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The Spirituality of Watchman Nee from a Neo-Confucian Perspective

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Abstract

Watchman Nee (Ni Tuosheng, 1903-1972) is one of the most influential Chinese theologians. His theology formed in the early twentieth century and still attracts Chinese people today. This thesis undertakes an innovative twofold-perspective investigation into Nee's idea of sanctification. By clarifying Nee's synthesizing of the Holiness Movement theologies and examining his view of sanctification through the lens of the neo-Confucian idea of moral cultivation, this work argues that the practical pursuit of living in holiness and the synthesis of rational thinking and mystical intuition of Nee's spirituality both deeply resonated within the Chinese spiritual neo-Confucian mindset. Viewing Nee's theology as a bridge connecting profound Western theological traditions and potential Chinese cultural elements, this thesis deepens the understanding of Nee's theology, suggests possible spiritual interactions between Christianity and Chinese culture, and explores the future viability of Charismatic Chinese Christianity in relation to Nee's vision of Chinese Christianity.

Keywords

Watchman Nee, the Holiness Movement, Neo-Confucianism, mysticism, spirituality, sanctification, inter-religious dialogue, Chinese Christianity.

Contents

Abstract.....	i
1 Introduction.....	1
1.1 Literature Review	3
1.2 Methodology	10
2 Watchman Nee’s Western Theological Sources	12
3 The Theological Spirituality of Watchman Nee	38
3.1 The Spirituality of Neo-Confucianism	39
3.2 The Theological Spirituality of Watchman Nee.....	49
3.2.1 The Blood of Christ	51
3.2.2 The Cross of Christ.....	52
3.2.3 The Theological Tripartite Anthropology.....	57
3.2.4 Nee’s View of Sanctification.....	59
4 Conclusion	72
Bibliography	78
Curriculum Vitae.....	83

Chapter 1

1 Introduction

Watchman Nee (Ni Tuosheng, 1903-1972), the founder of the Little Flock (xiaoqun), also known as the Christian Assembly (Jidutu Juhuichu) or the Local Churches (Difang zhaohui), is one of the most influential Chinese Christian theologians. Nee played an important role in the indigenization of Christianity in Modern China. He developed his theology and founded his church in a turbulent period, and many commentators consider his theology a response to this turbulent period. In 1919, the May Fourth Movement broke out and gave rise to a tide of anti-imperialism. It also led to the rise of a widely hostile attitude towards all kinds of religions in China, particularly Christianity, as the previous century was the period of numerous Christian missions to China. Under these circumstances, in 1922, the Anti-Christian Movement rose in Shanghai and Beijing. Afterward, the influence of this campaign spread throughout much of China. In the first half of the twentieth century, China was in the shadow of the second Sino-Japanese War (1937-1945). During this time, denominational churches with Western roots and leadership suffered greatly. They were attacked by either angry Chinese masses or destructive military forces during the war.¹ However, at the same time, several indigenous Protestant Christian sects gradually emerged in many rural areas.² Nee's Little Flock was one of these groups, and it originated in the 1930s. The Little Flock survived both the Republican era (1912-1949) and the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976). It is one of the most successful Protestant churches in contemporary China. Its theological foundation established by Nee energizes the local churches and remains attractive to the Chinese people today. The vitality and endurance of Nee's theology in China can be attributed to not only its relevance to the social and historical context of modern China, but also to its deep resonance with the Chinese culture.

¹ In Japanese occupied areas, denominational church properties in large cities were either destroyed or looted by military forces. See in Xi Lian, *Redeemed by Fire: The Rise of Popular Christianity in Modern China* (New Haven [Conn.]: Yale University Press, 2010), 179.

² The earliest independent Protestant group was the True Jesus Church founded by Wei Enbo Paul (1876?-1919) in 1917. The other two prominent independent Protestant sects are the Jesus Family and the Little Flock. They both formed in the first half of the twentieth century.

One of the distinctive features of Nee's theology is his emphasis on spirituality. In this study, spirituality refers to a form of personal piety associated with certain values centered around individual life.³ Nee's spirituality can be demonstrated by his schema of sanctification, which is based on his theology of the Cross, theological tripartite anthropology and ecclesiology. Each has its origin in classical or Western theology and in the missions of the late 1800s and early 1900s, such as the Brethren or Keswick movement, but is adapted for his Chinese environment. Nee's theology of the Cross, theological tripartite anthropology and ecclesiology, then, are both derivative and innovative, and the language he uses must be carefully parsed in terms of origin and innovation. His theology of the Cross is the fundamental principle of sanctification; his tripartite anthropology explains the underlying logic of sanctification; and his functional ecclesiology reveals the ultimate purpose of sanctification. According to Nee, sanctification includes two steps: regeneration and reproduction. The former is the salvation of the spirit and signifies the new birth in which one's spirit is quickened while the latter refers to the process of realizing holiness whereby one manifests the salvation of the soul. This implies his tripartite anthropology. The salvation of the spirit at the new birth, the salvation of the soul in the present life, and the salvation of the body through rapture at Christ's Second Coming. Nee's teachings of sanctification are mainly concerned with the first two aspects: salvation of the spirit and the soul, and it is his ecclesiology where one works out the process of sanctification by living a godly life. According to Nee, to be a spiritual Christian requires one to grasp the divine truth on the one hand *and* to live a holy or spiritual life on the other hand. In his literary works, Nee formulated a normal pattern of living for believers. According to Nee, as long as believers practice according to his instructions and have their soul life sanctified, they will grow into the likeness of Jesus Christ. At first glance, this seems very similar to many Protestant theologies, especially the missionary theologies that flooded China inspired by the Brethren and Keswick movements and their adaptation of historic Christian theologies.

Crucially, however, Nee's exposition of individual spiritual growth shares some similarities with the idea of self-cultivation found in neo-Confucianism. Neo-Confucianism is one of the most influential Chinese cultural traditions to permeate the

³ Don Cupitt, *Mysticism after Modernity* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers Ltd, 1998), 27.

Chinese spiritual landscape. Both of Nee's sanctification and the neo-Confucian self-cultivation stressed a subjective spiritual/moral growth and the role the mind plays in the process of sanctification/cultivation. However, these similarities do not mean that Nee consciously made use of Neo-Confucian concepts to interpret his view of spirituality. Neither did Nee mention any Neo-Confucian languages in any of his works, nor did he comment on Neo-Confucianism in general. Yet his scholarly attainment of neo-Confucianism and its subtle influence on his mindset should not be overlooked. It was recognized that Nee's knowledge of Confucianism was beyond merely understanding it as a general cultural background.⁴ Ni Wenxiu, Nee's father, studied Confucian classics for the state's competitive civil service examinations after he finished his education in a Christian elementary school. His good performance in the second degree earned him the position of Junior Officer for Imperial Customs.⁵ Apart from the potential influence of his father, when Nee was a child, he and his elder sisters received traditional Chinese education at home. His parents taught them propriety and Chinese calligraphy. Moreover, Nee's father hired a tutor (*xiuca*), a graduate of the first degree in the civil service examinations, to teach his children moral principles in the Four Books and the Five Classics of Confucianism.⁶ Therefore, given that Nee was exposed to Confucianism from an early age, the connections between neo-Confucianism and his theological spirituality deserve special attention. It is no accident that Nee's theological spirituality is in harmony with the Confucian moral cultivation. Therefore, it is meaningful to conduct a comparative study of Nee's spirituality and neo-Confucianism to uncover how he adapts his theological approach to his cultural context.

1.1 Literature Review

Many previous studies on Nee have been drawn on for this project. Generally, existing studies on Nee's spirituality can be divided into two categories of perspective: 1) socio-historical perspective and 2) theological perspective (like this work). Within the socio-historical group, Joseph Tse-Hei Lee's "Watchman Nee and the Little Flock Movement in Maoist China" (2005) examines the activities of Nee

⁴ Angus Kinnear, *Against the Tide: The Unforgettable Story of Watchman Nee*, 3rd ed. (CLC Publications, 2017), 10.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ *Ibid.*, 22.

and his Little Flock in a historical environment that was dominated by Maoist ideology. Lee's work revealed intricate interactions between the Little Flock and the Maoist state.⁷ His paper argued that even though the social and political circumstances were hostile towards Christianity, Nee's theology was well received by many Chinese people and energized his Little Flock. Lee concluded that it was the independent and flexible form of the local congregation that helped the Little Flock through the difficult Maoist period. Nee's insistence that the Little Flock should avoid politics and stay independent from the government's authorized churches saved the Little Flock from being weakened by the Maoist state. The only reference to Nee's spirituality in Lee's work is concerned with Nee's insistence that worldly affairs should remain separate from spiritual pursuit and that Nee viewed politics with disdain. Admittedly, Nee's passive attitude towards social and political issues benefited his Little Flock during a certain historical period; however, the theological foundations of his quietistic spirituality deserve further discussion rather than being merely regarded as a lucky accident.

Xi Lian, in his monograph *Redeemed by Fire: The Rise of Popular Christianity in Modern China* (2010), studied the emergence of popular Christianity in twentieth-century China.⁸ Watchman Nee and his Little Flock were examined with many conclusions similar to Lee but with a deeper investigation into the origins of Nee's theology. The course of the formation of Nee's theology was outlined chronologically in its particular historical context. Lian traced Nee's contacts with several Western figures who had deeply impacted his theology, such as Margaret E. Barber (1866-1929), Jessie Penn-Lewis (1861-1927), and Theodore Austin-Sparks (1888-1971). Lian revealed the major sources of Nee's theology, including the Holiness Movement, the Plymouth Brethren Movement and Quietism. Thus, Nee's theology was viewed in both Western and Chinese theological contexts. However, the content of Nee's theology was not examined at length; rather, it was merely catalogued because Lian conducted his study from a historical perspective. Like Lee, Lian believed that it was the quietist impulse that allowed Nee's flock to endure Maoism. Lian did not deal with the content of this theology in either its Christian or Chinese form in detail.

⁷ Joseph Tse-Hei Lee, "Watchman Nee and the Little Flock Movement in Maoist China," *Church History* 74, no. 1 (2005): 68–96.

⁸ Xi Lian, *Redeemed by Fire: The Rise of Popular Christianity in Modern China* (New Haven [Conn.]: Yale University Press, 2010).

Thus, Nee's emphasis on spirituality as a distinctive feature of his theology was not thoroughly discussed. Lee and Lian simply articulate that Nee's lack of political interest allowed his congregations to avoid Maoist persecution and hostility until the threat passed.

Those scholars who do pay attention to Nee's theology include Ken Ang Lee. In "Watchman Nee: A Study of his Major Theological Themes" (1989), Lee examined Nee's theology in terms of the following theological categories: anthropology, applied soteriology, Christology and spirituality.⁹ Lee argued that theological anthropology was the crucial lens through which to view Nee's work. Nee's division of the spirit, the soul and the body was, in essence, a dualistic polarization of the spiritual and the material.¹⁰ Lee argued that Nee's theology manifested a distinctive Chinese mindset. Instead of resorting to abstract speculations, Nee organized his theological ideas in a pragmatic way and made his doctrines relevant to people's daily lives and individual situations. Lee called Nee's approach Chinese ethico-pragmatism.¹¹ Lee also noted that several important theological themes, such as the nature of God, the nature of the Holy Spirit, the nature of the Trinity, and the doctrine of election, were foundational concepts in Western theology (and some of which raise issues with dualism) but were left untreated in Nee's theology.¹² Yet this does not mean that Nee was theologically weak; instead, it suggests that his theology was practice-oriented. He crafted his theology to meet the needs of Chinese believers. As a result, Nee's theology appeared familiar to Chinese audiences and was easy for them to understand. Lee argued that Nee's theology was in harmony with the Chinese culture and mindset. Although this thesis agrees with Lee in this regard, several questions need further exploration. What particular theological sources did Nee adopt from the West? How did Nee arrange his Western theological sources to make them fit into the Chinese cultural mindset? And how did Nee's theology interact with his Chinese cultural background? These questions will be addressed in the following chapters. Lee's work is an important contribution to Nee scholarship, but needs to be expanded to examine the particular sources of Nee's dualism, his anthropology and Chinese context.

⁹ Ken Ang Lee, "Watchman Nee: A Study of His Major Theological Themes" (Westminster Theological Seminary, 1989).

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 178.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 186.

¹² *Ibid.*, 187.

In “Watchman Nee’s theology of Victory: An Examination and Critique from A Lutheran Perspective” (1997), Yuan-wei Liao explored Nee’s theological anthropology and conceptions of justification and sanctification in terms of Nee’s theology of victory.¹³ Liao identified Nee’s theology as a “spiritual theology” in which sanctification served as the central issue in Nee’s teachings. With regard to spirituality, Liao criticized Nee’s tripartite anthropology for its absolute division between the spirit and the outward person (soul and body), presumably in favour of a more classical Lutheran position. Noting that Nee’s tripartite division implied that the cause of the Fall (actual sin versus original sin) existed in human creaturehood and action, Liao deemed that this problematized Nee’s ‘full’ salvation. Liao described Nee’s theology of victory as a “scene of a strictly compartmentalized humanity collecting a fragmented salvation.”¹⁴ Although Nee expressed that the full salvation had been accomplished by God alone, the critical role of human free will in sanctification implied the significance and necessity of human efforts.¹⁵ According to Liao, a rehabilitation of Luther is needed in Nee’s thought. But it is not Luther that is Nee’s inspiration; rather, it is Nee’s deep roots in the Holiness Movement and his interest in the neo-Confucian context.

Chin Ken Pa, in “The Theological Anthropology of Watchman Nee: In the Context of Taoist Tradition” (2011),¹⁶ analyzed Nee’s tripartite theological anthropology from a Taoist perspective and claimed that Nee unconsciously shared common spiritual features with Zhuangzi (Zhuang Zhou, 369BC-286BC). The affinity of Nee’s theology with the traditional Chinese way of thinking made Nee’s theological ideas naturally acceptable for Chinese adherents. Chin’s approach is close to the aforementioned Ken Ang Lee’s. Both scholars have noticed the similarities between Nee’s theology and Chinese culture. Like Ken Ang Lee, Chin contended that Nee’s tripartite anthropology was shaped by dualism. However, for Chin, its source was not Western Christian theology but Taoism. The opposing relationship between the outer person (soul and body) and the spirit and was essentially a division between the material and the non-material. Furthermore, Chin stressed that Nee’s total denial of

¹³ Yuan-wei Liao, “Watchman Nee’s Theology of Victory: An Examination and Critique from A Lutheran Perspective” (Luther Seminary, 1997).

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 179-180.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 195.

¹⁶ Ken Pa Chin, “The Theological Anthropology of Watchman Nee: In the Context of Taoist Tradition,” *Sino-Christian Studies*, no.12 (2011): 159–87.

every form of human efforts, especially human intellectual ability, was rooted in the anti-intellectual tendency of Lao-Zhuang thoughts.¹⁷ Chin found that it was the Taoist idea of *kong* (emptiness, 空) rather than the influences of Western theological traditions that determined Nee's emphasis on the spirit. The normal Christian life as suggested by Nee is in line with the idea proposed by Laozi: *zhixu shoujing* (arrive at the extreme of emptiness, and guard the extreme of the quiescence, 致虛守靜). According to Laozi, "Returning to the original root is what is meant by quiescence. Quiescence is what is meant by returning to destiny. Returning to destiny is what is meant by eternity. Knowing eternity is what is meant by sagacity."¹⁸ Because of the affinity between Nee's thoughts and Taoism, Chin called Nee a "Taoist Christian."¹⁹ Although the ultimate purpose of these two ideologies are different, Nee's theology, to at least some degree, can be interpreted in a Taoist cultural context. To supplement Chin's view, this thesis will adopt Chin's approach but examine Nee's theology from a different Chinese cultural perspective, neo-Confucianism. Nee's theology had not only an anti-intellectual tendency, but also a cognitive inclination, revealing a strong neo-Confucianism influence. Therefore, this thesis examines Nee's theology from a neo-Confucian perspective.

Two more studies are helpful. Dongsheng John Wu's *Understanding Watchman Nee: Spirituality, Knowledge, and Formation* (2014) focused on Nee's idea of spirituality picking up the 'ethico-practical' tones of other theologies.²⁰ Wu traced several Western theological traditions that had significant influence on the formation of Nee's theology and then explored Nee's theology alongside the thoughts of contemporary spirituality theologian Mark McIntosh. Wu centered his study on Nee's "spiritual knowledge." He explored Nee's view of revelation and illumination, the role of the mind in spiritual progress, and Nee's idea of spiritual perception. Wu admitted that Nee's theology was inconsistent. Nee held a negative attitude towards the human intellect while he also affirmed the significance of the human mind in spiritual growth. To address this problem, Wu argued that systematic consistency was not Nee's central concern. Instead, what Nee really cared about was a more practical

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 174.

¹⁸ Xiaogan Liu, ed., *Dao Companion to Daoist Philosophy* (Springer Netherlands, 2015), 118.

¹⁹ Ken Pa Chin, "The Theological Anthropology of Watchman Nee: In the Context of Taoist Tradition," *Sino-Christian Studies*, no.12 (2011): 179.

²⁰ Dongsheng John Wu, *Understanding Watchman Nee: Spirituality, Knowledge, and Formation* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2014).

issue.²¹ According to Wu, Nee focused on whether or not his teachings would meet the varying needs of his audience. For those at the beginning of their spiritual life, it was necessary to constrain the independent activity of the mind; therefore, the human intellect should be completely denied. On the other hand, for those who had a relatively mature spiritual life, their minds should serve as assistants for their spirits; therefore, the human intellect was important.²² Wu identified this evident contradiction in Nee's theology as Nee's "pastoral sensitivity."²³ Wu recognized Nee's practical concern and evaluated his theology from a Western spiritual context. Wu argued that Nee's theology of spirituality was not only intelligible in the orthodox Christian spiritual tradition (a la McIntosh) but also meaningful in contemporary spiritual practice.²⁴ However, Wu's study appears to lack an examination of Nee's Chinese cultural context and its influence on his spirituality. Nee's spirituality cannot be fully understood without an exploration of his Chinese cultural background because Nee's emphasis on practice had its origin in the Chinese mindset and not McIntosh's revision of Christian mysticism. But it is certainly clear that there is a mystical or spiritual dimension to Nee's applied theology. This thesis will pay attention to the interactions of Nee's spirituality with the Chinese spiritual landscape and will compare Nee's view of sanctification with the neo-Confucian idea of moral cultivation.

Zhenyu Guo's "A Study of Watchman Nee's Idea on the Theology of the Cross" (2015) studied Nee's theology of the Cross. Guo deepened Nee's spirituality as a continuum rather than as two disparate or ad hoc ideas derived from his theology. Guo examined Nee's theology by dividing it into three categories: salvation, justification and the Holy Spirit.²⁵ Guo maintained that Nee understood the theology of the Cross in a practical way rather than an epistemological one because Nee's theology of the Cross was contained in his teachings of sanctification and served as the principle of believers' spiritual growth.²⁶ Guo argued that the prominent feature of Nee's theology was the intimate relationship between the Cross and individual life

²¹ *Ibid.*, 177.

²² *Ibid.*

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 241.

²⁵ Zhenyu Guo, "A Study of Watchman Nee's Idea on the 'Theology of the Cross'" (Chung Yuan Christian University, 2015).

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 146.

experiences. Nee emphasized that believers should “bear the Cross” everyday and deny their personal desires. According to Nee, the Cross should function significantly in believers’ subjective experiences. Admittedly, Guo has pointed out one of the most distinctive characteristics of Nee’s theology: Nee’s emphasis on individual holiness. Nevertheless, Guo failed to interrogate the manner in which Nee organized his idea of spirituality due to his neglect of Nee’s neo-Confucian influences.

As seen in the previous studies, Nee’s theology pursued spiritual purity and centered on the existential situation of individual believers. Nee’s pursuit of living a deeper Christian life can certainly be traced back to classical and contemporary Western theological sources. Nee was significantly influenced by the Holiness Movement and the Plymouth Brethren Movement; he carried on their passion for living a higher Christian life and made creative use of their teachings to develop his own spiritual theology. Apart from the impact of Western theological traditions, Nee’s theology was also shaped by his Chinese cultural context. Nee’s theology is not an abstract and coherent system of doctrines but rather a set of practical instructions for individual sanctification. Nee’s emphasis on practice derived from his Chinese mindset. As Chin Ken Pa and Ken Ang Lee mentioned, the Chinese way of thinking subtly influenced the construction of Nee’s theology. In traditional Chinese culture, truth is always concerned with the existence of human beings; therefore, it never separates from practice. As Wang Yangming, one of the greatest neo-Confucian thinkers, said, “Knowing and acting form a unity” (*zhixing heyi*, 知行合一). Thus, Nee’s teachings were all centered around and organized for the purpose of spiritual practice: sanctification. Many scholars have noticed these characteristics, yet few studies have been done to comprehensively explore the underlying causes that contributed to Nee’s distinctiveness.

