JETS 65.2 (2022): 239–59

AGAINST THE TIDE: THE ECCLESIOLOGY OF THE LOCAL CHURCHES MOVEMENT IN THE COLONIAL CONTEXT AND ITS CONTRIBUTION TO A GLOCAL CHURCH

JACOB CHENGWEI FENG*

Abstract: *The Local Churches movement has achieved a global presence since its inception in 1922. However, it has been much misunderstood, particularly as regards its ecclesiology. Engaging a hybrid methodology that incorporates contextual, theological, and historical approaches, this study investigates Watchman Nee's context, presents Nee's critique of Brethren doctrines and practices under the influence of colonialism, and discusses Nee's Trinitarian ecclesiology and its focus on locality as its ground. An evangelical evaluation of the Local Churches movement's innovative ecclesiology is then offered, concluding that Nee's missional ecclesiology proves to be a viable solution in the contemporary multi-ethnic and postcolonial world. Next, the study engages in dialogue between Nee's ecclesiology with Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen's constructive ecclesiology, concluding that Nee's ecclesiology is neither progressive nor primitivist, but glocal in scope, missional in nature, and ecumenical in prospect, fostering the glocal interaction between the global and the local church.*

Key words: *ecclesiology, Local Churches movement, Watchman Nee, colonialism, glocal church, mission, Brethren movement.*

In the latest revision of his *Introduction to Ecclesiology*, Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen dedicates a chapter to identifying Christian communities in Asian contexts. He reminds readers of a Christian community founded by Watchman Nee,[1] which is widely recognized as the "Local Churches":[2]

> Nowadays one cannot do justice to the rich diversity of Christian communities on Asian soil without mentioning other nontraditional church forms. One of them is called "Local Churches," a movement currently present in the Global North as well, particularly in the United States. This vibrant movement is stronger in mainland China and Taiwan, and it is also spreading elsewhere

* Jacob Chengwei Feng is a PhD student at Fuller Theological Seminary, 135 N. Oakland Ave., Pasadena, CA 91182. He may be contacted at chengweifeng@fuller.edu.

[1] For biographies of Nee, see Angus I. Kinnear, *Against the Tide: The Story of Watchman Nee*, rev. ed. (Fort Washington, PA: Christian Literature Crusade, 1974); Leslie T. Lyall, *Three of China's Mighty Men* (Fearn, Ross-shire, UK: Christian Focus/OMF, 2000). Recent academic studies in English include Lian Xi, *Redeemed by Fire: The Rise of Popular Christianity in Modern China* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010), 155–78; Joseph Tse-Hei Lee, "Watchman Nee and the Little Flock Movement in Maoist China," *CH* 74.1 (2005): 68–96; Alexander Chow, *Theosis, Sino-Christian Theology and the Second Chinese Enlightenment: Heaven and Humanity in Unity*, Palgrave Macmillan's Christianities of the World (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 41–63.

[2] Despite Nee's and his community's rejection of any particular designation, including "Local Churches," this study uses it for the sake of continuity and clarification in scholarly discussions.

> thanks to its missionary outreach. Founded by Watchman Nee and Witness Lee, this movement focuses on lay ministry and mission and a comprehensive Christian discipleship.[3]

The Local Churches movement's exceptional features have been recognized in that they originated "from the non-Western world [and have] become globalized. Furthermore, following the principles of the 'Local Church,' the converts in every locality are mainly people of local origin rather than Chinese immigrants."[4] While Liu is right to identify "mission and immigration" as two methods that contribute to this transnational movement,[5] he does not offer a satisfactory ecclesiological explanation. Some attribute the Local Churches movement's success to Nee's "indigenous ecclesiology,"[6] while others attribute it to Nee's radical primitivism inherited from the Brethren.[7] The Local Churches movement's contribution to the *glocal* church, and its Global South-North and South-South missions, have previously received little attention beyond its own literature.[8] This represents a significant ecclesiological oversight, for the Local Churches movement represents one of the few, if not the only, Christian communities that originated from China and now have achieved a global presence whose members are primarily of local origin.

Another widespread misunderstanding of this community lies in their lack of a distinctive name. Those outside the movement have assigned names such as "Little Flock."[9] However, Nee is explicit in instructing the faithful not to "be robbed to

---

[3] Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, *An Introduction to Ecclesiology: Historical, Global, and Interreligious Perspectives*, 2nd ed. (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2021), 129.

[4] Yi Liu, "Globalization of Chinese Christianity: A Study of Watchman Nee and Witness Lee's Ministry," *AsJT* 30.1 (2016): 110.

[5] Liu, "Globalization of Chinese Christianity," 111.

[6] For example, May attributes their success to Nee's "indigenous Chinese Ecclesiology." See Grace Y. May, "Watchman Nee and the Breaking of Bread: The Missiological and Spiritual Forces That Contributed to an Indigenous Chinese Ecclesiology" (ThD diss., Boston University School of Theology, 2000). Lee argues that the movement's rapid development "fitted well with an indigenous development called the Three-Self Movement." Joseph Tse-Hei Lee, "Watchman Nee and the Little Flock Movement in Maoist China," 68.

[7] David Woodbridge, *Missionary Primitivism and Chinese Modernity: The Brethren in Twentieth-Century China*, Studies in Christian Mission 54 (Boston: Brill, 2019), 18. Others attribute their success to less significant reasons such as institutional flexibility, nationwide networks, and their doctrines which spoke to the strong sense of fear and insecurity pervasive in Chinese society during the Sino-Chinese War. Joesph Tse-Hei Lee, "Watchman Nee and the Little Flock Movement in Maoist China," 78.

[8] Existing studies on Watchman Nee's ecclesiology rarely touch on analysis of Nee's contribution to the glocal church. See Jonghyun Kim, "Watchman Nee for Missional Church: An Examination and Critique of Watchman Nee's Ecclesiology in Relation to Missions" (PhD diss., Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2019); Simon Chan, "Asian Ecclesiologies," in *The Oxford Handbook of Ecclesiology*, ed. Paul Avis, Oxford Handbooks (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 595–614; Bei-wen Lee, "Watchman Nee's Ecclesiology" (master's thesis, Wheaton College, 1968); James Mo-Oi Cheung, "The Ecclesiology of the 'Little Flock' of China Founded by Watchman Nee" (master's thesis, Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, 1970); James Mo-Oi Cheung, *The Ecclesiology of Watchman Nee and Witness Lee* (Fort Washington, PA: Christian Literature Crusade, 1972).

[9] Woodbridge, *Missionary Primitivism and Chinese Modernity*, 1.

follow others in calling ourselves the 'Little Flock.'"[10] Elsewhere, addressing outsiders' misrepresentation of this community as the "Christian Assembly,"[11] "the Revival Church, or the Little Flock Church, or The Christian Church," or even "Local Churches," Nee makes the following clarification concerning the community's ecclesiological self-identification:

> First, we must clarify that we are not some thing. We are not a new denomination. Neither are we a new sect, a new movement, or a new organization. We are not here to join a certain sect or form our own sect. Other than having a special calling and commission from God, there would be no need for us to exist independently. The reason we are here is that God has given us a special calling.[12]

One might ask certain questions: In what way is the Local Churches movement nontraditional? What contributes to its global presence and local enculturation? Is Nee's ecclesiology indigenous? Is it primitivistic? What was at stake when Nee and his community refused to be designated with a particular name? This article aims to answer these questions and clear some widespread ecclesiastical misunderstandings. After presenting its methodology, it analyzes the colonial background and the local context in which Nee and the Local Churches movement were situated and then examines Brethren influences on the birth of the Local Churches movement. It is argued that while inheriting some key ecclesiastical elements from Brethren doctrines, Nee remained critical of that heritage and independent of the colonial dominance of the Brethren while developing a unity-centered and mission-focused ecclesiology to meet the needs of his context. The study then evaluates Nee's ecclesiology and elucidates its binding and dynamic aspects, which contribute to the movement's global spread and its constitution of local and indigenous people. Next the study highlights Nee's agreement with Kärkkäinen's constructive ecclesiological proposal, which is complemented by the former's locality-based approach. The study then argues against the claims that Nee aims at establishing indigenous Chinese churches and that his approach is primitivistic. The study concludes that Nee's ecclesiology is missional in nature, ecumenical in prospect, engaging locality as its ground, and contributing to the glocal church by fostering interaction between the global and the local. Therefore, Nee's ecclesiology deserves a seat at the table of global doctrines in the postcolonial world.

