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woman to 'submit herself' to her husband ([Eph. 5:22](#)) is not teaching that the woman is an inferior being, but that she is a being whose nature adapts more easily to that function within marriage. The fact that the exploitation of women by men at times is based on 'the feminine nature' is a direct consequence of the fall expressed in the words of God to the woman: 'Your desire will be for your husband, and he will rule over you' ([Gen. 3:16](#)). But that the woman sees in submission to her husband something more compatible with the characteristics of her own sexuality is consequence of a voluntary acceptance of the plan of God in creation, expressed in his words: 'It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him' ([Gen. 2:18](#)). For that reason Paul adds that the submission of the woman is as 'unto the Lord' as a Christian duty. In our society, more totalitarian than egalitarian, the desire to be freed from all paternalism is flourishing. One development has been the 'death of God' complex, to use an expression of Roger Mehl,²⁷ which establishes a necessary contradiction between every idea of authority, on the one hand, and the democratic ideal of equality and fraternity. In this context, and in the light of a long history of abuses committed against the submissive sex, it is not surprising that what has been called to question is the biblical model for the matrimonial relationship: 'However, each one of you also must love his wife as he loves himself, and the wife must respect her husband' ([Gal. 5:33](#)). Apart from the recognition of the different functions that correspond to the man and the woman in the human couple, however, there is no hope for the survival of marriage. 'Whatever should be the evolution [p. 288](#) of customs and the egalitarian tendency of civilization, it is essential that the man and the woman in no way forget that they have been created *different*, that each one is called to fulfill a distinct vocation, and that sexual differentiation is an essential characteristic of humanity.'²⁸

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Watchman Nee—Church Planter and Preacher of Holiness

Norman H. Cliff

This article brings to light many unknown details of the life and ministry of the influential Chinese preacher, Watchman Nee. The author's analysis of his doctrine of holiness and of the church provides a helpful framework to understand the preacher's writings. Norman Cliff, son of missionary parents, spent the first 20 years of his life in China. He has recently completed an M. Phil. thesis on The Life and Theology of Watchman Nee with the Open University, England.

(Editors)

²⁷ *Society and Love*, The Westminster Press, Philadelphia, 1964, p.20.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p.41.

On the 10th April, 1952, in the middle of the 'Accusation period' in China when dozens of pastors and workers were falsely accused before vast crowds in the various city centres, Watchman Nee was condemned by a Communist court and sent to a small cell in the Shanghai First Municipal Prison.

That should have been the end of the extraordinary ministry of this Chinese preacher. But events were to take quite a different turn. In 1957 two Chinese manuscripts of addresses given by Nee in Shanghai were translated and published in Bombay by the Gospel Literature Service. The two books, *The Normal Christian Life* and *Sit, Walk, Stand*, expositions of Romans and Ephesians respectively, were soon bought out by Christians in south east Asia. In 1962 these books were republished in Eastbourne, England, by the Victory Press, now Kingsway Publications. The Christian Literature Crusade in Fort Washington, Pennsylvania, likewise commenced to print these addresses for Christians in North America. Further editions have come out nearly every year since in English, as well as being translated into two dozen languages.

By the time Nee died in an open centre in Anhui province in 1972, after 20 years of being orally silenced by the Communist authorities, he was a household name in many parts of the world.

HIS EARLY LIFE

Nee was converted at a revivalist meeting held in his home town of Fuzhou, whilst he was a student at the large college there run by the Church Missionary Society. Soon afterwards he was baptized by an independent preacher in the river Min. The young baptismal candidate's prayer was 'Lord, I leave my world behind. Your Cross separates **P. 290** me from it for ever. And I have entered another. I stand where you have placed me in Christ.'¹

In later years when expounding [Romans 6:1-17](#) in his *The Normal Christian Life* he said, 'The real meaning behind baptism is that in the Cross we were baptized into the historic death of Christ, so that His death became ours ... It is to this historic baptism that we assent when we go down into the water. Our public testimony in baptism today is our admission that the death of Christ two thousand years ago was a mighty all-inclusive death, mighty enough and all-inclusive enough to carry away in it and bring to an end everything in us that is not of God.'²

In his new zeal Nee found the Christians of the missionary societies' churches half-hearted and compromising, and charged that the denominations were weighted down with what was to him manmade traditions regarding baptism, worship and ordination, teaching what was quite foreign to what he read in the New Testament.

