

THE ECCLESIOLOGY OF WATCHMAN NEE

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Published in “Featured Article” of www.GlobalMissiology.org October 2011

Introduction

In the West, Chinese Christian leader Watchman Nee (1903–1972) is primarily known as the author of a number of popular books on personal sanctification and the Christian life. Although he only wrote and published one of these books personally, due to the extensive catalogue of his sermons, lectures, and conference addresses, many of which were originally published as magazine articles, a large collection of his teaching on a variety of different subjects is available to the public in several different languages and formats.¹ Spending the bulk of the last twenty years of his life in a communist prison cell in China, it is likely he himself was never aware of the worldwide impact of his writings.² His greatest impact, however, was likely within China itself. A Western missionary, quoted by Nee’s biographer, Angus I. Kinnear, bears this testimony: “There is no doubt that Mr. Nee was a man raised up by the Lord to inject the truths of the gospel into the very blood-stream of the Chinese people. His words stuck like burrs. His

¹ Leslie T. Lyall, foreword to *Against the Tide*, by Angus I. Kinnear (Eastbourne, Sussex, UK: Victory Press, 1973), viii. The entire collection of Nee’s writings may be accessed at www.watchmannee.org.

² Kinnear, 170.

books and tracts ran everywhere. If one was asked to draw up a short list of the most influential Chinese Christians there have ever been, it would be hard to leave him out.”³

Though the biblical orthodoxy of several of his views on topics such as the nature of man and spiritual authority has been challenged by some,⁴ it is likely that none of his teaching has been quite so controversial as his teaching (not so widely known in the West) on ecclesiology, or the nature of the church.⁵ Originally influenced by the Plymouth Brethren, though differing with them in several key aspects, Nee’s ecclesiology does not fit neatly into any of the traditional categories of episcopal, presbyterian, or congregational. A major issue for Nee and those who have followed in his ecclesiological footsteps is the essential unity of the Body of Christ and the practical implications of how this unity should be expressed among groups of Christians at a local level. He believed that the major systems of Christian ecclesiology had all gone awry and that through careful Bible study the Lord had revealed to him various forgotten elements of his plan for the Church,⁶ which Nee endeavored to put into practice with the hope of prompting a restoration of New Testament ecclesiology in contemporary church life.

The evaluation given by evangelical leaders of the results of Nee’s ecclesiological ideas and efforts is mixed. The Local Church movement, under the leadership of Nee’s close associate,

³ Ibid., 176.

⁴ Though somewhat outside the scope of this paper, the *Christian Research Journal* dedicated an entire issue to the teaching of Nee’s close associate Witness Lee and the Local Church movement and determined, as a result of their research, that their teaching on these matters, though, in some senses quirky, is within the realm of evangelical orthodoxy. See *Christian Research Journal* 32, no. 6 (2009).

⁵ Dana Roberts, *Secrets of Watchman Nee* (Orlando: Bridge-Logos, 2005), 147; Elliot Miller, “Cultic, Aberrant, or (Unconventionally) Orthodox?: A Reassessment of the ‘Local Church’ Movement,” *Christian Research Journal* 32, no. 6 (2009): 10.

⁶ Throughout this paper, in order to help avoid confusion, the universal Church is referred to with a capital “C,” and the local church with a small-case “c.” The “Local Church” refers specifically to the movement associated with Witness Lee, while “local church” refers to the concept undergirding that movement, as well as related movements associated with Watchman Nee.

Witness Lee (1905–1997), who carried the work started in China to various other countries and eventually moved to the United States in 1962, has been labeled by some as sectarian and by others as doctrinally aberrant. Recently, however, responsible parties of the influential cult-watch organization Christian Research Institute have publicly confessed to misunderstanding and mischaracterizing the Local Church and have declared it to be “not only Christian but . . . in many ways an exemplary group of Christians.”⁷ In China, a group known by outsiders as the “Shouters” or “Screamers,” tracing its origins to the ministry of Watchman Nee and Witness Lee, is regarded by most evangelicals as an extreme cult and as such has been persecuted by the Chinese government, provoking at times the persecution of more orthodox evangelicals along with them.⁸ There are other groups of believers, however, associated with the “Little Flock” movement initiated by Nee who are more evangelically orthodox, and who, together with several other networks of churches, have been key catalysts in the development of the house church movement that has experienced phenomenal growth in China since the Communist Revolution. The ecclesiological innovations of Nee have alternatively been credited as important contributions toward the survival and successful adaptation of the Chinese church under communist control and branded by others as divisive and harmful.

In this paper, we will briefly outline some of the relevant biographical and historical data associated with the life of Nee and the various ecclesiastical movements which have been inspired by his teachings. We will then present a summary of his unique ecclesiology, especially with regard to his understanding of a biblical and practical expression of the essential unity of the Body of Christ. Finally, we will identify some strengths and weaknesses of the ecclesiology of

⁷ Miller, 29

⁸ Tony Lambert, *China's Christian Millions* (London: OMF, 1999), 82, 122; Dennis McCallum, “Watchman Nee and the House Church Movement in China,” Section V, n.p. [cited 2 Sept. 2011]. Online: <http://www.xenos.org/essays/neeframe.htm>

Nee and propose some lessons to be learned by evangelicals concerned with expressing Christian unity in a more productive and Christ-honoring way.

The Life of Watchman Nee

Ni Tuosheng, as he is known in China, was born in 1903 on the heels of the Boxer Rebellion in the southern city of Foochow. His grandfather was a Congregational pastor, but Nee grew up attending his mother's Methodist church, while taking classes at a local Anglican school. At age 18 he made a personal profession of faith in Christ at an evangelistic meeting led by Methodist evangelist Dora Yu. Ironically, although he was subsequently influenced by strict Brethren teaching on the limited role of women in church, some of the leading spiritual influences in Nee's own life were women. One of his main influences, in addition to Yu, was British missionary Margaret E. Barber, who upon becoming convinced of a baptistic view of baptism resigned from the Anglican Church Missionary Society in order to continue as an independent missionary in China. Later, he was also influenced by Elizabeth Fischbacher of the China Inland Mission, who introduced him to charismatic beliefs and practices which he himself only partially embraced.⁹

From the beginning, Nee was zealous in his Christian commitment, joining on with a band of street evangelists who wore special "gospel shirts" and engaged in aggressive evangelism, passing out Christian literature and preaching on the streets of Foochow. He also met for a couple of years in a private home with this group of young people to "break bread" in the name of the Lord. Eventually, however, his idealistic views opposing the need for ordination and salaried church leadership led to his separation from this group and to meeting with others

