

Reconfiguring Asian Theology from the Ground Up: Watchman Nee and John Sung on Scriptural Interpretation

by

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Abstract

“Asian theology”, as a separate category within contemporary theological studies, has proven problematic on several fronts. Among the category’s most significant challenges has been its failure to engage fairly and substantively grassroots Asian Christianity. This failure has perhaps been due, first, to the category’s own conceptual captivity to the Western Enlightenment; and second, to its practitioners’ common unwillingness to take seriously the lived experiences of the ordinary people of God in Asia as a source of theological reflection. This is most clearly seen in “Asian theology’s” engagement—or rather *disengagement*—with Scripture: contemporary construals of Asian theology tend either to devalue Scriptural authority (for contextual/cultural relevancy) or dismiss the traditional figural reading of Scripture. This dissertation proposes that the theological hermeneutics of Watchman Nee and John Sung provide a rich and complementary set of resources for understanding a grassroots approach to Scripture that is both authentically Asian and faithfully Christian. While Nee and Sung were highly influential leader-preachers in China and Southeast Asia, their names almost never appear in handbooks of Asian theology and biblical interpretation. And while there are some serious recent studies on Nee and Sung’s work, scholarly evaluations of their theology and interpretation of Scripture are scarce, suggesting that either Scripture is not central to their overall theology or there is nothing particularly distinctive in their exegesis worth analyzing.

This dissertation aims to address this scholarly lacuna by focusing on Nee and Sung’s interpretive practices, unearthing their cultural, hermeneutical, and theological assumptions, and then detailing their influence on and legacy among contemporary grassroots Christians in China and Indonesia. Ultimately, I suggest that their theology and interpretation of Scripture have had more influence on grassroots Chinese Asian Christians—perhaps even on the majority of Asian Christians—and have greater resonance and relevance for them, than does the work of many contemporary Asian theologians, especially those well-known in the West.

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Introduction

I was only twenty years old when I first met her in 2001. She was an old, poor Christian widow who lived by herself in a tiny, lowly house in Malang, East Java. I did not know her exact age, but she must have been around seventy years old, if not older. I do not even remember her name, but we called her “*Nenek*” (literally: grandma), which is a common designation for an elderly woman in Indonesia. As part of our seminary training, we students were required to do some teaching and pastoral care in several “ministry posts” around the city of Malang every weekend. Along with some of my friends, I was assigned to a ministry post, or fellowship, where most of its members were children. This particular *Nenek* was the caretaker of one of the children we ministered to. Thus, we regularly visited her and her grandchild to offer pastoral support and prayer. As was (and still is) customary for such an occasion, we often started the conversation by reading a Bible text and sometimes briefly explaining it. As a second-year seminary student, I was always more than eager to share my scriptural knowledge from exegesis class or the biblical commentaries that I read. Often, however, it was this *Nenek* who taught me how to read Scripture.

Take, for example, the Gospel of Luke. This *Nenek* did not know much of the historical background of the Gospel, nor could she explain the original meaning of the particular terms that Luke utilized there. But she believed that Luke’s Gospel was literally the word of God, that Jesus was really present in and through the reading of it, that it contained the Holy Spirit’s power to feed her soul and transform her life, that her whole life was somehow narrated in the book, and that her faith in God would simply not work without her reading it on a daily basis. She did not attempt to teach me anything; she merely shared her experience of reading Scripture

as part of her daily devotions. Truth to be told, I do not remember what she said, or even the specific biblical texts we talked about. But her simple faith in and her lived experience with the Lord, along with the way she held her Bible against her chest while telling me what the text really meant for her, suggested to me that she knew Scripture better than me at the time. Almost always, I felt spiritually charged to be a more faithful follower of Christ after spending time listening to her testimonies. Indeed, to this day, I still think that there is a sense in which she was a better Scripture reader than I—or than many professional scholars, for that matter.

But in what sense? How can an uneducated, lay, elderly *Nenek* be a better Scripture reader than professional theologians or biblical scholars? I am not sure why this is the case, but I know that it is the reality. This *Nenek*, and my incapacity to articulate the reason for my own basic conviction of her Scriptural wisdom, are part of the initial impetus for this dissertation. I hope that by the end of this study I can have a better grasp of why I believe what I believe regarding the “superiority of the pre-critical reading”¹ of this *Nenek*.

Another, related impetus for this project is the observation that most of the academic works that bear the name “Asian theology,” especially those that circulate in the West, are not truly representative of Asian Christianity at the grassroots level, including the Christianity of the *Nenek* above. In his fine study *Mangoes or Bananas? The Quest for an Authentic Asian Christian Theology*, the Malaysian Methodist Bishop Hwa Yung likens many so-called Asian academic theologians and their works to “bananas”—yellow of skin, but revealing off-white flesh when peeled. In Yung’s analysis, these Asian theologians tend to talk about Asian problems and sometimes even use Asian resources in their works, but their theological presuppositions and methodological commitments often betray the modern Enlightenment

¹ I borrow the phrase from David Steinmetz’s well-known essay. See David C. Steinmetz, “The Superiority of Pre-Critical Exegesis,” *Theology Today* 37, no. 1 (1980): 27–38.

legacy that they have (unconsciously?) inherited from their Western educators or mentors.² Furthermore, most of these Asian theologians are writing for the academy, particularly for their *Western* colleagues and audiences. They are also not writing about what many ordinary Asian Christians really believe and practice. To use the story which I recounted above, these Asian theologians neither write *to* nor write *about* that Christian *Nenek* in Indonesia. Obviously, they do not speak *on behalf of* her either. But why not? If the majority of Christians in Asia are evangelicals or Pentecostals, as some have pointed out,³ why then are there not many works in the category of Asian theology that study these grassroots Christians and their theology? And if most active Asian theologians today do not really represent these Christians, from whom can we learn the nature and texture of Asian Christianity on the grassroots level?

In *Grassroots Asian Theology*, Singaporean theologian Simon Chan also calls for a rethinking of the way Asian theology is currently undertaken. The first two lines of this work are very telling: “Much of what the West knows as Asian theology consists largely of elitist accounts of what Asian theologians are saying, and elitist theologians seldom take grassroots Christianity seriously. Yet it is at the grassroots level that we encounter a vibrant, albeit implicit, theology.”⁴ To make that implicit theology explicit is what Chan thinks the primary job of a theologian ought to be. And that is precisely what Chan has done in his book. His work is a breath of fresh air amidst the sea of current Asian theological discourse, for it privileges the lived experiences of the Christian majority in Asia.

² Hwa Yung, *Mangoes or Bananas?: The Quest for an Authentic Asian Christian Theology* (Irvine: Regnum International, 1997). Yung instead calls for more theological “mangoes” in Asia—yellow on both the outside and the inside. Note that many species of mangoes in Asia have yellow skin when ripe.

³ In addition to the Yung’s work cited above and Chan’s work below, see also more general works on Asian or Majority World Christianity, such as Scott W. Sunquist, ed., *A Dictionary of Asian Christianity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2001); Scott W. Sunquist, *Explorations in Asian Christianity: History, Theology, and Mission* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2017); Philip Jenkins, *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity*, 3rd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

⁴ Simon Chan, *Grassroots Asian Theology: Thinking the Faith from the Ground Up* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2014), 7.

This dissertation follows Yung and Chan's lead in taking grassroots Christianity seriously as an authentic Asian theological construction. It will specifically examine one theological locus that Chan has not dealt with in his survey, one that is obviously crucial for Christianity in general but even more so for largely evangelical and Pentecostal Chinese-Asian Christianity: namely, the theology and interpretation of Scripture. My assumption is that if Asian evangelical and Pentecostal churches are intentional communities that are centered around Scripture, then it is natural to infer that their theology and interpretation of Scripture is key to understanding grassroots Asian theology in general. I have selected two influential Chinese evangelists as my main interlocutors: Watchman Nee and John Sung. Nee and Sung were popular leaders of indigenous Christianity in early twentieth-century China, but their influence has spread to the Chinese diaspora all over the world up to the present. In this study, they serve as instantiations that embody what common Asian Christians at the grassroots level think and believe about the nature and interpretation of Scripture.

Thesis and Significance

About twenty years ago, Yung called Asian scholars to the need for proper studies on “a number of outstanding evangelistic and pastoral figures whose writings are widely read by the church at the grass-roots.” Among the figures he listed were Watchman Nee and John Sung.⁵ However, Yung apparently did not have much interest in their theology or exegesis. His call was for rigorous biographical studies of these figures, as he thought studying them as Asian

⁵ Yung, *Mangoes or Bananas?*, 223. The other two Asian grassroots leaders that Yung mentioned as highly influential yet understudied were Sadhu Sundar Singh of India and David Yonggi Cho of Korea. The enduring influence of Nee and Sung among Chinese Christians can be seen in the fact that, to this day, their writings are among the pieces of literature most widely available in Chinese Christian circles, both inside and outside China. See Gloria S. Tseng, “Revival Preaching and the Indigenization of Christianity in Republican China,” *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 38, no. 4 (October 2014): 178. Tseng writes on John Sung and Wang Mingdao, but her observation can easily be applied to Watchman Nee as well. Indeed, a case can be made that Nee's work is even more popular and accessible to Chinese audiences worldwide than that of Sung and Wang Mingdao.

Christian leaders could contribute to the specific fields of Asian missiology, spirituality, and pastoral leadership. While Nee and Sung produced extensive popular biblical exposition and sermon materials, Yung thought that “the exegetical basis of much of these has often been found wanting” as “their approach to the biblical exegesis tends to be rather simplistic, literalistic, and sometimes even allegorical.”⁶ Yung’s call for more scholarship on leaders like Nee and Sung as Asian leaders influential in certain “practical” fields of studies is no doubt a necessary one. Yet the judgment that their theologies and interpretations of Scripture are far-fetched is premature, especially given the lack of proper studies on precisely those aspects of their work. That the lives and works of Watchman Nee (one of the most widely read Chinese Biblical expositors in the world) and John Sung (one of the greatest preachers of twentieth-century China and Southeast Asia) have gained relatively little scholarly attention with respect to their theology and interpretation of Scripture is a matter that provokes legitimate curiosity.

Indeed, scholarly evaluations of these popular figures have been few. Of the two, Nee is more known in the West. While his theology and spirituality have been the subject of some fine studies in the past, such studies rarely engage with Nee’s approach to Scripture in detail,⁷ thus suggesting that either Scripture is not central to Nee’s overall theology or that there is nothing particularly distinctive in his exegesis worth analyzing. Scholars have only recently begun to

⁶ Yung, *Mangoes or Bananas?*, 233, 223.

⁷ See e.g. Norman Howard Cliff, “The Life and Theology of Watchman Nee, Including a Study of the Little Flock Movement Which He Founded” (M.Phil. Thesis, Open University, 1983); Peterus Pamudji, “Little Flock Trilogy: A Critique of Watchman Nee’s Principal Thought on Christ, Man, and the Church” (Ph.D. Dissertation, Drew University, 1985); Luke Pei-Yuan Lu, “Watchman Nee’s Doctrine of the Church with Special Reference to Its Contribution to the Local Church Movement” (Ph.D. Dissertation, Westminster Theological Seminary, 1992); Yuan-wei Liao, “Watchman Nee’s Theology of Victory: An Examination and Critique from a Lutheran Perspective” (Th.D. Dissertation, Luther Seminary, 1997); Grace Y. May, “Watchman Nee and the Breaking of Bread: The Missiological and Spiritual Forces That Contributed to an Indigenous Chinese Ecclesiology” (Th.D. Dissertation, Boston University School of Theology, 2000); Dongsheng John Wu, “Revelation, Knowledge, and Formation: Interpreting Watchman Nee through Mark McIntosh’s Works on Spirituality and Theology” (Ph.D. Dissertation, Graduate Theological Union, 2006). An exception can be found in Seung Gon Lee, “Exploring the Possibility of an Asian Way of Doing Theology: An Examination of Watchman Nee’s Life and His Theological Thoughts as a Model” (Trinity Theological College, 2008), where Lee dedicates one full chapter to Nee’s scriptural hermeneutic.

pay more serious attention to Sung. Most of the research, however, falls under the categories of leadership, homiletics, or mission studies.⁸ Scholarly work on Sung's *theology*, particularly his theology and interpretation of Scripture, is scarce to say the least.⁹ The few works that do touch on his approach to Scripture dismiss it too quickly as superficial, fanciful, or simply problematic.¹⁰

This dissertation aims to address this scholarly lacuna by focusing on Nee and Sung's interpretive practices, unearthing their cultural, hermeneutical, and theological assumptions, and then detailing their influence on and legacy in contemporary grassroots Christians in China and Southeast Asia. It is my contention that Nee and Sung's theology and exegesis of Scripture are important keys to their overall teaching and ministry. While some claim that Nee and Sung's exegesis is simplistic and far-fetched, I will argue that their interpretive practices are culturally interesting and substantially Christian, and that they must be read in the context of their own historical-cultural moments but also in light of the broader (and older) tradition of Christian reading of Scripture. Against those who dismiss their approach to Christianity as simply a Chinese version of Western fundamentalism, I will argue that their scriptural theology exhibits the hybrid character of Asian indigenous Christians, who are critical of both earlier Western

⁸ See e.g. Samuel Mau-Cheng Lee, "A Comparative Study of Leadership Selection Processes Among Four Chinese Leaders" (D.Miss. Dissertation, Fuller Theological Seminary, 1985); Yun-Han Gwo, "Indigenous Preaching in China, with a Focal Critique on John Sung" (Th.M. Thesis, Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 1982); Phillip Koo, "An Examination of Text-Driven Elements in Select Narrative Sermons of John Sung" (Ph.D. Dissertation, Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2018); Chin Cheak Yu, "Uncovering Seeds for Awakening and Living in the Spirit: A Cross Cultural Study of John Sung and John Wesley" (Ph.D. Dissertation, Claremont School of Theology, 2001); Ka-Tong Lim, "The Life and Ministry of John Sung: Sowing Seeds of Vibrant Christianity in Asian Soil" (Ph.D. Dissertation, Asbury Theological Seminary, 2009); Daryl R. Ireland, "John Sung: Christian Revitalization in China and Southeast Asia" (Ph.D. Dissertation, Boston University, 2015). The last three works (by Yu, Lim, and Ireland) engage with Sung's theology quite a bit, but they are primarily mission and/or historical studies rather than theological or exegetical ones.

⁹ See a brief but adequate literary review on research on John Sung in Tang Li and Martha Smalley, "A Chinese Christian Leader Revisited: The John Sung Papers at Yale Divinity Library," *Journal of Religious & Theological Information* 15, no. 3–4 (October 1, 2016): 92–95.

¹⁰ An exception is Ka-Lun Leung, "A Defense for Spiritual Interpretation of the Chinese Church," in *The Role and Interpretation of the Bible in the Life of the Church in China*, trans. Wai-Shing Chau, China Study Series 3 (Hong Kong: The Lutheran World Federation, 1997).

missionary activities as well as later anti-Western sentiment. Ultimately, I suggest that their theology and interpretation of Scripture, compared to that of most contemporary Asian theologians, have had more influence upon and more affinities to many, even perhaps to the majority, of Asian grassroots Christians.

Overview of This Study

In order to make this argument, I will first sketch in chapter one the contemporary state of Asian theology and its predominant discourse. I will introduce some common ways to conceptualize the “Asianness” of Asian theology and point to the problems inherent in each proposal. I will also outline three main forms of Asian theology that are dominant in today’s scholarship: liberation theology, religious pluralism, and inculturation theology. I will argue that these types of Asian theology are problematic because they uncritically assume the idealized notion of Asian identity and adopt modern Western Enlightenment assumptions, while ignoring the lived experiences of many devout Asian Christians in grassroots communities. One obvious issue with this approach is that while grassroots Asian Christians continue to center their theology and practices on Christian Scripture, many so-called Asian theologians tend to undermine and relativize the place of the Bible in their theological construction. At the end of the chapter, I will introduce an alternative approach that takes the experiences and practices of grassroots Christians seriously. This will set the stage for the subsequent chapters, which will examine two examples of grassroots Asian theologies of Scripture.

In chapter two, I will discuss Watchman Nee, the founder and the primary teacher of “the Local Church”—one of the most popular Chinese indigenous Christian movements of the twentieth century—and a leader whose writings are among the most widely read by Chinese Christians worldwide. While his theology is commonly accused of being merely a product of

Anglo-American fundamentalism, I will argue that Nee is a Chinese contextual theologian in his own right—even though he draws much from the Western Christian tradition—precisely because of his theological commitment to Scripture as God’s living word. I will first explore his theoretical treatment of Scripture, focusing on his view that the nature of Scripture comprises the trichotomy of body, soul, and spirit, and on this outlook’s application to the person of the interpreter and methods of interpretation of Scripture. Nee insists on the importance of the role of the Holy Spirit and spiritual fittingness between the reader and “the spirit of the Scripture,” realities that he thinks are more important than investigations of hermeneutical methods and reading techniques that have preoccupied much modern biblical interpretation today. I will then look at examples of Nee’s exegetical method and argue that his exegesis has much in common with the allegorical exegesis of the church fathers. Nee’s reading of Scripture has been called “Chinese spiritual interpretation” and has been criticized as fanciful and simplistic, but I will contend that his approach to Scripture is a form of traditional figural reading of Scripture, which has its own logic and appeal to Chinese grassroots Christians.

In chapter three, I turn to John Sung—one of the greatest Chinese revival preachers of the twentieth century, whose influence has been deeply felt and widely spread among many Chinese churches in Mainland China and Southeast Asia. I first narrate his unusual life and conversion story, including the formative period of his life when he spent 193 days in a mental institution in New York. I will then devote a section to Sung’s dramatic preaching that caught the public’s attention at the time. On top of existing scholarly social-cultural and psychological analyses of Sung’s preaching, I add a more theological account of his homiletical habits. I suggest that Sung’s theatrical preaching was a natural outworking of his figural understanding of Scripture’s own creative power that enacts itself for the reader/preacher as it chooses. Scripture is, as Sung would say, Jesus’ own garment, that heals both physical and spiritual hemorrhage.

This conviction will be further clarified through analysis of some of Sung's exegesis, which I characterize as mainly allegorical and tropological in nature. In short, I will argue that one of the most important parts of Sung's legacy was his theology and interpretation of Scripture, which has shaped Chinese Christianity both in China and Southeast Asia.

While in chapter two and chapter three I focus on the life and work of Watchman Nee and John Sung respectively, in chapter four I will step back and expand the scope of the discussion in terms of both location and time by outlining some of the main contours of today's grassroots reading of the Bible in China and in Indonesia. My argument is that many, perhaps even the majority, of indigenous Chinese Christians in those regions exemplify an approach to Scripture that is similar in nature to that of Nee and Sung. I will illustrate the ways in which Chinese Christians receive and appropriate the Bible as Christian Scripture through discussing the infamous controversy between the government-sanctioned TSPM (Three-Self Patriotic Movement) officials and the leaders and members of unregistered churches in China. This will also serve as an extended and concrete example of the top-down theological indigenization project that went amiss because it did not take the local grassroots Christian belief and experience about Scripture into account—a problem that I have introduced briefly in chapter one. In my discussion on Indonesia, I will trace the lasting influence of Nee and Sung upon Chinese-Indonesian churches by highlighting several influential evangelical and Pentecostal leaders whose ministries have been shaped by Nee and Sung. While there are many theological approaches present in these communities, I argue that the dominant form of Christian scriptural interpretation in their midst is very much in line with the hermeneutical traditions of Nee and Sung discussed in previous chapters.

Chapter five will conclude the study by briefly summarizing its main arguments and delineating the significance of some of the main findings for the future direction of Asian theology, as well as for the study of figural interpretation of Scripture. I will suggest that revisiting the earlier hermeneutical traditions of Asia's popular Christian leaders, such as those of Nee and Sung, may reframe the discourse of Asian biblical interpretation that has long been dominated by forms of theology either irrelevant to the lives of grassroots Asian Christians or foreign to the traditional Christian self-understanding about God and Scripture. In the last section of the chapter, I venture to speak more broadly about Majority World Christianity, highlighting some interesting developments and parallels from other parts of the world that have some affinities with the findings of this study.

Definitions and Methods

Since this dissertation concerns grassroots Christianity, a word on the category of "grassroots" seems necessary here. A wide variety of terms have been used by scholars for what is called here "grassroots Christianity." Three terms are most frequent: popular Christianity, folk Christianity, and common Christianity. While I will use all of these terms interchangeably in this dissertation, it is important to note the nuances that distinguish them. Robert Schreiter offers a basic explanation of the three terms, albeit with respect to religions in general:¹¹

Literally [the term "**popular**"] means "of people" and can be used to mean of all people in general, or of one class of people (usually the poor, majority class) in particular. It is not ordinarily used in the English sense of "popular" meaning "in fashion." When used in Latin American contexts, it generally refers to the poor, majority class.

While [the term "**folk**"] can be understood to carry the same meaning as "popular," it generally has additional overtones.... "Folk" carries with it connotations of the lower strata of society, people who, in their simplicity, are the subjects of the authentic history of a nation. In the romanticized version of "folk," we have a body of wisdom in tales, proverbs, and lore, which has been preserved and transmitted orally from generation to

¹¹ Robert J. Schreiter, *Constructing Local Theologies* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1985), 124.

generation. In the politicized version of “folk,” we have a native purity and tradition relatively untainted by industrialization and modernization, which periodically asserts itself against the secularization process.

Similar to the two preceding concepts, [the term “**common**”] emphasizes the fact that the more theological or doctrinal understanding of religion are [*sic*] usually the province of but a small segment of the population, which has been entrusted with the maintenance of religious institutions. The religion of the greater part of the population will have various relationships to the religious institutions of that society, and those people will seldom identify all their religious experience with the social institutions.... Common religion forms a baseline of general experience, which is then specified by the institutional expression of religion.

The category “grassroots,” as I employ it in the dissertation, encompasses all three nuances, though the description of the term “common religion” above is probably the closest to the term “grassroots” as I use it in this study. “Grassroots” clearly provides a contrast between the religious experience of the common people and the theological expressions of the official institutions. The contrast emphasized in this study, however, is not so much social-institutional as cultural-intellectual. Thus, it is more accurate to draw a contrast between “grassroots/common Christians” and “elite (academic) theologians” (instead of “official religious institutions”). When “grassroots” is understood as a cultural category, it contrasts with the more literate, verbal, and conceptually sophisticated approach of one group, as opposed to the more illiterate, nonverbal, and often enthusiastic form of another (“lower”) group. Thus, the category of “elite” is used to identify the theological sophistication of some people—usually professional theologians or religious scholars—in contrast to the more rudimentary level of understanding found among the great majority of adherents to a particular religion.¹²

Underlying many studies and categorizations of the phenomenon of popular religion is the fact that, as Schreier also observes, religion seems to be construed here as a set of ideas, which then shape a particular practice.¹³ For most people in the majority world, however,

¹² Ibid., 125.

¹³ Ibid., 126.

religion is more a way of life than a theory about life. This is the premise of Simon Chan's grassroots approach to Asian theology, to which I alluded at the beginning of this chapter. Chan's premise, which this dissertation also assumes, is that "theology is a lived experience of the church before it is a set of ideas formulated by church theologians."¹⁴ While the term "theology" usually refers to critical reflections on faith in essays, confessions, official declarations, and statements by institutionally accredited theologians, this rather narrow and academic understanding of theology is not equal to capturing the lived experience of the people of God at the grassroots. Thus, Chan points to "the vast reservoir of implicit or 'primary theology' (*theologia prima*) found in sermons, hymns, poetry, testimonies, etc. of the practitioners of the faith."¹⁵ William Dyrness calls this "vernacular theology"—a process of "working on the whole symbolic complex of a community's Christian life so as to distill a vocabulary in which its meaning can be described, shared, and then valued."¹⁶

This dissertation is an exercise in working out the implicit theology of Scripture found in the works of Nee and Sung, "so as to distill a vocabulary in which its meaning can be described, shared, and then valued," as a way to re-narrate Asian theological discourse from a grassroots perspective. My methodology for drawing out Nee and Sung's views of Scripture and their interpretative practices is primarily driven by a close reading of their works on their own terms and in their respective contexts. Yet I will also situate their approach to Scripture within the larger theological and interpretive traditions of the church. Although political, sociological, and

¹⁴ Chan, *Grassroots Asian Theology*, 15. Chan, of course, is not alone in postulating this basic order of doing theology. For his part, however, Chan draws this notion from a famous axiom of Prosper of Aquitaine, a disciple of Augustine: *ut legem credendi lex statuat supplicandi* (the rule of prayer should determine the rule of faith).

¹⁵ Simon Chan, "Evangelical Theology in Asian Contexts," in *The Cambridge Companion to Evangelical Theology*, ed. Timothy Larsen and Daniel J. Treier (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 226.

¹⁶ William A. Dyrness, *Invitation to Cross-Cultural Theology: Case Studies in Vernacular Theologies* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), 33.

psychological considerations will be addressed and acknowledged as significant factors in their hermeneutical contexts, my primary interest lies in the theological aspects of their interpretation of Scripture.

Chapter 1

Mapping the Land of Asian Theology: A Critique and a Proposal

During the last four decades, an increasing number of scholars have attempted to present Asian theology as a distinctive theological category that is independent from Western theology.¹ One scholar even suggests that the Asian theological movement finds it *necessary* to set itself against Western theology, for it regards the West as a political and cultural oppressor against whom it has to fight.² At the same time, dissenting voices from some Asian theological circles criticize the authenticity of previous theological reflections that bear the name “Asian theology.”³ These critics argue that just as Western theologians do not consciously characterize their theologies as “Western theology,” Asian theologians also should not define their work as “Asian theology,” lest they succumb to the temptation of a reactionary mode of doing theology.⁴ Indeed, many Christian theologians in Asia are lukewarm about constructing an Asian theology in the first place.⁵ What is Asian theology? Is there such a thing? If so, how can it be identified? And why would theologians want to construct one?

This chapter delineates Asian theology by answering the above-mentioned inquiries and engaging with other questions relevant to the current state of Asian theological discourse, particularly the nature of Asian identity and the methodological questions of doing Asian theology. While it is largely descriptive in nature, surveying key literature on Asian theological

¹ See the work of C. S. Song, Kosuke Koyama, Stanley Samartha, Aloysius Pieris, Archie C. C. Lee, R. S. Sugirtharajah and many others below.

² Simon Shui-Man Kwan, *Postcolonial Resistance and Asian Theology* (London: Routledge, 2014), 2.

³ See the work of Bong Rin Ro, Rodrigo D. Tano, Hwa Yung, Namsoon Kang, and Simon Chan below.

⁴ Moonjang Lee, “Identifying an Asian Theology: A Methodological Quest,” *Common Ground Journal* 6, no. 2 (Spring 2009): 60.

⁵ *Ibid.*

methodology for the past four decades, the present chapter will also critique common approaches to Asian theology and will suggest a better way going forward. Particularly, I will argue that many so-called advocates of Asian theology suffer from a lack of self-critical engagement with both modern Enlightenment assumptions and the idealized notion of Asian identity, while ignoring the voices and experiences of many devout Asian Christians in grassroots communities. The end result is that the “Asian theology” they produce is ironically neither truly Christian nor authentically Asian. At the end of the chapter, I will introduce an alternative approach that seriously takes the experiences and practices of grassroots believers into account in any Asian theological construction. Both critique and proposal will set the stage for the subsequent chapters, where two examples of grassroots Asian theologies of Scripture will be introduced and examined. A grassroots theology of Scripture is one that takes seriously the lived experience and practice of grassroots Asian Christians, the complex hybrid nature of Asian identity, and the intrinsic power of Scripture to critically contextualize itself to Asian culture and people. This grassroots Asian theology, as we will see, stands in contrast to many of the proposals outlined below. We will begin with the question of identity: what it means to be Asian.

Seeking Asian Identity: One or Many?

Asia is a vast continent, with many associated islands, countries, ethnic groups, cultures, religions, and languages. One might ask whether it is possible to speak of “Asian theology” in the singular. Should we speak of “Asian theologies,” instead?⁶ While the plurality of Asian

⁶ For practical reasons of style and convention, I will use the singular form of “Asian theology” to refer to this area of discourse. And by Asia, I mean here South, Southeast, and East Asia, leaving out Central Asia and West Asia. This is a common geographical limitation within Asian theological discourse. Michael Amaladoss offers two reasons for this. First, the churches in this part of the world have, historically, been coming and working together in various ways. Second, despite its differences, this part of Asia has more common cultural identity

reality/ies is widely accepted, for many Asian theologians there is a sense of *Asianness* that groups them together as a distinctive whole and justifies their endeavour to construct an Asian theology. According to Michael Amaladoss, this sense of *Asianness* is regarded as the most basic trend in Asian theology over the last fifty years.⁷ But what is the exact content of this *Asianness*? Below I will survey the main attempts to define its content in the context of Asian theological discourse. I have divided these proposals into three categories: Asian way of thinking, Asian common context, and Asian theologians' common enemy.

1. Asian Way of Thinking

It is customary for discussions on Asian theology to begin with a distinction between Western and Eastern ways of thinking. Scholars often characterize Western thought as abstract, rationalistic, and dualistic, whereas Eastern thought is said to be concrete, holistic, and non-dualistic.⁸ This characterization is typically rooted in Western and Eastern cultures and religious backgrounds. One scholar, for instance, suggests that while the abstract rationality of Greek culture is at the root of much of Western culture, a certain experiential and intuitive non-dualism characteristic of Hinduism, Buddhism, and Daoism marks the East.⁹

It is also customary to contrast the “either/or” of the Western way of reasoning to the “both/and” of the Eastern way. The paradigm of the *yin* and the *yang* of Daoism is often evoked in this context.¹⁰ The Western approach to reality is largely dichotomous, so it is argued, with a neat distinction between God and creation, the spiritual and the material, the human and the

compared to other parts of the world. See Michael Amaladoss, “Asian Theological Trends,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Christianity in Asia*, ed. Felix Wilfred (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2014), 104.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Chan, *Grassroots Asian Theology*, 9.

⁹ Amaladoss, “Asian Theological Trends,” 105.

¹⁰ E.g., Lee Young Jung, “The Yin-Yang Way of Thinking,” in *What Asian Christians Are Thinking: A Theological Source Book*, ed. Douglas J. Elwood (Quezon City, Philippines: New Day Publishers, 1976).

cosmic. But while the West reaches out to the Absolute through external reality, the East looks inward. Furthermore, the Eastern way of thinking is described as holistic and integrated, for it perceives reality as one and interdependent. Consequently, the East often utilizes symbols and stories that seek to seize reality imaginatively in its lived complexity.¹¹ Michael Amaladoss thus writes: “Asian theology of the future will be a narrative theology, close to life in the world and contextual, not an abstract universal system. It will not be narrowly rational, but holistic, including the emotional, the imaginative, and the experiential. It will be pluralistic.”¹²

Hwa Yung is another Asian theologian who argues that Asian culture has its own distinctive way of thinking. Drawing from the work of Edmund Perry and others, Yung outlines three basic cognitive approaches that are found in virtually every culture: the “conceptual” (cognition by postulation), the “psychical” (cognition by intuition), and the “concrete relational” in which “life and reality are seen pictorially in terms of active emotional relationships present in a concrete situation.”¹³ They argue that these three ways of knowing are appropriated by all people of different cultures, but not in the same manner or priority. Yung provides an example of how this epistemological framework applies to the three major cultures of the world: the West, India, and China. The primary mode of cognition in the West is conceptual, followed by concrete relationships, and lastly psychical experiences. Chinese minds, on the other hand, prioritize concrete relationships, followed by concepts, and psychical experiences. The Indians regard psychical experiences as primary, concrete relationships as

¹¹ C. S. Song speaks of the “third eye” to indicate such an intuitive vision into the real. See C. S. Song, *Third-Eye Theology: Theology in Formation in Asian Settings* (Guildford: Lutterworth Press, 1980).

¹² Amaladoss, “Asian Theological Trends,” 105. He mentions Kosuke Koyama, C. S. Song, and Anthony de Mello as pioneers of this Asian narrative method by resurrecting traditional stories or referring to current ones. This emphasis, of course, does not mean that Asians had no use for reason, concepts, or logic. But reason was subordinate to experience and concept to story. Amaladoss mentions Buddhist philosopher Nagarjuna and Hindu philosopher Sankara as examples of excellent dialecticians from the land of India.

¹³ Edmund Perry, *The Gospel in Dispute: The Relation of Christian Faith to Other Missionary Religions* (New York: Doubleday, 1958), 99. As quoted in Yung, *Mangoes or Bananas?*, 80.

secondary, and concepts as tertiary modes of cognition. These differences can be seen more clearly in the different approaches taken by each culture towards their understanding of miracles:

With respect to the first, the Western mind focuses on critical conceptual and analytical issues like, “How can miracles be possible in a scientific age?” The Chinese mind is likely to ask, “Can I trust the person who reportedly witnessed and told me of the miracle?” thus focusing on the relationship between the teller and the listener. The Indian mind is likely to say, “I will accept its truthfulness if I can experience it for myself.”¹⁴

Yung admits that these are matters of relative emphasis within each culture, but he insists that “they do end up shaping the predominant theological questions asked and approaches taken from within each culture differently.”¹⁵

It cannot be denied that basic differences arise from different cultural and religious experiences, but whether these distinctions should be demarcated as Western and Eastern is another matter. Simon Chan is right when he suggests that what is sometimes called the Western way of thinking should more accurately be called Cartesian or Enlightenment thought. This is because Enlightenment thought as described above (as abstract, rationalistic, dualistic, etc.) does not exclusively define Western epistemology and philosophy. He uses the personalist philosophy of Michael Polanyi as a counterexample, showing how some Western postcritical/postmodern ways of thinking have more in common with what is typically described as the Eastern way. At the same time, Chan observes that some Asian theologians have bought into theological presuppositions and methods that derive directly from Enlightenment thought.¹⁶ Furthermore, often the antithesis between East and West is no more

¹⁴ Yung, *Mangoes or Bananas?*, 80.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ Chan, *Grassroots Asian Theology*, 9–10. More on this point will be further elaborated below.

than a way of expressing certain value judgments. “In some circles,” Chan writes, “‘Western’ theology is theology one does not particularly like, while one’s preferred theology is regarded as more authentically ‘Asian.’”¹⁷ With Chan, I concur that it is time to break the habit of portraying different patterns of thought in terms of Eastern and the Western ways of thinking. Such portrayals are neither helpful nor accurate, particularly given the globalized world in which we are living now.