The only monograph on Nee’s spirituality was done by Dongsheng John Wu in 2014. Wu focused on the aspect of “spiritual knowing” in Nee’s theology. He regarded revelation and illumination as important parts of spiritual practice and examined their significance as a mystery of hearing God. Additionally, Wu analyzed the roles of the human mind and the Holy Spirit in one’s spiritual journey. Apart from Nee’s own theological ideas, Wu also distinguished several Western theological traditions in Nee’s teachings, such as the Holiness Movement, the Plymouth Brethren Movement

and Quietism. On the one hand, Wu argued that Nee did not deviate from mainstream Western theologies because Nee's theological roots were identified within these traditions; and on the other hand, Wu fully affirmed the value of Nee's theology in terms of Christian mystical spirituality. Another study that is of concern to this thesis in terms of its approach is the paper by Chin Ken Pa. Chin reflected on Nee's theological anthropology from a Taoist perspective and revealed the affinity between Nee's theology and Chinese spiritual culture. He argued that Nee's potential Chinese mindset greatly shaped his theology. Nee's negative attitude towards worldly affairs and his anti-intellectual inclination were both in accordance with Taoism. Compared to the Western theological influences distinguished in Nee's teachings, his Chinese way of thinking mattered more in the formation of his theology. It was Nee's Chinese mindset that mainly led to his interest in mystical teachings and his emphasis on the spirit. Chin's paper revealed that Nee's theology could not be deeply understood without special attention paid to Nee's Chinese cultural background. Inspired by the approaches employed in the above two insightful studies, this thesis will probe the practical dimension of Nee's spirituality from two perspectives. First, Nee's Western theological roots will be explored at length. Next, Nee's view of sanctification will be examined from a neo-Confucian perspective.

1.2 Methodology

Watchman Nee's view of spirituality was mainly elucidated in two of his well-known literary works—*The Spiritual Man* and *The Normal Christian Life*.²⁷ Although Nee's theological teachings are very rich and *The Collected Works of Watchman Nee* has been compiled and published in both English and Chinese, *The Spiritual Man* is unique because it is written by Nee himself and is a systematic demonstration of Nee's theology.²⁸ As for *The Normal Christian Life*, it is Nee's most popular and widely circulated work.²⁹ More importantly, it offers a relatively complete description of Nee's view of sanctification. It can be viewed as a theological manual to guide believers to live in holiness. Its theme coincides with this thesis. Thus, these two

²⁷ Watchman Nee, *The Spiritual Man*, trans. Stephen Kaung (New York: Christian Fellowship Publishers, Inc., 1968). Watchman Nee, *The Normal Christian Life*, PB edition (Fort Washington, Pa: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., 1977).

²⁸ Watchman Nee, *The Spiritual Man*, trans. Stephen Kaung (New York: Christian Fellowship Publishers, Inc., 1968).

²⁹ Dongsheng John Wu, *Understanding Watchman Nee: Spirituality, Knowledge, and Formation* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2014), 9.

books will be treated as the most important primary sources in this work. Also, various other works selected from *The Collected Works of Watchman Nee* will be referenced as needed.

The present study will first explore Nee's Western theological roots in terms of sanctification, such as the Plymouth Brethren Movement, the Holiness Movement and Quietism. Additionally, Nee's use of Western theologies will be clarified and the distinctive features of Nee's spirituality will be identified. Furthermore, Nee's own spirituality will be examined at length in terms of neo-Confucianism influences and the relation between Nee's Chinese cultural mindset and his unique view of sanctification. This thesis will argue that Nee's spirituality functions as a bridge that connects the spirituality of the Holiness Movement and neo-Confucianism, suggesting possible interactions of spirituality between Christianity and Chinese culture. Finally, a brief examination of the current state of Chinese Christianity will be explored, as well as the rise of Pentecostalism, or Charismatic Christianity, during recent decades. Which version of Chinese Christianity and spirituality will be likely to thrive in the 21st century? Will it be Nee's adaptation or a different kind of spirituality that distinguishes Christian China?

Chapter 2

2 Watchman Nee's Western Theological Sources

It is clear that Watchman Nee primarily learnt his Christian theology from the missionaries who came to China during various evangelical missions in the late 19th century, and it was their libraries and translations of the Bible that he read and worked from. Also apparent is that Nee innovatively adapted what he learnt, and was not always interested in the questions of classical theology that typically preoccupied these first evangelical missionaries or their traditions. As others have noted, Nee's theology instead was interested in a spirituality that was in line with his Chinese mindset, and this interest began when he interacted with the Plymouth Brethren and various loosely 'evangelical' traditions that comprised the Holiness Movement of the late 19th and early 20th century, as well as the Keswick Movement. Of course, these movements were scrutinized and criticized (and remain so) by the Great Church traditions, but Nee seemed deaf to those criticisms as he constructed his own theological applications. Understanding Nee's use of those traditions as a spiritual movement rather than a strictly coherent classical theology and that this application reveals his desire to craft a Christian spirituality that is in line with a neo-Confucian way of thinking is critical.

Nee grew up in an educated Christian family. Through his mother's friend Dora Yu (Yu Cidu, 1873-1931), he was introduced to his spiritual mentor, Margaret E. Barber (He Shou'en, 1866-1929).³⁰ In 1921, Nee was re-baptized by immersion by Barber. Under the guidance of Barber, Nee first became familiar with Western theologies through her library. With Barber as his mentor, Nee steeped himself in extensive Western Christian works, including the works of J. N. Darby, Phoebe Palmer, Andrew Murray, Madame Guyon, Jessie Penn-Lewis and others.³¹ Several Western traditions can be distinguished in Nee's theology, such as the Holiness Movement, the Keswick Convention, the Plymouth Brethren Movement, and Quietism.³² In addition, his spiritual way of biblical interpretation is viewed as extremely similar to the ancient

³⁰ Xi Lian, *Redeemed by Fire: The Rise of Popular Christianity in Modern China* (New Haven [Conn.]: Yale University Press, 2010), 157.

³¹ Dongsheng John Wu, *Understanding Watchman Nee: Spirituality, Knowledge, and Formation* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2014), 51.

³² *Ibid.*, 51-80.

allegorical method used by some Patristic authors.³³ According to Dongsheng Wu's research, the early Church Fathers to whom Nee referred to in his teachings include Ignatius of Antioch (ca. 35-107), Justin Martyr (ca. 100-165), Clement of Alexandria (ca. 150-215), Tertullian (ca. 160-225) and Origen (ca. 185-254).³⁴ Exactly how Nee used these disparate sources and Christian theologians is tied to his biography, as he did not have any formal or systematic theological training.

Two Chinese women played influential roles in the formation of his theology. The first was Nee's mother Lin Heping (1880-1905). Lin was raised Anglican and was baptized at age nine.³⁵ Her primary aspiration was to become a doctor. To prepare for applying for medical school in the United States, Lin went to Shanghai to attend the McTyeire School (Zhongxinüxue, The Anglo-Chinese Girls' School) to learn English.³⁶ A major turning point in her life occurred in 1920 when she attended a series of revival meetings led by Dora Yu. Lin was deeply moved during those meetings. Afterwards, she was re-baptized by immersion in 1921. After her conversion, Lin severed formal ties with the Methodist church and became a committed but independent evangelical who pursued the doctrine of entire sanctification.³⁷

Dora Yu was raised in a Christian family, and her father was a preacher of the American Presbyterian Mission. Yu spent eight years studying in the Soochow Hospital Medical School. Grace Ying May inferred that during this period, Yu became acquainted with Mrs. Josephine P. Campbell, a missionary of the Methodist Episcopal Church South.³⁸ In 1897, Yu went to Korea to engage in medical and evangelical missions.³⁹ After returning from Korea, Yu devoted herself to the revival enterprise in China. In 1913, Yu went to England to attend the International

³³ *Ibid.*, 74.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ Grace Ying May, "Watchman Nee and the Breaking of Bread: The Missiological and Spiritual Forces That Contributed to an Indigenous Chinese Ecclesiology" (Boston University School of Theology, 2000), 63.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 61.

³⁷ According to Grace Ying May, despite Lin formally removing herself from the membership of the Methodist Church, she was still invited to speak at the Methodist schools and gatherings. See the footnotes of Grace Ying May "Watchman Nee and the Breaking of Bread: The Missiological and Spiritual Forces That Contributed to an Indigenous Chinese Ecclesiology" (Boston University School of Theology, 2000), 72.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 76.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

Missionary Conference at Keswick. In July of 1915, Yu organized the two-week Women's Summer Conference, gathering people from over twenty cities in China. *The Chinese Recorder* (*Jiaowu zazhi*) reported that Yu had given several talks on Christ's Second Coming and how to live a godly life in that year.⁴⁰ In 1924, Yu was invited to attend the World-Wide Revival Prayer Movement as a committee member by Mrs. Henry Woods of the American Presbyterian Mission.⁴¹ In 1927, Yu was asked to speak at the Keswick International Missionary Conference again. Yu's theological ideas, by all accounts, were similar to the Keswick teachings and they inspired both Lin Heping and Watchman Nee, who were both in attendance at Yu's revival meetings.

Yet it was Margaret E. Barber who primarily influenced Nee. She was initially a missionary of the Anglican Church Missionary Society. Barber arrived in China in 1896 with the intention to train more Chinese women to assist with ministry work. In 1909, she broke from the Anglican Church because of her re-baptism by immersion conducted by D. M. Panton, the minister of Surrey Chapel.⁴² In 1921, Nee was introduced to Barber by Dora Yu and Barber became Nee's spiritual instructor. It was through Barber's library that Nee gained access to extensive Western theological works, including the works of the Plymouth Brethren Movement.

Nee's initial exposure to the Plymouth Brethren Movement was reading J. N. Darby's works in Barber's library. Nee's premillennial eschatology, obedience to Scripture, appreciation for the simplicity of the early church, and view of the corporate union in Christ were all in line with the teachings of the Exclusive Brethren as found in Darby. In 1932, correspondences between Nee and the Exclusive Brethren began.⁴³ A group of six people from the Brethren came to Shanghai in May 1932 to meet their Chinese counterparts. In December of the same year, they broke bread together in Hardoon

⁴⁰ "Women's Summer Conference," *Chinese Recorder*, no.46 (1915): 580–81. Cited in Grace Ying May, "Watchman Nee and the Breaking of Bread: The Missiological and Spiritual Forces That Contributed to an Indigenous Chinese Ecclesiology" (Boston University School of Theology, 2000), 79.

⁴¹ Grace Ying May, "Watchman Nee and the Breaking of Bread: The Missiological and Spiritual Forces That Contributed to an Indigenous Chinese Ecclesiology" (Boston University School of Theology, 2000), 83-84.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 92.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 124.

Road, Shanghai.⁴⁴ This, of course, signaled their preliminary acceptance of each other. In 1933, Nee traveled to England and was welcomed into the Exclusive Brethren. However, some issues soon emerged in terms of Nee's doctrine (primarily on exclusivity of the union of Christ) and his openness to the Keswick Movement. Nee's visit to the Keswick Horner Oak Fellowship in London was the flashpoint. The Exclusive Brethren neither allowed their members to attend meetings outside of their assemblies nor accepted any believers outside of their fellowship to their own meetings. They insisted on keeping the purity and holiness of their fellowship by rejecting those belonging to other denominations or holding different doctrines. Nee's willingness to visit other Christian denominations was clearly contrary to the Exclusive claims on the church. Later, Nee's Little Flock was known to accept a wide range of believers at their meetings despite doctrinal divergences and different denominational backgrounds, as the members of the Little Flock believed that only the Holy Spirit could discern the children of God.⁴⁵ Nee and the Exclusive Brethren also had differing opinions on the doctrine of rapture. The Exclusive Brethren maintained the position of total rapture, which indicated that the Church would not go through the tribulations before the end time, whereas Nee believed in partial rapture, which held that not all of the saints would be raptured before the tribulations. Grace Ying May inferred that Nee's view of rapture was shaped by the turbulent environment in China.⁴⁶ Nee found that the Exclusive Brethren were arrogant about their understanding of spirituality and valued their "orthodox doctrines" over the internal spiritual union in Christ.⁴⁷ The Exclusive Brethren regarded Nee's view of rapture as unscriptural, and therefore unfounded. Moreover, the Brethren's lack of interest in the supernatural, particularly demon exorcism, seemed to disappoint Nee, a

⁴⁴ Angus Kinnear, *Against the Tide: The Unforgettable Story of Watchman Nee*, 3rd ed. (CLC Publications, 2017), 147. Cited in Grace Ying May, "Watchman Nee and the Breaking of Bread: The Missiological and Spiritual Forces That Contributed to an Indigenous Chinese Ecclesiology" (Boston University School of Theology, 2000), 124.

⁴⁵ While open to welcome believers outside of their fellowship to their meetings, the Little Flock strictly discourages their own members from participating in the services of other denominations.

⁴⁶ Grace Ying May, "Watchman Nee and the Breaking of Bread: The Missiological and Spiritual Forces That Contributed to an Indigenous Chinese Ecclesiology" (Boston University School of Theology, 2000), 129-130.

⁴⁷ According to the contents of the correspondences between the members of the Little Flock, represented by Nee, with London Exclusive Brethren. Watchman Nee, D.C. Du, Y.A. Wu and K.Y. Chang, Shanghai, China to the Brethren, London, England, 1934, Personal Archives of Angus Kinnear, London, England. Cited in Grace Ying May, "Watchman Nee and the Breaking of Bread: The Missiological and Spiritual Forces That Contributed to an Indigenous Chinese Ecclesiology" (Boston University School of Theology, 2000), 148-164.

Chinese Christian whose cultural beliefs included the belief in spirits and ghosts.⁴⁸ These disputes ultimately led the Exclusive Brethren to break from the Shanghai Little Flock Assembly.⁴⁹ These contradictions, both explicit and implicit, reveal why Nee decided to craft a theology that would characterize the Little Flock as Chinese rather than parroting Western theological concerns. But the first theological interest Nee has is without doubt derived from his exposure to the Exclusive Brethren's doctrines and his earlier exposure to the female missionaries and their libraries. Some of these influences remain throughout his theology such as his absolute confidence in Scripture, albeit one modified by a more allegorical interpretation. Yet the divergences also show how he was beginning to shape his theology with elements of his Chinese culture.

Nee retained his own stated theological foundations despite his clear interactions with various Christian movements of the 19th and 20th centuries. Although he kept in touch with his Western contemporaries and immersed himself in Western theological writings, Nee never considered the Little Flock to be affiliated with any denominations or built on any theological traditions. Rather he believed that Scripture was the supreme authority and only the Holy Spirit could interpret the Scripture without any errors. He interpreted the Bible in an allegorical way and focused on the spiritual meaning of the Scripture. It is assumed that Nee's spiritual exposition of the Bible was influenced by the methods of Philo of Alexandria, Origen, Augustine and other mystical authors.⁵⁰ Some scholars point out that the source of this approach is not Western per se as the allegorical method was also employed by other Chinese theologians in the early twentieth century, such as Wang Mingdao (1900-1991), John Sung (Song Shangjie, 1901-1944) and Jia Yuming (1880-1964).⁵¹ Most scholars believe that one important reason why these Chinese theologians adopted an

⁴⁸ Angus Kinnear, *Against the Tide: The Unforgettable Story of Watchman Nee*, 3rd ed. (CLC Publications, 2017), 147. Cited in Grace Ying May, "Watchman Nee and the Breaking of Bread: The Missiological and Spiritual Forces That Contributed to an Indigenous Chinese Ecclesiology" (Boston University School of Theology, 2000), 131-132.

⁴⁹ According to the research by Grace Ying May, the Little Flock never strived for recognition from the Exclusive Brethren or had any interest to be affiliated with the Exclusive Brethren.

⁵⁰ Dongsheng John Wu, *Understanding Watchman Nee: Spirituality, Knowledge, and Formation* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2014), 74-75.

⁵¹ Katheryn Leung, "Ping Nishi de Ge Zhong de Ge Yu Yuyifa Jiejing (On Nee's Song of Songs and Allegorical Interpretation of Scripture)," in *Shuling Shiji de Zhuixun: Cong Shengjing, Lishi, Shenxue Kan Ni Tuosheng de Sixiang (Seeking for Spiritual Reality: Viewing Watchman Nee's Thought from the Biblical, Historical, and Theological Perspectives)*, ed. Hong-du Xu (Taipei: China Evangelical Seminary, 2003), 21-48.

allegorical approach is because it is flexible to the application of Chinese social and cultural contexts.⁵² Similarly, an allegorical way of biblical interpretation allows Nee to bridge the cultural and religious gaps between the West and his Chinese experience. But this is too broad a claim in one sense. The preference for allegorical interpretation in Nee, despite his commitment to Scripture as learnt from his teachers, comes from his spiritual commitments. Nee retains the position that the Bible is absolutely central and correct for Christian life. The plain command of the Bible is absolute for him in directing the Christian life. The allegorical is a higher mystical skill that only a cultivated spirituality can discern. It is because the allegorical sense he uses is in agreement with both the neo-Confucian mind and the plain command of Scripture that Nee's use of the Bible is a manifestation of his flexible use of spirituality.

If Brethren theology was the seed of his initial theology, then where he deviated from it is important to note. His exposure to the Keswick Movement is this flashpoint, as it introduced Nee to the Holiness Movement. Both the Keswick Movement and the Exclusive Brethren derived some of their ideas from the Holiness Movement of the 18th and 19th centuries. The Holiness teachings had far-reaching influences on the Revivalism in America and England and Nee's understanding of sanctification and spiritual life. It is important, then, to understand the Holiness Movement as it comes to Nee's attention in the Brethren and Keswick movements, and their debate on sanctification and spiritual life, respectively.

The Holiness Movement has deep roots in John Wesley's concept of "entire sanctification." According to Wesley, the Holy Spirit alone serves as the agent of God and calls sinners to respond to salvation, guides humans to repent, have faith, and regenerate as the new born in Christ.⁵³ Although all human beings have sinned, God offers them prevenient grace.⁵⁴ This prevenient grace is the starting point on the journey of salvation for those who accept it and have faith.⁵⁵ The new birth signifies the point of departure to sanctification, in which under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, the restoration of God's divine image and the formation of Christ's experience begin

⁵² *Ibid.*

⁵³ Melvin Easterday Dieter et al., *Five Views on Sanctification* (Grand Rapids, Mich: The Zondervan Corporation, 1987), 16.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 25.

in believers as they realize the holiness and pure love for God.⁵⁶ Wesley's theology places the depraved sinner in a sea of grace in which the Holy Spirit opens their heart towards God and they begin swimming to the island of holiness. Influenced by the Reformed tradition and his personal spiritual experience, Wesley maintained the doctrine of total depravity but also noticed how outer obstacles or inner rebellions constantly hindered believers' pursuit of holiness and caused many tensions and struggles.⁵⁷ Wesley believed that everyone regenerated as the child of God had the promise to triumph over sin by the power of the Holy Spirit, but also lived in a fallen world with a fallen, albeit regenerated, self that needed to be addressed. The child of God could be delivered from the sovereignty of sin, as well as the accompanying struggles, and live a peaceful and loving life but could also go in the other direction.⁵⁸ For Wesley, entire sanctification did not mean that the sinful nature of humankind was eradicated; rather, it was a medicine for human spiritual sickness. In other words, the tension between sinfulness and the sincere love for God and neighbours could be resolved by the grace of God but also worked out by the individual believer as a co-agent in the process of reception of divine love.⁵⁹ This state of perfect love could be reached in this life by having faith in the great work done by Christ.⁶⁰ Using the previous metaphor of swimming in a sea of grace, one could easily swim away from as well as towards the island of holiness won by Christ. Wesley pointed not only to the necessity of humans depending on God, but also to how God's grace alone offered forgiveness to all human beings. God works within human free will, wherein humans respond to salvation offered obediently or disobediently.⁶¹ According to Wesley, being sanctified does not mean being totally emancipated from the possibility of committing sins in the present life or being free from the effects of sin; instead, it means being saved from the necessity of willful transgressions of God's will.⁶² Of course, Wesley's theology was problematic for many of his Reformed peers and those who followed.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 17.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 14-16.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 14.

