts that threatened what he understood to be central to the Christian faith.

One of the most significant religious trends in Republican China was the rise and growing strength of radical critiques of all religion. The philosophical materialism of the Communists cut across the distinction between superstition and religion, suggesting that *all* beliefs and practices related to supernatural forces and beings could be dismissed as erroneous, and even potentially harmful. While Nee generally avoided engaging with philosophical

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[82] On Protestant critiques of Chinese religions, see Eric Reinders, *Borrowed Gods and Foreign Bodies: Christian Missionaries Imagine Chinese Religion* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004). Rebecca Nedostup also suggests that the very idea of "religion" in Republican China was heavily influenced by Protestant ideas, *Superstitious Regimes*, 10-11. On the importance of the fundamentalist/modernist debate to Chinese Christians, among others, see Thomas Alan Harvey, *Acquainted with Grief: Wang Mingdao's Stand for the Persecuted Church in China* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2002) and Kevin Xiyi Yao, *The Fundamentalist Movement among Protestant Missionaries in China, 1920-1937* (Dallas, TX: University Press of America, 2003).

materialism as such, his polemics against the modernists engaged atheistic ideas by proxy. In this sense, Nee can be understood as a reformer not only in the context of Christianity, as he has usually been understood, but also as a religious reformer in the context of Republican Chinese religion. Nee's early responses to modernism have never been examined by scholars, but they place him in the larger intellectual and social milieu of Republican China.

The most prominent liberal Christians of the era were willing to significantly revise central Christian doctrines that seemed to conflict with philosophical materialism. By the 1930s, influential Chinese Christians such as T. C. Chao (Zhao Zichen) and L. C. Wu (Wu Leichuan) had written about the need to discard or seriously revisit traditional concepts of the Trinity, atonement for sin, Jesus's physical resurrection, miracles, the nature of the church, and eschatology. Many of these were dismissed as irrelevant, and radically new interpretations were given. At times, these liberal Christians explicitly admitted the role of doubt in catalyzing their theological projects, confessing that they had turned to liberal Christianity after their confidence in traditional Christian doctrines had been shaken by crises of faith.[83]

By 1943, the Christian leader Y. T. Wu (Wu Yaozong), was arguing that an atheistic revolutionary's confidence in the Marxist historical dialectic was *identical* to a religious person's faith in God. Wu admitted that to orthodox philosophical materialists and orthodox religious believers alike, such a statement might seem to be "an incomparably ridiculous heresy."[84] His assertion, however, rested on the basis of his definition of God, which was nothing more definite than a principle of singularity, or that which made the universe a universe rather than a

[83] Yamamoto, Sumiko. *History of Protestantism in China: The Indigenization of Christianity*. 1st ed. Tōkyō: Tōhō Gakkai (Institute of Eastern Culture), 2000. All three of the major figures Yamamoto covers, Wu Leichuan, Wu Yaozong, and Zhao Zichen expressed such sentiments.
[84] Yaozong Wu, *Mei you ren kanjian guo shangdi* (Shanghai: *Qingnian xiehui shuju*, 1946) 12-13. Wu's book was first published in 1943.

multiverse. This basic principle had been "unified, personified, and emotionalized" by human beings and attributed to the noun "God."[85] Wu was one of the national leaders of the Chinese YMCA, and in 1951 he would go on to found the Three Self Patriotic Movement (TSPM), the official Protestant church of the People's Republic of China.

In response to these liberal claims, fundamentalist Chinese Christians made bitter accusations. Wu and his teachings became something of a *bete noire* to Christian leaders such as Wang Mingdao, who suggested that Wu and other liberal leaders were "not Christians" and that the TSPM was an "anti-Christian institution."[86] This long-lasting cleavage stretched from the Republican Period to the present day, and has often been used as a primary lens for distinguishing different kinds of Chinese Christians.

In some ways, Nee defies easy categorization. At least in his published works, Nee never referred to Wu by name. And yet, especially in his earlier works, Nee directly responded directly to some of the doubts raised and addressed by Wu and other liberal Chinese Protestants. Eventually, Nee developed a thoughtful, careful response to the question of God's presence and intervention in the world. The resulting writings could speak both to those who maintained exuberant beliefs in spiritual forces and to those who harbored more skeptical reservations.

Nee's Early Doubts

During the 1920s, Nee wrote a number of short articles that were clearly aimed at those who doubted or denied classic Christian doctrines. In 1924, he wrote a short piece titled "Where is Heaven?" While trying to avoid provoking impious curiosity, Nee still felt the need to assert

[85] Wu, *Mei you ren*, 10.
[86] Harvey, Thomas Alan. *Acquainted with Grief: Wang Mingdao's Stand for the Persecuted Church in China*. (rand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2002), 82

the existence of heaven to "comfort many pilgrims on the heavenly journey," who were presumably upset that "the world has many conjectures" that heaven didn't exist, or was only a state of mind. To these doubts, Nee responded confidently, "The word of God will not fail."[87] Nee spent much of the article going through various verses in the Bible that refer to heaven, emphasizing the ways in which they all agreed that heaven was an actual place, whether it was above or "in the North." Nee concluded by admitting that some of these details may not be "of utmost importance." Nevertheless, "The important thing is to believe that there is a place called heaven," even in the face of "numerous attacks and mocking."[88] It seems that Nee's central concern was that doubts about heaven would reduce it merely to an insubstantial metaphor. He writes that if heaven is merely a "state of being" that is "within man's heart" or "within man's mind," then "it is rather confined and too ordinary."[89]

Similarly, at some point before 1927, Nee refuted the concept of universal salvation, arguing that it was a "very appealing" kind of doctrine that was nevertheless "a sugar-coated, poisonous pill." Nee argued that this "very popular and modernistic teaching" deceived people into ignoring their need to repent, confess their sins, and receive Jesus as their Savior.[90] Like his essay on heaven, the bulk of Nee's short piece is occupied with careful Biblical exegesis. In both tracts, Nee ends his work with an invitation to his reader to believe in Christ.

Together, these works may give some sense of the content of Nee's earliest evangelistic work during the early 1920s. Besides these essays, little evidence remains of that period. Nee was willing to address and refute questions and doubts common to contemporary educated audiences. He steadfastly held to the authority of traditional interpretations of the Bible and

[87] CWWN 2, 89.
[88] CWWN 2, 97.
[89] CWWN 2, 89.
[90] CWWN 2, 99.

matched these with careful exegesis. In the course of his exegesis, he laid out alternatives to philosophical materialism. In the case of heaven, Nee presented a consistent Biblical message that pointed to an extraordinary, blissful place for Christians. In the case of God's fatherhood, Nee described the enjoyable intimacy of a filial relationship in which Christians partook of God's own nature, holiness, and love.[91] Taken together, the two pieces refute common arguments and doubts regarding Christianity's supernatural, otherworldly emphasis and its claims to uniqueness.

In February of 1926, Nee published another short polemic, "Is the Higher Criticism of Modern Theology Believable?" This short essay is more combative than the other two, showing that for Nee, the stakes were higher. In his other essays, although Nee was occasionally polemical, he largely resolved doubts about the Christian message by appealing to the Bible's authority and the attractiveness of its message. This stance meant that doubts about the Bible itself cut to the root and core of his own faith, and forced him to confront the attacks more directly. As Nee writes, "If the Bible is not inspired by God, on what can we base our faith? Without the Bible as the basis of our faith, there is no ground to believe in the divine teaching as revealed in the Bible. The higher critics are purely materialistic because they have assigned all supernatural things to the category of the unbelievable."[92]

Nee tried various strategies to defend against these materialistic arguments. He quotes conservative archaeologists as authorities and "people with equal or higher intelligence than these critics."[93] Nee also suggests that higher criticism is methodologically unstable because higher critics had come to no definite conclusions. In fact, "There are almost as many different

[91] CWWN 2, 113-7.
[92] CWWN 2, 128.
[93] CWWN 2, 127.

conclusions about the Bible as there are critics!"[94] The doubts that could be raised were endless and were impossible to absolutely put to rest. Nee cited one of his professors at Trinity College who claimed that if the "method of the higher critics" were followed scrupulously, one might study Napoleon and conclude that Napoleon had never existed.[95] Furthermore, Nee objected to higher criticism on the grounds of its moral bankruptcy. It "cannot help people advance spiritually" nor "lead people to Christ" but only "corrupt people's faith." The bad fruit proved that the tree was also bad.[96]

Finally, Nee seems to recognize that at some level there were irreconcilable, different presuppositions as the basis of disagreement. While Nee believed that the Bible was inerrant, the higher critics had their "own standards of measurement" by which to judge the consistency and authorship of the Bible. In the end, one had to decide whether "Christ and the testimony of the Bible are more reliable or human philosophies are more reliable."[97] At the end of this tract, rather than inviting his readers to believe in Jesus, Nee calls for other Christians and "leaders in the church" to see the clear difference between the "modern camp and the traditional camp." He concludes:

> We would rather write books that no one reads than to oppose God's truth in an attempt to please the religious, social mentality. We would rather publish magazines that no one reads than to publish magazines that are an offense in God's eyes, which have thousands of subscribers. We would rather speak sermons that no one hears than to whitewash sinners, only to see them becoming sons of hell! "Whoever… does not doubt in his heart, but believes" (Mark 11:23). "Blessed are those who have not seen and have believed" (John 20:29).[98]

[94] CWWN 2, 125.
[95] CWWN 2, 126.
[96] CWWN 2, 127.
[97] CWWN 2, 125-6.
[98] CWWN 2, 129.

In light of the larger conversation around religion in Chinese society, it is telling that Nee ultimately characterizes the debate on higher criticism as a basic, irreconcilable conflict between doubt and belief in the immaterial. The polarizing influence of foreign missionaries, the anxiety concerning radical religious doubts raised by other Chinese, and Nee's own theological disposition may all have contributed to his depiction of higher critics in these stark, polarizing terms. In any case, these early writings show that Nee was never as fully insulated from his social milieu as some have suggested. The question of doubt, specifically around God's presence and intervention in the natural world, certainly occupied his attention in the years immediately following his conversion. This same problem finds a more interesting and subtle resolution in Nee's ethics.

Nee's Careful Regard for Supernatural Intervention

Nee himself avoided using the word ethics because he understood that the only acceptable kind of Christian living was Christ living through the believer. For Nee, ethics conjured up ideas of human practices and regulations rather than simple unity with Christ, who could not be bound by artificial rules. Nevertheless, in academic terms, much of Nee's thought, including some of his most interesting and original ideas, would be broadly considered under the rubric of ethics. Even Nee's central understanding of the super-cognitive union with Christ in the spirit, deeper than the soul and the mind, is not only metaphysical but ethical. The point is not only that such a union exists, but also that it is the *only* proper means of Christian life and conduct.

We can explore something of Nee's deeper negotiations with the problem of God's presence (or absence) in the natural order by studying his other early writings, this time on the

subject of healing. Nee suffered from a number of chronic conditions, including angina pectoris and an unspecified stomach illness.[99] His considerations on health and healing, then, were anything but theoretical. In fact, the book from which much of the subsequent discussion is drawn, *The Spiritual Man*, was written over four months in 1927 when Nee was desperately sick with tuberculosis. He later recalled, "At that time my disease became so aggravated that I could not even lie down. While writing I sat on a chair with a high back and pressed my chest against the desk to alleviate the pain… After completing each time of writing I would say to myself, 'This is my last testimony to the church.'"[100]

Many of Nee's basic premises accord with those of other teachers who believed in and practiced divine healing.[101] He begins his discussion with some of the most popular verses in the divine healing canon, Isaiah 53:4-5: "Surely He has borne our sicknesses… And by His stripes we have been healed." Nee points out the parallel with verse 12, in which Christ is also said to "bear the sin of many," and he argues that healing from sickness and the forgiveness of sins often seem to go together. In fact, Nee points out that in the gospel record, "Jesus seems to have done more healing work than anything else." Nee's explanation for this reflects on the biases of contemporary readers, and possibly his own as well. "This is because it was harder for the Jews to believe in the Lord's forgiveness of sins than in His healing of sickness (Matt. 9:5). However, believers today are completely the opposite… Believers today believe in His power to forgive

[99] Lee, *Watchman Nee*, 169-170. Weigh Kwang-hsi, one of Nee's childhood friends claimed that Nee's heart was "only half as big as a normal person's" and that at the time of his death, he had been suffering from heart disease for many years, causing him acute pain during fits of illness." CWWN 26, 450.
[100] CWWN 26, 473. See also, CWWN 12, xii-xiii where Nee hints at his near-death experiences in *The Spiritual Man's* preface.
[101] Many scholars now prefer the phrase "divine healing" to "faith healing" or "spiritual healing," following the adherents' own preferences. As Candy Gunther Brown writes in *Global Pentecostal and Charismatic Healing*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), divine healing "emphasizes that God's love, rather than merely human faith or an impersonal spiritual force, is the source of healing; it underscores the perceived need for supernatural intervention instead of implying that faith is a natural force that can be manufactured by human will; and it emphasizes that the object of faith, not simply the degree of faith or spirituality, matters in receiving healing" (4-5).

sins, but doubt His grace to heal sickness." Nee indicates that the lack of healing in modern readers is due to the lack of a balanced faith, which does not "divide up a perfect Savior into two halves"[102] but embraces both the healing of the soul and that of the body.

Thus, for Nee, sickness in the believer is a sign of God's special intervention. On the basis of Paul's letter to the Corinthians, Nee argues that sickness is God's way of chastising or disciplining Christians. Because of his theological anthropology, however, Nee's understanding of the purpose of this discipline is distinct. Though Nee briefly acknowledges that sickness may be punishment for sin, and that sickness may make help Christians to "recall and examine our life" in order to find "hidden sins," he identified the main problem as the self, which was his term for the fallen, sin-corrupted human soul. Again, for Nee, the soul encompassed all of what most would consider to be psychological faculties—primarily the emotion (feelings), mind (reason), and will (choices). Nee writes:

> Our daily life is too filled with our own will. In God's work, in our dealing with people and matters, in our thinking and opinions, there are too many indomitable wills. Therefore, God has to bring us to the door of death so that we will see the plight of those who resist Him. God allows us to pass through profound grief and pain in order to break us and cause us to give up the self-will that He deplores. Countless numbers of believers do not seem to hear what the Lord says to them during ordinary days, but when the Lord makes their bodies suffer, they become willing to obey completely. The Lord's way is to resort to scourging when the admonition of love has lost its effect. The purpose of His scourging is to break our self-will. It would be well for every sick believer to examine himself concerning this matter.[103]

Nee's insistence that Christians could live in constant union with Christ came with a significant demand. Like many other mystics, Nee understood transcendent experiences as the result of severe spiritual discipline. Christians must completely forsake their own wills. That is to say, they must not make all of the unthinking decisions and judgments by which most people live

[102] CWWN 14, 680-1.
[103] CWWN 14, 687.

their daily lives. At the root of all these choices, Nee saw something "indomitable"—an assertion of independence and identity that blocked people from following the Christ who was united to their spirit. Since most people were not aware of the depth and breadth of their self-will, God had to use sickness as a goad to reflection.

Similarly, Nee also saw sickness as an opportunity for God to expose the problem of self-love, another corrupted faculty of the soul. When people became sick, they often loved themselves all the more, pampering their bodies and praying desperately for healing. Nee argued that this was the very opposite of God's intention. God "wants us to realize that we love ourselves immensely. In the midst of a sickness, he wants us to learn not to look at our symptoms and care for our pain, but to look at Him wholeheartedly."[104] For this reason, Nee thought that medicine and other healing technologies were potentially spiritually dangerous. They turned Christians' attention away from God and toward the medium of God's healing. Illness presented Christians with a crucial question: "when a believer is driven by self-love to fervently seek healing and a cure in medicine, are his activities out of his own self, or are they done under the guidance of the Holy Spirit?"[105]

For Nee the problem of inner purity predominated, even when the stakes were human health and life. Of course, this demand for purity was also self-fulfilling. Those who had achieved purity by rejecting their own will and refusing to love themselves would be willing to accept even physical death from the hand of God. Whether God intervened to heal them directly, through other media, or not at all, they had already received the goal of their seeking. They had intimacy with the Holy Spirit and their attention was wholly occupied with Christ, the object of their love. Nee also sensed that this mysticism could be pursued to an extreme. He ends his

[104] CWWN 14, 688.
[105] CWWN 14, 690.

passage by cautioning those who "think they are closer to God when they are lonely and in pain" that they should recognize that, all things being equal, it is better to be healthy.[106]

Nee's discussion of healing reveals his understanding of the merits and problems of a robust belief in supernatural intervention. On the one hand, Nee agrees that God wants all his children to be healthy. Christians should claim Christ as both their redeemer and healer, and the lack of faith in the modern world is one of the main reasons that supernatural intervention is relatively rarely encountered. On the other hand, Nee's insistence on purity and the problem of the fallen soul suggests that external circumstances are meant to focus a Christian's attention on Christ alone, without any expectations for the self. Nee insists that this is true even in the case of sickness, where he recognizes that the instinctive tendency is to focus on oneself and one's own healing. In this sense, the natural course of the universe accomplishes God's will, even when he does not choose to intervene in the suffering of his beloved children.

For Nee, the purpose of this suffering—that is, the gaining of God himself—was worth the cost. He wrote that "The goal of the believer should not be merely to receive God's blessings. God Himself is more precious than all of His gifts." In other words, God's inner presence was the supernatural intervention in human affairs that mattered most. The problem of doubt was thus rendered irrelevant by the ideal Christian's indifference toward health, sickness, fortune, and calamity. Nee argued that God "desires to be the life of our body so that we may live by Him every moment." In such a life, "a moment's breath enables us a moment's living; nothing can be put in reserve. This is a life completely joined to and dependent upon the Lord," a life in which God himself "saturates our every nerve, blood vessel, and cell with His strength."[107] In sickness and in health, continual intimacy with God was the real end and reward of Christian living.

[106] CWWN 14, 695ff.
[107] CWWN 14, 717-8.

Nee's theology offered a vision of a universe in which all events worked to join people to God. This vision could foster an exuberant faith that God could work great miracles. It could also grant a transcendent passion that ultimately made life and death irrelevant. Conveyed in simple terms, Nee's prescriptions for human behavior were easily adaptable to a wide variety of audiences and expectations.

Patriotism and Watchman Nee

Although romantic love and religious doubts were important themes in Republican society and culture, patriotism undoubtedly overshadowed them both. Patriotism was arguably the dominant theme of the times, intersecting with many other aspects of Nee's life and thought. Patriotism commanded Lin Heping's fervent devotion and filled Watchman Nee's pre-conversion ideals and dreams. The demands of the nation also forced young Chinese to change and adjust their hopes and conceptions of romantic love in response to national crises. Finally, secular conceptions of the nation-state forced many religious actors to rethink some of their basic convictions. These new ideas fostered a number of significant religious reform movements, and it seems natural to place Nee's reform of Christianity in this context.

Scholars of Nee, however, have routinely ignored the role of patriotism in Nee's thought, except, at times, to argue for its absence. Most of the secondary works on Nee are unpublished theses and dissertations from seminaries, treating different aspects of Nee's thought in terms of systematic theology.[108] For these works, the general context of Nee's life has seemed largely irrelevant. Other academics, writing for broader audiences, have come to similar conclusions.[109]

[108] The entire list is rather exhaustive. At least sixteen graduate theses and dissertations have been written specifically about Nee's thought from a theological perspective. Only one or two have been published
[109] Daniel Bays, *A New History of Christianity in China* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), 132-133, Chloë Starr, *Chinese Theology: Text and Context* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2016), 4-5.

It is hard to believe, though, that Nee was absolutely insulated from the effects of patriotism. Not only was his mother deeply involved in patriotic causes during his youth, but also one of Nee's brothers, Shengzu, who joined two revolutionary societies and lost his life during a patriotic demonstration.[110]

There are good reasons that scholars have generally written Nee out of the dominant narrative of Republican patriotism. For one thing, his own writings suggest that he intentionally avoided appeals to patriotism and nationalism, and that he understood such ideologies to be fundamentally at odds with the Christian message. One of his earliest writings condemned Protestants for "the sin of nationalism," or their willingness to establish "national churches, the necessary creeds, and the power of politics as the backbone of the church."[111] Late in his life, in a series of lessons for new Christians, Nee also wrote about the importance of rejecting national bias:

> Some people are so strong in their nationalistic feelings that they cannot be Christians in a proper way. Though we are Chinese and under the jurisdiction of our country, this relationship ceases when we are in Christ. Whenever we come before the Lord, we do not come as a Chinese person. Such a consciousness should be kept outside the door. We hope new believers will see from the very beginning that we are linked together in the life of Christ. I have received the life of Christ, and a brother in England or a brother in India or Japan has also received the same life of Christ. We are united according to the life of Christ, not according to our nationalities. We must have a very clear vision about this. In the Body, in Christ, and in the new man, nationality does not exist. That distinction has been totally abolished.[112]

Written in the late 1940s, in the aftermath of a devastating war, Nee's reference to Japan is certainly deliberate, a way to declare emphatically his willingness to accept *all* Christians on the basis of a transcendent life, regardless of international or national politics. Nee's followers were obviously attracted by this message, and they have had no reason to challenge the scholarly

[110] Nee, *Against the Tide*, 113-4.
[111] CWWN 5, 494, 492.
[112] CWWN 48, 117.

assumption that Nee's work belongs only in the realm of universal ideas and systematic theology. Similarly, some of Nee's detractors have seen in such statements an unwillingness to join in the Chinese project of nation-building and a lack of good citizenship. Obviously, much depends upon the exact boundaries of "the jurisdiction of our country" and the nature of the metaphorical door separating the church from politics. Regardless of Nee's exact conception of the division between religion and politics, there seems to be an almost unanimous consensus. Nee, the scholars who have studied him, his followers, and his critics all agree that his primary interaction with Chinese patriotism was to reject it.

At least two recent works seriously challenge this premise. Grace May's dissertation on Nee portrays him as an indigenous theologian. Using historical materials, she recreates the Eucharistic liturgy at Trinity College as Nee might have experienced it during his college years. Services "tended to be wordy" and included "prayer for the crown of England." Furthermore, "the physical posture of communicants receiving the elements while kneeling especially before an English cleric undoubtedly caused many Chinese to bristle."[113] While neither Nee nor May makes the explicit connection, her work suggests that certain ritualistic practices of Western churches would have been grossly offensive to young Chinese.

It is unfortunate, however, that May relegates nationalistic pride to Nee's understanding of bread breaking. For Nee, the bread was a symbol of the church, as a holy entity completely beyond the political order. It was thus a paramount symbol of Christian unity and the rejection of divisive boundaries, including nationality.[114] At least on this point of church practice and theology is understandably difficult to interpret Nee against his own repeatedly stated intentions to overcome the bonds of national chauvinism.

[113] May, "Watchman Nee and the Breaking of Bread," 47.
[114] May seems to recognize this fact at times, as in "Watchman Nee and the Breaking of Bread," 157.

After college, Nee's willingness to compromise his teachings with Chinese nationalism was stretched to the limits. The boundaries that he was unwilling to cross eventually cost him his freedom, his health, and twenty years of his life. In light of all this evidence, it is hard not to believe that Nee held his beliefs in a universal, trans-patriotic Christian message with utmost sincerity. Nevertheless, human beings are not always aware of their own intentions, as Nee well understood. Even if he whole-heartedly believed in a message that transcended China, the offensiveness of Western Christendom was a culturally conditioned and context-specific claim with roots in Republican China. Beyond Nee's intentions and open statements, it is still possible to read a significant role for patriotism and Chinese nationalism in his life and thought, and even more so with regard to his followers.

The second study to challenge the wholly apolitical conception of Nee is historian Lian Xi's *Redeemed by Fire: The Rise of Popular Christianity in Modern China*. This book lays out a convincing argument about Nee and patriotism. According to Lian, elite professors in liberal universities were not the only Chinese Christians who were bothered by the sometimes contradictory claims of Christianity and the Chinese nation. Lian helpfully points out that a generation of older, more conservative Christians including Dora Yu, Cheng Jingyi (1881-1939), and Ding Limei (1871-1936) also took steps in establishing an indigenous, Chinese Christianity. They differed from the liberals in refusing to take liberties with central Christian doctrines. Whereas liberal Christians fused their religion with Confucianism or philosophical materialism, the conservatives understood Sinicized Christianity to take the form of Chinese leadership and varying degrees of independence from foreign missionary bodies. Even in their resistance to foreign dominance, they "succeeded only in fulfilling the missionary vision of a native church safely within the limits of mainline Western Protestantism." Lian aptly concludes,

> Patriotism alone failed to attract either a sufficient and stable following or adequate funding. The indigenous church movement remained to be fired by more sublime visions. What emerged later as vibrant and enduring forms of Chinese Christianity invariably contained the ferment of antiforeignism and a spirit of independence but christened such attitudes as righteous indignation against the corruption and deviations of a worldly, and Western-dominated church.[115]

It is among those "fired by more sublime visions" that Lian places Nee. Both the conservative and liberal Christians who tried to explicitly tie the Christian message to Chinese indigeneity found only limited and short-term success. A more compelling, positive vision of the Christian message was necessary, and by the time Nee's generation came of age, the demands of antiforeignism and the "spirit of independence" required much more than arms-length independence from foreign missionaries. The Chinese people were no longer interested in mainline Protestantism with different faces at the helm.

Thus, even if Nee himself intended for his Christianity explicitly to foreclose national pride, his followers may well have been drawn to the implicit patriotism of a Chinese minister who claimed to follow a purer, more orthodox, more refined form of Christianity than that adopted by the vast majority of Westerners and missionaries. Nee's readers and followers were neither particularly cosmopolitan nor isolated from current political events in China.[116] Some of them were even government functionaries or members of the military. Most of them understood the criticisms of Christianity as a foreign religion and they also understood that their nation was imperiled by foreign powers.

Certainly, Nee's followers were aware of and sensitive to these pressures to different degrees. Nevertheless, they should not be understood as standing entirely outside the mainstream currents of Chinese society. Indeed, comparing their rhetoric and actions to conservative

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[115] Lian Xi, *Redeemed by Fire: The Rise of Popular Christianity in Modern China* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2010), 41.
[116] Interview with Zhang Lijiao, March 2013; Zhu Rukai, March 2013; Liu Suey, March 2013.

Christians of generations past, may help Sinologists understand the changing parameters of patriotism and nationalism in the late-Qing and Republican era and the nature of growing Chinese antagonism toward foreign powers. Within this milieu, however, Nee still stood out. The patriotic nature of his appeal was that of a Chinese person who had become more Christian than most Western Christians.

Even if understanding Nee as an unconscious patriot goes against his own conscious decisions, there is no doubt that his stance was defiant of Western religion at a time when the West was deeply unpopular among Chinese people. His critiques of Western Christianity are complicated by the fact that many of them come from the West itself, but the West has never been monolithic. Nee's selective use and combination of some of Western Christendom's most self-critical stands created a synthesis that radically re-evaluated the key positions of Western doctrine and practice. Although Nee maintained warm relationships with certain Western Christians, they taught him to condemn the Western church's divisions, its close relationships with political power, and its wholesale lack of real piety.

If Nee's own patriotism was unconscious, many of his followers were more open in their appeals to nationalism. Nee had to repeatedly admonish his "co-workers" not to use his critiques of Western Christianity merely as propaganda.[117] He understood that in an age of anti-foreign sentiment, it was all too easy to establish local congregations by rallying Chinese Christians to leave their foreign denominations. Thus, the story of Watchman Nee remains deeply intertwined with the story of patriotism as the dominant theme of Republican China.

Watchman Nee and a New Form of Chinese Christianity

[117] CWWN 25, 253-5; CWWN 26, 437; NTSWJ 26, 204.

Scholars of modern Chinese Christianity have almost always placed Nee and his followers among other indigenous Christian groups that first emerged during the Republican period.[118] Like the communal Jesus Family and the unitarian True Jesus Church, Nee's followers, who were commonly known as the "Little Flock" (*xiaoqun*) or the "Assembly Hall" (*juhuichu*) were supposedly "wholly independent and without any foreign leadership whatsoever."[119] Positively, all three were "energized by Pentecostal and millenarian convictions."[120] And yet, upon closer examination, the Little Flock clearly stands out from both the Jesus Family and the True Jesus Church .

Although Daniel Bays suggests that "each of the founders of these movements was influenced by foreign Christians at times early in his development," Nee's engagement with foreign Christians continued until his death.[121] Even if the Assembly Hall never wholly accepted foreign leadership or direction, Nee deeply respected a large number of Western Christians. He was also a lifelong avid reader, particularly of works within the sphere of what could generally be called Anglo-American evangelicalism.

Through these authors and their citations, Nee also accessed a lineage of influential Christian thinkers that stretched back to the earliest years of the Christian tradition. The depth and subtlety of his engagement with established Christian teachings are certainly a major part of the reason that among Chinese Christians, only Nee and his close follower, Witness Lee, have gained large followings far beyond the Sinosphere. Nee's ideas resonated with those who were familiar with evangelical themes and texts. His teachings and writings spread rapidly through the

[118] Lian's *Redeemed by Fire*, Bays's *A New History*, and Yamamoto's *History of Protestantism* all adopt this categorization. Alexander Chow's *Theosis* uses Nee as a representative for legalist, conservative Christianity, along with figures like Wang Mingdao and John Sung. (12)
[119] Bays, *A New History*, 129.
[120] Lian, *Redeemed by Fire*, 41.
[121] Bays, *A New History*, 129.

human networks, international institutions, and print cultures that had already been established by evangelical missionaries and church leaders.

The depth of Nee's understanding of classic Christian themes and the creativity with which he placed them in new combinations makes him something of an anomaly among the Chinese Christians of his generation. To some extent this is suggested by his hybrid biography, which combines elements common to the elite liberals and the grassroots independents, two groups who were both hard at work creating indigenous Chinese Christianities, albeit in very different ways. Like many of the liberal Christians, Nee was born in a financially secure family and graduated from a modern missionary school. Instead of pursuing further studies or taking up one of the stable jobs for which he was qualified, however, Nee then followed a path that mirrored that of the grassroots leaders. He eschewed a fixed profession and began a life of itinerant preaching, quickly gathering a core of followers and establishing local congregations.

This hybridity can also be seen in Nee's publications. Most revivalists and preachers left behind only a very thin paper trail if they wrote at all. As befit college professors and well-educated members of the upper class, liberal Christians frequently wrote carefully edited, extensive monographs, published through established institutions. Nee's copious writings are an eclectic mix of magazines and books he himself wrote and edited, articles he submitted to periodicals managed by others, and sermons that were transcribed and published by his followers. He published much of his own work. Sometimes, as with *The Revival*, he distributed it according to the principle of faith, allowing his readers to choose whether they contributed and

how much. Other times, as with *The Christian*, a magazine he started in 1925, he charged a small fee, but even this was not collected strictly or regularly.[122]

In the end, Watchman Nee's life, writings, and followers represent a new form of Chinese Christianity, one that challenges the categories that have traditionally been used to depict Christians in China: fundamentalist, modernist, grassroots, elite, indigenous, and Western. One way to understand these differences is to consider the ways in which Nee's biography and work reflected and interacted with his Republican Chinese context.

Nee was especially interested in applying romantic love to the relationship between God and human beings, and he was often eloquent and ardent in his expositions on that theme. Nee also developed arguments against doubts that were common to religious thinkers throughout the Republican Period. One of his most interesting solutions to the challenge of philosophical materialism was to point toward the goal of a constant, practical, and mystical unity with God. This teaching encouraged belief in God's continual, supernatural intervention within the soul while diminishing the relative importance of other types of external miracles such as healing and tongues. Finally, Nee seemed to completely reject one of the most important themes of Republican China—the rise of patriotism. He understood the universal claims of Christianity to transcend and even counter national consciousness. Nevertheless, in his context, where one of the major critiques of Christianity was its foreign origin, even this very claim of universal citizenship could paradoxically have significant appeal to nationalistic sentiments. Nee's followers may well have been attracted to him because he seemed to champion a purer form of Christianity than most of the Western Christians themselves.

[122] The price of *The Christian* was 70 cents for 12 issues when many urbanites would have made about one dollar a week. (see Link, *Mandarin Ducks*, 12). In some of the early issues, Nee ways for the "financially poor" to get copies for free and reminds readers to pay for their subscriptions. CWWN 7, 1231-4.

Nee's ability to synthesize these complex and conflicting themes was readily evident within the first few years of his conversion. Even his earliest writings display a masterful authorial voice. Thus Witness Lee recalled his assumptions when he first read Nee's work around 1925: "From the way this writer [Nee] addressed his readers, I imagined he was an aged Christian teacher, perhaps over sixty years of age. Actually, he was a young man only two years older than I."[123] At the time, Nee was actually twenty-one years old. Similarly, a foreign missionary named Elizabeth Rademacher wrote that in 1934, she first heard about Nee and supposed that he was "an aged man with a flowing white beard!"[124]

His authoritative presence and charisma were not limited to the printed page. Nee left behind not only his written works but also a number of lasting institutions. Paramount among these are the dozens, if not hundreds of local congregations that followed his teachings and example closely. To understand the perseverance of the institutions Nee left behind, it is helpful to examine another aspect of his work—his teachings and practices related to the church. Watchman Nee's ecclesiological outlook was deeply shaped by the early years of his ministry, which he spent raising up a local congregation in his home town of Fuzhou.

[123] Witness Lee, *Watchman Nee*, 284.
[124] Witness Lee, *Watchman Nee*, 146.

Chapter 2

Fuzhou: Church and Conflict

On an otherwise unremarkable afternoon in 1923, a strange and motley procession slowly made its way through the Cangqian neighborhood at the center of the city of Fuzhou. At the head of the group were Nee and a few other young men who were singing loudly and wearing white vests emblazoned with bold slogans like "You Will Die" and "Believe Jesus, Be Saved." The crowd of a few hundred that followed them was a heterogeneous snapshot of Fuzhou's population—women and men of all ages chatted as they walked toward a pavilion in a large private home where they were expecting to hear a sermon. In each of their hands was a stool they had brought from their own homes. The local residents and even a few policemen gathered to watch the strange sight.

Many in the crowd had already come to previous meetings at the pavilion. Initially, most were drawn by the remarkable sight of the young men's energetic singing and marching through the city. Locals knew the men to be students at the well-respected Trinity College, and the Chinese legacy of regard for educated leaders persisted.[1] Audiences had thus initially gathered and followed out of both respect and curiosity. Day after day, growing crowds listened to the young men preach a simple message, assuring their listeners that they could be certain of their destinies, that eternal life was freely and irrevocably given because of faith in Jesus Christ. Some of the audience had already heard Christian teachings in the past, but had not been sure if they

[1] The Confucian examinations had been abolished in 1905 so there was no longer a direct correlation between education and positions of political power. Still, in 1919, during the May 4th Movement, thousands of Chinese had followed the lead of angry university students to hold strikes and protests opposing the Treaty of Versailles and the concession of the province of Shandong to Japan.

might still be damned. The boldness of the revivalists' affirmative message was infectious, and the crowds grew larger and larger.

Earlier in the revival, the leaders had run out of money and could no longer rent stools for their meetings. At that point, Nee had stood up and announced that, in the future, all attendees would have to bring their own stools. In this way, the odd processions had gained one of their characteristic quirks.

On this particular day, the procession reached its destination and the participants set down their stools all over the property, overflowing the premises and occupying every available space. The home belonged to Leland Wang, one of the young men at the head of the revival. The kitchen, the living room, and the empty spaces all around the pavilion were filled with people eagerly waiting to hear the teaching of salvation. In the ensuing weeks and months, many from among the audience would be baptized, forming the nucleus of a new Christian congregation in Fuzhou. The small group of young men, including Watchman Nee, would soon have their first opportunity to lead a Christian congregation.[2]

Watchman Nee's early life and conversion were clearly marked by some of the larger trends that shaped Republican Chinese society. At the same time, both the course of his ministry and the nature of his lasting effect on the modern world were also decided by a much more particular, local context. Immediately after his conversions in 1920 and 1922, Nee began to meet with a small group of other young men who alternately mentored, followed, fought, and worked with him. The group fostered a revival, which led to the formation of a Christian community. These first experiences of congregational life deeply affected Nee's conception of Christianity

[2] The story is told in NTSWJ 26, 235-6. Ryan Dunch tells of another case with an interesting similarity about "an illiterate old carpenter" who was "one of the early Anglican converts" near Fuzhou. This carpenter "took to walking all through the region wearing the text of the Ten Commandments, the Christian Cross and an explanation of it, and the account of his own experiences on a banner sewn on his back." *Fuzhou Protestants*, 12.

and Christian practice. Nee became convinced that even the most personal and intimate spiritual experiences had important ramifications for the church. During his years in Fuzhou, Nee set a pattern of intertwining individual spirituality with communal practice, a powerful combination that continues to inspire and guide millions around the world.

This earliest period of Nee's Christian work spanned only about four years, from his conversion in April of 1920 to his departure from the Fuzhou congregation in the first half of 1924. Nevertheless, these years are crucial for understanding Nee's contemporary significance. If he had been only a teacher and a writer, Nee's legacy might have been entirely encapsulated by his literary contribution. Nee's written works, however, support living communities, which, in return, continue to propagate his teachings. Thus, a significant part of Nee's enduring impact derives from the fact that he was not only a thinker but also a church leader. Nee's formative church experiences began in Fuzhou.

Baptism and Breaking Bread

As soon as he first converted in April 1920, Nee was confronted with a series of questions that revolved around the church. For instance, Nee quite naturally began to seek out the company of fellow Christians that would support his new convictions. Nee's conversion had been an intensely private, personal matter, however, and the catalyst for his conversion had been a travelling evangelist. These facts did not easily point in the direction of a settled congregation in Fuzhou. An obvious first step lay at home, with his newly converted mother, Lin Heping. She ardently supported her son's Christian commitment and every Thursday, she also hosted a Bible study at their home. Watchman quickly joined the group. Nee, however, was only sixteen years

old and "the ones who came to the Bible studies were almost all old and elderly people, so that I was like a little child, and I couldn't seem to find anyone around my age to talk to."[3]

Nee was thus grateful when after two or three weeks, a younger person joined the Bible study. Leland Wang (*Wang Zai,* 王載, 1898-1975) was five years Nee's senior, and in many ways, the two men were ideal companions. Both were intelligent, energetic, and devoted. Both had recently given up promising careers for Christian ministry. When Nee had decided to convert, he had made the simultaneous decision to abandon any secular career. Wang had been a naval officer but had just resigned his commission to become a full-time revivalist. A Fuzhou native, Wang had returned to his hometown and found himself unoccupied and hungry for Biblical teachings at almost the same moment that Nee began to seek fellowship for his own Christian journey.

The friendship was strengthened soon afterward in 1921 when Nee began to engage with another aspect of church practice. Both Nee's recent conversion and his intense study of the Bible caused him to reflect on his own childhood baptism. Although he had received a baptismal certificate with his name and the signature of the Methodist bishop who baptized him, he would still have "dared to do anything" prior to his actual conversion. It thus appeared to Nee that the baptism had no effect and that the certificate was worthless. Nee was also convinced that the form of his baptism was wrong. Whereas the bishop had scattered cold water upon Nee's head, the Bible recorded that after Jesus's baptism, he had "come up out of the water," strongly implying baptism by immersion, not sprinkling.[4]

Nee's growing convictions seemed to be confirmed by all the Christians who were most important in his life. In May, Lin Heping approached Watchman and asked him for his opinion

[3] NTSWJ 18, 76. 1
[4] NTSWJ 18, 75.

on whether she should be baptized by immersion. Nee responded enthusiastically, "I have also just been considering being baptized by immersion." In fact, he had already looked into the matter and found that Margaret Barber lived a short two-hour journey from their home. Significantly, when Dora Yu had come to Fuzhou for her revival meetings, she also had been baptized by Barber. Perhaps buoyed by their common sentiment, mother and son decided not to delay at all and went that very day to be baptized by Barber. Upon his return, Nee's very first order of business was to tell his friend, Leland Wang, who responded with hearty approbation, "Very good, very good!" It turned out that Wang too had once been baptized by sprinkling before becoming convinced that he should be immersed. As Nee recalls, "We two were so delighted because we had received the same light."[5]

The fact that his mother, Wang, and Dora Yu had all reached the same conclusions may have fortified Nee when his decision was first challenged. The Bible study at the Nee's home had been led by an "old pastor" whom Nee respected deeply, having the opinion that "In Fuzhou, he was number one in knowing the Bible." After sharing news of his baptism with Wang, Nee went to this pastor as well, expecting a warm reception since "He used to tell us that everything must be done according to the Bible." The pastor admitted that immersion was scriptural but chided Nee for being "such a stickler." Instead of questioning his decision, Nee began to question the pastor and all his other teachings on the church, resolving to "put aside all human authority, and henceforth to carefully study the Bible instead."[6]

This further Bible study fostered even more questions in regard to the church. Also in 1921, Nee began to have his first serious doubts concerning the legitimacy of the Western denominations. In the early 1930s, Nee recalled the nature of some of these earliest critiques:

[5] NTSWJ 18, 75-6.
[6] NTSWJ 18, 76.