⁹ Lam Wing-Hung, "Watchman Nee," *Biographical Dictionary of Chinese Christianity*, n.p. [cited 2 Sept. 2011]. Online: <http://www.bdcconline.net/en/stories/n/ni-tuosheng.php>

who agreed with him on these matters.¹⁰ According to Dennis McCallum, “Nee was not only idealistic, he was hyper-idealistic. The word ‘compromise’ was not in his vocabulary.”¹¹

Introduced by Barber to the writings of John Nelson Darby and other Brethren leaders, Nee read widely and began to digest the ideas to which he was exposed and synthesize them with his own understanding of Scripture, as informed by his diligent personal study. The spiritual and theological influences in his life are many, including John Bunyan, Hudson Taylor, George Müller, George Cutting, J. G. Bellett, William Kelly, Charles G. Trumbull, A. B. Simpson, Madame Guyon, Brother Lawrence, T. Austin-Sparks, Jessie Penn-Lewis, Mary C. McDonough, D. M. Panton, Andrew Murray, and F. B. Meyer. He also studied the lives of significant Christian leaders, such as Martin Luther, John Knox, Jonathan Edwards, John Wesley, George Whitefield, David Brainerd, John Henry Newman, Dwight L. Moody, Charles Finney, and Charles H. Spurgeon. His ecclesiology, though, was especially influenced by the Brethren, most notably Darby and C. A. Coates.¹²

In 1927, Nee moved to Shanghai, and set up the first assembly based upon many of the principles he was developing as a result of his studies and reflection.¹³ A trip to England in 1933 gave him the opportunity to personally meet and dialogue with various Brethren leaders. Upon independently taking the initiative to “break bread” at the Honor Oak Fellowship associated with

¹⁰ Norman H. Cliff. “Watchman Nee—Church Planter and Preacher of Holiness,” *Evangelical Review of Theology* 8, no. 2 (October 1984): 290.

¹¹ McCallum, Section IV.

¹² Sources giving different lists of influences in Nee’s life and theology include: Lambert, 52; McCallum Section V; Huelen Mountfort, “Watchman Nee (1903–1972): A Biographical Study,” *IIM Magazine Online* 4, no. 19 (May 13–20, 2002), n.p. [cited 2 Sept. 2011]. Online: <http://thirdmill.org/watchman-nee-1903-1972-a-biographical-study>; J. Gordon Melton, “The (Local) Church Movement,” *The Encyclopedia of American Religions, Fifth Edition* (Detroit: Gale Research Inc., 1996), n.p. [cited 2 Sept. 2011]. Online: <http://www.localchurches.org/recognition/excerpts/melton1.html>; Lam Wing-Hung, n.p.; “Watchman Nee’s Life and Ministry,” n.p. [cited 2 Sept. 2011]. Online: <http://www.watchmannee.org/life-ministry.html>

¹³ Kinnear, 76–77; Lam Wing-Hung, n.p.; Mountfort, n.p.

the ministry of Austin-Sparks, however, and a subsequent visit to China of several Exclusive Brethren representatives in 1935, Nee was informed he was no longer welcome to fellowship with them.¹⁴ This experience led Nee to denounce the exclusivist policies of the Brethren and to advocate the open communion stance that became a distinctive of the churches associated with the so-called “Little Flock” movement founded by Nee, which by 1936 had multiplied to thirty assemblies throughout China.¹⁵ The name “Little Flock” comes from a hymnal Nee published in 1931 entitled *Hymns for the Little Flock*, taking its name, in turn, from an English Brethren hymnal. It was never Nee’s intention that the local churches he founded adopt this name or any name that might be construed as a denominational label, but the name stuck, and to this day the movement started by Nee is popularly known in China as the “Little Flock.”¹⁶

Subsequent Bible study and reflection led Nee and his companions, who by this time included Witness Lee, to refine their ideas concerning New Testament “church ground.” Lee reminisces on this period:

The first church established in the Lord’s recovery was raised up in 1922 in Foochow, Brother Nee’s home town. After I was saved in 1925, I came in contact with Brother Nee through his writings. His writings helped a number of us to see the mistakes of the denominations. We came to realize that although we held to the Lord’s name, the gospel, and the Bible, we had to drop many other aspects of organized Christianity. Under the leadership of Brother Nee, we studied church history, biographies, and all the important spiritual and doctrinal writings. Through our study we gained a detailed knowledge of Christianity. Gradually we came to discern those practices we should adopt: immersion, eldership, practical holiness, the proper Pentecostal spirituality. Those who visited our meetings were often troubled by the fact that they could not categorize us. To some we

¹⁴ Melton, n.p.; Lam Wing-Hung, n.p.

¹⁵ McCallum, Section V.; Lam Wing-Hung, n.p.

¹⁶ Kinnear, 87; Mountfort, n.p.; Melton, n.p.

appeared to be like Baptists, but to others we resembled the Presbyterians or the Plymouth Brethren.¹⁷

During this time, the movement associated with Nee's ministry continued to grow. McCallum gives the following assessment:

It is hard to tell how large the Little Flock movement was in China at the time of the revolution. One reason for this is the fact that Nee felt it was fleshly to consider numbers. Therefore there was no systematic effort made by Little Flock themselves to count their people. There was no formal membership in the group, since Nee believed membership in the body of Christ was determined by God, and there was no good reason for the church to try to draw up a list. According to Cliff, in 1949 the Little Flock had over 70,000 members in 500 assemblies. However, according to the Ecumenical Press Service the "Little Flock" had at this time 362 places of worship and 39,000 members in the one province of Chekiang. These figures were interpreted as indicating that members of the "Little Flock" made up 15–20 per cent of the whole Protestant church in China, and that they may have been the largest single denomination. In other words, this estimate would show anywhere from 150,000 to 300,000 members for the Little Flock. Cheung affirms that there were "thousands" of assemblies by 1956, and that the Little Flock was the largest Christian group in China.¹⁸

For several years, Nee fell out of favor with and was placed under discipline by the elders of the Shanghai assembly, who thought he had violated their guiding principles by setting up a business out of which he used the proceeds to support Christian workers. Eventually though, they were able to iron out their differences and Nee was reinstated to his position of leadership within the group.¹⁹ During this same timeframe, Nee, together with Lee, recognized that certain aspects of the church leadership system they had developed were not working well and decided to refocus the work, concentrating more authority in the hands of the "apostles" or trans-congregational workers. During the next several years, there was a marked upswing in the growth of the movement, both numerically and spiritually, as many believers spontaneously began to give

¹⁷ Witness Lee, *The Genuine Ground of Oneness* (Anaheim: Living Stream Ministry, 1979), 141.

¹⁸ McCallum, Section V.