Generally speaking, the end of Wesley's sanctification is a life of holiness, which contains two dimensions of meaning. One is the realization of the relationship of the perfect love that Christians have with God and their neighbours, and the other is the fulfillment of the law of the Old Testament, which is not regarded as in opposition to the Gospel.⁶³ In this case, it was not about fulfilling Hebrew law per se, but rather a metaphor for following God's commands and training one's mind and spirit to do so. Wesley, and many in contradiction, held two ideas in tension. The grace of God was able to cure the corrupting effects of the Fall (and this was done by God alone in Christ) and that it was possible to release humans from sinful tendency completely and rebuild the relationship of the perfect love as one pursued holiness by living a life of obedience to Scripture and grace.⁶⁴ Christian life should be a progressive journey from the new birth of faith through to entire sanctification, during which believers through God's grace are being restored gradually to the divine image that is lost in the Fall.⁶⁵ Wesley's thoughts on holiness accentuate the significance of human free choice. Admittedly, the grace of God is the only means leading to salvation, but the choice to follow depends on free will. The subjective initiative features prominently in the process of salvation and, specifically, sanctification. Wesley's work, naturally, is not without controversy and disclaimers, but he does signal a fairly substantial movement in Reformed theology to include a subjective personal element into the process of becoming holy while trying to maintain the primacy of God's action in Christ. In his work, salvation is both an event in which a believer learns of the offer of unique grace and on acceptance begins the process of becoming God's child in perfection. Of course, this also means believers can reject or denude the offer, and 'backslide'. Wesley's sanctification theology becomes a motif in Evangelicalism and revivalism through the next centuries, with some strengthening or weakening his claim of co-efficient grace, and others incorporating more elaborate 'births' or baptisms of the Spirit.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 27.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 24.

⁶⁵ According to Wesley, what humans lost in the Fall is the *imago Dei*, which contains three aspects: the natural image, which offers humans immortality, free will and affections; the political image, which endows humans with the authority to govern the natural arena; and the moral image, by which humans have righteousness and holiness like God, and intelligence. When humans sinned, those three parts were all corrupted and they lost the divine image. Because of the lack of love, the Fall occurred, and the original sin is the depravity of all of the three parts of human nature. The only part that is related to salvation is the third one, the moral image. Cited in Melvin Easterday Dieter et al., *Five Views on Sanctification* (Grand Rapids, Mich: The Zondervan Corporation, 1987), 22-23.

Influenced by Wesley, Charles Grandison Finney (1792-1875), a Presbyterian and Congregational evangelist, developed Oberlin Theology or Oberlin Perfectionism. Like Wesley, Finney criticized Calvinism for its idea that humans were not capable to choose conversion by their free will or to work that conversion actively through spiritual life. He believed that the only real impediment in the way of sinners' response to the Gospel was the failure to exercise their free will in response to the offer of prevenient grace.⁶⁶ Finney further advocated for the possibility of obtaining a higher Christian life than that of mere conversion with a "second spiritual crisis" or "second conversion."⁶⁷ For Finney, something can only be regarded as sinful or righteous if it is not outside of one's free will. Therefore, while a person is a sinner before conversion, they do not sin per se until they are shown by God's Spirit that they have already sinned. Since sin is defined as only occurring during specific acts of the will, "fallen nature" or "inherited depravity" does not exist.⁶⁸ There is no primordial sin, only actual real sin that occurs in a personal history. The origin of the sin nature is unclear, but it is a real thing in real personal history. Conversely, if one becomes a sinner by committing sins, then one becomes holy by practicing holiness. Or, if a redeemed person commits sin, then this 'backslide' demonstrates the need for more conversion, more commitment or more spiritual work to the offer and reality of grace. This logically means, as believed by some of Wesley's other followers, that it is also possible to become totally holy (totally sealed in sanctification) in one's lifetime if one pays enough attention to becoming holy. Christian perfection, according to Finney, is the perfect observance to God's law. Humans are able to overcome their selfishness through their own abilities to become morally as perfect as God.⁶⁹ The Holy Spirit acts initially to quicken the spirit and then subsequently only intervenes in the course of sanctification as a persuasive influence.⁷⁰ Whether or not one converts only depends on his or her free choice instead of the election of God. Finney's thoughts are classically Pelagian, or semi-Pelagian, in that he believed that humans could by their own efforts attain salvation. Nonetheless, Finney claimed that entire sanctification was both a gradual progress and an attainable goal in this life. He

⁶⁶ Melvin Easterday Dieter, *The Holiness Revival of the Nineteenth Century* (Lanham, Md., and London: The Scarecrow Press, Inc., n.d.), 18.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 19.

⁶⁸ Keith J. Hardman, *Charles Grandison Finney, 1792-1875* (Syracuse, New York: Syracuse University Press, 1987), 332.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 332-343.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 355.

affirmed the sufficiency of human ability to satisfy the commands of God and become morally perfect. Finney's theology has an inherent tension between God's first and continuous objective actions of grace in Christ via the Holy Spirit and subjective human choice as applying that action in conforming the mind and therefore body to holiness. The asymmetry is glaring, and often confusing, but it remains a feature of Oberlin theology that final sanctification is both a human and divine work, and possible in this life rather than as a redeemed heavenly state. Seeing evidence of such sanctification is then a natural preoccupation, and gifts of the Spirit become fundamental as proof of divine sanctification. Finney's revivalist thought runs throughout the Holiness Movement, extends Wesley's idea and resonates with Nee's emphasis of the significance of the human mind during the process of spiritual self-cultivation.

Much more dramatic than Finney, in the Methodist tradition, Phoebe Worrall Palmer (1807-1874) and her sister Sarah Lankford Palmer (1806-1896) revived Wesley's concept of entire sanctification and developed "Altar Theology." Palmer thought that the entire sanctification could happen *instantaneously* in this life when believers presented themselves as living sacrifices on the altar. This personal experience is called the "second blessing." Palmer believed that according to the Scripture, Christ was the sacrifice for the sin of humans as well as the altar on which humans should consecrate themselves to God.⁷¹ By "putting oneself on the altar," Palmer meant that through Jesus Christ, believers were willing to reckon themselves as dead unto sin and alive unto God and acknowledge themselves as belonging to God permanently.⁷² For Palmer, once believers sacrifice themselves upon the altar, they would be sanctified and enabled to submit themselves to love God devotedly and observe His commandments.⁷³ This is presumably after the first quickening of Wesley and Finney as an awareness of the call of God in Christ for salvation to which the believer submits. It is, as its name indicates, a second quickening or spiritual birth following

⁷¹ Melvin Easterday Dieter, *The Holiness Revival of the Nineteenth Century* (Lanham, Md., and London: The Scarecrow Press, Inc., n.d.), 23.

⁷² *The Devotional Writings of Phoebe Plamer*, ed. Donald W. Dayton, "The Higher Christian Life" Sources of the Study of the Holiness, Pentecostal, and Keswick Movements (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc.), 30. Cited in Grace Ying May, "Watchman Nee and the Breaking of Bread: The Missiological and Spiritual Forces That Contributed to an Indigenous Chinese Ecclesiology" (Boston University School of Theology, 2000), 186.

⁷³ Melvin Easterday Dieter, *The Holiness Revival of the Nineteenth Century* (Lanham, Md., and London: The Scarecrow Press, Inc., n.d.), 23.

conversion (and baptism). Palmer maintained that to live a holy life, believers should fully and continually submit themselves to God.⁷⁴ The second blessing, itself a choice of submission, allows the objective power of sanctification to manifest and is reinforced by the persistent subjective acceptance of that power. Unlike for Finney, the second blessing is less ‘persuasive’ and more evidential. It gives rise to “signs and wonders” of spiritual power. Eventually, the Pentecostal movements of the late 1800s and early 1900s would reinforce this second blessing as glossolalia. Palmer’s holiness teachings and activities led to the establishment of the National Camp Meeting Association for the Promotion of Holiness in 1867, later the National Holiness Association.⁷⁵ The National Holiness Association supported disparate camp meetings every year, and this even more than Methodist circuits accelerated the spread of the holiness movements in the US and Britain. Although Palmer’s theology seems much more passionate than Finney’s, human free agency is still crucial in her approach. Human free will, through exercising faith, plays an important role in attaining the dramatic personal experience of entire sanctification. But there is an additional element that interests Nee: signs and wonders as evidence of sanctification. Recall that this was, particularly in the context of exorcism, an issue in his disagreement with the Exclusive Brethren. Although usually Nee’s teachings are not regarded as Pentecostal, Nee showed his openness towards signs, wonders and demon exorcism and contended that these could be evidence of being filled with the Holy Spirit.⁷⁶ His attitude towards signs and wonders will be discussed later at length.

Paralleling the holiness movements in the Methodist arena was the Reformed tradition’s William E. Boardman (1810-1886), Hannah Whitall Smith (1832-1911) and her husband Robert Pearsall Smith (1827-1898). Boardman was affected by both Finney’s Oberlin Theology and Wesleyan Perfectionism. He read Finney’s works given to him by an itinerant Methodist minister and attended Tuesday Meetings

⁷⁴ *The Devotional Writings of Phoebe Plamer*, ed. Donald W. Dayton, “The Higher Christian Life” Sources of the Study of the Holiness, Pentecostal, and Keswick Movements (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc.), 30. Cited in Grace Ying May, “Watchman Nee and the Breaking of Bread: The Missiological and Spiritual Forces That Contributed to an Indigenous Chinese Ecclesiology” (Boston University School of Theology, 2000), 187.

⁷⁵ To promote the Holiness renewal in New York from 1840 to 1870, Palmer organized the “Tuesday Meetings,” which included activities such as Bible study, prayer and personal testimony. See in George. M Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 74.

⁷⁶ Watchman Nee, *Sit, Walk, Stand*, 4th ed. (Wheaton, Ill.: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., 1977), 61.

regularly.⁷⁷ In 1858, Boardman's *The Higher Christian Life* was published. Melvin Dieter commented, "This book opened the doors of non-Methodist churches to the revival's teachings more widely than any volume which had preceded it."⁷⁸ Instead of sophisticated theological arguments, Boardman drew on his personal spiritual experience. His work was well received.⁷⁹ In 1875, Hannah Smith's *The Christian's Secret to the Happy Life* was published and enjoyed great popularity. In her work, Smith introduced two steps of dramatic acts of faith: justification, in which one's guilt of sin could be purified, and sanctification, in which the power of sin could be cleansed, the soul could rest, and the higher life and happiness could be realized.⁸⁰ Boardman and Smith's theologies were similar to Palmer's and Finney's, as their views of sanctification all involved subjective and dramatic features. However, due to their Reformed commitments, Boardman and Smith hesitated to claim Christian Perfectionism or entire sanctification; in the Reformed tradition, sanctification was not a crisis but a life-long journey full of obstacles.

In 1873, Boardman and Smith inaugurated a series of gatherings to promote holiness teachings. Those meetings later developed into conferences located in the scenic Lake-District of Keswick. At the Keswick meetings, it is believed that the meaning of sanctification fell into three categories: positional sanctification, experimental sanctification and ultimate sanctification.⁸¹ Each claimed a position from Scripture. Positional sanctification is described in 1 Corinthians 1:30 in the following passage: "But of him are ye in Christ Jesus, who was made unto us wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification and redemption," suggesting that every believer has the sanctified position from the point of regeneration because of the work of Jesus Christ on the Cross.⁸² Experimental sanctification begins at the moment of regeneration. It is a life-long transformation of the nature of believers in everyday life and has no completion, working to restore the divine image of Christ to them.⁸³ Ultimate sanctification is mentioned in 1 John 3:2: "Beloved, now are we children of

⁷⁷ Melvin Easterday Dieter, *The Holiness Revival of the Nineteenth Century* (Lanham, Md., and London: The Scarecrow Press, Inc.), 50.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 49.

⁷⁹ George. M Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 75.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

⁸¹ Steven Barabas, *So Great Salvation: The History and Message of the Keswick Convention* (Eugene, Or: Wipf and Stock, 1952), 84-85.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 85.

⁸³ *Ibid.*

God, and it is not yet made manifested, we shall be like him; for we shall see him even as he is.” This is the perfect status that all the believers will be realizing in the life to come.⁸⁴ What makes the Keswick view of sanctification significantly different from the aforementioned views of Finney and Palmer is that instead of regarding sanctification as something to strive for and obtain, the Keswick teachers believed that sanctification was a gift and a part of salvation that had already been accomplished by Christ, returning to Wesley’s inherent contradictions. Believers only receive the “rightful inheritance of every child of God” and a “divine bestowal of a position in Christ.”⁸⁵ Holiness has been given to every believer through the work done by Jesus Christ on the Cross. It is not the end for which believers have to keep working and struggling, but rather the beginning from which believers should set forth to make it experiential in their own lives.⁸⁶ Steven Barabas summarized Keswick teachings as informing Christians what they were offered in Christ and how to hold on to those possessions.⁸⁷

The Keswick speakers contended that the foundation of sanctification consisted in the identification with Christ in His death on the Cross. Sanctification starts with identification on the Cross. These ideas follow directly in Nee’s own thought. This identification includes two aspects: by the blood of Jesus Christ, believers are justified in being in front of God; and by the union with Christ in His death, believers have been crucified with Jesus Christ on the Cross and delivered from the sovereignty of sin. Evan Hopkins, one of the representatives of Keswick and the editor of *The Christian’s Pathway of Power* and *The Life of Faith*, asserted the significance of Romans 6:6 - 7 for showing the divine fact that every Christian should know and believe: “For we know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body ruled by sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves to sin-because anyone who has died has been set free from sin.”⁸⁸ After the death of the unregenerate old self, believers are emancipated from the dominion of sin and legally free. In other words, believers are sanctified in terms of their position in front of God.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 88.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 87.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 88.

⁸⁸ *The Keswick Week*, 1906, 94. Cited in Steven Barabas, *So Great Salvation: The History and Message of the Keswick Convention* (Eugene, Or: Wipf and Stock, 1952), 89.

After regeneration, the Holy Spirit, as the agent of sanctification, comes to make that positional sanctification transform into an experiential one. During this process, the Holy Spirit constantly teaches Christians in their lives to hold onto and substantiate the holiness that has already been given to them. Criticizing the holiness view of Christian Perfectionism as too radical for it implied the eradication of humans' sinful nature, and the Reformed view as too weak for it would lead to a constant tolerance of sin, the Keswick speakers maintained the view of counteraction as God's method of sanctification.⁸⁹ Drawing on Romans 7:23, "but I see a different law in my members, warring against the law of my mind and bringing me into captivity under the law of sin which is in my members," and Romans 8:2, "For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus made me free from the law of sin and of death," the Keswick teachers believed that sin was an indwelling tendency that could not be removed but only counteracted, and only by counteraction could sin be defeated.⁹⁰ The energy of the Holy Spirit, a new law as well as a stronger power, is able to counteract the effects of the law of sin as well as the sinful inner tendency of humans and stop believers from falling into sin. However, the counteracting power of the Holy Spirit cannot take effect unless believers cooperate with it. Even though the Holy Spirit has the ability to bring the victory of Christ into their daily lives, the failure of humans to cooperate can hinder the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit.⁹¹ As the old nature of humankind is not removed and can still exert its effects, believers may easily slip back into their old sinful tendencies rather than follow the guidance of the Holy Spirit. This idea is very attractive to the neo-Confucian Chinese mind of Nee.

To avoid this potential spiritual reverse and maintain the consistent progress in sanctification requires three conditions: knowing the divine truth properly, having faith and being willing to die unto desires of flesh.⁹² The first condition means that it is necessary for believers to have definite knowledge about their union with Christ on the Cross in His death and resurrection, as it is the divine truth that can set them free; this is evident from John 8:32, "And ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make

⁸⁹ George. M Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 77-78.

⁹⁰ Andrew David Naselli, "Keswick Theology: A Survey and Analysis of the Doctrine of Sanctification in the Early Keswick Movement," *Detroit Baptist Seminary Journal* 13 (2008): 17-67.

⁹¹ Steven Barabas, *So Great Salvation: The History and Message of the Keswick Convention* (Eugene, Or: Wipf and Stock, 1952), 105.

⁹² *Ibid.*, 106.

you free.”⁹³ Secondly, although knowing the truth intellectually is necessary, such mental consent to the divine truth is still not enough. Believers must totally rest on the truth of God, reckoning themselves as dead unto sin and alive unto God.⁹⁴ The third condition is the development of the former one. Since one has reckoned himself or herself as dead unto sin, one must deny his or her desires of flesh, which belong to the old self, so as to let the divine image of Christ manifest in the newness of life.⁹⁵ The above three conditions for sanctification can be summarized, respectively, as the premise for faith, the way of having faith, and the dedication to faith. Although holiness has been accomplished by God and given as a free-gift to believers, humans bear crucial responsibility during the process of sanctification. In the relationship of cooperation between the Holy Spirit and humans in sanctification, faith is the only thing that is required from humans.

In the Keswick teachings, faith goes beyond accepting the doctrines intellectually; rather, it means fully surrendering oneself to God through consecration. The necessity of consecration is rooted in the Keswick view of sin. According to F. B. Meyer (a leader of the movement), sin is the “assertion of self,” or seeing self as the center of life and being independent from the will of God.⁹⁶ It is the self-centeredness that led to the Fall. In virtue of the identification with Christ in His death, believers are dead unto sin and God restores His supreme authority in the life of humans. Therefore, believers are not the slaves to sin anymore but servants of God, recognizing God’s absolute sovereignty and dedicating themselves to His will. Consecration involves two actions: affirming the authority of God and denying the desires of self.⁹⁷

Regarding denying self, the Keswick speakers pointed to the difference between their idea and that of Quietism.⁹⁸ The Keswick position means choosing the will of God over personal desires, whereas the Quietist view means totally rejecting mental activities, and this involves letting the human mind be completely empty. For the Keswick teachers, important roles of will in confession, prayer, self-examination, Bible study and any other activities helpful in fostering faith have been affirmed.⁹⁹

⁹³ *Ibid.*

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 110-111.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 117.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 97-98.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*

Hubert Brooke, one of the Keswick representatives, explained that the act of consecration implied offering one's whole being to God with real sincerity.¹⁰⁰ It marks the start of the earnest sanctification. What is noteworthy is that the course of sanctification has begun at one's regeneration.¹⁰¹ Consecration is a crisis in the sense that it is a definite decision that signifies a tremendous shift in a human being and brings a drastic upheaval to every aspect of one's life. It is a continual process in the sense that during the life-long journey of sanctification, consecration should be made during every single day to collaborate with the work of the Holy Spirit.¹⁰² Generally, the Keswick view of sanctification requires three steps, as described by Evan Hopkins: fact, faith and experience.¹⁰³ Namely, one should first know the divine event of identification with Christ in His death on the Cross. Then, one should rest upon this divine truth and reckon his or her old self as dead unto sin and alive unto God. Thirdly, one should recognize the sovereignty of God in his or her own life and deny personal desires to cooperate with the counteracting work of the Holy Spirit, bringing the triumph of Christ into his or her own daily experience.

The Keswick view is in accordance with Wesley's, Finney's and Palmer's in terms of the emphasis on the significance of humankind's free will and the subjective experience of sanctification. But, critically, the Keswick view is more conservative when compared to the others, as the speakers maintained that it was not possible for Christians to reach entire sanctification in their lifetime because the old sinful nature, which could not be eradicated and still had effects on the entire person, made humans imperfect recipients for God's perfect blessing. Believers are only able to avoid conscious sins (meaning sin that they have acknowledged to be sin, but may still be in sin but unaware of manifestations as it is a later stage of holiness); thus, the holiness they possess remains imperfect.¹⁰⁴ In the above four stances, no matter to what degree sanctification can be realized in this life, humankind's free agency is as critical factor in the sanctifying process as an act of faith, and at its essence is a rational act. For Wesley, this rational act is exhibited in how one responds to God's grace; for Finney, it is revealed if one is willing to obey the moral law of God; for Palmer, the rational decision is needed to present the self on the altar for entire sanctification; and for the

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 112-113.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 115.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, 114-116.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, 91.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 99.

Keswick speakers, to cooperate with the work of the Holy Spirit, believers have to make a rational choice between the will of God and individual desires. Nee is interacting with, distinguishing from and indigenizing all of these views into his mature Little Flock theology as he navigates his interactions with Western texts, missionaries and movements in England and China.

However, it is Jessie Penn-Lewis (1861-1927) who influenced Nee's mature theology the most. She took the Keswick position further, claiming that merely intellectually understanding the divine truth of identification with Christ in His death on the Cross was insufficient. Nee, an eager reader of Penn-Lewis, adopted her theological ideas as one of his major sources when constructing his own spiritual theology. According to Ka-lun Leung's research, around the 1920s Nee corresponded with Penn-Lewis and worked as the chief translator of her books in China, introducing her theological ideas to Chinese audiences.¹⁰⁵ Penn-Lewis referred to the work by G. H. Pember (1837-1910), a representative of the Plymouth Brethren Movement, and pointed out that the ignorance of the distinction between "soul" and "spirit" was the main factor that impeded the spiritual growth of many devoted believers.¹⁰⁶ Furthermore, with her distinction of the Greek *pneuma* (spirit), *psyche* (soul), and *sarx* (flesh), Penn-Lewis appealed to a tripartite anthropology, which she recovered from Tertullian and Andrew Murray (1828-1917), one of the representatives of the Keswick Convention. She thought that body or flesh was the physical being of human. Soul was the meeting place or the medium between body and spirit and the seat of one's personality, including the faculties of intellect and emotion, while spirit was the place where God dwells and believers could unite with Him. Among the three parts, spirit was supposed to be the leader of the other two parts.¹⁰⁷ According to Penn-Lewis, if believers understand God's Word with their minds, they merely know the letter of God's Word instead of its underlying spiritual power. This is not having faith. However, on conversion, the Holy Spirit opens or quickens the spirit with divine truth, which in turn combines in their life experiences of body and soul/mind as a life of

¹⁰⁵ Ka-lun Leung, "Cong Fenxing Yundong Dao Shenmi Zhuyi-Binluyi Shimu de Shuling Shenxue Sixiang (From Revivalism to Mysticism-Mrs. Penn-Lewis's thought on Spiritual Theology)," in *Ni Tuosheng Zaonian de Shengping Yu Sixiang (Watchman Nee: His Early Life and Thought)* (Hong Kong: Graceful House, 2005), 2-56.