I. METHODOLOGY

The method adopted in this study is first contextual. It is imperative to heed Kärkkäinen's declaration that "all theology is contextual!"[13] By looking into the local Chinese context of the early twentieth century, this study will pave the way to examine Nee's early thoughts on ecclesiology as a response to colonialism and de-

---

[10] Watchman Nee, *The Collected Works of Watchman Nee*, 62 vols. (Anaheim, CA: Living Stream Ministry, 1992), 18:301.

[11] Joesph Tse-Hei Lee, "Watchman Nee and the Little Flock Movement in Maoist China," 72.

[12] Nee, *The Collected Works of Watchman Nee*, 11:843.

[13] Kärkkäinen, *An Introduction to Ecclesiology*, 97.

nominationalism. Such a contextual investigation will be necessarily accompanied by a brief historical examination to uncover Western influences on Nee and his community and their critical responses.

Secondly, in his treatment of the Christian church and ecclesiology in the matrix of secularism(s) and religious pluralism(s), Kärkkäinen articulates the responsibility of contemporary ecclesiologists to "hold in dynamic tension the honorable heritage of the past centuries and the cynical criticism of contemporary people."[14] Following Kärkkäinen's suggestions, this study will analyze the Local Churches movement's ecclesiology by examining its Western (particularly Brethren) heritages and its critical analysis of the Brethren ecclesiastic doctrines and practices.[15]

Reminding his readers of the "danger that *global* smacks of modernity's preference for *universal*, grand projects and concepts," Kärkkäinen, along with some contemporary writers, suggests a newly coined word, *glocal*, namely, "a hybrid of *global* and *local*."[16] In consideration of the Local Churches movement's global presence and its successful enculturation, this study will address, on a doctrinal and practical level, its ecclesiology's unique contribution to a glocal church.[17] Having outlined its incorporation of contextual, theological, and historical approaches, the study investigates the contexts in which Nee's ecclesiology was situated.

II. LOCAL CONTEXTS: CHINA UNDER BRITISH COLONIAL AND MISSIONARY INFLUENCES

The Local Churches movement was founded by Watchman Nee in China in 1922, an era in which China was designated as a "semi-colony."[18] The Opium War (1840–1842) between England and China marked China's transition from the stage of imperialism to semi-colonialism.[19] Protestants and Catholics, described as both enthusiasts and critics of the war, sent missionaries to China.[20]

---

[14] Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, *Hope and Community*, A Constructive Christian Theology for the Pluralistic World 5 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2017), 233.

[15] This study uses "Exclusive Brethren," "Closed Brethren," and "Brethren" interchangeably for readability, recognizing that in the period under discussion, the group itself would have used none of these terms, nor any other, as a formal name. See William E. Buntain, "The Exclusive Brethren, Watchman Nee, and the Local Churches in China," *Brethren Historical Review* 15 (2019): 41.

[16] According to Kärkkäinen, the term was invented a few years ago in the interdisciplinary debate about the meaning of globalization and has been subsequently used by some Christian missiologists, among others. See Kärkkäinen, *An Introduction to Ecclesiology*, 99.

[17] For studies on the glocal church, see Tormod Engelsviken, Erling Lundeby, and Dagfinn Solheim, eds., *The Church Going Glocal: Proceedings of the Fjellhaug Symposium 2010* (Oxford: Regnum, 2011); Gene Wood, *Going Glocal: Networking Local Churches for Worldwide Impact* (St. Charles, IL: ChurchSmart Resources, 2006).

[18] The concept of "semi-colonialism," or "semi-colony," has its origin in Vladimir Lenin and was adopted by Mao Zedong in the 1920s and 1930s, both of whom underscored semi-colonialism as a unique social formation characterized by the coexistence of colonialism and native feudal structure. For a nuanced understanding of the concept of semi-colonialism that draws on recent scholarship on British imperial history in China, see Taoyu Yang, "Redefining Semi-Colonialism: A Historiographical Essay on British Colonial Presence in China," *Journal of Colonialism and Colonial History* 20.3 (2019).

[19] For a detailed historical account of the two Opium Wars, see William Travis Hanes and Frank Sanello, *The Opium Wars: The Addiction of One Empire and the Corruption of Another* (London: Robson, 2004).

Mainline Protestant churches established denominations mainly in China's coastal cities, including Fuzhou, Nee's hometown.[21] Fuzhou was among the earliest cities forced to open up to Western empires for trade.[22] Among the earliest churches established in Fujian province, the largest were established by three major mission societies, including the Board of Foreign Missions of the Methodist Episcopal Church (North).[23] Nee's grandfather became one of the earliest ordained Chinese pastors in northern Fujian province and served in the Methodist Church while being borrowed by other churches due to the shortage of pastors. From his childhood, Nee and his family were members of the Methodist church.[24]

Though a large number of missionaries were sent by mainline Protestant churches, there were many fewer independent missionaries. Margaret E. Barber played an essential role in Watchman Nee's spiritual formation.[25] Barber first went to Fuzhou in 1899 as a missionary with the Church Missionary Society (CMS), which was associated with the Church of England. However, on returning to Britain on furlough in 1906, she began attending services at Surrey Chapel, an independent chapel founded in Norwich in 1854. Surrey Chapel was not a Brethren assembly but was influenced by Brethren ideas and writings. The founder of Surrey Chapel was Robert Govett, who passed the leadership to David Panton, from whom Barber adopted the chapel's independent stance. She broke with the CMS and, on her return to Fuzhou, operated a small ministry on the edge of the city. There she devoted herself to local evangelism and providing informal training to young Chinese Christians who she hoped would become leaders in the churches.[26]

The Brethren movement had its origins in Britain and Ireland in the second quarter of the nineteenth century, a century marked by the expansion and proliferation of nonconformist groups in Britain. One of the key early expressions of the Brethren was "the holding of small, informal meetings of evangelicals from different denominations, during which services of Communion took place. These gatherings were an attempt to observe the Bible's command to maintain the unity of

---

For a detailed portrait of the opium traders, missionaries, businessmen, diplomats, and settlers who constituted "Britain-in-China," see R. A. Bickers, *Britain in China: Community Culture and Colonialism, 1900–1949* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1999).

[20] Peter Ward Fay, *The Opium War, 1840–1842: Barbarians in the Celestial Empire in the Early Part of the Nineteenth Century and the War by Which They Forced Her Gates Ajar* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1975).

[21] For a detailed description of Chinese Protestants in Fuzhou, see Ryan Dunch, *Fuzhou Protestants and the Making of a Modern China, 1857–1927*, Yale Historical Publications (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001).

[22] John King Fairbank, *Trade and Diplomacy on the China Coast: The Opening of the Treaty Ports, 1842–1854* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1969).

[23] The other two are the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions and the Church Mission Society. Woodbridge, *Missionary Primitivism and Chinese Modernity*, 52.

[24] Witness Lee, *Watchman Nee: A Seer of the Divine Revelation in the Present Age* (Anaheim, CA: Living Stream Ministry, 1997), 129.

[25] On Barber, see Witness Lee, *Watchman Nee: A Seer of the Divine Revelation in the Present Age*, 16; James Reetzke, *M. E. Barber: A Seed Sown in China* (Chicago: Chicago Bibles and Books, 2007); Joesph Tse-Hei Lee, "Watchman Nee and the Little Flock Movement in Maoist China," 74.

[26] Woodbridge, *Missionary Primitivism and Chinese Modernity*, 55.