¹⁹ Lambert, 52–53. Lam Wing-Hung, n.p.

sacrificially to support the work, and large groups migrated to unreached cities, following a new church planting strategy suggested by Lee.²⁰

During this same period, the Communist Revolution spearheaded by Mao Zedong was taking root and gaining ground throughout China. Nee suggested that Lee leave the country and assume responsibility for the continued expansion of the movement among the Chinese diaspora.²¹ Against Lee's urging, Nee stayed behind and in 1952 was arrested and imprisoned by the government, having been declared guilty of charges of corrupt business practices and moral improprieties.²² According to Kinnear, "He is said to have been offered the chance of reinstatement as a public Christian figure if he would lead his immense following into step with the People's Government within the Three Self Reform Church."²³ Though the details of his last days are a bit cloudy, he remained in prison for almost twenty years, and died either in prison or shortly after being released in 1972, likely due to poor health.

In the meantime, many of the believers and other leaders of the "Little Flock" assemblies throughout China were pressured to integrate into the government-sponsored Three Self Patriotic Movement (TSPM). Though some initially capitulated, many subsequently reversed their decision and took the movement underground, opting to meet in private homes when their assembly halls were confiscated. Others were arrested and imprisoned along with Nee.

²⁰ Lambert, 52–53.

²¹ Kinnear, 142.

²² While conclusive evidence on the validity of the charges against Nee is extremely hard to substantiate, in the interest of Nee's legacy and reputation I think it is appropriate to note here that, in light of the combination of Nee's testimony, both in his written and transcribed works, the other documented events of his life, and the testimony of those who knew him personally, together with the known *modus operandi* and evident motives of the Mao regime, in my opinion, it is highly likely that the charges against Nee were trumped-up and his conviction and sentence were an extreme injustice.

²³ Kinnear, 155.

When the foreign missionaries were forced to leave the country, a large contingent of national believers associated with conservative groups such as the China Inland Mission decided to subsume their work under the auspices of the “Little Flock,” providing a significant initial impetus toward the staggering growth of the underground house church movement in subsequent years.²⁴ Kinnear provides the following testimony:

A missionary in Chekiang wrote, soon after leaving, of conditions in that Province: “The influence of the ‘Little Flock’ permeates the country. It has begun to lay a new and strong emphasis on evangelism. It has never had any affiliation with foreign missions, and this is a great asset in the New China. May it not be that this movement is God’s specially prepared instrument for the present time? It is close-knit, yet unobtrusive and adaptable in organization; it is wholly indigenous, deeply spiritual, and with a kindling missionary fervor.” A letter received a year or so later spoke of the possible union of the different groups of Christians in the town, and she comments: “This would mean a union under the leadership of the ‘Little Flock,’ and it is perhaps the best provision under the present difficulties.”²⁵

We will revisit the question of the enduring influence of Nee and the “Little Flock” at the conclusion of this paper.

Nee’s Local Church Ecclesiology

Contextual Factors

Whatever else one might think of Nee’s conclusions and ecclesiological methodology, it is hard to deny he was a diligent student of Scripture who strove to the best of his ability to consistently follow through with the implications to which his studies led him. In several aspects, though, Nee in his approach to Christian unity was a product of his time. On the heels of the Boxer Rebellion of 1900, anti-imperialist sentiment in China was at its peak. Beaten down by persecution and accusations of selling out to Western political interests, many Christians desired

²⁴ Cliff, 291.

²⁵ Kinnear, 147.

to distance themselves from the denominational model, which they considered to be a Western import.²⁶ At the Edinburgh World Missionary Conference of 1910, Chinese delegate Cheng Jingyi had made an impassioned plea to the missionaries gathered there to allow the Chinese church to pursue its own form of unified organization free from the entanglements of Western denominationalism.²⁷ Many conservative Christians, however, were not sympathetic to the growing worldwide ecumenical movement due to its emphasis on the social gospel and lack of definition regarding key doctrines such as the authority of Scripture.

In addition, Nee himself was undoubtedly influenced to a large degree in his thinking regarding ecclesiology and Christian unity by his reading of the Plymouth Brethren. But he was not predisposed to swallow everything they wrote without following the New Testament example of the Bereans, who “examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true” (Acts 17:11, NIV).²⁸ In many ways, the conclusions reached by Nee regarding ecclesiology can be explained by a combination of his socio-historical context, the influence of the Brethren, and his method of biblical hermeneutics, along with the sincerity of his commitment to faithfully carry out the corresponding implications.

Nee’s Hermeneutics

Nee had a high respect for the authority of Scripture and considered every detail to be important. In *Rethinking the Work*, he wrote: “We must remember the divine economy of words in Scripture, and we must realize that neither the occurrence, nor the record of it, was accidental. There is no room for chance happenings or unimportant records in God’s Word. All that is

²⁶ See, for example, Roberts, *The Secrets of Watchman Nee*, 149–50; Lam Wing-Hung, n.p.

²⁷ Brian Stanley, *The World Missionary Conference, Edinburgh 1910* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 108–09.

²⁸ Watchman Nee, *The Church and the Work, Vol. II: Rethinking the Work* (New York: Christian Fellowship Publishers, 1982), ix.

written there is written for our learning, and even a seemingly casual remark may enfold a precious lesson.”²⁹ Especially with regard to ecclesiology, he believed that Scripture teaches by way of example as much as by precept. Though circumstances may differ, the initial principles communicated largely by way of example in the book of Acts and other historical passages remain valid, and thus it is incumbent on modern-day disciples to search for clues, uncover these principles, and diligently apply them in their own context.³⁰ If anything, Nee may be accused of being over-meticulous in his desire to faithfully follow the example of Scripture. Kinnear opines: “When it came to ecclesiology his chief weakness (but one in which down the ages he has had plenty of company) lay in treating as mandatory the principles he had derived merely from New Testament example.”³¹

Nee was consistently recognized by those who knew him as a diligent student of Scripture. McCallum provides a couple of significant testimonies: “Witness Lee said of Nee, ‘I have never met a man so well-versed in the Scriptures as he.’ Noted Chinese evangelist John Sung said, ‘For exposition of the Scriptures, I am not equal to Watchman Nee.’”³²

Nee’s Ecclesiology Easily Misunderstood

Because Nee’s approach to ecclesiology is different than the traditional models known in the West it is susceptible to misunderstanding. On first consideration, much of it appears to be impractical or overly idealistic. In the Preface to the English Edition of *Rethinking the Work*, Nee remarks: “After the publication of my book in Chinese, quite a number of missionaries asked for an English edition. I felt reluctant to comply, for personally I should prefer to have those books

²⁹ Nee, *Rethinking the Work*, 144.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 5–9.

³¹ Kinnear, 175–76.

