

WHY WE READ AND PROMOTE THE MINISTRY OF WATCHMAN NEE AND WITNESS LEE

Sometimes we who meet in the local churches are asked why we read and promote the ministry of Watchman Nee and Witness Lee. The asker may imply that doing so is wrong. When we are asked such a question, we should not become defensive but rather explain why we appreciate the ministry of these two servants of the Lord so much.

Nearly every Christian ministry focuses on man's need. Man is fallen and in need of mercy and forgiveness. This mercy and forgiveness come to us through the redemptive death of Christ. All of this is true, but it is only the beginning of the gospel (1 Cor. 15:3). The ministry of Watchman Nee and Witness Lee is unique in that it focuses on God's eternal heart's desire, which Paul in Ephesians calls the good pleasure of God's will (Eph. 1:5, 11). This ministry has shown us the eternal purpose of God, God's way to accomplish His purpose, and how we can participate in that purpose (Eph. 3:11, 9; 1:9-11; 4:12, 15-16). It has opened up the central line of the Bible, showing us that in order to carry out His plan, which the Bible calls God's economy, the Triune God created the heavens and the earth (Gen. 1:1) and then entered into that creation by becoming incarnated in Christ (John 1:14; 1 Tim. 3:16), who, through death and resurrection, became a life-giving Spirit (1 Cor. 15:45b) so that He could regenerate men (John 3:6) to become members of the Body of Christ (1 Cor. 12:27), which will consummate in the New Jerusalem as the mutual dwelling place of God and man for eternity (Rev. 21:2-3, 22). We are aware of no other ministry that opens up the Bible from beginning to end in such a marvelous way.

This ministry has brought us to realize that God is working out His plan to build up the Body of Christ through His complete salvation. The understanding of salvation of many Christian teachers stops at redemption, presenting heaven as man's hope. As a result, they neglect the present, ongoing salvation that God carries out in the believers in the life of His Son. The ministry of Watchman Nee and Witness Lee has plainly shown from Romans 5:10 that God's complete salvation is of two parts. The first part is accomplished judicially through the death of Christ (5:10a) and includes the forgiveness and washing away of our sins (Luke 24:47; Heb. 1:3), justification (Rom. 3:24-25), reconciliation to God (2 Cor. 5:19), and positional sanctification (1 Cor. 1:2; Heb. 13:12). The second part, which the apostle Paul refers to as being saved "much more," is carried out in the life of God's Son, which is the eternal life that we received when we believed in the Lord (Rom. 5:10b; Eph. 4:18; 1 John 5:12), the indestructible life by which He is able to save to the uttermost those who come forward to God through Him (Heb. 7:16, 25). Through the life-giving Spirit, God regenerated us with His divine life (John 3:3, 5; 1:12-13) with the goal of progressively sanctifying us with His divine nature (Rom. 15:16; 2 Thes. 2:13; 2 Pet. 1:4), renewing us inwardly (Titus 3:5; Rom. 12:2), and transforming us with His very element (2 Cor. 3:18), ultimately conforming us to the image of Christ and bringing us fully into His glorious expression (Rom. 8:29; Heb. 2:10).

These biblical truths point to the need to know Christ experientially, and, more than any other ministry we are aware of, the ministry of Watchman Nee and Witness Lee seeks to bring believers into a subjective knowing of Christ as their life (Col. 3:4). This ministry has presented to us, as no other ministry has, the unsearchably rich Christ as the gospel (Eph. 3:8), as the portion given to us by God (Col. 1:12; John 3:16). It has shown us that this Christ is now living in us (2 Cor. 13:5), dwelling in our spirit (2 Tim. 4:22), and even becoming one spirit with us (1 Cor. 6:17). It has shown us our need to grow in Christ, not merely in objective knowledge of the Bible, but in His life (Eph. 4:15; 1 Pet. 2:2; cf. 1 Cor. 8:1). It has inspired us to pursue knowing Christ and being found in Him, to gain His very person (Phil. 3:9-14), to be filled with the Spirit (Eph. 5:18), and to live and magnify Christ by the bountiful supply of the Spirit (Phil. 1:19-21). This ministry has shown us that it is these subjective truths, not principles of outward behavior, that will issue in the building up of the Body of Christ to accomplish God's eternal purpose according to His heart's desire (Eph. 3:16-21). While the objective truths are needed, the church as the Body of Christ is actually built up through the subjective experience of and growth in Christ, coupled with the mutual supply among all the members (Col. 2:19; Eph. 4:15-16).