2. Asian Common Context

Other Asian theologians prefer to focus on commonalities of context across Asia to justify their endeavor to speak on and for Asian theology. Franklyn Balasundaram, for instance, outlines the present-day context of Asia within two categories: a) the social, economic, and political context; and b) the cultural, religious, and worldview context. Within the first category, he describes five common socio-economic-political realities that are present in Asia today, namely: (1) Colonial experience and debilitating structures of domination; (2) poverty of the many and opulence of the few; (3) increasing marginalization of sections of national minorities; (4) inferior and oppressed status of women; and (5) growing international militarism and repressive regimes.¹⁸ With respect to the second category, Balasundaram simply points out

¹⁷ Ibid., 10. Chan gives the example of how some Asian theologians superficially equate “the Western model of theology” with colonial domination and oppressive capitalism. Cf. the document from the Seventh International Conference (1986) of the Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians (EATWOT) in K. C. Abraham, ed., *Third World Theologies: Commonalities and Divergences* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1990), 196.

¹⁸ Highlighting the political and economic context of Asia, K. C. Abraham comments: “This narrow concentration of power in the elite is the most striking feature of the present Asian reality.... Thus the significant aspect of Asian reality is the dominance of the elite, a minority over the masses, which perpetuates the misery of poverty, unequal distribution and excessive unemployment.” Thus, “[a]ny discussion of suffering and hope in Asia will be irrelevant if we fail to come to grips with this.” K. C. Abraham, “The Asian Reality: Some Economic and Political Trends,” in *Asian Expressions of Christian Commitment: A Reader in Asian Theology*, ed. T. Dayanandan Francis and F. J. Balasundaram (Madras: Christian Literature Society, 1992), 2, 7.

the obvious manifold presence of world religions and religious worldviews in Asia, such as Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam, Confucianism, Shamanism, and Christianity.¹⁹

In a similar vein, David Thompson offers four characteristics of Asian context that are somewhat comparable to the above, namely (1) war and the consequence of suffering, (2) poverty, (3) the presence of other world faiths, and (4) the inferior position of women.²⁰ For John Parratt, two primary contexts that have been the framework and source material for doing theology in the Majority World are: the impact of colonialism and Western mission, and the extent of religious plurality.²¹ When pressed to think of one thing that brings much of the Majority World together, however, Parratt suggests that it is “a sense of pain, what the Koreans would call *han*, a sort of righteous indignation at the wrongs perpetrated upon their world.”²² This concurs with M. M. Thomas’s observation that “in spite of its plurality of cultures, political ideologies, and social structures, we can discern certain common features in what Asian peoples are revolting against and are struggling for.”²³ According to these thinkers, the revolts and struggles that Asians are facing are to be understood almost exclusively in socio-political and economic terms. They all boil down to what Aloysius Pieris identified as two fundamental poles of Asian reality: religious plurality and poverty.²⁴ As Pieris puts it, the Asian Church “must be humble enough to be baptized in the Jordan of Asian *Religiosity* and bold enough to be baptized on the Cross of Asian *Poverty*... [O]ur desperate search for the Asian

¹⁹ Franklyn J. Balasundaram, *Contemporary Asian Christian Theology* (Delhi: United Theological College; ISPCK, 1995), 1–5.

²⁰ David Thompson, “Mapping Asian Christianity,” in *Christian Theology in Asia*, ed. Sebastian C. H. Kim (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 10–14.

²¹ John Parratt, “Introduction,” in *An Introduction to Third World Theologies*, ed. John Parratt (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 10.

²² *Ibid.*, 11.

²³ M. M. Thomas, *The Christian Response to the Asian Revolution* (London: SCM Press, 1966), Preface. As quoted by Douglas J. Elwood, “Asian Christian Theology: Introduction,” in *Asian Christian Theology: Emerging Themes*, ed. Douglas J. Elwood (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1980), 24.

²⁴ Aloysius Pieris, “Two Encounters in My Theological Journey,” in *Frontiers in Asian Christian Theology: Emerging Trends*, ed. R. S. Sugirtharajah (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1994), 143.

Face of Christ can find fulfillment only if we participate in Asia's own search for it in the unfathomable abyss where Religion and Poverty seem to have the same common source: God."²⁵

While in general it is true that Asia is marked by the poles of poverty and religiosity, this proposal minimizes the diversity among people of different social and cultural strata within Asia. Postcolonial feminist theologian Namsoon Kang, for instance, is very critical of such an understanding of Asia. First, she argues, the degree and experience of poverty in Asia differs extremely not only between countries but also within a single country. Furthermore, she questions the notion of "being poor," for it is a very relative and complex one. But her main critique of this monolithic view of Asia is that it is derived from and perpetuates the Orientalist notion of essentialized identity that is not only inaccurate but also dangerous. Formulating Asian identity only as what Western identity is not ignores the complexity of Asian people's issues and the overlapping dimensions they share with Western ones.²⁶ We will explore this critique further below, but it is enough now to observe that Asian identity cannot be comprehended by such grand concepts as poverty and/or multifaceted religiosity.

3. Asian Theologians' Common Enemy

The two points discussed above are usually combined with and give rise to a third proposed feature of *Asianness*, namely that Asia lives in contradistinction from the West. This viewpoint is particularly common among the self-professed Asian theologians. Since Asians have their own way of thinking and their own distinctive contexts, so it is argued, then their

²⁵ Aloysius Pieris, "The Asian Sense in Theology," in *Living Theology in Asia*, ed. John C. England (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1982), 175–176. Emphases in original.

²⁶ Namsoon Kang, "Who/What Is Asian? A Postcolonial Theological Reading of Orientalism and Neo-Orientalism," in *Postcolonial Theologies: Divinity and Empire*, ed. Catherine Keller, Michael Nausner, and Mayra Rivera (St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2004), 106.

theology must necessarily differ from the theology of the West. Indeed, most Asian theologians find their rationale for doing Asian theology in their critique of Western theology. Thus, it is important to examine this critique, however briefly, before we return to the question of Asian identity. Lee observes that an Asian critique of Western theology is raised from three different, yet interrelated, viewpoints.²⁷

First, Western theology is criticized for being itself a highly contextualized theology, and thus irrelevant to Asia. It is now generally recognized that every theology is contextually shaped, for there is no way to do theology in an ahistorical, context-free location. Any theology is formed in the process of interacting with particular questions in a particular society at a particular time. It follows that the transmission of a theology shaped in one region cannot be accompanied by the original situation that gave birth to that theology. Thus, imported theologies, as particular answers to particular questions, do not offer much help to those in different contexts with different questions.²⁸ But irrelevancy is not the only problem. According to Archie Lee, doing theology “using non-Asian texts, alienated from the Asian socio-political and cultural-historical contexts, disregarding the Asian experiences and despising without discrimination the richness of Asian spirituality” will result in spiritual malnourishment for Asian Christians.²⁹ Western theology in this respect is a “super-imposed theology” that enslaves Asian minds and destroys creativity and the imagination of Asian thinkers. This critique has provided a platform for Asian theologians to utilize Asian resources in doing theology and to justify their endeavour to construct a contextual Asian theology.³⁰

²⁷ Lee, “Identifying an Asian Theology: A Methodological Quest,” 62–67.

²⁸ Moonjang Lee, “Re-Configuration of Western Theology in Asia,” *Common Ground Journal* 6, no. 2 (Spring 2009): 83.

²⁹ Archie C. C. Lee, “Doing Christian Theology in Asian Ways: Prophetic and Sapiential Hermeneutics in Asian Ways of Doing Theology,” *ATESEA Occasional Papers*, no. 12 (1993): 1.

³⁰ Lee, “Identifying an Asian Theology: A Methodological Quest,” 64.

Second, Western theology is criticized for being irrelevant to Asian people because Western theology *itself* is alienated from the life of Western peoples.³¹ In other words, contrary to the first critique above, here Western theology is perceived as non-contextual theology and is criticized precisely for being such. It deals only with intellectual questions that most people in the real world are not actually asking, even in the West. Ahn Byung-Mu, for instance, criticizes Western theology as living in the academic and abstract world of ideas. He voices the thoughts of many people—Asian or otherwise—when he says:

Reading theological books produced by Western theologians, I feel that for them theology *per se* has become the context of doing theology. In other words, they always refer to other theologians. They say, “Barth said this and Bultmann said that,” “Bornkamm argued this and Tillich argued that” and so forth. Theology for them is characterised as a confrontation between words and/or between perspectives. These academic confrontations in turn create a context for doing theology. The academic world has become the context of theology, being alienated from the concrete realities.³²

If it is true that every theology is basically contextual theology, as asserted before, then it is wrong to say that Western theology is a non-contextual theology. Byung-Mu’s apt observation, however, suggests that Western theology is indeed contextual—yet only in an abstracted, small world of academia.

Third, Western theology is criticized for being naturalistic and rationalistic, as the product of the post-Enlightenment intellectual environment.³³ As a contextual theology of the West, Western theology understandably takes the cultural and intellectual milieu of the post-Enlightenment world seriously. At the same time, this move is one major reason why Western theology often pretends to be a universal theology, claiming freedom from context of any sort, in accord with the Enlightenment’s universalizing values. It also explains Western theology’s

³¹ Ibid., 65.

³² Ahn Byung-Mu, *Speaking on Minjung Theology* (Seoul: Han Gil Sa, 1993), 34.

³³ Lee, “Identifying an Asian Theology: A Methodological Quest,” 66.

preoccupation with theologizing for the sake of academic discourse. Since Asia has a different epistemological framework and it has never collectively encountered the intellectual paradigm shifts of the Enlightenment,³⁴ some Asian theologians argue that Western theology should not be imposed anymore on Asian Christians.³⁵ As a result, Asian theologians need to free themselves from the influence of the West and do theology with Asian resources.

The three critiques of Western theology above are only partially true at best and self-defeating at worst. These critiques are only partially true because they over-generalize and over-simplify the broad spectrum of Western theology. Which part of Western theology are they talking about: American, Canadian, British, or European theology? And whose Western theology: man or woman, white or black, rich or poor, Roman Catholics or Protestants, conservative evangelicals or mainline liberals, etc.? While we can say that the West was (and is) somewhat more prone to the effect of the Enlightenment than Asia, it is simply wrong, especially in the wake of postmodernism, to assume that *all* Western theologies are subject to a naturalistic and rationalistic worldview. The same can be said to the charge that Western theology is a disengaged theology, living only in the world of academia. This is probably true in many circles, or in some time periods in the West, but the rise of ecclesial-centered types of theology—to give just one example—surely challenges this sweeping accusation. The criticisms are also self-defeating in that some of the so-called Asian theologians who critique

³⁴ See Miyon Chung, “Theology and the Future of Asia,” in *Theology and the Future: Evangelical Assertions and Explorations*, ed. Trevor Cairney and David Starling (London: T&T Clark, 2014), 64.

³⁵ See Yung, *Mangoes or Bananas?*, 3–8. Drawing from anthropologist Charles H. Kraft, Yung characterizes the Western worldview as *naturalistic*, with the supernatural largely disregarded; as being governed by *materialistic* values; as being *humanistic*, thus making God largely irrelevant; as being *rationalistic*, thus rejecting anything that appears to fall outside the purview of rigorous rational analysis; and as valuing *individualism* and *independence* above community and group-identity. Then Yung asks, “[H]ow can such a theology adequately address the concerns of Asian and other Two-Thirds World cultures which are generally much more holistic, without the sharp separation between the natural and the supernatural with its emphasis on the world of spirits and the dead; decidedly less materialistic; no less humanistic, but not so at the expense of denying the divine; no less rational but nevertheless open to knowledge through intuition and other non-rational media; and group and community-oriented rather than ruggedly individualistic?” (3).

Western theology also adopt many of the same modern Enlightenment assumptions in their theological constructions, as I will show below. In addition, despite some Asian theologians' rhetoric of being *contextual* theologians, many of their works remain distant from the actual realities of Asian Christians at the grassroots level—thus, they are guilty of the same charge they make of Western theologians. In short, we may conclude that these critiques do not present a true picture of Western theology and thus do not serve as a sufficient rationale for constructing Asian theology.³⁶

Identifying the Root of the Problem: The Trap of Essentialized Identity

It should be clear by now that articulating an Asian theology merely as a reaction to Western theology is problematic on many fronts. The main problem with this reactionary method of doing Asian theology, however, is the way it subtly perpetuates the unhealthy dichotomy of West and East that will eventually lead to the undoing of the very notion of Asian theology itself. In “Who/What Is Asian? A Postcolonial Theological Reading of Orientalism and Neo-Orientalism,” Asian feminist Namsoon Kang traces how Asian theologians found their voices in the midst of Western theological hegemony. She notes that “[i]t is natural... for Asian theologians, at the primary stage of constructing their own theological discourse, to try to break the general assumption of the superiority of Western theology and culture” by harshly criticizing them and contrasting them with Asian theology and culture.³⁷ She further observes that in most Asian theological discourse, there has been a frequent habit of positing an essential *Asianness* that all Asians share despite their racial, class, gender, religious, ethnic, and cultural differences. In this framework, Asia becomes an “anonymous collectivity.” The problem, as

³⁶ Cf. Lee, “Identifying an Asian Theology: A Methodological Quest,” 67.

³⁷ Kang, “Who/What Is Asian? A Postcolonial Theological Reading of Orientalism and Neo-Orientalism,”

Kang sees it, is that this framework “carries *the mark of the plural*, obscures the heterogeneity of Asians, and eventually cuts off examination of the significance of such heterogeneity for the contemporary construction of Asian theology.”³⁸ Consequently, all Asians look alike in most Asian theological discourse. For these Asian theologians, Asia is *essentially* different from the West.

In Kang’s observation, asserting Asian cultural uniqueness, based on the old dualism of Asia as the Orient and European-American countries as the Occident, has been the core of Asian theological discourse for the past several decades. This is ironic because the initial critique of Western theological imperialism by Asian theologians is precisely aimed towards undermining Orientalist dogma.³⁹ Orientalism, a term popularized by postcolonial scholar Edward Said, is an approach that “essentializes” the culture of others in a way that justifies their intellectual and political domination.⁴⁰ Thus “Asia” was constructed as the antithesis of “Europe or America” and was identified with despotism, mass poverty, ancient religious civilizations, exotic rituals, and sacred texts, among other things. That widespread poverty and multifaceted religiosity (Pieris’ dual Asian context) will continue to be a feature of Asian life is beyond doubt. But, as Sri Lankan lay theologian Vinoth Ramachandra rightly points out,

Asia is *also* about giant corporations with a global reach, nuclear power, urbanization (including major world financial centres), the cybernetics revolution, cutting-edge pharmaceutical, fashion and biotech industries, a secularist intellectual ethos as well as new religious movements, conflicts within as well as between cultural communities, and a pervasive consumerist culture that shapes the aspirations, values and identities of the young (and not-so-young). It is impossible to separate “Asian” issues from “American” or “European” issues.⁴¹

³⁸ Ibid., 106. Emphasis in original.

³⁹ Ibid., 103.

⁴⁰ Edward W. Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Knopf, 1994).

⁴¹ Vinoth Ramachandra, *Church and Mission in the New Asia: New Gods, New Identities*, ed. Kimhong Hazra (Singapore: Trinity Theological College, 2009), 14–15. Emphasis mine.

Or, in Kang's own words, "As the West as a homogeneous whole exists only in the imagination, Asia as a homogeneous whole exists only in the imagination."⁴² Asia as a singular entity is an "imaginative geography."⁴³ And if Asia is continuously depicted as an essentialized entity, Asian theology as theological discourse will lose its accountability by virtue of under- and/or mis-representing the tremendously diverse reality of Asian people.⁴⁴

Drawing from her own experience as an Asian feminist theologian, Kang further elaborates her critique, noting that many Western and non-Western feminist scholars too easily fell prey to the temptation of "homogenizing, tokenizing, and ghettoizing" marginal voices in their work. Despite their well-intentioned effort to include voices from the Global South in their scholarship, Kang notes that the method of representation being employed is often marked with "overgeneralization, oversimplification, and homogenization," as "the diversity, complexity, and historicity of feminist theological discourse of those regions are suppressed."⁴⁵ As she puts it pointedly, "When I read the chapter on Asian feminist theologies in *Women and Redemption* by Ruether, I felt that *the real me* had been *re-formed* into *the discursive me*—Asian/Korean

⁴² Kang, "Who/What Is Asian? A Postcolonial Theological Reading of Orientalism and Neo-Orientalism," 103.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 108.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 107.

⁴⁵ See *Ibid.*, 109–110. She particularly criticizes the methodological inconsistency of Rosemary R. Ruether's *Women and Redemption* by pointing out how the author introduces feminist theologies in the West by mentioning various individual feminist theologians in chapter 6 and 7, whereas in chapter 8 "the names of individual theologians disappear from the content of the book, and instead, Ruether deals with vast regions within one chapter by employing a grand categorization: Latin America, Africa, and Asia." Kang grants that given Ruether "does not have knowledge of the vernacular languages of each region, she must be... unable to access the various resources written in those languages." Nevertheless, Kang accuses Ruether of "[o]vergeneralization, oversimplification, and homogenization" in her method of representation. For Kang, Ruether is "not only practicing a discursive hegemonic power but also tokenizing and therefore ghettoizing non-Western feminist theological discourse." The reason she provides is worth quoting in full:

This homogenizing of non-Western feminist theological discourse is an act of *othering* the women in Africa, Latin America, and Asia: They are somehow *others*, different from Western feminist theologians.... Homogenizing Asian feminist theology is a kind of *epistemic violence* because Asian women are represented identically in feminist theological discourse *regardless* of their historicity and specific physicality. Ruether does not use terms such as "*North American* feminist theology" as she does for other parts of the world. If she were to use it, she would immediately get harsh critique from fellow feminist theologians for generalizing and homogenizing the extreme diversity of feminist theologies in North America. (*Ibid.*, 110-111)

women, the plural, lacking my physicality, historicity, and personality as an individual.... In this homogenized discourse *on* Asian feminist theology, I *as* an Asian woman, hardly feel I am fairly/properly represented.”⁴⁶

In an even more candid manner, Kang shares her personal reflections on being invited to speak in the West: “When *they* ask me to talk *as* an Asian woman, I know that it is both complimentary and complementary... *They* make me feel I am special in the sense that I should/must be *different* from them. In the process of tokenizing, homogenizing, and eventually ghettoizing, the multiple *I*'s disappear. There remains only the *mark of the plural*—the collective identity.”⁴⁷ Here she finds herself in what she calls the dilemma of “*speaking as*”—torn between wanting to be heard and resisting the dictates of the host and audience. Asians are expected to speak *only* as Asian. Otherwise, they are deemed not authentic enough. Thus, Asians ought to generalize themselves, to make themselves representative, and to necessarily distance themselves from the West. In the process, Kang admits, they often lose themselves—their real contexts and particularities do not matter because they are all alike.⁴⁸

⁴⁶ Ibid., 111–112. Emphasis in original.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 111. Emphasis in original.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 109. Her passionate reflection sometimes becomes repetitive, but the section below is particularly worth quoting:

When we Asian women are asked to present ourselves *as* Asian theologians, we are expected to fill our presentation with ancient folklore, rites, shamanistic symbols and rituals, dance, emotional *han*-ridden story-telling. Otherwise, *they* don't listen because it bores them. From fellow Asians we are also accused of being Westernized. We have to be born and continuously live only in the past. However, “like it or not, the past can in no way guide me in the present moment,” and we Asian theologians, whether by choice or by discursive force, are becoming more and more “the slave of the past” in the name of indigenization, of self-identity, of multiculturalism, of celebrating/respecting difference. We are more and more frozen into the past because *we*—the East—are/must be different from *them*—the West. (Ibid., 113. Emphasis in original.)

Sri Lankan theologian Vinoth Ramachandra voices a similar critique, using an interesting metaphor of music taken from Edward Said's work:

In his book... Said argued for a greater cosmopolitanism, “I have no patience with the position that “we” should only or mainly be concerned with what is “ours,” any more than require Arabs to read Arab books, use Arab methods, and the like. As C. L. R. James used to say, Beethoven belongs as much to West Indians as he does to the Germans, since his music is now part of the human heritage.” And we could add, Bob Marley and Reggae belong to the Germans as much as to the Jamaicans! The problem I am identifying, however, is that while European and American Christians readily embrace Reggae without feeling any need to justify their tastes to West Indians, those of us who prefer Reggae to local traditional

Here we see another dimension of her critique of the Orientalist notion of essentialized identity. Portraying Asia as an entity that is entirely different from the West may have worked in the past—even though it is still debatable—but it definitely does not work in the highly-globalized world of today. Those Asian theologians who insist on the binary nature of the East/West divide are, in Kang’s view, romanticizing history and living in the past. In reality, there is no “Asian experience” in general, including the experiences of oppression and liberation; there are only historically circumscribed experiences in particular times and spaces, which are differently shaped by social class, race, education, religion, culture, individual difference and so forth. She concludes:

As “women” can never be univocally defined, “Asian” can never be univocally defined due to its cultural, political, economic, societal, and religious diversities. Asia is utterly hybrid/heterogeneous and never can be homogeneous.... Claiming one’s identity only in *differential*, claimed by either Asians themselves or by non-Asians, is essentializing the multiple/hybrid identities of Asia and the West through a binarism of representations in the realm of stereotype, with the aim of fixating the sense of difference between Western and Asian parts of the world.⁴⁹

Having deconstructed the notion of Asian essentialized identity, what are we left with? Can we still speak of Asian theology as a distinct theological category? No, if by that we mean a type of theology that generalizes, romanticizes, and essentializes Asian identity in a simple contradistinction with everything non-Asian. We cannot speak and do Asian theology in such a manner, simply because there is no such identity—at least, not anymore. What we do have, as Kang and other postcolonial scholars suggest, is a “hybrid identity,” arising from the notion of cultural hybridity in the globalized world in which we find ourselves in. Edward Said puts it lucidly:

music are dubbed “Western” by many European and American missionaries with the implication that we are not properly “contextualised!” Is this not a continuation of the colonial attitude that tries to define our “context” and identities for us? (Ramachandra, *Church and Mission in the New Asia*, 15).

⁴⁹ Kang, “Who/What Is Asian? A Postcolonial Theological Reading of Orientalism and Neo-Orientalism,” 112–113. Emphasis in original.

[A]ll cultures are involved in one another; none is single and pure, all are hybrid, heterogeneous, extraordinarily differentiated, and unmonolithic.⁵⁰

No one today is purely one thing. Labels like Indian, or woman, or Muslim, and American are not more than starting points... Imperialism consolidated the mixture of cultures and identities on a global scale. But its worst and most paradoxical gift was to allow people to believe that they were only, mainly, exclusively, white, or Black, or Western, or Oriental... but there seems no reason except fear and prejudices to keep insisting on their separation and distinctiveness, as if that was all human life was about.⁵¹

But “[w]ill Asian theology be recognizable in a global context if it does not talk about Asian *as* Asian, if it does not focus on *ethnic identity* in isolation from the other elements of identity, and if it does not try to describe the situation of ‘Asians in general’?”⁵² To her own question, Kang offers only a cryptic answer:

[Asian theologians] have to struggle regarding the definition of “Asian” and to grapple with the significance of differences/similarities among Asians and between Asia and the West. Asian theological discourse is constituted by and will thrive on such struggles. Through such grappling, Asian theology from a postcolonial perspective will create conditions for coalitions that challenge totalizing discourse in the name of culture, race, ethnicity, and nation.... The hybrid self, decentering any foundational notion of Asian, can be a Christian ideal of losing oneself to find oneself.⁵³

Cryptic as it may be, I find the notions of “struggle,” “hybridity,” and “losing oneself,” as Kang outlines above, helpful in pointing the discourse in the right direction. There is no easy, simplistic Asian identity anymore; one must continuously struggle to identify what kind of Asian hybridity one is. There is no hard and neat dichotomy of East and West anymore. There is no more triumphalist romanticization of Asian culture and context; one still needs to speak as

⁵⁰ Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, xxv. According to another prominent postcolonial thinker Homi Bhabha, all forms of culture are continually in a process of hybridity, where hybridity is described as the third space that “gives rise to something different, something new and unrecognizable, a new area of negotiation of meaning and representation.” See Homi K. Bhabha, *Nation and Narration* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 211. As cited in Kang, “Who/What Is Asian? A Postcolonial Theological Reading of Orientalism and Neo-Orientalism,” 115.

⁵¹ Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, 336.

⁵² Kang, “Who/What Is Asian? A Postcolonial Theological Reading of Orientalism and Neo-Orientalism,” 116.

⁵³ *Ibid.*

an Asian and listen to Western voices (and vice versa) but without a presumption that one's culture or context is necessarily better than the other. As will be later discussed, one form of this new direction of doing Asian theology is an approach that takes the voices of Asian grassroots Christians seriously on their own terms. But, to appreciate this approach and to put it in proper context, I will first look more closely at the dominant approaches of doing Asian theology by surveying and critiquing some of its main players and tenets.

The Three Strands of Asian Contextual Theology

A quick survey of several theological works that have the word "Asia/Asian" in the title will show that theologies from Asia by Asians are as diverse as the continent itself. Today, there is a vast array of Asian local theologies, commonly classified as Indian theology, Indian Dalit theology, Sri Lankan theology, Chinese theology, Japanese theology, Korean theology, Korean Minjung theology, Burmese theology, and so forth.⁵⁴ While each of these local theologies has its own emphasis and distinctive traits, most proponents and observers would easily group them within a larger discourse called "Asian contextual theology," for despite their apparent differences, they nevertheless still share a common Asian context and work out their theology *consciously* from that context. This last feature, as we have seen, helps to distinguish them from Western theology. So, although no theology can help being contextual in one way or another, making *explicit* the centrality of contextual issues does represent a departure from the current Western theological mainstream.⁵⁵

⁵⁴ See Chung, "Theology and the Future of Asia," 67. For comprehensive resources on Asian theologies based on regions (South Asia, Southeast Asia, and Northeast Asia), see the gigantic three-volume work of John England in John C. England et al., eds., *Asian Christian Theologies: A Research Guide to Authors, Movements, Sources*, 3 vols. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2002-2004).

⁵⁵ Parratt, "Introduction," 8.

Although Pieris's characterization of poverty and multifaceted religiosity as Asian dual contexts is problematic on many fronts, as we have seen, it nevertheless has gained popular acceptance among many Asian theologians. Thus, it still offers a useful framework for classifying current Asian theological discourses. In addition to Asian theological initiatives that are preoccupied with the *socio-political* and *religious* contexts of Asia, I would add another category whose focus is on the Asian *cultural* context.⁵⁶ Hence, the three categories of Asian theology we will survey below: Asian liberation theology, Asian theology of religions, and Asian inculturation theology.⁵⁷

1. Asian Theology as Liberation Theology

While Latin American theologians have been the pioneers of liberation theologies that address the problems of massive poverty and political oppression in their own context, in the last four decades Asian theologians have also seriously begun to do the same.⁵⁸ Asians have not only suffered from colonization and massive poverty but also from the postcolonial demarcations of new national borders, tribal and people group conflicts, wars and communism, recurring environmental calamities, and the structural oppression and corruption that affect the vast majority of the Asian continent.⁵⁹ Today, Asia has the highest number of poor people of any continent. Ironically, this state of affairs has coincided with the rise of China, Korea, and India as major global economic powers. Hence, the growing disparity between the rich and the

⁵⁶ See Moonjang Lee, "Asian Theology," in *Global Dictionary of Theology: A Resource for the Worldwide Church*, ed. William A. Dyrness and Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2008), 75–76. Cf. Chung, "Theology and the Future of Asia," 68–70; T. D. Gener and L. Bautista, "Theological Method," in *Global Dictionary of Theology*, 890.

⁵⁷ Needless to say, this categorization contains overlapping areas and serves merely as a heuristic tool to map the broad terrain of Asian theology. Just as in the previous section, in each category below we will offer a brief critique when necessary before then going into a deeper analysis.

⁵⁸ Yung, *Mangoes or Bananas?*, 67.

⁵⁹ Chung, "Theology and the Future of Asia," 69.

poor in Asia seems insurmountable.⁶⁰ Given this context, liberation has consistently been one of the most prominent themes in Asian theology. As one observer puts it, “[I]t’s as if Asian theology would not be Asian without the rhetoric of liberation.”⁶¹

Within this strand of Asian theology, several oft-cited liberation movements include Minjung theology in Korea, Dalit theology in India, and Burakumin theology in Japan. Minjung (“people”) theology focuses on the working poor, exploited by the nation state in connivance with burgeoning corporations.⁶² Dalit theology foregrounds those who were once referred to as the untouchables (“Dalit” is their own preferred name, which means “broken ones”),⁶³ while Burakumin theology takes up the cause of the Japanese Burakumin minority (the indigenous group and the tribal peoples) that has been oppressed for more than four hundred years.⁶⁴ These various regional theologies have constructed a similar Christology that reclaims Jesus as one of themselves in their struggle against ruthless traditional regimes and ideologies. As Clarke puts it, “By identifying the solidarity of the historical Jesus with the poor and the excluded, Asian theology gives value to such people’s existential situation and connects this with God’s mission to free and uplift them. The human Jesus was the Human One from God who identified with and continues to work with the poor... and the outcast in their right to live as human beings with dignity and justice.”⁶⁵

⁶⁰ Sathianathan Clarke, “The Task, Method and Content of Asian Theologies,” in *Asian Theology on the Way: Christianity, Culture and Context*, ed. Peniel Jesudason Rajkumar (London: SPCK, 2012), 8.

⁶¹ Carver T. Yu, “The Cross, the Kingdom of God and the Nation,” in *The Cross in Asia Today*, ed. Mark L. Y. Chan (Singapore: Trinity Theological College, 2011), 31.

⁶² See Paul S. Chung, Kim Kyoung-Jae, and Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen, eds., *Asian Contextual Theology for the Third Millennium: A Theology of Minjung in Fourth-Eye Formation* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2007).

⁶³ See Sathianathan Clarke, Deenabandhu Manchala, and Philip Vinod Peacock, eds., *Dalit Theology in the Twenty-First Century: Discordant Voices, Discerning Pathways* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).

⁶⁴ See Teruo Kuribayashi, “Burakumin Liberation Theology,” in *Dictionary of Third World Theologies*, ed. Virginia Fabella and R. S. Sugirtharajah (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2000), 33.

⁶⁵ Clarke, “The Task, Method and Content of Asian Theologies,” 9–10.

In addition to Asian regional liberationist movements linked to groups like Minjung, Dalit, and Burakumin, there are numerous individual Asian thinkers who see Asian theology primarily as liberation theology and whose works can be classified in this liberationist strand. The Taiwanese American C. S. Song is one such theologian. He is arguably the most widely published Asian theologian alive today. For the last four decades, he has been identified as the embodiment of Asian theology by Western theologians.⁶⁶ The one unchanging feature of his theology over the years is his renunciation of any normative revelation in the salvation history of Israel and the Church. In his book *Jesus, the Crucified People*, Song argues that the whole Christian tradition is built on a grave misunderstanding of the meaning of God, the cross, and Jesus.⁶⁷ God has been wrongly depicted by the Church as a God who is oversensitive to human sin. The cross, a sickening and cruel instrument of torture, has been wrongly used by the Church as a tool of salvation. And Jesus has been wrongly understood by the Church as the incarnate God who became man.⁶⁸ Song argues instead:

Jesus, in short, is the crucified people! Jesus means crucified people. To say Jesus is to say suffering people. To know Jesus is to know suffering people. Traditional Christian theology tells us that to know Jesus we must know God first. But we stress that to know God we must know Jesus, because Jesus makes God real to us. Now we must go even farther: to know Jesus we must know people. By people I mean those men, women, and children, in Jesus' day, today, and in the days to come, economically exploited, politically oppressed, culturally and religiously alienated, sexually, racially, or class-wise discriminated against.⁶⁹

To Song, Jesus is completely identified with the marginalized and stripped of any divine significance at all.

⁶⁶ Yu, "The Cross, the Kingdom of God and the Nation," 32.

⁶⁷ Choan-Seng Song, *Jesus, the Crucified People* (New York: Crossroad, 2000).

⁶⁸ See Yu, "The Cross, the Kingdom of God and the Nation," 33.

⁶⁹ Song, *Jesus, the Crucified People*, 215–216.

Song's theology has been heavily criticized by some Asian theologians as both reductionistic and ineffective. Carver Yu, for instance, points out the arbitrariness of Song's insistence on utilizing Jesus as the symbol of crucified Chinese people. Having understood the *real* meaning of Jesus, why do Chinese people still bother to hold up the name of Jesus and proclaim him as the "crucified people?" Is it not presumptuous of Christians to insist that Jesus is *the* universal symbol of justice against injustice?⁷⁰ Yu, furthermore, questions the relevance of Song's God to people in China:

What has the gospel that Song proclaims to offer to the Asian people? What unique spiritual resources has his theology brought to the Asian people in the face of oppression? To the Asian people, Song's God is utterly powerless; for after all, they have to rely completely on themselves to fight against injustice and oppression. What is the use of Jesus' powerless identification with the people? Is it not in fact opium for the people?... The Chinese in the face of oppression did not need Jesus; they needed a revolutionary leader like Mao Zedong.⁷¹

This criticism shows that despite his advocacy for the oppressed in Asia, Song's theology is not useful for the Chinese people at the grassroots level. Indeed, some argue that Song's theology actually ignores the suffering of the people in China. Simon Chan, for example, questions Song's advocacy for the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) in China. In his glowing report on the movement, Song claims that "the transition of the old China to the New China and... the continuing effort of the Chinese Communist Party to transform man and his society" are the sure sign of God at work in China.⁷² One wonders what led Song to speak of the "New China" in such glowing terms, as the devastating effects of the Cultural Revolution were already clearly apparent at the time when Song wrote the report (1974). As Chan puts it, "It boggles the imagination to hear Song extolling China's 'social, economic and political

⁷⁰ Yu, "The Cross, the Kingdom of God and the Nation," 33–34.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 34.