³² McCallum, Section IV.

translated which better represent my ministry, rather than this one which is liable to be misunderstood and controverted.”³³

The Universal Church: The Corporate Christ

According to Luke Pei-Yuan Lu, who wrote his doctoral dissertation on Nee’s ecclesiology, the starting place for understanding Nee is his identification of the universal Church as the corporate Christ. For Nee, just as Eve was taken out of Adam’s rib, the Church, as the Bride of the Second Adam, is an actual representation of Christ on Earth. Just as each member of the Body partakes separately of one common loaf in the Lord’s Supper (1 Cor 10:17), the Church is not merely all of the believers put together, but rather the putting together of all the little pieces of Christ in each individual Christian. At the present, earthly gatherings of Christians are an imperfect representation of this deeper-level spiritual reality. As the corporate Christ, the Church is like the ugly duckling, which is at heart a beautiful swan.³⁴

Strictly speaking, according to Nee, there is only one Church. The various groups of believers in different localities are merely local expressions of the corporate Christ. In each different city or town, wherever there is a group of believers who gather together, that group of believers constitutes the Church scattered and sojourning in that locality, a “miniature representation” of the Bride of Christ.³⁵

Another corollary of this understanding of the Church for Nee is the centrality of the building up of the Church in the economy of God. From Nee’s perspective, much missionary work is defective because it is focused merely on preaching the gospel and not on the building up

³³ Nee, *Rethinking the Work*, ix.

³⁴ Luke Pei-Yuan Lu. “Watchman Nee’s Doctrine of the Church.” Audio recording. 1994. Evangelical Theological Society 46th Annual Meeting. Chicago, Ill. “Hermeneutics: Issues and Concerns.” Nov. 17–19, 1994.

³⁵ Watchman Nee, *The Church and the Work, Vol I: Assembly Life* (New York: Christian Fellowship Publishers, 1982), 50.

of the Church. Nee was not opposed to missions or gospel preaching in and of themselves, but considered them as misguided if not carried out within the context of the building up of the Church, or the New Jerusalem, the ultimate objective which God has in mind.³⁶

The Local Church

Although Nee's understanding of the Church as one single entity is fundamental, he also recognized the practical reality of a plurality of local churches:

We have clearly two different aspects of the Church before us—the Church and the churches, the universal Church and the local churches. The Church is invisible; the churches are visible. The Church has no organization; the churches are organized. The Church is spiritual; the churches are spiritual and yet physical. The Church is purely an organism; the churches are an organism, yet at the same time they are organized, which is seen by the fact that elders and deacons hold office there.³⁷

He did not see each local church, however, as a separate entity, but as “the Church” in Ephesus, or “the Church” in Smyrna, “the Church” in Pergamos, etc.³⁸

When describing his understanding of a biblical local church, Nee first of all makes clear what it is not:

What is a New Testament church? It is not a building, a gospel hall, a preaching center, a mission, a work, an organization, a system, a denomination, or a sect. People may apply the term “church” to any of the above; nevertheless they are not churches. A New Testament church is the meeting together for worship, prayer, fellowship, and mutual edification, of all the people of God in a given locality, on the ground that they are Christians in the same locality.³⁹

A necessary corollary of this understanding for Nee is that there is only one local church in each city. By definition, all the believers living in a particular city or town are automatically members

³⁶ Nee, *Assembly Life*, 1–7.

³⁷ Nee, *Rethinking the Work*, 86.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 89.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

of the local church of that city or town. According to the example he found in Scripture, the boundary of a local church always coincides with the political boundary of the local municipality. There is no mention in the New Testament of national, provincial, or district-wide churches.⁴⁰ In addition, from Nee's perspective, though there may well be some missiological rationale for working toward a truly indigenous church, the New Testament church was not divided on the basis of ethnic, linguistic, or cultural differences, but rather on the basis of geopolitical locality.⁴¹ Nee is quite dogmatic in his conclusion: "In Scripture there is always one church in one place, never several churches in one place, nor one church in several places."⁴²

One Local Church, Various Meetings

An obvious question that arises with relation to the presence of only one local church in each city or town has to do with the size of the group, and, in those situations where the number of believers multiplies, the existence of venues large enough to accommodate everyone. Additionally, the New Testament speaks on various occasions of churches that met in private homes. Some have suggested that this implies the existence of a plurality of "house churches" within a given locality. According to Lee, the explanation for this is that in those places where a "house church" is mentioned in the New Testament, it is because the group of believers in that locality was not yet large enough to require a larger venue for its meetings.⁴³ This did not mean, however, that there was never a plurality of church meetings within a given locality. Whenever a local group of believers grew, such as in the case of the church in Jerusalem, they not only all

⁴⁰ Nee, *Assembly Life*, 97–103; *Rethinking the Work*, 89–92.

⁴¹ Nee, *Rethinking the Work*, 129–33.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 95.

⁴³ Witness Lee, *Young People's Training* (Anaheim: Living Stream Ministry, 1976), 194–95.

gathered together in one place but also from house to house in smaller meetings. This led Nee to conclude that even though all the believers together in one locality form one local church they may meet separately.⁴⁴ In practice, Nee preferred for church meetings to consist of no more than 50 or 100 believers in one place at one time. Though not dogmatic on this point, he believed that the model of Jesus breaking the crowd at the feeding of the 5,000 into groups of 50 and 100 served as a valid precedent and that the practical need for adequately personalized pastoral oversight demanded such a system.⁴⁵ Nee was careful to point out, however, that this does not imply a congregational system of church government. As one united local church, the different smaller groups of believers in a given locality shared a common administration and body of elders who were entrusted with the spiritual oversight of the entire church.⁴⁶

Local Church Ground

At first glance, all this seems simple enough. But Nee was not so disingenuous as to ignore the co-existence in any given locality of a number of different groups of Christians who each considered themselves to be legitimate local churches. If there is only one true local church in each locality, it is necessary to have some criteria for determining which group that is. From Nee's perspective, the true local church in any locality is that group of Christians which assembles together on "local church ground." Correctly understanding what Nee, Lee, and others in the Local Church movement identify as "local church ground" is a key element for understanding their overall ecclesiology. Though it may seem a technicality, the following point by Nee helps to avoid some confusion on an otherwise apparent discrepancy between his

⁴⁴ Nee, *Rethinking the Work*, 213–18.

⁴⁵ Nee, *Assembly Life*, 105–07.

⁴⁶ Watchman Nee, *The Church and the Work, Vol. III: Church Affairs* (New York: Christian Fellowship Publishers, 1982), 103.

definition of a local church as comprising all believers in a locality, whether they actually met together with them or not, and of “local church ground”: “We admit that we are not the church; we are merely those who meet on the ground of the church. We are not the church in Shanghai, but we are meeting in a way that maintains and upholds the church in Shanghai. We are standing on the same ground that the church stands on, yet we are not the very church itself.”⁴⁷

Though some have sought to differentiate between the teachings of Nee and Lee on various topics, on the key point of what constitutes “local church ground” it appears they are in essential agreement. Lee identifies the following six characteristics of a genuine local church: no particular name, no particular fellowship, no particular teaching, no isolated fellowship, no separate administration, and no hidden connections with other organizations.⁴⁸ A one-by-one look at Lee’s six characteristics will help us to understand what Nee and Lee both mean by “local church ground.”