And so from 1921 to 1923 Watchman Nee was part of a zealous group of young people who broke bread every Sunday morning in a private home in Fuzhou. During the week in their spare time they marched through the streets wearing 'gospel shirts' and conducting open air services. But soon the honeymoon period for this earnest group was over, and Nee and Leland Wang clashed, the former strongly opposing the need for ordination or for Christian workers to receive fixed salaries. Nee was asked to discontinue fellowshiping with these Christians.

NEE'S PUBLIC MINISTRY

¹ A. Kinnear *Against the Tide*, pp.42, 43.

² W. Nee *The Normal Christian Life*, p.63.

By 1928 Nee had settled in Shanghai. At that time throughout China there were anti-foreign demonstrations and kidnappings. Most missionaries had returned temporarily to their home countries. The future of mission-founded churches was uncertain. Many Chinese pastors had severed their links with western missions.

Renting a property in Hardoon Road seating 100 people, Nee commenced preaching. Convinced of the rightness of his unstructured assembly, free from denominational traditions, he asserted, 'Those who really want to live entirely in accordance with the Lord's truth will know real freedom in our midst.'

Soon Watchman Nee was conducting crowded services in this large commercial port. The congregation included Chinese of all social [p. 291](#) classes, as well as a number of missionaries who had left their societies to support this Chinese preacher, having accepted his severe strictures of western missionary work.

During the 1930s assemblies were established in most of China's main cities. The movement was particularly strong in the provinces of Jiangsu, Zhejiang and Fujian. Although Nee had been emphatic that Christians should meet 'only in the name of Jesus', free from denominational labels, the assemblies were soon known as 'the Little Flock'. This arose because Nee had published a hymn book in 1931 called *Hymns for the Little Flock*, taking over the name of the hymn book of the London Party of the Exclusive Brethren in Britain. This name stuck, although Nee was careful to give a different title to his next hymn book.

By the time Mao Zedong stood up in Tian An Men Square in Peking on 1st October, 1949, and announced 'We have stood up', the Little Flock (LF) had over 70,000 members in 500 assemblies. And when the missionaries left China in the exodus of 1951 a number of conservative churches joined this fast growing movement.

STAGE I IN NEE'S PREACHING

The emphasis in Watchman Nee's preaching went through a number of phases. The first stage, little known about in the west, reveals Nee the evangelist, travelling through villages in south China seeking to win converts to the Christian faith. Happily 16 of these addresses have been preserved in a two-volumed book *Full of Grace and Truth*. The sermons are simple, direct and powerful, with homely illustrations taken from Chinese life. Reading through them raises the question as to whether he should not have continued and developed his evangelistic preaching.

STAGE II

Stage II in Nee's preaching was aimed at the instruction and the building up of the spiritual lives of Christians. In 1929 he published his three-volumed *The Spiritual Man*. Apart from his *Concerning our Missions* (later re-published as *The Normal Christian Church Life*) this is the only literary effort planned by Watchman Nee for publication, the other 50 books being records of sermons and addresses given verbally by him and subsequently translated into English.

