

WATCHMAN NEE REJECTED THE EXCLUSIVE WAY

A Miracle

In August 1933 a miracle occurred related to Watchman Nee. Some might consider it an unfortunate event rather than a miracle. Nevertheless, it had far-reaching implications for Watchman Nee and the subsequent course of the Lord's recovery.

A young teenage sister was traveling by train from London, England, to Glasgow, Scotland. Freshly inspired to follow the Lord, she opened her Bible and began to read, unmoved by the glances of her fellow travelers. An older man, sitting opposite, inquired if she was a believer. "Yes," she replied enthusiastically; she belonged to Honor Oak Christian Fellowship. A few weeks earlier, she had been inspired by a visiting Chinese Christian. Chinese visitors to England were rare in those days; Chinese Christians even more scarce. The inquirer asked for more details. "His English name? Mr. Nee, Mr. Watchman Nee," she responded. A surprised expression passed over the man's face.

This "chance encounter" caused trouble. Had the teenage girl and older gentleman traveled in different compartments, the conversation would never have occurred. Honor Oak Fellowship was a small assembly of believers under the ministry of T. Austin-Sparks. The older brother's circle of fellowship was not large either. He was a leading brother among the Exclusive Brethren, begun by John Nelson Darby. Their encounter was therefore highly improbable, hence the "miracle."

In 1933, Watchman Nee visited Britain at the invitation of this branch of the Plymouth Brethren. For two months he traveled and ministered among their meetings. Once however, he traveled to London on "personal business," including a visit to Honor Oak in SE London. That visit, known to the Exclusive Brethren through the teenage sister, caused problems for Brother Nee. Yet, we believe, it was God's sovereign arrangement.

A few days after the encounter on the train, a leading brother at Honor Oak, received a phone call. Questions were posed in rapid succession: "Do you know a Chinese believer, named Nee?" "Did he join the meetings there?" "Did he partake of the Lord's Table?" "Yes," he answered to each question. Abruptly the caller hung up. "Someone's in trouble," he thought. The Exclusive Brethren consider participation in denominations a sin. Reception into their fellowship required one to forsake denominations, including their Lord's Table. Brother Nee had violated this taboo.

James Taylor & Watchman Nee

During the interval, Watchman Nee took a ship across the Atlantic accompanied by James Taylor, the undisputed leader of the exclusives. Taylor enjoyed their fellowship, "*We got on well on the steamer,*" he recorded; "*Nee was very free, making much enquiry, and communicating much as to the work in China.... He gave me a list of the meetings, also a list of the more useful brothers....*" Taylor wished to build upon the relationship begun in 1930, when a British engineer, Charles Barlow, visited Shanghai. Barlow's reports of the Lord's work in China had created a sensation among Brethren circles in the West. They felt that the Lord had produced a testimony in China which matched their own. A follow-up visit to China in 1932 by a delegation of six exclusive brothers further strengthened relations. A century after the Lord's move through John Nelson Darby, would He unite His two works of recovery into one global testimony?

In New York, Brother Nee ministered to gatherings of over 2,000 Brethren (W. Lee, p. 203). Taylor reported, "*Nee has been received here with open arms and had a very large – for New York – audience to hear him.*" The Brethren thought Watchman Nee's message was "*wonderful.*" But, for Taylor himself, it was "*in my judgment very defective doctrinally.*" That feeling was not shared by the saints, who joyfully received Brother Nee's ministry. Others eagerly anticipated his visit. Brother Nee was expected in Vancouver where (Taylor wrote) "*they are in raptures ...at the prospect of having him.*"

While in the US, Watchman Nee visited Dr. and Mrs. Stearns, his co-laborers in China. In his absence, the shocking news arrived by cable: "*Nee had broken bread with an independent company of Christians in London.*" On his return, Taylor confronted Watchman Nee with his indiscretion, only to discover he had also broken bread with Dr. Stearns (and other believers) in New Haven, CT. When challenged, Brother Nee "*made no admission of violation of principles.*" James Taylor was reluctant to press the issue, since, "*this might jeopardize the whole work in China.*" Writing to others, he stated, "*the whole Chinese position ...is so extraordinary, and so many Christians being involved, that if issue were taken in a formal way the enemy would get an advantage.*" Much was at stake, in particular the Exclusives' hope of uniting with the local churches in China, or perhaps absorbing them into their fellowship. A few days later, Watchman Nee left for Vancouver, where he ministered to a receptive audience before taking the ship across the Pacific.

Correspondence Between West & East

Back in China, Watchman Nee faced a dilemma. Joining with the Brethren provided a link with the Lord's prior recovery and a line of ministry stretching back to Darby. You "*have opportunity of profiting by [what] God wrought during the last century,*" Taylor wrote to Faithful Luke, no doubt echoing his admonition to Brother Nee. Moreover, he continued, "*This ministry, ... is your heritage, my beloved brother, and that of all the dear brethren in China, ... and you are obligated to the Lord to embrace it, profit by it, and stand firmly by it....*" On the other hand, the Brethren were characterized by exclusivity and a trend towards global organization.

An exchange of letters between the Brethren in the West and the brothers in Shanghai ensued. The exclusives sought to enlighten their Chinese brothers concerning Christian fellowship and to judge Brother Nee's actions, which (they claimed) "compromised the fellowship." The final response, dated July 2, 1935, was signed by Watchman Nee, Witness Lee, and four other brothers. In it, the brothers explained, "*the kind of fellowship in which we believe and why we cannot join the 'Closed Brethren'*" (Nee, *Collected Works*, vol. 26, p. 419). Concerning fellowship, the brothers stated, "*The Bible has revealed.... We must receive one another as Christ also received us (Rom. 15:7).... This command is clear, unequivocal, and draws a very clear boundary*" (Nee, 26:421). Moreover, the brothers drew a sharp distinction between sins which severed fellowship (immorality and heresy) and 'sins' which did not. Among the latter, they included denominations and the incorrect interpretation of Scripture. They wrote "*'evil companions' [denominations] and 'evil doctrines' [wrong interpretation of prophecy] are not 'sins' which hinder fellowship*" (Nee, 26:423). Their stand was inclusive, in that "*the only thing we can do is to separate God's children from the children of the world. The Lord has not ordained us to separate God's children from each other*" (Nee, 26:424).