¹⁰⁶ Jessie Penn-Lewis, *Soul and Spirit* (Fort Washington, Pa.: CLC Publications, 2014), 7.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 12-13.

active and willful holiness.¹⁰⁸ Penn-Lewis quoted James 3:15-17 to demonstrate that spiritual wisdom could not be received through the human mind but only through the human spirit where God dwells, for it came from “above” and was free from being stained by the human soul.¹⁰⁹ Whereas the human mind is a function of soul, therefore, it is not possible for humans to obtain the divine truth of God through their rational or emotional abilities. Moreover, Penn-Lewis maintained that the faculties of the human soul limited the understanding of the truth of God. She also believed that the soul was extremely dangerous because human intellect was involved in the Fall.¹¹⁰ Pointing to Genesis 3:6, “. . . and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took. . .,” Penn-Lewis argued that Eve was tempted by obtaining wisdom; therefore, the temptation was a desire for knowledge.¹¹¹ Naturally, the consequences of the Fall were the breakdown of the relationship between God and human beings at the spirit level and the subsequent imbalance among human body, soul and spirit. In unredeemed humans, since the spirit has lost its dominant position among the three parts, sinners are either governed by the flesh or controlled by their intellect or emotions. But, of course, even the redeemed can have an imbalanced relationship of spirit, soul and body and thus sin remains an active choice against the grace, effective and complete redemption, of God in the blood of Christ.

To deal with this fallen condition, the only way is the Cross. According to Penn-Lewis, because of the identification with Christ in His death on the Cross, sinners are justified by the blood of the Lamb, and since the “whole continent of sin” of fallen humanity is abolished, humans are liberated from the sovereignty of sin and regenerate with Christ in their spirit.¹¹² By this divine work wrought by Christ on the Cross, the balance of the three parts of humans can be restored. The spirit functions as the highest leader of the entire person, communing with the Holy Spirit of God. Through the soul the divine will of God is articulated and delivered to the body. This means that believers surrender their entire soul and body to the reign of God in the spirit, ceasing to satisfy their own desires and following the will of God. Letting spirit

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 9-10.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 32. James 3:15-17 (ASV): This wisdom is not a wisdom that cometh down from above, but is earthly, sensual, devilish. For where jealousy and faction are, there is confusion and every vile deed. But the wisdom that is from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, easy to be entreated, full of mercy and good fruits, without variance, without hypocrisy.

¹¹⁰ Jessie Penn-Lewis, *Soul and Spirit* (Fort Washington, Pa.: CLC Publications, 2014), 15.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹¹² *Ibid.*, 27-28.

dominate the entire person implies turning the soul into a vessel of spirit to display the spiritual wisdoms revealed by the Holy Spirit. As Penn-Lewis depicted: through the mind the spiritual wisdom was articulated; through the will the divine purpose was revealed; through the affections love was expressed; and through the emotions joy was felt.¹¹³ This condition is what Penn-Lewis defined as “alive unto God.”¹¹⁴ However, even though spirit has been quickened in regeneration, it does not mean that a regenerated Christian has no tendency to commit sins. When believers live in their old selves, following their own wills, they could walk “after the flesh” again. Only when they abandon their personal wills and continually consider themselves as dead to sin can they “walk in spirit.”¹¹⁵

Based on which part of the three dominates the whole person, three types of Christians were described by Penn-Lewis: the “spiritual man,” dominated by the Holy Spirit of God in his or her spirit; the “soulish man,” who was governed by soul, namely, intellect or emotions; and the “carnal man,” who was driven by flesh.¹¹⁶ When believers enter the stage of “spiritual man,” as 1 John 1:7 described, “but if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship one with another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanse us from all sin.” In their spirits, they are in union with not only God, but also with believers who are connecting with God in their spirits.¹¹⁷ As long as they stay in this divine fellowship, believers are perfected because the blood of Christ purifies them continuously and keeps them away from all kinds of unknown sins.¹¹⁸ However, since the growth from new birth to a spiritual Christian is a gradual and unstable process, it is still possible for many believers who were once entirely sanctified to move backwards from being a spiritual Christian to a soulish one. According to Penn-Lewis, it is unknown how long after regeneration it takes to grow from a new born or carnal Christian to a mature or spiritual one, yet the depth of the understanding about the divine truth and the attitude of self-surrender matter significantly in spiritual progress.¹¹⁹ This is a significant variation from Wesley through to the Brethren movements that Nee interacted with. Like Finney’s Oberlin

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, 71.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 27-28.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 21-22. Penn-Lewis adapted the word “soulish” as the adjective of soul from Pember.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 81.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 82.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*

theology, to some extent, Penn-Lewis's idea at its essence attaches great importance to individual moral efforts in spiritual growth. It requires believers to "bear the Cross" and stay in their spirits continually to make progress. One reason why this speaks to Nee is that this way of spiritual growth fits with his Confucian understanding of self-cultivation.

Although she paid attention to the work of the Holy Spirit, Penn-Lewis remained against Pentecostalism, especially speaking in tongues, because she thought that associating speaking in tongues with being filled by the Holy Spirit could lead to splits in the Church.¹²⁰ She did not regard dramatic behaviours or miraculous phenomena as testimonies of the power of the Holy Spirit. The information they offered could be very subjective and the spiritual unity of the Church would be damaged if the Church paid attention to individual personalities rather than its mission. Penn-Lewis also viewed strong emotive feelings as unreliable in the Christian experience. The evil spirits of Satan could deceive believers by creating emotions felt in their souls, and those delusive feelings could blind them and then stop them from cooperating with the work of the Holy Spirit.¹²¹ Furthermore, Penn-Lewis deemed that once the spirit had been quickened, it was open to two forces at the same time in the spiritual realm: the guidance of the Holy Spirit and the counterfeit of evil spirits.¹²² Considering the potential danger of human emotional feelings and evil spirits, Penn-Lewis suggested that believers must be cautious and deeply ponder the meaning of God's Word rather than merely seek dramatic experiences or outer supernatural phenomena.¹²³ At this point, Penn-Lewis acknowledged the significance of the human mind in preventing believers from being misled.¹²⁴ Human spiritual growth is not completely passive, as it is necessary for humans to detect the true work of the Holy Spirit by employing their rational thinking. Although Nee acknowledged the significance of the human mind in assisting with the spiritual practice like Penn-

¹²⁰ Ka-lun Leung, "Cong Fenxing Yundong Dao Shenmi Zhuyi-Binluyi Shimu de Shuling Shenxue Sixiang (From Revivalism to Mysticism-Mrs. Penn-Lewis's thought on Spiritual Theology)," in *Ni Tuosheng Zaonian de Shengping Yu Sixiang (Watchman Nee: His Early Life and Thought)* (Hong Kong: Graceful House, 2005), 2–56.

¹²¹ Jessie Penn-Lewis, *Soul and Spirit* (Fort Washington, Pa.: CLC Publications, 2014), 91.

¹²² *Ibid.*, 96. In *War on the Saints*, Penn-Lewis defined some of her terms. "Counterfeit" refers to an imitation, or exactly copy and resemblance to Divine, human or Satanic things, or workings; "evil spirits" refers to spirit beings who are evil.

¹²³ *Ibid.*, 94-96.

¹²⁴ Dongsheng John Wu, *Understanding Watchman Nee: Spirituality, Knowledge, and Formation* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2014), 64.

Lewis, he held a differing opinion about Pentecostalism and was inclined to accept the Holiness Movement's emphasis of signs, wonders and other spiritual gifts.

In regard to holiness, by adopting the tripartite theological anthropology, Penn-Lewis made it possible that on the one hand the idea of total depravity of human beings was maintained, whereas on the other hand believers could be sanctified perfectly and kept away from all sins as long as they stayed in the holy union with God. Her thoughts on holiness are more radical than the Keswick teachings in that even potential sins that have not been known consciously can be avoided. In contrast, the Keswick speakers believed that only known sins that existed in the area of the human mind could be destroyed because the obedience to God's will was only a matter of reason.

In the above-mentioned five views of holiness, which comprise the Holiness Movement family tree that would later come to include Pentecostalism, Wesley, Finney, Palmer and the Keswick speakers, all of the speakers have highlighted the difference between God and humans. For them, holiness means the sanctified state of believers. Although the primary action for sanctification is the grace of God, holiness concerns only humans, as they are objects that need to be sanctified. During the process, or at the crisis of sanctification, the distinction between human selfhood and God is kept. Therefore, human reason matters significantly in realizing holiness. In contrast, Penn-Lewis's thoughts on Christian perfection stress the union with God in the spirit by adopting the tripartite anthropology. In the divine union, the difference between human beings and God is dissolved. For her, the state of sanctification is neither repairing the fallen human nor making humans cooperate with the Holy Spirit, as the cooperation of humans requires their free will to decide whether or not to follow the will of God. And the free will, one of the most important functions of soul, leads humans to sin and is not reliable for choosing God's will. Therefore, Penn-Lewis's holiness means realizing the holy union with God. In other words, believers who stay in the union with God are totally led by the Holy Spirit rather than themselves. For Penn-Lewis, the state of holiness has nothing to do with employing the faculties of self but denying them. Penn-Lewis's viewpoint significantly distinguishes itself from the others in terms of her stress on the dissolution of selfhood in the divine union with God in spirit. Generally, the common ground shared by these

five traditions is the pursuit of a subjective experience-based, deep, devoted and holy Christian life. This also became the dominant theme of Nee's theology.

Nee's Western theological sources can be traced from the above Western theological traditions. Specifically, on the matter of sin, Nee adopted the Keswick teachings, maintaining that humans were totally depraved and their sinful nature could never be eradicated. He also deemed that the identification with Christ in His death on the Cross was the foundation of sanctification. This identification contains two aspects: on the one hand, believers are included in the death of Christ, therefore, they are justified by the blood of Christ and then they are freed from the sovereignty of sin; and on the other hand, believers are contained in the resurrection of Christ, therefore, they receive the new spiritual life dispensed by God. Also in line with the Keswick teachings, Nee thought that believers should not strive for sanctification because it had been accomplished and offered by Christ already, and this was a divine fact that every Christian should have realized clearly. A normal Christian life should begin with a discovery of holiness that God had provided. Sanctification is based not on what believers can or should do, but on what God has done in Christ on the Cross. What believers should do is to follow the guidance of the Holy Spirit to manifest the holiness in their new-born life. In other words, they should make a positional sanctification an experiential one. For Nee, as he learnt from the Keswick teachers, sanctification means transforming an objective holiness into a subjective one. This sanctification can be realized instantaneously in the form of a crisis, as long as believers consecrate themselves to God and follow the guidance of the Holy Spirit. At the same time, it is also a life-long process during which believers should submit themselves to God continually.

During the process of sanctification, the Holy Spirit plays a critical role in making a God-given positional sanctification into an experiential and individual one. At this point, the Keswick speakers introduced the idea of counteraction, which meant that since the sinful nature of humans could not be removed, and humans would have the tendency to commit sins, the Holy Spirit worked as a counteracting strength that was stronger than the power of sin to defeat the effects of the law of sin inside humans. In order to live a holy Christian life, believers should cooperate with the work of the Holy Spirit by denying their individual desires. Due to the imperfect nature of humans,

the holiness they received cannot be perfect. However, Nee did not adopt the Keswick idea of counteraction and their conception of imperfect holiness. He advocated that humans were completely corrupt. Nee employed Penn-Lewis's tripartite anthropology to make it possible that an imperfect receiver could realize a perfect holiness. For Penn-Lewis, humans are constituted by three parts: flesh, soul and spirit. Before the Fall, spirit used to be the highest leader among the three. It is the soul that has sinned. The consequence of this is the disorder of the three parts: humans are not led by spirit anymore but governed by soul or flesh. However, by the divine work done by Christ on the Cross, the dominant position of spirit is restored. Therefore, as long as one stays in his or her spirit and follows the guidance of the Holy Spirit, denying their soul life, a perfect holiness can be realized.

In addition, Nee explained the meaning of faith with "the act of consecration," a phrase that was employed by Phoebe Palmer, the Keswick speakers and Penn-Lewis. However, consecration has different meanings to each of these authors. For Palmer, it means presenting oneself as a living sacrifice on the altar and considering oneself as dead to sin and alive to God, so as to love God with all of one's heart. It is a rational act of choosing God over anything else. For the Keswick speakers, consecration signifies that believers fully surrender themselves to God, forsaking their own desires and following the will of God sincerely. It is an act of rejecting self-desire. For Penn-Lewis, consecration requires denying one's selfhood, making it subject to his or her spirit, where God dwells, in order to grow into union with Him. Essentially, Palmer's consecration stresses the position of humans before God; the Keswick speakers treated consecration in terms of a moral choice for Christians; and Penn-Lewis viewed consecration as a Christian mystical experience. In this regard, Nee adopted Penn-Lewis's perspective, promoting a spiritual Christian life and pursuing the goal of mystical union with God.

Although he adopted many of Penn-Lewis's thoughts, Nee held a different attitude towards Pentecostalism. He was inclined to adopt the Holiness teachings and its openness to signs and wonders, speaking in tongues and other spiritual gifts. His interest in demon exorcism also falls in line with this inclination. Pointing to Mark 16:17, Luke 10:17-19 and Acts 16:18, Nee asserted that God committed His authority to His children, so that God's faithful servants who were in union with Him could

defeat the Satanic powers through the mighty strength of His name in spiritual warfare.¹²⁵ Spiritual warfare is a battle in the spiritual realm between the spirits of believers and those of Satan. According to Nee, only those who have experienced Spirit-baptism can become spiritually sensitive and discover a spiritual world in their own spirits.¹²⁶ In other words, spiritual warfare is only relevant to those spiritual Christians who rest on the truth of God and live holy lives. As God's children and faithful servants who act according to God's will, they are bestowed with the power to exorcise demons or perform miracles in spiritual conflicts. Nee used the action of Peter in healing the crippled man in Acts 3:6 as an example to illustrate the power that God had given to His children for them to use. When Peter took action in the name of God without hesitation or pause, it was God that acted through him.¹²⁷ According to Nee, in the face of spiritual warfare, believers should act like Peter, having the attitude of "stand." According to Ephesians 6:10, 11, 13-18, Nee explained that "stand" implied "hold your ground" because the ground being attacked by the enemy belonged to God, and therefore belonged to the children of God. God's children do not need to fight for the territory but merely keep it.¹²⁸ And as long as believers' actions satisfy the following features, God will fully commit His great power to them. Firstly, believers should know about God's eternal purpose in creation and redemption through revelation. This purpose is that His Son Jesus Christ becomes the firstborn among many glorified children, all of whom have His divine image.¹²⁹ Secondly, the works of believers should be conceived and initiated by God and conform to His will.¹³⁰ Thirdly, during their works, believers should depend on the power of God alone.¹³¹ Finally, their works should be God's glory.¹³² When believers' works or missions are of God, God will support them in wonderful ways.

According to Witness Lee (Li Changshou, 1905-1997), a successor of Nee in the Little Flock, Nee admitted that his view of spiritual warfare in *The Spiritual Man* had

¹²⁵ Watchman Nee, *Sit, Walk, Stand*, 4th ed. (Wheaton, Ill.: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., 1977), 61.

¹²⁶ Watchman Nee, *The Spiritual Man*, trans. Stephen Kaung (New York: Christian Fellowship Publishers, Inc, 1968), 55.

¹²⁷ Watchman Nee, *Sit, Walk, Stand*, 4th ed. (Wheaton, Ill.: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., 1977), 62.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*, 54.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*, 65. Watchman Nee, *The Normal Christian Life*, PB edition (Wheaton, IL.; Fort Washington, PA: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., 1977), 107.

¹³⁰ Watchman Nee, *Sit, Walk, Stand*, 4th ed. (Wheaton, Ill.: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., 1977), 66-67.

¹³¹ *Ibid.*, 67-69.

¹³² *Ibid.*, 70.

been mainly based on the works and experiences of Jessie Penn-Lewis and Evan Roberts. However, according to Nee, Penn-Lewis and Evan Roberts's viewpoints were limited to the individual aspect of spiritual warfare, so they regarded spiritual warfare as difficult.¹³³ Although in his work Nee never directly referred to his sources or commented on Penn-Lewis's idea of spiritual warfare, Nee's view can be seen as a response to Penn-Lewis's concern about Pentecostalism. For Penn-Lewis, speaking in tongues, signs and wonders are unreliable and believing in them would lead to a split in the Church. For Nee, according to 1 Corinthians 12:12-13, the work and baptism of the Holy Spirit should be "corporate" in nature.¹³⁴ The Holy Spirit guides and fills individual believers for the sake of the whole Body of Christ, the Church. Individual believers are supposed to unite with each other as one Body in Christ, so the guidance of the Holy Spirit in individual spirits should accord with one another. Therefore, any spiritual gifts should be apprehended from a corporate perspective. Otherwise, individual manifestations or interpretations would easily lead to divisions and contradictions. Nee suggested that after receiving personal guidance in one's spirit, he or she should also seek two or three agreements that other spiritual members received in their spirits. Only in this way can believers determine whether or not they are filled or led by the Holy Spirit.¹³⁵ Nee's holistic perspective of spiritual warfare and his adoption of the Brethren ecclesiology determined his acceptance of a wide range of spiritual gifts.

Although Nee emphasized spiritual experience, he also attached great importance to human reason. For Nee, one can grasp God's truth only in his or her spirit by God's revelation, and rational activities were able to assist with this spiritual practice. Penn-Lewis mentioned the significance of the human mind in preventing believers from being misled by evil spirits or outer dramatic phenomena. Rational activities, for example Bible study as more than spiritual allegory as in Wesley, were also encouraged at the Keswick Conventions. Nee acknowledged the significance of the human mind in cultivating individual spiritual life, but he did not regard the activity of the human mind as reliable for acquiring God's truth. To Nee, human reason is not as important as it is to the Keswick speakers because the revelation of God is the only

¹³³ Witness Lee, *Watchman Nee: A Seer of the Divine Revelation in the Present Age* (Anaheim: Living Stream Ministry, 1991). <https://www.ministrybooks.org/books.cfm?n>

¹³⁴ Watchman Nee, *The Spiritual Man*, trans. Stephen Kaung (New York: Christian Fellowship Publishers, Inc, 1968), 143.

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*

source of truth. Humans cannot know the spiritual meaning of the Word only through intelligence. Harkening back to Wesley's initial 'Holy Club', Nee believed that Bible study was as much a spiritual exercise as a mental one. However, human reason plays more of a crucial role in Nee's thoughts than in Penn-Lewis's. Penn-Lewis realized that when the spirit stopped working letting the mind stay completely empty was dangerous because evil spirits would have the opportunity to misguide the individual. However, human reason also helps safeguard against fake spiritual guidance. Nee contended that rational thinking could perform more active and critical tasks, including initiating or guiding an individual's spiritual practice. In regard to grasping the spiritual meaning of God's Word, Nee is in line with Penn-Lewis, insisting that the only way to understand the truth is through God's revelation in the spirit. Believers are passive recipients of God's spiritual knowledge. In terms of individual spiritual practice, Nee fully asserted rational activities like the Keswick speakers did. Nee believed that the spiritual wisdom revealed by God in one's spirit should be rationalized and kept in one's mind. To live a holy life, one should practice according to these spiritual virtues every day. Of course, the reason for this variance still remains open. It will be formed by his indigenization of neo-Confucian context into his Christian theological thought.

This chapter has briefly surveyed Nee's personal background and the three women who greatly influenced his teachings: Lin Heping, Dora Yu and Margaret E. Barber. This chapter then examined some important Western theological sources of Nee's spiritual thoughts and their influence on Nee, including John Wesley's "entire sanctification," Finney's Oberlin theology, Palmer's Altar theology, the teachings of the Keswick Convention and the mystical thoughts of Penn-Lewis. Also, this chapter has demonstrated how Nee deconstructed these theological traditions and adapted them to construct his own spiritual theology. In the next chapter, Nee's own spirituality will be explored at length with particular attention paid to his own Chinese Confucian context.