Christ's followers."[27] Other ecclesiological features that make the Brethren distinctive include autonomous groups of believers without an ordained clergy; refusal to be identified as a new or separate grouping; radical departure from denominational structures and traditions, modeling their activities only on the accounts of the first gatherings of Christians in the New Testament; and giving the mission a high priority.[28] Woodbridge opines that by the practices they embraced, the Brethren sought "to recreate the life of the primitive church, and in doing so they were part of an [endeavor] that has been a recurring feature of Christian history." Hence, primitivism was and remained a central identifying feature of the Brethren movement.

The Brethren movement divided into the "Open" and "Exclusive" branches in 1848, a split brought about by one of the movement's early leaders, John Nelson Darby. Darby sought to bring greater doctrinal uniformity to the Brethren movement, and when others disagreed with his criteria for such uniformity, he effectively excommunicated them. Furthermore, Darby developed a principle of fellowship whereby association was forbidden with those who, though otherwise doctrinally sound, held communion with others considered to be in error.[29] After Darby's death, the Exclusive Brethren divided even further. The largest group was led by Frederick Raven. He was succeeded by James Taylor, under whom the group became identified as the Taylorite Exclusive Brethren.[30] It is with this Brethren community that Nee and the Local Churches had a short-lived association.

In sum, Nee's upbringing was rooted in an environment in which, sociologically, China was in a state of semi-colonialism, and, religiously, multiple denominations had already enjoyed a popular local reception. Hidden in this scene were sporadic missionaries who were unaffiliated with these established religious entities and who sought to cultivate young Chinese church leaders from an independent stance. Having established the colonial context and the missionary influences of China in Nee's time,[31] this essay next examines the Brethren influences upon Nee and the origin of the Local Churches.

---

[27] Woodbridge, *Missionary Primitivism and Chinese Modernity*, 4.

[28] Woodbridge, *Missionary Primitivism and Chinese Modernity*, 4–5.

[29] Woodbridge, *Missionary Primitivism and Chinese Modernity*, 57–58.

[30] For simplicity, the Taylorite Exclusive Brethren will be referred as "Exclusive Brethren" in this study. For a comparative history of both the Open and Exclusive branches of the Brethren movement in the twentieth century, see Roger Shuff, *Searching for the True Church: Brethren and Evangelicals in Mid-Twentieth-Century England*, Studies in Evangelical History and Thought (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2005).

[31] Woodbridge argues that three factors affected Watchman Nee's upbringing, namely, social mobility, China's anti-imperialist nationalism, and independent Christianity. *Social mobility* contributed to Nee's social status as urban middle class, which resulted in the upward mobility achieved through the educational and employment opportunities that membership of the churches provided, something that Nee's family experienced as early as his grandfather. *China's anti-imperialist nationalism* refers to the anti-Christian movement as a result of the Second Revolution (July-October 1913), which caused much of the esteem that Protestant communities had built up to be lost. *Independent Christianity* refers to the emergence of a revivalist movement among churches in China that brought a more individualized, devotional focus to Christian activities. See Woodbridge, *Missionary Primitivism and Chinese Modernity*, 52–54. It is this study's estimation that these factors were peripheral and less important than the factors presented here.

III. THE BIRTH OF THE LOCAL CHURCHES MOVEMENT AND ITS RELATIONSHIP WITH THE BRETHREN MOVEMENT

Born and raised in one of the earliest Christian families in Fuzhou,[32] Nee's conversion and spiritual formation had a strong connection with Western tradition, particularly with the Brethren and other independent missionaries. In childhood, Nee received the sacrament of baptism through sprinkling from a bishop of the Methodist Church in Nanjing and obtained a certificate of baptism.[33] While attending Trinity College,[34] Nee kept the Christian forms of "holy communion, church attendance, Bible study, and prayer."[35] However, by Nee's own testimony, it was not until 1920 that he was saved under the influence of Dora Yu's preaching.[36]

The Brethren influence on Nee's ecclesiology in his formational stage came from his reading of Alexander Marshall, a Plymouth Brethren Evangelist from Scotland, whose *Straight Paths for the Children of God* raised the question of sectarianism, which "clarified to [Nee] the meaning of regeneration," and "caused [him] to doubt the current organizational method of the denominations and to wonder whether these were all really scriptural," even though it "did not resolve for [him] any questions related to denominationalism."[37] Nee's questions regarding organizational method were mainly related to how the denominations conducted the sacraments of baptism and the Eucharist.

Regarding baptism, Nee questioned the method and the timing of his childhood baptism because he "saw that baptism by sprinkling as practiced by the denominations was not scriptural." For timing, Nee resorted to Scripture and believed that baptism is valid only after a person willingly believes in the Lord (Mark 16:16). Therefore, he considered the certification of baptism received at childhood "absolutely meaningless." Soon afterward, he received the sacrament of baptism from Barber in March 1921.[38] His conversion experience made him a fervent Christian active in evangelization[39] and caused him to "put man's authority aside" and instead insist on obedience to the Scriptures,[40] an attitude he inherited from the Brethren doctrines,[41] among others.[42]

---

[32] Nee, *The Collected Works of Watchman Nee*, 7:1250.

[33] Nee, *The Collected Works of Watchman Nee*, 18:304.

[34] Trinity College was founded in 1907 by the Dublin University Far Eastern Mission, which was connected to the Church Mission Society. Woodbridge, *Missionary Primitivism and Chinese Modernity*, 53.

[35] Witness Lee, *Watchman Nee: A Seer of the Divine Revelation in the Present Age*, 128.

[36] Dora Yu was an independent woman preacher. For a biography of Dora Yu, see Silas H. L. Wu, *Dora Yu and Christian Revival in 20th-Century China* (Boston: Pishon River, 2002).

[37] Nee, *The Collected Works of Watchman Nee*, 7:1250.

[38] Lee is incorrect to state that "in 1922, [Nee] and the two Wang brothers (Wang Zai and Wang Lianjun) baptized each other in the Min River." Joesph Tse-Hei Lee, "Watchman Nee and the Little Flock Movement in Maoist China," 73. According to his own recollection, Nee and his mother were baptized by Barber in 1921. See Nee, *The Collected Works of Watchman Nee*, 18:304.

[39] According to his classmate K. H. Weigh, Nee's life suddenly changed and he then became a fervent Christian, giving testimonies before his classmates and exhorting them to believe in Jesus Christ. Witness Lee, *Watchman Nee: A Seer of the Divine Revelation in the Present Age*, 129.

[40] Nee, *The Collected Works of Watchman Nee*, 18:306.

[41] Woodbridge, *Missionary Primitivism and Chinese Modernity*, 47.

Regarding the Eucharist, Nee again compared the scriptural practices of the earliest churches with those of the denominations of his time. Nee questioned the denominational practices such as who could administer the sacrament, the frequency of the celebration of the Eucharist, and the qualification of the recipients of the Eucharist. In so doing, he realized that his conscience no longer allowed him to continue to associate with the denominations.[43]

In 1922, following the the early churches' practice of breaking bread on the first day of the week (Acts 20:7), Nee and two other lay Christians administered the sacraments in a house in the absence of any bishop or ordained clergy. In Nee's recognition, 1922 marks the beginning of the Local Churches movement's formal "ecclesiality," which clearly is defined by the gospel and the sacraments, the two defining features of the ecclesiality of the Lutheran Augsburg Confession (article 7).[44]

Nee's zeal for evangelization, in addition to the wide circulation of his journal *The Christian*, with one issue dedicated to Marshall's *Straight Paths*, caused Nee's theological views and practices to spread quickly to nearby cities, provinces, and even as far as Malaysia and Singapore in Southeast Asia. By 1949, the Local Churches movement numbered seventy thousand members in more than seven hundred meetings across China. The community has been one of the main engines driving the growth of Protestant Christianity in China at the end of the twentieth century.[45] By the twenty-first century, the Local Churches movement had achieved a global presence.[46]

Traversing the historical trails of the Local Churches movement to its origin makes it manifest that Nee's adherence to the principle of obedience to the Scriptures, rejection of sectarianism, operation without ordained clergy, refusal to be identified as a new or separate sect, and departure from denominational structures and traditions can all trace their conceptual origin to the Brethren's primitivism. However, it is essential to note that Nee founded the Local Churches movement free from direct intervention by the Brethren or any other Western missionaries. This study will next present Nee's critique of the Brethren ecclesiology and their intended control out of a colonial mindset.