Today in the church, there are so many members who are Christians in name only, but in the Bible it says that only saved people are in the church. Today there are so many denominations, but in the Bible there are no Methodists nor Presbyterians nor any other denominations. Why am I a member of the Methodist church? God's word does not speak this way, why then do I practice this way? The Methodist bishop was a good friend of our family, but social relationships were one thing, denominations being unbiblical were another thing altogether. I also saw that the system of pastors was unbiblical and that Christian meetings should be conducted according to the principles of the Bible.[7]

Like many non-Western Christians, Nee was forced to grapple with the dissonance between Western church traditions, his own Bible study, and the realities on the ground around him. Although Nee family had a long history of working with Western missionaries, the lasting divisions between different Protestant denominations were still rooted in the alien history of Europe and North America. Especially in Asia, where Protestants were a tiny, relatively new religious minority that had to survive among much larger and better established religious traditions, the reasons for these denominational divisions could seem frivolous and even offensive. Furthermore, the form of Protestantism that captivated Asian Christians in the 19th and 20th centuries was often a deeply biblical form of evangelicalism. Its ethic of respect for the Bible as the ultimate authority could easily be turned against itself, especially on the question of church denominations, which were obviously post-biblical developments. Sometimes, as with Nee, this led Asian Christians to dramatic conclusions. Japanese Christians in the *mukyokai*, or "No-Church" movement, went so far as to argue for a Christianity without the church. One leader in the movement criticized Western Christians for being "churchmen" who held to a "Church faith" that egoistically pushed people to "opt for one denomination [and] cut themselves off from those in other denominations."[8]

[7] NTSWJ 18, 77.
[8] This was Tsukamoto Toraji, as quoted in John Howes, *Japan's Modern Prophet: Uchimura Kanzo, 1861-1930* (Toronto: UBC Press, 2005), 369-370.

Nee admits that at this stage, his critiques were generally embryonic and hazy. He compared himself to the blind man in Mark 8 who, having been healed by Jesus, could only perceive people to be walking trees.[9] Still, like the blind man in the story, his vision quickly improved and his conceptions of the church, both constructive and critical, developed more and more definitive form.

In the first half of 1922, Nee began to think about the Eucharist, which, characteristically, he preferred to refer to by its more strictly biblical moniker, "the breaking of bread" (擘餅). Since the time of his salvation, he had "never been to receive the so-called Holy Communion," because he was bothered by the many unscriptural practices of the churches in which communion was offered. They offered communion only four times a year, they allowed congregants who were sinful or not even Christian to receive the elements, and they insisted that only an ordained pastor could preside over the meeting and break the bread. And yet Nee also recognized that the biblical record clearly showed that the early Christians came together frequently to break bread. Thus, he was caught in a conundrum. "At this time, I was very, very troubled. The Bible said that I must frequently break bread to remember the Lord, and I wanted to go, but I had no place to go."[10]

Once again, he sought out his friend Leland Wang. After their Thursday Bible study, the two had a private conversation and Nee shared many of his burgeoning insights, listing the many unscriptural practices that seemed to surround the Christian practice of communion. As with the case of his baptism, Nee found Wang to be a kindred spirit. Wang took Nee's hands and responded enthusiastically, "What God has been leading you in has been just the same for me. Last night, I couldn't sleep at all, I just kept praying and studying—should believers break

[9] NTSWJ 18, 77.
[10] NTSWJ 18, 78

bread? Is breaking bread something that a pastor must preside over? The conclusion of my prayer and study was that the Bible did not say in any place that only an ordained pastor can break the bread." The two quickly decided that they should not hesitate and agreed to break bread together on the coming Sunday, which, again, Nee referred to using the strictly Biblical term—"the Lord's day."[11]

Although the outward circumstances seemed to strongly confirm his beliefs, Nee was still hesitant. He and Wang decided to hold the initial ceremony in Wang's home because Nee feared that "If my mother knew of these things, she might say that we young people were being rebellious." Nee spent all of Friday and Saturday eagerly anticipating the joyful day, and finally, on Sunday evening, he told his mother that he had to go to Wang's home to "take care of a very important matter." If any doubts remained, the experience turned out to be an ecstatic celebration. Nee writes:

> That night, the three of us (Brother Wang, his wife [Ada], and I), were in a little home, breaking bread together and drinking the cup together. I must tell you, to my dying day I will never forget, even in eternity I will never forget—I have never been so close to heaven as I was that night! That day, heaven was truly near the earth! The three of us could not stop weeping! Only that day did we realize the true significance of breaking bread to remember the Lord. When I was young, after I had been baptized by sprinkling, I had taken Holy Communion. At the time, I said 'The bread is a bit sour and the grape juice is a bit sweet.' I only remember that one was sour and the other sweet, I didn't understand anything else. Only on this occasion did I come to know that [Communion] is in the presence of God, and is most precious to God. We learned for the first time what it meant to worship, what it meant to remember the Lord. We were speechless, we could only praise and thank God![12]

The three communicants then decided, upon the basis of further Bible study in Acts, that they should meet together weekly, an obligation that Nee took very seriously, writing that "From that day on, I have broken bread every Lord's day unless I was sick, on the road, or detained by some unexpected circumstance." When his mother discovered shortly thereafter what Nee was

[11] NTSWJ 18, 78-9.
[12] NTSWJ 18, 79-80.

up to, she did not oppose him, only commenting that they had been "quite bold." After a few months, she also began to join them to break bread together.

These humble but happy gatherings gave Nee a powerful taste of the church as an ideal Christian society. It convinced him that some aspect of the church must be practicable, and even suggested the church as a bridge between heaven and earth. Just as these dramatic experiences pulled him in the direction of independent church leadership, other forces seemed to conspire to push him out of the Western churches where he and his family had such deep roots.

Decisive Break with Mainstream Western Christianity

Nee was baptized by an American Methodist bishop, and the Methodist Episcopal Church was the Nee family's congregational home. Nee's own grandfather was one of the first native Chinese to convert under the auspices of an American mission, and he became a double pioneer as one of the first ordained Chinese pastors in the province. Nevertheless, Nee and Heping's decisions to be re-baptized by immersion and to serve themselves the Eucharist were iconoclastic by the standards of many Western Christians. If American or British Methodists had taken similar actions, they would likely be construed as challenging their local pastors or the episcopal hierarchy. Despite the Nee family's respectable standing in the small world of Fuzhou Protestantism, the Chinese Methodists were also offended. Nee used similar terms to describe the Methodist pastor's "very cold" response to his baptism,[13] and the change in attitude of other "very good friends" in the Methodist Church who "because of this matter of baptism, became cold toward us."[14]

[13] NTSWJ 18, 76.
[14] NTSWJ 18, 80.

Although Nee now recognized that following the Bible's commands could exact a high social cost, he was undeterred. He continued his detailed study of the Bible, probably reading it alongside other Christian texts.[15] In the second half of 1922, after he began the practice of breaking bread, he discovered another point of conflict between scriptural teachings and Western Christian practice. Alighting on Paul's condemnation of factionalism in his first letter to the Corinthians, Nee realized that Paul's words condemned the Methodists (and all other denominations) as well as the Corinthians. Nee writes:

> In 1 Corinthians 1, Paul commands the believers in Corinth not to split into parties, because they were each saying, "I am of Paul, I am of Apollos, I am of Cephas, I am of Christ" (v. 12). I began to think, is Wesley greater than Paul then? Even if the believers in Corinth said that they were of Christ, Paul still condemned them. Thus, if you say are Presbyterian, I say I am Methodist, he says he is Baptist, these things do not accord with the Bible.[16]

Of course, John Wesley himself had never intended on founding a separate denomination, a fact which Nee acknowledged. Still, for Nee, the fact remained that Wesley's students and heirs now called themselves Methodists and had established a system that was contrary to the plain instruction of the Bible.[17] At first, Nee was content to simply avoid calling himself a Methodist, which was one way of literally interpreting and obeying Paul's dictum in First Corinthians. However, as he considered the matter further, he began to think that it might be necessary to leave the Methodist denomination altogether. Even if he did not verbally admit any allegiance to Methodism, even his ostensible membership was a problem. For Nee, the analogy of a business partnership was enlightening. To be a member of the Methodist Church meant that he was in a partnership with Methodism. A business partnership implied that debts and

[15] Nee never disclosed when he first started reading the materials of the British evangelical group known as the Plymouth Brethren, but his early critiques are suggestive of Brethren influence.
[16] NTSWJ 18, 81.
[17] CWWN 47, 57.

responsibilities had to be shared in common. Thus, if the Methodist denomination was divisive, Nee had to completely extricate himself from the entire Methodist organization in order to avoid bearing responsibility for its divisiveness. As Nee wrote, "Although I did not participate in any part of the Methodist system, in name, I still had not broken the connection. If I wanted to follow the Lord, I could not simply stop being a member of the Methodist Church in my conduct, I must remove even my name from the Methodist Church."[18]

Thus convinced, Nee felt that he had to present the matter to his mother. The matter concerned her directly, since she was the one who had arranged for his baptism and for his being enrolled as a member of the Methodist Church. For him to unilaterally withdraw his name from the church would have been unfilial and insulting, causing her to lose face, especially among her Christian friends. As a matter of fact, Heping was resistant. She feared that Nee's proposed actions might be misunderstood and would offend "the Western clergy who were all our good friends."[19] Over a period of two months, Nee repeatedly discussed the matter with his parents, but Heping would not yield.

Perhaps because his Christian ideas were opposed by his mother for the first time, Nee sought out other Christian counsel. He returned to Margaret Barber, the English missionary who had baptized both him and his mother. Barber was fourteen years older than Heping and forty-three years older than Nee himself. He may have seen in Barber something of a motherly figure, and he was certainly seeking mentorship. When he asked for her counsel on his leaving the Methodist denomination, Barber confirmed his developing ideas regarding the church's spiritual nature. She dismissed the importance of the Methodist church's register, which was called the book of life, telling Nee, "If your name is written in the book of life in heaven, what help can the

[18] NTSWJ 18, 82.
[19] NTSWJ 18, 82.

book of life on earth give you? If your name is not written in the book of life in heaven, what benefit is the book of life on earth to you?[20]

Nee thus persisted in his attempts to convince his parents that it was necessary to leave the Methodist denomination. Finally, after two months of discussions, Nee confronted his parents one last time while the family was spending time together in their garden. He had obviously convinced them on many of his points of view and they admitted in front of all their children that it was not scriptural to remain connected with the denomination. They also conceded that it was their duty to obey the Bible. Nee pressed the matter, "Then why do we delay and not obey the Bible?" Finally they relented, allowing Nee to draft the letter which clarified that the family would like to remain on friendly terms but simply wished to obey the scriptures in refusing sectarianism and denominationalism.

Sensing that the Nee family was considering an irrevocable break, the Methodists came out in force to conciliate them and urge them to reconsider their decision. Western missionaries, a school principal, their pastor, their district superintendent, and their bishop all visited the Nees in the coming days, explaining that baptism by immersion was compatible with membership in the Methodist Church. Nevertheless, Nee had convinced his family that the problem with Methodism went beyond the proper form for certain rites. At stake was the central problem of obedience to scripture and the denomination's fundamentally unscriptural basis.

The Methodists' fears proved right. Removing their names from the Methodist book of life was a decisive step. Nee had convinced his family that the Western denominations were sectarian, and the new practice of bread breaking that he had recently started was a ready replacement as a new form of congregational life. Reflecting on the sequence of events suggests

[20] NTSWJ 18, 82.

an interesting trend. Heping had been a powerful catalyst for her son's conversion. She had also agreed with him on the matter of baptism. Although it took longer, she eventually came around to his views on the breaking of bread. Now, on the question of leaving the Methodist Church, she resisted, but eventually both she and her husband followed their son's lead. Just two years after his conversion, Watchman had gradually emerged as the leader of his family in matters of religion.

The dynamics of the Nee family are a microcosm of larger trends in Chinese Protestantism. Heping was born in 1880, and like other Chinese Protestants of her generation, her instinct was to work together with what historian Daniel Bays has called the "Sino-Foreign Protestant Establishment," a cluster of influential Chinese and foreign Christian individuals and institutions. By the early 20th century, these denominations, mission boards, parachurch organizations, schools, and hospitals were apparently ascendant, all "long-established and reasonably well-funded."[21] Many Chinese Protestants of Heping's age went on to become luminaries in this establishment—people like Marcus Chen (1884-1964), a conservative seminary professor and administrator, Wang Zhengting (1882-1961), who served in China's national cabinet, and Cheng Jingyi (1881-1939), a Bible translator who was one of the few non-Western Christians to be invited to the Edinburgh Missionary Conference of 1910. Cheng's addresses at Edinburgh were among the most influential of the conference, and he strongly advocated for more Chinese leadership and the dropping of denominational distinctions.

Cheng later became the pastor of an independent church, and his participation in Edinburgh showed that he both understood Chinese sentiments and that he was willing to call the Western Christians to task. Nevertheless, the Sino-Foreign Protestant Establishment was slow to

[21] Daniel Bays, *A New History of Christianity in China*, 99-100.

hand over significant power and resources to native Chinese leaders, and Cheng was "never able to fully shake off the label 'foreign toady' or 'running dog.'"[22] It was the spiritual and physical next generation, the May 4th generation, which drove both the national and ecclesiastical conversation. In light of their grievances at the hypocrisies of Western imperialism, they demanded a more definite rejection of foreign involvement in Chinese affairs.

Margaret Emma Barber

Nee's total break with the Methodists was thus characteristic of the new attitude among young Chinese. It also opened up a wide, blank space for his future. Nee's rejection of the Methodists cut him off from many of the Western Christians who had previously been his teachers and authorities. Unbounded by their traditions, he found himself free to pursue whatever he felt the Bible commanded. Furthermore, when he had made his dramatic decision to convert, he knew that it meant not only a change in religious affiliation, but also a complete abandonment of all his previous dreams of a successful career. He was committed to a life of full-time Christian ministry, but it was now impossible to take a regular job in the Protestant establishment, the steadiest and surest route for Christian employment. He had very few role models to map out a path forward. In fact, in those years he believed that "one could scarcely find even two or three" preachers who were living without a settled salary in all of China.[23]

It just so happened that one of those "two or three" such figures was living very near to him. Margaret Emma Barber (1866-1930) had probably first met Nee in March 1921 when she baptized him and his mother by immersion. Sometime during the following year, Nee came to her seeking counsel regarding his sense that he still lacked the power of the Holy Spirit. Her

[22] Bays, *A New History*, 113.
[23] NTSWJ 26, 252-3.

response to Nee helped to foment the struggles that eventually culminated with his giving up his love for Charity Chang. When even his mother opposed his decision to leave the Methodist denomination, Barber had strongly supported Nee's stance. Now that he had unprecedented freedom to forge a new form of biblical Christianity, his relationship with her became more intimate than ever.

Unfortunately, much of Barber's life story is shrouded in mystery. Much of what is known about her comes from Nee's repeated attestations to her remarkable behavior. She became a revered figure and a mentor not only to Nee, but also to all the other young men who eventually worked with Nee to lead the revival in Fuzhou. Out of all the Fuzhou revivalists, however, Nee seems to have been the most deeply and most lastingly affected by her influence. For him in particular, she became something of an exemplar of the ideal Christian values and behavior, and he held her teachings and conduct in utmost esteem. As he aged, his regard for her only seemed to grow. He may well have appreciated her life and teachings more at the end of his life than even during these Fuzhou years when she was clearly his paramount spiritual advisor.

Almost any other mentor or theology would have set Nee along a very different path. In fact, not long after his conversion, possibly even before he was baptized by immersion, Nee had tried to enroll in Dora Yu's Bible Institute in Shanghai. Yu would have been one of the other two or three Christians that Nee was aware of who did not live on a fixed income from a denomination. Unfortunately, he had been at the institute only a short while when she dismissed him, telling him only that "It would be inconvenient" to have him stay there any longer. He later attributed this to the fact that he was "fleshly and not dealt with," or spiritually disciplined, since he still loved "to eat well, dress well, and sleep until eight in the morning."[24]

[24] NTSWJ 26, 221.

Yu enjoyed a cordial relationship with many Western denominations, and they sometimes financially supported her. They also frequently invited her to hold revival meetings and speak to their congregations. It is possible that under her influence, Nee could have learned to maintain a closer and more friendly relationship with mainstream Western Christianity and the Chinese Protestant establishment. Instead, he encountered the idiosyncratic Barber at a decisive moment in his intellectual and spiritual development.

An unlikely set of circumstances and events led Barber to be stationed in Fuzhou, not far from Nee's home, at exactly the time when he most needed religious guidance. By 1922, Barber had already spent about fifteen years in China as an independent missionary. She herself had left the Church of England to be baptized by immersion and had joined an independent congregation called Surrey Chapel. In all of China, Surrey Chapel supported only two missionaries, Barber and her companion, Margaret Ballord.[25] Barber was one of the few Westerners who could have wholeheartedly sympathized with Nee's objections to common Christian practices on the grounds of their being unscriptural. Her years in China had not seen much outward success, but she was busy cultivating an inward spirituality that prized quality over quantity. If the aspiring minister needed a pattern, the experienced teacher was also happy to find a worthy student.

The road that led Barber to Nee and made her virtually unique among her peer missionaries began rather conventionally. She was the fourth of ten children born to an evangelical, pious family. Her father was a wheelwright, and later a carriage builder.[26] Regarding

[25] Ballord's name appears as "L. S." in Wing Hung Lam's [林榮洪], *Shuling Shenxue: Ni Tosheng Sixiang de Yanjiu* (Hong Kong: China Alliance Press, 1985), 22 and "M. L. S." in James Reetzke's *M. E. Barber: A Seed Sown in China* (Chicago: Chicago Bibles and Books, 2007), 109, and Kinnear's *Against the Tide*, 57-58. In a letter taken from the Norwich Records Office (NRO) 76/85, however, she signs her name "Margaret Ballord." Margaret Ballord to David Panton, April 6, 1931. Reetzke claims that she was Barber's niece (109), but this was almost certainly not the case. In the "Report of the Foreign Band 1930" from NRO 76/82, Ballord is simply called Barber's "friend and helper."

[26] 1861 England Census, 1866 Birth Certificate—Barber's Birth, 1872 Birth Certificate for Alice Maud, 1877 Birth Certificate for Robert Edward, 1882 Marriage certificate of Frederick Lewis and Elizabeth Catherine Williamson,

her childhood, she later told Nee that "From the time I was nine years old up to these last decades, I have never been satisfied in the presence of God. After gaining grace and revelation yesterday, I say to God again, 'You still have so much, I still want more, I still want more. I continually want more.' My attitude is one of being both eternally hungry and eternally sated."[27] Although Barber never specifically described her religious conversion, it seems likely that her childhood was marked by spiritual precocity.[28] In any case, a 19th century British girl who was "eternally" and "continually" hungry for God[29] would have very naturally been drawn to foreign missions, of which the biggest and most important field was China.

After about ten years of preparation, Barber was finally sent to China as a missionary with the Church Mission Society (CMS), which was associated with the Church of England.[30] She served the CMS in Fuzhou for two roughly five-year terms between the years 1896 and 1907. Although the exact reasons are not known, it is clear that by the end of her second term she had become disillusioned not only with mission practices but also with the Anglican Church as a whole. In 1907 she took the decisive step of being baptized by immersion at Surrey Chapel, an "undenominational Church in Norwich," her hometown.[31]

Surrey Chapel was famous because of its prolific and influential founding pastor, Robert Govett (1813-1901) and his successor, David Morrieson Panton (1870-1955). Govett, Panton, Barber, and Nee comprised something of an intellectual lineage. They read many of the same

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Marriage certificate of August 1889 of Harry Charles and Hanna Laura Matthews, Marriage Certificate of July 1897 of Harry Charles and Helen Kathleen Hastelaw, and finally death certificate of wife, Martha Gibbs in March, 1913.

[27] *CWWN* 42, 250.

[28] The piety of the family is attested to not only by Barber but also by Frederick Lewis, the second oldest son in the family. In 1881 he was staying at the "Home of Clergy" as a trainee. By 1891 he was a licensed lay preacher in Blackburn. In 1901 Frederick was still a missionary with the police, and a lay preacher as well. 1881, 1891, 1901 England Census.

[29] *CWWN* 41, 63-4, NTSWJ 41, 50.

[30] Church Missionary Society, *Extracts from the Annual Letters of the Missionaries for the Year 1896*, (London: Church Missionary House, 1896), 321.

[31] "Margaret Barber to Baring Baring-Gould" Norwich, September 18, 1907.

British evangelical authors, while maintaining and developing their own set of theological distinctives and Biblical interpretations within that tradition. With Panton and Surrey Chapel's support, Barber returned to China the same year of her baptism. Until her death in 1930, she mostly stayed in the Fuzhou area, where she spoke the local dialect and was familiar with the surroundings. The first decade of Nee's ministry thus coincided almost perfectly with the last decade of Barber's life.

Although Barber's last mission to China was by far her longest and most influential, very little written record of her life during this period remains. She seems to have been living with Ballord in a small rented bungalow when she first met and baptized Nee. She also maintained some correspondence with the Welsh laywoman revivalist and Bible teacher, Jessie Penn-Lewis (1861-1927). Barber's first two trips to China were carefully recorded in numerous letters that reported back to the CMS Secretary. If Barber also wrote regular reports to Surrey Chapel, little of that correspondence survives.

Historian Jay Riley Case has argued that scholars should pay more attention to the "antiformalist" evangelical missions that eschewed scrupulous recordkeeping and institution building in favor of simply contacting people and winning souls. Because they had little need to connect with hierarchies and funding sources in their sending countries, they often enjoyed far closer relationships to the individuals and cultures where they were stationed. This social and cultural intimacy made them far more successful at converting natives while also rendering them invisible to official documentation.[32] Barber's missionary career strongly supports Case's claims. Her first missionary trips offer a rich paper trail, but appear to have had little lasting impact. Her last missionary trip might easily have completely disappeared from the record had one of her

[32] Jay Riley Case, *An Unpredictable Gospel: American Evangelicals and World Christianity, 1812-1920* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012) 7-15.

native converts not been so impressed that he wrote about her repeatedly. In any case, the absence of her own writings means that the story of her relationship with Nee must be told largely from Nee's perspective.

At every turn, Barber had encouraged Nee to follow a strict Biblical piety. She baptized him by immersion, she encouraged him to seek a filling of the Spirit that caused him to give up his romantic interest, and she disparaged official church membership, cementing his break with Western denominationalism and the Sino-Foreign Protestant Establishment. She also gave him a practical, if demanding tool to maintain his newfound independence.

The "Faith Principle"

Nee knew that Barber "lived by faith," without a regular means of support.[33] At the time, Nee seemed to be aware of only two Christians in China who were living by the same principle, Barber and Dora Yu.[34] In the context of Republican China, the "faith principle" was significant as material evidence of God's existence and continued intervention in the world. In the context of evangelical piety, however, the "faith principle" had other important implications. When Barber had first considered returning to China for her last missionary journey, she had consulted with a respected, older missionary who had responded, "'A foreign country, no promise of support, no backing of any society—all these present no problem. The question is here: Are you going on your own initiative or are you being sent by God?'" Barber immediately replied, "'God is sending me.'"[35] God's seal upon Barber's mission would be proven by his continued faithfulness in supporting her.

[33] CWWN 10, 543-4.
[34] CWWN 26, 483.
[35] CWWN 30, 144.

Barber was a member of Surrey Chapel, and the Chapel organized a group of supporters whose subscriptions helped finance foreign missionaries. Nevertheless, it appears that Barber never received a definite salary, and it is unclear how regularly she was paid.[36] Not surprisingly, she was forced to rely on God, sometimes coming to desperate circumstances. Nee recounts that on one occasion, after Barber had "used her last dollar," she had written a poem that began with the lines "There is always something over / When we trust our gracious Lord."[37] For Nee, such a response showed a certain greatness of soul, which hinted at the real purpose of living by faith.

Barber's example and his own desire to remain independent forced Nee into a difficult position immediately after his initial conversion. Later, Nee dated the start of these concerns to 1921 and 1922, around the same time he was struggling with his love for Charity. Nee recognized that he could have chosen to be a "preacher in a denomination" which would have yielded him a "large monthly salary." Instead, he felt that he had to "walk in the Lord's way" and "only rely upon Him to support me."[38] For Nee, the first step along this path was to speak to his parents about their expectations. This precaution provides a small insight into Nee's adaptation of the Christian message to ethical life in a Chinese family. In that culture, parents' significant investments in their children often came with the expectation of reciprocal support for them in their own old age. Nee recounts:

> One evening I spoke with my father concerning the matter of receiving financial assistance. I said, "After praying for several days, I feel that I must tell you that I will no longer spend your money. I appreciate that you have spent so much on me in accord with your sense of fatherly responsibility. But you will expect me to earn money in the future and support you in return, and I must tell you beforehand that since I am going to be a preacher, I will not be able to repay you in the future nor pay you interest. Even though I have not completed my studies, I wish to learn to depend solely upon God." When I said this, my father thought I was joking. However, from then on, when my mother would occasionally

[36] Surrey Chapel "Report of the Foreign Band 1930".
[37] CWWN 10, 150.
[38] CWWN 26, 481.

> give me five or ten dollars, she would write on the envelope: "To Brother Nee To-sheng." She was not giving me money as a mother.[39]

Nee followed up this story with a few autobiographical vignettes taken from his early years of ministry. Each of these vignettes pointed to a similar lesson. In every case, Nee came to dire financial straits. Once, he was pickpocketed. In another instance, God specifically commanded him to give money to one of his co-workers even though he did not have enough for himself. On other occasions, God called Nee to a mission or a project that he did not have the resources to carry out. Every time, Nee refused to ask for human help. In fact, God forbade Nee from borrowing, begging, or otherwise making his needs known. At one point, Nee even tells a would-be supporter that someone else had already taken responsibility for his needs without specifying that this "someone" was God. Frequently, the devil tempted Nee, mocking his unreasonable behavior and trying to cause him to waver. Through every difficulty, Nee persevered and, in the end, God providentially, almost miraculously provided. Nee suggested that he had "ten to twenty more cases" that would serve to prove the same point.[40]

Nee later concluded that "in spiritual work there is need for an unsettled income, because that necessitates intimate fellowship with God, constant clear revelation of His will, and direct divine support." A fixed income would actually rob the Christian worker of her "utter dependence on God" and compromise the quality and nature of her work.[41] Barber's conduct showed Nee a vibrant pattern for this kind of life. She was certainly one of Nee's examples when he argued that depending on God for support went hand-in-hand with a life of constant, absolute intimacy, in which outward circumstances repeatedly forced a Christian to turn inward, examining her own conscience for anything that might hinder God's unstinted approval. For

[39] CWWN 26, 482.
[40] CWWN 26, 487.
[41] CWWN 10, 140-1.

Nee, living by faith was the earliest iteration of a lifelong theme: dependence on God was a non-negotiable requirement, trumping all rational expectations and calculations.

Living by faith could foster misunderstanding and suffering, but misunderstanding and suffering could be helpful. Ideally, they caused a Christian earnestly to seek God's presence, rather than find temporary relief in material comforts. Nee's insistence on this principle of faith went hand in hand with his careful teaching regarding supernatural intervention during times of sickness. Both sickness and poverty were tangible constraints that were used by God to cause Christians to depend on God rather than work by the independent strength of the soul. In fact, Nee held that all kinds of sufferings could be transcended when a Christian learned the lesson of the cross.

For most Western Christians, the cross lay at the center of the Christian message. The central importance of the cross was often understood in terms of atonement, or the means by which God saved humanity from its own sins. Following Barber and the teachers to which she introduced him, Nee agreed with this common understanding of the cross, but he also emphasized the cross's more mystical, personal significance. For Nee, the power of the cross to abolish sin should be matched with its ability to nullify the egotistical self. Barber taught Nee that this denial of the self was a radical demand that had to be lived daily, even constantly.

Thus, for Nee, the theology of the cross was deeply intertwined with its practice, and a real understanding of the cross was only granted by experience. Appropriately then, Nee's first individual encounter with the cross became a touchstone by which to understand recurring patterns in both his biography and his thought. He later wrote that he first learned the "lesson of the cross" during the years of his earliest Christian work in Fuzhou.[42] Although the stakes of

[42] CWWN 26, 463.

these first lessons were relatively low and the contentions involved might otherwise seem trivial, in retrospect, it is clear that Nee's time in Fuzhou set the stage for almost everything else that followed. In Fuzhou, he first tasted the kind of spirituality that could support his conception of the church.

Promise and Conflict in Nee's Early Work on Fuzhou

Watchman Nee's first mission field was his school, Trinity College. Around 1920, one of Barber's friends had shamed Nee about his lack of success in the gospel. She then coached him to begin keeping a notebook, writing down the names of his schoolmates, and praying for them by name. Eventually he had about seventy names in his notebook, and he was praying for them daily, "Sometimes once every hour, even in class, praying silently."[43] Eventually, his efforts were rewarded and many on his list were converted.

In 1923, when revival came to Fuzhou, Trinity was at the center of events. Nee led the revival along with six other young men, five of whom had been his schoolmates since childhood.[44] Among these five were John and Wilson Wang (no relation), Faithful Luke, and Simon Meek. The experience of the Fuzhou revival proved formative for these companions as well, as they all went on to devote their lives to Christian ministry.[45] Luke and Meek's English names are idiosyncratic and seem to be chosen for Christian effect, and it is possible that Nee

[43] NTSWJ 26, 223.
[44] NTSWJ 26, 232.
[45] Angus Kinnear, *Against the Tide,* pp. 65-79. James Chen, *Meet Brother Nee*, 18-19. Leland Wang's Testimony accessed at http://www.joyfulheart.com/maturity/no-bible-no-breakfast.htm on November 1, 2016. Although Nee says that there were five other schoolmates, Leland Wang mentions only the four and I have been unable to find the name of the last revivalist.

adopted "Watchman" around this time as well.[46] Rounding out the group was Wilson Wang's older brother and Nee's special friend, Leland. He and Nee quickly dominated the small group.

Although Nee and Leland Wang had shared many pleasant experiences, leading a revival was quite different from participating in a Bible study or agreeing to follow the Bible on questions of baptism and bread breaking. There were many practical points to consider, and in many cases there was no clear biblical solution. Nee later admitted ruefully that "We had a co-workers' meeting every Friday and the other five would all listen to the two of us argue."[47]

Leland's growing reputation was based on both his own eloquence and on his "famous surrender of worldly success to the service of God," having resigned a naval commission to preach as an itinerant evangelist.[48] Wang was certainly one of the more vibrant and influential Chinese Christians to emerge during the 1920s. He would go on to have a successful international preaching career, travelling widely throughout China and the Sinosphere. Like Nee, he would find special success in Southeast Asia, where the common Fujianese connection helped both men make inroads into large, well-established, diasporic Chinese communities.

Often, when two strong personalities are forced to work in close proximity, social friction is the result. Nee and Wang's different temperaments may also have had an effect. Whereas Wang was exuberant and extroverted, Nee was reserved and analytical. The two men's youth may also have been a factor. In 1923, Nee would have been only twenty and Wang, twenty-five. In any case, Wang and Nee disagreed strenuously and often. Nee admits that "I frequently lost my temper."[49]

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[46] In Chinese, Nee was already using the stylized Christian name (倪柝聲) by which he became known in his written articles, another sign that if he used an English name, it may also have been his adopted Christian one.
[47] NTSWJ 26, 228.
[48] Lian Xi, *Redeemed by Fire*, 159. Lian points out that a naval commission in China was less glamorous than it might have seemed, which may have helped Wang's decision.
[49] NTSWJ 26, 228.

In a sense, the young Christian group was a victim of its own success. In 1936, even after he had already rebuilt and expanded his following to include many congregations throughout China, Nee still looked back fondly to his work in the early 1920s, claiming that he "had never seen a revival greater than this one." He continued:

> At that time, there were people being saved every day. It looked as if anyone who contacted us would immediately be saved. Every morning at five o'clock, when I arrived at school, I saw people everywhere reading the Bible—more than one hundred of them. Reading novels had been very fashionable, but now those who wanted to could only do so secretly. Instead Bible reading now became an honorable thing to do…
>
> More than sixty people daily marched in procession carrying banners, and a few dozen also went around daily distributing tracts. The whole town of Fuzhou—about a hundred thousand people—was shaken.[50]

For a small group of students to overturn the culture of their own college must have seemed an impressive achievement. Furthermore, the nucleus of seven young men was also able to inspire dozens of others to join them in their vocal processions throughout the town. It must indeed have seemed to the revival leaders that the whole city was shaken, even though most of the city's hundred thousand inhabitants were probably unaware of their activities.[51] Nor were they the only young Chinese who had grand ambitions to change the world with only a small group of committed followers. In 1921, the Chinese Communist Party planned to make China into modern socialist nation with a party membership of only sixty nationwide.[52]

Of course, the rising number of conversions begged an important question—what was the next step for this group of burgeoning Christian ministers? None of them had any taste for foreign Christianity. Nee notes that the headmaster of Trinity "admired us for everything we

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[50] CWWN 26, 468.

[51] Unfortunately, no church records exist to fix a definite number for those who were saved, baptized, or regularly meeting with the congregation. At least one early follower corroborates Nee's story. See James Chen, *Meet Brother Nee* (Hong Kong: The Christian Publishers, 1976).

[52] Jonathan Spence, *The Search for Modern China* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1990), 322-3

did," only "lamenting our attitude towards the Anglican church" because the group resolutely "refused to belong to that [Anglican] denomination."[53]

Led by Wang, the other six leaders of the revival wanted to continue in the most natural course of action. The people of Fuzhou were evidently welcoming, so they should continue to "be zealous in revival and gospel preaching work" because "the fruit of such work could easily be seen." Nee, however, had been studying the book of Acts and had come to the conclusion that "God's wish is to establish local churches in every city." For Nee, this understanding was not only an exegetical doctrine. He spoke of his realization as a mystical vision, writing, "What the Lord revealed to me was extremely clear: Before long He would raise up local churches in various parts of China. Whenever I closed my eyes, the vision of the birth of local churches appeared."[54]

This disagreement went to the heart of the conflict between Nee and Wang. In the end, although both felt called to Christian ministry, they had very different understandings of its purpose. Wang was primarily interested in saving souls and following something akin to the model of Cheng Jingyi and Dora Yu. He hoped to found a flourishing independent church, while also maintaining warm and mutually beneficial contacts with the Sino-Foreign Protestant Establishment. Wang would be given the honor of baptizing Ruth Bell, Billy Graham's future wife and he eventually received an honorary Doctor of Divinity degree from Wheaton College.[55] Nee, on the other hand, was already starting to show his penchant for mysticism and the dramatic reform of Christian ideas.

[53] CWWN 26, 468.
[54] CWWN 26, 468-9.
[55] Lian, Redeemed by Fire, 162.

Nee had already indicated his concern for the longer-term effects of the revival. He had gone to considerable trouble to pray for, finance, and publish a periodical, all to give the new converts something to read. Not satisfied just with amassing converts, Nee returned to his "vision of the birth of local churches." This vision had historic and universal dimensions that can only be understood by studying Nee's sources in Western Christianity.

The Vision of the Local Churches: The Brethren Inheritance

Both Nee's personal sense of commission and his ambition for the church were derived from his careful study of the writings of the Plymouth Brethren, a British evangelical fellowship that flourished in the 19th century.[56] The Plymouth Brethren are a complex Christian movement, founded when a number of theologically similar groups coalesced in the late 1820s and early 1830s. Initially, these groups were primarily clustered in Ireland and Western England. A number of common themes united the first Christians who became the Brethren, including their study of unfulfilled prophecy, their radical Protestant adherence to the principle of *sola scriptura*, their pacifism, and their pessimism regarding the direction of secular and ecclesial history.[57]

Although Nee adapted a number of these disparate themes, for him, as for many of the Brethren, the church lay at the heart of all these concerns. The concept of the church captivated

[56] Both the original "Plymouth Brethren" and the contemporary groups designated by that name would refuse to name themselves as such. As we will see, they considered all denominational monikers to be divisive. Nevertheless, for the purposes of analysis, it is impractical not to name them at all. There are many other Christian groups that use the generic English name "Brethren," which they would prefer (for instance, see brethrenonline.org and brethrenhistory.org). Thus, "Plymouth" has the benefits of granting further differentiation, recognizing one of the movement's early bases of strength, and pointing to the movement's source in the United Kingdom.

[57] Callahan, *Primitivist Piety*, xii-xiii. Despite this internal diversity, many scholars have primarily focused on Brethren teachings related to eschatology. See Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain*, 86-91, Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture*, 48-62, Boyer, *When Time Shall Be No More*, 80-112, and Matthew Avery Sutton, *American Apocalypse: A History of Modern Evangelicalism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014) 16ff.

Nee. Besides Christ himself, it is possible that no other subject occupied as much of Nee's attention throughout the course of his life. From his earliest recorded work to his latest, Nee spent an immense amount of time and energy thinking about the nature of the church and trying out different methods of church organization, propagation, and worship. For Nee, the church was at the very center of God's purpose and work. If a Christian properly understood the church she would understand how she could best live and behave with respect to everything else in the universe. This included both the invisible order—God, Satan, angels, and evil spirits—and the visible order—herself, other Christians, secular society, and government authorities.

Trying to uncover Nee's own understanding of the "local churches" at this earliest stage is difficult. Before 1925, Nee wrote very little—only scattered articles for denominational magazines and a few issues of his own publication, *The Revival*, which was meant to provide spiritual food for the young Fuzhou congregation. Neither venue was particularly conducive to spelling out a controversial, intricate, Brethren-inspired theory on the nature of the church. Nevertheless, his rationale for leaving the Methodist denomination, the aversion to Anglicanism he shared with his fellow revivalists, and the nature of his most serious conflict with Leland Wang all make sense in light of Brethren ideas, which were sharply critical of Western church structures and clergy.

Soon after the Fuzhou conflict resolved, Nee began to publish openly and extensively on his understanding of the church, and these writings are clearly and heavily indebted to Brethren teachings. According to Witness Lee (1905-1997), in the beginning stages of Nee's work in China, the influence of the Brethren on Nee's followers was so thorough that some even referred to them as "the Chinese version of the British Brethren."[58] In 1925, Lee also wrote to Nee,

[58] Witness Lee, *The History of the Church and the Local Churches* (Anaheim, CA: Living Stream Ministry, 1999), 62.

asking him for help to "understand the Bible verse by verse." Nee referred Lee to the *Synopsis of the Books of the Bible*, written one of the Brethren's founders, John Nelson Darby (1800-1882).[59] One year later, Nee publicly acknowledged Darby's *Synopsis* as "the best commentary" available.[60]

Taken together, all of these facts strongly indicate that Nee's ideas on the church were formed during the early 1920s and that these ideas were firmly rooted in Brethren ecclesiology. Some of Nee's slightly later works on the church, published between 1925 and 1927, can thus be read profitably to offer insight into Nee's ecclesiological thought in those first years between 1920 and 1924.

It is unclear how Nee might have been exposed to Brethren literature in the first place. Because of the relative paucity of Barber's writings during this period, it is impossible to establish a definite link between her, the Brethren, and Nee. It evident that Barber and Nee's teachings on eschatology owe much to the Brethren concept of Christ's imminent return, but this link may have been indirect, perhaps channeled through the Surrey Chapel pastors, Govett and Panton. In 1910, Barber wrote a letter decrying the "superficial unity" to be found in Christianity, and her dismissive attitude toward the Methodist book of life is also highly suggestive.[61] Therefore, it is possible that she may have accepted some of the Brethren's ecclesiological critiques along with their eschatology, but nothing definite can be known.