No Particular Name

According to Nee and Lee, the problem with church names, no matter how non-descript they may be, is that they are by default sectarian. Lee observes: “Once a group assumes a special name, it has become a denomination, for taking such a designation separates that group from all other groups.”⁴⁹ This evidently eliminates the large majority of Christian groups from “local church ground.” This is also the reason why Nee was so opposed to the churches associated with his movement calling themselves the “Little Flock.”

⁴⁷ Nee, *Assembly Life*, 36.

⁴⁸ Witness Lee, Outline adapted from *Young People’s Training*, n.p. [cited 2 Sept. 2011]. Online: <http://www.local-church-characteristics.org/>

⁴⁹ Witness Lee, *Spirit and the Body* (Anaheim: Living Stream Ministries, 1976), 210.

No Particular Fellowship

Non-denominationalism, in and of itself, however, is not sufficient to place a group of believers on “local church ground.” They must also practice open communion. This particular aspect of “local church ground” set the “local churches” in China apart from the Exclusive Brethren. Nee explains: “The Brethren say that they cannot receive anyone to their bread-breaking meeting who has not left the denominations. But this makes them another sect. As for us, we can fellowship with all those who are saved in the denominations.”⁵⁰ This point is one on which Nee, Lee, and the “local churches” are particularly liable to being misunderstood. The following quote from Nee helps to clarify their position:

If we make non-sectarianism the basis of our fellowship, then we are dividing the church on a ground other than the one ordained of God, and thereby we form another sect. The scriptural ground for a church is a locality and not non-sectarianism. Any fellowship that is not as wide as the locality is sectarian. All Christians who live in the same place as I do, are in the same church as I am, and I dare exclude none. I acknowledge as my brother, and as a fellow member of my church, every child of God who lives in my locality.⁵¹

It should be noted, however, that although those associated with the “local churches” in China practice open communion they do not allow denominational Christians to preach or occupy positions of ministry responsibility, nor encourage the members of the local churches to go to the denominational meetings to “break bread” with them there.⁵²

No Particular Teaching

The following quote from Nee explains this aspect of “local church ground”:

⁵⁰ Nee, *Assembly Life*, online edition, Chapter 5, Section 5, n.p. [cited 2 Sept. 2011]. Online: <http://www.ministrybooks.org>

⁵¹ Nee, *Rethinking the Work*, 93.

⁵² Nee, *Assembly Life*, 49–56.

God forbids any division on doctrinal grounds. Some believe that [the] rapture is pre-tribulation; others, that it is post-tribulation. Some believe that all the saints will enter the kingdom; others believe that only a section will enter. Some believe that baptism is by immersion; others, that [it] is by sprinkling. Some believe that supernatural manifestations are a necessary accompaniment to the baptism in the Holy Spirit, while others do not. None of these doctrinal views constitute a scriptural basis for separating the children of God. Though some may be right and others wrong, God does not sanction any division on account of difference as to such beliefs.⁵³

It appears, however, that although Nee did not articulate a clear theory of *theological triage*,⁵⁴ he did distinguish between gospel essentials and non-essentials when dividing on doctrinal matters, positing 2 John 9—“Anyone who . . . does not continue in the teaching of Christ does not have God”—as an exception to the rule.⁵⁵ Also, “local church ground” does not imply that “local churches” fail to maintain any distinctive practices or customs. Lee explains: “It is right for us to have all our practices according to the Bible. Thus, in our practice we baptize people by immersion and we have the eldership, but we do not make these things particular items that divide us from other believers.”⁵⁶

No Isolated Fellowship

This aspect of “local church ground” refers not so much to fellowship with denominational Christians in the same locality as to fellowship with other “local churches” around the world. Lee comments: “The local churches should fellowship with all the genuine local churches on the whole earth to keep the universal fellowship of the Body of Christ. Any local church that does

⁵³ Nee, *Rethinking the Work*, 126.

⁵⁴ For an explanation of the concept of theological triage, see Albert R. Mohler, “Theological Triage,” *9Marks eJournal* (March-April 2008), n.p. [cited 3 January 2011]. Online: <http://www.9marks.org/ejournal/theological-triage>

⁵⁵ Nee, *Rethinking the Work*, 134.

⁵⁶ Lee, *Young People’s Training*, 192; for a more extended treatment of Nee’s view of baptism and open communion, see *Rethinking the Work*, 116–17; *Assembly Life*, 112.

not keep this universal fellowship of the Body of Christ is divisive and becomes a local sect.”⁵⁷

Though autonomous in their administration, Nee felt that the local churches should not be spiritually independent, but should rather seek out fellowship with other churches, respect decisions made by other churches with regard to church discipline, and take into consideration how their decisions will affect the local churches in other places.⁵⁸

No Separate Administration

As the list of qualifications for “local church ground” grows, the list of those who qualify as “local churches” necessarily shrinks. In keeping with Nee and Lee’s ecclesiology, there can be no more than one true local church in each locality:

In a particular locality there may be a group of Christians who have no special name, special practice, special teaching, or special fellowship. However, they may still have an administration separate from the church in that city. If so, that group is a sect. In addition to the local church in a city, an independent group may come into being that in nearly every respect is the same as the church. But that group may still insist upon having a separate administration. This is like having two city halls in the same city. But there should be just one city hall in a city. If there is more than one, it is a sign of division. If a group of Christians has truly seen the ground of unity, they will say, “We cannot have a separate administration. We must have one administration with the church that is already in this city.” As long as there is a city hall, it is impossible to have another one. If you insist upon a separate city hall, you are a division.⁵⁹

This qualification appears to deal with the eventuality of two competing groups in the same locality each claiming to be the church of that locality.

⁵⁷ Witness Lee, *The Eldership and the God-Ordained Way*, Vol. 2 (Anaheim: Living Streams Ministry, 1992), 122.

⁵⁸ Nee, *Assembly Life*, 52–59; *Rethinking the Work*, 96–99.

⁵⁹ Witness Lee, *The Conclusion of the New Testament: Messages 189–204* (Anaheim: Living Streams Ministry, 1988), 2149.