The young Chinese preacher intended this systematic treatise on the Christian life to be his swan song, his magnum opus. Twenty-four years old and weak with tuberculosis, he was convinced he was going to die soon. Renting a small room in Wusi, Jiangsu province, he shut himself [p. 292](#) up and wrote daily for four months. In these volumes he enunciates his trichotomous concept of man, which he had taken from the writings of Andrew Murray, Jessie Penn-Lewis and T. Austin-Sparks and developed further. The soul, the carnal part of man which has no capacity for the things of God, must be brought under

the control of the spirit, which in turn is controlled by God's Holy Spirit. 'The spirit is the noblest part of man, and occupies the innermost area of his being. The body is the lowest, and takes the outermost place. Between these two dwells the soul, serving as their medium. The body is the outer shell of the soul, while the soul is the outer sheath of the spirit.'³

A further idea was superimposed on this tripartite doctrine of sanctification in 1947. For the previous five years he had been barred by his elders from preaching in the Shanghai assembly, due to his having become Chairman of the Board of Directors of the China Biological and Chemical Laboratories. Nee had launched into this commercial venture primarily to help his full time LF workers have a means of livelihood, as they were suffering financially with rocketing inflation as the Japanese war progressed. But it was never successful. But in doing this Nee had gone against his own public teaching (enunciated in his *Concerning our Missions*) that the Christian worker 'should look to God for divine supply'.

And so when a chastened Nee, penitent for his mistake in leaving the preaching ministry, began his expositions again in Guling and Fuzhou, there is a new emphasis on the need for 'brokenness', based on [Psalm 51:17](#), [John 12:24](#) and [Mark 14:3-9](#). 'The Lord wants to break our outward man in order that the inward man is released, and that both unbelievers and Christians will be blessed'.⁴

STAGE III

Thus from 1929 to 1937 Nee's teaching stressed the spiritual struggle in man's three-part personality. In 1938 the young preacher attended and participated in the annual Keswick Convention in the Lake District. The well-known convention banner 'All One in Christ Jesus' draped over the large tent found little response in his spirit. In an address years later he observed, 'At Keswick there is unity in Christ for one week every year. What about the other 51 weeks of the year?'⁵ In another address he described interdenominationalism as merely 'holding hands over the fence'.⁶ **P. 293**

But the emphasis of Keswick teaching—that victory over sin comes through the spiritual crucifixion of self with Christ upon the Cross—left its mark on his ministry of exposition. Within two years he delivered two series of addresses in Shanghai, which are now published as *The Normal Christian Life* and *Sit, Walk, Stand*. Here Watchman Nee shares his burden that too many Christians have received only half their spiritual birthright—salvation but not sanctification. The living of the victorious life should be 'the normal Christian life', though admittedly it was not the usual.

STAGE IV

The fourth identifiable stage in Nee's preaching centres around his doctrine of the Church. Whilst travelling with Miss Fishbacher of the China Inland Mission through Europe to address Conventions he wrote his *Concerning Our Missions*. Quoting extensively from the Book of Acts (and to a lesser extent from the Pauline Epistles) Watchman Nee criticized

³ W. Nee *The Spiritual Man*, Vol. 1, p.27.

⁴ W. Nee *The Release of the Spirit*, p.11.

⁵ W. Nee *Further Talks on Church Life*, p.132.

⁶ W. Nee *Further Talks on Church Life*, p.95.

denominational missions for their polity, ordinances and structure. The New Testament was the divine blueprint for all time. Believers should meet weekly in the Lord's name. There should only be one church in one locality. The local assembly should be run by elders though formed originally by itinerant apostles.

In his *The Glorious Church* and *The Orthodoxy of the Church* the influence of J. N. Darby, who taught the utter corruptness of the institutionalized Church, is discernible. In the latter book he expounds 'The Messages to the Seven Churches' in [Revelation 2](#) and [3](#). He sees the Church at Thyatira as representing Roman Catholicism, the Church at Sardis that of the Reformation (to him the return of the Reformers to the New Testament was only partial). In the Philadelphian Church he sees the birth of the Brethren movement in the 19th century, a full return to New Testament simplicity; and then the Church at Laodicea the same Brethren movement in the present century, now proud and materialistic.