Whether Nee was introduced to the Brethren through Barber or independently, by 1925 he was clearly steeped in their ecclesiology. In December of that year, *The Christian*, another

[59] Lee, *Watchman Nee: A Seer*, 285. Comparing this reference with another of Lee's in *Elder's Training, Book 10, The Eldership and the God-ordained Way* (Anaheim, CA: Living Stream Ministry, 1992), 117, gives the date of 1925.
[60] CWWN 7, 1082.
[61] Reetzke, *M. E. Barber*, 138-9 and *The Overcomer*, Vol. 2, December 1910.

magazine he had founded, began to publish "Meditations on Revelation," which was Nee's extensive exegesis on the first three chapters of the book of Revelation. In particular, "Meditations on Revelation" focused on his prophetic interpretations of the seven churches described in the second and third chapters of Revelation. Like his Brethren teachers, Nee understood these seven local churches to be both historical and prophetical. By thinking about the church in this way, church history and practice were put into a cosmic timeline. It was the state of the church that would move God's hand, leading to Jesus's second coming, and eventually, to the end of time.[62]

It would take Nee two years and hundreds of pages to complete his study. These writings suggest that when Nee repeatedly invoked what he believed to be his divinely-inspired vision of "the local churches," he was borrowing heavily from Brethren theology. Although the phrase itself might seem like a generic reference to local congregations, for Nee, the "local churches" included a significant body of specific ecclesiological beliefs and practices. Furthermore, the stakes involved in getting the local churches right were so high that Nee was willing to confront his Fuzhou companions and potentially endanger his part in a promising new revival. Reading Nee's "Meditations on Revelation" alongside Brethren teachings helps to elucidate the underlying issues.

Nee's "Meditations on Revelation" shares many key themes and emphases with Brethren ideals regarding the church. To begin with, he claimed that his work was scrupulously based on biblical principles according to a radical interpretation of the Protestant concept of *sola scriptura*, or "only the Bible." Both the Brethren and Nee held the Bible in such high regard that they were willing to use its message even against other Protestant ideas and organizations that

[62] Nee's exegesis here is especially indebted to the Brethren historian, Andrew Miller, *Miller's Church History* (London: Pickering and Inglis Ltd., 1974),

they felt to be unbiblical. Nee wrote that "The greatest goal of the Reformation was to show that nothing is trustworthy except the Bible."[63]

In his earliest writings, Nee had responded generously to common doubts about traditional Christian beliefs. When considering attacks on the Bible's trustworthiness, however, Nee was provoked to respond with passionate earnestness. Again and again, Nee grounded the controversial decisions he made with regard to baptism, the Eucharist, and denominations in deeply biblical language. Emotionally, intellectually, and practically, Nee was committed to the idea of the Bible as the ultimate arbiter of truth and actions. Similarly, an early critic of the Brethren admitted that one of their only virtues, and a reason for their success was their devotion to the Bible, writing, "The minds of the Brethren were saturated with the words of Scripture."[64]

Crucially, Nee and the Brethren agreed that the church was at the heart of the biblical message and furthermore, that the vast majority of Christians were not following the biblical commands on the church. Nee believed that if Christians "allowed the Bible to solve all problems," they would see that "neither the teachings of Luther, the teachings of Calvin, the Anglican Church, nor the Genevan Church have brought us back to the initial position of the church. They had not yet seen the truth of the body of Christ and the spiritual house built with living stones." Such groups transgressed the basic unity of the spiritual church and erected "national boundaries," dividing Christ's one body.[65]

This rationale helped to explain Nee's idea that being involved in the Methodist Church in any way made him complicit in its sins. As a denomination, Methodism divided the spiritual body of Christ, participating in the sin of division. For him to remain attached to Methodism,

[63] CWWN 5, 490.
[64] William Blair Neatby, *A History of the Plymouth Brethren*, London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1901, 278-9.
[65] CWWN 5, 491. See also CWWN 5, 548-9.

even nominally, was to share in its sin. This stance was virtually identical to the Brethren position. Early Brethren had defended their choice to leave their original congregations and denominations on the grounds that "Separation from Apostasy [is] Not Schism."[66] Since the original congregations and denominations were unbiblical and divisive, they constituted apostasy. In such a case, a faithful, obedient Christian had no choice but to separate herself.

Just as Nee was convinced to leave the Methodist denomination because of Paul's exhortation to unity in 1 Corinthians, so too, the Brethren left their original congregations in the name of church unity. The Brethren writers frequently gave unity pride of place in discussing the hallmarks of the true church. One argued that the first "departure from the simplicity of the faith of Christ" was "internal disunion."[67] Another stated his objection to "division, and sectarianism… whether it assume the character of the Establishment or of Dissent."[68] In the Parliamentary Returns, their peculiar emphasis on ecumenism coupled with their refusal to denominate themselves caused them to be entered in the rolls as "Catholic, not Roman."[69] The Brethren touted their catholicity and unity even as they denounced Anglicans, Dissenters, and the rest of post-Apostolic Christendom for "disunion," "division, and sectarianism."

This apparently paradoxical position can be explained by a widespread Protestant belief in the invisible church. Historian Grayson Carter elaborates:

> Central to Evangelical ecclesiology was the idea of the 'Church of Christ', the invisible body of all regenerate souls to which alone could be given the adjectives, 'one, holy, and catholic'. Here, at the theoretical level, all Evangelicals were agreed. While they prized the visible Church into which they were ordained, Evangelicals maintained that its interests

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[66] Henry Borlase, "Separation from Apostasy Not Schism," *Christian Witness* 1 (1834).
[67] Benjamin Newton and Henry Borlase, *Answers to Questions Lately Considered at a Meeting, Held in Plymouth* (Plymouth: J. B. Rowe, 1834), 301 as quoted in Callahan, *Primitivist Piety*, 93.
[68] William Kelly, ed. *The Collected Works of John Nelson Darby, Ecclesiastical,* Vol. 1 (London: George Morrish, n. d.), 31.
[69] James Bennett, *History of Dissenters, During the Last Thirty Years (from 1808-1838),* (London: Hamilton, Adams and co., 1839), 30.

> should be subordinated to those of the real church, the 'Church of Christ', or the invisible body of all believers.[70]

From an evangelical perspective, the true or "real church" was composed of those who had passed through the watershed experience of conversion, and were to be counted among God's elect. Anglicans, Roman Catholics, and Magisterial Reformers all agreed that the earthly church was inevitably a mixed body, filled with both saints and sinners. For various reasons, both utilitarian and dogmatic, loyalty to the visible churches was promulgated by apologists within these traditions. Nevertheless, most British evangelicals, who treasured the value of adult conversion or regeneration, had to admit that the members of the "one, holy, and catholic Church of Christ" were to be found across the denominational lines of many visible congregations. The discrepancy between these mixed, visible congregations and the pure, spiritual church weighed heavily on some consciences.

Like the Brethren, Nee simply placed a higher emphasis on this doctrine of the invisible church than other Protestants. In particular, he argued for a more visible manifestation of its unity and catholicity, wanting to see a gathered body that would eschew any denominational names and markers. Western evangelicals might all believe in the "one, holy, and catholic" church, but Nee, like many non-Western Christians, was more deeply scandalized by the discrepancy between faith and practice. To him, all Christian groups enforced divisions in the Body of Christ. The only ecumenical option, then, was to leave them all.

Visible unity and catholicity comprised one part of Nee's reason for leaving the Methodist Church were also part of his vision for the local churches. Visible holiness was another. Here again, Nee drew on the biblical record to discredit the mainstream practices of

[70] Grayson Carter, *Anglican Evangelicals: Protestant Secessions from the* Via Media, *c. 1800-1850* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 9.

Western Christianity. Because the New Testament covers only the first generation of Christians, there is no allowance for nominal Christianity. Instead, the Biblical churches all seem to be tightly regulated communities of true believers. For instance, the book of Acts records a period in which all goods were held in common. When a married couple, Ananias and Sapphira, lied about their contribution to the common fund, the apostle Peter openly condemned them, and they were miraculously struck dead.

When Nee studied the question of the Eucharist, he was bothered by two major, apparently unbiblical practices that both seemed to compromise the purity of church practice. The first was that ungodly and unchristian members were allowed to receive communion; the second was that the Methodists, like most Western Christians, required an ordained pastor to preside over the ceremony. It is relatively easy to understand why Nee accused the Methodists of impurity on account of their supposedly allowing the unconverted to partake of their holy communion. It is less obvious why Nee believed pastoral ordination to be a transgression against the church's holiness as well.

Nee did not deny that "only a minority among all Christians" might have the abilities to function as "an evangelist, a shepherd, or a teacher."[71] Nevertheless, such gifts were given by God and did not require the acknowledgement of human beings. The concept of ordination as most Christians understood it created a "special group of people" who were "different from ordinary people" and who "inserted themselves between God and human beings."[72] Even if priests or pastors were not understood to be members of a special class, the concept of ordination itself was still problematic since it required fallible human beings to discern and approve of the

[71] CWWN 4, 396.
[72] CWWN 4, 394.

gifts of others. Abilities and vocation were bestowed directly by God and they should be carried out in direct dependence on God alone.

Here, Nee's scrupulous biblicism and idealization of a direct dependence on God again followed critiques that had first been raised by the Brethren. Darby had argued that even the "notion of a clergyman" was a sin. Although the Bible mandated certain offices, or gifts, such as apostleship, Darby wrote that "the idea of a 'Clergyman,' that is, of a humanly appointed office, taking the place and assuming the authority of the Spirit of God, necessarily involves (in its condemnation of what the Holy Ghost does do) in the sin against the Holy Ghost: and I defy any one to shew how it can be otherwise."[73] Inasmuch as clergy were appointed by human agency and vested with authority from human beings, they were intrinsically an affront to God's authority and God's desire for the church's direct and absolute dependence.

In similar fashion, Nee argued that one of the features that distinguished Judaism from proper Christianity was that according to the New Testament, "Everyone can now come directly to God. The intermediary priesthood has forever been removed, for now every believer is a priest before God." It was the responsibility of every Christian to "contact God directly." In this light, both "the system of 'priests' in the Roman Catholic Church and the system of 'pastors' in the Protestant churches" were only "different manifestations" of the same erroneous teaching.[74] Thus, as with the question of unsaved members in the congregation, the problem of clergy was ultimately one of purity. Whereas Christians should enjoy direct, intimate access to God, any system of clergy created a mediatorial class that infringed upon a most holy relationship with human meddling.

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[73] Kelly, *Collected Works, Ecclesiastical*, 58-61.

[74] CWWN 4, 390. 每人都可直接到神的面前來。居間的祭司職分，已經永遠取消。因為每一個信徒，在神前都是祭司。 Nee's conception of Judaism seems to share the biases of many of his 19th century sources.

To these two major critiques of purity, Nee added a third. He also condemned Christians for joining political and ecclesial matters. In particular, the Reformers had not trusted enough in the "boundless power and unlimited wisdom" of God. As a result, they relied on "the patronage and support of the power of the world. By doing so, they could not help but allow the power of the world to occupy a place in the church. It is as equally wrong for the church to rule over the world as it is for the world to rule over the church."[75] If Roman Catholics were wrong to suggest that the church should intervene in secular politics, the Protestants were also wrong for accepting the help of the state. In Nee's view, a pure church was one that was completely separated from the defiling influence of worldly power.

Once again, these views had a clear Brethren antecedent, including even Nee's genealogy of the church's error. One Brethren teacher wrote, "Thus Protestantism was always wrong, ecclesiastically because it looked up to the civil ruler as the one in whose hand ecclesiastical authority was vested; so that if the Church had been, under Popery, the ruler of the world, the world now became, in Protestantism, the ruler of the church."[76] The Protestants had erred because "They overlooked the grand truth, that all needed power for the Church, both inward and outward, spiritual and governmental, dwells in the Head, and that neither the tyranny of Rome, nor the feebleness of a few reformers weaken in the least this blessed reality."[77] The church should have maintained its trust in God, even in the face of terrible persecution and overwhelming power. Christ required that the church, his body, maintain a sacred obedience only to himself. If the church made use of civil power in any way, it betrayed its faith.

[75] CWWN 5, 476.
[76] Andrew Miller, *Miller's Church History* (London: Pickering and Inglis Ltd., 1974), 667.
[77] Miller, *Miller's Church History*, 666.

This sharp, unbridgeable gulf that Nee and the Brethren maintained between the secular and ecclesiastical spheres was to have immense consequences for Nee and his followers. Nee lived through some of the most politically turbulent decades in modern Chinese history, but his works scrupulously avoided any mention of political affairs. Even when lives and congregations were at stake, Nee did his best to maintain an apolitical stance, submitting to all secular authorities alike and showing no favor to any political ideology or group. It is possible that this political chaos made the Brethren ecclesiology even more attractive to Nee. A church that stood apart from political powers offered the hope of a lasting haven in the midst of a rapidly shifting political landscape, which often had brutal consequences for its losers.

Nee's overall vision of the church was thus built upon a foundation that was substantially laid by the Brethren. He believed that the church was a heavenly entity comprised of true Christians who followed Christ directly and were subject only to the Spirit. In terms of purity, the church was to be entirely freed from worldly affairs, human intermediaries, and false or nominal Christians. In terms of unity, Nee held that the Biblical oneness of the church had been disturbed by the creation of nominal bonds, churches, congregations, communions, denominations, and fellowships. Thus, although there were already Christians throughout China, Nee still dreamed of purer, more unified manifestations of the church, of "local churches in every city."

The Vision of the Local Churches: New Developments

The emphasis on a local presence for the church was one of Nee's first innovations and developments of the basic Brethren framework. It took a relatively minor insight that the Brethren and other careful Western exegetes had begun to point out in the 19th century and

turned it into a startlingly new principle for church organization.[78] By focusing on the biblical concept of a locality, or place, Nee felt he had found a way to overcome one of the biggest limitations of the Brethren ideas on the church.

Brethren ecclesiology was consistently and resolutely pessimistic. They admitted that even the earliest, Apostolic church was wracked with problems. Thus, unlike other primitivist groups of the 19th century, they harbored no hopes of restoration or re-establishment of an original, unsullied church. Instead, they opted for holy grief, a "separatist lamentation or jeremiad."[79] The Brethren discounted the validity of *every possible* contemporary congregation. One of the early Brethren "clearly saw the only spiritually viable option… separate from all churches and join none, create none, and restore none."[80]

Nee accepted the general premise of pessimism, arguing that the book of Revelation offered a "striking contrast" to the belief that "the world is getting better day by day, and that all civilizations are improving."[81] Nevertheless, he continued to engage in his own course of intensive, repeated readings of the Bible to find further keys to the practice and nature of the church. Thus, he discovered "locality" as an interpretive key that distinguished him not only from the Brethren but also from his cohort in Fuzhou.

Nee later suggested that between 1921 and 1923, while he was "carefully studying the book of Acts," God gave him the key and "opened my eyes to see that His purpose requires that those who have been saved by grace stand upon the ground of oneness in local churches to represent and maintain God's testimony on the earth." Although Nee was convinced that this was

[78] The word translated into English as "locality" is a common word for "place" or "location" in Chinese (地方), and is generally a translation of the Greek term, *ousia*. Nee sometimes used the word generically but in relation to the church, he uses it almost always as a technical, theological term. Thus "locality" probably better represents Nee's usage of the Chinese phrase.
[79] Callahan, *Primitivist Piety*, 187.
[80] Callahan, *Primitivist Piety*, 190.
[81] CWWN 3, 112.

God's plan, his "co-workers held different views regarding important points of our work" which resulted in "friction among us."[82]

The resistance from Nee's co-workers was understandable. Nee's concept of a "ground of oneness in local churches" in order to "represent and maintain God's testimony on the earth" was a novel concept. Nee joined this concept with the rest of his Brethren ecclesiology to form an unprecedented basis for a Christian fellowship. Nee's own writings confirm that at least by the mid-1920s, these principles were firmly established in his mind. In "Meditations on Revelation," Nee writes repeatedly about his understanding of the importance of "locality" and the local church, the only legitimate "name" by which to distinguish a group of Christians. Nee thus focused his attention on the names the Bible had given to the seven churches in Asia.

> We are familiar with terms like "the Anglican Church," "the Roman Catholic Church," "the Greek Orthodox Church," and "the Church of Christ in China," but the Bible is different. It says "the church in Ephesus." In the original language it means the church which is in Ephesus. Those in the church were but part of the people living in Ephesus. The Ephesian were still Gentiles. "The church in Ephesus" was only that part of the Ephesians that had believed in the Lord Jesus. The church was only in Ephesus; it is not an Ephesian church. Today, people try to establish Chinese churches because they do not understand the Bible. The church is only residing in a locality. It is not a product of a locality. This should forever be the church's stand. Once the church is joined with the world, it loses its qualifications![83]

Thus, although the Bible does give the church a name of sorts, that is, "the church in Ephesus," the phrase should not be understood as a proper noun, describing a separate entity with its own existence. It was only a way to denote the church that happened to be in Ephesus that had not taken on any of the secular qualities of that city. The phrase "the church in Ephesus" functioned as a means of address or an adjective. It was a description of the universal, spiritual, legitimate church that had a physical, practical presence in a particular location.

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[82] CWWN 26, 468-9.
[83] CWWN 4, 277.

Nee walked a fine line to make a subtle point. Both Nee and the Brethren had a hard time articulating what exactly they were. Their horror with regard to division kept them from claiming themselves to be a new Christian church, movement, or organization since any definite name would seem to give them a sectarian identity. The many names that have been used to designate these various groups have generally been foisted upon them by outsiders. Although Nee accepted the Brethren's rejection of every name for Christian groups as divisive, writing that "the churches in all the places do not have any name," he also recognized that the Bible itself was willing to distinguish Christians on the basis of where they lived.[84] Even if properly speaking they were not "names," the congregations that followed Nee's teachings could designate themselves as "the church in Fuzhou," or "the church in Shanghai."

Other careful readers of the Bible, including the Brethren, had already noticed that the Bible generally listed only a single church in each city, and Nee concurred, writing that "There is only one church in one locality."[85] Nee differed from these other Christians, however, in insisting that the principle of no more than one church in one city was a biblical mandate, and a concrete way to practice the Brethren's otherwise ethereal, impracticable ecclesiology. In general, Christians had erred when they "established many different denominational churches in one locality."[86] Instead, all the Christians in a particular place should come together to properly represent the ideal, unified, heavenly church in their local context.

On the one hand, Nee refused to claim that such local churches represented a restoration of the apostolic church, writing that "We are not here to bring in a new Pentecost… We should not seek for conspicuous works. Rather, we should be satisfied with the Lord Himself."[87] On the

[84] CWWN 4, 278.
[85] CWWN 4, 232.
[86] CWWN 4, 278.
[87] CWWN 5, 536.

other hand, Nee nevertheless argued that the local churches were "the representation of the whole church of God in that particular locality. Although the number, spiritual condition, and other matters differ in different local churches, they are all representations of the one unique body."[88] To some extent, the impracticality and pessimism of Brethren ecclesiology had been tamed. There was an easy, visible way to maintain fidelity to the one, pure church. Christians simply needed restrict themselves to a single administration and a single fellowship within the bounds of a single city.

Nee's concept of locality also threaded the needle of another basic tension inherent in Brethren theology. Today, scholars of the Brethren and participants in the movement identify two main strands of Brethrenism, the "Open Brethren" and the "Closed" or "Exclusive Brethren." Open Brethren maintained "a dogmatic insistence on the inviolable independency of each local assembly or meeting" while the Closed Brethren were "by contrast, tightly connexional with a high degree of inter-dependence within a network of assemblies…"[89] In other words, the Brethren broke apart from each other over the old Protestant question of congregational versus episcopal polities that had separated Anglicans, Lutherans, and Methodists from Baptists, Congregationalists, and Presbyterians.

Although the Brethren all rejected church hierarchies and bishops on principle, they had no way to adjudicate the relative importance of unity when claims based on local unity contradicted claims based on inter-congregational or universal unity. If a local Brethren assembly insisted on doctrines or practices that other assemblies found problematic or heretical, did the other groups have the right to interfere with the local administration and disturb the local

[88] CWWN 4, 278.
[89] Roger Shuff, *Searching for the True Church: Brethren and Evangelicals in Mid-Twentieth-Century England* (Waynesboro, GA: Paternoster, 2005), 3.

consensus? Nee suggested that even while each local church represented the "whole church of God," the Bible rejected forced, organizational conformity, writing,

> We never find any man-made terms such as 'head church' or 'mother church' in the Bible. The church of God is the body of Christ, composed of individual members. It is not composed of many small churches. The unit in the body of Christ is the individual believer and not an individual church. Believers are the members of Christ, being joined to Christ their head by the Holy Spirit. No grand-scale union of churches as is found today can be found in the Bible.[90]

Thus, Nee understood the local church to be a special kind of entity. It had no name or existence on its own, it was not a "real" part of the universal church of Christ—it was merely the physical, local reflection of that reality. Thus, it was a well-defined place that could offer a rich, congregational daily life but also one that, in the sense of eternal verities, had no independent existence, keeping the purity and unity of the spiritual church inviolable. When individual believers participated in the activities of their local church, they were being joined directly as members to body of Christ and its head. Their local assemblies were only practical, temporary means; Christians were directly related to Christ and to the holy, catholic church. Nee thus found a way to maintain both local and universal unity, without imposing artificial, human authority.

Of course, this was easier spoken in theory than carried out in practice. The Brethren, who had been wracked with many internal schisms, offered a cautionary example. In fact, the whole history of Christianity seemed to suggest that it was fleetingly rare for Christians actually to maintain either local or universal unity, let alone both at once. Nee was acutely aware that the church's past was filled with intrareligious division and controversy based on matters great and small. In this, Nee departed again from Brethren ecclesiology to offer a novel solution. Nee had argued that "the unity of the body" was the "individual members." Thus, it was the responsibility of each of these individual members both to display the unity of the universal church in each of

[90] CWWN 4, 278.

their local churches and to still maintain a connexional unity with all other local assemblies. This high ideal of unity placed an enormous demand on the members, who had to conduct themselves with incredible forbearance and self-sacrifice in order to maintain their love and oneness with one another.

To make this demanding church unity accessible and practicable, Nee added the transcendent, powerful mysticism of the cross to which he was introduced by Barber. The story of the cross is best told by returning to Nee's conflict with Leland Wang, since Barber used their conflict as a painful lesson by which to train Nee not only to understand her theology of the cross, but also to become its living embodiment.

The Lesson of the Cross

Although we do not have Wang's record of the controversy, it is possible to reconstruct something of his point of view. He was an older, married man who had given up a reputable profession to join his younger brother and his brother's schoolmates to evangelize China. Perhaps because he was the only one with a house of his own, the initial revival meetings had been held in a pavilion on his property. Since their preaching had been successful and had gained hundreds of converts, it was natural that Wang wanted to continue a successful work that God had seemed to bless. In Nee's later recollection, the other five young men agreed with this obvious course of action and they "always sided with [Leland Wang] and opposed me. No matter what I did, they would invariably condemn me."[91]

Nee had his own reasons to be proud. Simon Meek, one of five schoolmates, later told Nee's biographer that Nee was the "planner and ringleader" for many of their ventures, which

[91] CWWN 26, 463-4.

included twenty-four hour prayer watches and the parades with white vests and banners. It was also Nee who had come up with the ingenious idea of asking the revival's participants to bring their own stools when the revivalists had run out of money to rent more.[92] Nee explained that he was used to positions of leadership, writing "I was always ranked first in my class as well as in my school. I also wanted to be first in serving the Lord. For this reason, when I was made second, I disobeyed. I told God repeatedly that it was too much for me to bear; I was receiving too little honor and authority, and everyone sided with my elder co-worker."[93] Like Wang, Nee had also given up a promising future upon his conversion, and he was deeply earnest in his desire to follow his intricate vision for the local churches. Nee suggests that the gravity of the situation pressed upon him heavily. He "seldom laughed at that time" and "frequently lost [his] temper."[94]

Every Friday, as the seven "co-workers" met, Nee and Wang monopolized the proceedings with their arguments. On Saturday, Nee would appeal to Barber, hoping that she would justify him. Instead, Barber took the opportunity to humble Nee further. Again and again, she told Nee that since Wang was five years older and "The Scriptures say that the younger should obey the elder," Nee had no choice but to obey Wang.[95]

Thus, Nee recounts that he would weep on "Friday evening after the dispute on Friday afternoon. Then I would go to Sister Barber the next day to state my grievances, hoping that she would vindicate me. But I would weep again after coming home Saturday evening."[96] Even when Nee wanted to baptize fellow students from Trinity who had believed as a result of his own preaching and prayer, Barber forbade him. Instead, she ordered him to submit to Wang and allow

[92] Kinnear, *Against the Tide*, 69. CWWN 26, 466.
[93] CWWN 26, 464.
[94] CWWN 26, 460.
[95] CWWN 26, 460.
[96] CWWN 26, 461.

Wang to perform the baptisms, arguing again that Wang's age made him more qualified. Nee, sensing a loophole, suggested that a third brother who was older than both himself and Wang might be allowed to baptize. Barber was unmoved and still "insisted that Leland be the baptizer."[97]

Barber's consistently opposed Nee over the course of "a year and a half" throughout his arguments with Wang.[98] Her behavior might seem capricious and even cruel to an outside observer and it is easy to imagine that persons more level-headed than the young Watchman Nee would have been infuriated by this treatment. In fact, it seems befuddling that Nee continued to come to Barber and to seek her approval. Evidently, Barber possessed a mysterious quality that both subdued and attracted Nee. All the existing accounts of this early revival suggest that she seemed to have this same effect on the whole group of the young men, all of whom deferred to her spiritual seniority.

In later years, Nee recalled Barber's authority with a number of fascinating descriptions. One of his favorite was a theological concept of "life." He wrote, "God is not satisfied with us only having His life; He wants His life to flow out of us. Churchwoman Barber was such a person. As soon as others touched her, they touched life. If you sat down and fellowshipped with her for a minute or two, you would feel life flowing out of her. If a person with life sits beside you, his very presence will bring life to you."[99]

At other times, Nee spoke of Barber possessing a kind of prescience that could be powerfully convicting. Nee wrote that "Several times Churchwoman Barber seemed to be speaking like a fortune-teller about certain brothers. Eventually we found out that what she said

[97] CWWN 57, 9.
[98] CWWN 26, 461.
[99] CWWN 44, 851.

was exactly what had happened."[100] Similarly, he wrote that "Many who knew Churchwoman Barber can testify that she was very different from others. Whenever someone went to her and sat in front of her, spontaneously he would realize how much he was off. He would realize that he did not have what she had and would aspire for what she had." Thus, Nee recounted that early in his Christian life, he had been proud of his understanding of the Bible and "I went to her to tell her about this. After I prayed a few words with her, I saw my pride before she even opened her mouth to rebuke me. I knew that I did not have what she had."[101]

Thus, in his disagreements with Leland Wang, Nee was trapped. He admired Barber and wanted to learn from her and gain her approval, but she resolutely opposed him. Later, he suggested that over the course of these years, he went to her "forty or fifty times" and she "did not agree with me once." If Nee was frustrated, Barber too, may have felt that the lesson she was trying to impart was not taking. Nee described the moment of their breakthrough on a number of occasions, but in his most thorough description of the affair, Nee had clashed with Leland yet again. In describing the aftermath, he wrote:

> I felt there was no justice in this whole episode. I went to Churchwoman Barber to point out Leland's mistake. For half an hour to an hour I was filled with righteous indignation. I was young and could not contain my fleshly indignation. I kept talking for a long time. Eventually, Churchwoman Barber said, "For the past few months, you have been coming to me to complain about Leland's mistakes. What if I were to say that Leland was wrong? What good would that do you? Are you here to fight for your right or are you here to bear the cross?" After a minute of silence she spoke again, saying, "Look at you! Is this the attitude of the Lamb?" She spoke to me loudly and called me by my name: "Watchman Nee! Is this the way to bear the cross?" Immediately, I began to cry. I was crushed. From that day onward, I dared not accuse anyone. I feel that I owe this sister quite much. Today I do not have such an opportunity to learn such precious lessons. Although I suffered much under her hand, those dealings were a great blessing to me."[102]

[100] CWWN 41, 223.
[101] CWWN 42, 238.
[102] CWWN 59, 17. NTSWJ 59, 20-21

On another occasion, Nee reiterated that this was "the most precious lesson in my life."[103] Nee had begun to share Barber's vision of "bearing the cross"—one that idealized Jesus's meek, silent response to misunderstanding and human opposition. His open arguments with Leland Wang stopped, and he would return to this experience again and again for the rest of his life as an important touchstone.

If Nee's conception of the local church was to be practiced, the demand placed on the individual members was significant. Although the local churches were to be reflections of the universal church, they had no ultimate, eternal significance of their own. Nee maintained the essence of the Brethren vision by arguing that individual believers, and no earthly congregations, were the only units to be directly related to the spiritual church. Nevertheless, the local churches were to be pure and harmonious, unified within each city, and unified also with all the other local congregations throughout the earth. Furthermore, they were to maintain this standing without the interference of a hierarchical clergy. This meant that the individual members and churches had to discipline one another to maintain a proper representation of the true church. For members to be restricted in their disciplining of one another, humble in their receiving each others' discipline, and magnanimous from both sides to avoid offense was a tall order, but it was the only way that Nee's vision of the church could be practiced. In learning his "most precious lesson" from Barber, Nee realized that the way of the cross—absolute self-negation—was the only path forward.

Nee immediately had crucial opportunities to test the depth of his new convictions and understanding of the cross. Although Barber's rebuke had destroyed his will for open arguments, he still felt that God had expressly commissioned him to establish local churches. The root of the

[103] CWWN 26, 461.

disagreement between Nee and Wang remained, and they continued to work in contradictory directions without open confrontation. As a figure of growing renown, Wang frequently left town to preach in other meetings and congregations. Nee writes, "When he was away, I worked according to my vision, when he returned, he undid what I had done, working according to his vision." Nee did not give details, but explained only that "One way was that of focusing on revival and preaching, while the other way was that of establishing local churches." Some of the other co-workers "were not satisfied" with Nee and eventually, "God allowed the church in Fuzhou to fall into a trial. In order to avert a schism, I left Fuzhou."[104]

One of Nee's co-workers told a much more dramatic and specific account of the schism. James Chen was a long-time leader of a congregation that followed Nee in Hong Kong. He first met Nee in 1926, when he was converted by Nee's itinerant preaching in the aftermath of the schism in Fuzhou.[105] He later recounted that the final question that divided Nee and his friends was their desire to "invite an ordained minister for the purpose of having themselves ordained as ministers." Nee opposed this practice, making the familiar claim that "a minister is a gift given to the church by God (Ephesians 4:11) and not a position created by man," and arguing that the "system of ordination" was an unscriptural, erroneous tradition. Nee then preached a message warning that "once the ark had left Shiloh, there was no return, thus alluding to the fact that we should not backslide to old ways."[106]

As might be expected, Nee's sermon "incited resentment in his fellow-workers" who excommunicated Nee and "announced it publicly." Chen records that there was a significant backlash to this drastic decision and that Nee was "well loved because of his eloquence and his

[104] NTSWJ 26, 238-9.
[105] James Chen, *Meet Brother Nee* (Hong Kong: The Christian Publishers, 1976), 29-30.
[106] James Chen, *Meet Brother Nee* (Hong Kong: The Christian Publishers, 1976), 18-19.

ability to shed light on the Scriptures in his preaching." Nee's supporters went to discuss the matter with "the leading brothers" and their anger soon began to focus on Leland Wang, whom they recognized as "the key figure in the expulsion decision." In the heat of the argument, some of them rushed at Wang, seeking to attack him when Nee jumped in front of him and "spoke loudly, 'Don't touch him! If you want to beat him, beat me first! He is loved by God, and loved by me too. He is our brother! I have forgiven him. You should also do the same. At any rate, you must not lay your hands on him.'" Chen recounts that Wang was "deeply moved, and shed tears on the spot" and that "The demand for ordination was no longer raised." Still, it was at this point that Nee recognized that his presence had become a divisive factor and left Fuzhou of his own accord.[107]

It is understandable that ordination could become an explosive issue among young Christian workers with no official status. Most, if not all of the young men involved in the revival, would eventually devote their lives to full-time ministry. Like Nee, his classmates had also given up promising futures for an uncertain career. They all agreed on formal independence from denominations and the Sino-Foreign Protestant Establishment. There is no indication, however, that any of the other revivalists had either made Nee's radical decision to live by the faith principle or come to Nee's conclusions about the unscriptural nature of the hierarchy. Since they had not traveled down those paths, Leland Wang's method and future seemed much brighter than Nee's.

Wang had agreed that clergy were not required to preside over the Holy Communion, but this did not necessarily imply that the clerical system was inimically wrong. Wang maintained both his independence *and* close ties with denominational Christians and the Protestant

[107] Chen, *Meet Brother Nee*, 19-20.

establishment. Although establishment Christians were slow to cede actual power to native Christians, they did make smaller concessions to indigenization, such as sponsoring the preaching tours of independent Chinese revivalists, or paying for them to preach in their denominational congregations. Ordination could have given the young men firmer footing and recognition from other Christian congregations. Wang would go on to have great successes overseas, widely feted by Chinese and Western Christians alike. Nee would be opposed repeatedly for his ideas on the church and would eventually pay an enormous price for his convictions.

The first period of Nee's ministry had come to an end and appeared to result in total personal failure. Nee had been converted and had given up the prospect of secular employment in order to devote himself to Christian ministry. With a small group of his childhood schoolmates, he had spearheaded a heady revival in which hundreds were saved, many of them by his own preaching among his classmates and the people of Fuzhou. His friends wanted to continue with "revival and evangelism," possibly seeing ordination as a way to solidify their careers and status. Nee, however, insisted on "establishing local churches" according to his vision of an exacting, scriptural way to practice church unity and purity. Nee then chose exile over schism, allowing himself to be cut off from the congregation that he himself had helped to establish.

In the coming decades, Nee would be banished at least two more times from groups in which he clearly held a founding, leading role. In each conflict, Nee allowed himself to be marginalized without mounting a defense, rallying his supporters, or trying to make a case for his perspective. Especially as his stature grew, it is hard to believe that he could not have won significant support, or even banished his opponents, if he had been inclined to try. Nee's

apparent passivity during these crucial moments has become part of an enduring puzzle, making it even more difficult for later historians and biographers to sort out the facts.

Self-abnegation is not a common quality in leaders, but for Nee, it was a crucial, non-negotiable part of the Christian message. Barber had introduced him to a theology of the cross, which demanded a radical form of self-denial, and Nee had begun to see that this was the only means by which church unity could actually be achieved and practiced. The combining of a Brethren based ecclesiology with this mystical, demanding conception of the cross was one of Nee's most novel contributions to Christian thought.

Nee later trained his own co-workers to absorb and embody this same principle. He warned them that their usefulness depended upon the depth of their experience of the cross and their willingness to submit even in the face of great wrong and injustice.

> If you cannot stand the trials of the cross, you cannot become a useful instrument. It is only the spirit of a lamb that God takes delight in: the gentleness, the humility, and the peace. Your ambition, lofty purpose, and ability are all useless in the sight of God. I have been down this path and must often confess my shortcomings. All that pertains to me is in the hand of God. It is not a question of right or wrong; it is a question of whether or not one is like the bearer of the cross. In the church, right and wrong have no place; all that counts is bearing the cross and accepting its breaking. This produces the overflowing of God's life and accomplishes His will.[108]

Nee's idea that the cross invalidates questions of "right and wrong" is a curious one. Biographically, the notion can be derived from Nee's assessment of his own behavior. Even when he was on the "right" side of the argument against Leland Wang, Barber exposed his proud, uncharitable attitude. Intellectually, however, the claim that the Christian life did not depend on notions of right and wrong was another of Nee's contributions to an ongoing conversation. As with his ecclesiology, Nee inherited a particular set of Western Christian ideas on ethics and behavior and then developed these ideas on the basis of his own Bible study,

[108] CWWN 26, 461-2.

creating a theology that had special resonance in his own context and adaptability for many other audiences.

On the one hand, Nee left Fuzhou with little to show for his time there. On the other hand, he had received a detailed vision of the local churches derived from his own Bible study, his understanding of Brethren theology, and his training under Barber. To this, he had added certain innovations that tempered the Brethren's pessimism, impracticality, and contradictions between congregational and universal unity. Possessed of the vision and blueprint of the local churches, he was ready to implement what he had seen. To these he also added a particular understanding of the Christian life, one that eschewed outward success in favor of inward attainments.

The combination of local churches and self-denial allowed for a deeply communal form of Christianity. During his time at Fuzhou, Nee was constantly involved in Christian meetings, from his mother's Bible study, to Barber's mentorship, to meetings with his co-workers, to his first communion in the house of Leland and Ada Wang. Except for the larger gatherings in their rented building, all of these meetings took place in the participants' homes, suggesting a high degree of intimacy and sociability.

Wherever Nee established churches in the future, the congregations would follow suit, meeting throughout the week, often in one another's houses. One scholar of Nee's life has suggested that his placement of the home and hearth at the center of congregational life capitalized on the traditional Chinese emphasis on family.[109] This form of daily church practice, where members might regularly spend many hours each week together heightened both the potential for conflict and the demand for unity and harmony.

[109] Grace Ying May, "Watchman Nee and the Breaking of Bread."

Even though he was eventually rejected by his companions, Nee first glimpsed the possibilities of such a life in Fuzhou. As a result of his Fuzhou experiences, Nee also believed that he now had the secret to fostering a congregational life that could overcome all differences in personality and vision. Every member of the church simply had to take the way of the cross. Even if he had to begin anew by himself, he was now equipped with Barber's lessons, and also the secret of her attractive wisdom and equanimity. He was prepared to embark on a Christian path that could produce "the overflowing of God's life."

Chapter 3

The Spiritual Human

After Watchman Nee left Fuzhou in 1924, he was suddenly very alone. His excommunication from the congregation and subsequent departure from the city largely cut him off from the Christian society he had previously enjoyed. Nee's mother, Leland Wang, Margaret Barber, and his fellow schoolmate revivalists all remained in Fuzhou while he began to move from place to place, never staying in any location for more than a few months. With a few significant exceptions, he would never again be quite as solitary or unsettled as he was during the two to three years between 1925 and 1927, which would turn out to be a period of both intense suffering and impressive productivity.

Nee took advantage of that solitude to distinguish himself and refine his distinctive message more than ever before. If his childhood friends had been a source of support, they may also have been something of a limitation. Nee's biographer, Angus Kinnear, suggests that the schism "shook [Nee] from his rest in Christ and plunged him deep in discouragement."[1] In his own writings, though, Nee leaves no record of being depressed at his expulsion from the Fuzhou group. In some sense, the parting of ways may even have freed Nee from having to compromise his growing set of convictions. He set about advancing his work with remarkable drive and confidence. Instead of falling into obscurity, Nee wrote and published more than ever and his burgeoning ministry began to garner a significant reputation and a sizeable following. He had lost Fuzhou, but he was gaining a much wider audience.

[1] Kinnear, *Against the Tide*, 91.

Nee's surprising persistence in the face of adversity may have owed something to the lessons of self-denial he had so freshly learned under Margaret Barber's tutelage. One of the first things Nee wrote after his expulsion from the Fuzhou congregation touched on the importance of true humility. In this article, Nee argued that "Humility is not thinking less about oneself; it is thinking nothing about oneself. Humility is not lightly esteeming oneself, but not considering oneself at all. A truly humble person is truly dead to himself." Barber had taught Nee to identify with the cross so closely that he would be able to ignore all personal insults, slights, and setbacks because he was "truly dead" in any case. Nee had also concluded that for the "truly humble person," there was no place for wavering or indecision, writing that "True humility before the Lord does not withdraw at a crisis or pull back from advancement in the name of false meekness." Thus shorn of the burdens of self-pity, regret, and doubt, Nee was paradoxically freed to "strive forward while acknowledging his uselessness and powerlessness."[2]

The paradoxical figure who embodies both dynamism and a total lack of self-consciousness is a familiar trope in Chinese religion and philosophy. Daoist and some strands of Confucian thought famously uphold the ideal of *wuwei*, which connotes a kind of effortless excellence, action that transcends intention and artificial exertion.[3] As Nee represented himself and his experiences in terms of total freedom from self-regard, he was using language that would have been culturally familiar to Chinese audiences and widely identifiable as a sage, a generic figure of ethical superiority and wisdom who was able to uplift the conduct of others, presumably his readers and followers.