No Hidden Connection with Another Organization

This final qualification narrows the field even more. Lee explains what he means by a group with a hidden connection with another organization: “[They] are like a kite in the air: someone on the ground is holding the string. How high the kite flies does not depend upon the kite; it depends upon the one holding the string . . . One group said, “We are exactly the same as you . . . However, we eventually learned that this group was connected to an organization in England. The kite was flying in China, but the one who held the string was in England.”⁶⁰

Understood from the perspective of these six characteristics, it is easy to understand why the ecclesiology of Nee and Lee has been called impractical by some and sectarian by others. It is hard to imagine a group of Christians anywhere in the world that meets all six of these qualifications outside the specific circle of influence of Nee and Lee.

The Church and the Work

Another key aspect of Nee’s ecclesiology with significant missiological implications is his understanding of the division between “the church” and “the work.” Closely related to this is his understanding of the role of elders and apostles. His biblical rationale for this understanding is what he calls the Antioch principle, based on the premise that the church in Antioch, where the barrier between Jews and Gentiles was first broken down, and from which the apostolic team of Barnabas and Saul were sent out, was the first church established on pure “church ground,” and is thus the pattern on which subsequent churches and apostolic work should be based.⁶¹

According to Nee, “Since churches are the result of the work, they cannot possibly include it. If

⁶⁰ Lee, *Spirit and the Body*, 213–14.

⁶¹ Nee, *Rethinking the Work*, 50.

we are to understand the mind of God concerning His work, then we must differentiate clearly between the work and the churches.”⁶²

Apostles and Elders

A key to understanding the difference between “the church” and “the work” from Nee’s perspective is correctly distinguishing between the role of apostles and elders: “The work belongs to the apostles, while the churches belong to the local believers. The apostles are responsible for the work in any place, and the church is responsible for all the children of God there. . . . It is wrong for the apostles to interfere with the affairs of the church, but it is equally wrong for the church to interfere with the affairs of the work.”⁶³ Nee clarifies further: “The authorities which God sets in the Church are the elders and the apostles. God appoints the first in a local assembly. He appoints the second in the midst of many assemblies. The authority of an apostle is over various assemblies, whereas the authority of an elder is in the local assembly.”⁶⁴

When Nee talks about modern-day apostles, it is important to recognize that he does so not in the unique sense of the twelve, who were eyewitnesses of the resurrection of Jesus, but in the sense of all those who are called and set apart by God, and sent out on an extra-local basis to do the work of the ministry.⁶⁵ They are not sent out, however, as representatives of any particular local church or organization, but of the Church at large. Though it is impossible for the Church at

⁶² Ibid., 138.

⁶³ Ibid., 138–39.

⁶⁴ Nee, *Assembly Life*, 14. See also, *Church Affairs*, 109–12.

⁶⁵ Nee, *Rethinking the Work*, 35–42.

large to actually send them out, those who do send them out send them out acting on “church ground,” and thus in solidarity with the Church at large.⁶⁶

According to Nee, the work of the apostles is clear-cut: “As the work of the apostles is to preach the gospel and found churches, not to take responsibility in the churches already established, their office is not a church office.”⁶⁷ Though the work of the apostles is separate from the church, according to Nee, it is always done in support of the church: “God is always aimed at and centered in the Church.”⁶⁸ Thus, the apostles, who are the workers in charge of “the work,” whenever they come to a place where there is no local church, will seek by the preaching of the gospel to establish a local church. If there is no group of believers already meeting on “local church ground” (although there may be groups of believers meeting on denominational or “sectarian” grounds), they should seek to establish one.⁶⁹ Wherever there already is a local church, their work must be with a view to building up that church, not to establish a new one.

Additionally, the responsibility of the apostles, once there is a group of believers meeting together in a given place, is to discern whom God has chosen as elders and to publicly appoint them as elders. As long as the affairs of the group are still in the hands of the apostles, it is not yet a “church,” but “the work.” But as soon as responsibility is passed on to the local believers, it is a “church.”⁷⁰ In this sense, the ministry (or “work”) of the apostles is temporary, while the ministry of the church is ongoing and permanent. It is not the job of the apostles to stay and

⁶⁶ Ibid., 60-61.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 138.

⁶⁸ Nee, *Assembly Life*, 65.

⁶⁹ Nee, *Rethinking the Work*, 124.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 211.

shepherd the believers, but rather to transfer that responsibility over to local elders.⁷¹ This does not mean the responsibility of the apostles is always strictly evangelistic. They should also seek to establish the new believers, but this should be done through occasional visits, not by long-term residential ministry.⁷² Nee refers back to the example of Paul: “Every apostle must learn to live in ‘his own hired dwelling’ and work with that as his centre, leaving the responsibility of the local church to the local brethren. . . . When God indicates that an apostle should move, his Work moves with him, but the church remains. . . . On leaving a place an apostle should hand over all the fruit of his Work to the local church.”⁷³

Elders, according to Nee, must always be appointed from among the mature men in the local church itself, never imported from outside. They are given responsibility to represent the church.⁷⁴ In each locality there should be a plurality of elders, mutually accountable to each other, not responsible to do the ministry themselves, but rather to oversee the ministry carried out conjointly by all of the members of the body.⁷⁵ Church decisions are not to be made in a democratic fashion, by “casting of ballots.” They should not, however, be made in an autocratic fashion either. The opinions of all should be heard and taken into account, with the ultimate responsibility for making decisions left in the hands of the more spiritually mature brothers.⁷⁶

⁷¹ Ibid., 66–67.

⁷² Ibid., 67.

⁷³ Ibid., 145–46.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 74.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 82–83; *Assembly Life*, 15.

⁷⁶ Nee, *Church Affairs*, 126.

Spiritual Authority

One of the issues that has clouded Nee's, and to an even greater degree, Lee's reputation has been their approach to spiritual authority. The fine line between an appropriate exercise of spiritual authority and overbearing authoritarianism can sometimes be difficult to discern. From the early days, a great deal of emphasis was placed upon the dangers of an independent spirit, and the need of believers to respect the leadership of their appointed elders and not join with groups of believers other than the "local church" in the place in which they lived.

On a closely related issue, throughout his ministry Nee appeared to walk an ecclesiological tightrope on the question of local church autonomy and interconnectedness. In the early years, he leaned more to the side of local church autonomy, as manifested in the Antioch Principle, which he espouses in *Assembly Life*: "Each local assembly is locally governed, it being directly accountable to Christ and not answerable to any other organization or assembly. . . . Let us therefore never consider the assembly in Shanghai as the mother church. The assemblies in various localities are subject to Christ directly and not to any other assembly."⁷⁷ During this same time, he also leaned toward investing local elders with a large degree of authority. In *Rethinking the Work*, he plainly states:

Once a church was established, all responsibility was handed over to the local elders, and from that day the apostles exercised no control whatever in its affairs. All management was in the hands of the elders, and if they thought it right, they could even refuse an apostle entry into their church. Should such a thing occur, the apostle would have no authority to insist on being received, since all local authority had already passed from his hands into the hands of the elders.⁷⁸

⁷⁷ Nee, *Assembly Life*, 99.