Chapter 3

3 The Theological Spirituality of Watchman Nee

Nee's spirituality is informed by his theological commitments and his context. They derive from his Western instruction and from his Chinese innovation. Spirituality is not separated from his doctrinal influences, his reading of the Bible, or his sense of being in the church. In other words, his spirituality – what was called ethico-practical – is not merely ethics or praxis, be it Christian or Chinese, but rather is shaped by his theology. His orthopraxy is his orthodoxy. Of course, this orthodoxy may not be classical theology in the Western sense, and it may not, as argued by others, be coherent with Luther or the like, but it is a system of theology.¹³⁶ Key in his theology is his understanding of sanctification, and how it opens his understanding of theological anthropology and salvation in the concept of the theology of the Cross. For Nee, the journey of sanctification begins at regeneration. At regeneration, one's spirit is quickened and thereby he or she can receive the eternal spiritual life offered by God. As Spirit-filled, one can commune with the Holy Spirit and receive revelations as instructions to follow the will of God. And because of the restoration of spirit life, the imbalance of humankind's three constituents (mind, body and soul) can be repaired: the spirit can serve as the leader of the soul and body; the soul can comply to the guidance of the spirit and articulate its spiritual messages and transmit them to the body; and the body can take action according to orders from the soul. Thus, as one keeps practicing in this way, he or she can unite with God in the spirit and live a holy life. This is very similar to the Keswick sources that influenced Nee, but he is novel in his application of neo-Confucianism to this sanctification and theological anthropology.

However, in practice, the realization of this holy state depends on the cultivation of the human mind. Due to humanity's total depravity, believers are still inclined to live relying on the soul rather than the spirit. They prefer to listen to their own will instead of God's. The soul, as it is the excessively developed part of the entire person, hinders one's spiritual growth the most. One's spiritual life cannot mature when the soul

¹³⁶ See in Yuan-wei Liao, "Watchman Nee's Theology of Victory: An Examination and Critique from A Lutheran Perspective" (Luther Seminary, 1997).

remains self-centered and against the spirit. Only when the soul is properly aligned can one's three constituents regain their balance so that the spirit becomes the dominant part. The dominance of the spirit always requires concession and cooperation of the other parts. The spirit itself is not able to make a believer become a spiritual Christian. The spirit is the highest only in terms of the spiritual order, whereas the mind is the most crucial part in terms of sanctification. In fact, it is the mind that is responsible for making the spirit a spiritually dominant role so that all spiritual revelations become functional. If the mind serves as a good assistant (in terms of the spiritual order) or administrator (in terms of practice), the spirit will rule, and then the person will follow God's will and live in holiness; if not, the person will live a soulish life. All spiritual knowledge would be useless if believers fail to deal with their minds. Therefore, to cultivate the mind appropriately is the focal point of the process of sanctification, for Nee's complete refusal of self-centeredness depends on the efforts of mind. Essentially, Nee's view of sanctification can be considered as a sanctification or cultivation of the human mind. This view is completely unique to Nee, and its source is important.

Cultivation of mind is a significant part of Chinese cultural tradition. It is regarded as the center of neo-Confucianism. Nee's idea of sanctification resonates well with the moral cultivation of neo-Confucianism in many respects. Specifically, his tripartite theological anthropology derives from the dualism of human nature seen in Zhu Xi's (1130-1200) and his explication of the spirit can be better understood as an extension of Wang Yangming's (Wang Shouren, 1472-1529) doctrine of mind. Nee's methodology of sanctification shares common ground with both Zhu and Wang's idea of moral cultivation. Nee's Chinese mind, however, interprets his Christian theological categories in a unique fashion.

3.1 The Spirituality of Neo-Confucianism

Neo-Confucianism is a renaissance of the classical Confucianism that emerged in the Song dynasty (960-1279). It revitalized the tradition of Confucianism and adopted new elements from Daoism and Buddhism and became the mainstream ideology in the Chinese intellectual community for eight centuries. Generally, neo-Confucianism is categorized into two schools: Cheng-Zhu School and Lu-Wang School. Cheng Yi (1033-1107), Cheng Hao (1032-1085) and Zhu Xi are representatives of the Cheng-

Zhu School; Lu Jiuyuan (Lu Xiangshan, 1139-1192) and Wang Yangming are preeminent figures in the Lu-Wang School. The central debate between these two camps was on the origin of human morality (goodness). The Cheng-Zhu School held that the root of human goodness resided in human nature, whereas the Lu-Wang School maintained that the source of morality is the human mind. Accordingly, the former is called “the school of nature” (*xingxue*, 性學), and the latter is named “the school of mind” (*xinxue*, 心學). Nee’s thoughts are in accordance with different aspects of these two schools. In regards to human nature, though, Nee’s idea is closer to that of the Cheng-Zhu School.

According to the Cheng-Zhu School, human nature (*xing*, 性) is derived from the heavenly principle (*tianli*, 天理). The word of *li* (*principle*, 理) was derived from Huayan Buddhism and it was later extended to refer to the ultimate reality. According to the normative usage of *li* established by the Cheng-Zhu School, the concept of *li* includes the meanings of patterns and norms to be understood by logic as order.¹³⁷ Cheng-Zhu neo-Confucians believed that everything in the world had its own principle (nature and purpose) that indicated the standard it ought to meet and what it ought to be.¹³⁸ Principle, in turn, defines the nature and norm of particular things or their purpose. It demonstrates how they should exist and towards what goal they should grow. Although everything bears a particular principle, there is an ultimate principle that unifies all individual principles and defines the order of the universe: the heavenly principle (*tianli*). Both the heavenly principle and multiple particular principles are inclined to a moral dimension rather than a scientific or merely intellectual one.¹³⁹ Humans should observe the heavenly principle and treat other objects according to their particular principles in order to realize humankind’s natural and moral obligations. The relationship between human beings and the heavenly principle in Zhu is one of moral realism. He claimed that the heavenly principle was real and objective and it was embedded in human nature. The moral essence, including humaneness (*ren*, 仁), righteousness (*yi*, 義), propriety (*li*, 禮) and wisdom (*zhi*, 智), are inherent in humans as a part of human nature itself. His idea implies that

¹³⁷ JeeLoo Liu, *Neo-Confucianism: Metaphysics, Mind, and Morality* (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, Inc, 2018), 6.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*, 7.

humans not only could but also should realize their moral obligations by attuning to the heavenly principle and their moral essence. In other words, human nature is intrinsically good, because humans are endowed with the ability to become an ideal role which is defined by the heavenly principle. Of course, this flies against Christian theologies and their conception of Original Sin or the complete fallen nature.

However, if humans bear the heavenly principle in their nature and are guaranteed with right original intention to meet the moral standard, what then causes evil among humans? According to Zhu, the constitution of *qi* (*chi*, 氣) is responsible for human's moral differences. *Qi*, usually translated as cosmic energy, material force, vital energy or vital stuff, is another source of human nature. According to Zhang Dainian's idea, *qi* is the stuff before form and matter and it constitutes everything. It is the original material of all entities and natural phenomena.¹⁴⁰ However, *qi* should not be simply regarded as a physical material. It is the constituent of not only the physical but also the spiritual. There is no distinction between the former and the latter. Particular formations of *qi*'s constitution account for human moral variance.¹⁴¹ Therefore, from its two roots human nature includes two aspects: the original nature (*benran zhixing*, 本然之性) and the spiritual-material nature (*qizhi zhixing*, 氣質之性). The former is human's moral essence, and the latter includes human's spiritual-physical and spiritual-psychological dispositions. These two dimensions of human nature are both manifested in the human heart/mind (*xin*, 心).

Zhu viewed the human heart/mind from two dimensions: "the heart of *dao*" (*daoxin*, 道心) and "the heart of human" (*renxin*, 人心). These ideas were developed from the *Book of Documents* (*Shangshu*, 尚書): "The mind of man is restless, prone (to err); its affinity to what is right is small." The heart of human is concerned with *qing* (情), which designates emotions and feelings. *Qing* can produce desires, whereas the heart of *dao* involves the understanding of the heavenly principle. However, there is only one mind, and these two dimensions are merely determined by two different inclinations of the human mind. When a mind follows the principle of heaven, it is a heart of *dao*; when a mind is driven by personal desires and moral sentiments, it is a

¹⁴⁰ Dainian Zhang, *Zhongguo Zhexue Dagang (The Outlines of Chinese Philosophy)* (China: Jiangsu: Jiaoyu Chubanshe, 2005), 66.

¹⁴¹ Zai Zhang, *Zhang Zai Ji (The Complete Work of Zhang Zai)* (China: Beijing: Zhonghua shuju, 2006), 16.

heart of human. Both the heavenly principle and human desires exist in the same heart and counteract each other. As Zhu explained:

In one's heart, if heavenly principle is preserved, then human desire will disappear; if human desire wins over, then heavenly principle is extinguished. There has never been a mixture of heavenly principle and human desire in the same heart.¹⁴²

The failure of controlling desires in an appropriate measure (*zhongjie*, 中節) is the cause of the immoral. The ideal state or the objective standard is called *zhongjie*, commonly translated as in agreement with ritual propriety, the right pitch, or seasonal harmony. This state of mind is the mindset of sages. Thus, according to Zhu, to preserve the heavenly principle and eliminate human desires, people should learn from sages to achieve an ideal state of mind. And the ultimate end of learning is “to completely remove human's desires and return to the precept heavenly principle.”¹⁴³ The nature of a human mind is good, yet *qi* is manifested uniquely in human personality and impedes the realization of human moral essence. Therefore, fulfilling human moral nature requires efforts of mind to cultivate the *qi*-constituted disposition to guide the person back to the heavenly principle. The means of this is to learn from the sage as a cultivation of the mind. It is easy to anticipate that Nee will see this both in the work of the theologians he studied and also the Cross of Jesus. Yet there are still deeper connections between Nee's theology and *qi*.

In Nee's teachings, the spiritual state of those at the beginning of their journey of sanctification are in line with the Confucian literati in Zhu's description. At regeneration, the spirit has been quickened and believers have received God's eternal life. This spiritual life determines believers' nature as the children of God. And the ideal role that believers should become is Jesus Christ. To be spiritual Christians, they need to develop their spiritual life and grow into the likeness of Christ. Also, the new-birth in spirit enables believers to receive revelations from God, which are objectively true. Namely, God's truth is available for every regenerated believer. However, although the spiritual nature of all regenerated believers is the same, distinctions of their *qi* composition make them become different types of Christians. Those who have

¹⁴² JeeLoo Liu, *Neo-Confucianism: Metaphysics, Mind, and Morality* (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, Inc, 2018), 134. Xi Zhu, *Zhuzi Quanshu (The Complete Work of Zhu Xi)*, vol. 14, 27 vols. (Shanghai: Guji Chubanshe, 2002), 388.

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*, 390. JeeLoo Liu, *Neo-Confucianism: Metaphysics, Mind, and Morality* (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, Inc, 2018), 134.

their *qi* compositions cultivated and their godly nature manifested are spiritual Christians; those who are governed by their *qi* compositions and ignorant of their heavenly-endowed nature are soulish or carnal Christians. The *qi* constitution in Nee can be seen as the unity of the body and soul. If one follows the guidance of the Holy Spirit, which is the heavenly principle, then he or she has a “heart of *dao*” and becomes a spiritual Christian; whereas, if one is driven by personal desires or moral sentiments, then he or she has a “heart of human” and becomes a soulish or carnal Christian. Therefore, a journey of spiritual growth can be seen as a neo-Confucian process of “to be true to their nature” (*jinxing*, 盡性). For Nee, to grow a spiritual life requires believers to bear the Cross to tame the self; and for Zhu, to become a moral person requires people to cultivate their *qi* constitution. Both of their methodologies for sanctification rely on a transformation of the human mind.

In addition, Nee’s methodology of mind-cultivation also echoes with that of neo-Confucianism. Nee’s way of spiritual growth is bearing the Cross, which contains two approaches: the internal individual consecration and the external discipline of the Holy Spirit. Both of these two steps are in accordance with Zhu’s way of moral cultivation. According to Zhu, the cultivation of one’s *qi* constitution requires twofold efforts: preserving the state of reverence or seriousness (*zhujing*, 主敬) and exhaustively investigating principles (*qiongli*, 窮理). “Seriousness is the first principle of the Confucian School...it must not be interrupted for a moment,” Zhu explained.¹⁴⁴ The virtue of seriousness involves respect for the objective truth (principle) and concentration on self-control. It implies one’s modest attitude towards the heavenly principle and careful introspection on distracting personal thoughts and desires. Only when one has preserved a serious or reverent mind can he or she proceed to investigating multiple principles. The virtue of reverence serves as the foundation of the investigating of principles and these two approaches are closely connected. As Zhu elucidated:

If one can exhaustively study principles, then one will daily advance one’s cultivation of perseverance in reverence; on the other hand, if

¹⁴⁴ Wing-Tsit Chan, *The Source Book in Chinese Philosophy* (New Jersey: Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973), 606.

one can persevere in reverence, the one will also become more and more meticulous in one's exhaustively attending to principles.¹⁴⁵

Similarly, Nee's idea of consecration in sanctification as a mental preparation for obtaining spiritual wisdom can be interpreted as an attitude of reverence. The act of consecration includes acknowledgement of God's authority on the one hand, and denial of personal desires and thoughts on the other hand. Zhu's virtue of reverence can serve as a clear instruction for Chinese believers to understand how to consecrate and realize the significance of consecration as an internal preparation for spiritual progress.

The other step of mind-cultivation is exhaustively investigating principles. According to Zhu, everything in the world has its 'particular principle' to reveal its nature and the way it should be treated, and all individual principles are unified by the heavenly principle. Therefore, everything in the world is meaningful, interconnected and included in a holistic scheme. Through exhaustive investigation, as one keeps investigating multiple principles contained in particular things, he or she will eventually come to know the heavenly principle. For Zhu, there is no distinction between moral righteousness and objective truth. Again, sages are those who know the heavenly principle and act according to it because they have cultivated an investigative mind through spiritual discipline. Thus, as one cognitively grasps more and more principles of specific things in daily life and applies them in terms of moral or spiritual discipline, he or she will get closer and closer to the heavenly principle. The specific method is investigating things exhaustively (*gewu*, 格物) to achieve knowledge (*zhizhi*, 致知). But it is not speculative knowledge or epistemology; instead, it is morally focused to correct living. Nee's teaching of receiving the discipline of the Holy Spirit easily fits into Zhu's methodology. According to Nee, Christians should pay attention to everything that occurs in their lives because all circumstances are arranged by the Holy Spirit to reveal underlying spiritual meanings. In this way, the more particular spiritual knowledge believers accumulate in their daily lives, the deeper they know the truth of God. Therefore, it is suitable for

¹⁴⁵ Xi Zhu, *Zhuzi Quanshu (The Complete Work of Zhu Xi)*, vol. 14, 27 vols. (Shanghai: Guji Chubanshe, 2002), 301. JeeLoo Liu, *Neo-Confucianism: Metaphysics, Mind, and Morality* (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, Inc, 2018), 257.

believers to practice Zhu's method of investigating things exhaustively in their personal lives to discover underlying spiritual knowledge.

The focus of Zhu's moral cultivation lies in controlling negative influences of human's *qi* constitution through rational ability, albeit focused on moral duty. His method is in accordance with Nee's teaching of denying self. In comparison, Wang's approach is different from Zhu's in that he emphasized developing the positive ability of the human mind. He pointed to discovering the truth in the human mind, and his ideas can shed some light on Nee's idea of the human spirit. Wang maintained that "the mind is principle (*xinjili*, 心即理). What fulfills the realm between heaven and earth is simply human mind's spiritual lucidity (*lingming*, 靈明). Without this spiritual lucidity, human beings are nothing but their bodily confinements."¹⁴⁶ Since the world is derived from the human mind and the truth/principle is not merely objective but within humans, morality and divine work rely on human agency in a very real sense. The human mind in agreement with the heavenly principle serves to bring the divine of self and the universe forth in a real kingdom. Although Nee and Wang held different ontological views, it is appropriate to compare Nee's idea of the spirit with Wang's doctrine of mind. For Nee, even though the origin of the ultimate truth is from the outside (God) the only means for believers to acquire the truth is through the spirit that is inherent in the human constitution as God's revelation occurs inside them too. In addition, since the spirit has been quickened at regeneration, it is capable of grasping the truth directly. But even more, the human as agent of the divine brings about divine purposes in human affairs. For both, the human and their mindful concord to spiritual things is integral for bringing about the kingdom of Heaven.

The center of Wang's doctrine is "intuitive knowledge," (*liangzhi*, 良知), an inborn faculty that is able to perceive moral truth immediately without rational justifications.¹⁴⁷ The usage of *liangzhi* can be traced back to the works of Mencius (Mengzi, 372BC-289BC). According to Mencius, "What a man is able to do without having to learn it is what he can truly do; what he knows without having to reflect on

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 142. Yangming Wang, *Chuanxilu (The Records of Wang Yangming's Teachings)* (Taiwan: Taipei: Taiwan Shangwu Yinshuguan, 1994), 272.

¹⁴⁷ JeeLoo Liu, *Neo-Confucianism: Metaphysics, Mind, and Morality* (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, Inc, 2018), 246.

it is what he truly knows.”¹⁴⁸ For Mencius, *liangzhi* is merely a moral sprout, which is a potential good tendency. Yet in Wang’s work, *liangzhi* goes further and refers to an instinctive moral judgement.¹⁴⁹ Wang contended, “The sense of right and wrong is what one knows without thinking it over and what one is capable of without having learnt it; this is the so-called *liangzhi*,” and “Having this knowledge is the original state of the mind. Mind naturally knows.”¹⁵⁰ According to Wang, the human mind is born with the function of moral intuition through which humans are able to perceive the moral truth immediately. Intuitive moral knowledge is absolutely true and beyond the limitations of cultures and histories. This is very close to the meaning of Nee’s spiritual knowledge.

The function of the spirit taught by Nee can be explicated with Wang’s moral intuition of the human mind. According to Nee, the spirit has three functions: conscience, intuition and communion. Conscience involves distinguishing right and wrong by a “spontaneous direct judgement” which is independent from reasoning. Intuition is responsible for sensing spiritual knowledge directly while communion is required for worshipping God.¹⁵¹ According to Wang, the moral intuition of the mind implies direct sensing and moral judgement, which can be likened to Nee’s conception of intuition and conscience of the spirit, respectively. Therefore, except for the function of communion, the immediate perception of the mind in Wang’s doctrine is in accordance with Nee’s functions of the spirit. Also, the instinctive knowledge grasped by moral or spiritual intuition is beyond rational thinking. Thus, Nee’s teaching of the spirit can be well mapped by Wang’s idea of moral intuition, except for its significance of communion with God. Believers who are familiar with or potentially influenced by Wang’s doctrine can easily understand and employ the faculty of the spirit according to Nee’s approach.

The problem of evil persists, though. Although the moral intuition is an innate capability of the human mind, not everyone is a moral person. According to Wang, it is by self-insistent ideas (*siyi*, 私意) that intuitive knowledge is veiled; the cause of

¹⁴⁸ Mencius, *Mencius*, trans. D. C. Lau, Penguin Classics (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1970), 184.

¹⁴⁹ JeeLoo Liu, *Neo-Confucianism: Metaphysics, Mind, and Morality* (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, Inc, 2018), 249.

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 250. Yangming Wang, *The Complete Works of Wang Yangming* (Taiwan: Taipei: Zhengzhong shuju, 1975), 65.

¹⁵¹ Watchman Nee, *The Spiritual Man*, trans. Stephen Kaung (New York, NY: CLC Publications, 1968), 32.

self-insistent ideas is having too many considerations or over-thinking. When people exercise rational deliberation excessively, they will be governed by their own ideas (*siyi*) or desires (*siyu*, 私慾) and lose equilibrium (*zhong*, 中) and fairness (*gong*, 公) of the mind. These self-insistent ideas and desires can deviate one's mind from principle. Therefore, according to Wang, it is selfishness (*si*, 私) that leads to immorality. Nee brings this concept into his idea of pride and selfishness – independence from God. Accordingly, Nee regarded a self-centered life as the opposite of a spiritual life. When believers are driven by their desires and wills, they are proud; thus, they cannot follow the will of God. Both Wang and Nee viewed selfishness/pride as the obstruction of the truth. Moreover, both of their solutions to this problem require a cultivation/sanctification of the mind. For Nee, it is denying self; for Wang, it is removing selfishness. However, due to their differing views of ontology, their ultimate goals distinguish their approaches. For Wang, the mind is the principle and the world is constructed within it; therefore, the self must and has to be the center. Thus, only self-insistent ideas, rather than self-centeredness, should be eradicated. For Nee, on the other hand, self-centeredness must be removed in order to abide by the will of God.