This view of God's intention and His economy to carry out this intention is an overarching principle in this ministry's application of biblical truths. For example, to many the Triune God is an arcane doctrine. To others it is only as a litmus test to assess others' orthodoxy. However, in attempting to construct a mental model or to adhere to a credal formulation of the Divine Trinity, many Christian teachers either overtly or unconsciously stray into an errant view that makes the Trinity three separate Gods (i.e., tritheism). They teach that the Father, the Son, and the Spirit are not only distinct in the Godhead but also separate, denying the clear meaning and import of crucial passages of Scripture. The Bible clearly states that the Father and the Son mutually indwell one another (John 14:9-10; 17:21, 23). Moreover, the

Bible also tells us that in resurrection the Lord (Jesus Christ, cf. 2 Cor. 3:14, 16; 4:5) is the Spirit (3:17) and hence the Spirit takes on new designations, including the Spirit of Jesus (Acts 16:7), the Spirit of Christ (Rom. 8:9), and the Spirit of Jesus Christ (Phil. 1:19). Thus, the coming of the Spirit to indwell the believers is the coming of Christ into them (John 14:17-18). For this reason the Bible at times uses *Christ* and *the Spirit* interchangeably (Rom. 8:9-11). Admittedly, how the three of the Godhead coinhere (mutually indwell one another) is an unfathomable mystery. Nevertheless, it is the revelation of the Bible, and to be faithful to our God we must both believe it and teach it (Gal. 1:10; 1:Thes. 2:4; 1 Cor. 4:1-2; Acts 20:20).

However, from the very beginning Watchman Nee and Witness Lee were not interested in mere doctrinal correctness, though they were very careful to only teach what is revealed in the Bible. To that end, they sought to understand the implications of the depths of the truth in the Word for our Christian life and service, both individually and corporately in the Body of Christ, and to find ways to foster the believers receiving their ministry in both their growth in Christ and the development of their capacity to serve the Lord. Using the example cited above, this ministry has shown us that the Bible's unveiling of the Divine Trinity is not for doctrinal knowledge but has vital significance for our Christian life. The concept of many Christians is that the Spirit is given merely to influence believers to depart from sin and do good. In fact, the function of the Spirit is to impart the divine life with all of its attributes into the believers (2 Cor. 3:6; John 6:63) and to make subjectively real all that the Father and the Son are and have accomplished (John 14:6, 17; 15:26; 16:13-15). Moreover, through His death and resurrection, Christ has brought the believers into Himself so that they now coinhere with Him in the same oneness that He has with the Father (John 14:20; 17:21, 23). Thus, we may abide in God and He in us (1 John 4:13, 15-16). This is not a mere objective fact. Rather, it is the very living that God desires all Christians to have.

Moreover, this ministry has encouraged us that every believer through the grace of Christ can reach unbelievers with the gospel (Acts 8:4) and build up the church by speaking to one another in mutuality (1 Cor. 14:26), and it has endeavored to perfect believers in such service to the Lord (Eph. 4:11-12). It has led us to abandon the unscriptural clergy/laity and denominational systems (Rev. 2:6 and footnote 1; 1 Cor. 1:10-13), both of which frustrate the growth in life and development in function of the members of Christ's Body. Our brothers' ministry has caused us to seek to maintain a testimony of practical oneness by meeting according to the New Testament pattern of the boundary of a local church being the city in which it resides (Acts 8:1; 13:1; 1 Cor. 1:2; Rev. 1:11), while at the same time seeking to maintain oneness with our fellow believers who choose not to meet on that basis (Eph. 4:3; 1 Cor. 1:9; 1 John 1:3).

Simply because Watchman Nee and Witness Lee were born in China, our critics sometimes misrepresent their ministry as being outside the mainstream of Christian teaching and influenced by Eastern mysticism. This is absolutely not true. Sadly, it plays into prejudicial racial and cultural stereotypes. The fact is that both men came from Christian families and were students not only of the Bible but also of Christian history and of historical Western Christian thought. From their study they gleaned the best of Christian teaching through the past two millennia, including many teachings that have been abandoned or neglected by contemporary Christian teachers, many of whom fall into the category of those who tickle the ears of their audiences (2 Tim. 4:3). On the one hand, we treasure the recovery of justification by faith through Martin Luther and the Reformers, the recovery of the preaching of the gospel through men such as John Wesley and George Whitfield, the opening of the many biblical truths through John Nelson Darby and the Brethren, the recovery of the subjective experience of the indwelling Christ by saints such as William Law and Andrew Murray, among many others. On the other hand, we realize that all of these recoveries fall short of what God desires to do today, which is to work out the building up of the Body of Christ through knowing Christ experientially as our life and everything, developing the function of every member of the Body of Christ, and practicing the oneness of the Body in local churches according to the New Testament pattern.

We have observed that ministries that emphasize other matters, even objective biblical truths or proper spiritual principles, can distract us from God's goal of the building up of the Body of Christ to be His fullness and from the central line of God's economy to accomplish that purpose (Eph. 4:14; 1 Tim. 1:3-4). In short, we find in the ministry of Watchman Nee and Witness Lee the ministry that most closely matches the central focus and the breadth of the teaching of the apostles in the New Testament, and we are willing to settle for nothing less (Acts 2:42; Titus 1:9).