⁷² Choan-Seng Song, "New China and Salvation History: A Methodological Enquiry," *South East Asia Journal of Theology* 15, no. 2 (1974): 61.

achievements... in which the suffering of the masses is largely eliminated’—this at the height of the Cultural Revolution, which even by the most conservative estimates led directly to the death of at least two million Chinese!”⁷³ Along the same line, Yu criticizes the fact that “even as those theologians were romanticizing about the equality, freedom, simplicity and brotherly love in China, the people in China found themselves in a living hell.... Many perished in despair, and many more lived in utter dehumanized mode [*sic*]. Theologians like Song gave no prophetic utterance against the oppression that was so obvious.”⁷⁴

Given this kind of incisive criticism against Song’s version of Asian theology, it is curious that his name is still at the forefront of Asian theologians surveyed in most textbooks of Asian theology today. Indeed, Archie Lee even regards “Song’s willingness to grant revelatory status to East Asian culture” as “not only something to be desired... but... also... an essential step” for doing theology in Asia.⁷⁵ While this assertion may baffle many Christians, it is actually thoroughly consistent with the main concern of any liberationist type of theology—Asian or otherwise—namely, the interpretation of the “signs of the times.”⁷⁶ Many Asian theologians became preoccupied with this attempt to discover divine action in historical events in Asia, even though time and again these theologians have been proven wrong. This concern, in turn, is part of the larger issue of theological method and its purpose. As Chan puts it, “If the theologian’s task is essentially a reflection on context—whether social, political or economic—such an approach can ostensibly produce interesting theologies if one believes that the various contexts are where God is at work.”⁷⁷ But when context sets the agenda for theologians, it is

⁷³ Chan, *Grassroots Asian Theology*, 22.

⁷⁴ Yu, “The Cross, the Kingdom of God and the Nation,” 36.

⁷⁵ Archie C. C. Lee, “Contextual Theology in East Asia,” in *The Modern Theologians: An Introduction to Christian Theology since 1918*, ed. David Ford, 3rd ed. (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005), 530.

⁷⁶ Yung, *Mangoes or Bananas?*, 67–68.

⁷⁷ Chan, *Grassroots Asian Theology*, 25.

only a small step for context to set the norms for theology as well.⁷⁸ Hence, it is not surprising to find Asian theologians like Lee echoing famous Brazilian liberation theologian Hugo Assmann's dictum: the context is the text.⁷⁹

2. Asian Theology as Theology of Religions or Interfaith Dialogue

Asians have always lived in a milieu of religious pluralism. Asia is the birthplace of today's major world religions: West Asia gave birth to Judaism, Christianity and Islam; South Asia generated Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism and Sikhism; and East Asia engendered Confucianism, Taoism, Shintoism and Shamanism. Indeed, multifaceted religiosity is a given reality in Asia. This is one feature that usually separates Asia from the other two continents in the so-called Majority World. Whereas in Latin America and to some extent also Africa the majority of people profess to be Christian, the proportion of the population professing Christianity in Asia is the lowest of any continent.⁸⁰ According to one calculation, in 2010 Christians made up less than ten per cent of the population of Asia.⁸¹ Thus, the way in which Asian Christians live out and practice their faith is marked by the fact that Christians are always a minority in the midst of a non-Christian majority. As Gener and Bautista put it, "How

⁷⁸ Asian evangelicals raised their concerns regarding this issue at the Sixth ATA (Asia Theological Association) Consultation. The document reads: "These concerns [of socio-political issues like poverty, economic and political oppression, violence and war, racism, sexism and casteism] are justified and, in fact, necessary. However, very often some theologians in their concern for contextualization tend to let their context determine not only the horizon but the whole agenda of their theology. Socio-economic analysis becomes the main perspective from which the human condition and human needs are interpreted.... To 'conscientise' the masses of their inalienable rights for freedom and justice without at the same time proclaiming the gospel of judgment and forgiveness of sin leads to a truncated theology which may result in one set of oppressors being replaced by another." Bong Rin Ro and Ruth Marie Eshenaur, eds., *The Bible & Theology in Asian Contexts: An Evangelical Perspective on Asian Theology* (Taichung, Taiwan, ROC: Asia Theological Association, 1984), 10.

⁷⁹ Lee, "Contextual Theology in East Asia," 531. Assmann's original axiom read: "The 'text,' we repeat, is our situation." Hugo Assmann, *Opresión - Liberación: Desafío a Los Cristianos* (Montevideo: Tierra Nueva, 1971), 141; cited in J. Andrew Kirk, *Liberation Theology: An Evangelical View from the Third World* (Basingstoke: Marshall, 1979), 36.

⁸⁰ Thompson, "Mapping Asian Christianity," 13. The only exception is the Philippines, where Catholics constitute a majority of the population. Countries in Asia with a significant Protestant presence (albeit within a minority of the overall population) include South Korea and Singapore.

⁸¹ Clarke, "The Task, Method and Content of Asian Theologies," 7.

Christians relate to other faiths in belief and in action remains critical for Asian churches (and beyond) as they seek to avoid religious conflicts and maintain respect for each other's religious traditions."⁸²

For some, this fact needs to be translated into a posture of openness to other religions, recognizing divine activity within them, and trying to see how they are related to God's revelation in Christ.⁸³ Thus, some Asian theologians call for a new method of doing Asian theology with Asian religious resources.⁸⁴ While traditionally the sources for Christian theology were limited to Scripture, tradition, reason, and (Christian) experience, today the divine presence in other religions is almost unanimously recognized and accepted by some theologians, so that the other great Asian religions, along with their histories, rituals, and scriptures, are considered as sources for theological reflection as well. One immediate ramification of this perspective concerns the Christian understanding of mission. Song, for instance, regards any attempt to proclaim the gospel of salvation to non-Christians as "Christian ecumenical imperialism."⁸⁵ The rhetoric is, as Chan puts it, typical: "since Christianity is only a minority religion in most Asian countries, it must assume a humbler position and proclaim with all the great Asian religions a shared message of God's universal purpose for humanity and creation centering on such themes as justice and peace."⁸⁶

Mission, then, is understood by these thinkers not as evangelization or as Christian witness, but as discerning God's universal purpose for the common good among other religions. This is achieved through interfaith or interreligious dialogue. But the *content* of mission is not

⁸² Gener and Bautista, "Theological Method (1)," 890.

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ Cf. Choo Lak Yeow, ed., *Doing Theology with Asian Resources: Theology and Religious Plurality*, vol. 3 (Singapore: ATESEA, 1993).

⁸⁵ Choan-Seng Song, *Jesus in the Power of the Spirit* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994), 176–179.

⁸⁶ Chan, *Grassroots Asian Theology*, 37.

the only thing that needs to be reshaped; the *direction* of mission itself also needs to be reversed. The Church's mission is not outward but inward: that is, the Church needs to reinvent herself in light of the multifaceted religious context which she inhabits. This obviously links closely to theologians' understanding of the theological task. As Sugirtharajah lucidly puts it:

The basic thrust now is not the declaration of the gospel in an Asian style but discerning it afresh in the ongoing broken relationships between different communities and between human communities and the created order. The task is seen not as adapting the Christian gospel in Asian idioms but as reconceptualizing the basic tenets of the Christian faith in the light of Asian realities.⁸⁷

Having assumed that all Asian religions are equally valid vehicles of God's self-revelation, Asian theologians seek to construct an Asian theology that sets interfaith dialogue as its primary agenda. In the process, not only mission but almost all traditional loci of Christian theology are radically revised—especially Christology, theology proper, soteriology, and biblical authority. Hence, it is not surprising to find Christian Swami Abhishiktananda experimenting with the advaitic tradition of Hinduism;⁸⁸ Seiichi Yagi seeking to integrate Christianity with Zen Buddhism;⁸⁹ Aloysius Pieris suggesting and practicing a double baptism in Buddhism and Christianity;⁹⁰ Stanley Samartha and Raimon Panikkar constructing a cosmic-pluralist Christology that allows for a positive attitude to other religions and their savior figures.⁹¹

⁸⁷ R. S. Sugirtharajah, "Introduction," in *Frontiers in Asian Christian Theology: Emerging Trends*, ed. R. S. Sugirtharajah (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1994), 5.

⁸⁸ Swami Abhishiktananda, *Saccidānanda: A Christian Approach to Advaitic Experience* (Delhi: I.S.P.C.K., 1984).

⁸⁹ Seiichi Yagi, "Christ and Buddha," in *Asian Faces of Jesus*, ed. R. S. Sugirtharajah (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993).

⁹⁰ Pieris, "Two Encounters in My Theological Journey," 141–146.

⁹¹ S. J. Samartha, *One Christ, Many Religions: Toward a Revised Christology* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1991); Raimon Panikkar, *The Unknown Christ of Hinduism: Towards and Ecumenical Christophany* (London: Darton, 1981).

The critical assessments of Asian theology's religious pluralism are numerous and accessible, and thus we will not repeat them here.⁹² Suffice it to say that proposals that attempt to merge the Christian faith with other religions usually end up sacrificing the basic tenets of Christianity. What I would like to focus on below, however, is the common assumption that theological religious *pluralism* is necessarily an Asian concept, given the presence and confluence of religious *plurality* in Asia.

Some Asian theologians have suggested that an exclusivist understanding of the Christian faith is really a form of Western religious imperialism towards other cultures.⁹³ It is further suggested that Asian cultures are generally more tolerant and perceive truth in more inclusive and conciliatory terms that favor a pluralistic theology of religions.⁹⁴ Indian Hindu philosophy and the Chinese *Yin-Yang* principle are usually given as examples of this tendency. But is this really the case? I do not think so. As Hwa Yung puts it, the reality is not as clear-cut as usually told.⁹⁵

It is true that Indian culture is known as a very tolerant culture. This is because different points of view are all perceived to be based on the *Brahman* (or the ultimate truth) in the Hindu worldview. But despite Hinduism's tendency to absorb elements from other traditions, it doesn't absorb everything. For example, while Jainism and Buddhism both grew out of Hinduism and share many doctrines in common with it, they were eventually excluded from orthodox Hinduism.⁹⁶ As Brian Smith has pointed out, over the past few millennia and even in

⁹² See, e.g., Vinoth Ramachandra, *The Recovery of Mission: Beyond the Pluralist Paradigm* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1997).

⁹³ See C. S. Song's comment on mission as imperialism above.

⁹⁴ S. Radhakrishnan once wrote: "The emphasis on definite creeds and absolute dogmatism, with its consequences of intolerance, exclusiveness and confusion of piety with patriarchism are the striking features of Western Christianity" (S. Radhakrishnan, *East and West in Religion* [London: Allen & Unwin, 1958], 58). The implication here is that this is not so with non-Western cultures.

⁹⁵ Yung, *Mangoes or Bananas?*, 115–118.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 115–116.

modern Hindu reform movements today, Hindu orthodoxy has defined itself by the acceptance of the foundational authority of the *Vedas*—the largest corpus of ancient Hindu scriptures. Consequently, “those Indians who did not and do not accept the sacrality of the Veda have been and are regarded as non-Hindus by those who did and do.”⁹⁷

Chinese culture also tends to be tolerant of different belief systems. This is partly derived from Buddhist influence and leads to the perception that the three major religious traditions of China—Buddhism, Confucianism, and Taosim—are merely different manifestations of the eternal *Dao*.⁹⁸ The *Yin-Yang* concept of complementarity is usually utilized here, in that it promises to always manage to harmonize two even mutually exclusive beliefs or concepts. Yung, however, shows that historically there has always been a traditional Chinese category for heterodox teachings. He writes:

The Chinese long possessed a well-established cultural category which they used to label teachings and practices which deviated from a particular ideal or norm. The category has been variously designated as *i-tuan*, *tso-tao*, *hsieh*... which may be roughly... rendered, “contrary to the Way of the Sages.”⁹⁹

This concept, as Yung explains, goes as far back as the ancient book *The Analects of Confucius* (Book II, Chap. XVI), which states that “it is harmful to study heretical thought.” The concept of heterodoxy was sometimes used by one school of thought to vilify another, or to vilify divergent norms. In fact, it was also used to denounce Buddhism in the ninth century and Christianity from the seventeenth century onwards. Yung concludes, “Granted that there existed

⁹⁷ Brian K. Smith, *Reflections on Resemblance, Ritual, and Religion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 18.

⁹⁸ See Hajime Nakamura, *Ways of Thinking of Eastern Peoples: India, China, Tibet, Japan* (Honolulu: East-West Center Press, 1964), 284–94.

⁹⁹ Paul Cohen, “The Roots of the Anti-Christian Tradition in China,” in *Christian Missions in China: Evangelists of What?*, ed. Jessie Gregory Lutz (Boston: D. C. Heath and Company, 1965), 35. Quoted in Yung, *Mangoes or Bananas?*, 117.

a certain fluidity and historical relativity to the concept, the point remains that Chinese tradition did not see everything as complementary.... The fact is that, whatever may be the meaning of the [*Yin-Yang*] in the Confucian-Taoist traditions, the latter does not always absorb everything into the both/and mode of thinking.”¹⁰⁰

The above evidence shows that while there are inclusive elements in certain streams of Asian thought, it is nevertheless wrong to assert that Asian cultures are naturally all-inclusive. Both Indian Hinduism and Chinese Confucianism, to mention but two examples, have clear canons by which orthodoxy is defined and heterodoxy is excluded. These canons have operated throughout the history of China and India, and continue to do so today.¹⁰¹ Hence, I suggest that there is nothing particularly *Asian* about Asian theologians’ preoccupation with the theology of religious pluralism. In my own experience, my home country of Indonesia tends to practice religious tolerance at the level of day-to-day life, whereas in Canada it is mostly discussed as a social and political agenda—that is, as an ideology of religious plural-*ism*. So, while there is a good deal of local/personal pragmatic tolerance in Indonesia as religion is practiced, this does not arise out of a deep-seated pluralistic ideology that informs the common practice of religious tolerance. In contrast, many Canadians have turned religious plurality into an overarching political and religious vision. This observation also is consistent with Yung’s conclusion that religious pluralism is largely a product of Western liberal religious thought that owes much of its inspiration to the Enlightenment: “*Pluralism in its present-day form is primarily—though not exclusively—a liberal Western problem, although its proponents have also drawn on inclusive elements in Asian thought in their attempts to universalize its appeal.*”¹⁰²

¹⁰⁰ Yung, *Mangoes or Bananas?*, 118.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, 120. Italics are in the original.

3. Asian Theology as Inculturation Theology

This category necessarily overlaps with the other two above, for a culture cannot be separated from the religious and socio-political contexts in which it is embedded. However, there are some Asian contextual projects that do not quite belong within either of the two strands above. Although some theological works that we will survey below may have liberationist dimensions and/or draw on elements from other Asian religions, their primary concern is to construct neither a theology of liberation nor a theology of religions, but to indigenize Christian faith within a certain local culture. Different terms have been used to describe this process, each with its own history and shade of meaning—indigenization, inculturation, contextualization, translation, and local theology. No matter the term, the approach basically concerns “the process of proclaiming and explaining the Gospel in a language a particular people understands.”¹⁰³ This means that we “can tell our faith to our own culture and in our language to our own people.”¹⁰⁴ In this way, Christian faith seeks to penetrate the most profound depths of a people’s soul and culture by making explicit use of cultural idioms, resources, and practices.¹⁰⁵

While it is widely accepted that Christians need to negotiate with local cultures for effective cross-cultural communication of the gospel, some Asian theologians are now questioning the legitimacy and relevance of such contextualizing efforts. Sugirtharajah, for instance, criticizes the earlier efforts of contextualization as naïve, triumphalist, apologetical, and polemical. This is so, because contextualization assumes (1) that the Christian gospel is immutable, and that Asian culture, thought patterns, and religious traditions are convenient

¹⁰³ José M. De Mesa, *And God Said, “Bahala Na!”: The Theme of Providence in the Lowland Filipino Context* (Quezon City, Philippines: Maryhill School of Theology, 1979), 54.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 55.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 56.

vehicles for it; (2) that the Christian gospel was an uncontaminated, neatly packed, and wholesome product that had universal validity; and (3) that the Christian gospel is final and unique.¹⁰⁶ Thus, Sugirtharajah calls for a move beyond contextualization: “The task is seen not as adapting the Christian gospel in Asian idioms, but as reconceptualizing the basic tenets of the Christian faith in the light of Asian realities.”¹⁰⁷ He offers a quotation from Japanese-American theologian Roy Sano as an example of this shift:

Because of warnings against syncretism, I once asked myself: How can I be Christian and yet Buddhist? Through time, however, as I became aware of the extent to which Buddhism permeated my Japanese cultural heritage and I recognized how impossible it was to eliminate everything from that heritage, my question changed. I now ask: “How can I be Christian without being Buddhist?”¹⁰⁸

In this revised view, the approach is not to assume the superiority of Christian revelation but to seek life-enhancing potentialities also in the sacred experiences of Asia. Consequently, the gospel is seen as just one among many divine manifestations, while the church is no longer the center of God’s work.

Soosai Arokiasamy’s work also delineates a typical shift in method in doing Asian contextual theology. Traditionally, “using the context” means that the context was a background for theology. Scripture and tradition, then, must address the questions and challenges posed by the context. Today, however, contexts are considered *loci theologici* together with the more traditional sources of Scripture and tradition. Contextual realities become resources of theology insofar as they embody and manifest the presence and action of

¹⁰⁶ Sugirtharajah, “Introduction,” 4.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 5.

¹⁰⁸ Roy Sano, “Holy Moments at Canberra,” *Christianity and Crisis* 51 (1991), 228, quoted in Sugirtharajah, “Introduction,” 5.

God and His Spirit.¹⁰⁹ How then can one discover the presence and action of the Spirit in Asian contexts? Here Arokiasamy appeals to the FABC¹¹⁰ and its calls for triple dialogue: “[D]ialogue with the poor, dialogue with cultures and dialogue with religions reveal the triple reality of our Asian context as resources of faith and theology. Dialogue which means intensive listening to these realities in empathetic solidarity helps to discern the presence of God and action of the Spirit in them and thus discover them as resources of faith and theology.”¹¹¹ And what exactly are the criteria for this discernment? Arokiasamy answers that it is the fruits of the Spirit, which he defines in typical socio-political terms as “being always liberative and promotive of life and the well-being of all people.”¹¹² He admits that Scripture and tradition remain the primary source of Christian theology, but his attitude to other cultures is sanguine. As he puts it, “the Divine is the Absolute Source of all humanity, and all values embodied in cultures are gifts of God and fruits of the Spirit.... [T]hey are the ‘seeds of the Word’ sown by the Spirit among peoples and nations.”¹¹³

One problem with this new contextual theology is its tendency to be too uncritically positive in its evaluation of Asian cultures. Chan points out that cultural contexts cannot be the source of theology, for they belong to the realm of fallen humanity rather than the humanity renewed by the Spirit in the Church. “A theology constructed from such sources,” Chan writes, “usually serves to reinforce what is culturally acceptable rather than challenge it.”¹¹⁴ Chan also observes that in many ecumenical contextual works, there is almost no serious attempt to bring

¹⁰⁹ Soosai Arokiasamy, “Doing Theology with Asian Resources in the Context of FABC,” in *Reaping a Harvest from the Asian Soil: Towards an Asian Theology*, ed. Vimal Tirimanna (Bangalore: Asian Trading Corp., 2011), 7–8.

¹¹⁰ Federation of Asian Bishops’ Conferences.

¹¹¹ Arokiasamy, “Doing Theology with Asian Resources in the Context of FABC,” 6.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, 19.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, 9.

¹¹⁴ Chan, *Grassroots Asian Theology*, 18.

those elements of Asian cultures contrary to Scripture under its judgment. The underlying assumption is that cultural realities are ultimately rooted in the Divine, and therefore they are not just neutral but also sacred. This, however, ignores the reality of sin that is both clearly taught in Scripture and exemplified in many cultures in history—Asian included.

Another criticism comes from the Indian theologian Kalarikkal Aleaz who questions the very notion of contextualization—but from a very different perspective from that of Sugirtharajah above. Aleaz argues that the concept of contextualization is rooted in the presupposition that the gospel is “external and alien to” Asians. But this assumption is questionable to say the least. He contends that contextual theologies methodologically delimit the God of the Bible as a local God who is inherently foreign to Asians.

Indigenization is a contradiction in terms because it is an artificial attempt to make indigenous that which is not indigenous. It implies a Christian theology which is “foreign,” that has to be translated in India. Theologically it is also branding God the Creator as a foreigner to one’s country and culture. We should not forget that God and Christian theology are always indigenous to our country.¹¹⁵

In a similar vein, Timoteo Gener also criticizes many Asian contextual theologians because they wrongly assume that indigenous culture and the message of Christianity, which for many Asians first arrived through Western missionaries, must remain in permanent opposition. For Gener, too strong a focus on indigenous culture has led many theologians to denounce Christianity as a religion alien to non-Western native cultures.¹¹⁶ Yet in most Majority World countries, including Asian countries, Christianity is no longer regarded as a

¹¹⁵ K. P. Aleaz, “The Theology of Inculturation Re-Examined,” *The Asia Journal of Theology* 25, no. 2 (October 2011): 245. This insight will be addressed again in the subsequent chapters, where I will argue that Scripture is *already* “indigenous” by nature.

¹¹⁶ Timoteo D. Gener, “Contextualization,” in *Global Dictionary of Theology: A Resource for the Worldwide Church*, ed. William A. Dyrness and Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2008), 193.

foreign religion. It has been, as Lamin Sanneh has argued, received and owned by the local people themselves, as evidenced by the growing presence of Christian churches in these regions.¹¹⁷ Gener thus suggests that contextual theologians need “a more inclusive, nonpurist notion of indigenization, one which describes a two-way process: indigenization (or contextualization) from *without* and from *within*.”¹¹⁸ What is contextualized “does not necessarily mean without borrowing from outside as long as the outcome is one suitable to and understood by the people; it rings true in that time and place.”¹¹⁹ This move is in line with, and perhaps also draws from, a renewed, postmodern cultural perspective that recognizes the interweaving of global and local flows and processes.¹²⁰ While the older concept sees culture as something static, the postmodern revision—usually linked with the work of Kathryn Tanner and Robert Schreiter—emphasizes the construction of culture and an orientation toward cultural practices.¹²¹ In a similar vein to the postcolonial critique that we have seen in the previous section, this renewed understanding of culture approaches the issue of contextualization with a more appreciative understanding of cultural synthesis and hybridity. Thus, the notion of the “pure Gospel” being introduced to “pure culture” has been substituted with a more realistic view that is sensitive to the complexities of multidirectional influence.¹²²

¹¹⁷ See Lamin O. Sanneh, *Whose Religion Is Christianity? The Gospel beyond the West* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003).

¹¹⁸ Gener, “Contextualization,” 193. Emphasis in original.

¹¹⁹ Wilbert R. Shenk, *Changing Frontiers of Mission* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1999), 78. Quoted in Gener, “Contextualization,” 193.

¹²⁰ Gener, “Contextualization,” 193.

¹²¹ See Kathryn Tanner, *Theories of Culture: A New Agenda for Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997); Robert J. Schreiter, *Constructing Local Theologies* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2015); Robert J. Schreiter, *The New Catholicity: Theology between the Global and the Local* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1997).

¹²² Anri Morimoto, “Contextualised and Cumulative: Tradition, Orthodoxy and Identity from the Perspective of Asian Theology,” *Studies in World Christianity* 15, no. 1 (January 2009): 79.

Will the Real Asian Theologians Please Stand Up?

Although I have offered specific criticisms of each strand of so-called Asian theology above, I would like to discuss further one of the main problems of the current dominant discourse within Asian theology, namely its elitist tendency. The problem can be simply stated as follows: the current discourse on Asian theology, as outlined above, reflects an elitist perspective rather than the perspective of Asian grassroots Christians.

I have already touched on this earlier when criticizing Song's liberationist Jesus as both reductionistic and ineffective for many Christians in Asia, despite Song's claim to speak for them. The same can be said of many other prevalent Asian contextual theologies, such as Minjung theology and feminist theology. Kim Seyoon, for instance, writes about Minjung theology: "It would appear that *minjung* theology is not so much a theology *of the minjung* as it is a non *minjung* elite's theology *for the minjung*."¹²³ This kind of theology promotes the views of the intelligentsia and largely ignores the views of ordinary people themselves, especially the ordinary members of the church. Or, as Chan aptly puts it, "It's the elite theologians who define the problem of the Minjung and decide what they really need: their problem is that they are victims of an oppressive social system, and what they need is a certain kind of political liberation."¹²⁴ As for feminist theology, the rhetoric is typical: the problem of Asian women, we are told, is the Asian structure of patriarchy and the solution is Western egalitarian ideology. "But if the Minjung should desire a more spiritual kind of liberation, or if Asian women should desire to pursue the ideal of motherhood and family, they are accused of having 'false consciousness' and therefore all the more in need of liberation."¹²⁵ Thus, while the subject

¹²³ Seyoon Kim, "Is 'Minjung Theology' a Christian Theology?," *Calvin Theological Journal* 22, no. 2 (November 1987): 262.

¹²⁴ Chan, *Grassroots Asian Theology*, 27.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*

matter of these kinds of theology may be the poor and the marginalized, the voices at the grassroots level themselves are hardly taken seriously in these accounts. Instead, “what we see is how the theologian views the grassroots and how they might fit in to the theologian’s grand scheme of things.”¹²⁶

Vinoth Ramachandra has observed the same problem with so-called Asian theological discourse: “Perhaps it is a communicative failure on the part of Asian theologians that their work has been better received in Western academic circles than in local churches and parachurch ministries in their hometowns. But, it may also be that, domiciled respectably as many are in American seminaries, their perspectives are more congenial to the agenda of the academic ‘left’ in the West.”¹²⁷ Here Ramachandra reveals an interesting reason why the elite theologians’ perspective does not resonate with the grassroots communities in Asia: those theologians are actually more Western than they think, for they succumb to the presuppositions and hermeneutical biases of Western theological liberalism. Even as they reflect on Asian cultures and religions, their assumptions and methods are profoundly influenced by the legacy of Enlightenment thought.¹²⁸ In essence, they are localized or Asian-enculturated implementations of Western theological models. Thus, although highly praised by ecumenical scholars, especially in the West, they fail to inspire much interest outside their own academic community.¹²⁹

Along the same lines, Hwa Yung observes that the dominant voices of Asian theology today are not necessarily “Asian” due to their indebtedness to the Western Enlightenment framework. In *Mangoes or Bananas?*, Yung likens Asian contextual theologians to “bananas”

¹²⁶ Ibid., 26.

¹²⁷ Ramachandra, *Church and Mission in the New Asia*, 13.

¹²⁸ See Ramachandra, *The Recovery of Mission*, 116–139.

¹²⁹ Chung, “Theology and the Future of Asia,” 73.

(yellow outside but white inside) instead of “mangoes” (yellow inside and out). One specific argument that he offers is that these theologians fail to engage the biblical portrayal of spiritual and supernatural reality that is very much ingrained within the worldview of ordinary Asians. Taking his cue from Paul Hiebert’s penetrating article “The Flaw of the Excluded Middle,”¹³⁰ Yung explains the difference between Western and Asian religious worldviews:

The Western mind has a two-tiered view of reality. The upper level is that of “High Religion” which deals with theistic answers to life, and rational beliefs concerning God and other beings who act in the spiritual (and other) world. The lower level is that of the empirical sciences which perceives this world as being controlled by lifeless and impersonal forces. In contrast, the Indian and biblical worldviews consist of three tiers. The upper and lower tiers are similar, at least formally if not materially, to that of the West. However, there is also a middle level of “Folk or Low Religion” which consists of beliefs in the local deities, ancestral and other spirits, demons, astrology, and the like who or which act in this world. As this middle level is absent in the Western mind, Western theology has little or no answers [*sic*] for the problems arising here.¹³¹

Whereas Hiebert, writing out of his missionary experiences in India, is concerned primarily with how Western missionaries were ignorant of this “excluded middle” in non-Westerner’s worldviews, Yung criticizes Asia’s own theologians for excluding this significant realm of reality. “Here we see clearly the debilitating influence of the Western Enlightenment and dualism on Asian theological writings. Most of the [*sic*] these have so neglected the ‘excluded middle’ from their considerations that it gives rise to the question whether they adequately understand, let alone address, Asian realities.”¹³²

¹³⁰ See Paul G. Hiebert, “The Flaw of the Excluded Middle,” *Missiology* 10, no. 1 (January 1982): 35–47. While Hiebert’s basic insight is generally true, the accuracy of his sweeping analysis of Western missionaries is historically questionable. A closer look at the history of Western missionaries reveals that many of them were quite willing to engage the “middle” world of angels and spirits, precisely because it “fits” local outlooks. In other words, Hiebert’s claim needs to be critically refined and properly contextualized, so as not to fall under the simplistic characterization of East versus West that we have discussed earlier.

¹³¹ Yung, *Mangoes or Bananas?*, 72–73.

¹³² *Ibid.*, 74.

When some Asian contextual theologians do touch on the issue, their remarks are often wrong or misguided. A case in point is the controversial plenary address of Korean feminist theologian Chung Hyun-Kyung at the Seventh Assembly of the World Council of Churches (WCC) in Canberra, 1991. In her presentation, after declaring the auditorium holy ground, Chung proceeded to invoke a whole host of “spirits” to come, in the conviction that these were the “agents” and “icons” of the Holy Spirit.¹³³ This move was so alarming that Raymond Fung, then Secretary for Evangelism at the WCC, commented:

Prof. Chung’s unconditional and untroubled affirmation of the wandering spirits, and her contradictory delineation of their relationship with the Holy Spirit, suggests to many, myself included, *a nonchalant attitude towards the spirit world which borders either on spiritual naivete or on manipulation and cynicism.... For those of us to whom the spirit world is real, one does not invoke spirits... lightly.* Invoking the spirits has consequences... One does not, as Prof. Chung did, urge people to “prepare the way of the Holy Spirit by emptying ourselves” and then proceed to invoke a whole legion of spirits. What if the spirits do come? Do we know what that could mean? I don’t think even our most radical imaginings could prepare us for the awesome presence, for instance, of “the spirit of Jewish people killed in the gas chambers during the Holocaust,” of the “spirit of people killed in Hiroshima.” *If we have the slightest inkling of the reality of the spirit world... our prayer would not have “come, you spirits.” It would be more likely “stay away, you spirits. But come, Holy Spirit.”*¹³⁴

Furthermore, Fung indicates how, unfortunately, thinking about such matters in the church at large has been shaped by Western perceptions rather than Asian ones. The religious press, including Asia’s ecumenical press, was so busy interviewing the Western and Orthodox delegates at the meeting that it missed the real point. “The issue at stake is not so much a conflict between Two-Thirds World and First World theologies, but rather one of the reality or otherwise of the spirit world! The truth of the matter is that many Asian delegates who understood the realities of the spirit world, and the shamanistic gestures used by Chung, were

¹³³ Ibid., 74–75.

¹³⁴ Raymond Fung, *Evangelistically Yours: Ecumenical Letters on Contemporary Evangelism* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1992), 258. Emphases mine.

highly critical of her position.”¹³⁵ In short, Chung’s perspective is an elitist perspective that may satisfy some curious elites in the West (and perhaps in Asia as well) but largely ignores the real concerns of Asian grassroots Christians.

If it is true that most so-called Asian contextual theologians do not represent Asian Christianity at large, as I have argued above, and if it is also true that these theologians actually operate with Western prejudices even as they call for the wholesale rejection of Western theology, then the question boils down to this: Whose theology are they presenting in their works? This observation leads Moonjang Lee to conclude that many Asian theologians “stand homeless between the two poles: Western theologies and Asian people’s understanding of Christianity.”¹³⁶ Instead of bridging the gap between the inevitable presence and influence of Western theology on the one hand and the real questions and concerns of grassroots Christians on the other, their theologies remain useless for many Asian ministers who are at the forefront of the encounter between these two tendencies. “In this regard,” Lee writes, “it is not Western theologies but Asian theologians who have been irrelevant to the Asian soil.”¹³⁷ The failure of elitist Asian theology is tersely summarized by one Latin American theologian who says, “Liberation theology opted for the poor, and the poor opted for Pentecostalism.”¹³⁸

Not all Asian theologians are guilty of this charge, however. In fact, I would argue that certain key Asian theologians/leaders *did* manage to integrate the two tendencies Lee identified above. The subsequent chapters will present two such leaders as concrete instantiations of

¹³⁵ Yung, *Mangoes or Bananas?*, 75.

¹³⁶ Lee, “Identifying an Asian Theology: A Methodological Quest,” 73.

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*

¹³⁸ Cited by Donald Miller, “The New Face of Global Christianity: The Emergence of ‘Progressive Pentecostalism’,” *Pew Research Center’s Religion & Public Life Project*, April 12, 2006, accessed January 12, 2017, <http://www.pewforum.org/2006/04/12/the-new-face-of-global-christianity-the-emergence-of-progressive-pentecostalism/>.

grassroots Asian theology. But first, a brief discussion of the advent of this new(er) approach to doing Asian theology is required.