[2] CWWN 7, 1139.

[3] There is a passage in the *Analects* in which Confucius uses the term approvingly, at Book 15.5. It has been argued that this is a late assertion, but Benjamin Schwartz points out that other parts of the *Analects* share a similar perspective. *The World of Thought in Ancient China* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1985), 188-191.

Nee would never have referred to himself as a sage since the terminology was so deeply associated with Confucianism and Daoism. Nevertheless, the years between 1925 and 1927 were the last stage in the process of Nee's formation and emergence as a sage-like figure. In 1924, he was known only to a small circle of Fuzhou Christians. After 1928, he was increasingly acknowledged by Christians throughout China to be a master of Christian doctrines and practices, and his teachings were widely believed to lead to true moral excellence. In other words, if one ignores the specific designation of Christianity, by the time he was twenty-five, Nee was clearly recognizable as a prototypical Chinese sage. Even if he and his followers used exclusively Christian terms to refer to their relationship, they were following well-trodden cultural paths.

On a practical level, the success of Nee's work in these early years of independence can be explained by his careful investment of time and energy. In general, he moved in three basic directions. He read and learned, he published his own work, and he preached widely. To begin with, Nee gathered material for his publication and preaching by reading the Bible and Christian literature at a furious rate. Early in his Christian ministry, Nee dedicated himself to reading through the New Testament once each week over the course of an entire year.[4] It is possible that he engaged in this course of intense reading during the mid-1920s when he was suddenly deprived of congregational duties. Nee also amassed a library of over three thousand Christian books and periodicals.[5] His book buying activity was so notable that in 1926 his Western suppliers began to ask him why he wanted these books. This exchange initiated a sequence of

[4] Witness Lee, *Crucial Principles for the Christian Life and the Church Life*.
[5] On Nee's library see Witness Lee, *Watchman Nee*, 25 and *Life-Study of Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs*, (Anaheim, CA: Living Stream Ministry, 1995), 55 and Jennifer Lin, "The Secret Flock of Watchman Nee: Curiosity about a Famous Relative Becomes an Unexpected Voyage of Discovery" *The Philadelphia Inquirer Magazine* (March 12, 2000).

events that would eventually connect Nee directly to the Plymouth Brethren and lead to his first visit to Europe and the United States.[6]

Based on his studies and experiences, Nee also continued his writing and publication. His first periodical, *The Revival*, had been published and financed on an irregular basis between 1923 and 1925.[7] In 1925, he replaced *The Revival* with a new magazine called *The Christian*. Nee would go on to publish twenty-four issues of *The Christian* between 1925 and 1927, and it was clear that he had developed his skills in planning and production considerably. Although no known copies of this first run of *The Revival* exist, Nee had correspondents and subscriptions for *The Christian* as soon as it started. Thus, it is possible that a warm response to *The Revival* convinced Nee that a more organized publication could also succeed.

Perhaps in keeping with the ethos of the "faith principle," Nee had not even asked for subscription fees for *The Revival*. As a result, he was only able to print issues as he had the funds. In contrast, the first issue of *The Christian* suggests a system of fees, asking for seventy cents for a yearly subscription of twelve issues, at a time when many urbanites would have made about a dollar a week.[8] Nee also suggested at the outset that for every ten copies ordered, one would be free, so that the "financially poor" could solicit other subscribers to "receive a copy free" for themselves.[9]

The content of *The Christian* also showed that Nee wanted to offer readers a more systematic approach than his earlier publications. *The Revival* had touched on various topics under the rather vague, overarching theme of "the deep things of God."[10] In contrast, *The*

[6] CWWN 18, 323-4.
[7] CWWN 18, 317. In 1928, he would stop printing *The Christian* and resume his publication of *The Revival*, giving it a second run of thirty-six issues going up to 1934.
[8] CWWN 7, 1232. On urban salaries and the costs of printed materials, see Link, *Mandarin Ducks*, 12.
[9] CWWN 7, 1232.
[10] CWWN 8, v, 1.

Christian began with a definite plan. Odd-numbered issues would be typical magazines with an eclectic collection of articles, "signs of the times," and a "question and answer box." Even-numbered issues would be specifically devoted to biblical exposition. Nee more or less kept to this plan and, during the first sixteen issues, he even maintained a nice parallel structure with odd issues containing substantial articles on Genesis while even issues were entirely devoted to Revelation. *The Christian*'s subscribers thus received extended exegeses sequentially explaining the difficult and controversial bookends of the Bible.[11] Around this time, Nee also founded the Gospel Book Room to handle his publications.

These changes between *The Revival* and the first issue of *The Christian* were the fruit of lessons learned through Nee's work in publications during the interim. In 1922, Nee and his cohort in Fuzhou had invited an older Christian named Ruth Li (Li Yuanru, 李淵如, 1894-1969) to help in their revival. In 1924, Nee went to visit and work with her in Nanjing, where she was editing a Christian magazine called *Spiritual Light*. Although Li was initially resistant to Nee's ideas with regard to the church, she was eventually convinced, and by 1927, she had quit her position to devote herself to Nee's work. For the rest of his publishing career, she would be one of his primary editorial assistants.[12]

Nee's additional expertise notwithstanding, early issues of *The Christian* still show evidence of a number of difficulties. Some were common obstacles faced by many new publications. Early issues thus apologize for problems in typesetting and proofreading.[13] Another asks readers to "increase the usefulness of *The Christian*" by recommending it to "believers

[11] Nee's writings on Genesis dealt with a number of knotty questions raised by the book. For instance, following some other conservative Christians of the time, he reconciled literal readings of Genesis with contemporary science and archaeology by positing that there was an indeterminate gap of time between Genesis 1:1 and 1:2. His use of the book of Revelation to discuss his ideas on the church is largely covered in chapter two.
[12] Lee, *Watchman Nee*, 104-6.
[13] CWWN 7, 1233-4.

within and outside your province."[14] Nee admits that "It is not an easy thing to start a magazine" and repeats his initial plea for his readers to "have a share in this work" by "doing your best to introduce this paper to others."[15] By the second issue, he found it necessary to raise the cost of a subscription to one dollar a year, and he also asked those readers who had not yet paid to "send in your money to the Gospel Book Room as soon as possible."[16]

Nee also faced problems due to the general chaos in Chinese society and the serious lack of infrastructure. In the third issue, he tells readers that all subscribers should have received their copies, but if not, "it is probably due to the unstable political condition of the times."[17] Even sending and receiving money could present significant complications. Some subscribers were apparently unable to send in their fees because the post office was "not issuing postal money orders." Nee suggested a workaround in which subscribers would "buy a cashier's check from a foreign bank, or spend five cents to send the money to us by mail."[18]

Despite these difficulties, Nee was certain that there was "no lack of seekers for the truth." The only problem was that "they do not know about us and therefore have not subscribed to our magazine."[19] Nee had evidently judged the temper of the times correctly. By the seventh issue, sent out in the spring of 1926, he was able to announce that "our magazine has greatly increased in circulation" and that a number of back issues were already sold out. By the tenth issue, *The Christian* had thirteen hundred subscribers, and was possibly covering its costs.[20]

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[14] CWWN 7, 1232-3.
[15] CWWN 7, 1235. There are other similar pleas at 1239-40.
[16] CWWN 7, 1233.
[17] CWWN 7, 1235.
[18] CWWN 7, 1240.
[19] CWWN 7, 1235.
[20] CWWN 7, 1240-1. In the 1910s, a magazine of about 55,000-85,000 characters might break even at three thousand copies for sixty cents a copy. By the 1920s, there had been significant technological advances in print. Furthermore, *The Christian* usually ran at around 30,000 characters and, of course, Nee did not have to pay the author or copy-editor any royalties. Link, *Mandarin Ducks*, 11-12, 86-91.

The Success of The Christian

Nee's success in publishing and preaching went hand in hand. As readership of *The Christian* increased, Nee's growing fame and connections led to numerous invitations to travel and speak. Throughout the 1920s, he preached and held revival meetings not only across his home province of Fujian but also in the populous Southern Chinese provinces of Zhejiang and Jiangsu. Those provinces included important cities such as Shanghai, the burgeoning giant of commerce and industry, and Nanjing, which would soon become China's political capitol.[21]

In the latter half of 1924, Nee had also accompanied his mother on a preaching tour through Malaysia and Singapore, establishing his first international contacts among the significant Chinese diasporic communities in Southeast Asia, among whom Fujianese were well-represented. The Chinese communities in Southeast Asia were quite prosperous, and although Nee did not discuss the financing of his trip, it is possible that he and his mother were sponsored by their hosts. Whatever their financial relationship, Nee and these diasporic Chinese communities enjoyed a strong relationship. Chinese from Malaysia and Singapore would continue to write to Nee and invite him to visit until the end of his life.

On this first trip, Nee probably distributed his writings, because the Southeast Asian congregations began to order his publications. The very first issue of *The Christian* included fees not only for Chinese readers but also for overseas subscribers: one US dollar or two shillings six pence for a twelve-issue subscription.[22] Likewise, the first query in *The Christian's* inaugural

[21] Kinnear, *Against the Tide*, 99. CWWN 18, 317-319.
[22] CWWN 7, 1232.

"Question and Answer Box" was from "Huang" in Singapore, who asked about the apocalyptic schedule of the book of Daniel.[23]

Huang's question centered on the interpretation of Daniel 8:14, which suggests that "on the two thousand three hundredth day, the sanctuary is cleansed." Huang argued that "According to *Our Day in the Light of Prophecy* published by the Seventh-day Adventists, this refers to a long period of time and is related to the end times." The Adventists claimed this "on the basis of verse seventeen, but how in fact should this be explained?"[24]

Huang's question presupposed not only that the Adventists were incorrect, but also that Nee would be able to solve a knotty prophetical problem that still bedevils contemporary commentators. Nee did not disappoint. He suggested that Adventist biblical exegesis was generally "far-fetched."[25] As evidence, Nee cited an Adventist publication that defended the year 1844 as the beginning of the end times—a reference to their distinctive "heavenly sanctuary" theology, which grew out of the "Great Disappointment."[26] Nee also appeared to have his own copy of *Our Day in the Light of Prophecy.* He cited other examples from the book that highlighted the very point Huang had raised, in which a day could be understood as a year based on passages such as Ezekiel 4:6 and Numbers 14:34. Nee argued that in both of those cases, contextual biblical references had been improperly expanded to apply as a general principle of prophetic interpretation.

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[23] CWWN 7, 1005.
[24] CWWN 7, 1005. 『到二千三百日，聖所就必潔淨；』；
若照安息日會現在出版的『現代索隱』所說，這是長期的，是關乎末後的。牠是根據本章十七節。究竟是怎樣說法？ The Adventist publication Huang references is a Chinese translation of *Our Day in the Light of Prophecy*, a work by William Ambrose Spicer, who was the president of the Adventist General Conference at the time.
[25] CWWN 7, 1006 "牽強附會的"
[26] The Seventh Day Adventists were founded by followers of William Miller. The failure of Miller's predictions has been called the "Great Disappointment."

As an alternative, Nee suggested a more rigorous, literal interpretation that maintained Daniel's understanding of days as actual days. His solution avoided Adventist interpretations while maintaining its own implications for both history and the future. Nee suggested that Daniel's prediction referred to the fact that Antiochus Epiphanes had desecrated the second temple for two thousand three hundred days, and that the coming Anti-Christ would do the same. The exactness of the Biblical interpretation with regard to the ancient Greek general preserved the Bible's status as an infallible source of truth, while the future promise safeguarded the "blessed hope" yet to come.[27]

This brief interaction gives some sense of the way the three modes of Nee's ministry could support one other. His extensive study allowed him to answer difficult questions, his preaching in Singapore piqued interest in his work, and his ongoing publications nurtured communities of followers. For many Chinese, Nee became an authoritative voice. His facility with English allowed him to channel a vast corpus of Western works that were inaccessible to most Chinese Christians. Nee was particularly masterful in his exegesis, where his knowledge of Western theology was supplemented by his familiarity with the Bible. Even when Nee's arguments undercut rival interpretations, they still maintained a deep confidence in the Biblical texts and could shore up the faith of wavering Chinese Christians, assuring them that literal readings of the Bible could fully conform to both history and science.

There was also a powerful symbiosis between Nee's writing and his preaching. When Nee first began publishing *The Revival*, his ostensible purpose was to create material to teach and sustain the new Christians who had been converted as a result of his and his friends'

[27] CWWN 7, 1007 有福的指望

evangelizing. Now, with the growing circulation of *The Christian*, the synergy began to flow in the other direction as well.

Individuals and congregations purchased and spread Nee's writings and began to practice his ideas. They began corresponding with Nee and invited him to come and speak to them. They also sent representatives to Nee to learn from him personally. Much of Nee's outreach was embodied by his literary production and, as the interaction with Huang suggests, his writings could touch on abstruse matters of doctrine and exegesis. Unsurprisingly, his followers tended to be more literate than the average Chinese citizen. During the Republican Period, a new class of literate citizens emerged. Historian Peter Zarrow has described "the study societies, state and private schools, arsenals, officials' secretariats, the new media" that gave institutional structure and support to an emerging social base of persons who were not part of the official hierarchy but still operated in the "newly opened public sphere."[28] Nee himself was part of this class, and naturally, they had an affinity for his work.

If Nee's support was disproportionately educated, however, it was not exclusively so. Some of Nee's ideas could also be readily understood even by poor, barely literate, or very new Christians, giving his work a broad base of appeal to match its depth. A few examples can be seen in the participants of Nee's "trainings." Throughout his life, Nee conducted a number of these trainings, which consisted of his selecting and inviting local leaders from around the country to join him for several weeks of intense topical Bible study and spiritual formation.

Pan Qingdao was an indirect participant in one of Nee's later trainings. Pan was brought along by a contingent of Wenzhou Christians to translate and negotiate the language barrier, since they were only able to understand their own local dialect. Another trainee was Zhang

[28] Peter Zarrow, *After Empire*, 22-3.

Lijiao, who had never received any formal education. She learned to read by using the phonetic symbols in her Bible and, even in her old age, continued to read with their help. Nevertheless, she had a local reputation as a successful evangelist, who had itinerated, preached, and taught the Bible in villages throughout the area for many years.[29]

The experiences of such followers hint at the breadth and nature of Nee's appeal. Evidence suggests that many Chinese Christians were able to quickly accept and propagate Nee's teachings from relatively marginal social and economic bases.[30] In fact, by 1927 Nee decided to stop printing *The Christian*, in part because he felt that his message was already, if anything, too well understood. In the last issue of *The Christian*, Nee noted that he had already made certain points abundantly clear. "If we continue our tiring reiteration, it will make *The Christian* a paper specializing in 'leaving the denominations,' 'baptism by immersion,' etc."[31]

Both baptism by immersion and leaving the denominations were obvious, practical teachings that could be readily understood and carried out—they were accessible theology for the illiterate. Nee had a special knack for using plain language to explain complex theological issues. For instance, when one subscriber named Guo asked Nee about the legitimacy of the Christian and Missionary Alliance, Nee was able to distill the Brethren ecclesiology into three simple points. A Christian group could be considered a divisive sect if it had a special name, if it held to a "charter other than the Bible," and if it did not include all regenerated believers. Since the Christian and Missionary Alliance had a name, held to its "special fourfold gospel" and "its

[29] Interviews with Pan Qindao and Zhang Lijiao on March 13, 2013.
[30] See the two letters Nee partially reprints at CWWN 7, 1252. The letters show very different levels of familiarity with the Bible and Christian doctrines, but both writers understood enough of Nee's arguments to seriously question the practices of other Christian groups.
[31] CWWN 7, 1256.

system did not include all regenerated believers," it could only be considered a sect, even if it was "one of the best denominations."[32]

Given the fevered climate of Republican patriotism and resistance to Western domination, the time was obviously ripe for resistance and independence. As one of Nee's correspondents noted, "During this time of dramatic changes in foreign diplomacy, it is the right time to reform the church."[33] When he introduced the first issue of *The Christian*, Nee also admitted that "Recently, being an indigenous church has become a fashionable subject." He repeated this basic observation about the temper of Chinese Christianity a number of times in following issues.[34]

From beginning to end then, the tenure and mission of *The Christian* were influenced by Nee's convincing resistance to many forms of Western Christianity. The magazine showcased Nee's ability to engage with Western claims on multiple levels, whether disputing Seventh-day Adventist claims by deploying careful exegesis or broadly pointing out that all denominations were fundamentally illegitimate in a way that many could understand. Even as he critiqued other Christian claims, Nee was simultaneously able to use the pages of *The Christian* to outline his own positive project: a detailed vision of the local churches as representatives of a pure, unified church.

Between these critical and constructive ideas, Nee's writings lay the groundwork for his basic solution to the problem of Christianity's Western roots. He would reject much of Western Christianity while also avoiding Chinese chauvinism. In their place, Nee wanted a spiritual, heavenly church. In the context of Republican China, Nee's views can be understood as an

[32] CWWN 7, 1115-6.
[33] CWWN 7, 1252.
[34] CWWN 7, 1231, restated at 1245. See also, 1044, 1105-6, 1234-5,

extremely attenuated form of patriotism, a word which in Chinese is literally translated as "loving the country."

In the earliest period of his life, Nee's unconscious patriotism could mainly be inferred by his choice of deeply self-critical Western sources. In this case, Nee's expression of love for his country was more positive. Here, patriotism did not imply any sense of Chinese ethnic or national superiority. Still, Nee implicitly made the more modest claim that ordinary Chinese people could follow the Bible according to the strictest interpretations of its mandates, whether they touched on prophecy, church organization, or baptism, and that in so doing, they could surpass most of the Western Christians from whom they had inherited their religion.

The Shadows of Death

Nee's accomplishments in these years give little indication that he was working under a cloud. As a matter of fact, the intensity of his pace was, in part, spurred by his fear that he had little time left. As early as 1924, probably upon his return from his Southeast Asian trip, Nee became aware of a problem. He reports having a "pain in my chest" and "a slight fever." After a medical examination, Nee learned that "I was afflicted with tuberculosis and that my condition was so serious that prolonged rest would be necessary."[35]

Tuberculosis often led to death, and Nee immediately recognized the severity of the situation. The night he received diagnosis he was unable to sleep and he became "very depressed." On the one hand, Nee was not afraid to die and he still "believed that the Lord could never be wrong." On the other hand Nee was also an ambitious twenty-one year-old with much unfinished business. Above all, he wanted to complete God's commission to him in the time he

[35] CWWN 26, 472.

had left. Of course, the nearness of the end put the question of God's intentions in sharp relief. Nee spent the next "half a year" earnestly considering his path before coming to a definite understanding regarding the "the Lord's will."[36] As he sought divine leading, his growing popularity only exacerbated the problem. News of his affliction spread through the network of churches and Christians that admired him. Nee writes that "The many letters I received during this time did not convey encouragement or consolation; rather, they rebuked me for overworking and for not taking adequate care of my life."[37]

Nee eventually concluded that God intended for him to move in two important, closely related directions for the little time he had left on earth. At the end of his six-month period of searching, Nee was visited by an unexpected contingent of "more than thirty brothers and sisters." As he spoke to them "regarding the question of the church," Nee realized that God had caused him to suffer specifically to force him to return to his "first vision" rather than to take "the path of a revival preacher."[38] Nee's first vision, of course, was that of the church, in particular, his unique understanding of the local churches.

Nee's service to the church could include some fairly traditional outlets, like preaching and sermons. Although doctors had warned him to rest, Nee could not remain entirely inactive, still taking time to "to study the Bible" and preach. Some of his supporters' admonishments concerning his overwork may well have been warranted. Nee recalls that on one occasion he was called "to conduct a gospel meeting." His health had deteriorated precipitously, but he persisted, even though he had to lean against lamp posts to rest and gather strength as he walked.[39]

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[36] CWWN 26, 472.
[37] CWWN 26, 472.
[38] CWWN 26, 472.
其時還有三十餘位弟兄姊妹來和我交通，我就和他們談論到教會問題。我知道神的手在我身上，就是要我回到最初的異象中；不然，我也會走上復興佈道家的道路。
[39] CWWN 26, 473.

Beyond his preaching and general publications, however, Nee began to sense that he had a special commission to write a specific work. Nee later recalled his greatest concern at the time: "All the things I had learned from the Lord over many years and the lessons I had experienced were unrecorded, would they all go with me to the grave?"[40] He began to conceive of a large work that would contain the most important of these lessons and would set them down in a comprehensive manner. This work would become *The Spiritual Human*.

Thus, in the four years between 1924 and 1927, as Nee read and preached and wrote, he was also ruminating over his experiences to find material for his spiritual bequest to the church.[41] The lessons he learned during this period took on a special significance and anchored an otherwise unfixed, uncertain life. Even if one discounts his short preaching tours, Nee rarely stayed long in any single place, making his productivity all the more impressive. He spent at least half of 1924 with his mother travelling across Southeast Asia. In May of 1925, he rented a small hut at Maxian (馬限) in the Mawei district, where Barber's home was also located, a short distance away from what was then Fuzhou proper.[42] He may have chosen the location to benefit from more frequent counsel with Barber, but he did not end up staying there long. In 1926, he left for Nanjing to stay at the home of a friend but, once again, he departed shortly thereafter to rest in the countryside in Wuxi. Fighting related to Chiang Kai-Shek's Northern Expedition in March of 1927 forced him to move again. This time, he came to Shanghai, where the foreign presence had long guaranteed some level of stability. Shanghai was just then coming under Chiang's firm control and the city would become Nee's home and his headquarters for most of the rest of his life.[43]

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[40] CWWN 26, 470. 不過我想到我多年在主的面前所學習的、所經歷的功課，都沒有寫出來，難道把這些都帶進墳墓裏去麼?
[41] CWWN 12, xi-xii.
[42] Kinnear, *Against the Tide*, 97-98. Nee refers to his "rented home" at "Luoxing Pagoda" in CWWN 18, 317.
[43] CWWN 26, 472, 470. See Spence, *The Search for Modern China*, 352-4 for the larger historical context.

The Structure and Thesis of The Spiritual Human

In Shanghai, galvanized by the fear of dying before he could contribute his work to the church, Nee finally finished and published *The Spiritual Human*, the culmination of a project he had been planning for four years. Often referred to as Nee's *magnum opus*, *The Spiritual Human* is indeed an impressive accomplishment, especially given the pressing circumstances of his health, the constant threat of war, and the constraints of his itinerant life. Its mystical bent may represent a reaction to his straitened circumstances. In a world that seemed to promise only suffering, Nee believed that the secret to human existence could be found deep within. Although understanding *The Spiritual Human* requires some effort, it is well worth examining in detail. Studying the premises and arguments of Nee's longest single work simultaneously explains much of Nee's place in the history of Christian thought and the reverence with which his Chinese and non-Chinese followers have held him.

While many of Nee's other works were "homiletic or expositional,"[44] *The Spiritual Human* is not structured around congregational needs or biblical texts. Rather, it is systematically arranged according to Nee's understanding of "biblical psychology."[45] In a similar vein, most of the works published under Nee's name today were derived from his oral preaching and exposition. In contrast, Nee personally wrote and organized the hundreds of pages that comprise *The Spiritual Human*. The book is the closest thing to a constructive theology that Nee ever created.

[44] CWWN 12, xiii.
[45] CWWN 12, xv. Nee may have derived this term from Jessie Penn-Lewis, *Soul and Spirit: A Glimpse into Bible Psychology* (Fort Washington, PA: The Christian Literature Crusade, n.d.).

Despite these characteristics, Nee did not intend for it to be a theological treatise at all. In fact, he found such theological knowledge to be potentially perilous. In an extensive postscript to his preface, he suggests that "The more profound a truth is, the easier it is to become a theory, because the more profound a truth is, the more difficult it is to attain to it without the operation of the Holy Spirit." The danger was that a person who "failed to attain to it" would "consider it a theory." An intelligent reader might receive the teachings of this book "in the mind only" and think that she had "acquired everything." Nee cautioned that this was "most dangerous. If we do this, we will be more deceived by the flesh and the evil spirit day after day."[46]

Instead, for Nee, the "system" of *The Spiritual Human* was to be understood more along the lines of carefully and intentionally placed signposts that simultaneously mapped the contours of the human being and the journey of spiritual experience. The entire book was a practical handbook for spiritual travelers. Although Nee sometimes talks about the experiences of unregenerate unbelievers, they are only brought up as examples, to underscore his understanding of certain biblical teachings. The book is not addressed to the unconverted, but rather, to earnest Christians who are seeking, even desperately hungry actually to participate in holy, spiritual experiences. Thus, in the preface, Nee also emphasized the fact that the Lord had delayed him from writing it for three years because "many of the truths… were not fully confirmed in my experience at that time." Only after he could personally "confirm and experience [the Lord's] truths more" and convert the "spiritual theories" into "spiritual facts" had God finally allowed him to begin writing. Nevertheless, Nee admitted that during these three years, "the writing of this book was on my mind every day."[47]

[46] CWWN 12, xxi-xxii.
[47] CWWN 12, xii.

It was an intensely personal journey and, as the phrase "biblical psychology" might suggest, it contained an intensely personal message. *The Spiritual Human* is rigorously focused on the experience of the individual believer and has almost nothing to say about the church in any way. Nevertheless, the work should not be read in a vacuum. It is important to recall that during the writing of *The Spiritual Human*, Nee was simultaneously writing and publishing those issues of *The Christian* that expounded the book of Revelation and outlined his Brethren-inspired ecclesiology. Nee's ideas and writings on the church still constituted a central pillar of his thought and work. In fact, it was the reminder that Nee should return to his "first vision" of the local churches that prompted the writing of *The Spiritual Human* in the first place. Nor did later experiences contradict his early sense of purpose. If anything, over the course of his life, Nee's ecclesiological convictions were to grow stronger and more ramified until eventually, all of his various ideas about the Christian life were included in some way in his thought on the church.

It is important to emphasize the underlying link between Nee's writings on the church and his writings on spiritual life because of later developments in the reception of his work. Nee would become well known throughout the world and his writings would be widely disseminated. In North America and Europe, however, his reputation developed a particular bias. Most Westerners knew Nee only as a devotional writer. Many lay evangelicals snapped up his book, *The Normal Christian Life*, which has sold hundreds of thousands, if not over one million copies in the United States alone from the 1970s to the present day. Like *The Spiritual Human*, *The Normal Christian Life* makes virtually no mention of the church, focusing instead on developing a Christian's personal experiences of victory and the cross. Even more scholarly Western

evangelicals who wrote a number of graduate theses and dissertations on Nee's work tended to ignore or occlude the ecclesiological dimensions of Nee's legacy.[48]

That being said, the significance of *The Spiritual Human* should not be minimized. It is Nee's longest written work by far, and it is intricately structured. Although some of his later works were more profound in terms of their insight and vision, none even approached *The Spiritual Human's* complexity of structure and form. In terms of its overall outline, *The Spiritual Human* is written in ten sections which are organized around repeated discussions of the three parts of the human person: the human spirit, soul, and body. Nee covers each of these three parts three different times. The order of Nee's three separate analyses roughly corresponds to his understanding of actual Christian experience.

First, the Christian must learn the doctrine and biblical basis for the three parts of the human, so Nee begins his work with a general overview of the three parts of the human while offering the biblical support for his beliefs. Then, the Christian must progress from fleshly experiences to soulish ones until she finally arrives at a spiritual life, so Nee walks through the three parts of the human being as flesh, soul, and spirit a second time, now in greater detail. Finally, the spiritual Christian gains an intimate understanding of the motions of her spirit, where she is united with God, until she is able to navigate the tricky waters of the soul, and finally, manifest full control over her body, no longer referred to as the sinful flesh. Nee thus spends the second half of *The Spiritual Human* with one final trip through the three parts of the human,

[48] There are many such works. Some examples include William Clyde Bassett, "The Formulation of a Basis for Counseling from a Christian Theory of Personality as Represented by C. S. Lewis and Watchman Nee," (EdD diss., University of Arkansas, 1976); Marc Barthélémy, "De l'anthropologie à l'éthique: la pensée de Watchman Nee," (Master's thesis, Faculté Autonome de Théologie Protestante, 1999); Olivier Baudraz, "De la Sanctification selon Watchman Nee: Une analyse de son anthropologie et de sa soteriology," (Master's thesis, La Faculté Libre de Théologie Réformée d'Aix-en-Provence, 1984); Yuan-wei Liao, "Watchman Nee's Theology of Victory: An Examination and Critique from a Lutheran Perspective," (PhD diss., Luther Seminary, 1997); Phillip W. Sell, "A Theological Critique of the Spiritual Life Teaching of Watchman Nee," (Master's Thesis, Dallas Theological Seminary, 1979).

spirit, soul, and body. This time he is able to analyze each part in great detail, pointing out common pitfalls and struggles along the way. At the end of his work, the harmony of the tripartite human being is restored, and the mature, spiritual Christian glorifies God in all her physical works, thoughts, and actions, which are an effortless expression of her inner unity with God.

Although the structure of the book might seem repetitive, with Nee covering the same general territory at least three times, he has so many different things to say that each section introduces significant amounts of new material to develop his major themes. *The Spiritual Human* contains a wide range of anecdotes, scriptural exegesis, detailed descriptions of spiritual experience, and careful doctrinal qualifications and analyses. In the end, however, its central thesis can be given quite succinctly. Nee's central argument is that although the human soul and the human spirit may be difficult to differentiate in both doctrine and experience, the Bible clearly and consistently teaches that they are, in fact, different faculties. The distinction between these two invisible parts of the human being may not be apparent to human perception and even advanced, spiritual Christians may be deceived. Nevertheless, in God's eyes, there is an unbridgeable, ontological chasm between Christian life and work that originates with the spirit and all other work, which can only be fleshly or soulish by default and is therefore disapproved.

In a characteristic passage, Nee argues that Paul "classified all Christians as either spiritual or fleshy." According to this stark dichotomy, the "spiritual Christian is one who has the Holy Spirit dwelling in his spirit and ruling over his whole being" while the fleshy Christian encompasses the "totality of the unregenerated human, including all the matters belonging to his sinful spirit, soul, and body." In sum, a fleshy Christian is "one who follows his soul and body to

sin, act, and behave."[49] The vague language Nee uses to define the evocative term "fleshy" is deliberate. Although Nee admitted that the flesh could include the usual litany of ugly and obvious sins, his understanding of the flesh was far-reaching and potentially more insidious.[50] Nee based his teaching on John 3:6 in which Jesus teaches "That which is born of the flesh is flesh." Following this broad definition, Nee concludes,

> Whatever a human being may have inborn in him or may have derived from nature when he was born of his parents is flesh. However good he is, however virtuous he may be, whatever talents he may have, or however kind and intelligent he may be, he is fleshly. Regardless of how bad, how unholy, how foolish, how useless, or how cruel he may be, he is of the flesh. That a human being is flesh means that *all* that a human inherits by birth, whatever it may be (whether good or bad) is of the flesh.[51]

Thus, the flesh refers to the entirety of the natural human state, which, even in its most exquisite, refined, and moral manifestations is utterly condemned by God. Exactly because the flesh included such a comprehensive range of activities and ideas, Christians frequently tried to "mend and improve the flesh, or to train and tame it" by all manner of ethical, ascetic, educational, and religious practices and regulations. God, however, had no hope in the flesh. He refused to ameliorate the flesh, and instead condemned it to death. In opposition to humankind's "innumerable methods to overcome the flesh," God's salvation was simple and stark: the cross of Christ.[52]

Theological Implications of the Spirit-Soul Distinction

Nee's understanding of the human being's tripartite nature gave him rich and varied materials with which to depict a broad and subtle range of human behaviors, interior states, and

[49] CWWN 12, 54. Nee cites 1 Corinthians 3.
[50] See CWWN 12, 82-4 for an example of one of Nee's discussions on the more obvious manifestations of the flesh.
[51] CWWN 12, 61.
[52] CWWN 12, 85-6. In particular, Nee cites Romans 6:6-7 and Galatians 5:24

proclivities, but the most important axis along which the arguments of *The Spiritual Human* turn is the absolute distinction between everything that proceeds from the regenerated human spirit and everything that proceeds from the rest of the human person. In Nee's understanding, the true work of God begins in the deepest part of the human being, the spirit, where God is one with the human being. Only activity that proceeds from this internal union is approved by God.

For Nee, spiritual union is also the true meaning of conversion. Nee writes that "Our being one with Christ's death and our initial step of obtaining His resurrection life are in our spirit. To be born again is completely a matter in the spirit; it has no relationship with the soul or the body."[53] Similarly, in another place he writes that "The resurrected Lord is the life-giving Spirit (1 Cor. 15:45); therefore, His union with the believers is His union with the believer's spirit."[54] Once "we accept His death as our death" and "His resurrection as our resurrection,"[55] we are freed from "everything natural and temporal" which is "lost in death, allowing the spirit, in the freshness of resurrection, to be joined to the Lord to be one spirit in a pure way, without any mixture."[56]

Nee clearly has an actual unity of spiritual "substances" and persons in mind, one that is irrevocable and can form the basis for the Christian's assurance of eternal salvation. Nee writes that in the process of regeneration, his preferred term for initial conversion, "the life of God is put into the human spirit by the Holy Spirit. Because this life is God's life, which can never die, all who have been regenerated have this life and are said to 'have eternal life.'"[57] As the divine life of God himself, this eternal life in the spirit can theoretically provide the basis for an endless

[53] CWWN 12, 47.
[54] CWWN 12, 236.
[55] CWWN 12, 237.
[56] CWWN 12, 238.
[57] CWWN 12, 53.

supply of grace and strength for true Christian service, not to mention peace and joy that transcend human understanding.

Unfortunately, Nee believes that most Christians rarely tap into these possibilities. Their experience is almost exactly the opposite. In practice, most Christians are much closer to the unregenerate. For fleshly and soulish Christians as well as for unbelievers, the spirit is ineffective and silent, dead in the eyes of God. Because they do not know or understand their own human spirits, God cannot take the initiative in their lives, because God is related to the human being most directly through the channel of the human spirit. As Nee suggests, "Therefore in the Bible we see that only spirit can serve Spirit (Rom. 1:9; 7:6; 12:11), only spirit can know Spirit (1 Cor. 2:9-12), only spirit can worship God who is Spirit (John 4:23-24; Phil. 3:3), and only spirit can receive revelation from God who is Spirit (Rev. 1:10; 1 Cor. 2:10). We should, therefore, keep in mind that God always deals with a human being by means of the human spirit and also accomplishes His plan through the human spirit."[58]

In Nee's view, a Christian who did not know the difference between her spirit and her soul, and who did not know how to live and work from the spirit could never truly satisfy God's desire, or even her own Christian calling. According to Nee, it was unfortunate that most Christians believed the spirit and the soul to be identical even on the level of doctrine. This mean that in practice, they had little ability to distinguish between real promptings of God in the spirit and distracting external stimuli. Like non-Christians, most Christians spent their lives mostly reacting to their physical environments. At best, they might be ruled by their own seemingly good human characteristics.

[58] CWWN 12, 48.

Thus, Nee writes that "there are many people who were merciful, patient, and meek before they believed in the Lord and were regenerated. Their mercy, patience, and meekness are natural, fleshly, of the self, and not of the spirit." Even when they are "merciful, patient, and meek" their work has nothing to do with the "Spirit of God" but rather comes only from "their own strength."[59] All non-spiritual modes of life and work are at best glittering counterfeits with dire consequences, even if those consequences might not be known or understood in this lifetime.

Part of Nee's subtlety as a thinker is his recognition of just how difficult it could be to separate or distinguish between the soul and the spirit. At times, Nee will appear to make claims that "Actually, spirit and soul are very easy to distinguish in experience." Nee then suggests that "The spiritual walk of life is a living which solely follows the direction of the intuition of the spirit… not deciding, initiating, and starting anything but rather waiting quietly for the voice of the Holy Spirit in his spirit." In contrast, "The soulish walk of life is entirely the opposite. It altogether has self as the center. When a believer is soulish, he acts according to self. This means that his conduct originates from his self."[60] Upon closer inspection however, Nee is speaking of such things at the level of theory, pointing to spiritual or ultimate realities that may be more difficult to discern in practice.

In practice, because the soul can have all kinds of apparently good impulses and characteristics, the critically important distinction between spiritual life and soulish life can easily be obscured. Nee uses the term "self" to describe the fallen, egotistical soul, and he points out that the self may not be sinful according to common understandings of sin. While "Sin is filthy, opposes God, and is utterly abominable," the self may be "quite honorable, wanting to

[59] CWWN 12, 144.
[60] CWWN 12, 148-9.

help God, and quite lovely." Thus, although "We know that to study the Bible is a very good thing," it is possible to do it by one's "own efforts" and "own intelligence" so that it is a "work of the self." Similarly, "pursuing spiritual growth is surely not sinful," but Nee laments "how often such pursuit is out of the fleshly self, perhaps because we do not want to fall behind others, or because spiritual growth may give us many advantages, or perhaps we may have some personal gain."[61]

Thus, even as Nee points out that the spirit and the soul are diametrically opposed and are "very easy to distinguish in experience," he almost immediately qualifies this statement by describing the soul as the "shell of the spirit" in the way the "body is the shell of the soul." In their natural state, the soul and the spirit are "tightly knit together" so that "the soul often influences the spirit." Because of this, the benefits of a Christian's spiritual union with God may be difficult to recognize or appreciate. "A regenerated person inherently has an unspeakable peace in his spirit, yet because the spirit and the soul have not been divided, even a slight stimulation will disturb the peace and tranquility of his spirit."[62]

Nee's work contains a basic, inherent tension. On the one hand, his "biblical psychology" clearly distinguishes between the three parts of the human being. The division of these three parts even lends its structure to the overall organization of *The Spiritual Human*. And, in fact, the central thesis of his whole work is to highlight the basic, crucial, and non-negotiable distinction between the flesh and the spirit. For believers, the flesh mainly encompasses the fallen soul and body, which are constantly perturbed, while the regenerated spirit is the place of unity with God and a source of "unspeakable peace." The two could not be more different. On the other hand, much of the motivation for and focus of the book derives from the difficulty of untangling these

[61] CWWN 12, 144
[62] CWWN 12, 149.

deeply intertwined parts. In the life and experience of most Christians, the spirit and soul are basically indistinguishable. The environment affects the body which acts on the soul, and even the slightest stimulations of the soul "disturb the peace and tranquility" of the spirit.

The Western History of the Soul/Spirit Distinction

On the face of it, the distinction between soul and spirit can seem like an arcane theological debate. Especially since Nee conceded that the soul and the spirit were very difficult to distinguish in practice, what was the point of insisting on a fundamental break between the two in the eyes of God? Especially if Nee were on his deathbed, beset with requests and letters from churches around the Sinosphere, why would he devote such an enormous amount of time and energy to spell out the intricate details of this theological anthropology? Understanding Nee's Western interlocutors only heightens the idiosyncrasy of his position.

In *The Spiritual Human*, Nee claimed a distinguished pedigree for his idea. In the preface to his book, he wrote the following:

> The teaching of the difference between the soul and the spirit did not originate with me. Andrew Murray said that the one thing the church, as well as individuals, has to dread the most is the inordinate activity of the soulish will and mind. F. B. Meyer also said that unless one knows how to differentiate between the soul and the spirit, he cannot imagine what his spiritual life would have been. Others such as Otto Stockmayer, Jessie Penn-Lewis, Evan Roberts, and Madame Guyon have given similar testimonies. Because we have received the same commission as they, I have freely quoted their writings. Because there are so many places where I have referenced them, I have not made specific reference to the sources.[63]

Many of the names Nee cites may not be familiar to contemporary readers. In fact, Nee referred almost exclusively to select, international group of Christian authors and teachers. They were all active in the late 19th and early 20th centuries and were all associated with a British

[63] CWWN 12, xvi.

phenomenon known as the Keswick Convention. This coterie of likeminded Anglophone evangelicals—figures like Murray, Meyer, Stockmayer, Penn-Lewis, and Roberts—probably introduced Nee in turn to older, similar traditions of Christian spirituality. Thus, Nee was aware of earlier, Roman Catholic mystics such as [Madame] Jeanne Guyon. In this passage, the relevant point for Nee is that all of these thinkers argued for what other Christian theologians have called the "trichotomous" position, which holds that the human being is composed of three parts (spirit, soul, and body) as opposed to the "dichotomous" position, which holds that the human being is composed of two parts (soul and body).[64]

Nee's listing of multiple trichotomous authors obscures just how much he is an outlier, even within this group. *The Spiritual Human* spends far more time and space discussing the distinction between soul and spirit than all the works by all the authors on Nee's list combined. While Nee did not misrepresent their arguments regarding the soul and spirit, none of these Western writers were as preoccupied with "proving" the doctrine's importance to anything like the degree that Nee was.