---

[42] From Barber's guidance, Nee became acquainted with the teachings of Jeanne de la Motte Guyon (1648–1717), G. D. M. Panton (1870–1955), Andrew Murray (1828–1917), and Jessie Penn-Lewis (1861–1927). In addition, the lives of George Müller (1805–1898) and Hudson Taylor (1832–1905) had a large influence on him. Witness Lee, *Watchman Nee: A Seer of the Divine Revelation in the Present Age*, 25.

[43] Nee, *The Collected Works of Watchman Nee*, 18:311.

[44] Quoted in Kärkkäinen, *Hope and Community*, 301.

[45] Woodbridge, *Missionary Primitivism and Chinese Modernity*, 49.

[46] Liu, "Globalization of Chinese Christianity," 110.

IV. THE LOCAL CHURCHES MOVEMENT'S CRITIQUE OF BRETHREN TEACHINGS AND PRACTICE

Soon after his conversion, Nee became a prolific reader of the classic Christian literature of the West, including the early Brethren, particularly Darby.[47] However, Buntain is correct in pointing out that "Nee's approach was not to adopt any system of teaching uncritically but to cull from broad readings what he considered to be both biblical and of spiritual value."[48] One departure from Brethren ecclesiology involves the basis for forming churches.[49] In the February 1926 issue of *The Christian*, Nee put forth his nascent understanding of the ecclesiology of the Local Churches movement. He noted that although Revelation 1 mentions seven churches, "we see no names for any of these seven churches. Ephesus, Smyrna and so forth are the names of the localities." Nee concludes that "the Lord uses a locality, such as Ephesus and Smyrna, as the unit of a church."[50] Following the biblical model, the churches Nee established were identified as the church in Shanghai, the church in Fuzhou, and so on, which was not meant as a name but rather as a description based on similar designations he found in Scripture (Acts 8:1; 13:1; 1 Cor 1:2).[51]

In the first eight years of the Local Churches movement's history, the Brethren influences remained merely ideological. This situation changed in 1930 when Charles R. Barlow, a leader among the Brethren from Peterborough, made a personal visitation to the church in Shanghai. Interested in the "work of God among the Chinese,"[52] James Taylor, the preeminent leader among the Exclusive Brethren, sent a delegation of six men and two women from the Global North (the United States, England, and Australia) to visit Shanghai in 1932. Aware that Brethren missionaries sought to keep tight control over their primitivist narratives, resulting in the marginalizing of Chinese Christian voices,[53] Nee advised the faithful of the church in Shanghai to "receive them in the Lord," and at the same time he warned them that "this does not mean that we have joined their organization, nor does it mean that they have joined our organization." Nee and the leaders of the church in Shanghai made the following public announcements in front of the eight visitors and the entire congregation:

---

[47] In the November 1926 issue of his magazine *The Christian*, Nee wrote, "As far as my observation is concerned, Darby's *Synopsis of the [Books of the] Bible* is the best commentary.… His study of the Bible is quite deep, and those who read these books have to read them three or four times before they can fully understand the meaning." "However," he added, "this set still has its shortcomings." Nee, *The Collected Works of Watchman Nee*, 7:1082.

[48] Buntain, "The Exclusive Brethren, Watchman Nee, and the Local Churches in China," 44.

[49] Buntain, "The Exclusive Brethren, Watchman Nee, and the Local Churches in China," 44–45.

[50] Nee, *The Collected Works of Watchman Nee*, 4:194.

[51] For a detailed description of the interaction between the church in Shanghai and the Brethren, see Buntain, "The Exclusive Brethren, Watchman Nee, and the Local Churches in China," 44–67.

[52] Alfred John Gardiner, *The Recovery and Maintenance of the Truth* (Kingston-on-Thames: Stow Hill Bible and Tract Depot, 1951), 216.

[53] Woodbridge, *Missionary Primitivism and Chinese Modernity*, 49.

> (1) We do not have a Chinese national fellowship based on a national boundary, like the Church of Christ in China. (2) We receive these brothers as brothers; we are not receiving what they represent. This means that we receive only these believers themselves, but not the organization behind them (the so-called Brethren). (3) This mutual fellowship is not a so-called combination of the Chinese fellowship with the Western "Brethren" fellowship. We do not belong to any sect and hope to remain so all the time. We fellowship one with another as brothers with brothers, and not as certain groups of Brethren with us.[54]

Woodbridge rightly observes that Nee was initially drawn to pursue fellowship with the Exclusives because of their "commitment to biblical authority alone."[55] At the invitation of the Brethren, Nee visited Europe and North America in late June 1933. Taylor accompanied Nee on his mid-August journey to America. While crossing the Atlantic, Taylor wrote in a letter to Coates: "It can be seen how important the work [of Nee] is and consequently the great need of skill, that what is of God may be saved." The implication was that for "the work" that "is of God" to "be saved," it must be brought into conformity with the Exclusives' principles regarding the assembly and must ultimately come under their purview.[56] Taylor's attitude changed after discovering that Nee visited the Honor Oak Christian Fellowship, where, against Brethren principles, he had broken bread.[57] They then began a two-year correspondence with the leaders in the church in Shanghai in which the Brethren in New York sought "to enlighten the Shanghai brethren as to the principles of Christian fellowship and to help them to judge the actions of [Mr.] Nee." Taylor later wrote of "the large number of saints in China who as to fellowship do not know their right hand from their left, who hang on Nee's words."[58] The Exclusive Brethren tried to persuade either Nee to renounce his actions or the Local Churches to renounce Nee.[59] By calling for those in China to embrace their ministry, Taylor "now asserted an alternative authority, located in their leaders and their ministry, and insisted that all groups, wherever they were located, acted in conformity with this."[60] Bays points out that "Nee's experience with the Plymouth Brethren in UK in the 1930s made him wary of foreign entanglements and foreigners using him for purposes of mission or for any other reason."[61] Woodbridge recognizes the Brethren "imperialist associations"[62] and "white dominions."[63] These are clear indications of the Brethren attitude of colonial dominance toward the

---

[54] Nee, *The Collected Works of Watchman Nee*, 18:324.

[55] Woodbridge, *Missionary Primitivism and Chinese Modernity*, 60.

[56] Buntain, "The Exclusive Brethren, Watchman Nee, and the Local Churches in China," 51.

[57] Buntain, "The Exclusive Brethren, Watchman Nee, and the Local Churches in China," 53.

[58] Buntain, "The Exclusive Brethren, Watchman Nee, and the Local Churches in China," 54.

[59] Woodbridge, *Missionary Primitivism and Chinese Modernity*, 59. For a record of the brief association of the Exclusive Brethren with the Local Churches movement, see Gardiner, *The Recovery and Maintenance of the Truth*.

[60] David Woodbridge, "Watchman Nee, Chinese Christianity and the Global Search for the Primitive Church," *Studies in World Christianity* 22.2 (2016): 133.

[61] Daniel H. Bays, *A New History of Christianity in China* (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), 133.

[62] Woodbridge, *Missionary Primitivism and Chinese Modernity*, 75.