⁷⁸ Nee, *Rethinking the Work*, 77.

In later years, however, he appears to back away from this and reserve more authority for apostles, who continue to exercise significant input and oversight into the lives of the local elders after having appointed them. In *Church Affairs*, Nee comments:

The apostles give the authority to the elders, and the elders administrate the local church directly. Therefore, everyone who is an elder, an overseer, must learn to listen to the apostles. Because their being elders is due to the apostles, they cannot overthrow the authority of the apostles. . . . After the meeting in Hangkow, some brothers misunderstood. They thought that though the elders are appointed by the apostles, they did not have to listen to the apostles.”⁷⁹

With significant input from Lee, and disillusioned by the treatment he received from the elders of the local church in Shanghai when they disciplined him for owning a business, he tweaked the Antioch Principle vision by adding the Jerusalem Principle, which “limited the power of the elders in the local assemblies, placed the whole movement under central control, and launched a program of evangelism by dispatching a host of workers to unreached areas.”⁸⁰ Though it is likely Nee himself was never totally comfortable with the implications of the Jerusalem Principle, Lee’s inclination in this direction led him and the groups with which he was associated in later years in a more authoritarian direction, leaning more on the side of inter-connectedness between the local churches and submission to a common apostolic authority.⁸¹

Nee and Lee: Two Peas from the Same Pod?

Before moving on to an evaluation of the strengths and weaknesses of Nee’s ecclesiology, it is necessary, due to the close association between the two, to assess to what degree the thoughts and work of Nee and Lee must be evaluated together as a single package. There is no doubt that Lee liked to present himself publicly as the spiritual heir and faithful disciple of Watchman Nee.

⁷⁹ Nee, *Church Affairs* online edition, Chapter 10, Section 2, n.p. [cited 2 Sept. 2011]. Online: www.ministrybooks.org

⁸⁰ Lam Wing-Hung, n.p.

⁸¹ Kinnear, 131–33, 139.

Due to the positive influence of Nee’s popular writings and wider name recognition, there are many reasons it may have been in his interest to do so. At the same time, it would be disingenuous to seek to disassociate the legacy of Lee with that of Nee. There is no questioning the fact that they were close friends and associates throughout the early development of the “Little Flock” or “Local Church” movement in China. In Lee’s writings, he references the teaching of Nee as a primary substantiating source of his own ideas. Nee encouraged and endorsed Lee’s ministry of taking the “local church” vision beyond the confines of China.

In spite of all this, several have suggested that Lee was not always faithful in his representation of the ideas and vision first enunciated by Nee. Lambert, for instance, states:

While Nee endured long imprisonment in labour-camps eventually suffering martyrdom in 1972, Lee sought to take over the movement from the safety first of Taiwan and then southern California. His views on the Trinity were reportedly unorthodox, and his control of the ‘Local Church,’ as it has become known, was increasingly authoritarian. In China the wide dissemination of his books in the early 1980s led many ‘Little Flock’ believers—and, sadly, often the younger, keen members—to wander into paths of extremism. In some cases, ill-taught followers ended up praying in the name of Lee and regarding him as little less than a new Messiah.”⁸²

Kinnear insinuates quite clearly that it was in good part the influence of Lee that led the “Little Flock” movement in a more authoritarian direction in the last years leading up to Nee’s imprisonment.⁸³ There is a lengthy online discussion between various disaffected former members of Lee’s movement contrasting the leadership style and general philosophy of Lee and Nee.⁸⁴ To some degree, the following comment by Nee seems to be prophetic with regard to the direction the “Local Church” movement would take under the spiritual leadership of Lee: “In the

⁸² Lambert, 122.

⁸³ Kinnear, 131–33.

⁸⁴ “Watchman Nee v. Witness Lee & BB,” n.p. [cited 2 Sept. 2011]. Online: <http://www.thebereans.net/forum2/showthread.php?t=48573>; another website, www.concernedbrothers.com, contains a plethora of information and commentary questioning the fidelity of the current leadership of much the Local Church movement to the vision of both Nee and Lee.

history of the Church it has frequently happened that when God has given special light or experience to any individual, that individual has stressed the particular truth revealed or experienced, and gathered round him people who appreciated his teaching, with the result that the leader, or the truth he emphasized, has become the ground of fellowship. Thus sects have multiplied.”⁸⁵

In spite of all this, the Christian Research Institute, in their thorough reevaluation of both Lee and the present Local Church movement, has determined that, though “harsh” and “regrettable” in their treatment of certain issues, they are within the realm of Christian orthodoxy and should not be regarded as a cult or a sect.⁸⁶ A Local Church statement of beliefs currently online, though notably succinct, is clearly evangelical in its affirmations.⁸⁷ Due to all this confusing information, it seems the best option is not to judge either Nee or Lee on the basis of the ideas and ministry of the other, except in the cases in which it can clearly be demonstrated that these coincide.

Evaluation: Strengths and Weaknesses

Upon evaluating the ideas and ministry of Watchman Nee, one thing that should not be overlooked is the impressive track record of lasting results for the extension of the kingdom of God. Dennis McCallum poignantly observes:

Although some of Nee’s time was spent preaching to a large (5000–7000 attendance) church in Shanghai, the main result of his work was the founding of hundreds of house churches throughout China. . . . It is interesting to compare Nee to John Wesley. Wesley’s work won, and incorporated into his fellowships about 120,000 people over the course of his 52 year ministry. Because of his work, and its aftermath, he is known to most people in the western world. The books on Wesley in an average library usually take up whole

⁸⁵ Nee, *Rethinking the Work*, 103.

⁸⁶ *Christian Research Journal*; see especially, Miller, 37.

⁸⁷ “What We Believe,” n.p. [cited 2 Sept. 2011]. Online: <http://fta.org/about/what-we-believe/>

shelves, analyzing every aspect of his life and teaching. Watchman Nee probably exceeded Wesley in terms of the actual size of his ministry, even though the duration of his ministry was only a little over one-half as long, and was carried out under circumstances including an 11-year-long world war. . . . Yet he is virtually unknown to westerners, and most libraries have nothing on his biography at all!⁸⁸

In addition to the results achieved during his active ministry, perhaps more impressive is the impact he and the ministry he inspired have had on the survival and continued growth of the church in China after the Communist Revolution. McCallum remarks: “Nobody has even hazarded a guess as to how many of the millions of Christians meeting in house churches today may be the outgrowth of Little Flock groups. Two things are clear: There are many house churches that are directly derived from Little Flock churches, and there are many other groups that owe a substantial debt to Little Flock doctrine and practice for their survival.”⁸⁹

As McCallum intimates, not only the numerical fruit obtained as a result Nee’s ministry, but also the model of church he espoused has much to commend itself, especially in a context of persecution such as that faced by the Chinese church after the Communist Revolution. According to Luke Pei-Yuan Lu,

Watchman Nee prepared the Chinese church for the days of the severe persecution ahead. When the dark age came with the arrival of the Communist totalitarianism and the retreat of all the Western missions, the Chinese church was able not only to survive, but also to proliferate hundredfold. Watchman Nee and his doctrine of the church has been and is suddenly being used by the sovereign God to equip the Chinese church for the second half of the 20th century.⁹⁰

According to Tony Lambert, the Chinese house church movement had its roots in the “Little Flock” and several other indigenous Chinese churches which were already emphasizing the

⁸⁸ McCallum, Section III.