The closest analogue in Nee's list was Jessie Penn-Lewis (1861-1927), the Welsh writer whom historian Grant Wacker has described as being "one of the most influential voices in higher life circles in Britain, if not in the English-speaking world."[65] Unfortunately, today Penn-Lewis is mostly forgotten among scholars, if not entirely among higher life evangelicals themselves. More than any writer before Nee, Penn-Lewis seized upon the distinction between soul and spirit and elaborated it as an important Biblical teaching with far-reaching

[64] In keeping with his aversion for technical theological language, Nee never adopts this terminology, but for the sake of convenience, they are helpful here.
[65] Grant Wacker, "Travail of a Broken Family: Radical Evangelical Responses to the Emergence of Pentecostalism in America, 1906-1916," in *Pentecostal Currents in American Protestantism* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1999), 29.

consequences. Of all Nee's predecessors, Penn-Lewis was the most careful to consistently distinguish between the terms "soul" and "spirit" in her written works, and only she devoted a work to elaborating the difference between the two, the aptly named, *Soul and Spirit: A Glimpse into Bible Psychology*.[66] Although Nee seems to have adopted the phrase "Bible Psychology" from Penn-Lewis, the difference in their subtitles is telling. If Penn-Lewis's work was a "glimpse," a short booklet of eighty-four pages, Nee's *The Spiritual Human*, was an exhaustive treatise—comprising over seven-hundred pages in English and over three-hundred in Chinese.

As for the distinction between soul and spirit itself and its theological justification, the Keswick authors belonged to the general tradition of biblical evangelicalism. This meant that they were relatively unconcerned about the scarcity in the Christian tradition that seemed to back their claims. If the Bible supported their arguments, it was more than enough reason to propound them. Here again, Nee both followed and outdid his Keswick teachers. Andrew Murray and Frederick Meyer were trained in classic languages at British universities, while Penn-Lewis frequently referenced various Biblical scholars and the importance of reading the Bible in its original languages.[67]

All of these writers believed that one of the difficulties in convincing "the generality of Christians" that the Bible taught a systematic distinction between soul and spirit was the fact that most Christians knew no Greek and were thus at the mercy of inconsistent translations. Penn-Lewis declaimed the fact that "'the Greek word which signifies "pertaining to the soul"' is sometimes rendered 'natural' and sometimes 'sensual.'"[68] Such seemingly minor choices in

[66] Jessie Penn-Lewis, *Soul and Spirit: A Glimpse into Bible Psychology* (Fort Washington, PA: The Christian Literature Crusade, n.d.).
[67] Penn-Lewis, *Soul and Spirit*, 1-3.
[68] Penn-Lewis, *Soul and Spirit*, 1. Here Penn-Lewis is drawing from George Hawkins Pember, yet another 19th century evangelical (and a Plymouth Brethren affiliate), who propounded the trichotomous position in his book *Earth's Earliest Ages*.

translation could actually obscure a great deal of what the trichotomists claimed was the actual intent of the Biblical record.

For instance, trichotomists frequently focused on the second chapter of 1 Corinthians in which Paul lauds "the human spirit" as the only thing that "knows the things pertaining to human beings" just as "the Spirit of God" alone "comprehends the things pertaining to God." Paul thus not only suggests a link between the two spirits, but also suggests that a special kind of spiritual knowledge exists, one that transcends "human wisdom" and speaks of "spiritual things" with "spiritual words" or "to spiritual people."[69]

Trichotomists such as Penn-Lewis and Nee emphasized the fact that Paul then contrasts the spiritual human with the "*psychikos*" human. English translations almost universally render the Greek word as "natural," "sensual," "selfish," or even, tautologically, some form of "unspiritual."[70] Nee pointed out, however, that *psychikos* is, in fact, derived from *psyche*, the etymological root of psychology, and that the word can be translated better as "soul." Tellingly, one of Nee's most important followers, Witness Lee, eventually oversaw a project to re-translate the New Testament. In Lee's Recovery Version, the Corinthian passage now explicitly contrasts the "spiritual" person from the "soulish" one.

Penn-Lewis and other Western Christians who had ready access to a wealth of biblical scholarship were galvanized by these biblical "discoveries." Penn-Lewis claims that "The ignorance of Christians concerning the distinction between 'soul' and 'spirit' is very general, and is a primary cause of the lack of full growth in the spiritual life in many devoted and earnest believers."[71] As grounded by the original languages, the distinction between soul and spirit

[69] 1 Corinthians 2:11-13. The Greek is ambiguous.
[70] 1 Corinthians 2:14.
[71] Penn-Lewis, *Soul and Spirit*, 1.

seemed to offer a hidden code by which to interpret the Biblical message. For Penn-Lewis especially, such knowledge may be manifestly obvious for those who can read Greek, but for those who are not "able to go direct to the Greek Testament," learning of the soul-spirit distinction may "enable them to grasp the truth, and receive spiritual understanding of spiritual facts set forth in the Scripture as necessary for their growth in life and godliness."[72]

If even the average Western Christian was in the dark, the lack of Greek knowledge among Chinese Christians was greater by many orders of magnitude. At least with regard to the translations of soul and spirit, Nee set about remedying this problem with a vengeance. *The Spiritual Human* began with a meticulous taxonomy that deals with every Biblical occurrence of a word that refers to one of the different parts of the human being. Each reference was traced back to the original language and indexed with the Chinese Union Version's translation of these words. Nee ended up supplying over 2500 Biblical citations, including every appearance of the Hebrew and Greek root words for "spirit" (*ruach*/*pneuma*), "soul" (*nephesh*/*psyche*), "flesh" (*basar/sarx*), "heart" (*leb/kardia*), and "mind" (Greek only: *nous*).

In effect, Nee gave readers with no knowledge of Hebrew or Greek a way to check the evidence and draw conclusions for themselves. He was confident that the Bible supported his findings, and that audiences would recognize the same pattern that he had seen. Nee's scrupulous efforts managed to largely invert the original situation. Today, it is more likely that a Chinese Christian has heard about the distinction between soul and spirit and its Biblical justification than a Western Christian.

The Chinese Reception of the Spirit/Soul Distinction

[72] Penn-Lewis, *Soul and Spirit*, 2.

Like *The Spiritual Human* as a whole, Nee's concordance of biblical terms far surpassed his Western teachers in its comprehensive attempt to demarcate the boundaries between soul and spirit. Nee's novel innovations in this regard all seem to follow the same trend. Each of them intensifies his predecessors' claims. He was the first to try to prove that the entire Bible held a consistent trichotomous anthropology, and he was also the first to suggest further subdivisions, maintaining that both the human spirit and the human soul were themselves composed of three constituent parts. Nee argued that the spirit was made up of intuition, fellowship, and conscience while the soul was comprised of emotion, mind, and will.

All of these departures from previous teachings beg the earlier question: what were the stakes for Nee? In an announcement for *The Spiritual Human*, Nee claimed "The most difficult thing for believers today is that in seeking progress on their spiritual journey, they cannot find the way forward, so they grope in the darkness." Nee felt that *The Spiritual Human*, with its broad scope, adequately addressed "every question related to spiritual things that believers want to know but cannot answer." These answers included "hearing God's voice, knowing God's will," and "regeneration, salvation, sanctification, denying the self, being filled with the Holy Spirit and power, the baptism of the Spirit, fellowship, prayer, reading the Bible, dying with Christ, the flesh, the life of the soul, emotions, supernatural experiences, miracles, discernment of true and false tongues, the intuition, the conscience, the revelation of God, spiritual work, warfare with Satan, evil spirits, demon possession, the free will, the renewing of the mind, passivity, consecration, ardent love, feelings of hotness and coldness, the body, sickness, the way to escape death, and countless other things."[73]

[73] NTSWJ 12, 1-2.

In other words, Nee felt that when Christians properly understood their own beings, their spirits, souls, and bodies, they would have the basic interpretive key to make sense of almost all their other questions and shed new light on many important Christian doctrines. For instance, hearing God's voice and knowing God's will became largely a matter of discerning between the spirit and the soul. God was one with the human spirit, while the human soul was frequently influenced by the selfish ego, the flesh, and evil spirits. Nee's further divisions of the human spirit and the human soul into their respective component parts gave even more practical handles for seeking Christians to understand their own experiences and advance their spiritual growth. If one understood that the spirit included the intuition, for instance, then direct "knowledge" from God that breached rational thought and conflicted with one's emotions was a distinct possibility.

Thus, in the eyes of Nee and his followers, *The Spiritual Human*'s careful delineations of the parts of the human being were anything but abstract theological positions. Instead, they were a set of practical, concrete tools by which any Christian could come to grasp God's eternal plan as spelled out in the Bible and follow God's ongoing revelation and guidance as known by the Holy Spirit. Thus enlightened and guided, the Christian could participate in a life of true spiritual work, defeating Satan while maintaining a joyous love for Christ that was balanced, unshakeable, and long-lasting. All of this potential could be realized simply by understanding oneself and one's true nature and position before God.

This was clearly a mystical argument, directed as it was, toward the individual. An important caveat, however, has to be made. Nee disliked the concept of introspection. He argued in *The Spiritual Human* that "Believers become depressed in their spirit mostly when they turn inward to look at themselves." He argued that to consider oneself too much was to become wrapped up in "self-centered prayer and worship," possibly caused by "the invasion of the power

of darkness." Instead of becoming obsessed with one's own spiritual condition, Nee argued that Christians should look outward and upward, to Christ's heavenly, victorious position and thus be "uplifted above the clouds."[74]

But Nee's objections in this case were somewhat contradictory. For Nee, the significance of looking to the outward, heavenly Christ lay partly in the fact that this same Christ was also simultaneously joined to the human spirit within. Even though the gaze needed to be fixed on the transcendent Christ, the comfort of Christ's transcendence lay in the fact that the Christian also shared in Christ's glorious, celestial position. Nee wrote that ideally, the spirit would be "in the condition of being out of the world and ascending to the heavens at all times" such that we "become citizens of the heavens in experience."[75] When the Christian looked "outward," and was conscious only of Christ, at that same moment she was paradoxically also seeing something of herself—her position and nature in Christ. As Zhang Lijiao, the semi-literate evangelist proclaimed, "Christ is really wonderful. When he died, we died with him. When he rose, we rose with him. Now we are even seated with him in the heavenlies. That's not a small thing!"[76]

The extraordinary claim that a deep part of the human being can exist in harmony with an ineffable, ultimate reality has a long and illustrious history in Chinese thought.[77] All of the major Chinese religious traditions contain some form of mystical thought, often coupled with meditation, self-reflection, or other modes of inward-focused discipline to perfect the union

[74] CWWN 13, 380-1.
[75] CWWN 13, 416.
[76] Interview with Zhang Lijiao, March 2014. Zhang attended Nee's 1949 Kuling Mountain training and had no formal education. She had taught herself to read by working through a Bible that had been printed with phonetic notation. She was well known in her village and its surrounding region for her past itinerant lay-preaching and pastoral care—Nee and his followers never formally ordained clergy.
[77] Alexander Chow has recently written a monograph on Chinese Christianity that takes this concept as its central conceit, tying various forms of Chinese Christianities to China's other religions. He includes Watchman Nee as the representative of one of his major types of Chinese Christianity. See Theosis, *Sino-Christian Theology and the Second Chinese Enlightenment: Heaven and Humanity in Unity* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).

between the human being and the higher or truer states of reality. Such patterns of thought and behavior can be traced from ancient records to contemporary China. This period of Nee's life was no exception.

Historians such as Prasenjit Duara and David Ownby have traced the history of various "redemptive societies" during the Republican period. These societies were complex organizations which combined religious, philosophical, and sometimes political themes with civic service or mutual benefit. Redemptive societies were active throughout Nee's lifetime and counted millions of members throughout China during the 1920s. Although their teachings were esoteric and varied, interior discipline and unity with a transcendent order were two common themes.[78]

The redemptive societies are also a congenial analogy because they often reveled in the intricate details of their religious beliefs and practices. Their sacred writings and teachers could illuminate complex paths to unity with the divine or ultimate. These byzantine components sometimes included internal maps of the human being, celestial pantheons, higher planes of existence, ritual practices, and mantras. Specific comparisons are difficult to make since Nee neither cited nor used sources other than the Bible and Western Christian writings. In fact, Nee suggested that even the more common Buddhist and Daoist practices such as meditation and breathing exercises could be infiltrated by evil spirits.[79] Nevertheless, when Nee offered *The Spiritual Human* as a detailed guide to the human being that would help people find oneness with God and live proper human lives, it is clear that the breadth and depth of his engagement would have attracted rather than deterred many potential adherents.

[78] For instance, see Duara's description of *Yiguandao*, and *Daoyuan* in *Sovereignty and Authenticity: Manchukuo and the East Asian Modern* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2003), 108-9.
[79] CWWN 10, 472-3.

If the form of *The Spiritual Human* was congenial to Chinese religious expectations, the content was even more so. By emphasizing the distinction between soul and spirit Nee promoted a kind of Christianity that strongly resonated with at least two major themes of Chinese religion: holism and effortlessness.

The philosophical idea of holism can be defined in many ways. Historian and philosopher Brook Ziporyn has described a form of holism which "defines 'parts' and 'wholes' in such a way that the parts in a whole obtain their meaning from their contextualization in that whole and are altered, in all aspects of their being, by their relationship with the other parts."[80] Ziporyn suggests that early Greek philosophers looked to mathematics as a model to understand metaphysical questions. This meant that they understood objects in the universe to be quantified, discrete, and mutually exclusive. In contrast, Chinese thinking has been motivated by "social and personal ethical questions" so that "the way *humans* interact is the model for how *things* interact." This led to a "pervasive Chinese holism" in which objects in the universe were understood to be reciprocal, inclusive, and mutually influential.[81] Every "thing" in the universe is a part that cannot be defined in isolation, but rather can only be understood in relation to other parts and to the whole.

Nee's Christian commitments obviously kept him from going down the paths of some of the stronger and more radical forms of Chinese holism, such as Buddhists who claimed that "there is no devil besides the Buddha and no Buddha besides the devil."[82] Nevertheless, by emphasizing the distinction between soul and spirit, he still ended up making iconoclastic claims about holism and value that had important parallels in Chinese thought. One of the implications

[80] Brook Ziporyn, *Evil and/or/as The Good: Omnicentrism, Intersubjectivity, and Value Paradox in Tiantai Buddhist Thought* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center for the Harvard University Press, 2000), 28.
[81] Ziporyn, *Evil and/or/as The Good*, 42-4.
[82] Ziporyn, *Evil and/or/as The Good*, 344.

of a holistic philosophy is that it may upset obvious or commonplace understandings of value. If, in a holistic universe, every "thing" is defined in relation to other things, it is hard to evaluate discrete "good" and "evil" people, actions, events, or ideas, since their "goodness" or "evil" are dynamically and relatively defined in relation to other things, which are again defined in relation to other things in a chain of infinite progression.

In this light, Nee's claim that the soul included the mind, emotion, and will but that the spirit transcended the soul took on a striking significance. It is important to remember that for Nee, the point was that in the eyes of God, all actions taken by the independent soul were ultimately sinful or unethical. Thus, on the truest level, all reason and analysis, pleasure and suffering, and every exercise of the free will that was not instigated by the spirit was fundamentally equal and undifferentiated. The best of actions and the worst of them, the wisest and the most foolish, so long as they were undertaken independent of God, were equally meaningless.

On the positive side, so long as a person acted from her union with God in her human spirit, actions that seemed good or evil, wise or foolish, ecstatic or devastating, could all be understood to fulfill God's will. Nee was not arguing for a completely unbounded antinomianism, since he believed that God would always work according to the Bible, but he still opened up a wide space for radical inversions of value. His experiences at Fuzhou are a helpful example. No matter how right or wrong Leland Wang's arguments may have been, God's command was for Nee to suffer in silence. As painful as the opposition to Nee and his excommunication may have seemed, they too, were God's choice.

Much Christian ascetic thought has embraced themes that may seem similar to Nee's regarding following God's inscrutable will even if it leads to suffering and self-denial. Nee,

however, tried to explicitly contrast his teachings with theirs. In *The Spiritual Human*, he argued against asceticism and those who would "do their best to use every kind of method to inhibit themselves." He argued instead that Christians only needed recognize to the fact that they were *already* freed from sin through their co-crucifixion with Christ. According to the sixth chapter of Romans, the "old human" that desired to sin was already dead, so there was no need to suppress one's own desires. Instead, Christians simply needed to recognize the fact of God's work and offer, or consecrate, themselves to God.[83]

Nee's main objection to asceticism in this case seems to be the fact that ascetics promoted a demanding, difficult, and ineffective road toward sanctification. It may be telling that, among other possible choices, Nee chose to translate asceticism as the "prohibition of desires" (禁慾主義). Instead of trying to uproot human sin or deal harshly with the body, God intended for a Christian to "allow the Holy Spirit to operate in his spirit." Such a spiritual Christian "receives the Holy Spirit, who is a person living within his own spirit" and "allows the life that the Holy Spirit gives him to supply him with the power to do everything that is necessary for his conduct and his humanity." In contrast, the soulish Christian was still "acting according to his own tastes," trying to serve God according to his "natural intelligence, and with his own numerous and very wise arrangements."[84]

Nee thus drew a sharp contrast between the spiritual Christian's simple channeling of God's power and personality and the soulish Christian's preoccupation with busy artifice and hard work. This contrast suggests the second way in which the content of *The Spiritual Human* echoed Chinese religious concerns, that is, in its invocation of the concept of effortlessness, or *wuwei*.

[83] NTSWJ 12, 143-151.
[84] NTSWJ 12, 163-4.

Wuwei is difficult to translate, but it stands at the heart of Daoist ethics. The first term, *wu* means simply "no," "not," or "there is not." The second term, *wei*, has a wide semantic field encompassing action, intention, and artificiality, among many other meanings. In classical Daoist thought, the *wuwei* of the universe manifests itself in "spontaneous patterns, routines, cycles, rhythms, and habits of nature," while the Daoist sage "makes it possible for the spontaneous *wu-wei* forces of the *tao*, [the ineffable "Way" that underlies reality,] to work their way in human affairs. He himself sees the human world from the point of view of the *tao*. He removes the obstacles to the free operation of the *tao*."[85]

The analogy is clear. By focusing intently on the distinction between soul and spirit, Nee allowed space for a kind of effortless, spontaneous Christian life. His thought was deeply mystical, but it was also opposed to many forms of asceticism in the sense of rigorous spiritual disciplines and harsh treatment of the body and soul. It was the soulish Christian who might exert strenuous effort on God's behalf and have many good ideas for Christian service. Nee idealized instead the "spiritual Christian" who simply recognized that the sinful "old human" was already crucified and that the way was clear for her to allow the Holy Spirit to work in her human spirit. Thus, God would have his way in human affairs through her, and she was, in some ways, a passive channel—active only in her consecration, the act of giving herself to God.

While *wuwei* is strongly associated with Daoism, it is important to recognize that the idea has broad appeal and deep roots in much of Chinese philosophical and religious thought. One of the most famous passages of Confucius's *Analects* reports, "The Master said, "At fifteen, I had my mind bent on learning. At thirty, I stood firm. At forty, I had no doubts. At fifty, I knew the

[85] Schwartz, *The World of Thought*, 202.

decrees of Heaven. At sixty, my ear was an obedient organ for the reception of truth. At seventy, I could follow what my heart desired, without transgressing what was right."[86]

One of Nee's greatest accomplishments was the crafting of Christian doctrines in forms that would appeal to Chinese audiences without explicitly referencing other Chinese teachers or teachings. Nee's ideas had many points of contact with classic Chinese thought, but it is unclear to what extent he knew or directly used these materials. In his childhood, he had received at least the basic grounding in the classics that was common to nearly all educated Chinese of his generation, but beyond that, he almost never cited indigenous Chinese traditions approvingly, and certainly not as sources for his own writings.[87] Nee successfully co-opted Chinese themes while presenting himself as a teacher of purely Christian doctrines based only on the Bible.

Even this self-presentation, however, and the way in which it was received, reveal the pervasive influence of traditional Chinese religion. Nee may not have meant to inhabit the role, but his followers increasingly understood him to be something of a sage or a charismatic master, a figure their traditional religious culture encouraged them to seek. Throughout his life, Nee received hundreds of letters from his followers. They are universally respectful, and some of them seem clearly to repeat the classic Chinese relationship between a master and his disciples. Nee's correspondents addressed him as "brother" or "elder brother" and signed off as "little sisters" or "little brothers" in Christ. For some of Nee's followers, the justification for their religious beliefs was probably their confidence in Nee's personal, spiritual maturity.

The fact that a following could so rapidly and reverently coalesce around a teacher of mystical doctrines suggests some of the practical stakes that followed from Nee's decision to write a detailed, spiritual itinerary. In a culture that embraced complex ethical teachings, an

[86] *Analects*, Book 1, Chapter 2. Accessed on December 8, 2016 at http://china.usc.edu/confucius-analects-2
[87] Kinnear, *Against the Tide*, 35-6.

immense mystical and devotional treatise had special attraction. Those teachings were usually embodied in the figure of the sage-teacher.

In later years, Nee and his co-workers repeatedly had to repudiate the concept that Nee was the master of a new Christian society.[88] The origins of these myths certainly had something to do with Nee's experiences during this period of his life in the mid- to late-1920s. If Nee's readers were culturally primed to look for a charismatic sage, Nee's personal history at this juncture seemed ready to oblige. The later issues of *The Christian* and the final sections of *The Spiritual Human* were written under dramatic circumstances.

Recovery: Setting the Stage, Embodying the Sage

By 1928, Nee had been sick for years and his health was rapidly declining. With the printing of *The Spiritual Human* in the fall of that year, he had ostensibly discharged his commission from God. In his own testimony, he suggests that "Following the publication of the book, I prayed 'Now let Your servant depart in peace.'"[89] Initially, it seemed that God might grant his request. Nee writes that he had become "a bag of bones" and that the "veteran nurse" who attended him was sure that he had only "three or four more days," weeping whenever she saw him and confiding to others that he was the most pathetic case she had ever seen. One friend even "telegraphed the churches in various places, telling them there was no more hope for me and that they need pray for me no longer."[90]

Still, Nee and some of the co-workers who had begun to gather around him in Shanghai had not completely lost hope. Perhaps a miracle was still possible. One day, with no other

[88] CWWN 25, 173; CWWN 26, 308.
[89] CWWN 26, 474.
[90] CWWN 26, 474. NTSWJ 26, 245.

possible means for healing, Nee turned again to God, asking for a reason for his death. Nee then confessed his sins, fearing that some hidden mistake might be the cause for his punishment by sickness. Finally, recognizing his desperate state, he admitted his lack of faith. Nee then devoted himself to fasting and praying, eating nothing from the morning until three in the afternoon. At the same time, his co-workers gathered in the home of Ruth Li to pray. Unexpectedly, as Nee was alone in his room, God answered. Nee writes:

> As I prayed to God to grant me faith, He spoke His words to me, words which I could never forget. The first sentence was, "The just shall live by faith" (Rom. 1:17). The second sentence was, "By faith you stand" (2 Cor. 1:24). The third sentence was "We walk by faith" (2 Cor. 5:7). These words filled me with great joy, for the Bible says, "All things are possible to him who believes" (Mark 9:23). I immediately thanked and praised God because He had given me His words. I believed that God had cured me.[91]

Nee's faith in divine healing was immediately tested—if he believed the message, he should rise out of bed. He struggled mightily to do so, "perspiring so profusely that it was as though I had been soaked through with rain." Nevertheless, he stood and put on the clothes that he "had not worn for a hundred and seventy-six days." In a cold sweat, he managed to get completely dressed. God then told him to go downstairs to the home of Ruth Li where "a number of brothers and sisters had been fasting and praying for [him] for two or three days." When the astounded group of "seven or eight brothers and sisters" opened the door, they were "speechless and motionless." Nee recalls that "For about an hour everyone sat quietly as if God had appeared among men." That very day, the small Christian group "hired a car" to visit "Dora Yu, the famous woman evangelist" who was "greatly shocked to see [Nee], for she had received recent news of [his] imminent death."[92]

[91] CWWN 26, 475.
[92] CWWN 26, 475-6.

The shadow of death had galvanized Nee's writing of *The Spiritual Human.* Now, however, the threat of darkness was suddenly and miraculously dispersed by the apparent hand of God. In the eyes of the faithful, God had dramatically affirmed Nee's message and his faithfulness, and the small group of Shanghai Christians and the scattered congregations around China that had been following Nee treated him as if he "had been raised from the dead."[93] They now had external confirmation for their belief that God had cultivated a special minister in China.

[93] NTSWJ 26, 248

Chapter 4

The Nanjing Decade

After Watchman Nee's miraculous healing from tuberculosis in the fall of 1928, he set about employing his time and energy with characteristic determination. Nee recalls that on the very week of his recovery, he "spoke for three hours from the platform on the Lord's day."[1] Over the next ten years, as China enjoyed a period of relative peace, Nee's activities and following would also expand at an incredible rate. During these years, by publishing, holding conferences, and visiting different congregations, Nee laid the foundations for a cohesive, self-propagating movement that had a strong sense of group identity.

Nee's co-workers imbibed the pithy and powerful summary of his message as he formulated it in these years, that is, the supremacy of Christ. In the name of Christ, Nee's followers thus established congregations throughout China, mostly without Nee's direct oversight. At the same time, Nee fueled this grassroots participation by formulating a theology of overcoming in which Christian fidelity and activity would have significant stakes in the age to come. The ways in which Nee's co-workers and their congregations were motivated to cooperate and expand their movement without central direction would prove to be a critical factor in their future survival in the years to come.

By 1928, Nee had already been in Shanghai for almost two years. Although his sickness had obviously limited his ability to engage in practical church leadership, he had still managed to gather an impressive amount of support while continuing to publish *The Christian* and writing *The Spiritual Human*. Nee was never in particularly robust health, suffering from a chronic case

[1] NTSWJ 26, 248.

of angina pectoris, which caused him chest pain and fatigue throughout his life. Nevertheless, he was no longer under the immediate threat of death and with his newfound strength, he began to work on his vision of the "local churches" in earnest.

Unfortunately for historians, few detailed records of his practical efforts remain. Although some of the congregations that wrote in to Nee and loosely followed his work may have done so, Nee himself did not keep church membership records in places where he had a direct leadership role. He may have never forgotten his critique of the Methodist's "book of life," and one of his central definitions of a sectarian group was that "its system did not include all regenerated believers."[2] In other words, Nee continued to insist that whatever visible congregation he was a part of was inseparable from all other regenerated believers, that is, all true Christians.

Despite the lack of records, a general sketch of Nee's work and following can be made. By 1928, the year of *The Spiritual Human*'s first printing, Nee and his Shanghai co-workers had already attracted enough congregants and financial support to make designated physical premises both necessary and possible. In January of that year, they rented a building on Wendeli Lane off of Hardoon Road in Shanghai's International Settlement. Not long afterward, the group purchased both that property and an adjacent one, giving them space and freedom to modify the buildings to suit their purposes. Thus, a few hundred could gather on the ground floor to listen to preaching while the upstairs rooms could be used for hospitality and business, including offices for church affairs and publications.[3]

It is difficult to trace the state of Nee's supporters and followers around the country leading up to 1927. The best clues are scattered throughout issues of *The Christian*. Some issues

[2] CWWN 7, 1115-6.
[3] Kinnear, *Against the Tide*, 133. The property was eventually expanded to include five consecutive lots (197-8).

of the periodical contained a section in which Nee answered questions sent in from his subscribers and readers. The so-called "Question and Answer Box" appeared on a decidedly irregular schedule. Though the feature was supposed to appear in every other issue, sometimes it did not.

To complicate matters, even when the section was printed, it was not consistently edited. Usually correspondents were listed only by their surname. Occasionally a full name was given, at other times, the correspondents remained anonymous. Finally, the feature was most inconsistent with regard to listing the writers' locations. Sometimes the locations were left off altogether. Mostly, however, the name of one place was given. This name could refer to a province, county, city, or even village. When generic names were used, such as "Feng (probably a surname) Village," it is impossible to trace the specific place. Yet despite all these limitations, analyzing the different "Question and Answer Boxes" can still give some sense for the minimum reach of Nee's work and the nature of his following.

Between 1925 and 1927, during the roughly two-year run of *The Christian*, Nee received letters from at least nine Chinese provinces: Anhui, Fujian, Guangdong, Henan, Jiangsu, Jiangxi, Rehe, Shandong, and Zhejiang. In addition, Nee also received letters from Beijing, Shanghai, and Singapore. Even if one assumes that all correspondents of the same surname from the same place are, in fact, the same person, Nee still received letters from almost fifty different writers spread throughout those different locations. Nee was thus reaching an engaged audience in a significant number of large Chinese provinces and important cities, although, to be sure, there were also many provinces and cities that were notably absent from the record.

These scattered writers varied widely in their understanding of Nee's message. While some of the writers were evidently quite familiar with the Bible, Nee's theology, and other

Christian doctrines, other writers were confused regarding the basics of church administration, Bible interpretation, or appropriate Christian responses to social, political, and religious trends.

As might be expected, the writers were much more uniform in terms of their identification with Nee, and implicitly, with each other. The pages of *The Christian* show the birth of something akin to a fellowship of churches or a Christian movement. Although they did not know each other, except by reading one another's letters, the writers all agreed with Nee about the primacy of the Bible in evaluating Christian claims and practices. They were also tacitly convinced that Nee offered the most faithful biblical interpretations, and they proved this again and again by asking him to solve exegetical questions and by requesting his opinion of other Christian groups. Namely, they frequently wanted him to enumerate ways in which the beliefs or practices of others were unbiblical. By reading one another's letters and sharing in their correspondence with Nee, individual writers could see that there were many more throughout China who thought as they did, although at this stage there was no evidence of any attempts at association or direct communication with one another.

This set of letters can be usefully contrasted to another set of letters that were sent about ten years later. Between 1937 and 1939, Nee published *The Open Door*, which was meant to be a special, temporary publication for helping different churches and so-called "co-workers," or full-time ministers, stay in contact during the Second Sino-Japanese War, when many of them were forced to flee or relocate. If, in the mid-1920s, the different correspondents to *The Christian* were unknown to each other, by the mid-1930s, they wanted to keep track of each other by name. In the very first issue, twenty-four different co-workers were named and their travel plans and detailed addresses given. In subsequent issues, dozens of further names were supplied in a flurry of letters sent across China.

In two years and eighteen issues of *The Open Door*, all the original provinces and cities that had sent letters to *The Christian* were represented again. In addition, the editors also received letters from the following provinces: Gansu, Guangxi, Guizhou, Heilongjiang, Hubei, Hunan, Inner Mongolia (then Suiyuan), Jilin, Liaoning (then Fengtian), Shanxi, Sha'anxi, Sichuan, Tibet (then Xikang), and Yunnan. Cities such as Hong Kong, Macao, and Tianjin were now represented, as were various parts of Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines. In *The Open Door*'s last issue of September 1939, the editors even published a letter from Thailand suggesting that a small group of Christians had begun to meet there as well, led by "two useless ones" who called themselves "weak sisters in the Lord."[4]

Even without detailed records, it is obvious that the ten years between 1927 and 1937 were pivotal and productive ones. In 1924, when Nee had first received his vision of local churches throughout China, he was about to be expelled from the only congregation to which he had ever belonged. And yet, about fifteen years later, his vision had been significantly realized, and, in some ways, exceeded, with the robust representation of churches beyond China in the various Southeast Asian countries. Nee had gone from a solitary, transient preacher to a recognized leader of dozens of co-workers and congregations, who were working at a rapid pace to spread their message even in the face of a devastating war.

Historically, Nee's completion of *The Spiritual Human* in 1927 roughly coincided with the beginning of what has become known as the "Nanjing Decade." This was a short period of stability inaugurated by the Northern Expedition, Chiang Kai-Shek's successful military campaign. Chiang's defeat of various warlords and the rival Beiyang Government meant that Northern and Southern China were united under a common central authority as they had not been

[4] CWWN 32, 597.

since the waning years of the Qing Empire. Although the benefits of peace were unevenly shared, much of China enjoyed a period of relative calm. Nee's recovery from tuberculosis and redoubled efforts to spread his teachings could hardly have been better timed. Nee's various publications were able to circulate with ease, as were his traveling co-workers. Meanwhile, the congregations that used his writings could study and practice his teachings, grow their numbers, and solidify their sense of common identity.

The Case of Witness Lee

The story of one individual may help to illuminate the way in which Nee's interested correspondents in 1927 became his dedicated co-workers by 1937. Thankfully, one of the most significant cases of this transition is also one of the best documented. In many ways, the life of Witness Lee (1905-1997) was a mirror image of Nee's own. Lee was born just two years after Nee in the city of Yantai in the northern province of Shandong. Yantai, like Fuzhou, was a coastal city with a long history of interaction with foreigners. Like Nee, Lee was a third-generation Christian. Lee's maternal grandfather had been converted by the Southern Baptist mission in China. Lee, however, considered himself to be a nominal Christian throughout his childhood. He attended Sunday School but was never baptized. Lee enrolled in post-secondary education at a mission school, and, in 1925, while he was a still a teenaged college student, he was converted by an itinerant female evangelist, Peace Wang (Wang Peizhen, 1899-1969). Like Lee himself, Wang would go on to become one of Nee's most loyal and influential co-workers.

The Chinese Protestant world was a small one, and Lee became aware of Nee almost immediately. Fresh after his dynamic experience of salvation, Lee was hungry for biblical

knowledge and Christian teaching. He subscribed to a Christian periodical and voraciously read every article of every issue. He writes:

> As I read, I frequently noticed that articles under the by-line of Watchman Nee. It was obvious that those articles were the most outstanding ones on biblical truths. They were the best in the whole paper. The more I read them, the more I enjoyed reading them. From the way this writer addressed his readers, I imagined he was an aged Christian teacher, perhaps over sixty years of age.

When the paper posted the announcement that Nee would be publishing his own paper, *The Christian*, Lee subscribed immediately and frequently read each sizeable issue on the same day it was delivered. He ordered everything else Nee published and eventually began to write to Nee. The "Question and Answer Boxes" of *The Christian* record some of this correspondence, suggesting that Nee found Lee's questions interesting enough to print.

Although Lee was meeting with the Chinese Independent Church, reading Nee's works caused him to be "through with denominations." When a likeminded friend from the same church was transferred to Shanghai on business, Lee encouraged him to join Nee's congregation. Years later, the friend would become one of the elders in Nee's Shanghai congregation. Meanwhile, Lee was stuck in Yantai, although he eagerly desired to visit Shanghai and listen to Nee's preaching directly. In any case, it was clear that Nee's teachings were making a strong impression. By the end of 1927, when the Chinese Independent Church elected Lee to be a member of its board, he could stand the contradiction no longer. He "asked them to remove my name from their 'book of life'" and "began to meet regularly with the [local] Brethren Assembly, attending all their seven weekly meetings."[5]

In 1931, Lee registered to attend one of Nee's overcomer conferences in Shanghai, hoping to finally meet Nee face to face. Unfortunately, the outbreak of hostilities with Japan kept

[5] Witness Lee, *Seer of the Divine Revelation*, 285-6.

Lee from leaving the province. Lee had left his former denomination on good terms, however, and through them, he was finally able to arrange a meeting with Nee. During the summer of the next year, Lee convinced the Chinese Independent Church to invite Nee to visit and preach to their congregation. Lee appears to have been thoroughly impressed by Nee's behavior and influence. As an elderly man, Lee recounted wistfully:

> My time with Watchman during those days deeply impressed me with the sweetness, loveliness, attractiveness, and newness of the Lord. Those days provided a new start for me in following the Lord and caused me to have a basic turn from knowledge to life. Because of those days with Watchman Nee, I began to have fellowship with the Lord in a more intimate way. The Lord became more precious to me. That experience was even greater than my experience of salvation. Those days with Watchman affected my pathway in the Lord throughout all the following fifty-nine years, since 1932. For eternity I can never forget those days! What a mercy and a grace it was to me.[6]

For Lee, the visit highlighted the contrast between his Brethren congregation's emphasis on "the accuracy of biblical knowledge" and Nee's teaching concerning "the necessity of life." Lee seems to have concluded that although the Brethren were knowledgeable teachers of sound, biblical doctrines, Nee's living, fresh relationship with Christ suggested an even deeper mastery of Christian teachings. For Lee, Nee not only taught but also personally epitomized Biblical theology, suggesting a "basic turn from knowledge to life."

Nee appears to have had a similar effect on other members of the congregation. A member of the Independent church's board came to Lee's home during the very evening of Nee's departure to ask for help on behalf of "another believer in distress." When Lee took him aside for fellowship, the man pleaded with Lee to baptize him that very night in the sea. Lee acquiesced and they started a meeting in Lee's own home, which blossomed quickly into a congregation.[7] Some of Nee's followers later saw 1932 as the beginning of the last of three four-

[6] Lee, *Seer of the Divine Revelation*, 288-9.
[7] Lee, *Seer of the Divine Revelation*, 288-9.

year periods that marked the development of Nee's work: Fuzhou in 1924, Shanghai in 1928, and now Northern China in 1932.[8]

Lee wrote again to Nee, informing him of recent events, and Nee returned in April of the following year to "confirm and strengthen" the new congregation, preaching both in their meeting hall and to denominational Christians in the auditorium of the Chinese Independent Church. Lee soon felt convicted to become a full-time minister, but he struggled to muster up the faith to give up his well-paying job, which supported both his growing family and the church. Nevertheless, in a moment of crisis, he finally conceded his future to God and turned in his letter of resignation. Two providential events quickly confirmed his decision. Shortly after resigning, he received a letter inviting him to preach in Changchun, the first such invitation of his life. After his seventeen-day preaching tour, he returned to find a letter from Nee, dated from the very time Lee had been struggling most intensely with God over his future. In it, Nee wrote simply "Brother Witness, as for your future, I feel that you should serve the Lord with your full time. How do you feel? May the Lord lead you."[9]

Lee immediately felt that he had to go in person to Shanghai to hear the story from Nee. There, Nee related that he had written the letter while he was on the Mediterranean, returning to China from a trip to Europe. As he prayed for God's work in China, he "felt he should write me a note telling me that I should spend my full time serving the Lord." Right away, Lee was "fully convinced that [Nee] was a person wholly with the Lord. Otherwise, how could I be thousands of miles away struggling with the Lord and he be on the Mediterranean Sea receiving a burden to write me concerning this matter at the very instant God was dealing with me?" Lee concluded:

[8] Kinnear, *Against the Tide*, 163.
[9] Lee, *Seer of the Divine Revelation*, 291.