Reconfiguring Asian Theology: Doing Theology from the Ground Up

Having exposed the weaknesses of the prevalent voices that bear the name of Asian theology, I will now introduce an alternative proposal for doing theology in Asia, one that takes grassroots Christianity seriously. Writing more broadly on Christianity in the global South, Philip Jenkins once noted:

Often... it can be difficult to tell which of these voices accurately represent the thought of the wider Christian community in those societies. Generally, attention focuses on academic or educated opinions, on the voices of professors, bishops, and church leaders, the sort of people who write books that get published in Europe or North America; but this emphasis can give a distorted view of global South traditions.¹³⁹

For our purpose, Jenkins's observation here is not meant to underestimate or undermine the massive achievements of Asian theologians, but to reveal that elite academics and ordinary believers often do not have the same understanding of what is spiritually significant.¹⁴⁰ For example, most Asian liberation theologians such as Pieris understand the "religious experience of the poor" in largely socio-political terms, whereas for grassroots Asians themselves, popular religious consciousness has more to do with shamanism, magic, avoiding evil spirits, and finding good fortune.¹⁴¹ The latter, as we recall, belongs to the "middle level" of folk religion—an essential component of the Asian worldview that has been neglected by both Western missionaries and, ironically, Asian contextual theologians.

¹³⁹ Philip Jenkins, *The New Faces of Christianity: Believing the Bible in the Global South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 7.

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 8.

¹⁴¹ Ramachandra, *The Recovery of Mission*, 56–57.

It is precisely this middle level of Asian worldview that provides an important reason for the wide acceptance of the evangelical and Pentecostal faith in Asia. Chan, for one, observes that “evangelicalism has much in common with the spiritual instincts of Asians.”¹⁴² These spiritual instincts are often described as “premodern,” but Chan criticizes the term as implying an earlier stage of human development that needs to be outgrown eventually—an assumption that presumes the superiority of the Western intellectual tradition of Enlightenment rationalism. He prefers to call the Asian spiritual instinct a “primal worldview.” “The primal worldview,” Chan explains, “sees reality in its totality and affirms a spiritual world behind the world of observable reality. Such a world has closer affinities with evangelicalism with its emphasis on spiritual conversion (‘born again’) than with liberal Protestantism. It resonates even more deeply with the Pentecostal-charismatic world.”¹⁴³

This recognition leads to Chan’s recent project of doing Asian theology that takes grassroots Christianity seriously—both in its evangelical and Pentecostal forms. From the very onset of *Grassroots Asian Theology*, Chan reveals the background and aim of his proposal: “Much of what the West knows as Asian theology consists largely of elitist accounts of what Asian theologians are saying, and elitist theologians seldom take grassroots Christianity seriously. Yet it is at the grassroots level that we encounter a vibrant, albeit implicit, theology. It is *this theology* that I wish to highlight.”¹⁴⁴ Underlying this statement is a particular understanding of theology that needs to be unpacked to appreciate his effort. What is usually

¹⁴² Chan, “Evangelical Theology in Asian Contexts,” 226.

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*, 227. Here Chan draws heavily from Harold Turner, a pioneer in the study of new religious movements. See e.g., Harold W. Turner, “The Primal Religions of the World and Their Study,” ed. Victor C. Hayes, *Australian Essays in World Religions* (Bedford Park, SA: Australian Association for the Study of Religions, 1977). An earlier, similar attempt, albeit in a very different setting (Africa), to understand grassroots Christianity in the framework of a primal worldview, is John V. Taylor, *The Primal Vision: Christian Presence amid African Religion* (London: SCM Press, 1963).

¹⁴⁴ Chan, *Grassroots Asian Theology*, 7. My emphasis.

meant by the term “theology,” according to Chan, is the critical reflections expressed in essays, confessions, official declarations, and statements by institutionally accredited theologians.

Reminiscent of Jenkins’s observation referenced earlier, Chan argues that this kind of theology belongs to a relatively small group of people and he questions whether it adequately captures what goes on at the grassroots level. Chan instead points to “the vast reservoir of implicit or ‘primary theology’ (*theologia prima*) found in sermons, hymns, poetry, testimonies, etc. of the practitioners of the faith.”¹⁴⁵ While they are often placed within the category of “devotion” or “spirituality,” he maintains that this latter type of theology is no less theological than the former, formal ones.¹⁴⁶

Implicit in this notion of theology is the basic order of doing theology that Chan draws from a famous axiom of Prosper of Aquitaine, a disciple of Augustine: *ut legem credendi lex statuat supplicandi* (the rule of prayer should determine the rule of faith).¹⁴⁷ Theology, in other words, “is first a lived experience of the church before it is a set of ideas formulated by church theologians.”¹⁴⁸ Note that this refers to the experience of the church as the whole people of God, not the experience of the individuals. Ecclesial experience, moreover, spans not just the experience of the present-day church but the experience of the church through space and time. Chan equates this ecclesial experience with the Roman Catholic notion of *sensus fidelium* and the Eastern Orthodox “living tradition”: “In this comprehensive sense, even the Scripture could be regarded as a part of ecclesial experience, that is, the normative experience of the first-

¹⁴⁵ Chan, “Evangelical Theology in Asian Contexts,” 226.

¹⁴⁶ William Dyrness calls this “vernacular theology”—a process of “working on the whole symbolic complex of a community’s Christian life so as to distill a vocabulary in which its meaning can be described, shared, and then valued.” William A. Dyrness, *Invitation to Cross-Cultural Theology: Case Studies in Vernacular Theologies* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1992), 33.

¹⁴⁷ A simpler, and perhaps more famous, version of this rule is: *lex orandi, lex credendi* (the rule of prayer [is] the rule of belief).

¹⁴⁸ Chan, *Grassroots Asian Theology*, 15.

century church.”¹⁴⁹ Ecclesial experience, in short, constitutes the primary theology of the church. Chan explains that this approach avoids two major pitfalls of doing theology:

First, it avoids conceiving theology as purely objective facts or propositions (as in fundamentalism) or as primarily subjective experience (“faith” in Schleiermacher’s sense). Second, it does not consider individuals as the primary agents of doing theology. Doing theology is essentially an ecclesial endeavor requiring cooperation between the people of God and the theologian.¹⁵⁰

Chan then aptly delineates the cooperation between the theologian and the faithful: “True theology occurs when the faithful respond with ‘amazed recognition’ to the theologian: ‘You said for us what we had wanted to say all along but could not find the words to say it.’ In other words, theology is ratified in the church by the laity’s ‘amen’; without it, theology is merely the imposition of the theologian’s own ideas.”¹⁵¹ Theology, in other words, has to be worked out “from the ground up” instead of the other way around.

This understanding of the nature and purpose of theology is the reason why Chan privileges the lived experience of grassroots Christians as the source of theological reflections. But he is not just interested in making explicit what is theologically implicit within real worshipping communities, but more importantly in disclosing the way this theological understanding participates in the catholicity of the church, for he is adamant that “any authentic theology must be developed in light of the larger Christian tradition.”¹⁵² This means that Chan refuses to do Asian theology merely as a reaction to Western theology—a posture that marks many, if not most, Asian theological discourses to date. Instead, Chan draws extensively on various—but especially Catholic and Orthodox—traditions to discover the catholicity of

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 16.

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 17.

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁵² *Ibid.*, 7.

grassroots beliefs in Asia. For Chan, “an Asian theology is about the *Christian faith* in Asia.”¹⁵³

Thus, any authentic Asian theology must also be a theology for the whole church. As Chan puts it at the very end of his book,

This way of construing theology is not only closer to the Asian spirit at the grassroots level but also consistent with the larger Christian tradition. It is this correlation that validates its claim to universality. An authentic Asian theology is not just for the church in Asia but for the worldwide church.¹⁵⁴

Writing about the future of theology in Asia, Miyon Chung once noted: “If Christian theology is to have a future in Asia, it must be authentically Christian as well as authentically Asian. To be so, Asian theology must embody at least two salient dimensions; it must stand in continuity with the confessions in the Bible by which its continuity with the historic confessions of the church can be established, and it must resonate with the dynamic life of the Asian church.” According to these criteria, Chan’s method of doing theology in Asia is commendable. Indeed, his proposal is a breath of fresh air amidst the sea of Asian theological discourse. One possible criticism of his vision of Asian theology, however, is that it too readily discounts the value of elite theologies, while the line dividing the elites and grassroots Christians is not often so clear in real life.¹⁵⁵ For example, the scope of what is considered elite or grassroots in a particular society or community can differ. Thus, there can be multiple and even conflicting grassroots perspectives on a particular theological issue, resulting in grassroots *theologies* in the plural. One might ask then: which grassroots Christian communities do we need to theologize? And what is the criterion to decide that? To be fair, Chan is very clear on the latter question: he assesses both elitist and grassroots theologies against catholic articulations of Christian

¹⁵³ Ibid., 10. Emphasis mine.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid., 204.

¹⁵⁵ This criticism is raised by Alexander Chow in his review of Chan’s book. See Alexander Chow, “Simon Chan’s ‘Grassroots Asian Theology’ – A Book Review,” *Alexander Chow*, July 24, 2014, accessed November 6, 2020, <https://alexanderchow.wordpress.com/2014/07/24/grassroots-asian-theology/>.

doctrine, or what he often refers to as the Great Tradition. But given the fragmented Church in which we live, as well as Chan's fondness for Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox traditions in particular, his proposed criteria may still be called into question. Despite these limitations, Chan's work still provides a valuable platform from which to explore these issues.

Building on Chan's helpful work, this present study will specifically look at two early twentieth-century Asian (Chinese) grassroots leaders who have been instrumental in the dissemination and development of the evangelical-Pentecostal form of Christianity in China and Southeast Asia: Watchman Nee and John Sung. Both Nee and Sung are not theologians in the professional sense of the term; their work—mainly in the forms of sermon notes, devotional writings, personal journals, and recorded testimonies—are not generally considered as academic work. Yet, as will be shown in the subsequent chapters, their preaching and teaching ministries were highly instrumental in the formation of the evangelical churches in China and throughout Southeast Asia. Moreover, their theology *is* alive and flourishes today in significant segments of grassroots Asian Christianity. This fact alone calls for a renewed appraisal and serious study of their work as one form of *theologia prima* within Asian Christianity.

The two subsequent chapters will be dedicated particularly to Nee's and Sung's theology and interpretation of Scripture, respectively. I focus on their treatment of Scripture partly because this theological topic is absent in Chan's otherwise thorough survey of grassroots Asian theology.¹⁵⁶ This omission is unfortunate, not only because the doctrine and interpretation of Scripture have always been central to the life and formation of evangelical faith even at the grassroots level, but also because Asian grassroots Christians have much to

¹⁵⁶ After the first chapter on "Methodological Questions," Chan's *Grassroots Asian Theology* follows the traditional outline of Christian doctrines: "God in Asian contexts," "Humanity and Sin," "Christ and Salvation," "The Holy Spirit and Spirituality," and "The Church."

contribute to the global conversation about Scripture and its interpretation. While recently Nee's and Sung's contributions to the fields of mission, church growth, and spirituality have been recognized by some scholars, only a few have examined their theology and interpretation of Scripture in light of the broader concern of Asian theology with biblical hermeneutics. By Nee's and Sung's own standards, however, Asian theology (or any theology for that matter) must be done with Scripture as the starting point. That is, Asian theology ought to be in accordance with scriptural teaching *and* Asian theology needs to take the form of scriptural interpretation (however construed) seriously.

Conclusion

In summary, I have discussed three common ways Asian theologians tend to conceptualize their Asian identity: as an Asian way of thinking, an Asian common context, and by positing Asian theologians' common enemy. These efforts are only partially effective at best and can be self-defeating at worst, for they presuppose (and hence, perpetuate) the false, Western-made Orientalist dichotomy of the East and the West. This, as demonstrated in the second section, translates to how Asian theological discourse manifests itself in three major strands of Asian contextual theology: liberation theology, theology of religion, and inculturation theology. In addition to being trapped in a reactionary mode of doing theology, this dominant Asian theological discourse hardly qualifies as being authentically Asian. One major reason is that it comes from the perspective of elitist theologians who are themselves largely influenced by the modern Enlightenment agenda. As such, the theology they offer is typically reductionistic and irrelevant to the common people in Asia. In contrast to this, emerging voices within Asia not only criticize the current Asian theological discourse, but also break new ground by taking the implicit theology of grassroots Asian Christianity seriously. Accordingly, the next two chapters of this study will deal with two influential leaders of

popular Chinese Christianity in the early twentieth century, even though their names are hardly mentioned in any textbook of Asian theology: Watchman Nee and John Sung.

Chapter 2

Watchman Nee's Theology and Interpretation of Scripture

Watchman Nee (Ni Tuosheng) is one of the most influential Chinese popular theologians of the twentieth century.¹ He is the founder of the Christian Assembly, otherwise known as the “Little Flock” or simply the “Local Church,” the largest Protestant Christian group in China at the time the Communist regime came to power in 1949.² It has been noted that his Local Church movement is to some degree responsible for the exponential growth of Christian churches, especially house churches, in China today.³ His influence, however, goes well beyond China. He produced some sixty volumes of devotional, sermonic, and theological writings, many of which were translated into dozens of languages and distributed all over the world.⁴ Indeed, Nee's work is among the few works of Chinese theology that continue to be read in Christian communities worldwide.⁵

Given his wide influence, it is surprising that Nee's name and work are virtually absent in most textbooks of Asian theology today. His name appears in some dictionary entries about the history of mission in China, popular Christian spiritual writers, or even modern Chinese

¹ See Joseph Tse-Hei Lee, “Watchman Nee and the Little Flock Movement in Maoist China,” *Church History* 74, no. 1 (2005): 72. Also: Lian Xi, *Redeemed by Fire: The Rise of Popular Christianity in Modern China* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2010), 10.

² Huelon Mountfort, “Watchman Nee (1903-1972): A Biographical Study,” *Thirdmill*, accessed June 18, 2020, [https://thirdmill.org/magazine/article.asp?link=hue_mountfort%5ECH.Mountfort.watchman.nee.bio.html&at=Watchman%20Nee%20\(1903-1972\):%20A%20Biographical%20Study](https://thirdmill.org/magazine/article.asp?link=hue_mountfort%5ECH.Mountfort.watchman.nee.bio.html&at=Watchman%20Nee%20(1903-1972):%20A%20Biographical%20Study).

³ See G. Wright Doyle, “Nee, Watchman | BDCC,” accessed June 20, 2020, <http://bdcconline.net/en/stories/nee-watchman>. Cf. Dennis McCallum, “Watchman Nee and the House Church Movement in China | Xenos Christian Fellowship,” accessed June 18, 2020, <https://www.xenos.org/essays/watchman-nee-and-house-church-movement-china#header>.

⁴ The entire collection of Nee's writings may be accessed online at www.watchmannee.org.

⁵ Paul H. B. Chang, “Workshop 10/20/11, Paul Chang Presenting | Religions in America,” accessed June 18, 2020, <https://voices.uchicago.edu/religionsinamerica/2011/10/14/workshop-on-october-20-2011-paul-chang-presenting/>.

Christian cults and sects. But one searches in vain for his name in a more “serious genre” of Asian theology or Chinese biblical interpretation. Admittedly, there are several theses and dissertations that examine certain aspects of Nee’s theology and hermeneutics. However, most of these works have discounted Nee’s Chinese heritage, and thus implied that his theology can be understood apart from his Chinese culture and context. Sinologist and theologian Chloë Starr speaks for many when she asserts: “[Nee’s] writings... are peppered with Chinese examples and cases, but he uses these primarily to illustrate Christian truths, rather than to determine them.... If we were to strip Ni Tuosheng’s [Watchman Nee’s] Chinese examples away, his point would almost always still stand.” To Starr, Nee is best understood simply as the product of Anglo-American evangelicalism and its branch movements, whose theology “presupposes a universal truth and universally applicable Christianity.”⁶ This in turn means that those who wish to study Asian interpretations of Christian theology must look elsewhere than to Nee.

The present chapter will challenge the above claim by arguing that Nee was a contextual Chinese Christian theologian in his own right. It will do so by providing a close reading of Nee’s thought on Scripture that is both faithful to his own project and sensitive to the larger contexts in which his thought developed. It will trace Nee’s influence from both Western and Chinese sources, but it will also situate Nee’s theology of Scripture within the larger Christian hermeneutical tradition. There are two main reasons for this focus on Nee’s approach to Scripture. One is practical: this area of his theology lacks proper academic attention. The other is theological: I believe that it is his approach to Scripture that enables Nee to be both faithfully Christian and authentically Chinese in his theology.

⁶ Chloë Starr, *Chinese Theology: Text and Context* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016), 4. We will revisit Starr’s argument more fully in Chapter 4 of this dissertation.

This chapter will begin by offering a brief account of Nee's life and some influences that give shape to his theology. This will be followed by a detailed exposition of Nee's theology and interpretation of Scripture. This section is primarily descriptive in nature, offering Nee's thought on Scripture on his own terms. Needless to say, this section is also an interpretive attempt to reconstruct Nee's distinctive approach to Scripture by being attentive to the nuances of his arguments that are often only implied, given the devotional-practical nature of his writings. In the final section, I will assess Nee's approach to Scripture by engaging with some of his critics and by offering a theological interpretation of Nee's scriptural approach as one form of Christian figural reading of Scripture.

Watchman Nee's Life and Influences

Nee was born in 1903 into a Christian family in Shantou, Guangdong.⁷ When Nee was six, his family moved back to their ancestral home in Fuzhou, a port in Fujian province, where Nee spent most of his adolescent life.⁸ His childhood was a genteel one, complete with a private tutor to school him in calligraphy, the Four Confucian Classics, and other Chinese classical

⁷ It is noteworthy that Nee was born shortly after the infamous Boxer Rebellion (or Boxer Uprising) ended. The massacres occurred between November 1899 and September 1901. The Boxers were a group of peasants, trained in martial arts, who were driven by an anti-imperialist ideology. Thinking themselves to be invincible, they attacked everything even hinting of Western influence in China, killing hundreds of foreigners, besieging nearly 900 men, women, and children in Peking's diplomatic quarter, and murdering tens of thousands of Chinese Christians. In many ways, the rebellion was a harbinger of the chaotic change and instability that would be played out in China during the twentieth century. While the Uprising ended in 1901 and the subsequent years witnessed the Western powers beginning to exert growing influence in China, both the scars of the massacres and anti-Western sentiment loomed large in the memory of Chinese people. This was the background context into which Nee was born. See William P. Brooks, "Watchman Nee's Understanding of Salvation," *Journal of Asian Evangelical Theology* 19, no. 2 (September 2015): 75.

⁸ Nee was a third-generation Christian. His paternal grandfather, Ni Yucheng, had been converted while attending a school run by the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions and baptized in 1857. He later became the first ordained Chinese pastor in the northern Fujian province. Nee's father, Ni Wenxiu, had also received a missionary school education and subsequently worked for the Chinese Maritime Customs Service. Nee's mother, Lin Heping, was also from a Christian family and had attended missionary colleges in Fuzhou and Shanghai. Thus, Nee's parents, like many other Protestant converts, had taken advantage of the educational opportunities offered by the missions to achieve a significant degree of social improvement. See David Woodbrigge, "Watchman Nee, Chinese Christianity and the Global Search for the Primitive Church," *Studies in World Christianity* 22, no. 2 (2016): 129.

studies typical of the middle-class household in China at the time.⁹ In 1916, Nee attended the junior high school at the Anglican Trinity College (run by the Church Missionary Society), although he was not personally interested in Christian faith at the time. In April 1920, however, at the age of seventeen, Nee had a born-again experience after hearing the preaching of Chinese woman evangelist Dora Yu.¹⁰ Yu later also introduced Nee to another woman¹¹—a British missionary named Margaret E. Barber, who turned out to be “the single most important personal influence on the development of Nee’s theology.”¹² Among other things, Barber directed Nee’s reading and introduced him to the writings of many Western evangelical Christians¹³—some of whom will be discussed further below.

From the time of his conversion, Nee became a diligent student of the Bible and a zealous witness for Christ. Together with two other graduates of Trinity College, Wang Zai

⁹ Xi, *Redeemed by Fire*, 156.

¹⁰ For a brief but helpful account of her life, see Yading Li, “Yu, Dora | BDCC,” *Biographical Dictionary of Chinese Christianity*, accessed June 20, 2020, <http://bdconline.net/en/stories/yu-dora>.

¹¹ David Rogers, “The Ecclesiology of Watchman Nee,” *Global Missiology* 1, no. 9 (April 10, 2011): 3, makes an interesting comment about this: “Ironically, although he was subsequently influenced by strict Brethren teaching on the limited role of women in church, some of the leading spiritual influences in Nee’s own life were women.”

¹² Xi, *Redeemed by Fire*, 157. As a British missionary, Miss Barber (1866-1929), as she usually called, was sent by the Church Missionary Society of the Anglican Church to Foochow, China, in 1899. After experiencing spiritual renewal and pursuing believer's baptism during her furlough, she returned to Foochow independent of any mission board in 1909. When Nee and his mother pursued immersion baptism in 1921, they sought help from Barber, in whose house Nee had attended Bible studies for a while. Barber’s own personal spiritual life and theology had an indelible impact on Nee’s life. Her life of faith as an independent minister, living with no fixed salary, along with her passion for the deeper aspects of the Christian life and the work of the Holy Spirit, clearly left a deep impression on Nee as his ministry also went independent and his teaching focused on the similar themes. In short, the influence Miss Barber exerted on Nee was immeasurably profound. Wing-Hung Lam describes her as “the main bridge that brings Nee into contact with the Western theology.” Wing-Hung Lam, *Shu Ling Sheng Xue [The Spiritual Theology of Watchman Nee]* (Hong Kong: China Graduate School of Theology, 1985), 23. As quoted in Ken Ang Lee, “Watchman Nee: A Study of His Major Theological Themes” (Ph.D. Dissertation, Westminster Theological Seminary, 1989), 46. See also Liao, “Watchman Nee’s Theology of Victory,” 38.

¹³ Barber introduced Nee to the writings of Christian mystics like Madame Guyon; Keswick and Holiness authors such as Jessie Penn-Lewis, Andrew Murray, F. B. Meyer, Evan Roberts, Charles Finney, and T. Austin Sparks; Brethren scholars such as C. A. Coates, J. Nelson Darby, C. H. Mackintosh, William Kelley, and George Cutting; and other independent writers like ex-Anglican clergy D. M. Panton and Robert Govett. See Pamudji, “Little Flock Trilogy,” 31–32; Wu, “Revelation, Knowledge, and Formation,” 64–65.

(Leland Wang)¹⁴ and his wife, Nee formed a home fellowship in 1922 where they would regularly “break the bread” and devote themselves to the full-time service of God.¹⁵ Not long after, however, they went their separate ways when Nee demanded a radical separation from Western missions and a complete rejection of denominationalism, which he had come to consider as anti-Christian.¹⁶ Historian Lian Xi notes that Nee did not take this decision lightly and that it affected the early years of his new career as an itinerant evangelist: “Nee’s self-imposed exile from mission Christianity had shut the door to church employment, recognized ecclesiastical status, and a dependable income.”¹⁷

Partly because of this difficult situation, Nee began to explore literature ministry, and found himself gaining a growing readership. In 1923, he edited an irregular journal entitled *Present Witness and Testimony*,¹⁸ which was devoted to the “profound matters of God,” and distributed for free whenever funds were available. In 1925, Nee started another journal named *The Christian*, which dealt with “truths about church and matters of prophecy,” and gained wide circulation in only a few years. In 1926, Nee began his first major book, *The Spiritual Man*, and completed it in about two years. In that three-volume work Nee sought “to explain spiritual formation in terms of biblical psychology, especially the radical distinction between

¹⁴ Wang Zai, better known as Leland Wang, was a famous Chinese evangelist in his own right. For more on him, see a brief entry on him in Hoover Wong, “Wang Zai | BDCC,” *Biographical Dictionary of Chinese Christianity*, accessed June 20, 2020, <http://bdconline.net/en/stories/wang-zai>.

¹⁵ Kinnear describes the experience, which was formative to Nee’s later ecclesiology, as follows: “One Sunday evening in 1922 a small group of just four persons, Wang Tsai and his wife and Watchman and his mother, remembered the Lord together in the breaking of bread. They found such joy and release in thus worshipping Him without priest or minister that they began to do this frequently; and after a few weeks they were joined by others.” Angus I. Kinnear, *Against the Tide: The Story of Watchman Nee* (Eastbourne, Sussex: Victory Press, 1974), 56.

From the early part of his ministry, Nee already recognized that “the breaking of bread” should be performed on a weekly basis and decided to conduct the practice every Sunday. For more on Nee’s theology and practice of the Eucharist, see the excellent study by May, “Watchman Nee and the Breaking of Bread.” May argues that the practice of “the breaking of bread” occupied a central place of importance in Nee’s “family-centric ecclesiology.”

¹⁶ See Doyle, “Nee, Watchman | BDCC.”

¹⁷ Xi, *Redeemed by Fire*, 162–163.

¹⁸ This publication, which was a devotional magazine, was also known as “*Revival*.”

‘soul’ (self-consciousness) and ‘spirit’ (God-consciousness).”¹⁹ This distinction became his overall hermeneutical lens in approaching many subjects, including Scripture, as we will see later. But it is important to note here that this period of his life marked the beginning of his ever-expanding literature ministry. One scholar has observed that Nee’s literature ministry is a key reason his influence has endured beyond similarly popular evangelist revivalists operating at the same time.²⁰

While he began his ministry as a revivalist preacher, Nee soon sought a calling higher than that of an itinerant preacher.²¹ In 1928, he came to believe that the church of the day was actually hindering the purpose of God. Nee was particularly seeking “an answer to the imported problem of denominational divisions,”²² which caused both spiritual malnutrition and ineffective gospel witness. In his struggle to find an answer in Scripture, Nee returned to what he deemed simple New Testament obedience suggested by the writings of J. N. Darby and C. A. Coates.²³ For him, this meant that churches in China should disregard denominationalism and instead be self-governing, self-supporting, and self-propagating. Nee decided to build a solid base in Shanghai, an indigenous local church of God’s elect, which was called the Christian Assembly or the “Little Flock.”²⁴ Instead of denominational flags, Nee promoted what he called “the principle of locality,” which states that there is only one true church in each

¹⁹ Doyle, “Nee, Watchman | BDCC.”

²⁰ Ang Lee, “Watchman Nee,” 3.

²¹ Xi, *Redeemed by Fire*, 168.

²² Kinnear, *Against the Tide*, 112.

²³ Mountfort, “Watchman Nee (1903-1972),” n.p.

²⁴ The name “Little Flock” comes from a hymnal Nee published in 1931 entitled *Hymns for the Little Flock*, which Nee adopted from an English Brethren hymnal. It was never Nee’s intention that the local churches he founded appropriate this name, or any name that might be construed as a denominational label for that matter, but the name stuck, and to this day the movement started by Nee is popularly known in China as the “Little Flock.” Nee and his followers, however, called themselves “A Local Gathering of Believers in the Lord’s Name,” or “(City name) Christian Meeting Place.” Hence, the epithets “Local Church” and “Christian Assembly” respectively. See Rogers, “The Ecclesiology of Watchman Nee,” 5; Mountfort, “Watchman Nee (1903-1972),” n.p.

city.²⁵ In the course of 1928 to 1942, Nee focused his ministry on: “(1) publications, (2) the Overcomer Conferences for national or regional coworkers, (3) the development of the local churches, and (4) training young Christians.”²⁶

During those years, the “Local Church” movement multiplied very quickly. By the time the communist regime took over China in 1949, Nee reportedly had founded about 1000 assemblies with around 90,000 adherents in China—at a time when the Protestant Christian population there was less than one million.²⁷ Joseph Lee has observed that the rapid development of this movement highlights the complicated relations between Chinese churches and foreign missionary enterprise.²⁸ On the one hand, as we mentioned, Nee was self-

²⁵ Wing-Hung Lam, “Watchman Nee,” ed. Scott W. Sunquist, *A Dictionary of Asian Christianity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2001), 589. Historian Joseph Lee provides a very balanced summary of Nee’s principle of locality, one that pertains both to doctrinal as well as to church government matters: “[Nee] emphasized the necessity to maintain independent local churches because on a doctrinal level, a local church could serve as a guardian of Christian teaching and contain heresy within one specific place. At an administrative level, the idea of ‘one church in one locality’ would discourage denominational competition in the same area. A church should not represent an area smaller or larger than a city and, therefore, its jurisdiction should correspond with administrative limits of a city. Only natural barriers and distance justified meeting in two separate churches in the same area. He saw no religious and practical reason for a group of Christians in the same locality to divide themselves into different denominations. On the issue of settling intrachurch disputes, he allowed a local church to seek the advice of another church but asserted that the final court of appeal remained in the church where the original dispute occurred. What he sought to promote was a locally autonomous and nondenominational church independent of any external control.” Lee, “Watchman Nee and the Little Flock Movement in Maoist China,” 75.

²⁶ Jonghyun Kim, “Watchman Nee for Missional Church: An Examination and Critique of Watchman Nee’s Ecclesiology in Relation to Missions” (Ph.D. Dissertation, Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2019), 31.

²⁷ Lu, “Watchman Nee’s Doctrine of the Church with Special Reference to Its Contribution to the Local Church Movement,” 1–2. In terms of the number, Dennis McCallum offers the following assessment: “It is hard to tell how large the Little Flock movement was in China at the time of the revolution. One reason for this is the fact that Nee felt it was fleshly to consider numbers. Therefore there was no systematic effort made by Little Flock themselves to count their people. There was no formal membership in the group, since Nee believed membership in the body of Christ was determined by God, and there was no good reason for the church to try to draw up a list. According to Cliff, in 1949 the Little Flock had over 70,000 members in 500 assemblies. However, according to the Ecumenical Press Service the ‘Little Flock’ had at this time 362 places of worship and 39,000 members in the one province of Chekiang. These figures were interpreted as indicating that members of the ‘Little Flock’ made up 15–20 per cent of the whole Protestant church in China, and that they may have been the largest single denomination in the country. In other words, this estimate would show anywhere from 150,000 to 300,000 members for the Little Flock. Cheung affirms that there were ‘thousands’ of assemblies by 1956, and that the Little Flock was the largest Christian group in China” (McCallum, “Watchman Nee and the House Church Movement in China | Xenos Christian Fellowship,” n.p.).

²⁸ See Lee, “Watchman Nee and the Little Flock Movement in Maoist China,” 76–77. Lee also makes the following instructive observation regarding the reasons why he thinks the movement gained so much popularity on the grassroots level: “As with other independent Chinese Christian groups like the True Jesus Church (founded in 1917) and Jesus Family (founded in 1921), the Little Flock experienced a rapid growth of its church membership

consciously forming an indigenous Chinese local church. His rejection of the clergy, furthermore, revealed his discontent with the very class of people who had excluded lay people from ministry in denominational churches.²⁹ As Grace May points out, “The empowerment of the laity was the backbone of the Assembly and the goal of his [Nee’s] ministry. Unlike denominational churches, which were clergy centered, the Assembly was clearly a ministry by and for the people.”³⁰ On the other hand, Nee continued to draw freely from Western spiritual authors in his teaching ministry. In fact, from 1930 to 1935 the Little Flock interacted internationally with a subset of the Plymouth Brethren in the West. Nee even personally visited them as well as some other independent Christian ministers, such as T. Austin Sparks, with whom Nee “broke bread”, and this resulted in the severing of the fellowship ties between the Exclusive Brethren and the Little Flock.³¹ Nee’s case, therefore, reveals the complex, hybrid character of an indigenous Chinese Christian movement.³²

During the late 1940s, the Communist Revolution, spearheaded by Mao Zedong, was taking root and gaining ground throughout China. At the same time, the Little Flock continued

between 1927 and 1949. Several reasons explain the popularity and safety in joining these groups during that era. The groups’ Chinese origins protected them from attacks in antiforeign campaigns during the late 1920s. Their institutional flexibility and nationwide networks shielded them from the Nationalist government control. Their millenarian and otherworldly belief systems, their emphasis on individual salvation, their rejection of the sinful world, and their belief in the Second Coming of Jesus Christ spoke to the strong sense of fear and insecurity pervasive in Chinese society during the Sino-Japanese War (1937-45).” *Ibid.*, 78.

²⁹ As a side note, Lee writes that the noted historian Daniel Bays once argued that Chinese churches in the early twentieth century reacted to the history of foreign missionary control by displaying a profound “congregational egalitarianism or anti-ecclesiasticism.” See Lee, “Watchman Nee and the Little Flock Movement in Maoist China,” 77.

³⁰ May, “Watchman Nee and the Breaking of Bread,” 293.

³¹ For more on the Brethren-Little Flock connection, see Woodbrigg, “Watchman Nee, Chinese Christianity and the Global Search for the Primitive Church”; Rogers, “The Ecclesiology of Watchman Nee.”

³² Lee notes another complicating factor in the relationship between the Chinese Little Flock and the foreign missionary enterprise: “Though the Little Flock leaders were highly critical of the foreign missionary enterprises in China, they were not totally separated from the mission churches. In fact, as Ryan Dunch points out, there was considerable overlap of membership between the Little Flock and the well-established mission churches. Many Little Flock members came from Chinese Christian families or from mission schools. A closer look at the profile of the Little Flock leaders in the Shantou Assembly in South China during the early 1950s confirms that they were all trained by Protestant missions.... Their early exposure to Christianity in Protestant mission schools undoubtedly made it easier for them to appreciate the teaching of Watchman Nee and to affiliate with the Little Flock” (Lee, “Watchman Nee and the Little Flock Movement in Maoist China,” 78–79).

to grow as an indigenous, grassroots Chinese Christian movement that embodied the so-called Three-Self Movement—that is, self-governing, self-supporting, and self-propagating. Lee calls this a “truly Three-Self Christian movement” in contrast to the “highly politicized...