Perhaps responding to an incipient organizational trend and Taylor's global ambitions, Watchman Nee wrote, "*Some, seeing the vast land of China, are tempted to attain the position of director over all of God's servants. How good this seems from a human point of view We would say, however, that regardless of how man seeks after God's will, the Holy Spirit is always the unique Executor. He never needs man to be His manager*" (Nee, 26:425, emphasis added). Watchman Nee rejected the concept of a human manager (director or executor) of God's work, with an "economic center for the work." Rather than relying on human organization, Brother Nee emphasized the role of the Spirit. He continued, "*We need to exercise such faith in the lordship of the Holy Spirit that we will never form an economic center for the work We must allow the Holy Spirit to exercise His lordship in everything. No matter how we have sought after His mind, we are never His assistants*" (Nee, 26:425). Finally they implored their brothers in the West, "*Would you be willing to lay aside your former prejudice ... and consider the matter in a fresh way...?*" (Nee, 26:430-1).

The Exclusives Excommunicate Watchman Nee

The Exclusive Brethren's response was swift and decisive. In a letter (dated August 31, 1935) to the brothers in Shanghai, they wrote, "*We recoil from your ...suggestion that we should now set aside assembly principles and order, ...and thus surrender the holy heritage which has been recovered in divine mercy in these last days for the whole assembly.*" They terminated fellowship with Watchman Nee and everyone associated with him, saying, "*We are unable to walk with you, or to receive from or commend to you. This, of course, applies also to all those maintaining links of fellowship with you.*" This ended the "China Episode," as the Exclusive Brethren called it.

What is the historical significance of these events? Had events unfolded differently, might the recovery have taken a different path? Could Watchman Nee and the local churches have joined the Exclusive Brethren? In our view, God sovereignly terminated all possibility of union with the Exclusive Brethren, thereby allowing His recovery to continue in China, untarnished by exclusive influences. Once the door was closed to Watchman Nee, however, thousands of Exclusive believers were deprived of Brother Nee's rich ministry which they had so briefly tasted.

The Exclusive Brethren – Where Are They Now?

What became of the Exclusive Brethren in later years? Where are they now? Already a "closed society," they became increasingly isolated and restrictive. Moreover, they developed a teaching which reinforced their isolation. Even before the "China Episode," "*many brethren adopted the idea that God always has one particular man for the moment, to whose utterances peculiar value must be attributed.*" (Frank R. Hole, p. 1) In Watchman Nee's era this "one particular man" was James Taylor. After the "China Episode," this teaching became more explicit and entrenched. God's unique spokesman accumulated titles, such as "today's Paul," "God's Elect Vessel," "the Man of God," and "the Universal Leader." The line of these "Men of Recovery" was traced back to John Nelson Darby and forward through J. B. Stoney, F. E. Raven, and C. A. Coates to James Taylor Sr. and then his son, James Taylor Jr. Not surprisingly, this line excluded Watchman Nee and many other servants of the Lord. What was the result of the preeminence given to "today's Paul"? "The Man of God" was "*incited to put forth novel things in an unbalanced way. These unbalanced teachings were hailed as new light by his followers... until the teacher ...became invested with almost papal authority by his admirers.*" (Frank R. Hole, p. 1).

As one "Man of God" succeeded another it became increasingly difficult to reconcile the latest revelations with the inspired utterances of preceding "Men of God." As a result the Exclusive Brethren's teaching became progressively more remote from the inspired Word of God. The ministry by these "Men of Recovery" was published through **one central depot**, which controlled literature among these Brethren. They adopted a "one publication" policy. Today a residue of Taylor "exclusives" remains, isolated, inbred and irrelevant. For them, "today's Paul" is a man named Hales who lives in Australia.

Repeating History?

Seventy years ago, God sovereignly intervened to prevent the recovery taking the Exclusive way. Perhaps we should ask: Today is the Lord's recovery in danger of taking the same path, albeit in a different guise? Is the current teaching of a unique "Minister of the Age" any different from the Brethren teaching about one man as "today's Paul"? By emphasizing one "Minister of the Age" and introducing a "one publication" policy do we risk repeating the history of the Exclusive Brethren?

Nigel Tomes
March 2006

The Fellowship Journal
www.ClevelandOnline.org

References:

Gardiner, Alfred J., “**Events Relating to China**” in *The Recovery and Maintenance of the Truth*, (2nd edition) Kingston-upon-Thames, U.K., Stow Hill Bible and Tract Depot, 1963, pp. 272ff. [Letters of James Taylor Sr. relating to the “China Episode” are also available on-line at www.mybrethren.org.]

Hole, Frank B., *Modern Mystical Teachings and the Word of God*, 1950, STEM Publishing, On-line at www.stempublishing.com.

Kinnear, Angus, *Against the Tide: the Story of Watchman Nee*, Fort Washington, PA, Christian Literature Crusade, 1973, chapters 10 & 11.

Lee, Witness, *Watchman Nee: A Seer of the Divine Revelation*, Anaheim, CA, Living Stream Ministry, 1991.

Nee, Watchman, “**A Reply to a Meeting in London**” in *The Collected Works of Watchman Nee*, vol. 26, pp. 419-431, Anaheim, CA, Living Stream Ministry, 1993.