Although Wang and Nee had differing ontological foundations and varying ultimate goals, their approaches correspond in terms of the ideal relationship among individuals. For Wang, as the mind is principle and defines the world, the self and the world are one. Namely, if one's mind is free from self-insistent ideas and desires, he or she will unite with everything in the world as Oneness:

The sage's heart is to be one with everything in the world. He treats everyone impartially, with no separation of inner or outer, far or near. Any living person is as dear to him as his own brothers and children, whom he desires to be safe and educated. This is how he fulfills his intent on being one with everything.¹⁵²

In this oneness, “the self can be seen as expanded rather than lost”.¹⁵³ The self in an expanded sense would naturally care and love others in the world:

¹⁵² Yangming Wang, *Chuanxilu (The Records of Wang Yangming's Teachings)* (Taiwan: Taipei: Taiwan Shangwu Yinshuguan, 1994), 129. JeeLoo Liu, *Neo-Confucianism: Metaphysics, Mind, and Morality* (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, Inc, 2018), 257.

¹⁵³ *Ibid.* David W. Tien, “Oneness and Self-Centeredness in the Moral Psychology of Wang Yangming,” *Journal of Religious Ethics* 40, no. 1 (March 1, 2012): 52–71. Philip J. Ivanhoe, “Virtue

Is there any suffering or miseries of the people that is not as dear to me as my own body's illness or pain. . . . As long as moral agents can cultivate their *liangzhi*, they can all share their judgements of right or wrong and their sentiments of like and distaste. They will then naturally look upon others as if their own self, look upon the nations as if their own family, and can be one body with everything in the world.¹⁵⁴

As for Nee, because all regenerated believers share the same eternal spiritual life of Christ with each other, they are essentially and actually one body in Christ. One body is not merely an ecclesiological idea, but a human community that is living various levels of holiness in the pursuit of God's will and manifestation of Heaven on earth. Nee's view of one body in Christ mirrors Wang's idea of Oneness. All believers are essentially identical and connected with each other. The more mature their spiritual life is, the more spiritual truth they will obtain and share with each other, and naturally the more they will love each other. The end of Nee's dissolution of self and Wang's expansion of individual self/selfishness are the same in the sense of retrieving one's true state (God's child/principle) and the ideal relationship with others (Oneness).

According to Nee, anything learned from daily experiences should be scrutinized in the spirit by God's revelation in order to filter out elements polluted by the soul. This step is in line with Wang's idea of self-examination. For Wang, the mind is principle; therefore, it can monitor and reflect on its own activities in order to keep in accordance with principle and remove those produced by selfishness. To achieve sage-hood merely requires people to maintain and employ the inherent principle (goodness). The further examination of the spirit can be regarded as an internal reflection, even though its objective standard is not derived from the spirit itself but God. From Nee's perspective, as the eternal spiritual life of Christ has been planted in their spirits, humans are capable of making spiritual judgements to discern and recognize God's truth in their daily lives. To be a spiritual Christian, believers need to employ the spirit to monitor all activities that occur in the soul. Therefore, in terms of

Ethics and the Chinese Confucian Tradition," in *Virtue Ethics and Confucianism*, ed. Stephen Angle and Michael Slote (New York: Routledge, n.d.), 28–46.

¹⁵⁴ JeeLoo Liu, *Neo-Confucianism: Metaphysics, Mind, and Morality* (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, Inc, 2018), 258. Yangming Wang, *Chuanxilu (The Records of Wang Yangming's Teachings)* (Taiwan: Taipei: Taiwan Shangwu Yinshuguan, 1994), 173.

spiritual practice, the function of the spirit can be interpreted as Wang's moral reflection. Nee and Wang's teachings both possess the feature of reflexivity.

Nee's idea of spiritual cultivation shares many similarities with both Zhu and Wang's ideas of moral cultivation. Zhu's view of human nature can be applied to interpret believers' state after regeneration. Believers should develop the "heart of *dao*" and remove "the heart of human." In order to grow into a spiritual Christian, believers should imitate the "sage" Jesus Christ and bear the Cross. Specifically, they need to respect God as the ultimate truth and concentrate on God in every aspect of their lives. Believers should seize every opportunity of their personal experiences to receive the discipline of the Holy Spirit and to bring about Heaven. However, in Zhu's teachings, human moral essence (heavenly principle) remains completely passive at all times. Its manifestation depends on the state of the human mind. If one cannot control his or her personal desires, all principles acquired through investigation will be ineffective.¹⁵⁵ Nee's teachings confront the same dilemma, as he recognizes that the state of the mind determines the role of the spirit in the entire person. Nee gives a different source of agency via the Holy Spirit, but retains the truth that all spiritual revelations will be useless when the mind refuses to employ them. Zhu and Nee both paid attention to transforming negative elements of the human mind. On the other hand, Wang's moral intuition of the human mind is close to Nee's mystical function of the spirit. Therefore, Nee's view of sanctification can be seen as a combination of cognitive and mystical ways of spiritual cultivation that accommodate the mindset of Chinese people.

3.2 The Theological Spirituality of Watchman Nee

Nee's spirituality qua Christian is controlled by his understanding of sanctification and the theology of the Cross. According to Nee, sanctification includes two ideas: regeneration and reproduction or holy living. Both of these are based on his theology of the Cross. The theology of the Cross (*theologia crucis*) was first proposed by Martin Luther (1483-1546) in 1518 in the Heidelberg Disputation in response to the theology of Glory. It is a repudiation of medieval Scholasticism and is regarded as a theology of revelation, which emphasizes that God has not only hidden but also

¹⁵⁵ JeeLoo Liu, *Neo-Confucianism: Metaphysics, Mind, and Morality* (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, Inc, 2018), 242.

revealed Himself in the sufferings and the Cross of Christ.¹⁵⁶ God's revelation is concealed in the Passion and Cross of Christ and can only be recognized by humans through faith. Therefore, faith serves as the only means to obtain the real knowledge of God and humans are considered incapable of knowing God through their speculative activities. Human reason cannot comprehend God's way; furthermore, it would lead humans to despair. As a result, what has been valued, including philosophy, moral activity, strength, and wisdom, is shattered. What has been considered weak and foolish turns out to be valuable for knowing God.¹⁵⁷ Only through the experience of suffering, which shakes humans' self-confidence, can humans become aware of their total depravity and learn to rely on God.¹⁵⁸ It is in this way, rather than through speculation, that one can grasp the true knowledge of God. As Luther explained, "Living, or rather dying and being damned make a theologian, not understanding, reading or speculating."¹⁵⁹ In addition, according to the Passion of Christ, it is through suffering that God reveals Himself. The humility of suffering is viewed as a gracious work of God Himself to work out Justification. Therefore, the significance of suffering is regarded as the strange work of God to bring about His Justification. On the basis of this, accordingly, if one is to be justified, he or she must undergo the torment of the Cross, which is humility, to become humble and realize his or her total depravity and trust only in God. Only through recognizing oneself as a sinner first, can he or she become righteous before God.¹⁶⁰ The Cross of Christ serves as the starting point and the center of the theology of the Cross.

As for Nee, although he maintained the main features of the theology of the Cross, he departed from the Protestant idea of the theology of the Cross as he understood the significance of the Cross in a more anthropocentric way. Like Luther, Nee considered the Cross the starting point of theology and the only way humans can grasp the authentic knowledge of God. Besides, Nee held that only through revelation could believers know God and by faith could humans become justified. Conversely,

¹⁵⁶ Graham Tomlin, *The Power of the Cross: Theology and the Death of Christ in Paul, Luther and Pascal*, Paternoster Biblical and Theological Monographs (Carlisle, Cumbria, U.K.: Paternoster Press, 1999), 112.

¹⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 116.

¹⁵⁸ Alister E. McGrath, *Luther's Theology of the Cross: Martin Luther's Theological Breakthrough* (Oxford, UK; New York, NY, USA: B. Blackwell, 1985), 149-150.

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 151-153.

¹⁶⁰ E.G. Rupp, *The Righteousness of God: Luther Studies* (London, 1953), 227-41. Cited in Alister E. McGrath, *Luther's Theology of the Cross: Martin Luther's Theological Breakthrough* (Oxford, UK; New York, NY, USA: B. Blackwell, 1985), 152.

human's rational thinking was regarded as not capable of grasping the truth of God. Thus, when it comes to knowing God, Nee valued experience and repudiated speculation. Moreover, he acknowledged that God revealed Himself through suffering. On the basis of the above understanding, Nee developed his theology of the Cross from an anthropocentric perspective; the significance of the Cross revolved around believers' spiritual change or development.

Nee's theology of the Cross has three implications: (1) the blood of Christ, which deals with sins and brings humans forgiveness; (2) the Cross of Christ, which refers to the redemptive work done by Jesus Christ, in which humans are freed from the reign of sin and imparted with the new eternal life; and, (3) the act of "bearing the Cross," which designates the subjective work of the Cross. The first two belong to the stage of regeneration and are the primary works done by God alone. The third implication, namely reproduction (holy living), serves as the only means to deal with believers' soul life, and it allows their new-born spiritual life to mature.

3.2.1 The Blood of Christ

The first two aspects of the Cross demonstrate the redeemed position before God. Nee's explanation of the value of the blood of Christ started with clarifying two problems that Nee saw reinforced in experience and in Scripture by distinguishing 'sins' from 'sin'. In the first eight chapters of Romans, Nee found that two ideas could be recognized by Pauline different use of the words 'sins' and 'sin'. Romans 1:1 to 5:11 form the first half and 5:12 to 8:39 the second.¹⁶¹ The first half discusses the matter of sins and refers to 'sins' as specific and various acts. They can be understood as sin defined by Finney, which is real and only occurs in a personal history. One is not sin, but sins in action. However, 'sin' means the root source or impulse of sins. According to Nee, it is the origin and the principle of particular sins: "The former touches my conscience, the latter my life."¹⁶² Sin is abstract whereas sins are experiential. Nee contended that the blood of Christ was effective to address sins, citing Romans 3:25 – 26:

¹⁶¹ Watchman Nee, *The Normal Christian Life*, PB edition (Wheaton, IL.; Fort Washington, PA: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., 1977), 3.

¹⁶² *Ibid.*

Whom God set forth to be a propitiation, through faith, in his blood, to show his righteousness because of the passing over of the sins done aforetime, in the forbearance of God; for the showing, I say, of his righteousness at this present season: that he might himself be just, and the justifier of him that hath faith in Jesus.

For Nee, the blood of Christ is for atonement of real actions, not an abstract pre-existent state. It is through the value of Christ's blood that sins are dealt with and humans are justified in the sight of God. Correctly understanding and appropriating the value of the blood is necessary for believers. Nee deemed that the most important value of the blood of Christ was to satisfy God's justice. God forgives humans only because He sees the blood of Christ, upon which He sets the value of atonement. God does not, he argued, ignore human actions that are sinful but instead covers them in the blood of Christ. God, in short, treats unholy life. Nee quoted 1 John 1:7 from Darby's translation, in which sin was translated as countable to emphasize that it was the blood of Christ that justified every sinful act of sinners: "The blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from every sin."¹⁶³ This is not merely a notional covering, but also a subjective reality that causes believers to want to live holy lives. As God covers sins in Christ's blood, the attachment to sin decreases as one lives up to that covering. Only if one knows this divine function of the blood of Christ and trusts in the blood could he or she both become justified and live as justified. The blood of Christ has meaning because it is the result of divine agency on the Cross.

3.2.2 The Cross of Christ

If Nee considers Romans 1:1-5:11 primarily concerned with what humans have done in their individual histories, then Romans 5:12 -8:39 exegetes what humans are in general nature. The evidence of sins is derived from the mystery of sin, and human origins in Adam. Following an evangelical literalism, Nee maintained Adamic federalism of Romans 5:19, "For as through the one man's disobedience the many were made sinners, even so through the obedience of the one shall the many be made righteous." The first "one man" in the verse refers to Adam, and it is by his disobedience that his offspring become sinners. Adam is the first man. There would be no human beings if he never existed. Therefore, when he violated God's order, potentially all human beings did so through his actions. Human beings were derived

¹⁶³ John 1:7: Marginal reading of the New Translation by J. N. Darby.

from the very first man Adam, who became sinful, inherited his sinful nature and sinned; in other words, humanity fell into sin and its reward of death in the blood bond with Adam. Like all Adamic federalism, all human beings are regarded as one in Adam who fell, and lived in sins and death. This first sin is the cause of sins, and the reason for the Cross and blood of Christ. It is an original impulse that describes experience:

We try to please the Lord, but find something within that does not want to please him. We try to be humble, but there is something in our very being that refuses to be humble. We try to be loving, but inside we feel most unloving. The more we try to rectify matters on the outside the more we realize how deep-seated is the trouble.¹⁶⁴

Like most federalist theologies, substitution is necessary as found in Romans 5:19, in which the second “one man” refers to Jesus Christ. Since humans entered into Adam through their births, only through death can they escape Adam and be emancipated from the reign of sin. Nee quotes Romans 6:2, “God forbid. We who died to sin, how shall we any longer live therein?” Therefore, God has made adequate provision to liberate humans from sin.¹⁶⁵ He has dealt with humans as a whole in Jesus Christ and therein they have been included in the death of Christ.¹⁶⁶

Nee then employs Romans 6:3-4: “Or are ye ignorant that all we who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried therefore with him through baptism into death: that like as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, so we also might walk in newness of life.” As God has incorporated humans into Christ, there is no need for humans to make any individual efforts because God alone has accomplished the inclusive work, and humans have been in Christ already. As the “last Adam,” Christ includes all human beings in Himself. When He was *crucified* as the last Adam, humans incorporated into Him were *crucified* as well. The theologic is striking - because of the inclusion in the death of Jesus Christ, humans can break away from Adam, become free from sin and live independent of sins (as above). Humans are in union with Jesus Christ: “The Cross is thus the mighty act of God which translates us from Adam to Christ.”¹⁶⁷ But there

¹⁶⁴ Watchman Nee, *The Normal Christian Life*, PB edition (Wheaton, IL.; Fort Washington, PA: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., 1977), 29.

¹⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 34.

¹⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 35.

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 40.

remains some questions, not only in terms of the resurrection theology in which the work of Christ is seen as effective, but also how Nee makes the leap to baptism. Baptism is the symbolic covering of the blood of Christ and the inclusion into the new life of Christ over the ways of the flesh. According to Nee, believers are baptized into the death of Christ on the Cross, which terminates their old sinful nature; and they are also baptized into the 'resurrection' of Christ, which imparts His eternal life to the redeemed.¹⁶⁸ There is a very curious lack here in Nee. Resurrection is not only the proof of satisfaction by God regarding the work of Christ, but also the reason for God sending the Spirit to the Church, as seen in classical theologies of the Cross. For Nee, though, resurrection is instead a symbol of being made ready for holy living as one is raised with Christ to God.

Nee's view of resurrection is evidently different from that of classical theology. According to Irenaeus, the resurrection of Christ is on the one hand the manifestation of God's decisive triumph on the Cross over the powers of evil, which includes sin, death and the devil; it is on the other hand the beginning of a new dispensation for the gift of the Holy Spirit.¹⁶⁹ The relationship between the resurrection and individual human beings is not direct. The 'tyrants' over whom God won His victory were seen as objective and impersonal. Human beings were suffering and stuck in bondage with them.¹⁷⁰ God's work of atonement was regarded as a cosmic drama or a divine conflict, in which God prevailed over the hostile powers. Thus, God reconciles the world to Himself and the enmity between God and the world is removed and a new relationship is established.¹⁷¹ Therefore, seen from a classical perspective, the resurrection of Christ proves changes in the relationship between God and the world and God's attitude towards humans. Yet it does not primarily affect human beings as individuals.¹⁷² In the doctrine of classical theology, God's work of redemption is thoroughly objective.

In addition, in the doctrine of Protestant Orthodoxy, even though the redemptive work of Christ was not expounded as a completely objective one, Christ is understood as

¹⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 91.

¹⁶⁹ Gustaf Aulén, *Christus Victor: An Historical Study of the Three Main Types of the Idea of Atonement* (London: S. P. C. K., 1953), 48.

¹⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 164.

¹⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 50.

¹⁷² *Ibid.*, 22.

the representative of human beings and not regarded as affecting individual human beings directly. The teaching of Protestant Orthodoxy on redemption was expounded in a strictly rational way. The death of Christ on the Cross, together with His obedience in His life time, was regarded as for the satisfaction of the retributive justice and law of God.¹⁷³ Jesus as the representative of the human race makes atonement on behalf of humans and God accepts it. Then God transfers the merits earned by Christ to humans, and as a result humans are justified. Although the atonement is viewed as made by Jesus Christ in His human nature, Christ does not relate to human beings directly.¹⁷⁴ In this type of doctrine, the redemptive work of Christ only affects the legal position of human beings before God. Redemption does not connect with believers' sanctification organically.¹⁷⁵ Therefore, seen from a Protestant perspective, the work done by Christ on the Cross has no direct relation with the ability of individual believers to live in holiness.

In comparison with these two types of doctrines, Nee's understanding of redemption obviously shows an anthropocentric tendency. He regarded the death and resurrection of Christ as the direct cause of the change in believers' spiritual situation. According to Nee, the significance of the redemptive work of Christ is primarily for the realization of God's eternal plan, which is His obtaining of a new race, who has Christ as their firstborn and manifests His life and glory. It is this group of people who have the divine sonship that constitute the Church.¹⁷⁶ Although Nee held the idea that God's creation and redemption were primarily for the purpose of creating the Church, the emphasis of his teaching focused on the relevance of the redemption to believers' being made ready for living in holiness.¹⁷⁷ Nee showed little interest in discussing the nature of God and redemption systematically; instead, he devoted almost all of his attention to exploring their meanings in terms of individual sanctification.

This feature can be distinguished in the teaching of Penn-Lewis, who was dedicated to demonstrating the close relationship between the Cross and believers' spiritual growth. Nee's view of redemption and his understanding of the significance of the

¹⁷³ *Ibid.*, 146.

¹⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 167.

¹⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 17.

¹⁷⁶ Watchman Nee, *The Normal Christian Life*, PB edition (Wheaton, IL.; Fort Washington, PA: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., 1977), 109.

¹⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 107

Cross are greatly influenced by Penn-Lewis's teachings. Also, it is partly due to his lack of resurrection theology. Moreover, the doctrinal system or its coherence is not the main concern of Nee's theology. In Nee's teaching, the Cross together with the blood of Christ constitutes positional sanctification, but how to activate this positional sanctification is obscure. Although Nee adopted the Protestant idea of justification by faith and admitted that faith was primarily based on God's revelation, he acknowledged that a spiritual Christian should always have faith in God even though there is no immediate revelation from God. That is to say, faith is not only a result of God's revelation but also a rational attitude of human beings.¹⁷⁸ Therefore, Nee's theology is vague when it comes to whether the positional sanctification is activated by God through quickening one's faith or by the agency of the redeemed through having a faithful attitude. Nevertheless, doctrinal incoherence like this neither bothered Nee nor weakened the influence of his theology in China.

The deepest reason underlying Nee's subjective and pragmatic understanding of redemption resides in his Chinese mindset that highly values individual existential situation and spiritual cultivation. Nee's Chinese approach to theology caused his lack of clarification on several important theological subjects, such as atonement, incarnation, justification and election. Seen from a Western theological perspective, Nee's theology is flawed by this obscurity. However, in the Chinese cultural context, Nee's lack of pure speculation on certain classical subjects of theology and his formulation of theology that revolves around individual spiritual practice demonstrate his endeavor to contextualize Christianity in China. In addition, Nee seems stuck on the notion of Oneness, the idea that human beings are considered as a whole and share common nature with each other; this echoes the holistic Confucian worldview. His understanding of the state of the regenerated believers can easily fit into the neo-Confucian idea of human nature, for all of them share the same spiritual life in Christ just as the neo-Confucian idea of Oneness was positional or notional.

¹⁷⁸ Yuan-wei Liao, "Watchman Nee's Theology of Victory: An Examination and Critique from A Lutheran Perspective" (Luther Seminary, 1997).

3.2.3 The Theological Tripartite Anthropology

Nee's theological tripartite anthropology is not original. He adopted it mainly from the writings of Penn-Lewis and Andrew Murray.¹⁷⁹ According to Nee, a person is composed of three parts: the body, the soul and the spirit.¹⁸⁰ The body, as the visible and material part, enables a person to sense the physical world; the soul, as the medium between the body and the spirit, contains the faculties of intellect and emotions and manifests the self or individual personality; and the spirit is that in which God dwells and mystical union with God occurs. A person can be a living soul because the spirit quickens the body. Spirit is the only part that believers come to apprehend, commune with and worship God.¹⁸¹ It is noteworthy that the human spirit, as one of the three parts of human composition, should be distinguished from the Holy Spirit and the spiritual life that believers receive at their regeneration.¹⁸² At its essence, for Nee the spirit is a vessel or capacity that enables humans to sense a spiritual world; whereas the spiritual life, which believers receive at their new-birth, is God's own life that is dispensed into the human spirit.¹⁸³

In addition, Nee asserted that the order of the three parts, the spirit, the soul and the body, as stated in 1 Thessalonians 5:23, should be the divine order. He used the structure of the Jewish lost Solomonic temple as an analogy to illustrate the particular position of each of the three as found in the Bible. The temple had three different parts: the outer court, which is visible and open to the public; the Holy Place, which is separated from God's presence by a veil; and the deepest Holy of Holies, in which God dwells and no human enters without purification and sanctification.¹⁸⁴ Likewise, humans exist as God's temple. The body functions as the outer court, practicing according to the commandments; the soul serves as the Holy Place, where emotions and wills can follow the order of the spirit to choose God's will; and the spirit resembles the Holy of Holies, which is beyond the reach of human consciousness and sensibilities. It is in the Holy of Holies/spirit that believers receive the revelations and

¹⁷⁹ Jessie Penn-Lewis, *Soul and Spirit* (Fort Washington, Pa.: CLC Publications, 2014); Andrew Murray, *The Spirit of Christ: Thoughts on the Indwelling of the Holy Spirit and the Church* (Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2004).