"[Watchman] did not need to ask me to work with him; I had already made the decision. I had to follow him and work with him."[10]

Lee ended up staying in Shanghai from October 1933 to February 1934. Nee himself was just turning thirty years old, but he was already filling the role of Barber as a spiritual mentor to younger Christians and a bridge to key Western Christian teachings. Lee recounts that when the two were alone, Nee once asked him to define patience. Lee did his best, suggesting that patience was a "sort of endurance." Nee denied that this was the answer, and when Lee asked for his definition, Nee responded simply, "Patience is Christ." After a pause, Nee repeated once more, "Patience is Christ." Neither man spoke again for a long while. Late in the afternoon, when Lee could bear the silence no longer, he took his leave and returned home perplexed, still unable to understand Nee's definition. As he prayed, however, he recounts that "The Lord spoke to me in those days, and my eyes were opened. I saw that Christ Himself is my patience. Real patience is not a kind of behavior, but just Christ lived out from me. I saw it!"[11]

Under Nee's tutelage, Lee also began to understand church history and the Bible from Nee's particular perspective, a combination of Brethren and Keswick themes that emphasized the importance of both the church and the divine life in the human spirit. Just as years before, Barber had pointed him in the direction of Jessie Penn-Lewis and other spiritual writings, Nee now introduced Lee to his preferred biblical scholars and Brethren exegetes.[12]

As Lee proved to be a capable teacher in his own right, Nee entrusted him with further responsibilities in both publication and preaching. When the Third Overcomer Conference was held in Shanghai in January 1934, Lee was readily at hand, meeting other Christians who had

[10] Lee, *Seer of the Divine Revelation*, 292.
[11] Lee, *Seer of the Divine Revelation,* 293.
[12] Nee recommended textual critic Henry Alford's *New Testament for English Readers* and Brethren leader John Nelson Darby's *Synopsis of the Bible*.

come from across China to participate. On the Sunday preceding the conference, when many expected to hear Nee speak, he was unexpectedly absent. Instead Lee was given a short note the same morning, asking him to preach in Nee's place. By February of that year, Nee and the other Shanghai co-workers asked Lee to move his family to Shanghai to become one of their number. Lee agreed, and for the next fifteen years, as he traveled across China to establish new congregations and strengthen existing ones, he understood his work as part of the "one flow and one current of the Lord's work in China."[13]

The Formation of a Fellowship

Lee's narrative is especially dramatic and striking. He rapidly earned Nee's confidence, and proved himself to be an outstanding leader even in Shanghai, where Nee's most trusted supporters lived and worked with him. Nevertheless, even if the particular details would have varied for others, Lee's story shows the way in which many Christians who were barely learning Nee's name in the 1920s could, over the course of a decade, find themselves drawn to increasingly associate themselves with the likeminded churches and fellow Christians who also followed Nee's teachings.

As a sign of the group's growing influence and cohesiveness, outsiders began to give Nee's followers various names. Because of the popularity of *The Christian,* some referred to the group as "The Christian Assembly." Others took their cues from the particular, nondescript names Nee's followers used for their buildings and called the congregations the "Assembly Hall" or "Meeting Place" (*juhuisuo/juhuichu*) churches. In 1927, Nee and some of his publication team had translated and printed a small hymn book for use during congregational worship. Many of

[13] Lee, *Seer of the Divine Revelation,* 298.

the songs within the pamphlet and its title were translated from a Plymouth Brethren work called *Hymns for the Little Flock*. It was a memorable title, and the churches that followed Nee's teachings were soon known as the "Little Flock." Nee was horrified by the development and quickly struck the words "Little Flock" from the title of the hymnal.[14] Neither he nor those within his movement would refer to themselves by any particular name at all, since a separate name was one of Nee's major criteria for discerning sectarianism. Nevertheless, for many outsiders, the moniker stuck. For ease of reference, these various names may be used in this work to refer to Nee's followers and their congregations.

While the expansion of the Christian Assemblies was impressive, their initial rate of growth was outpaced by that of the True Jesus Church, which was probably the fastest growing Christian movement in China. In 1922, only five years after its founding, the True Jesus Church already claimed a membership of ten thousand. The True Jesus Church and the Christian Assemblies were the only two indigenous Chinese churches to gain a true national following. As they fought to establish themselves and define their identities, their differences and similarities illuminated both the Chinese Christian landscape and the surprising, malleable forms that global Christianities could take.

Like the Christian Assemblies, the True Jesus Church traced its founding to a native Chinese Christian and maintained a scrupulous distance from both Western denominations and the Sino-Foreign Protestant establishment. Also like the Christian Assemblies, the True Jesus Church combined an adventist eschatology with a focus on evangelism and mission, charging its adherents to spread the message in the face of Christ's soon return and the end of the age. The combination of these factors proved to be a potent brew, galvanizing average Chinese citizens

[14] CWWN 18, 320-1. Kinnear, *Against the Tide*, 142-3.

from all walks of life to devote much of their time, energy, and money to Christian purposes. Unsurprisingly, both the True Jesus Church and the Little Flock quickly broke free from their local bases of support to cross provincial and even national boundaries.

Two of Nee's published correspondents in *The Christian* sought Nee's counsel on the True Jesus Church. Nee responded that it was necessary to "speak the truth in love," since by his estimation, the True Jesus Church was "a heretical organization."[15] Nee does not seem to have been aware of the True Jesus Church's unitarianism, which, for him, would have constituted a major heresy. Instead, he condemned their "confusion regarding the cardinal truth concerning salvation,"[16] that is, their insistence that salvation could only come through the proper rites of baptism. To Nee, this ignorance of redemptive atonement and salvation by faith meant that "They put aside the salvation of the cross and do not preach it."

Instead, Nee argued that True Jesus followers "emphasize only the Holy Spirit, but what they have actually received are *evil spirits*."[17] For support, Nee referred to 1 John 4:1-3, in which the writer of the epistle urged his listeners discern between spirits that were from God and "the spirit of the antichrist." Nee prefaced all his remarks by demurring that "we should not criticize others, but for the sake of the truth we must reject heresy." Still, he could not refrain from pointing out that the True Jesus Church's "exposition of the Bible is a hodgepodge of unrelated texts, an arbitrary, nonsensical speaking that is not even worthy for knowledgeable ones to laugh at."[18]

To be sure, Nee's theological differences with the True Jesus Church were legion. Besides their unitarian conception of God, the True Jesus Church also held to Sabbath

[15] CWWN 7, 1054.
[16] CWWN 7, 1105.
[17] CWWN 7, 1054.
[18] CWWN 7, 1054.

observance and worship. The group drew both many of its members and a number of its key leaders from the relatively small but influential Seventh-Day Adventist denomination. The True Jesus Church combined this Adventist heritage with a heavy Pentecostal emphasis on baptism by the Spirit and glossolalia, or speaking in unknown tongues.

Nee's accusation that True Jesus Christians "put aside the salvation of the cross," and his denunciation of True Jesus teachings as "confusion regarding the cardinal truth concerning salvation," had to do with the True Jesus teaching that without the proper rites of baptism, a person was destined for hell. The True Jesus Church insisted that its adherents be baptized by immersion, face-down, in natural, outdoor bodies of water and in the name of Jesus. Furthermore, a salvific baptism must be accompanied by tongue-speaking to testify to the Holy Spirit's presence. The ecstatic, miraculous experiences that accompanied the baptism of the Spirit were key to the movement's spread and to the potency of its message. As one scholar of the movement has observed, members of the True Jesus Church described their "Christian experiences as a process of spiritual yearning, a search for moral purity, a constant fear of hell that finally came to a happy conclusion when they received baptism of the Holy Spirit and a feeling of confirmation that they had finally been cleansed from sin and redeemed from hell."[19]

In short, True Jesus theology was a creative amalgam of many existing Christian themes. True Jesus teachers combined Adventist eschatology and Sabbatarianism, Oneness Pentecostal conceptions of God, Spirit-baptism, and glossolalia, and something akin to Tridentine Roman Catholicism, with its emphasis on the salvific nature of sacraments, performed correctly, under the auspices of the true church. Obviously, each of these commitments had biblical warrant, something that was of paramount importance to both the True Jesus Church and the Christian

[19] Melissa Inouye, "Miraculous Mundane: The True Jesus Church and Chinese Christianity in the Twentieth Century" (PhD Diss., Harvard University, 2010), 89.

Assembly. In the West, however, such disparate groups used very different rationales to justify their theological emphases. The Roman Catholic emphasis on sacramental rites, for instance, was based upon the church's careful custodianship of tradition, something to which the True Jesus Church paid little attention.

Instead, as was the case with many other global Christian groups, the True Jesus Church found that the primacy and immediacy of the Holy Spirit superseded all other forms of authority. The fact that adherents directly interacted with the Holy Spirit seemed to herald a return to the apostolic age and shrank the relevance of the intervening years of the Christian tradition. The unmediated guidance of the Spirit also seemed to minimize the importance of ordained pastors, formal theological education, and vested institutions. With the gatekeepers of Christian authority thus bypassed, ordinary believers were empowered to pick and choose from virtually any Christian teaching that appealed to them, supporting their claims with what Nee disparagingly called "a hodgepodge of unrelated texts." Theologian Harvey Cox has more charitably referred to the resulting beliefs as "spiritual bricolage."[20]

While theological differences between the two groups were extensive, the discrepancy in their general attitude and outlook may have been just as significant. Nee largely drew from Westerners to critique other Western doctrines. As a result, he was selective in his critiques of other Christians, attempting to carefully discern the specific doctrines and practices that should be accepted and opposed. The True Jesus Church embraced a much more aggressive brand of nationalism. When one Western missionary rebuked a True Jesus leader for "stealing the sheep," the Chinese man quickly retorted, "Whichever one of you is a foreign sheep can go back with [the missionary]!"[21] Similarly, when True Jesus representatives were invited to the National

[20] Harvey Cox, *Fire from Heaven*, 305.
[21] Lian Xi, *Redeemed by Fire*, 54.

Christian Conference of 1922, they took the opportunity to oppose the gathered Christian leaders to their face. Even though about half of the Conference was composed of Chinese nationals, the True Jesus Church's delegation accused them of "being used by the imperialists as the vanguard of their invasion."[22]

In contrast, although Nee attacked the denominational and clerical system, and considered that most Christians were tragically lacking in true spiritual experiences, he went out of his way to include them. For instance, he argued that "If we call ourselves the church in Shanghai, we have to include all the believers in Shanghai. Otherwise, we cannot be considered the church in Shanghai."[23] Indeed, because the basis of his arguments was an appeal *against* sectarianism, Nee repeatedly insisted that all true Christians were united in Christ's one body. It is indicative that a number of foreign missionaries eventually left their denominations and followed Nee's movement, but they were probably not welcome, nor did they appear to seek membership in the True Jesus Church. Likewise, modern-day descendants of the Little Flock have been much more successful at gaining indigenous leaders and followers *outside* of China, where Nee and his successors' ability to adopt a more recognizably evangelical language and tradition has paid dividends.

The difference in attitudes has also affected the cohesion of the groups as a whole. Once the True Jesus Church unleashed the critical power of direct spiritual visions against other Christian groups, it was hard to keep the process from replicating itself. Within two decades, at least fifteen splinter groups broke off with their own charismatic leaders and new revelations from God.[24] While Little Flock churches have also broken into a few dissenting divisions over

[22] Lian Xi, *Redeemed by Fire*, 58.
[23] CWWN 22, 41.
[24] Lian Xi, *Redeemed by Fire*, 62.

the decades, as befits a group that idealizes church unity, they have done so at a much slower rate and with more subdued rhetoric.

For the True Jesus Church, however, the attitude and shape of their movement had significant payoffs. The fierce rejection of all other Christian groups harnessed an explosive amount of religious power and authority. By teaching its members that they alone held the rites and teachings that could lead to salvation, the True Jesus Church condemned other so-called Christians to hell and suggested that they belonged to the devil.[25] This "confident exclusivism" invested True Jesus Church members with enormous stakes to stay faithful, avoid joining other Christian groups, and spread their uniquely salvific message.

Both True Jesus adherents and Little Flock followers frequently mentioned their uncertainty regarding their own salvations as a major impetus that drove them to seek new Christian groups and teachings. This fact suggests that among Chinese Christians, there was a significant amount of confusion over how Christians could know that they were saved and what their eternal destinies would be. This may have been the result of so many different denominations, each with their own perspective on Christian salvation. On this subject, as on so many others, Nee selectively appropriated a distinctive, minority school of Western Christian thought and used it as a corrective to more commonly held beliefs.

Nee's Theology of Salvation

In some ways, *The Spiritual Human* seemed to reflect the confusion among Chinese Christians about the question of salvation. The work focused on the human spirit's union with the divine life. It suggested that this union began with regeneration and that a proper

[25] Lian, *Redeemed by Fire*, 49.

understanding of regeneration should assure Christians that they had been irrevocably saved. A child of God could not be "unborn." Since the Christian had received the same life that God had, this new life could no more be destroyed than God's own life. At the same time, *The Spiritual Human* also suggested that Christians should fear God's judgment and that much Christian work done in God's name might not actually be approved by God. Still, it did not give any hint regarding the possible fate of nominal or apostate Christians who had received the life of God but who had gone on to ignore their spiritual senses to live soulish or fleshly lives.

In Nee's mind, however, this ambiguous state of affairs had a clear explanation. Even before *The Spiritual Human* had been completed, Nee had already begun to argue that the soul-spirit distinction did not only help Christians live more godly lives in the present, but it also had important effects on their destinies after their deaths. Nee's *Study on Revelation* is based on a bible study he conducted with a few others prior to 1928, the year *The Spiritual Human* was first published. In *Study on Revelation*, Nee talks at length about the question of the Christian millennium.

The phrase "millennium" appears repeatedly in the first seven verses of Revelation's twentieth chapter. The biblical text declares that during the course of those thousand years, Satan is bound, the nations are freed from deception, and certain souls are allowed to reign with Christ and serve him as priests. These cryptic statements have a long history of inspiring eschatological hopes among Christians, so much so that "millenarianism" has often become something of a shorthand for fevered end-times beliefs. Nee's reflections on the theme, however, suggest that he was not as interested in the imminence of the coming kingdom as he was in solving a perennially thorny problem of evangelical hermeneutics.

The different denominations and Christian groups that participated in the Anglo-American evangelical movement can be divided in many different ways. One of the most significant divisions that evangelicals themselves recognized, however, was the distinction between those who held to a Wesleyan or Arminian soteriology as opposed to those who held to a Calvinist or Reformed soteriology. These two camps disagreed over the possibility of Christians losing their eternal salvation. While Arminians argued that certain sins were grievous enough to entail the possibility of even a converted person experiencing damnation, Reformed theology held that the eternal bliss of the elect was secure and that no human action could thwart God's designation once a person had become a true Christian.

One of the reasons the division persisted was that, in a deeply biblical culture, both sides were able to marshal copious scriptural references to prove their points. At different times in the biblical narratives, Jesus and the apostles made statements that could be taken to support either claim. For instance, Jesus famously enjoins his followers to take the narrow gate since the broad way will lead to destruction, but he also assures his disciples that they are in his and in his father's hands, so that no one can snatch them out.[26] Similarly, Paul speaks both of struggling to win God's approval and exults that nothing can possibly separate him from the love of God.[27]

Nee believed that the concept of the millennium in Revelation opened the door to a third way that navigated the apparent biblical discrepancy. Two of the verses in the passage on the millennium mention something called "the first resurrection." Those who take part in the first resurrection are "blessed and holy," and "over these the second death has no authority." Like much of the book of Revelation, these passages are obscure, and can be interpreted in many different ways. Nee's *Study on Revelation* connects the first resurrection to Paul's use of the

[26] Matthew 7:13, John 10:28-29.
[27] 1 Corinthians 9:24-27; Romans 8:31-39.

phrase "out-resurrection" in Philippians 3:11 where the apostle hopes to "attain to the out-resurrection from the dead."

Although most English versions of the Bible translate the Philippians passage simply as "resurrection," Nee was attuned to the fact that the Greek noun for resurrection, *anastasia*, here alone, in all the New Testament also carries the prefix "*ex*." Nee points out that Paul had already argued at length earlier in his Philippian letter that he wanted to live and not die (1:23-25).[28] Furthermore, in Nee's view, the Bible taught that *all* human beings, regardless of whether they were saved or damned, good or evil, would be resurrected from the dead for the final judgment. Thus, if Paul was hoping to attain to this "out-resurrection," it must refer to something other than the common or general resurrection of the dead; it must be a resurrection that could be experienced even by the living.

Here, Nee believed that the passages in Revelation could be helpful. Those who attained to the first resurrection, or the out-resurrection, were freed from "the second death" which, in Nee's mind "does not merely mean to die; rather it means to go to a certain place to suffer."[29] This "certain place" of suffering was reserved for Christians who had genuinely received the life of God, but who had also lived sinful human lives. The existence of a third option negotiated the stark dichotomy between heaven and hell. According to Nee, when Paul spoke of his hope to attain to the out-resurrection, he meant to avoid the possibility of eschatological suffering and instead receive the reward of becoming one of the "priests of God and of Christ" to "reign with him for a thousand years."[30] The millennium thus functioned as a time of both reward and punishment. Those Christians who fought the good fight could expect a glorious period of bliss

[28] CWWN 16, 186.
[29] CWWN 16, 185.
[30] Revelation 20;6

while those who did not meet God's standard would spend those thousand years suffering instead.

A few years later, in 1931, Nee expanded on the same theme with his *Study on Matthew*. It is worth noting that Matthew, Revelation, and the Song of Songs appear to be the only books for which Nee engaged in an extended, focused commentary. Nee mined two of them for details concerning eschatological reward and punishment while expounding on the delights of romantic love with Christ in the third.

The *Study on Matthew* dwelt on two parables to expand on the question of reward and punishment for Christians. In the first parable there were ten virgins. Five were prudent, taking oil in vessels to accompany their lamps and five were foolish, neglecting to do so. They all fell asleep, and at midnight, they were awakened to meet the bridegroom. The wise were able to light their lamps again, meet the groom, and enter the wedding feast. The foolish had to scramble to buy oil, and as they were doing so, the door was shut and they were not allowed to participate in the feast.

Nee argued that in the parable on the virgins, the entire group of ten virgins must all be genuine believers. They are all called virgins, which suggests they "differ only in behavior but not in nature."[31] Furthermore, the judgment in this parable takes place after they had all "fallen asleep," a common biblical trope implying death. If the virgins were *not* all Christians, the timing of the rewards and punishments meted out to them would suggest that a person's eternal destiny could be changed *after death*. Nee suggests instead that, as Christians, all the virgins in the parable have their final destiny secured. Their different behaviors during their lifetime, however,

[31] CWWN 15, 323.

would affect their experience of the coming millennium. For Nee, a proper understanding of the human spirit helped illuminate the obscure parable.

All the virgins in the parable had oil in their lamps, but the five prudent virgins also had oil in their vessels. For Nee, these suggest "two kinds of analogies." The "oil in the lamp" points only to the Holy Spirit's *initial* union with the human spirit in regeneration, since the Bible argues that "The spirit of man is the lamp of Jehovah."[32] The oil in the vessel, however suggests not only the Spirit's presence, but also a certain fullness: that is, the extra oil. Thus, "God's desire is that we will not only have oil in the lamp but will also be filled with and full of oil. A student's goal in studying is not just to pass the examination (that is, to be saved) but also to excel (that is, to be filled)."[33]

To be full of the Holy Spirit was to be "normal," to come up to God's standard and to "excel" in God's "examination." Such excellence would have its reward. In the parable, the prudent virgins who had oil in their vessels were welcomed into the wedding feast. The foolish virgins, however, would also face consequences for their lack. Nee wrote:

> After resurrection, some will have joy, while others will have suffering. If a Christian's temper is not dealt with when he is alive, it will not be dealt with after his death either. The greed, pride, and selfishness of the rich man [in the parable of Lazarus] were still there after he died. Death cannot make a person holy. Otherwise, every person would be holy, since every person dies once.[34]

Nee's anthropology thus ended up having eschatological and soteriological implications. The fact that the human spirit was the point of regeneration meant that Christians could all be assured of eternal life. The variation in human souls, however, and the persistence of sins and

[32] CWWN 15, 325-6.
[33] CWWN 15, 326.
[34] CWWN 15, 332. The reference is to the parable of Lazarus and the rich man in Luke 16, in which a beggar named Lazarus and a rich man both die, and the rich man is tormented after his death for his greed and neglect of the poor while Lazarus rests "in Abraham's bosom."

failures in Christian souls would have repercussions after death. Sooner or later, God's standard of holiness would be met by all, and death was not the end. Christ's return would inaugurate a millennial kingdom, so named because it spanned one thousand years. During this period, the Christians who were victorious and filled in spirit would be rewarded with "the enjoyment of the marriage feast" and "the enjoyment of the bliss of the kingdom."[35] Christians who had failed to lead a spiritual life would spend the thousand years making up for their deficiencies in a place the book of Matthew refers to as "outer darkness." Even this phrase, Nee suggests, shows that something of a third destiny is available to Christians, arguing that "The New Testament never mentions that hell is the outer darkness. Hell has no darkness, but rather fire."[36]

Nee's Keswick predecessors had tried to negotiate the gap between Reformed doctrine and the Wesleyan emphasis on practical holiness. They frequently enjoined their hearers to come up to God's standard of holiness. In fact, the perceived gap between the Bible's teaching regarding sanctified living and the average Christian's experience of the same was part of the Keswick Convention's *raison d'etre*. When they were accused of introducing Wesleyan perfectionism, however, Keswick teachers defended themselves with classic Reformed doctrines on the persistence of sin and the perseverance of the saints. They scrupulously avoided any suggestion that sin could be eradicated or that a lack of holiness might cause a Christian to lose the security of their salvation. Deprived of future rewards and punishments, holiness in daily life had to be its own reward.

Nee's introduction of a thousand-year period of either suffering or bliss introduced a stark incentive for Christians to live properly. He also avoided going as far as the Arminian position, denying that even the basest actions could justify eternal damnation for the truly

[35] CWWN 15, 333-4.
[36] CWWN 15, 350.

converted. Although this creative position seemed to break the deadlock between Reformed and Arminian notions of salvation, it depended upon a startling concept.

A large measure of the initial appeal of the 16th century Reformation had been the denial of the Catholic notion of purgatory. One scholar of the period has argued that purgatory was "one of the most successful and long-lasting theological ideas in the Western Church," one that "bred an intricate industry of prayer."[37] By freeing Western consciences from the terror of purgative flames, or the need to pray for the suffering dead, the various reformers harnessed a powerful psychological energy and attracted many Christians to their message. Since that time, few, if any Protestants had dared to broach the idea that Christians could still suffer for their sins after their deaths.

To be clear, Nee's concept of the thousand-year kingdom as a reward and punishment differed in certain critical ways from the Catholic notion of purgatory. For Nee, the period of time was fixed, whereas for Catholic theology, the period of purgation was undefined. Likewise, for Nee, the bliss and suffering depended only upon an individual's own actions and readiness—the fullness of oil in their own vessel, whereas for Catholics, the church and the "intricate industry of prayer" may have an effect. Nevertheless, like Catholics, Nee saw something of a middle road between the stark evangelical alternative presented by Reformed and Wesleyan doctrines. Sin could have real and lasting effects that went beyond the span of a human lifetime, but Christians had no need to fear eternal torment or annihilation.

Furthermore, Nee was not the initiator of this novel idea. Nee's *Study on Revelation* references Robert Govett (1813-1901) a number of times.[38] In a conference given in 1934, Nee explicitly lauds Govett for being the first to "see the matter of Christian reward." In Nee's words,

[37] Diarmaid MacCulloch, *The Reformation* (New York: Penguin Books, 2003), 13.
[38] For some examples see CWWN 15, pp. 42, 51, 64-5.

Govett discovered that "while it is true that a person is saved by faith, he is rewarded according to his works before God." Furthermore, Govett had also taught Nee the idea that "there is a possibility that Christians will be excluded from the millennium."[39] And in fact, Govett's published works, which are still being printed today, clearly make the case that "eternal life is God's unconditional gift to believers" even while their "participation in the kingdom of Christ is conditional on their conduct, as good or evil."[40]

Govett's position, however, was deeply idiosyncratic, and the Christian Assembly may be the largest contemporary group that espouses his beliefs. Govett was also the first pastor of Surrey Chapel, the congregation to which Barber belonged. When she left the Church of England, Barber was baptized by immersion by Govett's successor, and Surrey Chapel supported her final mission to China, during which she contacted Nee. Thus, although Nee never explicitly credited Barber with introducing him to the writings of Govett, it is almost certain that this was the case. These Surrey teachings sharply distinguished Barber from other Western missionaries, and the fact that their legacy has flourished in China while virtually disappearing from the West is another quirk in the spread of Christianity.

The Glory of Church

Throughout the late 1920s and early 1930s, Nee worked out further aspects of his theological system. His developing thought can be seen in various issues of *The Revival*, which he resumed publishing after he stopped *The Christian* in 1928. Some issues of *The Revival* were composed of notes taken from Nee's spoken messages at a series of conferences. The Third

[39] CWWN 11, 851
[40] Robert Govett, *Entrance Into the Kingdom or Reward According to Works* (Miami Springs, FL: Conley & Schoettle Publishing Co., 1978), 1.

Overcomer Conference, which Lee attended in January of 1934, was one of Nee's last Overcomer Conferences. The edited notes from that conference also filled out the last issues of *The Revival*, which Nee stopped publishing in August of that year.[41] These works comprised some of Nee's most straightforward attempts to address the question of the church and his own relationship to it.

In these pages, Nee joined his understanding of the mystical, spiritual relationship between Christ and the believer to his vision of a unified and purified church. He began expansively, writing that "God had an eternal plan before the foundation of the world." This eternal plan was twofold, to "make all things express Christ" and to "make man like Christ, that man would have His life and glory." In executing this plan, God was presented with two problems, "Satan's rebellion and humanity's fall."[42] The church represented God's response to these problems and was thus the center of God's eternal plan. The church was meant "not only to preach the gospel to save sinners but also to testify of Christ's victory on the cross." In fact, God specifically "allows Satan to remain on the earth in order to provide us the opportunities to testify to His Son's victory."[43] Thus, Nee understood that his program of victory and holiness as outlined in *The Spiritual Human* was not ultimately meant for individual Christians, but for the church corporately, to defeat God's enemy and magnify Christ.

Although many Christians might differ from Nee on the specifics of victory and holiness, they could agree to this basic formula. God's purpose was for individual Christians as part of the larger church. Much of the difficulty lay in defining this church. To what entity did these holy Christians belong and owe their loyalty? What was the object of their service? Was the church a

[41] He would resume its publication much later, in January 1951.
[42] CWWN 11, 755.
[43] CWWN 11, 756.

visible body defined by apostolic succession or fidelity to orthodox creeds and doctrines? Was it an invisible gathering of the truly converted? Here again, Nee's developing theological system went in an unprecedented direction, which helped him devise his own solution to a perennially thorny question.

Like many evangelicals, Nee favored the invisible church of the converted, known only to God. Despite this, Nee also argued that if God's goal was to "testify to His Son's victory," then "All failing believers damage this testimony."[44] Nee thus walked a fine line. On the one hand, Nee understood Christians to be regenerated people and he further defined regeneration to be a deeply personal, spiritual union with Christ, by which the believer was born again with Christ's own divine life. The natural corollary was that true Christians could exist anywhere and in any congregation. They thus comprised an invisible church, a mystical body composed of all those who had received Christ's life. On the other hand, Nee's emphasis on testimony and expression made him pay particular attention to the church's visible manifestation. Nee writes:

> Satan cannot overcome the individual Christ, but he can shame the individual Christ through the corporate Christ. Failure of the body is failure to the head. A member's failure is the body's failure. We are the continuation of Christ. We are to extend Christ (Isa. 53:10) just as we extended Adam. God allows us to remain on earth for the purpose of accomplishing His eternal plan and achieving His eternal goal.[45]

Anthropologists have long suggested that the culture of the Sinosphere is attuned to shame in a way that Western culture may not be.[46] It is hard not to see something of that influence here as Nee argued that the failure of individual members reflects not only themselves, but also on the whole body of Christ and on Christ himself, the head of the body. Glory, then, is

[44] CWWN 11, 756.
[45] CWWN 11, 757. NTSWJ 11, 118.
[46] The classic study on this point is Ruth Benedict's *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword* (Boston MA: Houghton Mifflin, 1946). Since then, the claim has been frequently contested and qualified in the academic literature but is still very influential.

partially defined in relation to shame. The failure of Christians is a shame (*xiuru*, 羞辱) to Christ, but their holy living glorifies God and shames Satan instead. A sensitivity to shame may help to explain Nee's deep concern that God would have some kind of visible victory over Satan to prove Christ's victory in the invisible realm.

For Nee, this presented an obvious conundrum. He accepted many of Keswick and the Brethren's most pessimistic assessments regarding the state of Christianity. Many, if not most Christians were living defeated Christian lives while the visible church was wracked by division and impurity. If God and Satan were fighting for visible victory and shame, it seemed that Satan rather than God was prevailing. Here Nee relied on the Keswick distinction between "average" and "normal" Christians. Those authors frequently argued that the common condition of average Christians was not normal. Although many Christians might be defeated, God's norm was still holiness and victory.

Nee began to see these "normal," victorious Christians as the focal point of God's move in the world. God would somehow gain a group of overcomers to represent the whole body of Christians before Christ returned in victory to reclaim the earth. In fact, for Nee, the entire Bible was a record of this same principle, which would now be repeated in the present age. According to Nee, the Bible repeatedly showed how God selected a small number out of a larger body to bring salvation to the greater community.

For instance, Nee wrote that during the apostolic age, the churches were organized around the unifying principle of locality to "maintain the victory of Christ on the cross and bind Satan in each locality as the Lord bound him on Calvary." However, even at this earliest juncture, the church "became degraded." Nee pointed to the examples of "the falsehood of Ananias and Sapphira, the greediness of Simon, the admission of false brothers, the care of many

for their own affairs, and the forsaking by many of Paul when he was in prison" as some examples of apostasy even in the New Testament era.[47] Still, God was undeterred. Even though the church as a whole may have failed, God had a solution in mind. Nee continued:

> After the failure of the church, God searched for a small number of people in the church to become His overcomers, those who would bear the responsibility which the church should have picked up but did not. God wanted a small number of faithful ones to represent the church and maintain the victory of Christ. In all seven ages of the church, there are God's overcomers. This line of overcomers has never been broken. The overcomers are not special people. The overcomers of God are a group of people who are one with God's original purpose.[48]

The phrase "overcomers" was probably derived from Penn-Lewis's preferred term for referring to victorious, holy, Spirit-filled Christians. Nee not only attached the idea of millennial reward and punishment to overcoming, but also expanded it in many other directions. Overcoming was a basic biblical principle and overcomers helped to define the church. In Nee's eyes, God dealt with humanity according to the principle of overcoming, always seeking the "small number of faithful ones." When God wanted glory in the church, he recognized that the visibility of this victory would be limited to the overcomers, who alone were "one with God's original purpose." When the overcomers participated in the experiences of Christ's death, resurrection, and victory, they did so to "represent the church and maintain the victory of Christ."

Although overcomers constituted only a minority of the church, their victory and status were shared with all. Nee had come to see God's purpose as something that was inextricably communal in a way that Penn-Lewis had never considered. Penn-Lewis's writings focused on helping individual Christians achieve victory, but in Nee's eyes, individual victory of even the highest sort was something of a byproduct, a means to an end. Individuals had to overcome because by doing so, they represented the church, which was the goal of God's entire plan. In a

[47] CWWN 11, 760-1.
[48] CWWN 11, 761.

sense, there was no such thing as individual holiness. Holiness only made sense as a fulfillment of God's eternal purpose, which was a victorious church.

Since overcoming was related to the church and to God's will, it naturally had far-reaching effects that stretched out over space and time. God had worked in the principle of overcoming in the past, and overcomers also held the key to the future. Nee wrote that the overcomers existed throughout all of the "seven ages of the church," a clear reference to John Nelson Darby and the dispensational theology of the Brethren.

According to this theology, in every period of time, or dispensation, God had a special charge for humanity. Adam was responsible for heeding God's warning regarding the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, Noah "for the ordering of his house and family… in holy government," and so on and so forth. Although God took gracious action to save both Adam and Noah, both men failed in their responsibilities, and in fact, every dispensation had ended in failure and would continue to do so until God's final, direct intervention in the changing of the last dispensation. The current age or dispensation was no different. Thus, Darby wrote, "'as it was in the days of No[ah] and the days of Lot, so should it be in the day when the Son of man should be revealed.' Clearly then there was to be an awful apostacy before the close, and the state of the apostacy was the state of the dispensation at the close."[49]

For Darby, widespread Christian apostasy was to be expected, as most Christians, like Adam and Noah, shirked their responsibility to God's commission for their particular age, even though they still maintained their standing as God's chosen ones. Contrary to this, Nee argued that the overcomers represented God's final answer to the defeat of the church. In a way, the disagreement was simply a matter of where one drew the lines in the history of God's work. Both

[49] Kelly, *Collected Works, Ecclesiastical*, 174, 180.

Darby and Nee saw a general tendency toward failure periodically interrupted by God's selection of a chosen representative to carry on his work in a new dispensation. Whereas Darby focused on the failure at the end of each age, however, Nee now focused on God's recovery of a small group to continue with his eternal plan. Nee argued that in contemporary times, during the present dispensation, the overcomers would establish God's final victory "at the end of the age."[50] Just as every previous dispensation had changed because of the actions of a faithful few, the age of the church would end with Christ's second coming when the overcomers had achieved their victory in the face of general defeat.

Thus, Nee mapped the Keswick distinction between average and normal Christians onto the Brethren categories of apostate and faithful Christians. Whereas Darby focused on the "awful apostacy" that marked human failure at the end of each age, Nee focused on the positive testimony of the overcomers, who allowed God to claim victory. Like the Brethren, Nee turned to biblical history to justify his perspective, pointing out that although "God chose the Israelites to be a kingdom of priests among all people," their failure at the foot of Sinai caused God to "choose the sons of Levi" as overcomers "to replace the Israelites as priests." Still, God never gave up on the Israelites, and the Levitical service benefited the people of Israel as a whole.[51]

The example of the Levitical priesthood was simply one example of the same divine principle by which a few could represent and benefit the many. Nee wrote that "God works on a few persons first. Then He works on the majority of the people through these few. Before God could deliver the Israelites, He first had to deliver Moses… God had to deal with David to gain him first, before He could deliver the Israelites from the hand of the Philistines." Likewise, in the New Testament, "First God gained twelve people, then one hundred and twenty, and finally He

[50] CWWN 11, 777.
[51] CWWN 11, 763.

established the church." The Bible itself taught that God didn't work through all people generally but through a select few as his chosen instrument. "God allows a few persons to take up the responsibility which the majority should but would not. The principle of the overcomers is for God to allow a few persons to do something that results in blessing for the majority."[52]

Again, the combination of Keswick and Brethren themes is striking. Keswick's positive emphasis on achieving holiness was carefully joined to the Brethren pessimism on the church's degradation. The early Brethren refused to claim victory, arguing only that they maintained the most faithful approach to purity and holiness possible in an overwhelming tide of dissolution. Nee accepted much of the subtext on the church's general failure, but he still encouraged his audience to strive to be overcomers. He also argued that the holy overcomers could carry out their victory on behalf of the church at large, a claim that the Brethren never made. Even if the overcomers' triumph could only be seen in the "few persons" who "take up the responsibility which the majority should but would not," it was a triumph nonetheless and it would still bring in "blessing for the majority."

One biblical narrative vividly illustrated Nee's concept of holiness as tied to his idea of corporate victory. In the story of the crossing of the Jordan River, the priests entered the water first and stayed there while the rest of the nation of Israel crossed to enter the good land. Nee offered his allegorical explanation of the passage:

> God put the priests in the place of death so that the Israelites would have a way to the land of life. The priests were the first ones to go into the water and the last ones to come up out of the water. They were the overcomers of God. Today God is seeking for a group of people who, like the priests of old, step into the water, that is, walk into death first. They are willing to be dealt with by the cross first, to stand in the place of death in order that the church will find the way of life. God must first put us in the place of death before others can receive life. The overcomers of God are the pioneers of God.[53]

[52] CWWN 11, 763-4.
[53] CWWN 11, 764.

This biblical story neatly tied together many of the different themes of Nee's thought. If one accepted Nee's interpretation, the priests chose to die to allow others to live. On an individual level, to be an overcomer was to experience Christ's death. Christ's death terminated the independent self and the flesh, causing the Christian to depend on her union with God in spirit. On a corporate level, accepting the death of Christ meant imparting life to others, standing in the water while other passed on to the good land. The overcomer ushered others into the life of victory that she had already attained. On a cosmic level, the overcoming Christians accomplished God's original purpose. As God's representatives, they allowed Christ to claim victory in the age of the church. Instead of being put to shame, Christ could glory in their thrilling conquest. The overcomers would be God's instrument for exercising his judgment on Satan. At the end of the age, "When they are raptured to heaven, Satan will be cast down," because "Wherever the overcomers go, Satan must retreat."[54]

The Problem of the Church

The boldness of Nee's departures from standard Brethren teachings was not coincidental. In 1929, Nee's extensive book-buying from a London publisher had resulted in his becoming acquainted with the publisher's friend, a Brethren minister named George Ware. Ware and Nee corresponded for about a year, and the Brethren fellowship to which Ware belonged became quite excited about the "existence of this work of God in China."[55] One of their number, a British engineer by the name of Charles Barlow, was delegated to Shanghai by his employer. The

[54] CWWN 11, 780. NTSWJ 11, 146-7.
[55] Gardiner, A.J. *The Recovery and Maintenance of the Truth*. London: Stow Hill Bible and Tract Depot (1951), 216.

Brethren took the opportunity to ask Barlow to visit Nee and get a sense for the nature of Nee's work.

Barlow was deeply impressed with what he saw, writing back that "Some of these dear brethren are very sincere and thirsting for truth." He added that "Watchman Nee is undoubtedly the outstanding man among them. He is far beyond all the rest. He is only 28, but has had a good education and is possessed of marked ability. He is a hard worker and reads much. He is, too, a great student of J. N. Darby, and has evidently been greatly helped by his writings."[56] When Barlow returned in person, his reports created a stir and the Brethren ended up sending a significant delegation to the Shanghai congregation in the fall of 1932. After two weeks of careful observation, the visitors decided to take communion with the Chinese congregations, a significant act for a group of so-called Closed or Exclusive Brethren. In essence, the Brethren agreed that the Shanghai congregation was based on the same principles and could be completely identified with them.[57]

Excitedly, the Brethen extended an invitation for Nee to return the visit in the coming year, and in June of 1933, Nee made his first visit to the West, visiting Brethren congregations in Great Britain, the United States, and Canada. His talks on this tour were well-received by many, but Nee was beginning to have misgivings. He was bothered by the Brethren's spiritual pride, hearing them boast on several occasions that they had the highest spiritual revelation of any Christian group. Once, after listening to a long doctrinal discussion, he apparently chided his audience that all their knowledge of the truth would not help them much in China, suggesting

[56] Kinnear, *Against the Tide*, 140-1.
[57] Kinnear, *Against the Tide*, 147-9.

that "if when the need arose you could not cast out a demon!" He also confided later to Barlow that "his people" had "wonderful light, but oh so little faith."[58]

More significantly, during his trip, Nee went alone to the Christian Fellowship Center, an independent evangelical church that was being led by Theodore Austin-Sparks, a former Baptist minister and a fellow student of Penn-Lewis's teachings. Nee had subscribed to Austin-Sparks's periodical, *A Witness and a Testimony*, and had found his teachings deeply congenial. Like Nee, Austin-Sparks had pushed Penn-Lewis's emphasis on the individual Christian's inner, spiritual life toward a more corporate dimension. Also like Nee, Austin-Sparks accepted many of the Brethren criticisms of the church, but he did so with more of an ecumenical emphasis on the positive aspects of the church. In a 1933 issue of *A Witness and a Testimony* Austin-Sparks wrote that he had seen that "denominationalism, sectarianism, and all divisions which are of earth" contradicted "the truth of the universality of Christ, and the heavenly nature and vocation of 'the Church, which is His Body." Thus, he felt that "the Lord was leading us out from such and calling us into the spiritual, universal, heavenly ministry of His Son in relation to the *whole* Body as here on the earth."[59]

It was probably fitting then, that Nee's amiable decision to take communion at the Christian Fellowship Center ended up scandalizing his Brethren hosts and cutting him off from their fellowship. The Exclusive Brethren were zealous about maintaining a Christian principle that has become known as double separation. According to this principle, congregations must excommunicate not only apostate Christians, but also all those who had some kind of fellowship or communion with apostate groups, even if those persons were not themselves apostate. After hearing about Nee's decision to associate with the Christian Fellowship Center, the Brethren

[58] Kinnear, *Against the Tide*, 152.
[59] Austin-Sparks, T. "Editorial." *A Witness and a Testimony* (January-February 1933), 2.

leaders demanded an explanation. Nee demurred, writing back to one correspondent that he was still "waiting for light" and would like to consult with other leaders in the Shanghai congregation.