⁸⁹ McCallum, Section V; Lambert (52–55) provides some regional statistics that, though outdated, give somewhat of an idea of the extension of “Little Flock”-related ministry in the 1980s and 90s.

⁹⁰ Luke Pei-Yuan Lu, n.p.

“importance of close fellowship in small group meetings” long before the revolution began.⁹¹ In addition, the “Little Flock” emphasis on “the direct headship of Christ over each local assembly” has become a rallying point for those who have refused to submit to the government control of the TSPM.⁹² Ironically, the churches refusing to register with the TSPM appear to be the most consistent and truly indigenous followers of the Three-Self formula of self-government, self-support, and self-propagation. Nee’s “local church” ecclesiology, with its emphasis on unpaid ministry, flexibility in meeting places and schedules, and lack of a hierarchical structure, in many ways blazed the trail in this regard.⁹³

Another strength, which at the same time may be seen as a weakness, is Nee’s sincerity and idealism with regard to following Scripture. All too often, denominational and institutional traditions have blinded us as evangelical Christians to the simplicity of New Testament ecclesiology. Nee, though not entirely free of his own biases inherited from his reading of the Brethren and others, had a refreshing approach to Scripture that allowed him to glean insights often overlooked by others.⁹⁴ McCallum, however, offers an interesting and very likely valid critique: “Unfortunately, like so many purists, Nee’s meticulous insistence on even the smallest detail sometimes resulted in a violation of a major ethical imperative. Nee’s idealism was one of his greatest strengths, but without prioritization, it also became a weakness.”⁹⁵

⁹¹ Lambert, 44.

⁹² Ibid., 55

⁹³ Cliff, 296–97; McCallum, Section V; Roberts, *Secrets of Watchman Nee*, 37; Luke Pei-Yuan Lu, n.p.; Mountfort, n.p.

⁹⁴ The sincerity of Nee’s approach and desire to submit to Scripture comes across clearly, for example, in his Introduction to *Rethinking the Work*, 2–3; McCallum (Section V) observes, however, that Nee’s “run-in with the exclusive brethren in England . . . may have [led him to form] a rather one-sided picture of denominationalism in the west.”

⁹⁵ McCallum, Section IV.

There are also some weaknesses in Nee's hermeneutical method. His tendency to find allegorical symbolism and binding examples in biblical narratives is at times unjustified. Though there is no doubt some validity to Nee's observation about the New Testament church being organized on a city-wide basis, in all likelihood he allowed his fixation on that particular aspect of ecclesiology to become a control belief that served as a grid through which he viewed a large part of the rest of his ecclesiological ideas.⁹⁶ Before criticizing Nee too harshly on this point, however, we would do well to remember that most (if not all) denominational systems are constructed upon similar presuppositions. We would also do well to maintain a good dose of doctrinal humility when approaching issues on which Christians throughout the centuries have disagreed so often.

Of special concern is Nee's approach to spiritual authority. Though there is no significant evidence that he himself abused his position of leadership and influence among those who looked to him as their spiritual teacher, it does appear that some of those who have found inspiration in Nee's ideas have been overly authoritarian. Though there is no doubt some validity to the observation that modern-day Western society and, to a large extent, the Western church itself is excessively individualistic and aversive to legitimate authority, it is also true that authentic heart religion tends to prosper more in an atmosphere of grace and liberty than one of coercion.

Conclusion

Viewed from an objective analysis of Scripture, the unity of the Body of Christ is a very important issue. In many ways, however, evangelicals have allowed the pitfalls and impracticability of different experiments in Christian unity to relegate it to the backburner or to

⁹⁶ Luke Pei-Yuan Lu, n.p.; Kinnear (175–76), and McCallum (Section V), all generally sympathetic to Nee, have expressed similar concerns.

sweep it under the carpet. Sadly, however, several of those who have taken notice of this situation and tried to propose biblical solutions, such as those involved in the Stone-Campbell Restoration Movement, the Exclusive Brethren, and Nee, Lee, and the Local Church, have ended up founding groups that eventually became more sectarian than the churches and denominations they were seeking to reform. Almost certainly, were he to have read it, the following indictment would have stung Nee deeply: “In Nee’s effort to search for the only possible biblical pattern to establish the church, the “Little Flock” was founded. However, Nee’s sincere search for the ideal way of establishing churches has not only been divisive, he knowingly or unknowingly created another denomination more restrictive than most.”⁹⁷ Yet, it is hard to avoid the conclusion that for the most part this evaluation is true. On the other hand, it can also be said that many of those who have taken a more open stance to unity, such as those involved in the Conciliar Ecumenical movement, and certain sectors of the Charismatic Renewal, have ended up compromising on essential gospel doctrine, consequently undermining the very church they propose to build up.

In certain aspects, there is a large degree of truth behind the imperative to order our relationships with other Christians on the ground of one united Body of Christ. It appears, however, that Nee’s and Lee’s logical deductions of what this implies are overly restrictive and ultimately counterproductive to true unity. On perhaps the most practical level, living on “church ground” involves deeper relationships and spiritual fellowship with all true gospel-centered Christians living within the same locality. No doubt, however, many, if not most, of these believers will be affiliated with some denominational network or another. Though certain differences of doctrine and practice make direct cooperation between certain groups of Christians in certain ministry projects impractical, there is no doubt much more that can be done in most settings when it comes to making “every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of

⁹⁷ Mountfort, n.p.

peace” (Eph 4:3). Also, when working to preach the gospel and plant churches in places where other ministry and churches already exist, we must diligently “take care how we build upon” the foundation of others (1 Cor 3:10).⁹⁸ May the lessons learned from Nee’s experiment in Christian unity not discourage us, but rather spur us on, as we seek to be as faithful as we possibly can in serving our Lord and Master who desires that we may be one, just as he and the Father are one, so that the world may believe (John 17:11, 21).

⁹⁸ I have written a blog post that suggests “10 Principles for Building on Someone Else’s Foundation.”
Online: <http://sbcimpact.org/2011/08/08/building-on-someone-elses-foundation/>

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