¹⁸⁰ Watchman Nee, *The Spiritual Man*, trans. Stephen Kaung (New York, NY: CLC Publications, 1968), 2.

¹⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 26.

¹⁸² *Ibid.*, 24.

¹⁸³ *Ibid.*

¹⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 29.

unite with God.¹⁸⁵ Also, this illustration describes the hierarchy of the three of Nee's anthropology: the deepest and foremost is the spirit, the middle is the soul, and the lowest is the body. Such a preeminent position of the spirit determines Nee's focus on Christian spirituality and his emphasis on believers' spiritual growth.

Nee's view of sanctification can be understood as a recovery of the divine balance of the three parts. According to Nee, the original order of the three parts was broken at the Fall. Before the Fall, the spirit served as the governing part, to which the soul and the body were subject. The spirit could not command the body directly; it needed the soul as a medium to articulate and transmit its order to the body to take action. Since humans could commune with God and receive His order in their spirits, God in effect was the Lord in all things.¹⁸⁶ However, as humans had free will in their souls, they made their own decisions and betrayed God. Like Penn-Lewis, Nee thought that the main cause of the Fall was human intellect.¹⁸⁷ The desire for knowledge independent of God's revelation caused humans to become separated from God.¹⁸⁸ As a result, the intellectually driven and overly developed human soul destroyed the original balance of the three parts. In this regard, Nee's view coincides with Wang's. Both acknowledged that the truth was beyond humans' natural or independent reason. They both believed that to engage in rational thinking excessively, or to pride oneself on one's own thoughts and be independent from the truth, were the original causes of immorality or sin. For them, only through a mystical apprehension can humans grasp and unite with the ultimate truth. It is no accident that Nee was interested in Penn-Lewis's mystical teachings. His taste for mysticism was deeply rooted in his Chinese cultural background.

In addition, according to Nee, the Fall led to the death of the spirit and, as a result, humans lost their spiritual knowledge of God. By the death of the spirit, Nee meant that the spirit was dead unto God and lost its capability to commune with God, yet the spirit as an organ to sense the spiritual world still existed. Thus, the spirit of an unregenerated human has lost its capability to sense God, but it remains active to interact with other spiritual entities.¹⁸⁹ This is why Nee believed that people such as

¹⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 43.

¹⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 47-48.

¹⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 49-50.

¹⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 51.

witches were able to sense and connect with evil spirits. Other scholars have suggested that that Nee's appeal to the spiritual realm is related to the enchanted world in Chinese folk religion.¹⁹⁰ "Religion" was not a distinct category in Chinese culture until Western missionaries during the second half of the nineteenth century introduced it. Thus, the boundary between the religious and the non-religious did not exist clearly in Chinese people's daily lives, especially for those who lived in rural areas.¹⁹¹ Many people's lives were greatly shaped by an enchanted worldview, according to which the world was full of deities or spiritual forces, such as benevolent protector spirits, dangerous hungry ghosts, fox spirits, and many others.¹⁹² Therefore, Nee's exposition of the spiritual realm and the possibility of interactions between humans and spiritual entities could easily fit into the Chinese cultural environment.

Nee's peculiar adoption of the tripartite anthropology is certainly derived from his Christian theological teacher Penn-Lewis and in his exposition of the Bible. But it also is clear that the ordering of the three-part anthropology, and in particular his stress on the spirit, both laid the foundation for his mystical teachings and accommodated his theology to the mindset of most Chinese people by drawing on neo-Confucian parallels and its critique of intellectualization and popular religion.

3.2.4 Nee's View of Sanctification

On the basis of the teaching of the Cross and the tripartite anthropology, Nee set forth a methodology on how to achieve a deeper Christian life. Again, taking Romans as his Scriptural source, Nee concluded four steps to live a normal/spiritual Christian life: knowing, reckoning, presenting oneself to God and walking in the Spirit.¹⁹³ Although these steps were developed from an integration of the Keswick teachings of sanctification and Penn-Lewis's tripartite anthropology, they were also in accordance with Zhu and Wang's methods of moral cultivation. This process involves not only cognitive activities but also mystical approaches. It is the mystical side of the equation

¹⁹⁰ Angus Kinnear, *Against the Tide: The Unforgettable Story of Watchman Nee*, 3rd ed. (CLC Publications, 2017), 147; Grace Ying May, "Watchman Nee and the Breaking of Bread: The Missiological and Spiritual Forces that Contributed to an Indigenous Chinese Ecclesiology" (Boston University School of Theology, 2000), 131-132.

¹⁹¹ Richard Madsen, "Signs and Wonders: Christianity and Hybrid Modernity in China," in *Christianity in Contemporary China: Socio-Cultural Perspectives* (Abingdon, Oxon; New York: Routledge, 2013), 17-30.

¹⁹² Ibid.

¹⁹³ Watchman Nee, *The Normal Christian Life*, PB edition (Wheaton, IL.; Fort Washington, PA: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., 1977), 42.

that will now be addressed. This entire process is very similar to the series of events proposed by mystical historians and theologians such as Evelyn Underhill (1875-1941).

Nee's teaching of sanctification is to a large degree in line with Underhill's description of the Mystic Way. According to Underhill's typology, the mystical life involves the following five phases. The first is the awakening of the self. It can be understood as the moment of conversion, where one becomes aware of the Ultimate or Divine Reality.¹⁹⁴ This is followed by the second stage which is self-knowledge and purgation. The self at this point realizes its own imperfection and finiteness so that he or she tries to remove all the obstacles that impede his or her progress to approach to the Divine Reality through self-discipline or mortification. This was assumed as a painstaking state requiring enormous efforts by Underhill.¹⁹⁵ However, in Nee's case, the phase of purgation only involves self-knowledge, which means that believers become conscious of their total depravity and fallen state. For Nee, neither self-discipline nor mortification can be accepted in sanctification, as both of them were regarded as efforts of the soul and the body, which are stained by sin. To follow the way of self-discipline such as penance, for Nee, means to keep living a sinner's life; self-efforts are independent from the grace of God, whereas the end of sanctification depends on the development of the new-born spiritual life, which by nature is the eternal life of Christ and has nothing to do with sin. For Nee, the correct path of sanctification is indicated in the third phase of Underhill's typology-illumination. Underhill described this stage with Plato's "cave of illusion." Prisoners go through struggles and make it to the mouth of the cave and finally get a glimpse of the sun. This means believers, through meditation or contemplation, enter into the Ultimate and grasp the Divine Presence.¹⁹⁶ Certain apprehension of the Ultimate occurs in the state of illumination. Thus, commonly it brings about the feeling of happiness or sometimes engenders ecstasy.¹⁹⁷ Nee's notion of revelation can be understood as a kind of illumination, in which God can be revealed to believers, who thus grasp the truth of Him. This stage is followed by a second purgation called the "dark night of the soul" or "spiritual crucifixion." It is an experience of surrender that

¹⁹⁴ Evelyn Underhill, *Mysticism: A Study in the Nature and Development of Man's Spiritual Consciousness*, A Meridian Book, M 307 (New York: World Publishing, 1955), 169.

¹⁹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 170.

leads to total self-denial. In comparison with the phase of purgation, in which one's sense, interest and energies are purified and oriented towards the Ultimate, the experience of dark night further requires a complete purgation; one's I-hood, together with its individuality and will, must be killed in order to attain an utterly passive state in which one desires nothing.¹⁹⁸ Nee's idea of denying self can be understood as a 'dark night of the self.' It is the specific method to forsake one's soul life, which means to deny the leadership of the soul among the three parts of human's composition and everything produced from the soul such as individual will. For Nee, the end of this spiritual crucifixion lies in the transformation of one's soul into a passive vessel without any subjective will so that one can manifest the spiritual life that is grafted from Christ. Therefore, denying self serves as a prerequisite for a purified/sanctified state. According to Underhill, the ultimate goal of the mystic quest is called union. This is a state where the "Absolute Life" is not merely grasped, enjoyed or sensed by the self; instead, the self unites with it. In such a state, the self is purely spiritual as it and the Absolute Life are one. For Nee, the state of sanctification is the union with Christ in one's spirit. It is clear that Nee's process of sanctification can easily fit into Underhill's classification of the Mystic Way. On the other hand, it also corresponds with the general features of Western Christian mysticism noted by Underhill.

According to Underhill, what distinguishes Christian mysticism from non-Christian mysticism is that the end of Christian mystic experience is *not* an annihilation of the self. Christian mystics go through the Infinite to the Definite.¹⁹⁹ They pursue the transcendental meaning of life in order to define the transcendence. Underhill quoted Delacroix's description, "They go from the conscious to the subconscious, and from the subconscious to the conscious. The obstacle in their path is not consciousness in general, but self-consciousness, the consciousness of the Ego."²⁰⁰ Therefore, Christian mystics are devoted to turn the self, which is preoccupied by one's ego, into an "organ of revelation of universal being."²⁰¹ Nee's idea of sanctification carries this feature

¹⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 169-170.

¹⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 172.

²⁰⁰ Henri Delacroix, *Etudes d'histoire et de psychologie du mysticisme : les grands mystiques chrétiens* (Paris : F. Alcan, 1908), 235. Cited in Evelyn Underhill, *Mysticism: A Study in the Nature and Development of Man's Spiritual Consciousness*, A Meridian Book, M 307 (New York: World Publishing, 1955), 172.

²⁰¹ *Ibid.*

too. According to Nee's teaching, the aim of sanctification is not a complete suppression or an annihilation of the soul life but rather a cultivation of it. A sanctified or transformed soul is assumed to be a servant of the spirit and plays an indispensable role in manifesting the likeness of Christ. In terms of practice, Nee, like his Western predecessors, regarded the self/ego (self-centeredness) as the biggest obstacle in the journey of sanctification. Thus, Nee's expression of "denying self" should be understood as a paradoxical description of a state in which a person is led by the will of God instead of his or her ego. Furthermore, this view of sanctification with an end which results in self-transformation is in line with neo-Confucianism, as it seeks the principle not for the purpose of the total annihilation of the moral agent but to live a moral life.

As for Nee's idea of sanctification, knowing means to consider the identification with Christ in His death and resurrection as a historic reality. The only way to make the crucifixion effective in salvation is to accept and believe the redemptive work accomplished by Jesus Christ on the Cross.²⁰² However, knowing is not initiated by human efforts but rather by God's revelation in the spirit. As Nee explicated,

That knowing, which is not just knowing something about the truth nor understanding some important doctrine. It is not an intellectual knowledge at all, but an opening of the eyes of the heart to see what we have in Christ.²⁰³

This revealed or mystical knowing goes beyond the human rational ability and can be reached only through the mystical apprehension of God's revelation. It is different from the kind of intellectual understanding encouraged by the Keswick speakers and even Zhu. Instead, it has much in common with the mystical apprehension maintained by Penn-Lewis and Wang. As Nee described: "So there comes a time, in regard to any new apprehension of Christ, when you know it in your own heart, you 'see' it in your spirit. A light has shined into your inner being and you are wholly persuaded of the fact."²⁰⁴ After believers obtain this spiritual or mystical wisdom through God's revelation, they naturally come to the stage of reckoning. It is important to note several things. First, this apprehension is passive by the believer in terms of agency.

²⁰² Watchman Nee, *The Normal Christian Life*, PB edition (Wheaton, IL.; Fort Washington, PA: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., 1977), 46.

²⁰³ *Ibid.*, 47.

²⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 48.

It comes from God. However, and paradoxically, it is also something that serious or spiritually-minded Christians only can receive; there is a motif of preparation but it is not causal. Instead, the Christian struggle to live holy prepares one for deeper mystical understanding. This, in turn, is followed by a new heart and new reckoning.

According to Nee, “reckoning” in Greek refers to performing accounting and bookkeeping, and a Christian should act like an accountant, accurately accepting and steadfastly adhering to what has been revealed in the spirit.²⁰⁵ In other words, reckoning is an accurate rationalization and sincere acknowledgement of God’s spiritual message. In classical mystical theology such as Underhill, this is the ‘unitive’ life stage bringing together revelation and agency. In terms of neo-Confucianism, it is to act according to the principle. However, although the mystical truth has been revealed in one’s spirit and then rationalized in one’s mind, it remains objective or outwardly manifest rather than personal, secret, spiritual knowledge. Nee, like other authors of the Holiness Movement, maintained that to live a deeper Christian life, believers should go further than merely understand spiritual matters. They must substantiate spiritual truth in their own lives. In other words, they move from the subconscious to the conscious. To practice according to the spiritual truth is the center of living in holiness. Thus, Nee finds in the Christian mystical tradition and in the Holiness movements threads that support neo-Confucian teachings as well. For Zhu, action should follow knowledge (principle) closely. It is futile if one has acquired the principle but he or she does not take any actions according to it. Moral actions should follow true knowledge closely and be unstoppable. For Wang, “Knowing and acting form a unity” (zhixingheyi, 知行合一). Both Zhu and Wang pointed to the inseparability of the truth and personal practice or experiences. For Nee, it is faith that bridges the objective truth and subjective experiences. Thus, it is neither merely subjective nor objective but both, having been initiated by the inner life of spirit as one pursues holiness as an act of faith.

Nee elucidated faith with Darby’s translation of Hebrews 11:1, “Faith is the substantiating of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.” The redemptive work done by Christ on the Cross is historic and objective towards humans. However, through faith - a subjective act that is based on God’s revelation and human’s rational

²⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 59.

acknowledgement/application - the objective work of Jesus Christ can be substantiated in believers' personal lives. In terms of practice, faith means consecration, which means to present oneself to God. According to Nee, this is the third step to live a normal Christian life. Nee quoted Romans 6:13, "Neither present your members unto sin as instruments of unrighteousness; but present yourselves unto God, as alive from the dead, and your members as instruments of righteousness unto God." Since believers acknowledge that they have been crucified with Christ on the Cross, they are included in His death and grafted with His eternal life in His resurrection. Thus, Christ becomes their only source of life and believers cannot help but present themselves to God.²⁰⁶ Yet the consecration here does not mean that believers must engage in the preaching or mission (although desirable), but rather that they should abide by the will of God in whatever walk of life they are called to or found to be in. In other words, to consecrate is to acknowledge God's authority in every aspect of one's life without any reservations.²⁰⁷ The attitude of consecration should be as described in Romans 12:2, "And be not fashioned according to this world: but be ye transformed by the renewing of your mind, that ye may prove what is the good and acceptable and perfect will of God." A devoted servant of God should treat God's will as the center of his or her life. Believers should consider themselves as God's permanent property and no longer belonging to themselves. Also, they should treat God's will as their own will.²⁰⁸ Nee took Paul's life as an example of consecration in 2 Timothy 4, "I have fought the good fight, I have finished the course, I have kept the faith." Every Christian should be like Paul to choose the course appointed by God.²⁰⁹ Nee's understanding of giving oneself to God follows the particular idea of consecration as defined by Pheobe Palmer, and other Keswick speakers such as Penn-Lewis. Each argued that consecration was the end of spiritual quickening that allowed acknowledgement of God's ownership and subsequently making moral decisions and regarding the will of God as one's own. But, once more, there is another source of gravity for this application of sanctification as a process found in Chinese cultural norms. All of these implications can be summarized with the virtue of reverence (*jing*, 敬) in neo-Confucianism. A moderate, humble, devoted, sincere, selfless and serious attitude is the prerequisite for realizing

²⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 97.

²⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 100.

²⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 100-101.

²⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 100.

sagehood/holiness. The neo-Confucian attitude of reverence implies Nee's method of denying self.

Self-denial for Nee was found in the metaphor of John 15:4, "Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself, except it abide in the vine; so neither can ye, except ye abide in me." He deemed that the only way to realize a true and complete consecration was to step out of one's self and stay in union with Christ in one's spirit. According to Nee, the soul is the seat of the self or ego, which is driven by one's mind, emotions and will. When one follows his or her own will or desires, the self is manifested and the will of God is neglected. This was called by Nee living in soul life or living by the soul.²¹⁰ It represents a state of being independent from God and self-centered. Therefore, denying self means choosing the will of God, which is revealed in the spirit over one's own preference and is produced by one's own will or desires in the soul. According to Nee, a holy life is described as: "I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I that live, but Christ liveth in me: and that life which I now live in the flesh I live in faith, the faith which is in the Son of God, who loved me, and gave himself up for me" (Galatians 2:20). This means that since believers have obtained the holy spiritual life of Christ at regeneration, they should not live depending on their soul life anymore, for the soul serves the self or ego and deviates humans from faith in God. Instead, they should live spiritual lives following the will of God. For Nee, the end of his sanctification is the realization of the mystical union with God and the manifestation of the likeness of Christ. Conversely, the orientation of soul life is in contrast with this. Thus, what believers should do to live in holiness is deny their soul life and live unto God.

In terms of practice, the way to nurture the spirit life and deal with the soul is to "bear the Cross" everyday. In Nee's works, "bearing the Cross" designates a subjective aspect of the work of the Cross. It is a personal and gradual journey of sanctification. In other words, it is a sanctifying process of the soul. To make the soul become holy (a humble servant), believers should consecrate themselves to God continually and receive the discipline of the Holy Spirit, which is the unique "means of grace." Once again, Nee follows a mystical trajectory that attempts to unify interiority with objective action, and uses the language of the Holiness, Keswick theologies and his

²¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 229.

Biblical exegesis to describe how one ‘bears the Cross’ by following one’s inner illumination of Spirit. Subjective consecration serves as the foundation for receiving the Holy Spirit’s discipline, which in turn manifests in holy choices and living, creating the possibility of spiritual discipline internally; the process continues to drive the Christian forward to God as an act of reverence. But, again, this is also something that would appeal to the Chinese mind of Nee. As Zhu explained, the virtue of reverence was the basis of investigating principles.

As Nee described, it is a “painful process to discourage what the soul is asking for.”²¹¹ In his tripartite anthropology, Nee viewed the soul as the dangerous part of the human and the place in which pride and intellect crowd out God’s Spirit as ‘over-development’. Due to this over development of the soul, the spirit has been suppressed. As a result, many Christians are driven by personal desires (soul over development) that are against the will of God. On the contrary, a spiritual or normal Christian who pursues a holy life should deny his or her individual desires and totally rely on God and take Christ as the only source of energy. The soul and body should be completely subject to the spirit. One should not take any actions without the guidance of the Holy Spirit.²¹² But there is another idea that Nee gestures toward. The Holy Spirit’s discipline also works in an objective way via life circumstances to deal with individual soul life as a kind of providence. The discipline of the Holy Spirit, for Nee, also means that the Holy Spirit arranges particular external or worldly circumstances for individual believers (and presumably churches) according to their personal spiritual needs to assist with their spiritual growth. The Holy Spirit creates various opportunities within believers’ personal lives to chastise, quicken and prove God’s truth to offer spiritual progress. Everything happens to a believer for a reason and Christian lives are full of spiritual lessons.²¹³ Believers are required to pay attention to their real lives and to contemplate the spiritual lessons therein. To pay attention only to circumstance is not enough, and it is not enough to face life with blind faith. Rather, Christians should deny self and receive the discipline of the Holy Spirit at the same time, so that believers can bear the Cross continually and their soul life can be sanctified gradually over time. As a result, believers will come to the stage of walking

²¹¹ *Ibid.*, 260.

²¹² *Ibid.*, 233.

²¹³ Dongsheng John Wu, *Understanding Watchman Nee: Spirituality, Knowledge, and Formation* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2014), 186.

in the Spirit and live in holiness. In terms of neo-Confucianism, this painful process of sanctification is a journey of exhaustively investigating principles/ spiritual knowledges (*qiongli*, 窮理) and becoming true to one's nature/spiritual life (*jinxing*, 盡性).