Over the next two years, Nee and the Shanghai elders and co-workers continued to correspond with leaders in the Brethren movement. It eventually became clear to both parties that there were fundamental differences between the two groups. Finally, in July 1935, Nee, Lee and several of the other Shanghai leaders sent a long letter to the Brethren. It suggested that only "moral corruption" or "obvious sins" and "heresy regarding the person of Christ" disqualified a person from receiving communion. Otherwise, "the decision as to who should be in the fellowship must be made by the Holy Spirit and not by us." It then accused the Brethren of using artificial, human means to interfere with the Spirit's direct guidance in these matters, the very grounds upon which Darby had rejected the clerical system.[60]

Unsurprisingly, the Brethren were incensed. They wrote back that they had "judged before the Lord that we must entirely repudiate, as not being of God, the principles you set out as governing fellowship, and that since you identify yourselves with these principles, we are unable to walk with you, or to receive from or commend to you. This, of course, applies also to all those maintaining links of fellowship with you."[61]

Lee later clarified that the Shanghai congregation's decision signified a determination to forge a new path that represented their special sense of commission, writing that "In our consideration, we realized that we could neither follow the way of the Brethren nor follow the

[60] CWWN 26, 424-6.
[61] Gordon Rainbow, "The China Episode, 1932-1935," www.mybrethren.org/history/hy29chin.htm.

way of Brother Austin-Sparks. The way of the Brethren was exclusive, and the way of Brother Austin-Sparks was without practicality."[62]

In fact, Nee's writings show a concerted attempt to create an actual, local church that could faithfully represent both the criticisms of the Brethren and the mystical spirituality of Penn-Lewis and Austin-Sparks. There was a tension between Nee's rather subtle designation of the biblical ground of the church and the ecumenical service of the overcomers that might be lost on many of his followers. Although direct evidence for the beliefs of these nameless followers does not exist, the existence of such beliefs can be seen in the way Nee had to repeatedly push back against more sectarian and simplistic interpretations of his writings.

For instance, in a letter to his co-workers that was written in 1935, Nee bemoaned the poor response to his "Overcomer Conference." Nee wrote that during the conference "we saw what God's center is and how Christ should be the Head over all things." Unfortunately, the gist of the message seemed to have been lost by his associates—the leaders in the very congregations that read his ministry and sent representatives to his conferences. Nee continued, "Unfortunately, in the past two years we have not seen more loyalty, faith, or love toward Christ… On the contrary, leaving the denominations, forms of meeting, baptism, and [women wearing] head covering [in worship] have become the center of our truth." Exasperated, Nee rhetorically asked, "Are these outward matters our only testimony?"[63]

At the end of his letter, Nee admitted to the difficulty of following the path that God had revealed during the Overcomer Conference. He suggested that "If we do not have faith and obedience, and do not know in our experience what overcoming, filling, self-denial, and warfare are, how can we testify concerning these matters for Christ? In that case, we will choose the easy

[62] Witness Lee, *History of the Church*, 102.
[63] CWWN 26, 432.

matters, such as leaving the denominations, as our testimony." This was especially true because the outward messages were so "very effective" in causing "Many people [to be] touched to obey the Lord and walk in the way because they know the error of the denominations."[64]

Some of Nee's co-workers may have skipped the difficult work of studying his subtle thought on overcomers, heavenly churches, local testimonies, and the spiritual life. As the True Jesus Church had found, it was much easier to point out that denominations were unbiblical and win their fellow Christians with a bold, critical message. Thus, Nee proposed something of a moratorium, concluding,

> Therefore, *I ask, brothers, let us please resolve to refuse to discuss questions about the denominations, etc., with anyone who has not completely consecrated himself to God and is not ready to walk in the way of the cross.* We can only speak of these outward matters with those who live in God's will. We must absolutely not make *The Assembly Life* [Nee's book on the organization of the church] a propaganda piece toward outsiders. We should not forget that our goal is not to build up our assemblies but to allow God to gain something. Do people today really need life, or fellowship (on the ground of the church)? Brothers, we must wake up.
>
> We should not despise the brothers who are already among us, nor should we deal with them strictly. We must remember that our own spiritual condition is not very good. How can we place heavy requirements on them? We can only strive to pursue deeper experiences and serve them in love. Their future spiritual edification will depend on our pursuit of the Lord today.[65]

Of course, on the ground, it is impossible to know or parse how many of Nee's followers actually took up his calling of dealing with the hard matters, teaching people to "walk in the way of the cross" in "faith and obedience" and how many were simply happy to take up the banner of Nee's biblical practices and teachings to draw followers away from the denominations. The latter option was certainly more accessible. Nee seemed to recognize this fact when he concedes that "We should not despise the brothers who are already among us." As the central figure in a

[64] CWWN 26, 435-6.
[65] CWWN 26, 437; NTSWJ 26, 204, emphasis in the original.

growing circle, he had to maintain a careful balance. His response to the Brethren's sectarianism meant that he could not push people away or expel them for a lack of spirituality. At the same time, he had to watch for the possibility of sectarianism among his own followers.

Christ as Everything: Watchman Nee's Self-Definition

Nee attempted to thread this needle by formulating a definition of himself and his followers that was both ecumenical and demanding. During the Overcomer Conference of January 1934, Nee gave a message that was aptly titled, "What are We?" In it, Nee averred that he and his followers "are not some thing. We are not a new denomination. Neither are we a new sect, a new movement, or a new organization. We are not here to join a certain sect or form our own sect." Thus far, he could have been articulating a standard Brethren self-description of their own group, mostly defined by negative statements. Nee continued, however, by arguing that he and others like him had "a special calling and commission from God."[66]

Nee went on to emphasize a strange and particular phrase from 2 Peter 1:12, the "present truth," which Nee thought could "also be rendered the 'up-to-date truth.'" In keeping with his deep regard for biblical wisdom as unlimited and all-encompassing, Nee explains that "Actually, all the truths are in the Bible." The problem was simply that "through human foolishness, unfaithfulness, negligence, and disobedience, many of the truths were lost and hidden from man." Through different ages, God slowly "caused people to discover these specific truths" that were already part of the Bible. Progressively then, throughout many generations, God had lifted the veil of ignorance. All proper Christian theology could be explained as human beings

[66] CWWN 11, 843.

unearthing God's original intent in the Bible. The "present truth" was God's timeless biblical message brought out for a particular moment in time.[67]

Nee then presented a particular historiography that crossed the ages of Christian history, picking out certain figures and groups and the "present truths" that they had recovered and represented. Reflecting his 19th century Anglo-American evangelical sources, Nee admitted that even though there were recoveries before the sixteenth century, the most significant had begun with the Protestant Reformation. Thus, in rather rapid succession Nee covered Luther, the Anabaptists, the Pietists, the Moravian Brethren, Roman Catholic Quietists, Methodism, the Brethren, the Holiness and Keswick teachers, Penn-Lewis, the Welsh Revival, and the Azusa Street Revival.

Obviously, there was no direct, visible, or institutional link between these very heterogeneous groups. Instead, they represented the invisible work of the Spirit, a history of the unbroken chain of overcomers that God had produced in the church age. For Nee, these truths culminated in a recent revelation. Nee wrote that "it was not until 1934 that we realized that the centrality of everything related to God is Christ. Christ is God's centrality and God's universality. All of God's plan is related to Christ."[68]

If Nee had wanted to distinguish his "special calling and commission," he could have chosen any one of a number of his distinctive ideas. Instead, he focused on one of his most recent "discoveries," which was also a claim that was so common as to be almost unobjectionable to any Christian, that is, the supremacy of Christ. Jesus-centered devotion cut across many of the enormous divisions that marked contemporary Christianities: liberal and conservative, elite and popular, Chinese and Western. Even Buddhist scholars like Zhang Chunyi (1871-1955) praised

[67] CWWN 11, 843-4.
[68] CWWN 11, 857.

Jesus, claiming that "Christ is originally a bodhisattva" who "taught people to eliminate the three poisons—craving, ill will, and delusion—with all their soul and strength."[69]

Nee had a particular understanding of Christo-centrism, however, that really did differentiate his ideas from those of the general Christian and non-Christian milieu. Nee began the Third Overcomer Conference with a set of seven messages on "God's Center or the Centrality and Universality of Christ."[70] In those messages, he argues that "God's truths are all systematic and interrelated. There is a center to God's truths, and everything else is auxiliary." Therefore, Nee suggests that many different teachings, including some that could be ascribed to him, are only of secondary importance. Among these peripheral teachings were "baptism, speaking in tongues, forsaking the denominations, holiness, the keeping of the Sabbath." Nee suggests that these different doctrines and practices are generally based around people's "own inclinations and the need around them." But God himself has a need and a central work.[71]

For Nee, God's need and center was nothing but Christ. In message after message, Nee spelled out the primacy of Christ, beginning with eternity before time and before the foundation of the world. In God's plan, in creation, in eternity, in redemption, in the Christian life and experience, in the Christian work and in messages, Christ was always first. Although Nee suggests that at least for himself, and for the Christians around him, these claims were a recent and fresh revelation, much of his discussion returned to well-furrowed ground. Many of Nee's claims, such as being chosen in Christ before the world began, touched on Christian commonplaces, both in terms of orthodox doctrine and Jesus-centered piety. His last points

[69] Lan Pan-chiu and So Yuen-tai's "Mahayana Interpretation of Christianity: A Case Study of Zhang Chunyi (1871-1955)" *Buddhist-Christian Studies* 27 (2007), 78. Zhang was publishing his works in Shanghai at almost exactly the same time at Nee, his *Zhongguo Jidujiao* (Chinese Christianity) was reprinted in Shanghai in 1927. Lan and So, "Mahayana Interpretation," 85.
[70] CWWN 11, 731; NTSWJ 11, 87.
[71] CWWN 11, 731.

however, on the importance of Christ for redemption, Christian life and experience, and Christian work and messages, show progressively more distinctive developments.

In terms of redemption, Nee returned to his appropriation of the Keswick message, which both appealed to and indicted evangelical audiences by accepting the common Western atonement theology of redemption while still pointing out that salvation should include much more. Thus Nee repeated classic sentiments, writing that Christ's death "reconciled all things to God" and affirming the fact that "Christ's redemption has dealt with humanity's sins."

Nee went on to say, however, that this was only one half of Christ's redemptive work. Besides atonement, "Christ's redemption gives human beings His life." For this, Nee turned to John 12:24, in which Jesus identifies with a grain of wheat which "falls into the ground and dies" so that it may "bear much fruit." To Nee, this simple metaphor showed that Christ's redemptive work also included life. "The life of this grain of wheat is confined to its shell." When Christ died, the shell of his "flesh was broken" and "the life within was released." Similarly, Nee pointed to Luke 12:49, in which Jesus speaks of casting fire on the earth. For Nee, the fire again "refers to Christ's life." Thus, "Christ's death is a great release of His life!"[72]

By adding an emphasis on life to the traditional belief of redemption as being Christ's atonement for sins, Nee implied that redemption included the impartation of the divine life. Such a claim led naturally to Nee's teachings on the preeminence of Christ in Christian life and experience. Here, he pushed back against some potential readings of the Keswick message, and even some of his own earlier work. Nee argued that "holiness and victory" were widely misunderstood, outlining five misconceptions regarding these two terms. For Nee, holiness and victory did not mean deliverance from "sins and dealing with the temper," nor cultivating the

[72] CWWN 11, 740-2.

virtues of "being patient, humble, and meek." Holiness and victory did not even mean "putting the self and the flesh to death," or developing Christian practices such as "studying the Bible more, praying more, being careful, and trusting in the Lord for one's strength." In fact, Nee rejected even those who claimed to know that "power is with the Lord, that our flesh has been crucified on the cross, and that by faith, we should claim the Lord's power to overcome and be holy," claims that he himself had propounded just a few years earlier in *The Spiritual Human*.[73]

Nee insisted on discarding all of these options because his sharpening of Penn-Lewis's mysticism had caused him to reach an exuberant conclusion. Even Christians who shared in Christ's work to access Christ's power for victory did not fully grasp the implications of their union with God. Nee writes, "Christ is our life. This is victory! This is holiness! The victorious life, the holy life, the perfect life, are all Christ. From beginning to end, everything is Christ. Outside of Christ we have nothing." Any claim to virtue, power, or victory that did not begin and end with Christ was illegitimate.

In Nee's understanding, the believer's union with Christ was so complete that the human subject was put into a deeply passive position. Thus, it was incorrect to claim that "I draw power from Christ to help me be a human being." Instead, a Christian should say that "It is Christ who is the human being in my place." Such a conclusion calls to mind the lesson of patience that Nee had so recently taught to Witness Lee. In this case, it is telling that Nee does not use the usual Chinese word for "Christian" (*Jidutu*, 基督徒), which could be translated as a follower, or disciple of Christ. Instead, he prefers *Jiduren* (基督人), which can be translated "Christ-person" or "Christ-human," perhaps because the term indicates a blending of the two parties.[74]

[73] CWWN 11, 743-4.
[74] CWWN 11, 744; NTSWJ 11, 105.

Again, the reason Nee could claim that the Christian had such a deep identity with Christ had to do with his anthropology. As the Christian rejected her soul and chose to live by her spirit, she rejected everything that was independent or separate from Christ, and chose to live by the part that was entirely united with Christ. Thus, the flip side of Nee's transcendent, mystic passivity was the demanding road of the cross. Nee puts the two sides directly in juxtaposition.

> Victory is Christ! Patience is Christ! What we need is not patience, meekness, or love, but Christ. Christ must have the first place in all things. From within us, Christ lives out patience, meekness, and love. A man deserves only to die. There is nothing else that he deserves. After God created Adam, He had a will, and Adam had to obey this will. But when God re-created us, it was not like this. He put us in death, and God Himself lives out His will from within us. We should not only see a substitutionary Savior on Mount Golgotha, we should also see a Lord within us who lives in our stead.[75]

When Nee argued for Christ having the first place in all things, he was not simply returning to clichéd tropes about devotion to Jesus. He was arguing for a human experience in which Christ initiated and encompassed everything. The human role was to embrace death and total self-abnegation. "We must know the self thoroughly," Nee writes, accepting that "the self deserves only to die," and embracing the fact that "the self must come to an end." In this way, Christ really gains the first place, because everything is initiated by Christ from the human spirit, and the human soul is an entirely passive receptacle that has surrendered its volition and identity to allow Christ to work. Nee's preferred translation of Christ's prominence is *jü shouwei* (居首位), to occupy, or reside in the first place. In real Christian thought and action, Christ was always the first mover through the point of union in the human spirit.

For Nee, the final implication of Christ's centrality was that Christian work and messages must be entirely governed by this rule. In other words, he wanted all Christian ministry to be judged by the standard of his particular understanding of Christ. This included his own previous

[75] CWWN 11, 745.

and future work. Christ's superiority, he had now concluded, was the center to all of God's "systematic and interrelated" truths. It was possible to read *The Spiritual Human* and some of Nee's previous works as biblical expositions, pathways to holiness, and guidelines for Christian ministry.

In fact, many of Nee's works explicitly make such claims for themselves, highlighting the importance of prayer, submission, understanding a biblical passage, or some other doctrinal or practical teaching for the reader. The significance of "What are We" is that it is the only place in Nee's corpus where he directly defined himself, his followers, and his work at a higher level of metanarrative. To take him seriously here is to suggest that his claims for the importance of other aspects of his message were to be understood as referring back to the supremacy of Christ. Christ, as lived holiness, even as the Christian subject herself, must be the ultimate hermeneutic lens for both Nee's own work and all Christian work in general. Any other Christian message that could not be related to this center was, in the end, illegitimate.

Thus, Nee clarified that "Our central message should not be the dispensations, the prophecies, the types, the kingdom, baptism, forsaking denominations, speaking in tongues, keeping the Sabbath, or holiness, etc. Our central message should be Christ."[76] Given the popularity of Jesus, Nee had found a rhetorically powerful justification for his work.

In this, Nee was influenced by his 19th century evangelical predecessors. Stephen Prothero has argued that during the 19th century, evangelicals were implicitly and sometimes unconsciously involved in a major theological revision. The doctrinal emphases on scripture and faith that had been forged in the Protestant Reformation morphed into an intimate devotion to Jesus and an emphasis on a personal relationship with Christ. For many Anglo-American

[76] CWWN 11, 752.

Christians, *sola scriptura* and *sola fide* had become *solus Jesus*.[77] As popular as the figure of Jesus was, Nee could hardly go wrong in suggesting that the "present truth" he had been called to uphold was to bring more people into a purer exaltation of Christ.

At the same time, when Nee listed the teachings that should not be confused with the "central message," he did not include the authority and inerrancy of the Bible nor the distinction between soul and spirit. Even though Nee was willing to concede that many Christians were deeply committed to Jesus without agreeing on the specific interpretations of prophecies or the value of speaking in tongues, the Christ of the "present truth" was not so malleable that he could be understood as a bodhisattva or a merely human moral example as Chinese Buddhists or liberal Protestants were eagerly claiming.

Instead, Nee depicted a Christ who was grounded in a thorough, authoritative Biblicism, and one whose end goal was a corporate mysticism, displayed in the church. Even as Nee argued that "our work today is not just to save some souls or to help others become spiritual," he exhorted his audience, "May we be watchful, and may we not allow the flesh to come in or the self to gain any ground. May God's will be accomplished in us."[78] Nee's Christ specifically referred to the interior Christ who was implacably opposed to the fallen ego, and the proof of victory over the ego was a glorious church in which all in which all the members victoriously displayed Christ's selflessness.

In many ways, this intangible church was simply another iteration of the classic evangelical theme of the invisible church. Nee simply pushed the conclusions of the evangelical emphasis on conversion in the direction that had been set by the holiness movement. Whereas

[77] Stephen Prothero, *American Jesus: How the Son of God Became a National Icon* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2003), 43-86.
[78] CWWN 11, 858-9.

evangelicals saw the invisible church of the converted, Nee argued that God wanted a slightly more visible church of the converted *and* sanctified.

Nee's desire to maintain a visible unity also pushed against his willingness to retreat to more established notions of the invisible church. Thus in concluding "What are We?" he suggested that "concerning the church, we have to hold fast what we see today." And he also argued that the testimony of the preeminence of Christ "can be found in America, England, France, Spain, Africa, and everywhere. However, the number is not great. Outwardly speaking, their condition is also very poor. We should pray for these places."[79]

Nee's willingness to point to specific countries and judge their spiritual condition suggested that the testimony he had in mind had a certain visibility. And if Nee felt it unbecoming to openly boast about what was happening around him, especially given his ongoing dispute with the Brethren, his quote seemed to quite pointedly suggest that the Chinese had a central role in bolstering the numbers and condition of those who would uphold this Christo-centric witness. Nee exhorted his audience to pray for the Christians around the world. He thus re-imagined his audience as the active center of God's work in the world, not as the marginalized occupants of a mission field. The vibrancy and power of Nee's revelations and the growing strength of those gathered around him seemed to suggest a radical re-centering of God's work, as did Nee's genealogy which ran through Europe and North America only to conclude in China.

Buried in the web of assumptions that bolstered Nee's claims was a kind of patriotism that put China at the center of world affairs. Unlike many of his contemporaries, however, Nee was not arguing for Chinese military or political resurgence. China's importance was in the partially visible history of God's work. At least some Chinese Christians had inherited the

[79] CWWN 11, 859.

mantle of the "present truth" and were now commissioned to "sound out the call to God's children to return to God's central purpose."[80] Their relatively small numbers were only to be expected. Although they were dwarfed by both the global church and by the overwhelmingly non-Christian Chinese populace, this only mad them similar to all of the other groups that Nee had designated as his spiritual lineage. Once again, God's testimony would be carried by a determined minority of reformers.

In the end, one of the most interesting tensions in Nee's thought was the question of the relationship between these visible groups of reformers and the overcomers. Nee's desire to admit all who were not openly sinful or heretical meant that he refused to form a special fellowship composed only of overcomers. The Little Flock churches would be open to all, including weaker Christians who were obviously struggling in their Christian lives. At the same time, Nee's prophetic interpretation of the seven churches in Revelation indicated that overcomers were to be found in every kind of Christian group, even ostensibly apostate ones like the Roman Catholic Church and denominational Protestantism. In terms of the individual Christian's reward and punishment, overcoming was all that mattered. In terms of God's interests, however, someone still had to maintain a visible testimony of the one, pure church. This was the basis of Nee's disagreement with Austin-Sparks, whose view of the church "was without practicality."

For his part, Nee could be exceedingly practical in thinking about the visible organization of the church. Many of his works during this period dealt with the finer points of defining church offices, the kinds of meetings a local church should have, their proper arrangements and other quotidian details of actual congregational life. It could be hard to see how his teachings on the best bible study meetings were related to the supremacy of Christ. Nevertheless, in the very

[80] CWWN 11, 858.

message in which he insisted on Christ's preeminence, Nee also averred that "Our work today is to return to the biblical ground of the church," adding that "All of God's truth has the church as the starting point."[81]

One of the ways Nee tried to square this circle was to hide in the mysterious relationship between Christ and the church. Any interest in the church could also be understood as an interest in Christ. As Nee explained, "The Lord Jesus and the church are *Christ* (1 Cor. 12:12). When the individual Christ is joined with His church, they together become the *corporate* Christ." As his followers met in homes and the nondescript "assembly halls" they favored, their meetings became a "testimony to manifest Christ and express His life, His victory, and His glory."[82]

Even if the local churches included many average, subnormal Christians, Nee still believed that in some way, the churches reflected the high standards he had crafted from Keswick and Brethren teachings. For him, Christ's victory could only be shown by Christians who were utterly selfless, and this selflessness could only be proven by living in unity and purity in actual local churches in every city. Thus, he could argue for both Christ's supremacy and the "biblical ground of the church" as the "starting point" of all truth.

In the end, Nee was left with an uncertain answer to the question he posed at the outset—"What are we?" Of course, since he refused to call himself, his co-workers, and his followers either a denomination, sect, movement, organization, or even a thing, this difficulty with self-definition is perhaps not surprising. Nee's strongest rhetorical points were on the supremacy of Christ, but this was something he held in common with many other ministers and Christian groups. Much of the distinction remained in the subtext, the arguments about the Bible, the self, the human spirit, and the nature of the church that Nee had already explained to his audience.

[81] CWWN 11, 858.
[82] CWWN 26, 420.

Although he preferred to march under the ecumenical banner of Christ, what made Nee and his audience distinct was the fact that this Christ was defined in opposition to the self, and was ideally to be testified by overcomers who met on the proper ground of the church. If none of these elements was totally original in themselves, together, they were a novel combination.

Joy and Sorrow

Around the time of Third Overcomer Conference early in 1934, a familiar figure reappeared in Nee's life. Charity Chang, his childhood friend and first love, had finished her master's degree in Biology at the prestigious Yenching University and had come to Shanghai. Although she had previously shown no interest in Christianity, she now started coming to the meetings at Wendeli and was soon baptized. Charity's sister, Faith, acted as something of a go-between, confiding in Nee that if he proposed, her sister would accept. The two were engaged and then married on October 19, 1934, the anniversary of his own parents' marriage.[83]

Unfortunately, the new couple did not have much time to enjoy wedded bliss. Charity's aunt was infuriated by the union of her beautiful, well-educated niece to a poor preacher. A wealthy woman, she placed angry advertisements in a newspaper every day for a week. Some denominational Christians who were offended by Nee's critiques of their churches fanned the flames and circulated handbills to the Christian community to complement the newspaper advertisements. Together, they denounced Nee in vitriolic terms, accusing him of financial impropriety and hinting darkly at previous episodes of sexual immorality. Nee's biographer recalls that a missionary who received one of these papers thought it "so vile" that "I felt I needed a bath."[84]

[83] Kinnear, *Against the Tide*, 164-6.
[84] Kinnear, *Against the Tide*, 166; Chen, *Meet Brother Nee*, 44-45; Lee, *Seer of the Divine Revelation*, 176-7, 308.

The firestorm depressed Nee, while his confidants tried their best to comfort and encourage him. His new sister-in-law, Faith, asked rhetorically, "Does it matter what they say? You have won a wife after your own heart!"[85] Witness Lee, who had been Nee's best man, and another co-worker, Philip Luan, who had acted as the master of ceremonies at the wedding, did their best to quell the rumors with their own eyewitness testimonies. Nee himself, however, made no public response. Once again, he showed his commitment to the painful lesson Margaret Barber had taught him, that suffering in silence was the path of the cross.

In the meantime, the Christian Assemblies continued to spread throughout China. Nee's work, *The Assembly Life*, which he feared that his co-workers were using as a "propaganda piece," was published in September of 1934. In it, Nee laid out a blueprint for a kind of church practice that was faithful to New Testament. Nee admitted that in the present day, there were no apostles in the sense of the primitive apostles with their "holiness, power, victory, and work." Still, one could not deny that there was a group of people who was "doing the work of the apostles, such as preaching the gospel and establishing the churches." These unofficial apostles could appoint unofficial elders, allowing for authority and structure both locally and extra-locally.[86]

Neither the "apostles" nor the "elders" were official clergy. There was no educational requirement or formal process of ordination. Many apostles and elders even retained secular jobs to support themselves. As Nee pointed out, "In the Bible, there is no such thing as a worker giving up his salary and becoming a special supported class. Although Peter gave up his fishing, Paul remained a tentmaker."[87] Still, when finances allowed, the assemblies often opted to support

[85] Kinnear, *Against the Tide*, 166-7.
[86] CWWN 22, 22.
[87] CWWN 22, 35.

their gifted members. Throughout the 1930s, the number of churches, apostles, and elders grew. The flexible, unofficial nature of these arrangements made the Christian Assemblies adaptable and able to replicate themselves quickly.

By the close of the decade in 1937, when peace was shattered by the outbreak of the Sino-Japanese War between China and Japan, there were deeply-rooted congregations affiliated with Nee and his teachings throughout China. In some ways, the war years provided a special opportunity for the kinds of quick-reacting institutions that were able to respond. Both in absolute terms and relative to other Christian groups who lost vital links with their Western and missionary supporters, the congregations built around Nee's teachings gained much ground in these critical years.

To some extent, the differences in how the various Chinese Christian groups fared also came down to self-selection in the personalities of the groups' adherents. Nee once pointed out that the Western and missionary churches often gained their first converts from among their own servants and translators: that is, from people who reaped material benefits from their associations with foreigners.[88] In an age of fierce nationalism, those who were more likely to be leaders, or show independence of thought and action, were also more likely to leave the established churches, and to be attracted to novel messages like Nee's. During the turmoil of the war years, their initiative and courage would pay important dividends.

Late in 1937, while the bloody battle of Shanghai raged, Nee himself was in Southeast Asia, preparing for a second trip to Europe. After repeated delays, he concluded that God wanted him to "return to take care of some work before proceeding to England."[89] Nee decided to begin a new publication, *The Open Door*. The amorphous "we" at the heart of his earlier question,

[88] Kinnear, *Against the Tide*, 178-9.
[89] CWWN 31, 2.

"What are we?" now had "travelling workers (apostles)," to keep track of, as well as "The addresses of the meeting halls of the local churches, so that refugee brethren may find a place to go to meetings."[90]

The Open Door would obviously cement the sense of group identity among Nee's followers, and allow for some level of organization during the chaos of the war years. At the same time, it might seem to be an official, institutional newsletter, betraying Nee's refusal to start another sect or institution.

Thus, Nee himself admitted in the pages of *The Open Door* that he had wanted to begin such a publication "much earlier" but he had "hoped that others would be raised up by the Lord to bear its responsibility." Since no one had done so, Nee was forced to take action, even while he tried to downplay the apparent institutionalization of his followers, writing, "If this [project of *The Open Door*] had been undertaken by someone else, it would have been merely personal and done by someone who was gifted to do it. But if I were to do it, it would become official and would be based on my position. Therefore, in order to avoid this, I dared not move for years."[91]

Even now, in 1937, with circumstances forcing his hand, he insisted that the letter did not signify the formation of a new denomination or congregation. He urged his readers to "please keep in mind always, brothers, that this is a personal ministry and not the instrument of any organization."[92]

Although it was published only until 1939, *The Open Door* evidences the spread and strength of Nee's following even during the turmoil of the war. At the beginning of the first issue, Nee suggested that an appropriate verse for the situation was Acts 8:4, "Those therefore

[90] NTSWJ 31, 2.
[91] CWWN 31, 1.
[92] CWWN 31, 1.

who were scattered went throughout the land announcing the word as the gospel." Nee suggested that God had allowed the apostolic church to experience persecution to help it fulfill its commission to preach "in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria and unto the uttermost part of the earth." The early disciples were thus "spreading the word" even while they were "running for refuge."[93]

Similarly, the war in China was dislodging much of the Chinese population from the coast, where fighting was heaviest. Nee urged, "Now is the time for the apostles to spend more time to labor in the inland regions." He also urged the elders to encourage their congregations. The burden fell to average believers to spread the message with greater fervor instead of shrinking back in the face of war and chaos—"While it is true that the apostles should move out, it is also true that the disciples should move out."[94]

Always aware of the danger that his message would become oversimplified and twisted, Nee reminded his readers that "We are not here to exhort others to leave the denominations. Those who pay attention only to the matter of denominationalism are not our brothers; they are not our co-workers and are not qualified to be our co-workers." Nevertheless, Nee affirmed that the central work of "the preaching the gospel and the establishing of local churches" would prevail even in these times of trial, writing that "I personally believe that God will use this war to expand and increase the sphere of His work. May our prayer be correspondingly deeper!"[95] As the war progressed, eventually stretching out over eight long years, Nee's beliefs, work, and prayers would be put fully to the test.

[93] CWWN 31, 3.
[94] CWWN 31, 3-4.
[95] CWWN, 31, 4.

Conclusion

Nee managed to endure the early years of the war without suffering too much direct harm. One of his companions from the Fuzhou revival, Simon Meek, had established a successful work in the Philippines, and at the outbreak of hostilities with Japan, Nee had been visiting Manila at Meek's invitation.[1] By this time, any ill feelings had long been forgotten, and Meek considered himself to be, once again, one of Nee's co-workers.[2] The congregations Meek led may have formed Nee's main base of support in the Philippines.

Nee had intended to travel to Europe from Southeast Asia, but now, as the war intensified, he decided to return home first instead. He immediately went to find Charity in Shanghai, which, at the time, was the site of the most brutal fighting in the war. When he arrived, probably around late August of 1937, the National Revolutionary Army and the Imperial Japanese Army were involved in bloody, house-to-house combat through the streets of the city. The Nee's home was in the evacuated area and had been looted, but Charity was safe with other sisters in the meeting hall at Wendeli, which was protected by virtue of its location in the International Settlement.[3]

Assured of her safety, Nee continued on to Hankou, where he called together as many co-workers as could come. He urged them to consider the war as an opportunity to spread the gospel and establish churches in other provinces where there had been no local testimony previously. Recognizing that many among their number had already lost their jobs and homes, Nee also

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[1] Kinnear, *Against the Tide*, 181.
[2] CWWN 31, 5. One of Meek's early letters in February 1938 indicated that the churches were spreading rapidly throughout the Philippines as well. In October, one of Meek's preaching tours resulted in thirty-nine new local churches being established in ten different provinces. Meek's letter also indicated that businessmen (probably diasporic Chinese) were a major factor of support, both for spiritual leadership and, presumably finances. CWWN 31, 57.
[3] Kinnear, *Against the Tide*, 181-2.

established a fund for the needy to be administered through a co-worker in Hong Kong and another in Hankou, where he opened a branch office of his publishing house. While the future of Shanghai was uncertain, Hankou was centrally located.[4] Ruth Li also remained in Hankou, where she would oversee the production of future issues of *The Open Door*, the free publication that would help to coordinate the various churches' and co-workers' movements. By *The Open Door*'s third issue, printed in January 1938, demand had compelled Li to increase circulation from one to six thousand.[5] Finally, Nee left Charity, who was pregnant, in Hong Kong with his parents, where she would be safe from the ravages of war.

With things in China arranged in order as well as he could manage, Nee set out once again on his planned European trip. Nee's first visit to Europe had been largely initiated by his contacts with the Plymouth Brethren. Most of his time had been spent in their company, with the notable exception of his short visit to Austin-Sparks's congregation, known as the Christian Fellowship Center. Disillusioned with Brethrenism, he organized this trip around his contacts with Keswick teachers and inner life mystics. His first destination was the Christian Fellowship Center, which became his temporary base of operations. Together, he and Austin-Sparks attended that year's Keswick Convention, in which Nee offered a memorable prayer while sharing the stage with a Japanese Christian:

> The Lord reigneth. He is reigning, and He is Lord of all. Nothing can touch his authority. It is the spiritual forces that are out to destroy the interests of the Lord in China and Japan. We do not pray for Japan. We do not pray for China. But we pray for the interests of Thy Son in China and Japan. We do not blame any man. They are only tools in the hand of the enemy of the Lord. Lord, we stand in Thy will. Lord, shatter the kingdom of darkness. Lord, the persecution of Thy Church is persecuting Thee. Amen.[6]

[4] CWWN 32, 395.
[5] CWWN 31, 56.
[6] *The Keswick Convention*, 1938, 246.

After years of Keswick Conventions and other conferences, the European inner life Christians had a well-established network of correspondence and travel. If the Brethren were exclusive and suspicious of outsiders, these Protestant devotional teachers were welcoming and friendly. Nee travelled widely, visiting France, Germany, Norway, and Switzerland. In October, he came to Denmark, giving two messages in English that became the basis for the books *The Normal Christian Life* and *Sit, Walk, Stand*. It is possible that these manuscripts were rapidly translated and circulated among the inner-life circles that were already accustomed to sharing helpful literature. Certainly, within a few decades, there were formal printings in Danish, English, French, German, and Norwegian.

While he was in Europe, Nee received a letter from Charity, sharing the sad news of a miscarriage. Though they did not know it, they were never to have any children. Though Nee may have wanted to return home, the Shanghai co-workers charged him to remain longer in Europe to have a full discussion with Austin-Sparks on the problem which was a continual source of difficulty—the "practical outworking of the Body of Christ." In other words, how was their common emphasis on "the mystical 'Body' of Christ" to be worked out in practice?

Instead of returning at the beginning of the new year as he had planned, Nee stayed in England until May of 1938, translating his own writings into English to foster a deeper conversation on ecclesiology. After months of fellowship, however, Austin-Sparks could give no satisfying answer. Nee's understanding of the principle of local churches—one church in each city—was already far more concrete than anything the British mystic cared to set down. When Nee returned to China, he would continue forging his own path.[7]

[7] Kinnear, *Against the Tide*, 187-193.

Upon his return, Nee continued to train and raise his Shanghai congregation, which overflowed its meeting hall, even though other adjacent lots had been purchased and integrated into the complex. When a few members were moved to pray that Japanese inroads into the International Settlement would be limited, he gave his congregation a lesson in history, showing how God had used secular governments since ancient times to establish his purpose. He thus chided them that Christians of every nationality must be able to stand in one accord and agree to any prayer that was uttered, warning them that "In China[,] Christians and missionaries have too much intimacy with the State. In the last European war there was much prayer that dishonored God."[8] True prayer, in Nee's eyes, was of an entirely apolitical nature.

From 1939 to 1941, the church in Shanghai enjoyed something of a golden age. Safely located in the "Solitary Island" (*Gudao*) of internationally administered Shanghai, the church's physical premises and many of its members were protected from the worst ravages of war. As the war continued, however, Shanghai and the Solitary Island developed a complex social ecosystem with the simultaneous rise of printed periodicals, economic uncertainty, and lavish hedonism.[9] In this contradictory environment, the church's confident message found easy publication and eager audiences, who were longing for direction and answers to the evident problems that surrounded them. The combination of Nee's growing prominence and his continued insistence on the basic invalidity of every Christian denomination made him a growing target. Perhaps envious of his continued success, a number of foreign missionaries and Chinese Christians published critiques of his theology and even accusations that he was being supported by foreign funds.[10]

[8] Kinnear, *Against the Tide*, 197.
[9] Poshek Fu, *Passivity, Resistance, and Collaboration: Intellectual Choices in Occupied shanghai, 1937-1945* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1993), 30-48.
[10] Kinnear, *Against the Tide*, 199-205.

When the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor in 1941, the Japanese army also took control of the International Settlement, and the Shanghai congregation's brief respite from war was ended. It soon became all too clear that Nee's sources of income were mostly indigenous. The Japanese occupation of the Chinese coast and the subsequent disruption to trade meant that many of the businesses of Nee's supporters began to falter. At this point there were over two-hundred full-time workers, most of whom were supported by local congregations. About forty of them, however, were Nee's direct financial responsibility, since they travelled and assumed the work of apostles, without fixed ties to any specific local church. As inflation skyrocketed and financial constraints increased, many of Nee's young co-workers were pushed into desperate situations. Extreme privation, war, and fatal illnesses destroyed their ranks.

Six years later, when Nee addressed a group of "those engaged in business," he pointed out the need to support the "over twenty widows of former co-workers among us." In 1947, he was still haunted by the fact that he had "asked some co-workers to leave their jobs, and not long after that, they died. It was as if I had sent them to their graves." He continued, "Among our co-workers who have died, other than one who died of cholera, the one who was killed by the Communists, and the two others who died of other diseases, the rest died of tuberculosis."[11] During the war years, then, Nee was faced with horrible succession of his young co-workers' deaths.

Early in 1942, an opportunity presented itself, and Nee must have felt that it was God's way to escape or at least ameliorate his devastating dilemma. One of Nee's younger brothers, George, had earned a degree in chemistry and was a gifted researcher. George had opened a business and a factory, manufacturing and selling pharmaceuticals. Watchman recognized that,

[11] CWWN 57, 300.

during the war years, pharmaceuticals would be steady source of income, since they were considered necessary goods for the war effort. George was having trouble managing the administrative and financial elements of his company, and Watchman decided to work with him, devoting a certain number of hours each week to business and the rest to God, with the profits earned to be given directly to meet the churches' and co-workers' needs.

A number of the Shanghai elders, however, perhaps led by Ruth Li, disapproved of Nee's decision for reasons that are not entirely clear. Of course, Nee himself had spoken eloquently in the past about the need to live by faith and had also denounced the evil of commerce. Furthermore, as is often the case, problems arose in the administration of Nee's new business and it required more and more of his time and attention. For a spiritual man to suddenly hold business lunches in restaurants with wealthy partners may have seemed an egregious case of backsliding in a war-torn country when many co-workers were braving extreme physical dangers to spread the testimony to rural villages.

In August 1938, while Nee was comfortably enjoying fellowship with the English congregation at the Christian Fellowship Center, Li had left Hankou to preach the gospel in rural Guizhou. Signing one of her letters from "a mountain village in Wan County," she comforted her readers, "The Lord does not forget us, who are always weak and cold; let us not forget those who are also weak and cold."[12] Although she probably meant to refer to her spiritual condition, it is likely that her physical circumstances were similarly straitened.

Two issues later, in November 1938, Li reminded readers of Nee's original charge at the founding of *The Open Door*—that "the apostles should spend more time to labor in the inland regions." Li, who may have been born and raised in the city of Nanjing, does not seem to have

[12] CWWN 32, 414.

ever visited truly rural places before. She had recently learned through firsthand experience that even though the province itself might not border the sea, it might still have large and rich municipalities and counties, which were basically indistinguishable from those of littoral China. Li encouraged the co-workers to go to the truly "desolate regions" where she had seen desperate people, including coolies who broke their bodies carrying heavy loads to make just enough to ward off starvation. With "sighing tears and hopeful sincerity" she urged the co-workers to take up the burden to reach the distressed and forgotten with the gospel.[13]

It is possible to see how Li may have become scandalized by Nee's sudden decision to engage in business. Tragically, both parties were probably moved by the same phenomenon, but simply had opposite reactions. Whereas Nee wanted to assuage the suffering of his co-workers, Li would have preferred to see him continue the path of a preacher living by faith, and perhaps taste their privations himself. In any case, the upshot of their disagreement was that at the end of 1942, the elders of the church in Shanghai asked Nee to stop preaching at Wendeli entirely. At least one of the elders, an ophthalmologist by the name of Yu Zhenghua, may not have entirely agreed with the decision, since he also retired from preaching after the decision was made. Those responsible made no public announcement or explanation of their actions, and of course Nee also refused to defend or explain himself. Thus, many in the congregation were shocked and perplexed and rumors swirled. For two years, none of the elders even approached Nee for a conversation.[14]

Nee appears to have thrown himself into his business, securing important contracts with the government, and, apparently, avoiding selling his products to the Japanese.[15] For over two

[13] CWWN 32, 449-451.
[14] Kinnear, *Against the Tide*, 213-4.
[15] Kinnear, *Against the Tide*, 217.

years, he shuttled between Shanghai and Chongqing, the Nationalist Government's wartime capitol, occasionally preaching while he was at Chongqing. In the meantime, the Shanghai congregation floundered. It missed his leadership and even had to disband when the Japanese founded a "Religious Union" to exercise greater control over religious life in Shanghai. In order to avoid joining that body, the Shanghai members of the Little Flock ceased using their assembly hall until the end of the war and met only in the believers' homes when they met at all.