[63] Woodbridge, *Missionary Primitivism and Chinese Modernity*, 58.

young and flourishing churches in China, which matches the colonial style identified by Jennings:

> "[This] … points to a history in which the Christian theological imagination was woven into processes of colonial dominance. Other peoples and their ways of life had to adapt, become fluid, even morph into the colonial order of things, and such a situation drew Christianity and its theologians inside habits of mind and life that internalized and normalized that order of things."[64]

Theologically, the Brethren schism in 1840 and their further division shocked Nee and caused him to resort to the New Testament and reconsider the practical outworking of unity among the churches. As a result, Nee was convicted that to keep the unity of the body of Christ (Eph 4:3), it is necessary to separate the individuals from the groups they are associated with and to prioritize church unity over doctrinal differences.[65]

Secondly, even though Nee and the Exclusives shared some common ecclesiastical views that all believers in Christ constitute the church—the body of Christ universally—and that God desires that this body be expressed practically in how believers congregate, they possessed irreconcilable differences in their understanding of the implications of the oneness of the body of Christ and how to practice this oneness. Buntain rightly observes that "the same themes that rendered asunder the Brethren in the 1840s into Open and Closed camps reappeared in the interaction between the Exclusives and the church in Shanghai in the 1930s."[66] Nee's insistence on the "clear, unequivocal" scriptural command that "we must receive one another as 'Christ also received' us (Rom. 15:7)" indicates his inclusive view of church membership, which is a significant departure from the ecclesiology and practices of Darby and the Exclusives.[67]

Kinnear observes that Nee "never ceased to respect the wealth of biblical insight to be found" among the Brethren. At the same time, he lamented their spiritual complacency and the confusion and division among them.[68] On the one hand, Olson is correct in observing that the Local Churches "emphasize … following a system very close to that of the Plymouth Brethren without clergy and with unprogrammed meetings for Bible study and worship." On the other hand, they "emphasize inclusivity of all true believers in Jesus Christ in one worldwide body of

---

[64] Willie James Jennings, *The Christian Imagination: Theology and the Origins of Race* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010), 8.

[65] The Church of Christ in China (CCC) attempted to create a unified, indigenous Chinese church from existing denominational congregations, primarily Presbyterian and joined by some Congregational and Baptist groups. CCC failed in its stated mission largely because of the fierce disagreements that echoed the contemporaneous conflict between fundamentalists and modernists in American Christianity. See Bays, *A New History of Christianity in China*, 110–11.

[66] Buntain, "The Exclusive Brethren, Watchman Nee, and the Local Churches in China," 43.

[67] Liu is incorrect in stating that the Local Churches claim that "they are the true church" in that he failed to notice the inclusive nature of the Local Churches. See Liu, "Globalization of Chinese Christianity," 114.

[68] Kinnear, *Against the Tide: The Story of Watchman Nee*, 147–48.

Christ."[69] Nee's ecclesiology is inclusive in that "all believers living in one [city], no matter what their nationality, belong to one church."[70] Hence, Nee was not blind toward the Brethren's colonial and imperialist dominance, their exclusive ecclesiology, and schismatic practices. Lamenting that the Brethren "invented many rules, systems, and an organization rather than pursuing the ruling of the Holy Spirit in each believer,"[71] Nee and the Local Churches demonstrated irreconcilable differences with the Brethren ecclesiology, which resulted in the termination of their short-lived liaison in 1935.[72]

In sum, Nee drew inspiration from the Brethren while remaining theologically and sociologically critical. The five-year association between the Local Churches and the Brethren was a "sweet-then-bitter" experience for both. However, the young churches in China under Nee's leadership were able to withstand the colonial and white dominance and retained their independence and vitality. Having established Nee's critique toward the Brethren ecclesiology, this study turns to Nee's constructive ecclesiology.

V. THE LOCAL CHURCHES MOVEMENT'S CONSTRUCTIVE ECCLESIOLOGY

Concerning the life of the church, Nee proposed a Trinitarian ecclesiology. God's divine life is the life of the church, and the church is the house of God. The church is the body of Christ, with the power of Christ's resurrection being deposited in the church and operating in the church. The power of resurrection is in the Holy Spirit, who manifests the resurrection power of Christ through the church and transmits the resurrected Lord to the church.[73] The church is born of the Spirit to be the body of the resurrected Christ, being one with Christ the head. After his resurrection, Christ ascended to the Father, received from the Father the promised Spirit, and poured out the Spirit to women and men; hence, the church was produced. Christ was resurrected to be the head of the church and joined all the believers to be the one body of Christ. To Nee, the nature and life of Christ as the head become the nature and life of the body, the church.[74]

Nee's ecclesiology also exhibits a practical aspect. The divisions among the Brethren and their colonial dominance posed ecclesiastical questions to Nee, name-

---

[69] Roger E. Olson et al., *Handbook of Denominations in the United States*, 14th ed. (Nashville: Abingdon, 2018), 328.

[70] Nee, *The Collected Works of Watchman Nee*, 30:92.

[71] Nee, *The Collected Works of Watchman Nee*, 26:426.

[72] The Brethren had constantly accused Nee of breaking bread with those associated with other religious entities, among whom were Theodore Austin-Sparks and his Honor Oak fellowship. See Buntain, "The Exclusive Brethren, Watchman Nee, and the Local Churches in China," 62. Nee, however, believed that in deciding who can come into fellowship, the local church's duty is to examine only those who have moral corruption (1 Cor 5:10) or who hold heresy regarding the person of Christ (2 John). Besides this, only the Holy Spirit can decide who is in fellowship and who is not. See Nee, *The Collected Works of Watchman Nee*, 26:422.

[73] Nee, *The Collected Works of Watchman Nee*, 59:86.

[74] Nee, *The Collected Works of Watchman Nee*, 59:87.

ly, what is the boundary of a local church? How can Christians be properly "divided" while maintaining the unity of the body of Christ? Nee sees the two aspects of the church, namely, the universal church and the local church. Both aspects emphasize the oneness of the Spirit:

> Now what is true of the universal Church is also true of a local church. The universal Church comprises all those who have the oneness of the Spirit. The local church comprises all those who, in a given locality, have the oneness of the Spirit. The Church of God and the churches of God do not differ in nature, but only in extent. The former consists of all throughout the universe who are indwelt by the Spirit of God; the latter consists of all in one locality who are indwelt by the Spirit.[75]

Nee's view, akin to Eastern sensibilities, recognizes the full ecclesiality of each local church, which is necessarily part of the universal body of Christ.[76] This matches Küng's suggestion that the local churches "receive one and the same Gospel … the same mission and the same promise" under the one and the same Lord.[77] Informed by his observations in the West, Nee's re-study of the New Testament led him to make an influential and original proposal, namely, locality as the divinely-appointed ground for the division of the Church.[78] He produced a series of four messages in which he taught that "the boundary of a local church is the boundary of the locality in which the local church stands."[79] To Nee, only the division based on locality is scriptural. Any division of God's children other than a geographical one implies not merely a division of sphere but a division of nature. The local division is the only division that does not touch the life of the church.[80] A local church includes all believers who live in that city. The churches in a region might have similar needs, but no church possesses a higher authority over the other local churches. Therefore, the Local Churches repeatedly emphasize that there is no "headquarters"[81] and that no local church is joined to another church or regards another bigger church as the central church.[82] Each church is directly responsible

---

[75] Watchman Nee, *The Normal Christian Church Life*, 2nd ed. (Anaheim, CA: Living Stream Ministry, 1994), 81.

[76] Kärkkäinen, *Hope and Community*, 324.

[77] Hans Küng, *The Church* (Garden City, NY: Image, 1976), 122.

[78] Nee, *The Normal Christian Church Life*, 82.

[79] Nee, *The Collected Works of Watchman Nee*, 22:115.

[80] Nee, *The Normal Christian Church Life*, 82.

[81] Lee speaks of "the nationwide network of Little Flock assemblies with headquarters in Shanghai." Joesph Tse-Hei Lee, "Watchman Nee and the Little Flock Movement in Maoist China," 77, 79. However, this is a common misunderstanding. Nee clearly differentiates between the local churches and the work. The local churches are autonomous with no central control regionally, nationally, or internationally. Therefore, there is no headquarters for the churches. The work, however, belongs to a group of workers who are responsible for planting new churches and then transferring the leadership to local leaders. Necessarily, the work has a headquarters. Similar misconception applies to the Living Stream Ministry in Anaheim, California. Kim makes the same mistake while contrasting Nee's Antioch Principle and Jerusalem Principle and concludes that the latter "runs contrary to Nee's prior principle for the locality of the church." See Kim, "Watchman Nee for Missional Church," 111.