Given the general theological critique of the Holiness and Keswick movements that there is a centrifugal force of subjectivity that makes it unclear how the mind might engage in holy living, Nee tried to place the mind as critical in terms of agency. Even though Nee insisted that the spirit should be the dominant part of the whole person, he stressed the significance of the human mind during the process of sanctification. Although the mind is a part of the soul, it is crucial in Nee's teachings. The human mind has a dual function. It is able to safeguard the spirit through disciplined choices and can assist with spiritual practices once further transformed. Before it can contribute to any spiritual practices, God must first renew the mind. But paradoxically, one must forsake all false mentalities in their minds (over-thinking) and follow God's will, and only then God will renew their minds to comprehend revelations received in their spirits.²¹⁴ Nee quoted Ephesians 4:22-23, "that ye put away, as concerning your former manner of life, the old man, that waxeth corrupt after the lusts of deceit; and that ye be renewed in the spirit of your mind." Humans are responsible for giving up their old inclinations of the mind, and God then does the job of renewal. When the mind has been renewed, it can serve as a watchman to further spiritual development. Once the spirit senses God's messages, the mind interprets correctly, understands and sends orders to the outer person (the body).²¹⁵ It is important to see how Nee thinks of the mind; while always in danger of over-thinking, the mind tries to seek truth in the world and in the moral dimension although this is not saving knowledge. The mind, even unsanctified, is prone to discerning divine principles, and to prepare one to live according to this reverence is to prepare for sanctification. Presumably, this runs parallel to Nee's belief that God is providential for those whom God calls to salvation and that the moral wisdom of the world can prepare the mind for conversion. This, perhaps, is the most direct appeal to the propaedeutic work of Neo-Confucianism and its moral precepts and insistence of

²¹⁴ Watchman Nee, *The Spiritual Man*, trans. Stephen Kaung (New York, NY: CLC Publications, 1968), 52.

²¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 65.

reverence. To live in holiness requires cooperation between the spirit and the mind. Apart from paying attention to the mystical dimension, Nee also pointed to the importance of rationality and gestures to that of the pre-Christian life of his congregation. Of course, for those already in the church or near converts, this is merely in following the rationality of morality of general church life. But one must choose to be mindful in both cases, either to the best mental and moral life of Chinese culture or that of the congregational life itself. Becoming holy requires making holy decisions.

For Nee, the renewed mind plays a significant role in living a holy life. Due to the reality that no one could keep his or her spirit sensitive or active all the time to commune with God directly, Nee suggested that believers should employ the principle of the mind: assisting the spirit.²¹⁶ The human mind is one of the most important capabilities of the soul, serving as the medium between the spirit and the body. When the spirit senses God, it is the mind that makes revelations understandable, and afterwards the body can take action. Not only does the mind matter greatly in apprehending God's messages, but also it is responsible for memorizing knowledge revealed by God and preserving it. If one's mind is equipped with God-given knowledge, he or she can employ this knowledge to stimulate the spirit when the spirit is sleeping or silent.²¹⁷ For example, before the spirit wakes up, instead of waiting passively, one should pray with the mind first. Once one prays in this way for a while, the spirit will be energized and then begin to guide the entire person.²¹⁸ Over time, the mind will transform to be a good assistant for achieving the holy life of the soul.

Nee's theology has been considered by many as anti-intellectual.²¹⁹ However, the present study argues above that Nee's anti-intellectual attitude only manifests in his emphasis on the spirit and his pursuit of a mystical union with God. As for the practice of bearing the Cross, although Nee insisted that it was the soul that impeded

²¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 164.

²¹⁷ *Ibid.*

²¹⁸ *Ibid.*

²¹⁹ See in Grace Ying May, "Watchman Nee and the Breaking of Bread: The Missiological and Spiritual Forces That Contributed to an Indigenous Chinese Ecclesiology" (Boston University School of Theology, 2000), 181. Ken Pa Chin, "The Theological Anthropology of Watchman Nee: In the Context of Taoist Tradition," *Sino-Christian Studies*, no.12 (2011): 159–87. Yuan-wei Liao, "Watchman Nee's Theology of Victory: An Examination and Critique from A Lutheran Perspective" (Luther Seminary, 1997).

the communion with God and therefore the soul should be denied, in effect, Nee attached great importance to the human mind of the soul during the process of sanctification. Therefore, for Nee, a complete denial of the soul and walking in the Spirit does not mean that the soul should be discarded; rather, it should be cultivated.

But Nee's sanctification remains personal and individual with the exception of his inclusion of mindfulness as a way to satisfy the demands of his holistic ecclesiology, which is in accordance with his neo-Confucian cultural background especially Wang's notion of Oneness. Nee also emphasized sanctification's "corporate" significance. Nee's notion of corporate sanctification is based on his understanding of God's redemptive work and eternal purpose, and this is where his ecclesiology comes into focus. Nee claimed that the redemption had another meaning apart from dealing with sin: it was for the creation of the Church. Nee interpreted the Scripture in a typological way.²²⁰ He quoted Genesis 2: 21-22, "And Jehovah God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man, and he slept, ... and the rib, which Jehovah God had taken from the man, made he a woman, and brought her unto the man." Nee contended that the "sleep" here, which allegorically meant death, was not for dealing with humankind's sin but the existence of Eve because it was prior to the Fall.²²¹ Nee allegorically regarded Adam as Christ and Eve as the Church. According to Nee, these verses echo Ephesians 5: 25, "Husbands, love your wives, even as Christ also loved the church, and gave himself up for it." Eve was created out of Adam in his sleep, so the creation of the Church should occur in the same way. Jesus Christ, the "last Adam," was resurrected from His death, so the Church was created out of Him and should manifest His life.²²² Nee quotes Romans 8:29-30:

For whom he foreknew, he also foreordained to be conformed to the image of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brethren: and whom he foreordained, them he also called: and whom he also called, them he also justified: and whom he justified, them he also glorified.

Therefore, according to Nee, the divine purpose of the creation and redemption is that Jesus Christ becomes the firstborn among many glorified children, all of whom have

²²⁰ Watchman Nee, *The Normal Christian Life*, PB edition (Wheaton, IL.; Fort Washington, PA: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., 1977), 215.

²²¹ *Ibid.*

²²² *Ibid.*, 217-218.

His divine image.²²³ The Fall is regarded as an interruption of God's original plan, redemption is not only for dealing with personal sin, but also for creating the Church. In God's view, the Church is the Body of Christ and the Christ is the head of the Church.²²⁴ God requires a Body that is free of sin to manifest the image of Christ, so individual holiness cannot satisfy God. Nee quoted Romans 12:4, "For even as we have many members in one body, and all the members have not the same office: so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and severally members one of another." Although believers are many, they are one in Christ because they share the same eternal life of Christ. The communion with other believers is extremely important because through praying or talking with other members who have mature spiritual life, believers are enlightened by God's light and can discern what is God's will and what is not.²²⁵ Also, believers should love each other because they are sharing the same eternal life in Christ. This has two immediate implications. First, it places the Church and its lessons as locations of ethical or mindful life because they are full of spiritual Christians. Near converts and worldly Christians then can mimic their choices, and in doing so perhaps prepare their mind for sanctification. Being near a church, as the Church is holy, opens the door to following the Cross in all the above significations. Unlike general providence, the Church and churches are specific manifestations of God's Spirit to which adherents and converts should pay mindful reverential attention in life and deed. Secondly, this corporate significance of sanctification can be easily translated to the Chinese cultural context as it draws on Wang's idea of Oneness. If all believers are the children of God then differentiations should not exist; essentially, they are one. Believers should treat other members of the Church with the virtue of Confucian sages: "Any living person is as dear to him as his own brothers and children." Thus, spiritual individualism can be avoided. Although only a sanctified Body can fulfill God's purpose, the holiness of Body is built on the holiness of many individuals. Therefore, either of these two aspects of sanctification, individual or corporate, is indispensable in fulfilling an integral meaning of sanctification. Nee's ecclesiology is driven by his views on sanctification, and those derive from his reliance on the Scriptural theology of his mission teachers; however, it

²²³ *Ibid.*, 107. Watchman Nee, *Sit, Walk, Stand*, 4th ed. (Wheaton, Ill.: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., 1977), 65.

²²⁴ Watchman Nee, *The Normal Christian Life*, PB edition (Wheaton, IL.; Fort Washington, PA: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., 1977), 214.

²²⁵ *Ibid.*, 242-246.

is also clear that this particular kind of ecclesiology makes use of Chinese metaphysics – mind, body and soul as oneness.

In brief, according to Nee, a spiritual growth of a Christian includes four phases: knowing, reckoning, presenting oneself to God and walking in the Spirit. In the stage of knowing, believers should remain completely passive and receive God's revelations in their spirits to obtain spiritual wisdom; during the reckoning phase, believers should understand clearly and rely on steadfastly what is revealed by God; by presenting themselves to God continually, believers can substantiate God's truth in their personal experiences and gradually manifest the image of Christ in their individual lives; and when believers walk in the Spirit, their souls are sanctified and subjected to their spirits, and they become in union with Christ. This whole journey of spiritual growth or sanctification involves many 'backslides'. However, believers are holy and perfect as long as they stay in their spirit and unite with Christ. Nee's way of sanctification is in accordance with neo-Confucian moral development. It involves both cognitive and mystical dimensions of self-cultivation, which echo the school of nature and the school of mind, respectively. Its combination of rational cognition and mystical intuition properly fit into the mainstream Chinese mindset and laid the groundwork for Nee's theology to flourish in China. Nee's indigenization of Christianity is unique; he did not simply interpret Christian messages within the Chinese cultural framework. On the surface, Nee's theology could be seen as unoriginal because it is adapted from the Holiness Movement and at first appears uninfluenced by many Chinese cultural concepts. In fact, whether consciously or unconsciously, Nee made creative use of Western theological sources and forged them into a theology that profoundly accommodated the Chinese way of thinking.

Chapter 4

4 Conclusion

The preceding chapters have examined Watchman Nee's view of spirituality in terms of its Western theological sources and integration of neo-Confucianism. These two ideological traditions shaped his theology in different ways. Nee came into contact with Western Christian traditions at an early age through the influence of three important women in his life: Lin Heping, Dora Yu and Margaret Barber. They exposed him to Western theological resources, especially the Holiness Movement. Nee not only navigated the literary works of the Holiness authors, but also he communicated with representatives of the Holiness Movement in person. Due to his numerous and complex interactions with Western theological thought and his contemporary theological climate, Nee developed his own theology by synthesizing different theological branches of the Holiness and Plymouth Brethren movements. Accordingly, his theological pursuit was in line with these two movements and focused on living a deep or spiritual Christian life. Therefore, spirituality is at the centre of Nee's theology.

Nee's practical objective of living a holy or higher Christian life made sanctification a focal point of his teachings. In this thesis, the second chapter traced how Nee forged his own spiritual theology by deconstructing and reestablishing Western theological sources. In general, he followed the Wesleyan Holiness tradition and mainly adopted and integrated the teachings of the Exclusive Brethren, the Keswick speakers and Penn-Lewis. The emphases of his teachings were to realize a mystical union with God and substantiate God's revelations in one's subjective experiences. During the process of sanctification described by Nee, cognitive activity and mystical contemplation are both indispensable. Thus, it can be seen that Nee's view of sanctification shares some similarities with the neo-Confucian notion of moral development; both approaches attach great importance to the cultivation of the human mind. Furthermore, in the third chapter, Nee's spirituality was analyzed through the lens of neo-Confucianism. Nee's idea of spiritual cultivation was found to be similar to neo-Confucianism in many respects and could be interpreted in Zhu and Wang's teachings on the development of sagehood. The life-long journey of soul-sanctification in Nee's

spirituality mirrored the painstaking process of moral cultivation in Zhu's teachings. Nee's description of mystical union with God echoed Wang's exposition of immediate moral intuition. Although Nee neither directly mentioned any neo-Confucian concepts in his teachings nor explained any Christian notions in terms of neo-Confucianism, highlighting the potential similarities between his theology and neo-Confucianism helped to understand his theology and its acceptance by Chinese audiences.

The practical pursuit of living in holiness and the synthesis of rational thinking and mystical intuition of Nee's spirituality resonate with the Chinese mindset. For a mind shaped by traditional Chinese culture, pure rational arguments about God did not make any sense. This was one of the main reasons why most of the missionary preachings in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries were unsuccessful. For Chinese people, ideas should be relevant to the existence of human beings apart from their cognitive meanings. The truth and practice should never separate from each other. Therefore, for a Chinese mind, to live a deep Christian life always appears more meaningful and attractive than obtaining an abstract truth. In addition, for Chinese people the path towards holiness/truth is not limited to speculative analysis. The method of contemplation is also a significant part of the Chinese culture, as it plays critical roles in Zen Buddhism, Taoism and neo-Confucianism. Therefore, Nee's adoption of a mystical approach properly catered to the contemplative traditions of Chinese culture. Nee's preferences and choices among particular Western theological branches and his way of synthesizing were not determined by accident. His form of spirituality was in line with the Chinese way of spiritual cultivation. In other words, Nee's method of indigenization included two steps. First, he deconstructed carefully chosen Western theological sources, and then he reconstructed them according to the Chinese cultural mindset. This is the critical reason why Nee's theology has remained influential in China. However, Nee's theology is not the only one that presently thrives in China.

Christianity has striking grown in China since the 1980s. It has been predicted that by 2020 the number of evangelical Christians in China will exceed that of any other

country in the world.²²⁶ Also, Pentecostalism or quasi-Pentecostalism is regarded by many as a dominant form of Protestant Christianity in China.²²⁷ Protestant Christianity in China emphasizes spiritual gifts such as healing, exorcism, speaking in tongues and the miraculous. It also has a strong experiential nature, as believers in China tend to connect Biblical stories with their individual experiences.²²⁸ Scholars hold differing opinions on this Pentecostal or quasi-Pentecostal movement and its significance in the future development of Protestant Christianity in China. For example, Robert Menzies suggests that although Pentecostalism in China is currently facing several challenges, such as it is often limited to rural areas, it still has a promising future because its simple approach to the Bible is easy to understand; this is especially important given the large number of semi-literate people in China.²²⁹ However, Daniel Bays points out potential problems with this phenomenon and is not optimistic about the long-term prosperity of Pentecostalism in China. Apart from the challenge of introducing Pentecostalism into cities, the hybridization of Pentecostalism with Chinese folk religions to a large extent has led believers to neglect its particular faith and only concentrate on its efficaciousness.²³⁰ It has been customary for peasants to worship multiple divine entities of Chinese folk religions for healing or good fortune; therefore, they tend to value the supernatural aspect of Pentecostalism and its practical efficacy over its doctrinal truth.²³¹ Furthermore, as Bays explains, due to this experiential inclination rooted in and characterized by Chinese popular religion and the lack of doctrinal monitoring, it is natural to see the production of radical Christian cults, such as the Lightning out of the East (*Dongfang*

²²⁶ Tony Lambert, *China's Christian Millions*, New ed., fully rev. and updated (Oxford: Monarch, 2006), 179. Cited in Vinson Synan, ed., *Global Renewal Christianity: Spirit-Empowered Movements Past, Present, and Future*, First edition (Lake Mary, Florida: Charisma House, 2015), 68.

²²⁷ Tony Lambert, *China's Christian Millions*, New ed., fully rev. and updated (Oxford: Monarch, 2006); Philip Jenkins, *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2002); Allan Anderson and Edmond Tang, eds., *Asian and Pentecostal: The Charismatic Face of Christianity in Asia* (OCMS, 2005); David Aikman, *Jesus in Beijing: How Christianity is Transforming China and Changing the Global Balance of Power* (Washington, D.C: Regnery Publishing, 2006); Daniel H. Bays, *A New History of Christianity in China* (John Wiley & Sons, 2011); Vinson Synan, ed., *Global Renewal Christianity: Spirit-Empowered Movements Past, Present, and Future*, First edition (Lake Mary, Florida: Charisma House, 2015).

²²⁸ Vinson Synan, ed., *Global Renewal Christianity: Spirit-Empowered Movements Past, Present, and Future*, First edition (Lake Mary, Florida: Charisma House, 2015), 68.

²²⁹ Robert Menzies, "Pentecostals in China," in *Global Renewal Christianity: Spirit-Empowered Movements Past, Present, and Future* (Lake Mary, Florida: Charisma House, 2015), 67-90.

²³⁰ Daniel H. Bays, *A New History of Christianity in China* (John Wiley & Sons, 2011), 194.

²³¹ *Ibid.*

Shandian).²³² Thus, it is reasonable for scholars like Lian Xi to consider such radical sectarian movements as a challenge to the future of popular Christianity in China.²³³

Although the growth of Pentecostalism is rapid in China, its combination with Chinese popular religions blurs the core of Protestant spirituality-faith; the features of Chinese folk religions are so visible within the Chinese version of Pentecostalism that they conceal the essential content of Protestantism.²³⁴ In addition, radical cults, one of its by-products, misrepresent Christianity and impede the healthy development of Christianity in China. Conversely, Nee's version of spirituality caters to the Chinese mindset in a much subtler way and has many advantages that suggest it will continue to flourish in China. Firstly, its growth is not confined to rural areas and semi-literate people; instead, it has been highly welcomed in cities like Shanghai and embraced by the well-educated since the 1930s. Although it is disputed in terms of its doctrine, it distinguishes itself clearly from Chinese folk religions and maintains an emphasis on faith in Christ. Also, Nee's version of spirituality to a large degree is able to avoid producing radical cults because of its reasonableness. Secondly, Nee's emphasis on individual spiritual cultivation is in line with the experiential inclination of the Chinese mindset, and his open attitude towards Pentecostalism or spiritual gifts helps his spirituality easily win favour among the uneducated. Therefore, in the long run, Nee's version of Christian spirituality seems more promising than that of Pentecostalism.

However, a predicament exists in Nee's spirituality. With regard to practice, Nee maintained that believers must wait for the guidance of the Holy Spirit to take action. They should forsake their own abilities and rely on the power of the Holy Spirit alone during their actions. Practice that does not satisfy these two conditions is regarded as stained by the soul and therefore meaningless towards God. In other words, only a project that is conceived and started by God is worth doing. Believers' practice should not involve any self-motivation. Every action of Christians is supposed to become a part of God's great plan. Admittedly, this is the ideal state in which believers completely comply with the will of God. However, if there is no self-motivation, then

²³² *Ibid.*, 196-197.

²³³ Xi Lian, *Redeemed by Fire: The Rise of Popular Christianity in Modern China* (New Haven [Conn.]: Yale University Press, 2010), 222. Cited in Daniel H. Bays, *A New History of Christianity in China* (John Wiley & Sons, 2011), 197.

²³⁴ *Ibid.*

no direct connection would exist between believers' spiritual knowledge and their particular actions. If God's spiritual guidance is taken as the only motivation for believers' actions, then it could be used as an excuse for indifference or laziness, and believers could hesitate to take part in mundane affairs. Nee's Little Flock has typically held a passive attitude towards world affairs, instead focusing on believers' spiritual growth alone. However, in the 1950s, after the communist regime was built, Nee tried to promote the idea that believers should cooperate with the efforts of government to recover the country from the poverty caused by war. Moreover, he encouraged the members of the Little Flock to join the Three-Self Patriotic Movement (TSPM).²³⁵ These moves could be seen as a shift in Nee's attitude towards socio-political affairs. Shortly afterwards, though, Nee was imprisoned for economic crimes and never had a chance to further develop this idea.²³⁶ Therefore, Nee's move towards political issues did not have any obvious impact on the Little Flock. All of the members of the Little Flock have been taught and trained to remain in the spirit and stay away from the evil world. As a result, believers' spiritual maturity does not always manifest in their daily lives. It is known that even Watchman Nee himself had a morally controversial personal life. However, to manifest the image of Christ in one's personal life should not be simply understood as to pay attention to the spiritual dimension of one's life alone. A truly deep Christian life should not involve a strict distinction between the spiritual and the non-spiritual. A practicable holy life requires the fusion of the spirit and the soul. Admittedly, Nee's spirituality will remain attractive among Chinese people because it is in harmony with the Chinese form of spirituality. However, its lack of motivation to engage in worldly affairs and its eschewing of social and political issues will negatively impact its influence in the long run.

In conclusion, this thesis is a supplement to the existing studies on Watchman Nee, most of which either critiqued his theology according to the major themes in Western systematic theology or evaluated him from a social or historical perspective. Given Nee's double identities, a Christian under the influence of the Western theological traditions as well as a well-educated Chinese person, this thesis has examined Nee's spirituality from two perspectives: the Holiness Movement and neo-Confucianism.

²³⁵ Alexander Chow, *Theosis, Sino-Christian Theology and the Second Chinese Enlightenment: Heaven and Humanity in Unity*, 2013 edition (Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 60.

²³⁶ *Ibid.*

On the one hand, Nee's theological sources have been distinguished and clarified in a Western Christian environment; on the other hand, his spirituality has been analyzed in the Chinese cultural context. Viewing Nee's spirituality as a bridge connecting Western theological traditions with neo-Confucianism can shed some light on the possible interactions between Christianity and Chinese culture in terms of spirituality. The formation of Nee's theology has implied a form of spirituality that pays more attention to individual mystical and cognitive experience as well as personal holiness, and treats discrepancies among different Christian denominations and authorities of certain communities with a relatively free and open attitude. Nee's inclination to deconstruct Western theologies and stress individual spiritual cultivation allows more possibilities for the interaction between Christianity and the Chinese culture in terms of spirituality.

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