As the war came to an end in 1945, things began to change once more. Nee slowly divested himself of his business interests, and arranged for accumulated funds to be set aside for the future provision of his co-workers. Still unwilling to advocate on his own behalf, he stayed away from the Shanghai congregation. Nee's father had passed in 1941, and now, as the oldest son, he was the head of the household. He returned to the family home in Fuzhou with Charity and began making plans to restore it. At the time, he considered turning the property into a training center for his co-workers.[16]

Events would soon conspire to bring Nee back to Shanghai, however, and back into the center of events among the Christian Assemblies. In June of 1946, after having gone six years without seeing one another, Ruth Li invited Witness Lee to join her in Nanjing. Afterward, Lee was invited to Shanghai as well. The churches may have heard of Lee's successes during the war years. Besides his itinerating work in Suiyuan, Sha'anxi, and Shanxi, Lee had helped his home congregation in Shandong to grow by leaps and bounds. The church in Yantai had swelled in numbers and was energetically sending out groups of congregants to establish churches throughout northern China, a startling contrast to the scattered and demoralized Shanghai

[16] Kinnear, *Against the Tide*, 219-220.

congregation.[17] Soon, the Nanjing and Shanghai congregations invited Lee move his family to the south and work among them on a more permanent basis.

When Lee arrived in the fall of 1946, he immediately went to look for Nee to ask his counsel. Nee still had not returned to public ministry, but he was happy to speak at length to Lee and Peace Wang, two co-workers who had supported him throughout all his troubles. Lee also challenged the elders who had excommunicated Nee, and they readily admitted that they regretted their decision.[18]

With Nee's blessing, Lee applied his methods learned in Yantai to Shanghai. This involved carefully organizing the members of the congregation into groups for practical and gospel services. As at Yantai, the combination of Lee's methods, bold personality, and fervent preaching produced dramatic results. The church in Shanghai began to see its numbers swell, even as Lee's repeated entreaties to Nee finally convinced the latter to speak in public again, beginning with a number of small talks in Fuzhou in September 1947.[19]

Nee had been virtually silent for more than five years, but he had obviously continued thinking deeply about his ministry and the Bible. A torrent of material would be produced in the coming years in multiple periodicals, addresses, and devoted "trainings." The church in Shanghai finally purchased a second, larger property to accommodate its growing congregation, while Nee also made arrangements to develop a training center in Fujian.

The mystical content of his message deepened, and its ascetic tone sharpened. At the same time, Nee also called for more practical cooperation, a total consecration akin to that in the early days of the book of Acts. In the emotional meetings and revivals that followed, many

[17] Lee, *A Seer of the Divine Revelation*, 315. Kinnear, *Against the Tide*, 229-231.
[18] Kinnear, *Against the Tide*, 227.
[19] Kinnear, *Against the Tide*, 220-224. Lee, *A Seer of the Divine Revelation*, 317.

handed over their personal property, businesses, and wealth to their local churches. In late 1948, as the Communist forces made significant advances across China, their sacrifices may have taken on new significance.

Nee himself began to study the writings of the Communist founders, Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels. Nee argued that Karl Marx borrowed the idea of "sharing all things in common" from the book of Acts and declared, "It would be a shame to Christians if one day the communists would turn around to teach Christians about sharing all things in common, selling everything, and distributing to everyone according to his need. A proper Christian does not accumulate riches for himself; rather, he forsakes everything to take the Christian confession as his primary profession."[20] In response, some in the Little Flock began to pool their resources to live communally.

It became increasingly clear that the Communists would triumph and circumstances on the ground changed rapidly. As the missionaries retreated, some of their congregations attached themselves to their local Christian Assembly, recognizing the need to find an indigenous church that had no foreign attachments.[21] Nee repeatedly charged Lee to leave the mainland, while he resolutely determined that he himself would stay, even though he was convinced that Communist rule would bring unprecedented difficulties. Lee recalls that when he too asked to stay on the mainland with the other co-workers, Nee responded "Brother, you must realize that although in this desperate situation we trust in the Lord, it is possible that the enemy will one day wipe us out. If this happens, you will be out of China, and we will still have something left. So you must go."[22]

[20] CWWN 61, 61.
[21] Kinnear, *Against the Tide*, 250. Letter from Theodore Austin-Sparks to George Henry Lang.
[22] Kinnear, *Against the Tide*, 240-1, Lee, *Seer of the Divine Revelation*, 320.

At first, the fears of many Christians seemed unfounded. The new government interfered very little in their affairs and the churches continued to grow. But in 1950, as the Korean War started, the government asked Christians to sign on to "The Christian Manifesto," which promised that "Christian churches and organizations give thoroughgoing support to the 'Common Political Platform,' and under the leadership of the government oppose imperialism, feudalism, and bureaucratic capitalism." The Communist Party also established the Three-Self Patriotic Movement, which would become the only legal Protestant body in China.[23] The "Three-Self" in its name referred to its being self-governing, self-supporting, and self-propagating," in other words, it was to be completely free from foreign influence.

Christians throughout China responded in different ways. Wang Mingdao, an influential preacher in Beijing quietly refused to join. Eventually, when pushed, he angrily denounced the new body, writing, "We will not unite in any way with these unbelievers, nor will we join any of their organizations." He rejected even "formal, organizational union" with other Christians, because there was no biblical teaching to support it, concluding that "Whatever teachings are not in the Bible we totally reject. For our loyalty to God we are ready to pay any cost that is required. We shall shrink from no sacrifice."[24]

In contrast, Nee took steps to signify that he and his followers would be model citizens of the new regime. He had already collected a number of signatures to petition the government to allow the Christian Assembly to retain one of its properties, which was in danger of nationalization. It is unclear how much Nee consulted the signatories, but in any case, he now submitted his list in support of the new Christian Manifesto. In total, this meant that the Little

[23] Joseph Tse-Hei Lee, "Watchman Nee and the Little Flock Movement in Maoist China," *Church History*, 84. Thomas Harvey, *Acquainted with Grief*, 164.
[24] Thomas Harvey, *Acquainted with Grief,* 68, 88.

Flock contributed 34,983 signatures out of the total 200,195, making the Little Flock one of the largest supporters of the manifesto in China. Whereas Wang's understanding of biblical authority tended to be unyielding and legalistic, Nee's more mystical and holistic temperament allowed for a significant degree of flexibility. Although he believed that the church should remove itself from political entanglements, he also believed that Christians should be ideal citizens who submitted to authority. Nee was determined to obey the new government as much as possible, even encouraging his followers to remain in China and engage in voluntary civil service.[25]

As the political winds shifted rapidly, Nee proved to be quite adept at making the best of the changing facts on the ground. In 1951, when foreign missionaries were forcibly expelled from China, the trickle of different groups seeking to join the Little Flock became a flood. Local congregations of the China Inland Mission, the Jesus Family, and various independent churches all integrated themselves into Little Flock communities. Under Nee's direction, some of them retained their own, distinctive forms of church governance and worship. As rural land reform was promoted, he quickly broke up large personal and church landholdings and distributed them among poorer members. A number of Little Flock members even held important positions in the lower levels of the government bureaucracy, in a kind of reverse infiltration.[26]

These little victories, however, were also counterproductive, at least for a period of time. The adaptability, cohesiveness, and fervor of Nee's followers made him even more of a target. In 1952, he was arrested as he travelled and accused of being a capitalist because of his involvement with his pharmaceutical business. He was held incommunicado in a series of different jails until 1956. Little is known about his life in this period.

[25] Lee, "Watchman Nee and the Little Flock," 84-5.
[26] Lee, "Watchman Nee and the Little Flock," 85-90.

If the party hoped that Nee's arrest would decapitate the movement, they were quickly proven wrong. As Nee's constant addresses to his co-workers throughout his ministry attested, he had trained many able followers and entrusted them to make decisions on their own. Throughout the early and mid-1950s, the Little Flock congregations continued to grow, absorbing large numbers from the newly undesirable classes of capitalists, businessmen, landowners, and former Nationalist officials. They also managed to both retain their own children and to grow the ranks of their younger ones through campus evangelism in high schools and universities. Finally, they managed to spread in areas where official organs of supervision and control were relatively weak—in rural areas and among ethnic minorities along China's vast borders.[27]

Eventually, however, the central power of the state was too much. During the Maoist purge of counter-revolutionary elements in the mid-1950s, the Christian Assemblies were broken using methods that were perfected on the redemptive societies that they resembled. Beginning in January of 1956, the leaders of dozens of local Christian Assemblies were arrested throughout China.[28] In particular, Ruth Li and three other Shanghai co-workers were singled out as part of the "Watchman Nee Counterrevolutionary Group." Under extraordinary pressure, some of those who were arrested wrote confessions that detailed Nee's and their own counter-revolutionary activities.

On January 30, more than two thousand five hundred Shanghai Christians were invited to a special presentation in which one of the leaders of the city's public security bureau delineated the charges against Nee, namely espionage, embezzlement, and sexual misconduct. Then, from February 8 to 19, the evidence against Nee was displayed in a special exhibit held in the

[27] Lee, "Watchman Nee and the Little Flock," 90-91.
[28] Ying Fuk Tsang, *Fandi, aiguo, shulingren*, 129.

auditorium of the Shanghai Medical College. Almost ten thousand Christians from Shanghai participated. From February 21 to 24, over two hundred representatives of Christian Assemblies were also brought in from other parts of China to view the evidence.[29] Participants saw documents that purported to show Nee's misuse of funds and foreign connections. Grainy photographs of Nee *in flagrante* with female co-workers were also prominently presented. It was difficult to ascertain the identity of the people in the pictures and many of Nee's followers assumed that the other documents were forged.[30] Nevertheless, the public humiliation was effective. For the most part, even if they quietly continued in their activities, the local congregations stopped openly identifying as Nee's followers.

Nee himself proved harder to break. While Wang Mingdao, True Jesus Church leaders, and other Christians had signed confessions of guilt, Nee refused and may even have declined an offer to "defect to the West" in return for a large ransom to be paid by overseas admirers.[31] Instead, he behaved as a model prisoner, obeying the rules of his imprisonment, and working for the government to translate technical works from English into Chinese. He even managed to convert a prison guard and a fellow prisoner, who divulged a few details of his daily life to the outside world.[32]

His poor health was exacerbated by the prison conditions, and when two Christian Assembly elders were released in 1962, they reported that Nee, who was over six feet tall, now weighed less than one hundred pounds.[33] After five years in prison, Charity was finally allowed to visit for a half hour in a waiting room with a wire mesh barrier. One visit and a single letter

[29] Ying, *Fandi*, 132.
[30] Interview with Zhu Rukai, March 16, 2013.
[31] Kinnear, *Against the Tide*, 297.
[32] Kinnear, *Against the Tide*, 304; Interview with Wu.
[33] Kinnear, *Against the Tide*, 294.

were conditionally allowed every month, but unfortunately, none of that correspondence remains. These carefully overseen channels were to be Nee's only means of contact with the outside world until his death.

Nee was in prison as Charity passed through the vicissitudes of mid-century China: the cessation of hostilities in Korea, the Great Leap Forward, and the Cultural Revolution. In 1971, she fell from a stool and broke two ribs, dying shortly afterward of complications. Thereafter, Nee wrote his letters to other family members, some of which survive. Nee's final writings evince an unmistakable note of tragedy, while hinting at his continued faith in Christ's sovereignty. In May 1972, he wrote the following to Zhang Pincheng, Charity's sister:

> Tomorrow (May 7) it will be half a year since the death of Sister Hui [Charity]. Too many changes have transpired during the past half a year. In reminiscing over the former days and in perusing and caressing the articles left behind by her, I could not help but grieve and ache in my heart. For over twenty years, I have not been able to take care of her once. This will be a lifelong regret to me. It was all because of me; I owe her so much and have given her so many hardships… However, I submit to the arrangement placed on my environment. For the past ten days or so, I could not help but have unceasing deep feelings for Sister Hui.[34]

Even as Nee lamented the loss of his wife, he continued to "submit to the arrangement placed on [his] environment." Although the censors would not allow him to explicitly speak of Christian themes, it was obvious that he still saw the hand of God, even in moments of personal devastation. The previous month, he had signed his letter to Pincheng: "I maintain my joy, so please do not worry. I hope you will also take care of yourself and be filled with joy in your heart."[35] Both the Chinese word for "joy" (*xile*) and "full" (*manzu*) were recognizably biblical language, a repeated trope of Johannine literature. Notably, the Gospel of John records that in

[34] Lee, *Seer of the Divine Revelation*, 183.
[35] Lee, *Seer of the Divine Revelation*, 182.

Jesus's farewell address to his disciples, he repeatedly encouraged them and promised that their "joy may be made full."[36]

On May 30, the very day of Nee's death, he sent a final letter to Pincheng that once again recalled the theme of joy in suffering:

> In my sickness, I still remain joyful at heart. Please do not worry. I am still doing my best to not allow myself to be grieved by my own illness.
>
> Pinhui [Charity]'s ashes will be left to your care. I am trusting in you for everything. I give my consent to everything.
>
> This letter is short, yet my feelings run deep. I can only wish you well.[37]

Despite Nee's death, his spiritual descendants experienced something of a renaissance. During the Cultural Revolution, the public security and religious affairs apparatuses of the government ceased to function normally. This allowed Little Flock congregations critical breathing room and they were able to operate more freely without the strict oversight of the early Maoist years. At least one Little Flock leader remembered the later years of the Cultural Revolution as a time of unprecedented growth in his region of Henan and suggested that many other local congregations had had similar experiences. He explained that because the Cultural Revolution had crippled much of China's medical infrastructure, people came to Christians for prayers and healing. Many of those who were miraculously healed ended up converting, along with their families.[38] If true on a larger scale, these facts would suggest that China has followed what may be the most significant pattern of global Christianity, that is, conversion following divine healing.[39]

In the meantime, Nee's co-workers also flourished outside of China. Nee's connections to the diasporic community reached back into at least the early 1920s, when he visited Malaysia

[36] John 15:11, 16:24, 1 John 1:4.
[37] Lee, *Seer of the Divine Revelation*, 189.
[38] Interview with Bai, January, 2014.
[39] Brown, *Global Pentecostal and Charismatic Healing*.

with his mother. Especially after the 1950s, the growing Chinese diaspora proved to be a receptive audience for Simon Meek in the Philippines, Faithful Luke in Singapore and Malaysia, and Wei Guangxi (K. H. Weigh) in Hong Kong. Little Flock congregations still flourish in all of these locations in the present day. Probably the most significant concentration of Chinese outside the mainland was in Taiwan where much of the Nationalist government and army had fled after their defeat.

Witness Lee had also gone to Taiwan, and, as the mass conversions of ex-Nationalists on the mainland suggested, many of the refugees on the Taiwanese island were primed to re-consider Christianity in the face of their enormous losses. Lee had been a catalyst of revival everywhere he went and it was no different in a place and time that were primed for revival. While membership in all of Taiwan's major Christian churches grew during the 1950s, the Christian Assemblies may have grown the fastest, going from five hundred to more than twenty-five thousand in six years.[40]

In 1962, Lee emigrated to the United States, eventually becoming a naturalized citizen of that country. His decision to do so was, in part, prompted by his recognition that Nee was garnering a significant reputation in the American evangelical subculture. During the Cold War, the fact that Nee was a Christian who was imprisoned by Communists lent him considerable credit among more conservative Christians. At the same time, his Chinese heritage, principled objection to denominations, and devotional embrace of highly mystical themes meant that he could also be read against mainstream Christianity, an intriguing proposition in an age marked by searches for religious alternatives to traditional Western religions.

[40] Witness Lee, *Life-study of 1 & 2 Timothy, Titus, Philemon* (Anaheim, CA: Living Stream Ministry, 2001), 14-15.

Lee quickly gained a significant audience, drawing thousands of followers from all across the United States. The new Christian Assemblies in the United States were disproportionately young and drawn from the evangelical subculture. As in China, many of them came from college campuses. Nee and Lee's extensive production of literature proved especially attractive to educated Christians.

Just as Orange County, California was developing into a base for American and international evangelicalism, Lee made his own headquarters in Anaheim. There, he continued to develop his ideas, adding new teachings and practices to the tradition he had inherited from Nee. Lee also directed the international spread of the local churches and their printed publications. Largely due to Lee's influence, Christian Assemblies with indigenous leadership can now be found on all six continents and in all fifty states and Nee and Lee's writings have been translated into dozens of languages.[41]

In the meantime, during the waning years of the Cultural Revolution, religious actors within China gained increased space for operation. Lee's writings and audio tapes were smuggled back into China. In that religious vacuum his eloquent preaching and accessible teachings were like fire on dry tinder. They sparked powerful and unexpected currents of indigenous religion.

The resurgent Little Flock movement splintered, with the majority, now called the "Old Assembly Hall," rejecting Lee's developments of Nee's doctrine. A significant minority, however, now called the "New Assembly Hall" or the "Shouters," enthusiastically adopted Lee's teachings.

As their derogatory nickname suggested, some of Lee's followers were especially taken with his

[41] Yi Liu, "Globalization of Chinese Christianity: A Study of Watchman Nee and Witness Lee's Ministry" *Asia Journal of Theology*, April, vol. 30 (1): 109-110

teaching on "calling on the name of the Lord." They took to exuberantly and repetitively proclaiming Jesus's name, which shocked more settled sensibilities, and occasionally led to bitter squabbles. Both the Old and New Assembly Hall forged links with amenable congregations of the Christian Assembly overseas.

At the same time, more creative religious leaders also adapted Lee's ideas. They leveraged the popularity and the dynamism of Lee's teachings to support their own visions and started their own sects. Many of the so-called "evil cults" or "*xiejiao*" that are most popular in China today have genealogies that lead through either Old or New Assembly Hall congregations. The founders of the Established King (*Beiliwang*), Lord God Sect (*Zhushenjiao*), Disciples' Society (*Mentuhui*) or Narrow Gate in the Wilderness (*Kuangye Zhaimen*), and Eastern Lightning (*Dongfang Shandian*) or Almighty God (*Quanneng Shen*) all spent time in Little Flock congregations.[42] Their colorful teachings included intricate new celestial pantheons, strict institutional hierarchies, and even claims to be Christ reincarnated. Most of them no longer recognize either Nee or Lee as their founders, and Lee himself strongly denounced their deviations from Christian orthodoxy.[43]

This vibrant global legacy suggests that Watchman Nee has become a legend. The dramatic circumstances of Nee's life and death lent themselves readily to a number of narratives. Almost immediately after his death, Nee's admirers began to cast him as a martyr, a prophet, a saint, or a brave detractor of Communist government. At the same time, his critics depicted Nee as the leader of a dangerous sect, an authoritarian figure who exerted enormous sway over the simple followers who supported his empire. At best, he was theologically deficient for many of

[42] Lian, *Redeemed by Fire*, 220-230.
[43] Beiliwang (Established King), Zhushenjiao (Lord God), Kuangye Zhaimen (Narrow Gate in the Wilderness), Sanbanpuren (Three Grades of Servants), Dongfang Shandian/Quanneng Shen (Eastern Lightning/Almighty God) can all be traced to founders who had some interaction with the New Assembly Hall in China.

the same reasons his Plymouth Brethren and Keswick forebears had been critiqued. At worst, the Maoist-era accusations were accurate, and he had traded on his prestige to extract financial support and engage in extramarital affairs.

These different archetypes have obscured the figure of Nee as a human being. To some degree, Nee's own selective reticence is to blame. Nee spoke and wrote at great length about Christian doctrines and practices. He gave copious advice to his co-workers and to other Christians. He even spoke frequently of his personal experiences, but only to mine them for illustrative anecdotes, usually in the context of spiritual lessons learned. He said almost nothing about the relationships with his wife and with his family. Whenever he was accused and opposed of personal failings, he responded with total silence.

There is a well-known Chinese tradition of the "sage presenting as an ordinary person" or "not allowing the real person to show" (*Zhenren bu louxiang*). Nee certainly embraced this aspect of his own culture. Any attempts to recreate the human being at the center of Nee's story must rely heavily on the rare instances in which Nee or one of his associates was willing to talk about his personal life, history, and disposition. By extrapolating from these sparse materials, the picture of a genuine human being emerges. What follows is my best attempt at filling out the glaring silences of Nee's life to recreate the person underneath.

Nee was raised in a household that was dominated by the forceful personality his mother. She was alternately swept up in the great cause of national salvation and the quotidian pleasures of bourgeois life. Similar currents defined middle-class, urban life in Republican China, and Nee followed the general trend. He enjoyed fine clothes, lottery tickets, and movies. The dream he guarded most closely in his heart, however, was to gain glory in the literary sphere. Swept up in

the promise and disappointment that surrounded May 4th, Nee hoped that his writings would awaken China and restore her domestic unity and international prestige.

Christianity had no part in his future plans. In any case, the religion was rapidly and dramatically falling out of favor among educated young Chinese as a "Western religion." Nee submitted articles to local newspapers and was closely connected to the pulse of his generation. From the start, he was gimlet-eyed with regard to Christianity's failings, especially in the ways that it had been presented to the Chinese by Western missionaries. From the perspective of a young, patriotic Chinese man, the most glaring failure of Western Christendom was its complicity with Western nationalism and imperial domination.

In a surprising turn of events, however, Nee's own mother experienced a dramatic conversion, spurred on by the unsparing evangelism of Dora Yu, an indigenous Chinese preacher who had given up a glowing future to proclaim the gospel. The western religion that had been so easy to dismiss became an intensely personal and intimate affair. Even before he converted, Nee immediately recognized that any Christianity that championed Chinese superiority would be guilty of the Western missionary's own worst sin. He recognized that true Christian faith would change the entire trajectory of his whole life.

Thus, when Nee embraced Christianity, he emphatically cast aside his dreams of literary glory and national influence. Instead, he spent his days as a local preacher, working with other Christian classmates to effect a revival in his school and city. His background and training were not so easily suppressed, however, and one of the ways he distinguished himself from his fellows was in his early decision to begin a periodical. Throughout most of the rest of his life and career, he would be engaged in some kind of literary production, and he may have gained more national influence as a Christian than he would have as a secular commentator.

Nee's audience had changed, but his motivations remained strikingly similar. If before he had hoped to revive China in its weakness, he now hoped to revive the church, which he understood to be in a similarly desolate condition. The apparent pessimism of his outlook was always balanced by his attention to creating a rich communal life. Visitors to contemporary Little Flock congregations may still be struck the congregants' hospitality and conviviality.

Although it is not always evident from his printed works, this warmth can be traced to Nee's personal character, and was often most evident in his treatment of children. Angus Kinnear recalls that while Nee was in England, he was known to "relax and play hide-and-seek with the children, folding himself easily out of sight into a cupboard in his long blue gown."[44] Likewise, one of Nee's sisters-in-law recalls that he always loved to spend time with his nephews and nieces. On one occasion, Nee and her son were having so much fun that the boy refused to let Nee leave their home to attend a previously scheduled co-workers' meeting. Nee promptly put the boy on his shoulders and they went to the meeting together.[45]

The Nees' lifelong childlessness was one of his quiet personal sufferings. He endured this along with all of his more public trials. Some records of his coping exist. His published works have many references to the ways in which personal tragedy could be turned to transcendence with the help of spiritual discipline. On the topic of a more intimate and personal source of comfort, almost nothing is known. The loyalty and devotion Nee and Charity displayed for one another throughout his two decades in prison are the only hint that remains as to the nature of their relationship.

In conclusion, it is possible to see something of Nee as a human being. He never really left his calling as a writer, a career that depended heavily on expressiveness and authenticity.

[44] Kinnear, *Against the Tide*, 189.
[45] Interview with Ni Furen, June, 2013.

Like many writers, he was passionate and sensitive, with a rich personal life that was closely guarded and private. That privacy and the lack of historical records means that, in the end, a great degree of ambiguity still governs any depiction of his personal life.

Regardless of how Nee himself is depicted, his writings now stand on their own. The system of thought that he proposed is supported and propagated by hundreds of thousands across the globe even though Nee himself has been absent for over sixty years. There are many who simplify Nee's message into a form of anti-denominationalism or Christian self-help. There are many others who grasp his wider concerns. They take the supremacy of Christ as their central rallying cry. The Christ they uplift is the Christ who is one with their spirit, to be lived out and built up as the corporate Christ, the church. They look forward to the day when Christ will be fully manifest in his overcomers, gaining himself the final victory that brings in the end of the current age. Then, they will enjoy the reward of a millennium of restoration and joy before they, along with all other Christians, enter into the blessedness of eternity.

There are many potential implications for taking such a theological system seriously. On a broad level, Nee embraced one of World Christianity's most dominant trends while eschewing another of them. Nee's sources in the holiness and Keswick traditions were among the most significant antecedents of Pentecostalism. Nee hewed to the older message more closely than many later Pentecostals, and he never emphasized the need for an additional blessing or baptism marked by glossolalia. Still, Nee's insistence that common believers could directly access the Holy Spirit puts him squarely in the center of non-Western Christian developments. Like many contemporary Pentecostals and Charismatics, Nee minimized many of the means other Christians have used to mediate God's power—tradition, education, ordination, church history, and various

institutions. In this sense, Nee's teachings support the radical popularization that characterizes global Christianity.

This popularization of the Holy Spirit's authority has led many of these newer Christian movements to claim the right to establish churches and break away from existing bodies. The lack of mediating forces has meant that new churches and denominations are being formed at a faster rate than ever, endlessly splintering against themselves. On this front, Nee's theology is strongly opposed to current trends. Inevitably, many of his followers have come from existing Christian bodies and institutions, and their decisions to leave can cause schism and fracture in their original congregations. Nevertheless, Nee's ideas suggest that such decisions are only valid because the existing denominations reiterate and exacerbate divisions in the body of Christ. This horror with regard to sectarian names, teachings, and memberships clearly opposes prevailing trends. Even today, Nee's followers still refuse to name themselves for the sake of unity, hoping for the day when all Christians will simply be known as Christians and all churches as only the church.

With regard to the church, Nee's thought also distinguished itself for its attempt to join the classic evangelical conception of an invisible, heavenly, and spiritual church to the exceedingly concrete practice of actual local churches. Nee insisted that there must be some way for modern-day Christians to fulfill the many quotidian biblical injunctions concerning meetings and church order without also violating the church's holiness and oneness. Even as he spoke of the church in increasingly mystical terms, referring to it as the "corporate Christ," he was also consistently grounded. Nee wanted the corporate Christ to have an earthly address, and his concept of locality was one attempt to resolve the tension. In the end, he thought that maintaining

the ground of locality would allow Christians to preserve both congregational and universal unity in both theory and practice.

Nee's theology is also exceptional for its embrace of effortlessness and spontaneity as Christian virtues. While many other Christian mystics have spoken of the deep identification between God and the human subject, Nee argued that this implied an ideal in which the subject did not have to exercise artifice and effort to meet God's standards. Rather, God was supposed to live and flow through the Christian, and the Christian was supposed to allow God to be expressed in her actions. This emphasis was intensified by Nee's adoption of a form of holism, which claimed that discerning between good and evil was useless. Instead, the only real choice was to cede the initiative to the Christ who was joined to the human spirit and let Christ work out the truest "good". Tellingly, one of the few thinkers who clearly surpassed Nee in regard to these emphases was Witness Lee, Nee's own student.

Finally, Nee's work suggests a change in general Christian orientation. Both his vision of the church and his notions of spirituality prized purity over quantity. In either case, only that which was Christ alone belonged. The church was simply Christ in corporate form, and the individual believers safeguarded this purity by living only by their spirit, where they had the divine life of Christ. The overcomers lived lives of absolute holiness, rejecting everything other than Christ. Thus, they promoted the sanctity of the church, so that Christ could see his own reflection, gloriously free from the blemishes of sin, the world, politics, and cultural compromise. As Nee passionately argued, the special testimony he wanted to bear was not to be found in the size of his work nor its power, but only that Christ was satisfied. If Christ's own image shone through, that was enough.

It may be fitting then that Nee's legacy is so mixed and malleable. The same could certainly be said, to a much greater degree, for Jesus as well. Nee's fortunes in China have largely been tied to those of Christianity. The Maoist purges during which he was arrested and the early years of the Cultural Revolution when his movement almost disappeared were some of the darkest years in general for Christians in China. As Christianity enjoys a resurgence of interest in contemporary China, interest in Nee's teachings and his reputation have also grown.

Within the Christian community in China and throughout the world more generally, where Nee is known, he is mostly respected. At the same time, critics within the Christian tradition persist. Strict Calvinists have been particularly vocal detractors. They object to Nee on largely the same grounds that they objected to Keswick and Holiness Calvinists. The emphasis on experiential holiness supposedly confuses the doctrine of sanctification and over-emphasizes the possibility of perfection in this life.

Nee's ecclesiology is obviously an ongoing point of contention. Perhaps the larger surprise with this regard is not that his ideas are opposed, but that so many Christians have simply chosen to ignore them. Many Christians adopt Nee's teachings and writings for their own personal spirituality and congregational life, while glossing over his total rejection of their own Christian bodies and institutions. This selective appropriation is not wholly unprecedented. Brethren eschatology has become wildly popular in North America, even as Brethren ecclesiology is mostly unknown. Similarly, the Keswick authors and other devotional writers have frequently transcended their ecumenical boundaries to find wider audiences.

At the same time, each of the major movements that directly claims Nee as a founder—the Old Assembly Hall and New Assembly Hall within China, and their related networks outside of China—show signs of rapid growth and proliferation. Here, Nee's legacy is favored by two

larger trends. The Chinese state is unlikely to return to the levels of social control and the monopoly over the civic sphere that characterized Maoist China. Instead, the contested civic space of contemporary China has proven especially amenable to religion in general and to Protestant Christianity in particular. At the same time, as demographic balance of Christianity shifts from Europe and North America to the other continents of the world, Nee's voice and his concerns grow increasingly relevant and resonant.

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Appendix

On Sources

This dissertation relies heavily on the materials printed in Nee's name, particularly the Chinese *Ni Tuosheng Wenji* (NTSWJ) and the English version of the same, the *Collected Works of Watchman Nee* (CWWN). Both the NTSWJ and the CWWN were published by Nee's followers as a central repository for all of Nee's writings and materials that had previously been published in a piecemeal fashion through various publishers. Each new set of materials within the two series is also prefaced by helpful introductory material explaining the sources and context of that particular volume.

Although the NTSWJ and the CWWN represent the most complete and most carefully edited versions of Nee's works, they are marked by several limitations. During his lifetime, Nee published a number of periodicals. Although the NTSWJ and CWWN reproduce those articles that were written and sometimes translated by Nee himself, they do not reprint the issues as a whole. As a result, the NTSWJ and CWWN are missing some translated articles and almost all of the essays written by Nee's ministerial colleagues or "co-workers" (*tonggong*), as he preferred to call them. Other contextual materials may also be missing.

For those who are seeking an exact representation of Nee's original thoughts and words, one of the most significant challenges is posed by the portions of the NTSWJ and CWWN that are taken from handwritten notes of Nee's oral preaching. Most of this source material has not been made accessible to the public. Although my own references are by no means exhaustive, I can offer some analysis on the editing of the NTSWJ and the CWWN by giving an extended example. I will first reproduce two Chinese passages and then give their translations in English.

The following is a transcription of notes in the hand of Lin Yitian (Weigh Lin Yi-tian), the wife of one of Nee's co-workers:

1949 29/8 拜一晚
八時

1. 周康耀:
問: 勝不过在講台之感覺
Nee: 棄絕所有 feeling 的生活. F 有時雖是對, 但他也 lie. 所以也要拒絕. 不要從 lie 去找 truth. Satan 有時亦說真理. 但凡從他來的一概拒絕. 因他乃撒謊著. F 要完全 cool down. Outer man 要拆毀.

灵套魂上. 如手套手套上. 手套必須空. 才能聯起來. 灵要使用魂, 思想, 而他的不空叫灵沒法出來.

The following is the same passage as reproduced in the NTSWJ:

講時:一九四九年八月二十九日晚上(週一)
講地:廣州
關於感覺
學習棄絕過度的感覺
周康耀弟兄問:我自己常常覺得勝不過在講臺上的感覺。
倪弟兄答:你要學習棄絕所有感覺的生活。感覺有時雖然是對的,但基本上牠乃是虛謊。你不要從虛謊去找真理,因為你不能從虛謊找到真理。撒但雖然有時也說真理,但凡從他來的都要一概拒絕,因為他乃是撒謊者;即使他說真理,也是為了要欺騙。你的感覺要完全冷靜下來,這需要你外面的人被拆毀。

靈是套在魂裏,就如手是套在手套裏一樣。手套必須空了,纔能與手聯起來。手套裏面如果已經有東西,如何叫牠來套手?同樣的,若是靈要使用魂的思想、情感、意志,而牠們卻不空,裝滿了各種感覺、思想、判斷,那麼靈就無法出來,你也就很難有正確的判斷。

Now, my own English translation of the handwritten note is as follows. Words and letters written in English in the original notes are reproduced in bold.

1949 29/8 Monday PM
8 o'clock

1. Zhou Kangyao
Q: Can't overcome consciousness[, or feelings] on the speaking platform
Nee: Abandon all living by **feeling**. Although **F**[eelings] are sometimes correct, they also **lie**. Thus, they must be rejected. Do not look for the **truth** from a **lie**. **Satan** sometimes also speaks the truth. But whatever comes from him must be categorically rejected. Because he is a liar. **F**[eelings] must be totally **cool down**. **Outer man** must be demolished.

The spirit encases the soul. Like a hand encases a glove. The glove must be empty. Thus [the hand] can connect to it. The spirit wants to use the soul, mind, but its lack of emptiness causes the spirit to have no way to come out.

The editors of the CWWN offer the following:

A TALK WITH CO-WORKERS FROM HONG KONG AND CANTON

(1)

Date: Monday evening, August 29, 1949
Place: Canton

CONCERNING FEELINGS

Learning Not to Go Along with Too Many Feelings

Chou Kang-Yao: I am very conscious of myself when I stand on the platform, and I am not able to overcome this feeling.

Watchman Nee: We have to learn to deny living according to feelings. Our feelings may be right some of the time, but in essence they are deceptive. We should not look for truth among deceptions, because we can never find it. Satan can speak some truths, but we have to reject everything that comes from his mouth because in essence he is a liar. Even when he speaks the truth, he speaks it for the purpose of deceiving others. We have to calm down our feelings completely. This requires the breaking of the outer man.

The spirit is surrounded by the soul, just as a hand is surrounded by a glove. A glove must be empty before a hand can get into it. If a glove has something in it, how can it receive a hand? Similarly, if our mind, emotion, and will are filled with thoughts, feelings, and opinions instead of being empty and available, when the spirit needs to use them, it will find itself bound. Under such circumstances, it is hard to have right judgments.

A few apparent problems immediately emerge. It is clear that front matter, a title, and section headings have been added. Like many handwritten notes, the source material contains a number of fragmentary, incomplete phrases, which have been combined and polished in the edited material. Generally this has been done with the help of punctuation, transitions, and additional phrases. Sometimes entirely new phrases have been added, such as “Even if he speaks the truth, he speaks it for the purpose of deceiving others.” Especially at the end of the last

paragraph, a substantial number of new terms and clauses have been filled in—a reference to the soul has been redacted and the words "emotions" and "will" have been added. A simple reference to a "lack of emptiness" has been fleshed out with a reference to "thoughts, feelings, decisions" and a final note on the difficulty of making "right judgments."

Upon closer examination, however, these problems are less significant. The front matter only presents information that is already in the note, leaving off only the exact time of day. Likewise, the title and section headings are carefully chosen to organize the material. If the reader is aware that they are editorial emendations, there is little chance of confusion. The addition of such titles and headings is a common practice in scholarly publications of similar material. Edited volumes of the church fathers or the *Classics of Western Spirituality* series adopt similar standards.

In terms of the main text itself, many of the editorial changes correct grammatical errors or make sentence fragments into full thoughts in a straightforward manner. It is true that the phrases "Do not look for the truth from a lie" and "We should not look for truth among deceptions, because we can never find it" are not equivalent. The first phrase is a simple command, aphoristic and vague. The second offers a reason for the aphorism and suggests a more categorical rejection, namely, that it is impossible to find truth from lies. Still, even if the phrases are not equivalent, they are not opposed, and the second may be understood as an earnest attempt to elucidate the former. These additions may also trace back to other source materials. Lin's husband, Wei Guangxi (Weigh Kwang-Hsi), also took notes during some of these meetings and Witness Lee, who was personally involved in the CWWN's editorial process, may also have been present.[46]

[46] CWWN, Vol 61, v.

The carefulness of the editors' efforts can also be seen in the two most significant departures from the original text. The original notes suggest that the spirit "encases" or surrounds the soul like a hand "encases" or surrounds a glove. Even if one were not familiar with Nee's theology, which emphatically places the human spirit *within* the human soul, the error in the original notes seems obvious. The confusion may be partially explained by a subsequent passage in which Nee talks about the relationship between the spirit and the soul in similar terms. There, in an analogy similar to that of the glove, Nee suggests that the foot must wear the shoe rather than the shoe wearing the foot. Whether Nee misspoke with regard to the hand and the glove or Lin's notes were mistaken, there can be no doubt that the NTSWJ and CWWN more accurately represent Nee's original intent.

Further context also helps to explain the apparent digression on having right judgments at the end of the passage. Lin's notes, the NTSWJ, and the CWWN all unanimously record that the next section of Nee's talk had to do with making right judgments. In the notes, this transition is rather abrupt. Thus, it appears that the editors of the NTSWJ and CWWN attempted to smooth over this larger transition, just as much of their editorial work smooths over smaller transitions between sentences and phrases throughout the passage. The editors removed the general and somewhat inconsistent phrase "soul, mind" and replaced it with a reference to the mind, emotion, and will, which, for Nee, were the three component parts of the human soul. Since for Nee, the will was the soulish faculty involved in making decisions, the whole passage now leads more naturally to Nee's next point.

This passage presents something of a worst case scenario for the NTSWJ and CWWN. The text was composed from fragmented, handwritten notes. The editors converted these notes that were composed of Chinese with scattered English phrases into one entirely Chinese

document and then one entirely English one. The editors had to do considerable work smoothing out transitions and making the passage readable and coherent. In the end, however, the reader of the edited passage may have a better sense of Nee's original speaking and intention than can be derived from the choppy notes, which contain at least one major error. The additional phrases and clauses may not be exact representations of Nee's original utterances, but they embody a good-faith attempt at recreating them, even at the cost of being repetitive. It should be noted that Nee himself had a stylistic tendency to explain concepts repetitively, working in much the same way as the editors of the NTSWJ and CWWN. In the works that Nee himself wrote and edited, he tended to present a concept, repeat it, consider it from slightly different perspectives, and then slowly transition to his next, closely related topic, as we can see him doing here.

In conclusion, it is clear that the editorial changes of the NTSWJ and CWWN have been made with the meticulous care that one would expect of Nee's devoted followers, who have significant interests in maintaining fidelity to his ideas and intentions. Since the original source materials are inaccessible, the NTSWJ and CWWN can stand in as valuable resources for scholars interested in Nee's thought. Especially in terms of Nee's continuing influence and the reception history of his teachings, the NTSWJ and CWWN may be more valuable than the original notes themselves, since contemporary followers of Nee know him entirely through his published works.

For the purposes of this work, I utilize both the NTSWJ and the CWWN, offering my own translations when the source text is Chinese. When appropriate, I have commented on the source materials. In general, the NTSWJ and CWWN's versions of Nee's published and written materials are reprints of the originals, while articles and chapters based on handwritten notes are subject to the editorial process we have seen in this analysis.