Communist-initiated ‘Three-Self Patriotic Movement’ [commonly rendered as TSPM].”³³ The

Little Flock's reluctance to affiliate itself with the state-controlled TSPM obviously earned the suspicion and resentment of the Maoist state. Lee comments that by rejecting Maoism, the

Little Flock

adhered to Nee's theological perspectives on the autonomy of the church, asserting that all churches were directly under the authority of Jesus Christ rather than any external organization; and that each church should be an independent body, selecting its leaders and running its affairs. In affirming their Christian identity, the Little Flock Christians found themselves divided between preaching the divine or affirming the Maoist ideology, and opting for political stability by submitting to the state or resisting the state in endless political campaigns. Some Little Flock members chose to collaborate with the state, whereas other members refused to do so, but either way, they were embroiled in politics. The degree of tension and conflict with the state made them an easy target of attack throughout the Maoist era (1949-76).³⁴

In April 1952, Nee was arrested by the Communist government on charges of espionage, counter-revolutionary activities, corrupt business practices, and moral improprieties, and was sentenced to fifteen years in prison.³⁵ When his sentence was completed in 1967, the

³³ Ibid., 68. We will discuss the issue of TSPM in China again, especially with regards to the theological-political vision of Bishop Ting, in Chapter 4.

³⁴ Ibid., 69.

³⁵ Although he was arrested in 1952, Nee was not put on trial until 1956. Paul Chang offers a detailed portrayal of the trial: “On January 30 [1956], more than two thousand five hundred Shanghai Christians were invited to a special presentation in which one of the leaders of the city’s public security bureau delineated the charges against Nee, namely espionage, embezzlement, and sexual misconduct. Then, from February 8 to 19, the evidence against Nee was displayed in a special exhibit held in the auditorium of the Shanghai Medical College. Almost ten thousand Christians from Shanghai participated. From February 21 to 24, over two hundred representatives of Christian Assemblies were also brought in from other parts of China to view the evidence. Participants saw documents that purported to show Nee’s misuse of funds and foreign connections. Grainy photographs of Nee in flagrante with female co-workers were also prominently presented. It was difficult to ascertain the identity of the people in the pictures and many of Nee’s followers assumed that the other documents were forged. Nevertheless, the public humiliation was effective. For the most part, even if they quietly continued in their activities, the local congregations stopped openly identifying as Nee’s followers.” Paul H. B. Chang, “The Spiritual Human Is Discerned By No One’: An Intellectual Biography of Watchman Nee” (Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Chicago, 2017), 235–236.

officials demanded that he renounce his faith in order to gain freedom, yet Nee refused to do so.³⁶ Though the details of his last days are cloudy,³⁷ he remained in prison for almost twenty years and died in a labor camp in Anhui in 1972. The following note was found after his death on a slip of paper hidden under his pillow: “Christ is the Son of God who died for the redemption of sinners and resurrected after three days. This is the greatest truth in the universe. I die because of my belief in Christ.”³⁸

Having briefly sketched Nee’s life and career, the next section of this chapter will outline his theological roots and influences. This will put Nee’s approach to Scripture into a proper context. I will begin by discussing an influence mentioned above: the influence of the Brethren movement.

³⁶ According to Kinnear, “[Nee] is said to have been offered the chance of reinstatement as a public Christian figure if he would lead his immense following into step with the People’s Government within the Three Self Reform Church” (Kinnear, *Against the Tide*, 155).

³⁷ Concerning the controversy around the specific charges against Nee, I concur with the perceptive judgment of David Rogers: “While conclusive evidence on the validity of the charges against Nee is extremely hard to substantiate, in the interest of Nee’s legacy and reputation I think it is appropriate to note here that, in light of the combination of Nee’s testimony, both in his written and transcribed works, the other documented events of his life, and the testimony of those who knew him personally, together with the known *modus operandi* and evident motives of the Mao regime, in my opinion, it is highly likely that the charges against Nee were trumped-up and his conviction and sentence were an extreme injustice” (Rogers, “The Ecclesiology of Watchman Nee,” 7). But see also the recent memoir of Lily Hsu who purportedly accused Nee of sexual abuses. Lily M. Hsu and Dana Roberts, *My Unforgettable Memories: Watchman Nee and Shanghai Local Church* (Maitland, FL: Xulon Press, 2013).

³⁸ Witness Lee, *Watchman Nee: A Seer of the Divine Revelation in the Present Age* (Anaheim, CA: Living Stream Ministry, 1991), 190.

1. Brethren Ecclesiology and Dispensational Eschatology

Scholars have noted that the Brethren movement,³⁹ which was founded primarily by John N. Darby,⁴⁰ had a long-lasting influence on many aspects of Nee's theological thinking, especially his ecclesiology.⁴¹ For example, following the Brethren, Nee challenges the division between clergy and laity, and takes an antagonistic stand toward denominational affiliation.⁴² Grace May notes that, like the Brethren and other primitivists, Nee "selectively appropriate[s] chapters of church history" while asserting the authority of the apostolic church and its pristine practices. They basically view themselves as direct successors of the apostolic church.⁴³ This primitivist impulse is often coupled with an intense concern for prophecy and eschatology, which results also in Nee's close association with dispensationalism.

Nee came into contact with dispensationalism through his reading of Darby's works and his translation of the Scofield Correspondence Course into Chinese in 1926.⁴⁴ Though Nee modified and simplified the seven dispensations into four, the overall idea is essentially in consonance with dispensationalist teaching.⁴⁵ Nee believes that God deals with people

³⁹ Scholars have traced the beginning of the Brethren movement to the 1820s (in Dublin, Ireland and Plymouth, England), starting with random meetings of discontented evangelicals who were lamenting the doctrinal infidelity, spiritual dryness, and moral laxness, as well as the formalism and clericalism, in many British churches. The Brethren did not join other contemporary dissenting or reform endeavors such as the Oxford Movement that appealed for renewal within Anglicanism through the revival of Nicene Christianity. Instead, they favoured a direct appeal to the New Testament apostolic church as the basis of their authority. One scholar argues that though it was a radical dissenting group, the early Brethren were more than a negative reactionary movement of ecclesial discontent. They are best understood as part of a recurrent phenomenon in church history known as *primitivist* movements that aim at re-appropriating pure New Testament Christianity. For more on this, see James Patrick Callahan, *Primitivist Piety: The Ecclesiology of the Early Plymouth Brethren* (Lanham, MD: The Scarecrow Press, 1996), xi–xix.

⁴⁰ See Clarence B. Bass, *Backgrounds to Dispensationalism: Its Historical Genesis and Ecclesiastical Implications* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1960), 7, 64. Bass also asserts that Dispensationalism originated in Darby's thought and later reached "its synthesis and systematization in the works of Scofield" (Ibid., 21).

⁴¹ Wu, "Revelation, Knowledge, and Formation," 91.

⁴² Lee, "Watchman Nee and the Little Flock Movement in Maoist China," 74.

⁴³ May, "Watchman Nee and the Breaking of Bread," 162.

⁴⁴ Watchman Nee, *The Finest of the Wheat*, vol. 1 (New York: Christian Fellowship Publisher, 1993), 17. Cited in Liao, "Watchman Nee's Theology of Victory," 43–44.

⁴⁵ The Scofield Bible outlines seven dispensations as follows: Innocence, Conscience, Human Government, Promise, Law, Grace, and Kingdom. Nee states dogmatically that there are four dispensations: the Fathers (Adam to Moses), Law (Moses to Christ), Grace (the first coming to the second coming of Christ), and

differently in each dispensation: “In the Bible some doctrines are for a certain dispensation only, while others are for all ages.”⁴⁶ This has a significant bearing on scriptural interpretation, as he puts it: “If we are not clear about the different dispensations, we will think that some statements in the Bible are confusing. But once we distinguish between the dispensations, the confusion will disappear.”⁴⁷ Although Nee is quite dogmatic about getting this right, his main concern is always moral-practical and forward-looking: Christians ought to be mindful of the responsibility and the failure of humanity and how God deals with them in each dispensation so that we can be better prepared for God's master plan of triumph in the future.⁴⁸

2. The Holiness Movement and Keswick Spirituality

In addition to the Brethren and dispensationalism, Nee's theological development is unmistakably and strongly influenced by pietism.⁴⁹ The major source of Nee's pietistic influence came from and was filtered through two particular streams of pietism: the Holiness⁵⁰

Kingdom (the second coming to the end of the Kingdom). See Cliff, “The Life and Theology of Watchman Nee, Including a Study of the Little Flock Movement Which He Founded,” 175.

⁴⁶ Watchman Nee, *How to Study the Bible: Practical Advice for Receiving Light from God's Word* (Anaheim, CA: Living Stream Ministry, 1993), 141.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 108.

⁴⁸ Liao, “Watchman Nee's Theology of Victory,” 40, 44. The best example of a Christian group who “got it right,” according to Nee, is the Brethren. Thus, in his dispensational reading of Revelation 1-3, Nee refers to the Brethren as the Philadelphian Church, the Church of Brotherly Love. Nee argues that not only has the Brethren Church completely recovered apostolic orthodoxy by maintaining true unity through welcoming all Spirit-ordained ministers of the Word to serve freely, but she has also recovered all Scriptural truth in the areas of ecclesiology, eschatology, and the doctrine of sanctification. Nee remarkably writes: “if we were to enumerate one by one what they recovered, we may well say that in today's pure Protestant churches there is not one truth that they did not recover or recover more.” See Watchman Nee, *The Orthodoxy of the Church & Authority and Submission*, vol. 47, *The Collected Works of Watchman Nee, Set 3* (Anaheim, CA: Living Stream Ministry, 1994), 69-70.

⁴⁹ Pietism was a renewal movement within Lutheranism in the late 17th century. Although originally it was a reaction against the dead orthodoxy of German Lutheran state churches, the movement soon spread all over Europe and North America, influencing different stripes of Protestantism and beyond. In general, pietists stress the practical aspects of the Christian life, reject doctrinal formalism and church institutionalism, while upholding Scripture as the word of God. Ang Lee comments: “Shaking away all man-made externalities, the pietists wish to retain and uphold only the Word of God. As a result of their renewed interest in the Scripture, they always feel commissioned to reform the Church with the ‘light’ God has revealed to them. All these traits are encapsulated in the life of Watchman Nee” (Ang Lee, “Watchman Nee,” 49–50).

⁵⁰ Scholars note that the Holiness movement began initially in the 1840s and 1850s, when some Methodists in the United States believed that the way for Christians to renew their spiritual life lay in resurrecting the neglected Wesleyan teaching on Christian perfection. Wesley taught that the road from sin to salvation goes from willful rebellion against divine and human law to perfect love for God and neighbour. Following Wesley, Holiness preachers, who were typically Methodists, emphasized that salvation involves two crises. In the first,

and Keswick revival movements.⁵¹ Nee was acquainted with a number of Holiness authors, but his main reference point was arguably Jessie Penn-Lewis.⁵² Nee was an avid reader of Penn-Lewis's works and from the mid-1920s he was in regular correspondence with her and was chiefly responsible for translating, interpreting, and disseminating her teachings to Chinese audiences.⁵³

conversion or justification, one is freed from sins committed. In the second, usually called "entire sanctification," "full salvation," or "second conversion," one is liberated from the flaw that causes sin. This second crisis was taught as an experience of the "deeper work" of divine grace that gave one the ability to resist temptation and to avoid committing any sins knowingly as well as to live a life governed by a perfect intention to love God and neighbour. See R. V. Pierard, "Holiness Movement," ed. Daniel J. Treier and Walter A. Elwell, *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2017), 392; Wu, "Revelation, Knowledge, and Formation," 71–72.

⁵¹ The Holiness revival spread to England and gave rise to the Keswick movement, which originated in 1875 at a "Convention for the Promotion of Practical Holiness" in the Lake District town of that name. This convention was held annually and became the mother of similar conventions in various countries around the world. Rather than merely imparting biblical knowledge, these conventions aimed to be a spiritual clinic for restoring believers' spiritual health. Speakers at annual Keswick conventions emphasized the "deeper life" instead of "holiness," believing that the tendency to sin is not extinguished but is counteracted by victorious living through the Holy Spirit. The predominance of Reformed Anglicans along with like-minded Free Church evangelicals in the movement prevented the Wesleyan-Arminian view of sanctification from establishing a complete foothold. S. Barabas notes the typical weekly teaching of the Keswick convention as follows: "On the first day the addresses focus on sin and its disabling spiritual effects. On the second day the addresses deal with God's provision through the cross for dealing with sin, not only its guilt but also its power.... The third day is devoted to teaching on consecration, response to God's call for complete abandonment to Christ's rule, involving both crisis and process. The fourth day is occupied with teaching on the Spirit-filled life. All Christians, it is taught, receive the Holy Spirit at regeneration, but not all are controlled by him. The fullness of the Spirit is made experiential by abandonment to Christ and abiding in that abandonment. On Friday the theme is Christian service, the natural result of Spirit-filled life" (S. Barabas, "Keswick Convention," ed. Daniel J. Treier and Walter A. Elwell, *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology* [Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2017], 464). These "themes" are also Nee's favourite "themes" and can be easily found in his writings. It is also remarkable how the present-day ministry legacy of Watchman Nee and Witness Lee, i.e., the Living Stream Ministry, patterns their annual and semi-annual "conferences" and "trainings" after these Keswick conventions.

⁵² Jessie Penn-Lewis (1861-1927) was an influential laywoman teacher and writer in the early Keswick movement and the Welsh revival of 1904-1905.

⁵³ Wu, "Revelation, Knowledge, and Formation," 78. On the back cover of the January 1924 issue of *The Overcomer*, a Christian magazine that Penn-Lewis edited, she carried the following news:

A letter comes from a Chinese Christian, saying that he has issued in small magazine form some of the "Overcomer" literature, i.e. "More than Conquerors," the "Four Planes of the Spiritual Life," etc., and "testimonies are streaming in telling how God has owned and used the paper." But, he says, "Satan is fighting hard, and up to to-day there seems not a bit of hope to publish the next issue." The hindrance is financial and physical. He adds, "Please say that a free paper called 'The Reviving' has been published in Chinese to bear the 'Overcomer Testimony,' and ask your Chinese readers to write for a copy, also Missionaries to order some for their Chinese Evangelists. (Address: Watchman Nee, Chong Seng Sang, Foochow, China).

Cited in May, "Watchman Nee and the Breaking of Bread," 206 (emphasis in original).

The major emphasis of Penn-Lewis's message was that of the cross.⁵⁴ She teaches that the way to life in union with God is through death to the self, which is none other than the way of the cross. For her, the true meaning of the cross is "refusing the self"; anything less than this would limit the significance of the cross.⁵⁵ This emphasis on "surrender" and "service" through the mediation of the cross exerted a profound influence on Nee.⁵⁶ Grace May says of Nee's indebtedness to Penn-Lewis:

Nee relied on the same Pauline texts as Penn-Lewis in describing the work of the Cross. Nee echoed Penn-Lewis' understanding of the crucifixion of the old self, which they both regarded as essential for Christian maturity and effective service. Nee even adopted her tripartite doctrine of humanity, which viewed human beings as a composite of body, soul, and spirit.⁵⁷ Nee was also drawn to Madame Guyon, the same mystic that Penn-Lewis and Nee's own mentor, Barber, found so compelling.... Nee freely cited from works by Andrew Murray, F. B. Meyer, and Evan Roberts, Holiness authors whom Penn-Lewis often referred to in her own writings. Not surprisingly, the same themes which featured prominently in Keswick circles found their way into Nee's own writing and preaching.⁵⁸

⁵⁴ Penn-Lewis felt called by God to be a messenger of the cross, a topic she never seemed to grow weary of teaching. On a trip from Edinburgh to Liverpool, she recalled, "I ask[ed] God to show me the way never to give an address on any theme without 'preaching the cross,' and to my astonishment in those days, as I was speaking on many themes concerning the Christian life, I found myself, in the heart of the message, showing the cross as the center of every theme. Then I saw that all aspects of the spiritual life could be shown to have, as their basis, Calvary; and that *all spiritual truth radiated from the cross.*" J. C. Metcalfe, *Molded by the Cross* (Fort Washington, PA: Christian Literature Crusade, 1997), 76. Cited in May, "Watchman Nee and the Breaking of Bread," 205.

⁵⁵ Ka-Lun Leung, "Cong Fenxing Yundong Dao Shenmi Zhuyi--Binluyi Shimu de Shunling Shenxue Sixiang (From Revivalism to Mysticism--Mrs. Penn-Lewis's Thought on Spiritual Theology)," in *Watchman Nee: His Early Life and Thought* (Hong Kong: Graceful House, 2005), 15–19. Cited in Wu, "Revelation, Knowledge, and Formation," 79.

⁵⁶ May notes that in a nutshell, "surrender" and "service" captures the heart of Keswick teaching on spiritual life. See May, "Watchman Nee and the Breaking of Bread," 198.

⁵⁷ Especially influential was her book entitled *Soul and Spirit* and subtitled *A Glimpse into Bible Psychology*, an exposition of Hebrews 4:12 which provided Nee with the foundation for his own book *The Spiritual Man*. It is no coincidence that Nee said that his work is basically a book on biblical psychology. See Ang Lee, "Watchman Nee," 48.

⁵⁸ May, "Watchman Nee and the Breaking of Bread," 206–207. May further adds, "Even Nee's choice of titles and terminology presumed a knowledge of Penn-Lewis' works. For example, Penn-Lewis wrote a book entitled *Word of the Cross* (1908). Nee evidently liked the title and borrowed it for his two-part article entitled 'The Word of the Cross,' published in the *Spiritual Light Journal* in the summer of 1925. Nee translated many of Penn-Lewis' articles into Chinese and included some of them as chapters in a volume he edited called *The Christian Life and Warfare* (1927) and others in his periodicals. In the 1940s, years after Penn-Lewis' death, Nee named his training series for lay leaders The Overcomers Conference. *The Overcomer* was the name of Penn-Lewis' periodical and a favorite theme of the holiness movement" (207-208).

These themes include the emphasis on an intuitive experience of Christ over mere rational knowledge, the insistence on “the higher life” as the “normal Christian life,”⁵⁹ the expectation that holiness manifests itself in visible changes in lifestyle, the call to surrender all for Christ, and union with Christ as the ultimate goal of the believer.⁶⁰ Furthermore, Nee follows the Holiness tradition in accentuating the believer’s break from the world and highlighting “the incompatibility of faithful living and worldliness, the cosmic battle between good and evil, the spiritual opposition between God’s forces and Satan’s, and the irreconcilability of living for the now and the hereafter.”⁶¹ This, in turn, results in his church’s withdrawal from direct social and political engagements of the day.⁶²

3. Quietist Mysticism

Several scholars also observe the profound influence of the quietist mysticism of French Catholic Madame Jeanne Guyon (1648-1717) on Nee’s teaching.⁶³ Of particular importance is

⁵⁹ *The Normal Christian Life* is also the title of one of Nee’s most popular works. It is based on a study of Romans 6 to 8, which is also among the favorite passages of Keswick preachers. See Watchman Nee, *The Normal Christian Life* (Anaheim, CA: Living Stream Ministry, 2012).

⁶⁰ May, “Watchman Nee and the Breaking of Bread,” 184.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 183.

⁶² One example of this pietistic attitude is his famous prayer offered at the Keswick Convention in 1938. When Nee stepped up to pray, he refused to pray for China or Japan, despite the Sino-Japanese War and the atrocities committed in Nanjing; rather, he prayed for the interests of God’s Son and for God’s will. The Convention recorded the prayer:

The Lord reigneth. He *is* reigning, and He *is* Lord of all. Nothing can touch his authority. It is spiritual forces that are out to destroy the interests of the Lord in China and Japan. We do not pray for Japan. We do not pray for China. But we pray for the interests of Thy Son in China and in Japan. We do not blame any men, for they are only tools in the hand of the enemy of the Lord. We stand in Thy will. Lord, shatter the Kingdom of Darkness. Lord, the persecution of Thy Church is persecuting Thee.

See “The Keswick Convention 1938” (Pickering & Inglis LTD., n.d.), 246, accessed February 20, 2018, https://static1.squarespace.com/static/59cf9a2ac027d84167d1df58/t/59e810ce017db28c1ddf69ba/1508380881984/1938_keswick.pdf. Cf. Cliff, “The Life and Theology of Watchman Nee, Including a Study of the Little Flock Movement Which He Founded,” 175–176. Cliff observes that “Nee’s failure to face the social implications of the gospel in the needy situation in China” was due not only to his intensely pietistic outlook “but also to his dispensational eschatology, which relegated Christ’s teaching about compassionate service in Matthew 25:35-40 to a future prophetic period.”

⁶³ E.g., Wu, “Revelation, Knowledge, and Formation,” 81; Ang Lee, “Watchman Nee,” 46–47; Liao, “Watchman Nee’s Theology of Victory,” 38–39.

Quietism was a mystical movement, with identifiable precedents in Spain, Italy, and France, that gathered strength in 17th century Europe. Against common accusations that Quietism was heretical, Louis Dupré convincingly argues that the Quietist spirituality was heavily indebted to the “devout humanism” of Francis de Sales, who had merely given fresh expression to ideas within “a long and venerable lineage” that went back to the

Guyon's work *Short and Very Easy Method of Prayer*,⁶⁴ which was translated by one of Nee's colleagues into Chinese and was made available to every new convert in the Little Flock.⁶⁵ In that work, Guyon outlines two paths to encounter Christ: (1) "praying the Scripture" and (2) "beholding the Lord" or "waiting in his presence." On the first path, she encourages the practice of reading slowly, meditating on the very depths of the words of Scripture: "You do not move from one passage to another, not until you have *sensed* the very heart of what you have read. You may then want to take that portion of Scripture that has touched you and turn it into prayer."⁶⁶ The second path takes a very different approach. Whereas on the first path the content of the text is important because it reveals Christ to the seeking reader, on the second path, the reader is advised to make use of Scripture to *quiet* his/her mind. As Guyon puts it, "Once you sense the Lord's presence, the content of what you have read is no longer important. The Scripture has served its purpose; it has quieted your mind; it has brought you to him."⁶⁷ Christ, therefore, is found inwardly by faith. This is key for Guyon: "The Lord is found *only* within your spirit, in the recesses of your being, in the Holy of Holies; this is where he dwells."⁶⁸ It is remarkable the extent to which these teachings shape Nee's approach to Scripture and spirituality, as we will see later. The meditative practice of reading Scripture, the

desert mothers and fathers of the fourth century. Louis K. Dupré, "Jansenism and Quietism," in *Christian Spirituality: Post-Reformation and Modern*, ed. Louis K. Dupré, Don E. Saliers, and John Meyendorff, World spirituality v. 18 (New York: Crossroad, 1989), 132. Dupré also observes that the three famous representatives of Quietism—Miguel de Molinos, Madame Guyon, and François Fénelon—attempted to retrieve certain spiritual elements "from centuries of neglect," and saw themselves as "solidly anchored in Catholic orthodoxy" (Dupré, "Jansenism and Quietism," 121). Apparently, Nee was appreciative of all three mystics, though he was most impressed with Guyon. See Chen Fu-zhong, *Ni Tuosheng Zhuan (The Biography of Watchman Nee)* (Hong Kong: The Christian Publishers, 2004), 117–118.

⁶⁴ Another English translation of this book was issued as Jeanne Guyon, *Experiencing the Depths of Jesus Christ* (Sargent, GA: SeedSowers, 1975). There is also evidence that Nee read Guyon's autobiography, a book which chronicles her mystical relationship with God, early in his life. See Liao, "Watchman Nee's Theology of Victory," 38–39.

⁶⁵ Richard J. Foster and James Bryan Smith, eds., *Devotional Classics: Selected Readings for Individuals and Groups* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1993), 320; Wu, "Revelation, Knowledge, and Formation," 87.

⁶⁶ Cited in Foster and Smith, *Devotional Classics*, 321. Emphasis in original.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 322. Emphasis in original.

anti-intellectual tendency of contemplative prayer, the turn to inner spiritual reality as the locus of the divine-human encounter, along with its passive-receptive posture – all this can be found in Nee’s writings. In addition, Nee’s emphasis on complete submission, self-crucifixion, and the life lost in Christ also echoes Guyon’s mystical spirit.⁶⁹

4. Chinese Philosophy and Chinese Context

Virtually all Nee scholars agree that Nee is more concerned with practical Christian living than with doctrinal speculation.⁷⁰ Given his lack of formal theological training, the influence of pietism, and the anti-intellectual tendency of quietist mysticism, Nee’s practical approach to Christianity seems natural and does not need any explanation. Some scholars, however, offer an interesting alternative theory: Nee’s Chinese upbringing and context is also a significant factor for his practical Christianity. Ang Lee, for instance, observes that one basic characteristic trait of the Chinese mind is its pragmatism combined with a strong ethical concern.⁷¹ He calls it “Chinese ethico-pragmatism” and argues that it helps to explain much of Nee’s theology: “[Nee’s] soteriology is called applied soteriology; his Christology is centered

⁶⁹ Robert K. Wetmore, “An Analysis of Watchman Nee’s Doctrine of Dying and Rising with Christ as It Relates to Sanctification” (Th.M. Thesis, Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, 1983), 12. Cited in Liao, “Watchman Nee’s Theology of Victory,” 39. Regarding the theme of self-abandonment, May observes that Penn-Lewis was heavily influenced by Guyon, thus suggesting that Nee perhaps read Guyon *through Penn-Lewis’s eyes*. May notes, “While at the vicarage at Richmond, Surrey, Penn-Lewis read Madame Guyon’s *Life*, where Penn-Lewis initially encountered the challenge to die to self. In 1896, Penn-Lewis wrote a summary of Madame Guyon’s ‘Spiritual Torrents’ entitled ‘Life Out of Death.’ In brief, the pamphlet outlined the journey from estrangement to God to distrust of self to loss of self to complete abandonment to God. Challenged by Guyon’s writings, Penn-Lewis consciously and willingly exchanged her joyful experience of faith for an experience of ‘darkness’ in which she felt utterly alienated from God. When, however, she eventually passed through the period of darkness, she came upon the realization ‘that it was “dying” and not “doing,” that produced spiritual fruit.’ The depths of the experience left Penn-Lewis convinced that the extent to which Christians poured out their lives for others was the extent to which they could lead spiritually fruitful and fulfilled lives.” May, “Watchman Nee and the Breaking of Bread,” 230–231. May’s reference to Penn-Lewis’ work is from Jessie Penn-Lewis, *The Centrality of the Cross* (London: The Overcomer Book Room, n.d.), 33, 53.

⁷⁰ See Ang Lee, “Watchman Nee,” 182–183. Lee quotes several observations from different authors to back up this conclusion, such as: “Nee’s concern is to emphasize Christian experience and life rather than mere doctrine” (Carl F. H. Henry, “Sharper Focus on Watchman Nee,” *Christianity Today*, May 9, 1975, 31); “Doctrine without holiness was worse than plain ignorance—it was sin. Thus, practical Christian living occupies a high place in Nee, and doctrinal discussions are valuable only as they encourage piety” (Wetmore, “An Analysis of Watchman Nee’s Doctrine of Dying and Rising with Christ as It Relates to Sanctification,” 83–84).

⁷¹ See Ang Lee, “Watchman Nee,” 184–85 for the list of observations he gathered from several sources.

around the question ‘what I ought to be,’ based on and in response to ‘what Christ has accomplished’; and his teachings on Christian spirituality provide practical guidelines and instructions on how the spiritual man’s life is to be conducted.”⁷²

Another scholar, Seung Gon Lee, offers another possible Chinese influence, particularly on Nee’s scriptural hermeneutics. Gon Lee posits that Nee may have been influenced by traditional methods for textual interpretation in Eastern Asia, especially by the tradition of the School of Mind (*Xin Xue*).⁷³ The tradition of the School of Mind is part of the hermeneutic system of neo-Confucianism, which was developed in the era of the Song (960-1289) and Ming (1368-1644) dynasties in China.⁷⁴ In contrast to the other schools of thought within neo-Confucianism, the School of Mind tradition is not preoccupied with *methods* of interpretation or the *meaning* of the words. Rather, its concern lies with the hermeneutic of the construction of the human being itself.⁷⁵ The order of priority, in other words, is always moral formation first,

⁷² Ibid., 187. Ang Lee also notes, “[T]here are many areas of theology thought to be of essential importance by Western theologians that are either totally left out or only mentioned in passing in Nee’s theology. For instance, the entire area of the nature of God and the Holy Spirit, the nature of the Trinity, and the doctrine of election are not dealt with in his theology. Even in topics he chooses to include in his theology, speculative areas are not discussed. What Nee keeps in silence, we think, speaks loudly to his methodological approach, which is pragmatic, rather than speculative” (187-188).

⁷³ Gon Lee, “Exploring the Possibility of an Asian Way of Doing Theology: An Examination of Watchman Nee’s Life and His Theological Thoughts as a Model,” 89.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 95. Confucianism belongs to a text-centered tradition, just as Judaism and Christianity do. Confucianists also regard their scripture as the words of the sage, and as such, it is regarded as true and sacred. Zheng Zhi-ming explains, “The Chinese tradition to the religious scriptures has constantly sustained a mystical and [sacred] attitude. In general, Asian people admitted that the religious scriptures come from god’s revelation, so they thought that it cannot be criticized with human cognitive standard. Rather it is a taboo to deal with it by using human hermeneutic. As a result, rational translation of the sacred scripture has not been developed; instead, the mystic inspiration has become a better method of hermeneutic of religious scripture.” Zheng Zhi-ming, *Zhong Jiao Yu Wen Hua (Religion and Culture): Research for Taiwan Folk Religion* (Taiwan: Student Press, 1990), 84-87. Cited in Ibid., 113.

⁷⁵ Gon Lee, “Exploring the Possibility of an Asian Way of Doing Theology: An Examination of Watchman Nee’s Life and His Theological Thoughts as a Model,” 95. Gon Lee explains that Eastern methods of scripture reading, especially those centered in China, can be divided into two main streams of textual hermeneutics. The first stream is the tradition of the School of Scripture (*Jing-xue*), sometimes also called School of Classical Studies, or simply classical Confucianism. This tradition is represented by the interpretation method (*Zhu su xue*) in the Tang dynasty and the exegetical method (*Xun hao xue*) in the Qing dynasty and emphasizes the objectivity of language and word written in the text and its historicity. In general, this tradition takes a serious view of arrangement, reconstruction, and reinterpretation of a text. The other stream is the tradition of the School of Mind (*Xin Xue*), which is concerned with realizing and embodying the word of sages and practicing it in real life. The *Xin Xue* tradition is represented by the School of Cheng and Zhu (*Cheng-zhu xue*) and the School of Yang-

and only secondarily the knowledge through study.⁷⁶ As Gon Lee cryptically puts it, “the purpose of reading is not to produce [something] I [do not know]... but to restore the *a priori being*. That is, the purpose of reading is not a process [to make] a new creation but... to restore something which has already been created or formed.”⁷⁷ Like a mirror, the text reveals to the readers that they are yet to live according to the standard of the sage.⁷⁸ The whole hermeneutical enterprise thus centers on realizing and embodying the *Tao* (the way, or the truth) of the text in the life of the readers.⁷⁹ In short, Gon Lee suggests that Nee’s approach to Scripture emphasizes morality, practicality, and experience in ways that echo the hermeneutical tradition of the neo-Confucianist School of Mind.

It is the recent work of Paul Chang on Nee’s intellectual biography, however, that perhaps best illuminates the complex relationship between Nee and his Chinese context. Arguing against the common simplistic account of Nee’s life and theology that too easily dismissed him as an oriental copycat of the Western fusion of Brethren fundamentalists and Keswick-Holiness teachers,⁸⁰ Chang offers a more sophisticated reading that takes Nee’s Chinese context more seriously.

Nee’s Chinese context and heritage can be seen more clearly in *implicit assumptions* than in open declarations. His ideas mirrored broad thematic currents in both contemporary and classical China, *even when he was not purposefully echoing them*.

ming (Yang-ming xue) in the form of neo-Confucianism in the Song and Ming dynasties. This tradition, in general, emphasizes the fusion of horizons between the reader’s and the writer’s subjective understanding of life. See *Ibid.*, 90–91.

⁷⁶ Gon Lee, “Exploring the Possibility of an Asian Way of Doing Theology: An Examination of Watchman Nee’s Life and His Theological Thoughts as a Model,” 114.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 113. Emphasis in original.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 114.

⁷⁹ See *Ibid.*, 90, 97.

⁸⁰ In addition to Chloë Starr who is quoted at the beginning of this chapter, Grace May locates Nee’s theology within the Holiness tradition and American Fundamentalism of the late 19th and early 20th centuries: “While indebted to American Fundamentalists for his doctrinal positions, especially with regard to Scripture, Nee and the Assembly adhered to a form of spirituality that pulsated with the life engendered by the holiness movement.... The interesting mix of Fundamentalist teaching and holiness spirituality gave rise to a strong commitment in Nee to correct doctrine and conduct” (May, “Watchman Nee and the Breaking of Bread,” 183–84).

The legacy of his teachings, practices, followers, and institutions is shaped by Chinese history in ways that *the participants themselves may not have realized*.⁸¹

Chang provides several pieces of evidence for this claim, but one of his most interesting examples is Nee's connection with the Western theological traditions alluded to above. While he was profoundly influenced by the Brethren and the Keswick teachings, this does not mean that Nee disregarded specifically Chinese influences in his life. Chang notes that Nee's attraction to both traditions follows a logical pattern. Both Plymouth Brethren ecclesiology and Keswick Convention spirituality were deeply pessimistic. "The Brethren indicted virtually all Western Christian churches, denominations, and associations (even, to some extent, their own) for their divisiveness, artificiality, connections to local governments and politics, lack of holiness, and independence from God." Similarly, despite its warm and ecumenical tone, "Keswick teachers assumed that very few Christians were actually living up to the biblical standard of holiness. Instead, these holiness writers supposed that most Christians were generally defeated in their Christian lives, beholden to sin, fleshly desires, their own egos, and the vanities of the world."⁸² In short, Nee consciously (and critically?) drew from two of the most self-critical strands of Western Christianity. Chang now explains the Chinese connection:

Much of Nee's active ministry took place in Republican China, when the prevailing sentiment was fiercely patriotic and anti-Western. Chinese Christians had to fight off bitter accusations that they were foreign lapdogs, collaborating with imperialists. In such a context, it may seem odd that Nee chose to learn from Westerners at all. Nee's choice of these particular Western influences, however, gave him access to some of the most subtle and scathing critiques that Western Christians had lodged against each other. If Nee had to be associated with Western Christian thought, the Brethren and Keswick theologies had the potential to gain him significantly more interest than almost any others.