[82] Nee, *The Collected Works of Watchman Nee*, 22:109.

to Christ as the head.[83] Nee also promoted horizontal fellowship among the Local Churches without losing independence in handling local affairs. Here it can be discerned that Nee is in the first place a Protestant thinker who intends that the Local Churches be free from regional or global control by any entity or person, in contrast to Roman Catholic ecclesiology. Only then he is to be considered as an independent thinker who intends to safeguard ecclesiastical unity while keeping each local church autonomous and free from outside control.

In sum, Nee's ecclesiology possesses both a doctrinal and a practical aspect. The former refers to his Trinitarian view of the church. The latter is remarkably scriptural and original in that he proposes the local ground of the church, namely, one church in one city. This study will next offer an evangelical evaluation of Nee's ecclesiology.

VI. AN EVANGELICAL EVALUATION OF THE LOCAL CHURCHES MOVEMENT'S ECCLESIOLOGY AND ITS CONTRIBUTION TO THE GLOCAL CHURCH

Kärkkäinen rightly categorizes the Local Churches movement's ecclesiology as nontraditional, as it does not fit any of the six categories of ecclesiological traditions, namely, Eastern Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Protestant Reformation Lutheran, Protestant Reformation Reformed, Free Church, and Pentecostal/Charismatic ecclesiologies.[84] While arguably the Local Churches movement's ecclesiology mostly resembles Free Church ecclesiology in unmediated access to God and the priesthood of all believers,[85] its ecclesiology is distinctive from the rest mainly in two aspects, namely, the binding aspect and the dynamic aspect. The former refers to the ecumenical impetus, while the latter points to their understanding and practice of the church as mission. Based on Ephesians 4:4–6, Nee argues that the seven factors in spiritual oneness, namely, one body, one Spirit, one hope, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God, are "like a sevenfold cord" by which "the oneness of the Spirit binds all the believers throughout the world; and however diverse their character or circumstances, provided they have these seven expressions of an inner oneness, then nothing can possibly separate them."[86]

To Nee, any condition of fellowship beyond these seven factors will result in sectarianism, namely, "making a division between those who are manifestly children of God." Factors such as baptism by immersion, certain interpretations of prophecy, any special line of holiness teaching, or Pentecostal experience, and the

---

[83] Lee is unconvincing in stating that Nee "dismissed the original principle of one church per locality." Joesph Tse-Hei Lee, "Watchman Nee and the Little Flock Movement in Maoist China," 78. This comes from failing to understand the subtle relationship between the local churches and the work in Nee's ecclesiology.

[84] Kärkkäinen, *An Introduction to Ecclesiology*, 19–89.

[85] Kärkkäinen, *An Introduction to Ecclesiology*, 73–74, 75–77. For Watchman Nee and the priesthood of all believers, see Wai Man Ng, "Watchman Nee and the Priesthood of All Believers" (ThD diss., Concordia Seminary, 2005).

[86] Nee, *The Collected Works of Watchman Nee*, 30:80.

resigning from any denomination church, do not constitute scriptural ground of division among the Christians. Specifically, Nee enumerates seven grounds of division, namely, spiritual leaders (1 Cor 1:12), instruments of salvation, nonsectarianism, doctrinal differences, racial differences, national differences, and social distinctions. Nee is not downplaying or despising the spiritual value of any of these factors. However, due to his ecumenical impetus, these differences need to be eclipsed to make room for unity. According to Nee, "God has placed believers of different races in one locality, so that, by transcending all external differences, they might in one church show forth the one life and the one Spirit of His Son."[87] To Woodbridge, Nee envisions "a restored and unified church," which "echoed the spirit of unity associated with the Keswick Convention."[88]

The dynamic aspect of the Local Churches movement's ecclesiology originates in Nee's understanding of the nature of the church. As can be seen from his conversion experience, Nee's ecclesiology is firmly missional in nature.[89] Liu identifies mission and immigration as the two crucial elements in the Local Churches movement's church-as-mission ecclesiology.[90] Nee advocates that all believers are evangelists and missionaries.[91] As a result, most local churches throughout the world have been established by believers living in or migrating to those cities, occasionally strengthened by full-time workers.

While it is plausible for Bantu to recommend "strategic indigeneity" on top of two missiological models, namely, indigenization and indigeneity,[92] Nee's missional ecclesiology operates out-of-the-box in that, instead of relying on foreign missionary societies and outside missionaries, Nee insists that the local churches be established by believers' migration.[93] May is correct in pointing out that "the empowerment of the laity was the backbone of the Assembly and the goal of [Nee's] ministry. Unlike denominational churches, which were clergy-centered, the Assembly was clearly a ministry by and for the people."[94] Throughout their history, the Local Churches have taken on missional initiatives by encouraging the faithful to develop

---

[87] Nee, *The Normal Christian Church Life*, 92.

[88] Woodbridge, *Missionary Primitivism and Chinese Modernity*, 70. For a history of the Keswick Convention, see John Charles Pollock, *The Keswick Story: The Authorized History of the Keswick Convention* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1964). For Keswick in the context of the holiness movement, see David Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain: A History from the 1730s to the 1980s* (London: Routledge, 1993), 151–80.

[89] May recognizes the missiological and spiritual forces that contribute to Nee's ecclesiology. See May, "Watchman Nee and the Breaking of Bread." Thus, Kim is incorrect in stating that "in the early days of his ministry, Nee neglected the idea that the nature of the church is missional," and that in his later ministry, "Nee still understood missions as a task, instead of it being the very nature of the church." Kim, "Watchman Nee for Missional Church," 151, 153, 177.

[90] Liu identifies mission and immigration as the two crucial elements that contribute to the Local Churches movement's success in spreading. Liu, "Globalization of Chinese Christianity," 111.

[91] Watchman Nee, *Further Talks on the Church Life* (Anaheim, CA: Living Stream, 1969), 153.

[92] Vince L. Bantu, *A Multitude of All Peoples: Engaging Ancient Christianity's Global Identity* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2020), 227–28.

[93] Woodbridge notices Nee's "evangelism by migration strategy." Woodbridge, *Missionary Primitivism and Chinese Modernity*, 74.

[94] May, "Watchman Nee and the Breaking of Bread," 293.

new churches by migrating to another city,[95] province,[96] country,[97] or continent.[98] Nee planned five main routes to preach the gospel all across China by individuals or families who volunteered to migrate.[99] The faithful from Taiwan emigrated to Japan, South Korea, and the United States and established new churches in the 1960s, and did the same in South America in the 1970s.[100] While he is correct in stating that "South-South evangelism represents one of the most impressive phenomena in contemporary Christianity,"[101] Jenkins could have strengthened his argument by noticing the South-North evangelism, which has been demonstrated by the Local Churches movement.

At times, full-time workers are sent to a city to help plant new churches. To these workers, Nee's instruction is that they "be careful not to form an Overseas Chinese church there. A church is always local! If you go to any city in a foreign land, then it follows as a matter of course that you belong to the church in that city. There is nothing Chinese about the churches of God."[102] Thus, by stripping the local churches and their missions of cultural and national character, Nee encourages and enables the missionaries to quickly adapt to the local cultures and contexts to gain local and indigenous people.

Based on 1 Corinthians 12:13, Nee critiques the usual conception of an indigenous church, in that while "quite right in some respects, [it] is fundamentally

---

[95] In recent years, the Local Churches movement in America has encouraged believers to migrate to strategically chosen cities and strengthen the existing local church or plant new churches. This initiative is called GTCA (Gospelize, Truthize, and Churchize America). See "GTCA: Gospelize, Truthize, Churchize America," http://www.gtca.us.