But in Nee's 'Spiritual Authority' addresses delivered in Guling and Fuzhou in 1948, and 'Further Talks on Church Life', his last addresses before his imprisonment, we see the final evolution of his ecclesiology. The Chinese preacher states, 'If God dares to entrust His authority to man, then we can dare to obey. Whether the one in authority is right or wrong does not concern us. The obedient one needs only to obey ... Insubordination is rebellion.'⁷ [p. 294](#)

Here he is arguing for the authority of apostles in the modern Church—leaders recognized by their spirituality and authority as God's representatives. The historical background needs to be borne in mind. Witness Lee had convinced Nee of the rightness of 'Evangelism by Migration', based on the pattern of the early Christians in Acts going out from Jerusalem caused by persecution and as groups forming the nucleus of new churches. Enthused by this new insight Nee was convinced that if groups of 50 Christian families could be sent from the large assemblies at the coast to new areas inland China could be won for Christ within a few decades. Thus by stressing the importance of unquestioned obedience to the LF leaders he was conditioning his hearers to being ready to be sent to distant parts of China on apostolic authority. Several groups were sent to north west China in this way and formed strong assemblies in unevangelized areas.

WATCHMAN NEE'S MINISTRY IN RETROSPECT

It is now over 10 years since Ni To Sheng's death, and more than 30 years since his preaching ministry was abruptly ended by his arrest and imprisonment. What influence does this Chinese preacher have in the world today?

First and foremost his addresses are being studied in a wide range of 'mainline Church' situations. In the USA Methodist, Lutheran and Baptist pastors are in a number of cases taking their weekly Bible Study groups through such books of Nee's as *What shall this man do?* and *Changed into His likeness*. The writer has observed that many book-stalls in Britain and America are well stocked with his devotional addresses. These are read and studied enthusiastically by Christians of many denominations. Catholic religious communities involved in the renewal movement are making bulk orders for such books as *The Release of the Spirit* and *The Body of Christ a Reality*. The addresses in *The Ministry of God's Word* and *The Spiritual Man* are used as standard textbooks by some fundamentalist Bible Schools.

Secondly the influence of Nee's teaching has been considerable in the various branches of the renewal movement of the third quarter of this present century. Pentecostalism, deeply divided as to the place of the apostle in the modern Church, has

⁷ W. Nee *Spiritual Authority*, p.71.

found from an unexpected source strong support for the authority of the apostleship. The Jesus People, according to the survey by Enroth, Ericson and Peters, read Nee as one of their few extra-Biblical sources. Their 'anti-cultural p. 295 fundamentalism' is attributed to his addresses in *Love not the World*.⁸ The charismatic movement has warmed to his sermons on the dynamics of spiritual living. The present House Church movement (or 'shepherding movement') in such centres as Lauderdale, USA, and Bradford in Britain have adhered to his teaching of 'back to the Bible without human traditions', of 'one church one locality' and most significant of all the authority of apostles, who now demand obedience with regard to marriage, the purchase of a house or change of employment.

Thirdly the LF movement which spread to Chinese communities in south east Asia, Taiwan and North America, appears to be now going in three broad directions. A group of assemblies formed by his colleague Stephen Kaung on the east coast of the USA has been cooperative with all evangelical causes, retaining the best elements in Nee's teachings. Others have kept closely to their leader's principles and practices, remaining undenominational rather than interdenominational, aloof from other Christians in established churches. Thirdly there is the 'Local Church' movement, exclusive and travelling a different doctrinal path to that of Nee.

Lastly, we turn to Watchman Nee's influence on the Church in mainland China. Here a picture is emerging from the post Cultural Revolution period of a five-stream Christian tradition. (i) There are Roman Catholics still loyal to the Vatican. Many of these have been or are still in prison. (ii) A larger group of Roman Catholics are affiliated to the Catholic Patriotic Association, and out of communion with Rome. Bishops acceptable to the government have been irregularly ordained. (iii) There are Protestants, mainly in the towns, in the Three Self Movement (TSM), and like the last group under the control of the Religious Affairs Bureau (RAB) in Beijing. (iv) There are Protestants, largely in the rural areas though also in the towns, meeting in house groups. Many of these are wary of the RAB. (v) There is another group of Protestants also meeting in house groups who have kept to themselves, still following closely the teachings of Watchman Nee. (From this last group a breakaway has taken place in recent years of believers who have adopted Witness Lee's teachings. Many China watchers feel that the Chinese government is making the fanatical behaviour of 'the Screamers' an excuse for tightly controlling all unaffiliated groups.)