Because of their unfavorable judgements of other Christians, both the Brethren and the Keswick teachers were embroiled in controversies in the West, and these controversies would follow Nee throughout his career. In China, however, to be controversial among

⁸¹ Chang, "'The Spiritual Human Is Discerned By No One': An Intellectual Biography of Watchman Nee," 3–4. Emphases added.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 4.

Westerners, was, if anything, a sign that one had maintained one's nationalistic integrity. Although Nee could have easily traded on this anti-Western reputation, he took a more careful route. By taking many of his cues from the West's own critics, Nee claimed to be following a more universal, pure version of Christianity than that practiced by the vast majority of Western Christians.⁸³

For this reason (along with the others), Chang believes that Nee “made for an ideal exemplification of Chinese theology.”⁸⁴ Throughout the rest of his work, Chang suggests some of the confluences that restore Nee to his Chinese context. Just as in the above example, however, these confluences work in a subtle and even paradoxical way. As Chang puts it, “Nee’s system only made sense and retained its vibrancy inasmuch as Nee was not seen to be particularly beholden either to Chinese society or to Chinese thought. Paradoxically, it seemed that Nee could only be a viable representative of a living tradition of Chinese thought to the extent that he shunned the specifically Chinese character of that thought.”⁸⁵ This is one reason, according to Chang, why neither Nee nor his followers would have acknowledged Nee’s teaching as particularly “Chinese” in any way. This is also why many Nee scholars and Asian/Chinese theologians too readily discount the “Chineseness” of his thought. For our purposes, suffice it to say that Chang’s analysis is paramount in substantiating the hybrid character of Watchman Nee as both a universal Christian and at the same time an indigenous one.

⁸³ Ibid., 4–5. His further commentary on this is worth quoting in full: “Instead of being a simple champion of China, Nee was a champion of the idea that Chinese could engage in some of the most demanding forms that the Christian tradition had to offer. They could live rigorous lives of self-denial, forsaking their natural inclinations, preferences, and human affections, representing God in unified, holy congregations that pointed toward the truth of the mystical body of Christ. If Nee believed that this testimony was rather lacking in the West, he was confident that it could be vibrantly represented in China. *By positioning himself in this way, Nee opened up a significant space for Chinese to become serious, devoted Christians, while escaping the ignominy of association with the West.* Those Chinese who followed Nee maintained especially strong links to certain parts of the Western tradition. They prided themselves, however, on taking these rather elevated claims of the Christian tradition more seriously and following them more exactly than most of the Westerners themselves. In so doing, they understood themselves to be returning to the unadulterated practice of New Testament simplicity. *They had become more Biblical than the Western fundamentalists and more spiritual than the Western mystics*” (Ibid., 5-6; emphasis mine).

⁸⁴ Ibid., 6.

⁸⁵ Ibid.

5. Conclusion

By now it should be clear that despite his claim that his teaching was derived directly from Scripture, Nee was greatly influenced by several traditions outlined above. Robert Wetmore manages to capture the amalgam of influences on Nee's thought:

The theological atmosphere which produced Nee's theology was a combination of intense *pietism* from *Keswick-type* devotional writers and *Madame Guyon*, with the doctrinal precision and depth of *Plymouth Brethren* writers. This adds to his own study of Scripture and the Chinese culture, social unrest, and various movements of revival.⁸⁶

What is particularly interesting here is the acknowledgement of Nee's own engagement with Scripture and his Chinese context as factors that formed his theology. The influence of Scripture on Nee's thought should not be discounted, especially given his unwavering commitment to biblical authority and his personal discipline in studying Scripture.⁸⁷ The cultural-social-political context of China in which Nee found himself, particularly in the form of the Anti-Christian Movement of 1920s China, is also significant. As we have seen, Nee chose the route of indigenization along with the threefold processes of separation, identity, and integration, for his Local Church movement.⁸⁸ However, it should be emphasized that he did not consciously separate himself from the West simply for the sake of escaping the pressure

⁸⁶ Wetmore, "An Analysis of Watchman Nee's Doctrine of Dying and Rising with Christ as It Relates to Sanctification," 25. Cited in Liao, "Watchman Nee's Theology of Victory," 39.

⁸⁷ Shao has this to say about Nee's habit of reading Scripture: "Nee used to get up at 4am every morning to read, pray, and deeply meditate on God's Word, bowing down before the presence of God. He was well acquainted with knowledge in God's Word, had a profound comprehension [of] it, and maintained a balance between Old Testament and New Testament entirely. Hence for Watchman Nee, the Bible is a foundation of faith, and he encouraged brothers and sisters in the Lord to put extra effort in reading the Bible as they are young." (Jun-lun Shao, *Wo Zhi Dao De Ni Tuo Sheng De Jing Shen (The Spirit of Watchman Nee that I Know)* (Taipei: Xiao Yuan, 19 No. 5, 1977), 34-37; cited in Gon Lee, "Exploring the Possibility of an Asian Way of Doing Theology: An Examination of Watchman Nee's Life and His Theological Thoughts as a Model," 98. It has also been noted that when he was about 20 years old, Nee read through the New Testament once a week for about a year. See Lee, *Watchman Nee: A Seer of the Divine Revelation in the Present Age*, 24.

⁸⁸ Jonathan Chao explains these three processes: "A Chinese indigenous church would be an independent, non-denominational church, suited to the ethnic characteristics of the Chinese people and integrated with Chinese culture and ways of life." Jonathan Chao, "The Chinese Indigenous Church Movement, 1919-1927: A Protestant Response to the Anti-Christina Movements in Modern China" (Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Pennsylvania, 1986), 4.

from the cultural forces of the day. China's socio-political unrest at the time forced him instead to focus his attention on the Bible more closely. As Ang Lee puts it,

For him Scripture was to be the ultimate guide for all his undertakings. Therefore while the prevailing indigenous endeavor of the Church in China was careful to define the meaning of "Indigenously" to avoid causing undue alarm or offence to the western missionary sending societies, Nee returned to the Scripture to search for guidance for his relationships with the western churches and their missionaries. Thus his ecclesiological teachings reject denominationalism but not missionaries. However, where missionaries were propagating denominationalism or engaging in any undertaking which to him were unscriptural, he opposed them zealously without reservation. With the Scripture as his criteria, it is therefore no embarrassment to him that while the Church as a whole during this period distanced itself from Western influences, Nee instead sought guidance from western authors as long as their teachings were Scriptural.⁸⁹

The same could be said regarding the Chinese philosophical-hermeneutical influences on Nee's theology. For instance, while further research needs to be done to establish a more concrete link between Nee and the neo-Confucianist hermeneutical tradition, as hinted above by Gon Lee, in theory Nee would readily appropriate this approach, not because it is Chinese or traditional but because it is scriptural. Needless to say, his reading of Scripture was inevitably shaped by these sources as well, thus forming a sort of hermeneutical circle within Nee's system. Nevertheless, his own insistence on (and practice in) establishing a pure scriptural form of Christianity needs to be respected, even as it clearly betrays the theological-spiritual location within which Nee operated.

Nee's Theology and Interpretation of Scripture

1. The Ministry of God's Word: Nee's Practical Theology of Scripture

Consistent with his practical approach to Christian faith, Nee treats the subject of Scripture under the rubric "the ministry of the word." Scripture is *God's* ministry of the word for the world. Thus, Nee begins his discussion on Scripture with God, postulating that the most

⁸⁹ Ang Lee, "Watchman Nee," 35–36.

important work of God is the speaking of his word. In a move reminiscent of contemporary speech-act theory, Nee argues that God does things through his word, for God's word is his work.⁹⁰ But Nee quickly adds that God always uses human agents, whom Nee calls "the ministers of the word," to speak his word.⁹¹ All Christians today are called to be ministers of the word, but always in the footsteps of the ministers of the word in the past: the prophets in the Old Testament, the apostles in the New Testament, and Jesus in the Gospel as "the special minister of the word." Nee emphasizes that "all of God's subsequent words are based on His original words." Just as "[a]ll of the words of the New Testament are based on the words of the Old Testament," Nee writes, our ministry of the word today must be based on the speaking of the New and Old Testaments.⁹² In this sense, there is no new word of God apart from God's "old word" in Scripture.

Yet Scripture alone is not enough for the minister of the word. In addition to basing our words on God's previously spoken word, Nee argues that one needs to seek God's own interpretation of his word.⁹³ As he puts it, "God's word must be the foundation, but God must also furnish the explanation."⁹⁴ Underlying this statement is Nee's belief that God's word can

⁹⁰ "Without the word, there would be no work. As soon as His word is removed, His work becomes a void.... God's work is carried out through His word. In fact, His word is His work." Watchman Nee, *The Ministry of God's Word*, vol. 53, The Collected Works of Watchman Nee Set 3 (Anaheim, CA: Living Stream Ministry, 1994), 3. Nee does not specify the scope of God's work here, but it is safe to assume that by 'work' he means the whole range of divine economy as depicted by Scripture.

⁹¹ Indeed, Nee even says that God requires human ministers of the word, for God would not release his word through any other means than a human's mouth. "Only when God's word has been impregnated with the human elements is such a word complete" (Ibid., 16). Nee further asserts, "The basic principle of God's speaking is the principle of the Word becoming flesh. God is not satisfied with having His word alone; He wants His word to become flesh, to become part of man's word. This does not mean that God's word has been downgraded to the status of being just man's word. It means that... [i]t is truly man's word and at the same time truly God's word.... God's word is manifested through man's word and expressed through human elements" (Ibid.). This is what Nee called the principle of incarnation.

⁹² Nee, *The Ministry of God's Word*, 53:77.

⁹³ Nee further notes, "There were many scribes and Pharisees who were very familiar with the Old Testament, but none were ministers of the word. Today some people may have studied the Bible very thoroughly, but this does not mean that they are ministers of the word. Ministers of the word are those who are familiar with God's Word *and* those to whom God has also explained and opened up the Word. A minister of God's word must first possess a proper foundation. Next he must have the proper interpretation" (Nee, 53:78; emphasis mine).

⁹⁴ Ibid., 53:77.

only be interpreted by God Himself: “Without the interpretation of the Holy Spirit, the Word is closed to us and, as such, can never become the basis of our speaking.”⁹⁵

Another assumption at work here is Nee’s understanding of the revelation and inspiration of Scripture. Nee believes that Scripture has a dual nature: human and divine. “On the one hand, there is the outward, physical dimension of the Bible. As far as man’s physical dimension is concerned, he is made of the dust of the ground. But on the other hand, there is a spiritual dimension of the Bible. The Bible is related to the Holy Spirit; it is God’s speaking and God’s breath.”⁹⁶ Nee, however, does not wish only to recognize the distinction between the two; rather, he wishes to keep the two separated, for they belong to two different realms. This explains his insistence, as we will see later, that it takes different organs or faculties to deal with different dimensions of Scripture. While historical knowledge and linguistic skills may help to understand the physical dimension of Scripture, its spiritual dimension requires another organ for understanding it. As Nee likes to put it, only spirit can touch the spirit behind Scripture.⁹⁷

The breath of God is a very important notion for Nee; he returns again and again to the creation of Adam in explaining the inspiration of Scripture: “When God created the world, He created man out of the dust of the earth, but the created man was not alive. Man became a living soul after God breathed His living breath into him.”⁹⁸ In the same way, Scripture as a book written by human authors is not alive until God’s breath is upon it. While this line of thought is not uncommon within evangelical discourse on Scripture, what is perhaps unique is Nee’s belief that the divine breath in Scripture is *temporal or conditional* in nature. That is, the divine

⁹⁵ Ibid., 53:80.

⁹⁶ Ibid., 53:94.

⁹⁷ For a thorough examination of this idea, see the following section on Nee’s hermeneutics.

⁹⁸ Nee, *The Ministry of God’s Word*, 53:93. He continues, “The Bible... is made up of words spoken by men, yet it is God’s word in every sense. It was written by men, yet it was written by God’s own hand in every sense. It contains many expressions, sentences, and words, and God’s breath is upon all of these words.”

breath in Scripture is not static, locked in the text, as it were, but is rather dynamic, blowing actively through the text like a wind.

For Nee, Scripture is “the ministry of God’s word by His servants in the past.”⁹⁹ The letter to Romans, for example, represents Paul’s past ministry of the word to the church in Rome. At that time, Nee explains, God really spoke those words through Paul. “But today when we read the book of Romans, we may only touch the surface of the Bible, the physical and outward side of it. *Today God has to breathe His breath upon this word once again* before we can know God’s word and before we can be a minister to Him.”¹⁰⁰ This breath of God that needs to be invoked to enliven the scriptures again for us today is the same Holy Spirit who inspired the human biblical authors in the past. Nee differentiates between “revelation” and “inspiration”:

Inspiration is a once-for-all occurrence, but revelation is a repeated occurrence. When God breathes His breath upon His word a second time, when we find light again through the Holy Spirit and the anointing upon His word to see what Paul once saw, we have revelation. Revelation means God is doing something today; He is reviving today what He once gave to man through inspiration.¹⁰¹

The first time a word was released, it was released according to the *principle of creation*. When the word was spoken, something was created. A ‘son’ was born; there was a new birth. But the ministry of the word does not function this way today. God’s word is already here, and He is merely repeating what He has already spoken. God is putting His life into His word once more, and when this word becomes living in man, it is revelation to man.... This is *resurrection*.¹⁰²

While Nee emphasizes the temporal and theological differences in these two acts of the Spirit, they are related. There is no revelation today if there was no inspiration in the past. The “principle of resurrection” (revelation), according to Nee, presupposes and follows the

⁹⁹ Ibid., 53:97.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid. Emphasis mine.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 53:98.

¹⁰² Ibid., 53:103. Emphasis mine.

“principle of creation” (inspiration). Thus, while he speaks of “fresh revelation” and “the breathing again of the Spirit,” Nee does not open the door to God’s revelation outside of Scripture. “God has to speak to us a second time *through the words He once used*. He has to enlighten us a second time *through His revealed light*. He has to grant us fresh revelation *within His established revelation*.”¹⁰³ Nee considers this position to be a balanced view—one that takes both the authority of the text and the role of the Spirit, as well as both divine freedom and human responsibility seriously.¹⁰⁴

As noted above, Nee frames his theological discussion on Scripture within the practical context of the ministry of the word, which is synonymous with preaching ministry. In this context, the notion of divine usage or divine speaking becomes central to Nee. The inspired Scripture becomes revelation for us only when God uses it to address us through the preaching of the minister of the word. Furthermore, while God is bound to use *only* Scripture to speak, God is *not* bound to *always* speak every time someone reads, teaches, or preaches Scripture. In short, God has the prerogative to use/speak Scripture according to his own will and time.¹⁰⁵

This, however, does not mean that there is no place for human agency in Nee’s theology and

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, 53:100.

¹⁰⁴ As Nee puts it, “We must see the balance here. On the one hand, God has to use the word that He once released. When we preach God’s word, we do not have to look for new words. Rather, we should base our speaking on what has already been spoken. Yet on the other hand, what we preach should not be just the old words. It should be the same word and yet not the same word. It is the same word, because without that word as the basis, God cannot speak; there is no disagreement in His speaking. Yet in another sense there is the fresh anointing and revelation of the Holy Spirit with this word. Without the fresh anointing and revelation of the Spirit, the same word will not produce the same result. A man has to maintain a proper balance between these two aspects” (Nee, 53:101–2).

¹⁰⁵ As Nee puts it, “Revelation and anointing are in God’s hand. We can only repeat and recall the words; we cannot repeat or recall the revelation.... In reality, if a man does not hear God’s speaking, he can do nothing about it.... If God does not want to speak, man can do nothing. If the Lord will not speak, the ministers will not accomplish anything even if they all speak.... If He does not speak, nothing will happen” (Nee, 53:101, 104).

Based on this conviction, Nee offers interesting advice for his followers: “We should never be professional preachers. Once we become professional preachers, we will speak because it is our job to speak, and we will preach because it is our job to preach. We will not speak or preach as a result of receiving something from God. We must live in the presence of God. Without His presence we will not have the ministry of the word. God has to gain this among us.... For this we can do nothing except ask for His mercy. If the Lord does not speak through us, we cannot convey His word to others. If what we have is nothing more than a book—the Bible, we have nothing that is living. It is true that the basis of the ministry of the word is the Bible, but the Bible alone is not enough; there is the need of the revelation of the Holy Spirit.” *Ibid.*, 53:110.

interpretation of Scripture. On the contrary, Nee devotes a large portion of his treatment of Scripture to discussing human prerequisites for being a minister of the word.

2. Person over Method: Spiritual Prerequisites for Scriptural Reading

In *How to Study the Bible*, Nee begins by criticizing the modern preoccupation with methods in biblical interpretation, which assumes that *anyone* can read Scripture properly, given the right technique. But Nee rejects this assumption, stating that “[o]nly one kind of person can study the Bible, and we have to be that kind of person *before* we can study the Bible.”¹⁰⁶ Interpretive methods, in other words, do not come first; the interpretive agent does. This emphasis is clearly reflected in the order and proportion of his book: Nee devotes literally half of the work to “preparing the right person” for the task of interpretation before discussing his own method of interpretation in the second half¹⁰⁷—a move that is virtually unseen in modern textbooks on biblical interpretation. To appreciate this prioritization of person over method, we need to understand the relationship between the nature of God (and man) and the nature of Scripture in Nee’s mind.

First, Nee argues that we need to approach Scripture similarly to the way that we approach God, for both God and Scripture are essentially spirit. “Since the Lord’s words are spirit, we have to read them in spirit.... This spirit is needed to worship God. This same spirit is needed to read the Bible well. Without this spirit, a man cannot know God. Without this spirit,

¹⁰⁶ Nee, *How to Study the Bible: Practical Advice for Receiving Light from God’s Word*, 7–8. Emphasis mine. His full statement is worth quoting here: “Some people have a misguided concept that very few people can study the Bible. Others have a mistaken notion that anyone can study the Bible. Both are wrong. It is wrong to think that very few people can study the Bible, and it is equally wrong to think that everyone can study the Bible. Only one kind of person can study the Bible, and we have to be that kind of person before we can study the Bible. We have to see that the person is first; the methods second. If the person is wrong, nothing will work even if one has all the right methods... First, we have to be right in our person, and then we can speak about the best methods of Bible study.”

¹⁰⁷ Page 1 to 73 is dedicated to preparing the person, whereas pages 79 to 146 discuss methods of studying Scripture.

he cannot know the Bible either.”¹⁰⁸ This spirit, Nee explains, is no natural human spirit; instead, it is the “regenerated spirit”—the spirit of every regenerated believer.¹⁰⁹ One implication of this argument is that only believers can truly read Scripture in a proper manner. Nee puts it candidly: “No matter how clever and well educated a man is, as long as he is not regenerated, this book is a mystery to him. A regenerated person may not be that cultivated, but he is more qualified to read the Bible than an unregenerated college professor.”¹¹⁰

Being regenerated by the Holy Spirit is a necessary precondition to read Scripture. But that is just a first step. The ideal reader of Scripture is, according to Nee, what he calls the “spiritual person.”¹¹¹ The remainder of the first part of his *How to Study the Bible* is basically a detailed exposition of what it means to be the spiritual person who reads Scripture well. Nee does this by utilizing several metaphors he draws from Scripture itself, and in so doing, he unveils certain theological-hermeneutical assumptions along the way. In what follows, I will look at only one metaphor—that of light/vision—Nee uses to describe the character of the spiritual reader of Scripture.

Drawing from 2 Corinthians 3:18, Nee points out that the basic qualification for being enlightened by the glory of the Lord is to behold Him with “unveiled face,” which he interprets

¹⁰⁸ Nee, *How to Study the Bible: Practical Advice for Receiving Light from God's Word*, 9–10.

¹⁰⁹ Nee draws this conclusion from his treatment of three texts from the Gospel of John. As he summarizes it, “We should put John 4:24, 6:63, and 3:6 together: ‘God is Spirit,’ ‘The words which I have spoken...are spirit,’ and ‘That which is born of the Spirit is spirit.’ The words in the Bible are spirit. The life which a man receives at the time of regeneration is spirit, and it takes a man with spirit to read the words of spirit.” *Ibid.*, 10.

¹¹⁰ Nee, *How to Study the Bible: Practical Advice for Receiving Light from God's Word*, 10.

¹¹¹ Grounding his discussion from 1 Corinthians 2 and 3, Nee discerns three kinds of persons in relation to Scripture. First, the natural or soulish person. The natural person is a non-believer, without a regenerated spirit, and does not have the proper faculties to understand Scripture. Second, the fleshy person or the carnal Christian. Although they have a regenerated spirit in them, carnal Christians do not walk according to this spirit but according to the flesh. Consequently, they can only be fed with “milk” and not “solid food,” which means that they receive revelation only *indirectly* from the spiritual person—just as, Nee reasons, milk is something that is first digested by the mother. The third is the spiritual person, who walks according to the principle of the Spirit and to whom the revelation is given abundantly, as “spiritual things can only be communicated to spiritual man.” See *Ibid.*, 16–17.

as a heart's disposition to be completely *open to God*. Nee then applies this to Scripture reading, positing that only those who are open to God can be enlightened enough to see God's glory in Scripture. To Nee, this explains why some people struggle to understand Scripture. He compares this with someone who never sees the radiance of the sun because they always sit inside a room with a closed door and windows. Nee writes, "*The problem is not with the light but with the person*. Light will only shine on those who are open to it. This is true of physical light, and this is also true of spiritual light. Whenever we lock ourselves in, light cannot shine through.... *We must not pay attention just to reading and studying; rather, we should ask if we are open before the Lord.*"¹¹² He further argues that the amount of shining depends also on the amount of openness to God. This accounts for the various degrees of light readers experience when they read Scripture: full openness to God results in full understanding of Scripture, partial openness results in partial understanding, and no openness results in complete darkness. In short, our spiritual state before the Lord determines our (in)ability to understand Scripture. But the reverse is also true: our engagement with Scripture reveals our true spiritual condition. As Nee puts it, "Any lack of sight that we experience, whether great or small, complete or partial, means that we are in darkness. We should never consider it a small thing to find ourselves having difficulty understanding the Bible. If we have difficulty understanding the Bible, it can only mean one thing: We are living in darkness!"¹¹³

Nee further develops this notion of openness to God in terms of our obedience to the word.¹¹⁴ Taking his cue from John 7:17 ("If anyone resolves to do His will, he will know

¹¹² Nee, 17–18. Emphasis mine.

¹¹³ Nee, 18. He writes further, "The Bible exposes our condition.... If we want to know what a person is like in character and habit, all we have to do is to show him a chapter of the Scriptures and see what he gets out of it. The kind of person he is will determine the kind of reading he will have. A curious man will find the Bible full of curious things. An intellectual person will find the Bible full of reasonings. A simple-minded person will find the Bible merely a collection of verses" (25-26).

¹¹⁴ In addition to the practice of obedience, Nee also offers three practical traits of the spiritual person. They are: *not being subjective, not being careless, and not being curious*. Although at times described as reading

concerning the teaching, whether it is of God or whether I speak from Myself”), Nee argues that obedience is a condition for knowing God’s word.

First there is a right attitude, and then there is revelation. If we respond to the revelation with obedience, we will have more of the right attitude and will receive more revelation.... One experience of obedience will lead to another experience and then to even more obedience. One experience of light will lead to another experience and then to even more light. God’s will is behind every arrangement He has made.¹¹⁵

The interpretive process works like a hermeneutical spiral that brings the reader deeper and deeper into the light of scriptural revelation—provided that the reader continues in active obedience. This arrangement, Nee argues, is orchestrated by divine will. Thus, while Nee emphasizes our spiritual responsibility to receive and perceive God’s revelatory light, he still maintains the divine prerogative in the process. As he puts it, “God is never short of light, but whenever He sees any unwillingness on our part, He will hold back His speaking.... If there is any unwillingness on our part, the Holy Spirit will shy away; He will retreat and not release Himself in a cheap way.”¹¹⁶ In this way, Nee strives to struck a balance between divine and human agency in the spiritual process of scriptural interpretation.

3. Three Things of the Spirit: Hermeneutical Goals of Scriptural Reading

As we have seen, Nee believes that only the spiritual person can properly carry out the task of interpreting Scripture. But what is the goal of reading Scripture, according to Nee? This is an important question, because Nee’s answer reveals some of his main theological-hermeneutical presuppositions.

skills, these three traits are properly part of preparing the *person* of the exegete instead of the method of reading Scripture. Nee sees them as revealing the character of a person (whether one is subjective or objective, careless or careful, and curious or non-inquisitive) as much as prerequisite skills that need to be developed by intentional discipline. Hence, not being able to listen “objectively” to others because one is living in one’s own world of thoughts has a significantly detrimental effect on one’s capacity to read Scripture—just as being sloppy and inquisitive do. See *Ibid.*, 26–33.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 24.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 25.

Nee construes the goal of reading Scripture in terms of “entering into three things related to the Holy Spirit.”¹¹⁷ They are *facts* that were recorded by the Spirit, the *thoughts* of the Spirit, and the *spirit* behind the Scripture. These three things correspond to Nee’s tripartite understanding of Scripture: “On the surface there are the words. Underneath the words there are thoughts, and behind the thoughts is the spirit.”¹¹⁸ This trichotomy of Scripture, in turn, parallels his anthropological trichotomy, i.e., a view that man consists of three different entities or elements: body, soul/mind, and spirit. Nee believes this is God’s providential design for humanity, as well as for Scripture. Thus, our approach to Scripture must conform to the divine trichotomic arrangement of the world and reality.

When one reads Scripture properly, Nee argues, one wishes (1) to get the correct “facts” from the text, (2) to discern “the Spirit’s thoughts” of the text,¹¹⁹ and (3) to “touch the spirit behind the text.” These are all loaded terms in Nee’s theological-spiritual vision, yet for my purpose I will deal only with the third one here. The ultimate goal of reading Scripture, according to Nee, is to encounter the spirit of the text.¹²⁰ But what exactly does Nee mean by

¹¹⁷ See *Ibid.*, 35–73.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 59.

¹¹⁹ “The thought of the Spirit” is defined by Nee as the intention or “purpose of the Holy Spirit’s writing of the [biblical] book at the time He wrote it.” Nee further writes, “The first question we should ask when we read a portion of the Scripture is what is the Spirit’s intention in writing this portion.” Thus, Nee equates “the thought” and “the intention” of the Spirit in the text. Indeed, Nee even uses the term “the original meaning of the Holy Spirit.” At the same time, Nee seems comfortable with equating this with the intention of the human writers of the Bible: “Putting it in another way, we should sense the thoughts of Paul, Peter, John, and the others when the Holy Spirit spoke through them.” However, although Nee sometimes uses the language of (human) authorial intention and the Holy Spirit’s intention interchangeably, I would argue that it is the intention of the Spirit that really matters for him. In other words, the human authors are important only insofar as their thoughts are practically identical with the thoughts of the Holy Spirit who inspired them. It should also be noted that Nee is confident that the reader can get the text’s (human) authorial intention right. This is so, however, not so much through a thorough examination of the literary and historical context of the text, but by the illumination of the Spirit. As he puts it, “The thoughts of the writers of the Scripture should be the thoughts of the readers of the Scripture today. The writers of the Bible were inspired by the Holy Spirit to think a certain way. The readers of the Bible should also be inspired by the Holy Spirit to think the same way.” See *Ibid.*, 36–38.

¹²⁰ Using the metaphor of food, Nee explains the spiritual import of encountering “the spirit of Scripture” over simply knowing “the facts/impression” of the text and the “thoughts/teaching” of the text: “When we study the Bible, our purpose is to receive the ministry of the word. As such... we have to touch the spirit behind the word. If we do not touch that spirit, our understanding of the Bible will be very shallow indeed. At most we will have some doctrines and facts; we will not find spiritual nourishment. If God’s word is only impressions and

“the spirit of/behind Scripture”? Is it the Holy Spirit? Is it Jesus Christ? Is it the “spirit of the biblical authors” (whatever that mean)? Or is it something else?

Here Nee’s thoughts become muddier as he seems to refer to one thing in one place and to other things in another place. In *The Ministry of God’s Word*, for instance, Nee appears to say that the substance of the Bible is Jesus Christ himself. As he puts it, “The Bible is not merely a book; it is not merely pages of writings from which men receive doctrines and teachings. If the book, the Bible, is separated from the person, Christ, the book is a dead thing. In one realm the Bible is a book; in another realm it is Christ Himself.”¹²¹ Nee argues that, just as it requires the Holy Spirit to open our eyes to see Jesus as the Son of God, it also takes the Spirit’s revelation to enable us to see Scripture as the living Word of God.¹²² Scripture is not merely a book in the same way that Jesus Christ was not merely a man. It is noteworthy that here Nee does not only assert Christ as the subject matter of Scripture but also, and more importantly for Nee, Christ as the substance (or “the spirit,” as Nee fondly to say) of Scripture. Put it differently, Scripture is not just *about* Christ; rather, it *is* Christ himself in another form—namely, in the form of scriptural words. Nee could not be clearer than this: “The Bible is living; it is a person. In fact, it is the Son of God Himself. If we do not touch this living word when we read the Bible, whatever we know will not yield any fruit.”¹²³

thoughts to us, it cannot become our food. God’s word must become spirit before it can become our food. Our food can only come as we touch the spirit behind the word. The essence of the Bible is spirit.” *Ibid.*, 60.

¹²¹ Nee, *The Ministry of God’s Word*, 53:113.

¹²² See *Ibid.*, 53:115. He argues further, “God’s Word is a person, and God’s word is also a book. God’s Word is Jesus of Nazareth, and His word is also the Bible. We need God to open our eyes before we can recognize Jesus of Nazareth as being the Word of God and the Son of God. In the same way, God has to open our eyes before we will recognize the Bible as being the word of God and a revelation of His Son. Those who were acquainted with the Lord Jesus and who lived with Him for many years did not know Him. In the same way, those who are acquainted with the Bible and who have read and studied it for many years do not necessarily know the Bible. There is the need of God’s revelation. Only that which God reveals to us through revelation is living” (*Ibid.*, 53:116–117.).

¹²³ Nee, *The Ministry of God’s Word*, 53:121.

On the other hand, and particularly in *How to Study the Bible*, Nee seems to portray “the spirit of Scripture” in a less ontological and less Christological manner, and instead leans more toward a psychological understanding. Nee writes, for instance, that “[e]very portion of the Bible has its own unique spirit behind the word,” and that “certain *feelings and conditions* of the Spirit are impregnated within each portion of the Word.... Behind every passage there is *the feeling* of the Spirit.”¹²⁴ From several exegetical examples that he provides, it may be concluded that what he refers to as the “inner feeling” of the text is the underlying motivation or spiritual disposition behind the character’s action or words in the passage under consideration. Whatever passage Nee examines, the pattern is usually similar: we see one thing on the surface-text level, but there is another (more crucial) meaning hidden on the depth-psychological level. The natural reader perceives only what the text says, but the spiritual person sees more: the inner feeling behind the author or the character’s action or sayings.¹²⁵

Ultimately, Nee’s main concern lies not in defining the content of “the spirit of the Bible,” but rather on prescribing how to “enter into” or “touch” this spirit. He argues that Scripture is providentially arranged into three “things” (words/facts, thoughts/doctrines, and spirit) and that each of these parts can only be accessed with one of the corresponding three “parts” of the regenerated human being (body, soul, and spirit), with the spirit realm serving as the pinnacle of the communion. This realm is where the Holy Spirit is ultimately and fully present, both in the Scripture and on the reader. This is why a proper reader ought to undergo

¹²⁴ Nee, *How to Study the Bible: Practical Advice for Receiving Light from God’s Word*, 59. Emphasis are mine.

¹²⁵ Nee notes, “When our spirit is tempered to a proper condition, the words will be transparent and clear to us, even though the thoughts governing the words have not changed at all. When we speak about them, what comes out may be the same words, and the thoughts behind the words may will be the same, yet we will begin to know and be clear about the things we are speaking of. This is not a result of clarity in thoughts or words but of clarity in the spirit. *This is something deeper than word and thoughts. It is so deep that the only thing we can say is that we are clear, that everything has become transparent to us.* This is what happens when God’s Spirit matches our spirit with the spirit of His Word.” *Ibid.*, 62–63.

“the discipline of the Holy Spirit”¹²⁶ in order to be a “spiritual person” fit for the task of reading Scripture.¹²⁷ Underlying Nee’s whole hermeneutical prescription is a (platonic?) belief that only things that are similar in nature can communicate to each other.¹²⁸ As he puts it, “The Lord has to guide us to the point that our spirit *becomes one* with the spirit behind the Word.”¹²⁹

Whatever this union of the spirits means,¹³⁰ it seems clear that the ultimate goal of reading Scripture, for Nee, is not a matter of understanding the text. As the terms that he often uses (such as “entering into,” “touching,” “matching with,” and “mingling”) suggest, Nee’s vision of reading Scripture is perhaps best described as *communion*—a spiritual union between the spirit of the reader and the spirit of the text in the power and presence of the Holy Spirit.