[96] For example, because of the revival in 1935, Nee and coworkers decided to spread the churches to large cities through migration from Shanghai to Nanjing, and from Yantai to Tianjin. See Witness Lee, *The History and Revelation of the Lord's Recovery*, 2 vols. (Anaheim, CA: Living Stream Ministry, 2020), 1:91.

[97] Hundreds of new churches were established in Russia through a joint migration by believers from America and Taiwan in the 1990s. See Witness Lee, *Crystallization-study of the Epistle to the Romans* (Anaheim, CA: Living Stream Ministry, 2003), 97. New churches in India, Pakistan, and Nepal were planted by believers from Mainland China and Taiwan in the 2000s.

[98] Another recent missional initiative of the Local Churches is called the "Lord's Move to Europe," through which believers in America and elsewhere are encouraged to move to European countries, find a job, or go to school, learn the local languages, and strengthen or plant local churches. See "Lord's Move to Europe," http://lordsmove.org.

[99] In general, these plans failed to be executed due to the change of political situation. See Witness Lee, *The History and Revelation of the Lord's Recovery*, 1:183–84. However, Nee's vision was faithfully carried out by the faithful in China. George Hanlon, an Echoes of Service missionary, recalled an encounter with a dentist who was a believer in the church in Changsha. Responding to Nee's vision, he sold his thriving dentist business in Shanghai and migrated to Changsha, "doing dentistry during the day and preaching at night." Woodbridge, *Missionary Primitivism and Chinese Modernity*, 72. Lee also notices this "very aggressive evangelistic campaign of inland migrations" by "groups of families representing a cross section of professions" who were sent to other provinces. Joesph Tse-Hei Lee, "Watchman Nee and the Little Flock Movement in Maoist China," 79–80.

[100] Believers from Taiwan migrated to Japan, South Korea, and the United States and established new churches in the 1960s, and to South America in the 1970s. See Witness Lee, *The History and Revelation of the Lord's Recovery*, 2:371–81, 475–91, 505–12, 513–22.

[101] Philip Jenkins, *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity*, 3rd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 16.

[102] Nee, *The Collected Works of Watchman Nee*, 30:93.

wrong at the most vital point. Since the divine method of dividing the Church is according to locality, not nationality, then all differentiation between Christian and heathen countries is contrary to God's thought."[103] So, for Nee, the popular classification of the Local Churches as an indigenous movement is a misconception.[104] Instead, Nee's ecclesiology focuses on the divine basis of church formation according to the difference of cities but not of countries, nationalities, races, doctrinal differences, or spiritual leaders. Arguably, this proves to be a viable solution in the contemporary, multi-racial, multi-ethnic, and postcolonial world. Patterson detects an underlying agenda of the Chinese indigenous movement "to superimpose Chinese nationals on Western-conceived ecclesiastical structure." As a contrast, Nee's ecclesiology "personified a complete break with later Western tradition."[105]

In sum, this essay agrees with Kärkkäinen in his assessment that Nee's ecclesiology is nontraditional in that its binding aspect and dynamic aspect speak of his ecumenical and missional motivation, respectively. His ecclesiology dictates the Local Churches movement's missional strategy to go beyond indigenization and indigeneity models. By stripping off the Chinese characteristics in their mission, Nee intends that what is to be planted in different cultures is neither a Chinese church nor any indigenous church, but simply a local church consisting of all Christians in that locality. Next, this study engages in a dialogue between Nee's ecclesiology and Kärkkäinen's constructive ecclesiology.

1. *In dialogue with Kärkkäinen's constructive ecclesiology.* Situated in and deeply indebted to both Lutheran "mainstream" Protestantism and Pentecostal "free church" congregationalism, Kärkkäinen proposed a new way of conceiving the ecclesiality of the church with the hope of advancing the ecumenical conversation across the platform, from Orthodox and Catholic sacramental-episcopal orientations of ecclesiality to those driven by mainstream Protestant Word-sacrament beliefs, to those based on free church personal faith commitments.[106] The leading theological impetus behind his proposal has to do with two unresolved issues, namely, the mutual recognition of each other's ecclesiality and the disconnect between what the church is claimed to be and what the church does, that is, the church's mission.[107]

This study opines that the first unresolved issue is addressed by Nee's proposal of a transcendent view of the church that focuses on her spiritual reality. From the scriptural point of view, the churches' mutual recognition is spontaneous as long as we focus on the spiritual reality of the church. In proposing that Christians do not differentiate between the true church and the false church, Nee's ecclesiology is promising for ecumenical conversations:

---

[103] Nee, *The Normal Christian Church Life*, 92, 95.

[104] Nee, *The Collected Works of Watchman Nee*, 30:93. Thus, Kim is incorrect in his thesis that Nee's ecclesiological principles play a major role in performing missions in his indigenous movement. Kim, "Watchman Nee for Missional Church," 13.

[105] George N. Patterson, *Christianity in Communist China* (Waco, TX: Word, 1969), 69. Quoted in Woodbridge, *Missionary Primitivism and Chinese Modernity*, 74.

[106] Kärkkäinen, *Hope and Community*, 300–301.

[107] Kärkkäinen, *Hope and Community*, 295.

> Today many Christians become quite apprehensive at the very mention of the word *church*. Whenever the subject is brought up, great precautions are taken to clear the ground lest any confusion arise in the minds of the hearers. Care is taken to differentiate between the true church and the false church. But in the Lord's Word and in the Lord's thought there is no such distinction; the Lord added no footnote to the Scriptures when He spoke of the church. He did not seek to safeguard the spiritual reality by differentiating between a true and a false, between a real and an unreal, nor did He differentiate between the local and the universal. In the Word of God there is only "the church."[108]

The starting point Kärkkäinen takes is the "middle" position of the ecclesiality debate spectrum, which he labels CA 7.[109] The Local Churches movement's ecclesiology identifies with CA 7's claims of ecclesiality based on the gospel and sacraments in that their ecclesiology is gospel-oriented[110] and missional in nature; hence, the second issue taken up by Kärkkäinen is also (hopefully) resolved. In stressing the spiritual reality of the sacraments regardless of how they were carried out, Nee resonates with Kärkkäinen in affirming the value of CA 7 in that "as long as the gospel and sacraments are there, most everything else can be named a matter of *adiaphora*, including church structures and ministerial patterns."[111] However, following the Reformed and the free churches who will complement Kärkkäinen's proposal of CA 7, Nee would add the ground of the church, namely, "one city, one church." In alignment with Kärkkäinen's estimation, such addition is "not meant to necessarily discredit or reject the claim for ecclesiality by the Lutherans."[112] However, unlike the Reformed and most of the free churches as supposed by Kärkkäinen, Nee would most likely not be willing to negotiate his addition because of his unity-centered and practical ecclesiology.

2. *Progressive or primitivist?* In dialogue with Volf's suggestion of adopting a strategy of neither "progressive" nor "primitivist,"[113] Nee's approach to ecclesiology is undoubtedly not progressive, namely, what comes later is better than what is there now or what came earlier. Concerning primitivism, Dann argues that primitivist ideas have proven attractive to indigenous church leaders, and he has highlighted Nee as a notable example of this.[114] In his explanation of why the Local Churches movement took root in China amid the challenges of the rise of colonial nationalism, Woodbridge identifies Nee's theology with "radical primitivism."[115] This study humbly offers the following counterarguments. First, Woodbridge,

---

[108] Nee, *The Collected Works of Watchman Nee*, 46:1136.

[109] Kärkkäinen, *Hope and Community*, 301.

[110] Olson acknowledges that the Local Churches "emphasize evangelism and discipleship." Olson et al., *Handbook of Denominations in the United States*, 328.

[111] Kärkkäinen, *Hope and Community*, 301.

[112] Kärkkäinen, *Hope and Community*, 302.

[113] Miroslav Volf, *After Our Likeness: The Church as the Image of the Trinity*, Sacra Doctrina (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998).