Of the five groups above, Nee's influence can be identified in all the three latter Protestant groups. Regarding the third group, Christians in p. 296 the TSM, it is interesting to note that of the ten Vice Chairpersons of the TSM one is a former member of the LF—Tang Shou Lin. Of the 25 members of the TSM's Standing Committee two are formerly of the LF—Zhang Xian Zhou and Sun Yan Li. Of the 9 Vice Presidents of the more recently formed China Christian Council one is a former LF leader—Yan Jia Le. Of the 22 members of the Council's Standing Committee one is a former member of the LF—Liang Yuan Hui. Of the pastoral team leading the five Open Churches in Shanghai three are former LF leaders.

Mr. Raymond Fung of the WCC has recently published *Households of God on China's Soil*, a selection of 14 stories of Christian communities in China meeting in the 1960s and 1970s for prayer and worship. In these stories there is evidence of LF members joining house churches with Protestants of other traditions. He describes among others the 'East Treasure Jesus Lord Fellowship', a house church which included in its fellowship former Baptists, Presbyterians and Meeting Hall (LF) Christians. On the other hand in one town described by Fung there were three groups of Protestant Christians. Two co-operated

⁸ R. M. Enroth, E. E. Ericson and C. B. Peters *The Jesus People—a Factual Survey*, p.170.

with each other and welcomed all Christians. The third was led by a Deacon Yin, and was a former LF assembly with 40 members. This group had little contact with the other two fellowships, and characteristically believed Christmas to be a pagan festival.

Many of the features of the 'post-denominational Church' in China Nee would warmly endorse. Denominational labels have gone, and groups meet each week 'in the name of Jesus', as he advocated for many years. Most of the pastors are self-supporting and the laity plays a prominent role in Church life—features with which he would be in full agreement. The Church has been freed from the encumbrances of maintaining large premises and of running institutional work, both of which have been taken over by the government. Nee emphasized this approach in his *Concerning our Missions*.

But he would be critical of other facets of Church life in China. Many house churches are led by women, some of whom have assumed this role because their pastor husbands were killed or imprisoned. Women are being ordained as ministers. Nee would strongly condemn this procedure. Then with such widely diverging groups as Seventh Day Adventists, Baptists, Lutherans and Anglicans sharing a house church there has inevitably been considerable 'give and take' in questions of worshipping on Saturday, Sunday or both; on baptism by immersion or sprinkling; and the formal or informal conducting of the Lord's Supper. To Nee making concessions to paedo-baptism, liturgical worship etc. would be unthinkable. To be inclusivist would be to [p. 297](#) dilute and obscure New Testament teaching and practice.

We have observed Nee's undoubted influence in both registered and unregistered churches. Some China watchers estimate the Protestant Church in China to number over 15 million, and from all accounts there is vitality and continued church growth. There is little doubt that the strength and quality of this present day Church is due under God at least partly to the widespread ministry of Ni To Sheng in the second quarter of this century, the preacher whose motto was 'I want nothing for myself. I want everything for the Lord'.

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Preaching in History

James Philip

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The author takes us through the vicissitudes of Church history showing how the Church again and again returned to the use of homily as practised by the Fathers and the exposition of Scripture modelled on the New Testament itself.

(Editor)

The history of the Christian Church down the years shows only too clearly that the high dignity of the Biblical pattern of preaching was often but indifferently maintained, and sometimes and for long periods obscured and lost altogether.