4. Nee’s Hermeneutical Keys to Reading Scripture

As stated earlier, Nee privileges the spiritual preparation of the reader of Scripture over discussing methods of reading Scripture. But this does not mean that the latter is insignificant. The truth is, Nee spends the second half of his *How to Study the Bible* on the subject of methods. Yet the methods Nee discusses there are not the same as a typical discussion about

¹²⁶ By “the discipline of the Holy Spirit” Nee seems to refer to the actions of the Spirit towards Christians through the ordinary spiritual disciplines but also, and more importantly, through life experiences and suffering. The goal is what he calls “the breaking of the outer man and the release of the spirit” (See Nee, 60). Through life experiences and suffering, the Holy Spirit will “break... the outer man” of our being, which will lead to the “release of [our] spirit.” As he puts it elsewhere, “The breaking of the outer man leads to the free release of the spirit.... If the spirit is released, we can constantly abide in God’s presence. If the spirit is released, we spontaneously touch the spirit of inspiration that lies behind the Bible. We spontaneously receive revelation through the exercise of our spirit. If the spirit is released, we spontaneously will have power in our testimony when we deliver God’s word with our spirit.” Watchman Nee, *The Breaking of the Outer Man and the Release of the Spirit* (Anaheim, CA: Living Stream Ministry, 1997), 21.

¹²⁷ According to Nee, this deeper stage of reading, or communion with, Scripture is not meant for novices in faith. He writes, “During the first few years of our Christian life, we may understand some doctrines and facts, but touching the spirit is something more difficult.... We need a certain amount of time, at least a few years, for the Lord to adjust our spirit, to temper it, and to break it. Once the spirit is broken, it will be easy for the Holy Spirit to bring us into harmony with the condition of the Scriptures. Actually, it takes many years for our spirit to match the spirit of the Bible.... Only the Holy Spirit can bring our spirit into harmony with the spirit of the Bible.” Nee, *How to Study the Bible: Practical Advice for Receiving Light from God’s Word*, 63.

¹²⁸ Nee asserts, “Only when the two spirits are similar can we touch that which lies behind the Word. If they are not similar, we cannot touch anything.” *Ibid.*, 61.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*

¹³⁰ It should be noted that Nee is *not* clear on what this union means, although he often emphasizes its urgency and reality/possibility.

methods in many works of biblical hermeneutics. Rather, true to his practical approach to Christianity, they are practically oriented and in line with the general outlook of his spiritual theology of Scripture treated above. The bulk of the discussion outlines the various “Bible study plans” that Nee suggests, which will be discussed in the next section below. But first a brief consideration of Nee’s four practical “keys” to unlock the Bible, namely searching, memorization, comparison, and meditation, is required.¹³¹

By searching, Nee simply means “to read with deliberation and to devote time and care to our reading.”¹³² He advises readers to ask typical observational questions about the text, such as: “When was this written? Who wrote it? Who was it written to? Under what circumstance was this written... What was the purpose for writing it?”¹³³ Yet he has something more in mind as he quickly adds that “[a]mong the many words that God has spoken, there is *one word* which we need at the present moment. There is *one word* which will render us spiritual help at this particular time for this particular occasion.”¹³⁴ The search, in other words, is the particular search for a fresh word of God that really speaks to us today—what Nee calls “revelation,” as discussed above.¹³⁵ While actively searching,¹³⁶ the readers need to develop patience as a hermeneutical virtue, for it is ultimately God’s work to reveal his word (in and through

¹³¹ Cf. Watchman Nee, *Messages for Building Up New Believers (1)*, vol. 48, The Collected Works of Watchman Nee Set 3 (Anaheim, CA: Living Stream Ministry, 1994), 132–137. In this book, Nee offers “four basic principles in reading the Bible” that parallel the four hermeneutical keys in *How to Study the Bible*. While they are basically the same, Nee uses different wording in outlining them. Here are the four steps of reading Scripture according to *Messages for Building Up New Believers*: 1) discover the facts; 2) memorize and recite the words; 3) analyze, categorize, and make comparisons; and 4) receive God’s enlightening.

¹³² Nee, *How to Study the Bible: Practical Advice for Receiving Light from God’s Word*, 79.

¹³³ *Ibid.*

¹³⁴ *Ibid.* My emphasis.

¹³⁵ See Nee’s view of Scripture vis-à-vis revelation in the section of “The Ministry of God’s Word” above.

¹³⁶ Nee likens the whole process to “rummaging through our closets for a lost article of clothing,” examining many things for the purpose of searching for one thing that is necessary. Nee, *How to Study the Bible: Practical Advice for Receiving Light from God’s Word*, 79.

Scripture) to the reader.¹³⁷ Here, even in the first step/key of searching the Scripture, Nee already operates within his spiritual-mystical approach to Scripture:

If we come across anything in the Bible that we do not understand, we should not be anxious. There is no need to force ourselves to mentally apprehend or understand it, and there is no need to insist on receiving light from it. Things that come from the head will not produce an ‘amen’ from the spirit. Doctrines that are formulated by the mind are rejected by the spirit. We must not study God’s Word according to the mind. Rather, we should be patient, and search slowly. When God’s time comes, He will show us something.¹³⁸

The second key to unlock Scripture, as it were, is “by memorizing.” This is a curious choice, for one might simply ask whether Scripture memorization contributes to the interpretive process at all. For Nee, however, memorizing Scripture is significant because it creates a condition of possibility to receive divine revelation. As he puts it,

Whenever God grants us a revelation, He does so through the words of the Bible. If we do not memorize the Scriptures, it will be hard for revelation to come to us. This is the reason we should have God’s Word in our mind all the time. Memorizing the Scriptures is not for memorization alone; it is to lay the groundwork for us to receive revelation. If we memorize the Scriptures often and well, it will be easy for us to receive revelation and enlightenment, and the Holy Spirit will find it easier to speak to our spirit.¹³⁹

Note two important things highlighted here. First, as we recall, God’s revelation always uses the words of Scripture. Thus, we need to be immersed in the scriptural words (or world) by way of reading and memorizing Scripture. Second, although it always uses the words of Scripture, the event of revelation can occur any time, even outside the actual reading of Scripture, hence the importance of having the words of Scripture in our heart/mind.¹⁴⁰

¹³⁷ As Nee puts it, “Patience is needed in reading the Bible. If we do not understand something, we should come back to it a second time. We should read until we understand what it says. If God enlightens us and opens our eyes the first time, we can thank the Lord for it. But if He does not enlighten us or open our eyes the first time, we should go back and study it carefully the second, third, and even hundredth time.” *Ibid.*, 80.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*, 82.

¹⁴⁰ Nee also emphasizes the right attitude in the act of memorizing Scripture: “If a man merely memorizes the Scriptures with his mind, but his heart is not receptive or open to God and he is not submissive or meek, his memorization will not result in God’s word dwelling in his heart. Yet if a man thinks that there is no need to memorize God’s word because he only needs to be meek and submissive and open and receptive to God, he also

The third hermeneutical key is comparison. Taking his cue from 2 Peter 1:20,¹⁴¹ Nee establishes what he called the *principle of prophetic interpretation*: “We must compare our reading of one passage of the Scriptures with other passages.”¹⁴² While most take 2 Peter 1:20 to mean that God’s prophecy is not to be interpreted by human ideas, Nee argues that the grammar of Peter’s word should render the text to mean that no prophecy is of *its* (instead of *one’s*) own interpretation.¹⁴³ This means that the phrase “own interpretation” refers to an interpretation of a prophecy/text by that very prophecy/text itself! Nee reasons, “God’s speaking is not completed through just one text. In the books of the prophets we are told that God’s word is ‘here a little, there a little’ (Isa. 28:13). Therefore, no Bible student should interpret a passage according to that passage alone.”¹⁴⁴ To do so would lead to a “private interpretation,” which in turn opens the door to heretical teachings. As Nee puts it,

Many heresies in Christianity have resulted from men holding on to one or two verses of the Bible without consulting other related passages. Satan also quotes the Scriptures here and there, but he quotes them to tempt men. We must remember that the more we compare, the less we will be liable to private interpretation. It is much safer for us to compare one verse with ten other verses.... The more comparisons we make, the better it is.¹⁴⁵

The fuller meaning of a passage can only be perceived when the reader compares it with other passage(s) because the nature of God’s revelation in Scripture is “progressive,” according to Nee.¹⁴⁶ It is related to the way in which God reveals himself in Scripture, which is “here a little, there a little.” Therefore, comparative reading is not just safer (to protect against the heretical

will not be able to have God’s word dwelling in his heart” (Nee, 81). Here, as in other places, Nee attempts to strike a balance between the right method of studying Scripture and the right person who studies it, between the outer action of memorization and the inner disposition of being receptive to the word that one memorizes.

¹⁴¹ Beside 2 Peter 1:20, Nee also utilizes Psalm 36:9 (“In your light we see light”) in this section.

¹⁴² Nee, *How to Study the Bible: Practical Advice for Receiving Light from God’s Word*, 84.

¹⁴³ Nee also asserts, “If this verse meant that no prophecy is to be interpreted by man, Peter would have been too simple, for every Christian knows that God’s prophecy cannot be interpreted according to man’s own ideas. It would be redundant for Peter to say this.” (83)

¹⁴⁴ Nee, *How to Study the Bible: Practical Advice for Receiving Light from God’s Word*, 84.

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 85.

excess of private interpretations), but it is also the only reading that “can give us much light,” to “see many things which we previously have not seen.”¹⁴⁷

Nee’s fourth hermeneutical key is meditation. Meditating, for Nee, is to mold our thoughts according to the thoughts of Scripture. This has two sides: “On the one hand, we meditate when we read the Bible. On the other hand, we mediate at all times.”¹⁴⁸ Nee leaves the nature and mechanism of the meditation unexplained, while emphasizing the spontaneous character of this practice as it becomes a Spirit-led habit. At times, his explanation overlaps greatly with both the memorization step and the patiently waiting part of the searching step discussed above. The underlying assumption behind this practice of meditating on Scripture, however, is that the Holy Spirit will do his own work with his words once the reader has done all of his/her homework by inhabiting the world of Scripture.¹⁴⁹ As Nee puts it, “We should be inclined toward God’s Word in a spontaneous way.... It is not a matter of forcing ourselves to think about the Scriptures. The Holy Spirit will direct our thoughts in this direction, and it will become part of our habit. Once we develop such a habit, we will spontaneously become rich in the Lord.”¹⁵⁰

¹⁴⁷ Ibid. Nee offers an example of this comparative reading: “Revelation 19 says that when the Lord descends from heaven to fight, He will remove all His enemies by the sword of His mouth. If we interpret this text by itself, we may conclude that the Lord’s mouth contains a sword, and we may even say that this sword is quick, sharp, and shining. If we realize that no Scripture should be interpreted by its own interpretation, we immediately will look for the meaning of ‘sharp sword’ when we come to this passage, and from Ephesians 6:17 we will find that the sharp sword refers to the Word of God” (Ibid., 84-85).

¹⁴⁸ Ibid., 86.

¹⁴⁹ This assumption is made clearer when we compare this key to Nee’s fourth step of studying Scripture in *Messages for Building Up*: “First, discover the facts. Then memorize, analyze, categorize, and compare these facts. After this *pray to the Lord and wait on Him; He will enlighten you and give you sight*. These are the four principles of reading the Bible. We cannot skip any of them.” Nee, *Messages for Building Up New Believers (1)*, 48:134. Emphases are mine.

¹⁵⁰ Nee, *How to Study the Bible: Practical Advice for Receiving Light from God’s Word*, 86–87.

5. Two Examples of Nee's Bible Study Plans

As mentioned, the bulk of the second part of Nee's *How to Study the Bible* is comprised of various study plans. In it, he offers no less than twenty-eight plans for studying the Bible.¹⁵¹ While the plans seem randomly ordered and bear an experimental nature, they nevertheless reveal some of Nee's underlying hermeneutics. I will use a brief exploration of two of his Bible study plans below to demonstrate the consistency of Nee's overall theology, his ontology of Scripture, and his understanding of the task of scriptural interpretation.

First, Nee recommends a method of studying Scripture through its *numbers*. Rather than explaining how this numerical study can help one in reading Scripture, Nee goes straight on to interpret what number one to twelve may signify in Scripture. Some of these interpretations appear simple and straightforward, whereas others require some mathematical calculation and theological imagination to decipher their logic. According to Nee, number one signifies the one unique God, number two signifies fellowship, and number three signifies the Triune God. So, both number one and number three signify God, with number one referring to God's unity and number three to God's completion. The meaning of number four, however, is more complex

¹⁵¹ They are: (1) "Main Characters"; (2) "Women"; (3) "Types"; (4) "Prophecies"; (5) "Dispensations"; (6) "Topical Studies"; (7) "God's Relationship to Man"; (8) "Chronology"; (9) "Numerology"; (10) "Parables"; (11) "Miracles"; (12) "Jesus' Earthly Teachings"; (13) "Comparison of the Four Gospels"; (14) "Crucial Chapters," of which Nee references chapters such as Numbers 21, Deuteronomy 8, Psalms 22, Isaiah 53, Matthew 5-7, John 14-16, etc.; (15) "Past, Present, and Future," which is a plan to study Scripture according to our time referent to items that have already occurred, are our present reality, and will occur in the future as promised in Scripture; (16) "Salvation, Sanctification, and Ministry," which is a study plan of scriptures based on their applicability to stages in our spiritual life; (17) "Minerals," which is a study plan that involves tracing minerals throughout Scripture, e.g. the use of gold as representative of God's glory or the use of silver as representative of the Lord's redemption; (18) "Geography"; (19) "Names of Persons," specifically in reference to their meanings in Hebrew or Greek; (20) "Choruses," specifically in reference to poetic passages; (21) "Prayers," such as Abraham's intercession for Sodom or Paul's prayers in Ephesians; (22) "Difficult Passages"; (23) "Book-by-book Studies"; (24) "In-depth Studies of Key Books," e.g. Genesis, Daniel, Song of Songs, Matthew, Romans, Ephesians, and Revelation; (25) "Christ"; (26) "Word Studies," that is, by tracing key words through the Bible, of which Nee offers 50 examples; (27) "Doctrines"; and (28) "The Progression of Doctrines in the Bible." It is noteworthy that these plans are given to Christian novices as an exercise to be experimented with, although Nee strongly encourages his readers to try all the plans one by one to get the most of Scripture. See Nee, *How to Study the Bible: Practical Advice for Receiving Light from God's Word*, 101–46, for his full explication of each category.

than the first three. Nee reasons that since number three (3) signifies God, number four (which is 3 + 1) means anything that came out of God, i.e., God's creation. Therefore, number four must be the number of creatures. Nee finds the justification on this reasoning in scriptural data itself:

Everything that relates to the creature is four in number. For example, there are four corners of the earth, four seasons, four winds, and four rivers that flow from the garden of Eden. The image in Nebuchadnezzar's dream has four sections. Four beasts come out of the sea. The living creatures that represent all creation are four in number. The Lord Jesus' life on earth is recorded in four Gospels. Everything that is produced from God is four in number.¹⁵²

Nee's take on the significance of numbers six, seven, and twelve are no less intriguing. Number six is a human number, for human was created on the sixth day. It also denotes that "what man does can never match what God does,"¹⁵³ for six is less than seven, which is the number of perfection. Although it is customary to regard number seven in Scripture as a symbol of perfection, Nee thinks that it symbolizes a temporary perfection, and not an eternal one. He writes,

Three is the number of God. Four is the number of the creature. The sum of the Creator with the creature is perfection. God plus man equals perfection. But this is only... temporary perfection. Everything temporal in the Bible is signified by seven. For example, there are seven days to a week... seven churches in Revelation, seven lampstands, seven messengers, seven seals, seven trumpets, and seven bowls. All these refer to temporal perfection rather than perfection in eternity.¹⁵⁴

Eternal perfection belongs to number twelve. While there are a lot of sevens in the book of Revelation, Nee observes that in the new heaven and new earth there is no record of seven things. What we read instead, "[t]he New Jerusalem has twelve gates, twelve foundations, the names of the twelve apostles, twelve kinds of precious stones, and twelve pearls. The wall of

¹⁵² Ibid., 114.

¹⁵³ Ibid.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid.

the city was a hundred and forty-four cubits, which is twelve times twelve. All these will remain forever. Thus, twelve signifies eternal perfection.”¹⁵⁵ What is more, Nee goes beyond this scriptural observation to theologically speculate on the difference between number seven and number twelve:

Three plus four is simply God plus man, the Creator plus the creature. But three times four is the Creator multiplied by the creature. This means that the two are mingled together. There is a difference between addition and multiplication. In multiplication, God and man are no longer separate. It is a oneness between the creating God and the created beings. Such a oneness is eternal. Hence, the perfection signified by twelve is an eternal perfection.¹⁵⁶

While admittedly bizarre to modern ears, Nee’s interpretive numerology is not without its internal logic. He wishes to make an account of theological differences between temporal perfection and eternal perfection, between the initial act of creation and the final act of union/consummation, and between the first step of being Christian and the higher life of being the spiritual man. If this is a proper theological distinction—which Nee thinks it is—then it should be reflected in all Scripture, including its numbers. Combining this theological conviction with some scriptural data along with basic mathematics, Nee creatively offers the numerical significance of number one to twelve in the Bible.

The second example that I will highlight is his study plan of following “*the progression of doctrines in the Bible*.” In this study plan Nee asks the readers to trace the development of a doctrine throughout Scripture. Underlying this method is Nee’s theological assumption about the progressive nature of God’s revelation in Scripture, which was touched upon earlier. Nee believes that “every time [God] grants us a new revelation, it is more advanced than the old ones.”¹⁵⁷ The progressive nature of Scripture, however, does not mean that the previous

¹⁵⁵ Ibid., 115.

¹⁵⁶ Ibid.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid., 140.

revelation in Scripture is obsolete, although he admits that “when compared to the total revelation, each revelation is incomplete.”¹⁵⁸ So, for instance, “God’s revelation to Abraham was perfect at his time. But when we view it in the light of the total revelation today, we realize that the revelation to Abraham was not adequate. We have to learn to trace God’s revelation through Adam, Noah, Abraham, the children of Israel, Moses, etc., in a full and complete way.”¹⁵⁹ This is no mere typical canonical reading of Scripture, because Nee is not primarily concerned with the historical process of the canonization of certain books in Scripture within a community of faith, along with its hermeneutical import. Rather, Nee thinks almost purely in a theological-spiritual manner: he believes that the order of the books within the canon of Scripture *literally* reflects God’s progressive revelation of himself to humanity. The newer, in other words, is better and fuller than the older. Yet the older is indispensable because it is still God’s.

Nee believes that any truth or topic in the Bible has its own scriptural history that is marked by the canonical order of Scripture. For example, Nee argues that the revelation in the New Testament is more advanced than the revelation in the Old Testament; the Acts of the Apostles is further advanced than the Gospels; Pauline epistles further advanced than the Acts; and Johannine epistles and Revelation further along than Paul. Concerning studying a particular topic in Scripture, Nee instructs that one needs to find where it is first introduced, where it is developed and expanded, and where it is fully treated and settled. For

[e]very truth has its peak. The revelation is unveiled in one book, and then further revelations are unveiled in other books. When the progression reaches a certain book, the revelation peaks. For example, in studying the subject of righteousness, we have to start from Matthew and consider how this topic is first unveiled. . . . By the time we reach Romans and Galatians, the subject reaches its peak.¹⁶⁰

¹⁵⁸ Ibid., 141.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid.

¹⁶⁰ Ibid., 144–145.

Obviously, this narrowly constructed topical method raises a lot of questions both theologically and hermeneutically, which I will not address here. But for the purpose of this dissertation, it is sufficient to note that throughout his work, both in his theoretical-theological and practical-exegetical discussions, Nee is quite consistent with his overall approach to Scripture. Among other things, this reveals Nee's fundamental conviction that God is the ultimate author of the whole canon of Scripture, one who providentially arranged his self-revelation in a decisively progressive manner.

Nee's Theological Reading of Eve in Genesis 2: An Extended Example

Although we have seen bits and pieces of Nee's exegesis above, it is necessary at this juncture to provide a more substantial example of his actual exegesis to tie together many of the previously mentioned elements of his hermeneutic. For this purpose, I have chosen Nee's treatment of Genesis 2 in *The Glorious Church: God's View Concerning the Church*. As the subtitle suggests, this work explores the nature of the church from a heavenly perspective: the church as triumphant and glorious counterpart of Christ. It does so through a figural reading of four women in Scripture: Eve in Genesis 2, the wife in Ephesians 5, the woman in Revelation 12, and the Bride in Revelation 21-22. Due to limited space, I will only discuss Nee's treatment on Eve below.¹⁶¹

In his search for the church in Scripture, Nee begins with neither the Gospels nor the Acts of the Apostles, but from the very beginning: the creation of Adam and Eve in Genesis 2.

¹⁶¹ Nee's ecclesiology is a crucial subject of his theology that is worth a study of its own. Though his ecclesiology cannot be separated from his exegesis, as we will see shortly, the focus of the present study is the latter and not the former. For a scholarly treatment of Nee's ecclesiology, see: May, "Watchman Nee and the Breaking of Bread"; Pamudji, "Little Flock Trilogy"; Lu, "Watchman Nee's Doctrine of the Church with Special Reference to Its Contribution to the Local Church Movement."

Drawing from 1 Corinthians 15 and Romans 5, Nee takes it for granted that Adam is a type of Christ, which means “all that God purposed in Adam was to be achieved in Christ.”¹⁶² If Adam is a type of Christ, Nee reasons, then Eve must be a type of the church, for Ephesians 5:22-32 reveals that the church is Christ’s wife. To Nee, this means that God’s purpose in creation is not only accomplished by Christ but is also by the church, as evidenced in Genesis 2:18: “It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a help meet [sic] for him.”¹⁶³ According to Nee, from the very beginning God has Christ and the church in his mind, and the church is intended to complement Christ in fulfilling God’s will.

“God’s purpose in creating the church is that she may be the help meet of Christ. Christ alone is only half; there must be another half, which is the church.... [H]aving Adam alone, or we may say, having Christ alone, is not enough to satisfy God’s heart.... [T]here must also be Eve, that is, there must also be the church. Then His heart will be satisfied.”¹⁶⁴

Having identified Adam and Eve as Christ and the church, Nee then explores the meaning of the fact that Eve was created out of Adam. Nee contrasts this with the creation of other living creatures that were made of the earth:

All the beasts of the field, the cattle, and the birds... were made of earth. They were not taken out of Adam; therefore, they could not be the help meet to Adam.... Eve was formed out of a rib taken from Adam; therefore, Eve was the constituent of Adam. This means that the church comes out of Christ. Only that which is out of Christ can be the church. Anything that is not of Christ is not the church.¹⁶⁵

That Eve was made from Adam (and not from the earth) significantly informs Nee’s understanding of the nature of the church. Against the common evangelical notion of the church as a voluntary society, Nee remarkably presents a very high ecclesiology: the church is God’s

¹⁶² Watchman Nee, *The Glorious Church* (Anaheim, CA: Living Stream Ministry, 1993), 25.

¹⁶³ This is the Bible translation that Nee himself used. See *Ibid.*, 26.

¹⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 27.

(not man's) creation; she was made out of Christ himself. Indeed, Nee goes so far to say, the church is Christ in another form!

The fact that Eve was made from Adam signifies that the church is made from Christ. Eve was made from Adam's rib. Since Eve came out *from* Adam, she was still Adam. Then what is the church? The church is another form of Christ, just as Eve was another form of Adam. The church is just Christ. Oh, there are many people who think that the church is the coming together of the "people" who believe in the Lord and are saved. No, this is not true! Then who constitutes the church? The church is only that portion which has been taken out of Christ. In other words, it is the man which God has made by using Christ as the material. It is not a man made of clay. The material of the church is Christ. Without Christ, the church has no position, no life, no living, and no existence.¹⁶⁶

Nee also adds his argument from Genesis 1:26-27. Carefully noting that there are mixed singular and plural pronouns in these verses, Nee sees them as another hint that God views Adam and Eve as one entity and yet two persons. As he puts it,

Verse 26 says, "And God said, Let us make man in our image, after our likeness: and let *them*...." In the Hebrew language the word "man" is singular, but immediately following, the plural pronoun "them" is used. The same pattern is used in verse 27 which says, "So God created man in his own image, in the image of God created he him; male and female created he them." The noun "man" is singular, but the following pronoun "them" is plural. God created one man; but we can also say that He created two! One is two, and yet the two are one because Eve was *in* Adam.¹⁶⁷

This demonstrates that for Nee every detail in Scripture is important because it is *God's* detail. The change of pronouns (from singular to plural, or vice versa) is no mistake, but is divinely intentional. Thus, while Nee may be aware that Genesis 1 and 2 offer different accounts of the creation of man and woman, he does not theorize that they must come from two different sources in the manner of modern biblical scholarship. Instead, he offers a theological interpretation that posits that when God created Adam in chapter 1, Eve also was already included *in* Adam.

¹⁶⁶ Ibid., 28–29.

¹⁶⁷ Ibid., 27–28. His emphasis.

So, the church is in Christ, just as Eve was in Adam. But the opposite is also true: Christ is in the church. Nee argues this in two ways. First, he brings 1 Corinthians 10:17 into the discussion and suggests that the sacramental bread that Christians partake is that which makes the church *church*. His focus here is on the oneness of the church as it is signified by the one loaf of bread, which represents the one body of Christ. But Nee also stresses that Christ truly lives/resides in the church by means of this regular partaking of the Lord's Supper.¹⁶⁸ Against the mere sociological understanding of the church, Nee maintains that "[t]he church is not a matter of several Christians being put together with several other Christians. It is not so many 'men'; it is a *life*. The church is the church only because there are many people who all share the same life, the same Christ. You have a portion of Christ, and he has a portion of Christ; each one of us has a portion of Christ."¹⁶⁹ This life of Christ that the church is, is given and received in the Eucharist; this bread is the portion (read: body) of Christ. Nee concludes, "When all of these portions of Christ are put together, there is the church."¹⁷⁰

Second, he returns to the Genesis principle: "Only that which was made of Adam's rib was Eve." Without the rib of Adam, Nee reasons, there would have been no Eve. "She could exist only because a part of Adam was in her. It is the same with the church."¹⁷¹ Nee then interprets the rib/bone of Adam as the resurrection life, for when Christ was on the cross, none of his bones were broken. "Only that which is formed from the resurrection life of Christ is the

¹⁶⁸ As Nee puts it rather remarkably, "For many centuries throughout the world, all Christians have taken a little portion of this loaf and eaten it! If you could take all the pieces they have eaten and put them together, they would become the whole church. The church is not an individual 'I' plus an individual 'you.' It is not Mr. Smith plus Mr. Jones or even all the Christians in the whole world put together. The church is the Christ in you, the Christ in him, and the Christ in all the Christians around the world throughout all the centuries put together. Our natural man has nothing to do with the church. The only part of us which is related to the church is the portion of the loaf which we have eaten. This is especially shown in the Gospel of John, where it is revealed that all those who believe in the Lord have Christ dwelling in them and are therefore one in the Spirit." *Ibid.*, 29.

¹⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 32. Emphasis in original.

¹⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 31.

church,” Nee asserts.¹⁷² Thus, the church is not only in Christ, but Christ—his life—is in the church as well.¹⁷³

Furthermore, Nee is interested in the scriptural detail that Eve was created out of Adam’s rib *when Adam was asleep*. He interprets this as symbolizing that “God brought forth the church out of *the death of Christ*.”¹⁷⁴ This death, however, is a special kind of death that Nee calls “Christ’s non-redemptive death.” Concerning this death, Nee writes:

Regarding the death of Christ, the words in Genesis 2 are very special. It says, “The Lord God caused a deep sleep to fall upon Adam” (v. 21). This verse does not say that God caused Adam to die, but that He caused him to fall into a deep sleep. If death has been mentioned, then sin would be involved, because verse 17 in the preceding passage says that death and sin are related. Adam’s sleep typifies the aspect of Christ’s death which was not related to redemption. In the death of Christ there was an aspect which was not related to redemption but to the release of Himself. We are not saying that the death of Christ is not for redemption—we truly believe that it is—but His death involved an aspect which is not related to redemption. This aspect is the releasing of Himself for the creation of the church. It has nothing to do with sin. God is taking something out of Christ and using it to create the church. Therefore, “sleep” is used to typify His death through which man receives life.¹⁷⁵

¹⁷² Ibid.

¹⁷³ Nee offers some practical implications of this view for Christians: “The basis of our being a part of the church is our new birth, since it is then that Christ imparts Himself to us. *Therefore, there is a need for us to live, behave, and act according to this life, the life of Christ*. God cannot do anything more for us than to impart His Son into us that we may share the life of Christ. Even though we are just earthen vessels, there is a great treasure within us.... However, if we act according to ourselves, we are outside the church. Anything other than the portion of Christ in us is not the church; it is simply our own selves” (Nee, 31; Emphasis mine).

Thus, the twofold spiritual-practical outcome that Nee expects from seeing the church “from God’s point of view” are: (1) Christians are to live according to, or out of, the life of Christ *and* (2) they are not to live according to, or out of, themselves. To use Nee’s own terms, “if the church is to become a real church, two steps are necessary: the spreading or increase of Christ *and* the consuming of our self” (Ibid., 33. Emphasis mine). Or, as Nee puts it elsewhere, they are: the release of the spirit *and* the breaking of the outer man. The two steps are really two sides of the same coin and reflect the Holiness-Keswick influence in his theology. However, this illustrates not only that of the consistency of Nee’s theology and his exegesis, but also his ethico-practical interest in his exegesis. In other words, Nee’s figural reading of Eve as the church is not purely an exegetical exercise in and for itself; rather, it always geared toward the overall spiritual-practical purpose of making the corporate spiritual man, which is the church as God sees it.

As a side note on this notion of the church as a corporate man in God’s eyes, Nee has a very intriguing, albeit cryptic, comment: “We must be clear that God does not want individuals. God created man, male and female. The male is singular, and the female is also singular. Christ is singular, and the church is also singular. In the sight of God there is only one Christ and only one church. In the future we will see that there is only one man in Hades and only one man in the heavens; there is no third man. In God’s eyes, He only sees two men in the whole world. First Corinthians 15 reveals that Adam is the first man and Christ is the last man. There are no others. The Body of Christ, just as Eve, is one—not many!” Ibid., 32.

¹⁷⁴ Nee, *The Glorious Church*, 36. Emphasis mine.

¹⁷⁵ Ibid.

Again, this remark shows how Nee pays close attention to the details of the text, such as the use of the word “sleep” (instead of “death”) and the connection between sin and death in verse 17. But the underlying rationale of his interpretation is arguably a theological one: since the sleep of Adam was for the creation of Eve, and not for her redemption, so the death of Christ typified by Adam’s sleep must be for the purpose of imparting life to the church, and not for her redemption. This reading is also strengthened by Nee’s interpretative comparison between this text (Gen. 2) and John 19:31-37. In both texts something happens to the rib/side of the men: Adam’s rib was taken out after he slept, and Jesus’ side was pierced after he died. Nee argues that the fact that Jesus’ side was pierced *after* he died means the work of redemption had already been accomplished. This means the piercing of the side of Jesus was not for redemptive purposes, just as in Adam’s case. Nee also interprets the blood *and* water that came out of Jesus’ side as the two works of Christ: “It reveals that the work of Christ not only involved the shedding of His blood to redeem us from sins, but also the flowing out of water, typifying the imparting of His life to us.... The blood deals with our sins, while the water causes us to receive His life.... Blood is used for redemption; water is used for the non-redemptive aspect [of Christ’s death].”¹⁷⁶ In other words, Adam’s rib that was taken out for the creation of Eve prefigures the water that came out of Jesus’ side;¹⁷⁷ both represent the impartation of Christ’s life to the church, and not about the redemption of sin.

The emphasis on the sinlessness of the church is crucial to Nee’s ecclesiology. For *that* is how God sees the church: holy and blameless. The basis of this claim, as we have seen, is

¹⁷⁶ Ibid., 37. Nee distinguishes two aspects of Christ’s death: “Redemption and the receiving of life are two distinct things. Redemption involves a negative aspect of dealing with our sins. We have sinned and deserve to die; therefore, Christ came to bear our sins. His death accomplished redemption for us. This aspect of His death is related to sin. But there is another aspect of His death which is not related to redemption: It is the imparting of Himself to us so that through His death we may receive life” (36).

¹⁷⁷ Nee does not make this correspondence (between Adam’s bone and Jesus’ water) explicit but given his overall argument I think it is quite easy for readers to make that judgment.

Nee's figural reading of Eve. While he believes that many women in Scripture can and should also be read typologically as the church,¹⁷⁸ Nee nevertheless regards Eve as unique and the most important ecclesial figure.¹⁷⁹ The reason is

because Eve portrays the church as it really is in God's mind and the place it has in His eternal plan. All the other types occur after man's fall; only the type of Eve precedes the fall. All other types involve the matter of moral responsibility; this one alone is free of it. The Eve that God made came out of Adam, not out of a redeemed sinner.¹⁸⁰

The church comes out of the holy Christ; she is Christ himself in another form. Thus, Nee concludes, "We must see that the church is the vessel chosen by God to manifest His Son, Christ.... God desires to obtain a church, a corporate man, in whom everything is out of Christ and for Christ, a church in which there is no history of sin.... Oh, may we all enter into God's view of the church!"¹⁸¹

¹⁷⁸ Nee lists no less than six other women in the Old Testament as figures that typify the various aspects of the church: Rebecca's marriage to Isaac typifies the church being offered to Christ (Gen. 24:61-67). The marriage between Joseph and Asenath, and her bearing children in Egypt (Gen. 41:50), typifies how the church is chosen from the world for God. The marriage of Zipporah to Moses in the wilderness (Ex. 2:21) typifies the church in the wilderness. When Achsah marries Othniel, the request she makes of the springs from Caleb (Josh. 15:17-19) typifies the church's acquisition of her inheritance. Ruth's marriage to Boaz (Ruth 4:13) typifies the redemption of the church. Abigail's marriage to David (1 Sam 25:3-42) typifies the church enlisted as an army for warfare. See Nee, *The Glorious Church*, 39.