[114] Robert Bernard Dann, *The Primitivist Ecclesiology of Anthony Norris Grover: Church as It Was Meant to Be*, 2nd ed. (Chester: Tamarisk, 2015), 220.

[115] Woodbridge, *Missionary Primitivism and Chinese Modernity*, 18.

among others, defines primitivism by identifying two key elements, the empowering of the Holy Spirit and adherence to a biblical model. But is it not true that Christians, primitivistic or not, recognize these two elements across the broad spectrum of Christianity? Lee, on the other hand, points out that "it was from the Bible alone, not Christian theology or Western denominational doctrines, that he derived his religious authority."[116] Second, Nee was doubtless inspired by the Brethren doctrines, but as a prolific reader, he was equally, if not more greatly, influenced by the non-Brethren teachings, such as those of the French mystic Jeanne de la Motte Guyon (1648–1717), the Pentecostal forerunner Andrew Murray (1828–1917), and revivalist Jessie Penn-Lewis (1861–1927).[117] Woodbridge does not offer any analysis of the primitivistic or non-primitivistic nature of these teachings. Third, though making mention of Nee's locality-based church model, Woodbridge fails to contrast it with the exclusiveness of the Brethren movement. Such a sharp contrast eventually caused a parting of the ways. Hence, this study estimates that Woodbridge is unconvincing in ascribing Nee's theology to Brethren primitivism.[118]

Although Nee is well known for exalting the Scripture as the only standard,[119] Nee's ecclesiology, like all theology, is "necessarily contextual in the sense that each and every theology is shaped by and originates from a particular religious, cultural, and sociopolitical context." However, adopting Kärkkäinen's self-critical attitude, this study supposes that Nee most likely does not belong to the group of theologians who "are mindful and readily acknowledge the contextuality of their theologies."[120] However, in echoing Bevans and Schroeder, Nee demonstrates the need for Christian theology to continually negotiate the *constant* features of Christian beliefs and doctrines in changing, diverse, and often perplexing *contexts*,[121] resulting in a dynamic and highly adaptive ecclesiology which explains the Local Churches movement's enculturation and spread among local and indigenous people throughout the major continents.

In sum, this study argues that Nee's ecclesiology, neither primitivistic nor progressive, is contextual and scriptural. It is contextual in the historical sense and missional sense. Historically, Nee's theology was deeply rooted in the Chinese context of the early twentieth century and developed as a reaction to colonialism and

---

[116] Lee also ascribes Nee's methodology to Chinese traditions, but he does not elaborate on it. Joesph Tse-Hei Lee, "Watchman Nee and the Little Flock Movement in Maoist China," 77.

[117] Witness Lee, *Watchman Nee: A Seer of the Divine Revelation in the Present Age*, 25.

[118] This also invalidates Kim's conclusion that Nee attempted to develop churches in China on a "primitivist basis." Kim, "Watchman Nee for Missional Church," 15, 24, 29, 55. Likewise, Kim is proven wrong in his estimation that "Nee intended to indigenize Christianity in a primitivist way." Kim, "Watchman Nee for Missional Church," 57.

[119] In his announcement of the publication of the journal *The Christian*, Nee states that "the Bible is our only standard. We are not afraid to preach the pure Word of the Bible, even if men oppose; but if it is not the Word of the Bible, we could never agree even if everyone approved of it." See Nee, *The Collected Works of Watchman Nee*, 7:1231.

[120] Kärkkäinen, *An Introduction to Ecclesiology*, 97.

[121] Stephen B. Bevans and Roger Schroeder, *Constants in Context: A Theology of Mission for Today*, ASMS 30 (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2004).

denominationalism. Missionally, the local churches are required to adapt to the local context wherever they are planted.

3. *Against the tide*. On the one hand, Nee was situated in the context of the Global South and inescapably faced challenges from a colonial mindset and imperialist associations.[122] On the other hand, he was well exposed to the context of the Global North through his prolific reading of Western Christian literature and his prolonged visit to America and Britain. Nee's ecclesiology engages with "voices, testimonies, and perspectives from around the world and from different agendas" and at the same time exhibits "a communion of local conversations in a continuing interrelated dialogue."[123] Therefore, Nee's ecclesiology is *glocal*,[124] which continually pushes the Local Churches movement in its global spread "to become self-consciously what it in fact is: a *glocal* church," and to "live out its catholicity by intentionally and actively participating in Christ's mission that dynamically fosters the glocal interaction between the global and the local."[125]

The Local Churches movement represents a missionary movement "against the tide,"[126] namely, from the Global South to the Global North and then North-North and North-South, which confirms Jenkins's description of the rising churches in that they "usually preach a strong and even pristine Christian message." Though originating from China, the Local Churches decidedly keep a distance from the original Chinese ethnic form and thus exercise "an appeal across racial and national boundaries." Jenkins's prediction that a new "missionary century" is dawning in which the missionaries would be traveling northbound[127] already dawned on the Local Churches six decades ago due to Nee's mission-oriented, unity-centered, and locality-based ecclesiology.

In this section, the study has evaluated Nee's ecclesiology in dialogue with Kärkkäinen's constructive proposal of the ecclesiality of the church. Nee's position confirms that of Kärkkäinen's proposal, yet with an unambiguous addition. Following Volf's suggestion, this study invalidates the identification of Nee's method with primitivism. Instead, Nee's ecclesiology is *glocal* in perspective and therefore is promising in promoting ecumenical dialogue.

---

[122] Lee notices that the Local Churches movement's ecclesiology "did not share the highly politicized anti-imperialist rhetoric of another Three-Self Movement, the Communist-initiated 'Three-Self Patriotic Movement.'" See Joesph Tse-Hei Lee, "Watchman Nee and the Little Flock Movement in Maoist China," 68.

[123] Kärkkäinen, *An Introduction to Ecclesiology*, 98–99.

[124] See Kärkkäinen, *An Introduction to Ecclesiology*, 99.

[125] Charles Edward van Engen, "The Glocal Church: Locality and Catholicity in a Globalizing World," *Globalizing Theology: Belief and Practice in an Era of World Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006), 157. This paragraph is adapted from Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, *Christ and Reconciliation*, A Constructive Christian Theology for the Pluralistic World 1 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2013), 20.

[126] A phrase adopted from Kinnear's biography of Watchman Nee. See Kinnear, *Against the Tide: The Story of Watchman Nee*.

[127] Jenkins, *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity*, 135.

VII. CONCLUSION

This study has examined the Local Churches movement's ecclesiology in its colonial context. On the one hand, under Brethren colonial and missionary influences, Watchman Nee developed an ecclesiology that was indebted to the Western tradition, especially to Brethren doctrines. On the other hand, Nee maintained a critical stance toward the Brethren's colonial dominance and their exclusive ecclesiology. As a reaction to the Brethren internal schism, Nee proposed a Trinitarian ecclesiology with a scriptural feature, namely, "one city, one church." This study evaluated Nee's constructive ecclesiology, pointing out its binding aspect and dynamic aspect, which primarily account for the Local Churches movement's global spread and local enculturation. The binding aspect dictates that they not adopt any name other than that of the locality to avoid division on non-scriptural grounds. The dynamic aspect encourages the believers as missionaries to plant new churches in the city where they live or migrate by gaining its local people regardless of race, ethnicity, or nationalities. The study then put Nee's ecclesiology in dialogue with Kärkkäinen's constructive proposal of ecclesiology based on Lutheran CA 7 and argues that while upholding the latter, the former complements the latter by insisting on adding the ground of locality for ecumenical purposes. Nee disagrees with the concept of the indigenous church. His ecclesiology is neither primitivistic nor progressive but rather glocal in scope, missional in nature, engaging locality as its ground, and ecumenical in prospect.

Nee's ecclesiology is promising for carrying out ecumenical conversations, though the scope of this study prohibits extensive treatment on such a viable subject. Other aspects of Nee's ecclesiology, such as the Pentecostal/charismatic aspect, the spiritual gifts and church offices, and a communion of communions, deserve attention for further study.