¹⁷⁹ In *The Glorious Church*, Nee argues that the wife in Ephesians 5, the woman in the vision of Revelation 12, and the wife of the Lamb in Revelation 21, along with Eve in Genesis 2, are actually one and the same person! Nee writes, "These four women are actually one woman, but her history can be divided into four stages. When she was conceived in the plan of God, she was called Eve. When she is redeemed and manifesting Christ on earth, she is called the church. When she is persecuted by the great dragon, she is the woman in the vision. When she is completely glorified in eternity, she is the wife of the Lamb. These four women reveal God's work from eternity to eternity. The woman in Genesis 2 is the woman purposed in God's heart in eternity past, and the woman in Revelation 21 is the woman who fulfills God's purpose in eternity future. Of the two women in between, one is the church, prepared for Christ by God, and the other is the woman who will bring forth the man-child at the end time. In other words, these four women show us the four stages of the history of one woman: one stage is in eternity past, two stages are between the eternities, and another stage is in eternity future. Even though these four women appear to be different when we speak of them separately, they are the same when we put them together." *Ibid.*, 99-100.

¹⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 40.

¹⁸¹ Nee, 41. To complement this ecclesiology "from above," so to speak, it should be noted that Nee does speak about the church "from below" as well, although his vision is always toward the glorious church: "The church according to God's will and the church in experience are two entirely different things. The church in God's plan is completely without sin; it has never known sin, nor had any history of sin. It is transcendent far above sin, without even a trace of sin. It is altogether spiritual and wholly out of Christ. However, the church in history has failed and is fallen. Today the Lord is working among fallen men to bring them back to the church of His original will. The Lord desires to work among people who are fallen, corrupted, and desolate, full of sin and filthiness, so that He may obtain a church from among them. He intends to restore and recover them to what He purposed in

An Appraisal of Nee's Approach to Scripture

Nee's approach to Scripture has provoked discussion among scholars. Ang Lee identifies it as "that of allegorization," which contains a "conspicuous taint of spiritualization" and "sheer subjectivism."¹⁸² Lam Wing-hung slams it as "primitive, non-academic and irrational."¹⁸³ It is both "erroneous and dangerous" because, Lam argues, Nee's emphasis on the text's spiritual sense may easily lead to confusion between "illuminations" of the Spirit and one's own "personal ideas."¹⁸⁴ Along the same line, Terry Jenkins maintains that Nee's "subjective hermeneutics," along with his elaborate use of allegory and typology, "has the effect of frustrating the authority of Scripture."¹⁸⁵ John Yieh accuses Nee of following "a metaphysical-deductive approach," which simply means using doctrines to interpret Scripture. Yieh's concern is that Nee already knows what the text means before he exegetes it, that orthodox teaching takes precedence over correct interpretation.¹⁸⁶ Norman Cliff, for his part, charges Nee as an advocate of what he calls "extreme literalism." This is due to Nee's interpretive practice of making theological claims out of meticulous details in the text. Cliff writes, "This *slavery to words* led Nee into many futile exercises, in which distinctions are found in the use of words where none exist."¹⁸⁷ Furthermore, Nee's hermeneutical approach is

eternity past, so that He might have that which fulfills His desire in eternity future. In His magnificent work, the Lord is using the word He speaks as the instrument to bring the church back to God's original purpose." *Ibid.*, 57.

¹⁸² Ang Lee, "Watchman Nee," 201–202.

¹⁸³ See Leung, "A Defense for Spiritual Interpretation of the Chinese Church," 29.

¹⁸⁴ Lam, *Shu Ling Sheng Xue [The Spiritual Theology of Watchman Nee]*, 287–88 as cited in Leung, "A Defense for Spiritual Interpretation of the Chinese Church," 27. Stephen Chan also points out reservedly when evaluating the exegetical method of his uncle, Watchman Nee, that "this method of interpretation is more attractive to the readers and would not be boring and dry, but it is very easy (and unknowingly) to add in personal ideas. It is more safe and careful to restrict the text by the context." Stephen C. T. Chan, *Wo de Jiufu Ni Tuosheng (My Uncle, Watchman Nee)* (Hong Kong: Alliance Press, 1975), 66 as cited in Leung, "A Defense for Spiritual Interpretation of the Chinese Church," 71.

¹⁸⁵ As cited in Henry, "Sharper Focus on Watchman Nee," 32.

¹⁸⁶ John Y. H. Yieh, "Chinese Biblical Interpretation: History and Issues," in *Ways of Being, Ways of Reading: Asian American Biblical Interpretation*, ed. Mary F. Foskett and Jeffrey K. Kuan (St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2006), 26. Cf. Leung, *A Defense*, 53–54.

¹⁸⁷ Cliff, "The Life and Theology of Watchman Nee, Including a Study of the Little Flock Movement Which He Founded," 177. My emphasis.

also regularly criticized as anti-intellectual in nature.¹⁸⁸ Fred Wu, for instance, contends that Nee's trichotomist worldview necessarily devalues the role of critical reasoning, for logical thinking belongs to the inferior level of soul/mind that has no direct connection to the realm of spirit/God. This, in turn, would lead to "a tendency of seeking God through secret channels, bypassing human intellectual capability purposely," and thus open the door wide to mindless mysticism.¹⁸⁹ William Brooks adds that this whole enterprise of spiritual exegesis, as performed by Nee and other Chinese Christian exegetes, is highly influenced by Confucian, Daoist, and Buddhist hermeneutical traditions, which Brooks deems as not only foreign but also dangerous for the church's well-being.¹⁹⁰

Some other scholars, such as Ka-Lun Leung and Gon Lee, while still critical of some parts of Nee's theology and exegesis, are more sympathetic to Nee's overall approach to Scripture. Their strategy to rescue Nee's "spiritual interpretation" is to argue that his approach is categorically different from a premodern allegorical approach, which is commonly deemed arbitrary and fanciful. Nee's approach, so they argue, is derived not from Western premodern Christians, but from Chinese hermeneutical traditions.¹⁹¹ Thus, Gon Lee suggests that Nee's scriptural interpretation is best described not as an allegorical approach, but as what Jia-lin

¹⁸⁸ E.g., *Ibid.*, 167–170. Two other dangers as described by Dana Roberts are worth our attention. Spiritual exegesis, as Roberts terms it, "often neglects the narrative portions that deal with the humanness of God's revelation." As such no earthly life of Jesus is discernible in Nee's writings; rather it is the resurrected Christ, so far as he is related to doctrinal theology, that Nee cares to expound. The Old Testament and the prophets are appealed to only insofar as they and their teachings are related to redemptive events. Secondly, "Nee's ahistorical, spiritual understanding of the Bible infers that the church's spiritual life is unconcerned with the physical reality of war, famine and injustice." Dana Roberts, *Understanding Watchman Nee* (Plainfield: Haven Books, 1980), 148–49 as cited in Ang Lee, "Watchman Nee," 201–2.

¹⁸⁹ Ying-Chan Fred Wu, "Chinese Mission on Fire: A Theological Based Approach for Effective Chinese Evangelism" (M.A. Thesis, Reformed Theological Seminary, 2011), 35.

¹⁹⁰ William P. Brooks, "Critiquing Ethnohermeneutics Theories: A Call for an Author-Oriented Approach to Cross-Cultural Biblical Interpretation" (Ph.D. Dissertation, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 2011), 214, 217; Brooks, "Watchman Nee's Understanding of Salvation," 95.

¹⁹¹ Thus, while they may agree with Brooks and others above on the Chinese hermeneutical influence on Nee, they differ significantly on the value and validity of this influence for Christian usage: Brooks sees it as negative influence, whereas Leung and Gon Lee view it positively as part of Nee's creative yet faithful contextualization.

Yang termed as “figurism,” an ancient hermeneutical tradition in China that is adopted to interpret the divine scriptures.¹⁹² The problem of Western allegorical reading, so it is argued, is the total bifurcation between the literal meaning and the spiritual meaning. Chinese figurism, on the other hand, does not neatly oppose the two. Quoting Yang, Gon Lee asserts that this reading method “is not so much to deny... the literal meaning... as to insist that some hidden meanings contained in the background of literal meaning are the real meanings which the writer intends to transmit and at the same time are the message readers want to listen to.”¹⁹³ Gon Lee’s writing and sources are murky here,¹⁹⁴ although his main point is well taken: Nee’s spiritual interpretation is a different kind than that of the Fathers; the former is better than the latter. Leung seems to concur, as he suggests that we must “distinguish this [Nee’s] spiritual interpretation... from the radical and arbitrary allegorical interpretation in church history.”¹⁹⁵

In today’s atmosphere of modern biblical scholarship, it is not surprising that Nee’s approach to Scripture has not been appreciated by most scholars—both from the West and the East. Liang Jie-qiong speaks for many when he concludes that Nee’s spiritual reading has become “outdated and unnecessary in light of 20th century developments in critical biblical studies.”¹⁹⁶ But perhaps *that* is precisely the problem. Such a privileging of modern scientific and critical approaches to the Bible needs to be critically questioned, especially in the wake of

¹⁹² Gon Lee, “Exploring the Possibility of an Asian Way of Doing Theology: An Examination of Watchman Nee’s Life and His Theological Thoughts as a Model,” 135–136.

¹⁹³ Jia-lin Yang, *Ciao Qian Ru Dou Hou (Indigenized Interpretation and Theological Study)* (Hong Kong: Jian-Tao Theological Seminary, 2003), 8. As quoted in Gon Lee, “Exploring the Possibility of an Asian Way of Doing Theology: An Examination of Watchman Nee’s Life and His Theological Thoughts as a Model,” 136.

¹⁹⁴ I seriously question Gon Lee’s research in this particular point, as he seems to rely to only one source that is questionable and untraceable, partly due to his poor referencing methods. For my more substantive critique, see the footnote no. 213 below.

¹⁹⁵ Leung, “A Defense for Spiritual Interpretation of the Chinese Church,” 77.

¹⁹⁶ Liang Jie-qiong, “Ping Nixi de Ge Zhong de Ge Yu Yuyifa Jiejing (On Nee’s Song of Songs and Allegorical Interpretation of Scripture),” in *Searching for the Spiritual Reality: Viewing Watchman Nee from the Biblical, Historical, and Theological Perspectives*, ed. Xu Hong-du (Taipei: China Evangelical Seminary, 2003), 21–48. As quoted in Wu, “Revelation, Knowledge, and Formation,” 95.

postmodern and postcritical hermeneutical discourse. The attempts of some scholars to salvage Nee's spiritual interpretation by separating it from the ancient church's figural tradition are well meant, yet they also still operate under the same modern objectivist, historical-minded presupposition. Instead of viewing Nee as doing something really different from the Christian premodern exegetes, I suggest that we rethink our modernist bias about the church's figural tradition and consider that Nee's hermeneutical approach, with some qualifications, belongs to this tradition.¹⁹⁷ This is still true, I would argue, even if Nee did draw from some Chinese hermeneutical sources for his spiritual approach to Scripture. Indeed, as I will show below, Nee's theology and interpretation of Scripture bears a striking resemblance to the premodern hermeneutical tradition.

First, Nee's emphasis on the primacy of the formation of the person over the formulation of the method in scriptural interpretation enterprise fits squarely with Patristic hermeneutical traditions of Origen and Augustine, among others.¹⁹⁸ While Nee's portrayal of the intended reader of Scripture (i.e., the "spiritual person," in Nee's term) might differ with that of the church fathers, the underlying logic is nevertheless the same: since Scripture is ontologically related to God as *God's* word, then to approach Scripture is analogically likened to approaching God himself. In this schema, reading Scripture is less a matter of mastering a certain reading technique and possessing the right set of critical apparatus, than a spiritual practice to engage God through his word and in his presence. This presupposition, in turn, is

¹⁹⁷ Did Nee have knowledge of some patristic writings? The answer, according to Wu, is yes. Nee appealed to writings of some early church fathers in his teaching on observing the Lord's day. The writings he referred to include those of the Didache, Ignatius of Antioch, Justin Martyr, Clement of Alexandria, Tertullian, and Origen, as well as the edicts of Constantine in fourth century. See Wu, "Revelation, Knowledge, and Formation," 94.

¹⁹⁸ Origen, "On First Principles," in *Biblical Interpretation in the Early Church*, ed. Karlfried Froehlich, Sources of Early Christian Thought (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), 59: "Spiritual exegesis... is reserved for the one who can identify the heavenly realities." See also Ephraim Radner, *Time and the Word: Figural Reading of the Christian Scriptures* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2016), 266.

closely linked to at least three other inter-related elements in Nee's hermeneutic, namely the tripartite view of Scripture, the relationship of the same/similar nature, and the role of the Holy Spirit.

Second, Nee's tripartite view of Scripture resembles Origen's division of Scripture into body, soul, and spirit.¹⁹⁹ This semblance might (or might not) be superficial in nature, but it is clear that Nee's privileging of the inner/spiritual part of the Bible is very much in line with the Patristic priority of the spiritual sense over the literal sense of Scripture. Again, there are differences between the two, especially regarding the exact nature of "the spiritual part" of Scripture. We have seen that Nee was elusive here, but generally when Nee refers to Christ himself as the spiritual reality to which the text points, Nee is closer to the Patristic tradition. However, when referencing the inner psychological feelings or motivation of the character/writer in the text, Nee betrays his modern pietistic hermeneutical assumptions.

Nee's insistence that the spirit of Scripture can be approached only by one's spirit (and not by one's soul/mind) also bears a remarkable resemblance to the Platonist notion "only like knows like," except that Nee claimed to get it from Paul,²⁰⁰ not Plato. In any case, this notion can be found in many premodern writers, too. Furthermore, Nee is also in agreement with the Patristic tradition in stressing the role and place of the Holy Spirit in scriptural interpretation. Although there might be differences on the mechanism of this Holy Spirit-led reading of

¹⁹⁹ See Hans Urs von Balthasar, ed., *Origen, Spirit and Fire: A Thematic Anthology of His Writings* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1984), 103.

²⁰⁰ See his exposition of 1 Corinthians 2:13 in Nee, *How to Study the Bible: Practical Advice for Receiving Light from God's Word*, 12–15.

Scripture,²⁰¹ it is nevertheless true that both Nee and the Fathers see Scriptural interpretation as primarily the Spirit's hermeneutical work.²⁰²

Third, recall Nee's distinction of past inspiration and present revelation within the economy of God's use of Scripture that is both dynamic and temporal in nature. While it may seem novel initially, there are at least three instances in church history where a similar notion is entertained. The first one is the distinction between "logos" and "rhema" in some Pentecostal and Charismatic circles.²⁰³ The second is found in *some* interpretations of Karl Barth's theology of Scripture, where the notion of Scripture as witness to God's revelation and the language of "event," "encounter," and "becoming" seem to suggest a similar outlook to that of Nee.²⁰⁴ The third instance, which is the most relevant for this argument, goes back to ancient times. In their theology of creation, some church fathers do not only teach the well-known doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo*, but also the less-known doctrine of *creatio continua*.²⁰⁵ They believe that creation involves not only an initial act of God who brings creatures out of nothing, but it also involves

²⁰¹ The Fathers, for example, would not conceive the task of interpretation in Nee's terms of the "mingling" of the Spirit with our spirit so as to "match" the spirit behind the word.

²⁰² See Radner, *Time and the Word*, 279: "All traditional discussions of figural reading, from Origen on... have stressed a key point: the reading of Scripture is a *Holy Spirit-led activity*" (emphasis added).

²⁰³ This is especially true for a specific group of Pentecostals and Charismatics called "the Word of Faith" movement. See, e.g., D. R. McConnell, *The Promise of Health and Wealth: A Historical and Biblical Analysis of the Modern Faith Movement* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1990). Nee does not use this logos/rhema term in his discussion on this matter in *The Ministry of God's Word*, although he does use it quite extensively elsewhere (See Nee, *The Glorious Church*, 51–60). And while his argument seems to be more complex than the typical distinctions that were made by the preachers of the said movements, the main thrust of the argument is practically the same. Indeed, one might argue that Nee's teaching on this matter may engender or at least encourage the popular usage of this logos/rhema distinction in those circles today.

²⁰⁴ Some scholars have argued that Barth's notion of Scripture as *witness* to God's word means that Scripture is not (simply) identical with the word of God, or the divine revelation. The language of "divine encounter," "revelatory event," and "becoming" in Barth studies and his own writings may further suggest a certain similarity with Nee's idea that Scripture *becomes* God's word in the event where and when God uses it to address the reader or hearer. See a fuller discussion on this in Bruce L. McCormack, "The Being of Holy Scripture Is in Becoming: Karl Barth in Conversation with American Evangelical Criticism," in *Evangelicals & Scripture: Tradition, Authority, and Hermeneutics*, ed. Dennis L. Okholm, Vincent Bacote, and Laura C. Miguélez (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2004).

²⁰⁵ E.g., Clement of Alexandria. See James Kurzynski, "Understanding the Interplay Between Creatio Ex Nihilo and Creatio Continua – The Catholic Astronomer," *The Catholic Astronomer: The Vatican Observatory Foundation Blog*, accessed March 30, 2018, <http://www.vofoundation.org/blog/god-creation-understanding-interplay-creatio-ex-nihilo-creatio-continua/>.

God's continuous presence through his creative power. This notion is then transferred to the "creation" of Scripture, so to speak, resulting in the image of Scripture as the *living* book, animated by the living Spirit of God. Thus, Irenaeus, for instance, writes about the work of the Spirit that ensures Scripture's perennial youth.²⁰⁶ Being inspired by the Spirit does not happen only in the past to sacred writers but continues today to the sacred text itself—assuring that Scripture is always Spirit-inspiring and ever living.²⁰⁷ Indeed, one may call this *continua inspiration* (continuous inspiration). It is true that Nee's conception is less philosophical-theological, and instead more existential-practical, than the Patristic notion highlighted above. Still, they unmistakably share a basic theological understanding of the dynamic character of the Spirit's work in and through Scripture.²⁰⁸

Fourth, some of Nee's hermeneutical keys and Bible study plans also bear an interesting resemblance to certain aspects of premodern hermeneutics. Take, for instance, the importance of Scripture *memorization* in the interpretive process. What is key for Nee is not the act of memorization per se, but rather the role of memorization in allowing the Spirit to address us through the words of Scripture. It is widely known that the discipline of memorizing the Bible was a common practice for Christian readers in antiquity.²⁰⁹ While the exact role that this

²⁰⁶ Irenaeus, "'Against Heresies' in Ante-Nicene Fathers Volume 1: The Apostolic Fathers with Justin Martyr and Irenaeus," *Christian Classics Ethereal Library*, book 3, chap. 4, par. 1, accessed March 29, 2018, <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/anf01.ix.iv.xxv.html>.

²⁰⁷ See Mariano Magrassi, *Praying the Bible: An Introduction to Lectio Divina* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1998), 27–28.

²⁰⁸ Furthermore, like the Patristic writers, Nee also often uses the image of Scripture as becoming the *living* book or the *living* word. This, as recalled, is linked to what he calls "the principle of resurrection." See Nee, *The Ministry of God's Word*, 53:102–104.

²⁰⁹ See, e.g., Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine*, trans. D. W. Robertson, Jr. (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1958), 42–43: "In all of these books those fearing God and made meek in piety seek the will of God. And the first rule of this undertaking and labor is, as we have said, to know these books even if they are not understood, at least to read them or *to memorize them*, or to make them not altogether unfamiliar to us... Then, having become familiar with the language of the Divine Scriptures, we should turn to those obscure things which must be opened up and explained so that we may take examples from those things that are manifest to illuminate those things which are obscure, bringing principles which are certain to bear on our doubts concerning those things which are uncertain. In this undertaking *memory is of great value*, for if it fails rules will not be of any use" (my emphasis).

practice played in the interpretive task is unclear, the practice itself is undoubtedly seen as foundational and necessary to Patristic exegesis.²¹⁰

Both Nee and premodern readers also agree in seeing *meditation*—another of Nee’s interpretive practices—as an essential way to engage with Scripture. One is reminded of the medieval meditative approach of reading Scripture called “lectio divina,” where meditation is one of its essential components.²¹¹ However, it is Nee’s emphasis on the interpretive practice of *comparing* Scripture that primarily places him in the premodern figural tradition. His ease in moving from one text of Scripture to another without seemingly paying much attention to the genre or the historical context of those texts superficially aligns Nee with premodern exegetes such as Origen. Yet they also share substantial theological convictions that ground this hermeneutical strategy. Verbal connections, similar patterns, corresponding locations or numbers in all scriptures are not accidental but intentional, because Scripture, they believe, speaks as a unified whole.²¹² Thus, Nee’s intertextual hermeneutic, like that of Origen’s, is not arbitrary but has its own logic. This is evident, as we have seen, in Nee’s scriptural numerology practice, which is one of his Bible study plans. While it may seem fanciful to our modern hermeneutical sensibilities, Nee’s emphasis on the theological signification of numbers in Scripture echoes premodern numerology practices.²¹³

²¹⁰ So Radner, *Time and the Word*, 232–33: “The subversion of memorization is relatively recent. In fact, memorizing the Bible had been central to Christian concepts of basic scriptural meaning since before Augustine. For the latter, allowing Scripture to enter the memory was *foundational* for their understanding. . . . The problem of course is that memorization of Scripture is itself a widely abandoned discipline for most Christians today. Whether or not it is in fact a precondition for the figural reading of Scripture is something I cannot say; but it is certainly something that has been historically *necessary* for its pursuit” (my emphasis).

²¹¹ See Guigo, *The Ladder of Monks: A Letter on the Contemplative Life and Twelve Meditations*, trans. James Walsh and Edmund Colledge (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1981).

²¹² See Lewis Ayres, “Patristic and Medieval Theologies of Scripture: An Introduction,” in *Christian Theologies of Scripture: A Comparative Introduction*, ed. Justin S. Holcomb (New York: New York University Press, 2006), 16; R. R. Reno, “Origen,” in *Christian Theologies of Scripture: A Comparative Introduction*, ed. Justin S. Holcomb (New York: New York University Press, 2006), 27.

²¹³ See, e.g., Herbert Thurston, “Use of Numbers in the Church,” *Catholic Encyclopedia* (1913), n.d., Wikisource, accessed April 2, 2018, [https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Catholic_Encyclopedia_\(1913\)/Use_of_Numbers_in_the_Church](https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Catholic_Encyclopedia_(1913)/Use_of_Numbers_in_the_Church).

Fifth, and finally, Nee's exegesis of Eve in Genesis 2 is quite premodern. Augustine, for example, also interprets Eve as a figure of the church. Like Nee, Augustine also makes a great deal out of the fact that Eve was made from Adam's rib, which "symbolizes prophetically the union of Christ and his church."²¹⁴ Augustine, along with Jerome, also makes a figural connection between this passage to the wounded side of Christ on the cross, interpreting that the church was "made from his side" and "built up from water and blood."²¹⁵ While there are some noteworthy differences between their exegeses,²¹⁶ such as the ways in which they arrive at the same conclusion and the ecclesiological import of their interpretation, Nee's work broadly aligns with how the church fathers read this passage. That is to say, Nee and the Fathers may often take different routes, use different tools, and emphasize different textual details, but they nevertheless arrive at the same destination: that Adam and Eve are divinely arranged scriptural figures of Jesus Christ and his church.

Nee's scriptural hermeneutics ultimately belong to the church's figural reading tradition. This finding is remarkable considering the historical, cultural, and even doctrinal differences between the modern Chinese Nee and the premodern Western exegetes. Although Nee may have had access to the works of some church fathers, hitherto there is no direct evidence that he

²¹⁴ Andrew Louth, ed., *Genesis 1-11*, Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2001), 70.

²¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 70–71.

²¹⁶ I observe at least two significant points of difference. *First*, while Patristic exegetes commonly interpret Adam and Eve as figures of Christ and the church, they usually also regard the first couple as the first parents, i.e., the representation of all humanity. Chrysostom, for example, views Adam as the head of humanity, saying that man needed a helper because he still had to be regenerated in Christ (see *Ibid.*, 64.). Nee, on the other hand, seems to bypass this point and goes directly (and almost exclusively) to talk about Adam *as* Christ, arguing along the way that even Christ needed the church to fulfill God's purpose for the world.

Second, Nee's insistence on reading Adam and Eve almost exclusively in terms of Christ and the church brought him to some strange places theologically. This is most evident when he speculates that "Adam's sleep typifies the aspect of Christ's death *which was not related to redemption*"—a theological view that seems novel. To think that there are two aspects of Christ's death—one concerned with our redemption, the other with the impartation of his life to us—and that the creation of the church is concerned only with the second aspect based on his reading of Adam's sleep, seems too speculative to say the least. It shows rather Nee's painstaking effort to *read* his extremely high ecclesiology *into* the narrative of the text. In short, Nee's spiritual exegesis is woodenly set in a way that Patristic exegesis is not.

perused their work as much as the writings of the Brethren Darby, the Holiness Penn-Lewis, and the mystic Guyon. It is highly likely that Nee was introduced to scriptural figuralism from those writings, and scholars have argued that the authors/traditions that Nee was indebted to engaged in some sort of figural reading of their own.²¹⁷ But this raises the question of why Nee adopted their figural reading of Scripture in the first place. Here Paul Chang's work, as alluded to in the beginning of this chapter, is helpful in pointing out that Nee's subtle Chinese patriotism might be a significant factor in his choice of these Western primitivist approaches to Christian faith. Gon Lee's attempt to find the ancient Chinese parallels—in the hermeneutical traditions of the neo-Confucianist School of Mind and of Chinese figurism—to Nee's hermeneutics is also illuminating. However, contrary to Gon Lee's thesis (i.e., Nee's scriptural approach was totally different than that of the Fathers, for Nee purportedly got it from ancient Chinese traditions), the significance of his work lies in the fact that it may shed some light on why Nee chose to adopt the figural reading of the Western writers he read. In other words, *if*

²¹⁷ Radner, for example, has argued that Darby, and his dispensationalist movement, was indeed a figural reader of Scripture, albeit a narrow one. In his account of the history of figural reading, Radner observes that despite the eclipse of traditional figural reading practices in early modernity, some Protestant Christians found their own ways to continue the practice, albeit often in a limited manner, throughout the eighteenth century and beyond. He offers three ways through which they “creatively re-appropriated” the figural practice: “*Christian Hebraism*,” “the developing mechanism of *historical self-referentiality*,” and “*sectarian rationalization*.” See Radner, *Time and the Word*, 72–82.

In this account, Darby fits in the third category of *sectarian rationalization*, which implies that Nee, who is heavily influenced by Darby, may be situated in this category as well. But Radner's account of the second category of *historical self-referentiality* seems to also fit with Nee's own sense of progression of the fulfilled dispensation within Scripture. As we recall, this is one revealing example of Nee's Bible study plan I highlighted earlier. But there is more: one can even argue that Radner's first category of *Christian Hebraism* also relates to Nee's figural approach to Scripture. As mentioned before, Gon Lee argues that Nee might draw some of his hermeneutics from the earlier tradition of “figurism” in China. What Gon Lee fails to show is that this tradition is *not* particularly Chinese in origin. Instead, it is imported from a French Jesuit missionary named Joachim Bouvet (1656-1730). Historian Claudia von Collani, who has done some groundbreaking work on the figurist movement in China, traced the origin of Bouvet's figurist approach from “three traditions within European theology: (1) typological exegesis [of the church fathers]; (2) ‘ancient theology’ [*prisca theologia*]; and (3) the Judaeo-Christian cabala.” The figurist Cabala/Kabbalah connection certainly belongs to Radner's *Christian Hebraism*, which means that if Nee was indeed exposed to the long-standing, albeit obscure, figurism tradition in China, then he also participates, however indirectly, in the *Christian Hebraism* way of figural interpretation. It appears that Nee interestingly fits in with all three Protestant ways to maintain a figural reading of Scripture! For more on Chinese figurism, see Claudia von Collani, “Figurism,” in *Handbook of Christianity in China*, ed. Nicolas Standaert, vol. 1: 635-1800 (Leiden: Brill, 2001), 668–669.

Nee were indeed exposed to the Chinese ancient hermeneutical traditions that bore some basic resemblances with Christian premodern exegesis, then it would be quite natural for him to embrace the figural reading of Scripture that he found in the writings of those modern Western Christians.

However, I would like to suggest adding another factor into this inquiry; one that seriously takes Nee's own scriptural commitment and practices into account, but also considers the intrinsic power of Scripture, as God's word, when read figurally. One basic presupposition of figural reading is the belief that Scripture is *literally* God's own word, in that its nature is somehow tied with the very being of God the Word himself, so much so that the agency of God the Spirit is necessarily central in both the writing and the reading of it. As we have seen throughout this chapter, Nee, in his own way, shares this basic belief about the nature of Scripture. This in turn translates to many different emphases and practices, most notably: the sense of God's real presence in the act of reading Scripture, the Holy Spirit and the moral-spiritual prerequisites necessary to read Scripture properly, the formative and transformative character of Scripture reading, the priority of the unity of Scripture as God's single word, the Christological reading of the whole Bible, and the ecclesiological locus as the proper context and goal of reading Scripture, among many others. While Nee might inherit some of these from his studies of Western authors and/or his Chinese predecessors, it could also be argued that his extensive engagement with Scripture, along with his basic commitment to scriptural authority and its theological nature, yields "naturally" to these features of a figural reading of Scripture. The underlying assumption here is that Scripture, as God's word, has an intrinsic power to lead its faithful readers to read it in a certain figural manner. This in turn presupposes the primacy of divine agency in Scripture reading integral to figural reading.

By positing this, however, I do *not* wish to imply that figural reading of Scripture is a free-floating practice, as it were, independent of theological traditions and ecclesial contexts. It is certainly not. As I have shown above, Nee is anything but pure biblicist, even if he aspired to be one. But at the same time, he *is* a figural reader of Scripture, with all this entails, even as his exegesis betrays the influence of the Western theological tradition as well as the social-cultural milieu of modern China. This makes him a fitting exemplification of the hybrid character of the grassroots Asian theology discussed in the previous chapter. This in turn means that Nee is a rich resource to aid in the construction of an Asian/Chinese figural theology of Scripture. The implication of this argument will be further explored in Chapter Five, but now we must turn to another example of a grassroots Asian theologian: John Sung.

Chapter 3

John Sung and His Approach to Scripture

If Watchman Nee is the leading spiritual teacher for many Chinese Christians in the first half of the twentieth century, John Sung is the greatest Chinese preacher of the same era.¹ Whereas Nee’s influence outside China is due to his numerous books that circulated widely after his imprisonment and death, Sung was able to exert his influence beyond China directly through his evangelistic travels to Southeast Asian countries. Indeed, this “Billy Graham of China”² was regarded by many Chinese-speaking Christians in those countries—particularly Singapore, Malaysia, and Indonesia—as the most important spiritual leader of the twentieth century, the source of Chinese Christian identity, and “a unifying figure for Southeast Asian churches.”³ It is therefore surprising that there are only a few academic studies on Sung and his legacy as of today.⁴ Particularly, a thorough treatment of Sung’s theology and interpretation of Scripture is

¹ Lian Xi calls Sung “the greatest evangelist of twentieth-century China.” Xi, *Redeemed by Fire*, 141.

² G. Wright Doyle, “The Billy Graham of China: John Sung (1901–1944) | Christian History Magazine,” *Christian History Institute*, accessed December 11, 2018, <https://christianhistoryinstitute.org/magazine/article/the-billy-graham-of-china-john-sung>.

³ Michael Nai-Chiu Poon, “Introduction: The Theological Locus of Christian Movements in Southeast Asia,” in *Christian Movements in Southeast Asia: A Theological Exploration*, ed. Michael Nai-Chiu Poon (Singapore: Trinity Theological College, 2010), xxiv–xxv.

⁴ While there are several biographies and popular writings on Sung, academic studies on his life and thought are still very limited. To my knowledge, there are only four theses that deal specifically with Sung: Gwo, “Indigenous Preaching in China, with a Focal Critique on John Sung”; Yu, “Uncovering Seeds for Awakening and Living in the Spirit”; Lim, “The Life and Ministry of John Sung”; Ireland, “John Sung.” Since the writing of this present dissertation, Ireland’s thesis has been published as Daryl R. Ireland, *John Song: Modern Chinese Christianity and the Making of a New Man* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2020). Although I regret that I did not manage to peruse this newer version of his work (due to the timing of my writing vis-à-vis the publication of the book), I am glad that now Ireland’s significant work on John Sung will gain a wider readership.

For book chapters and article-length publications, see: Jonathan Seitz, “Converting John Sung: UTS Drop-Out, Psychiatric Patient, Chinese Evangelist,” *Union Seminary Quarterly Review* 62 (2009): 78–92; Lian Xi, *Redeemed by Fire: The Rise of Popular Christianity in Modern China* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2010), chap. 6; Daryl R. Ireland, “John Sung’s Malleable Conversion Narrative,” *Fides et Historia* 45, no. 1 (2013): 48–75; Daryl R. Ireland, “The Legacy of John Sung,” *International Bulletin of Mission Research* 40, no. 4 (2016): 349–357.

virtually absent⁵—a remarkable omission given his stature as one of the most successful preachers in Asia.

This present chapter will attempt to fill this lacuna in Sung scholarship. It will also demonstrate that Sung’s revival ministry was predicated on his particular approach to Scripture, which reflects, I will argue, both the grassroots Chinese sensibilities as well as the older Christian hermeneutical tradition. The chapter will begin with an overview of Sung’s life and ministry, with his “conversion experience” as its focal point, before delineating the most significant sources that influenced Sung theologically. This background section will be followed by a discussion about his preaching ministry, which will reveal some of Sung’s theological understanding of Scripture. The next section will analyze Sung’s interpretation of Scripture by examining extended examples of Sung’s exegesis. Finally, I will offer an evaluation to Sung’s theology of Scripture and his approach to the interpretation of Scripture.

John Sung’s Life and Ministry

Sung Siong Ceh (Song Shangjie) was born on September 27, 1901, the sixth child of Song Xuelien, a Methodist pastor in the Hinghwa Conference of the province of Fujian, China. Because of his exceptional mind and connections with some missionaries, Sung was offered a scholarship to attend Ohio Wesleyan University in the United States in 1920. He completed a bachelor’s degree in three years at that school before earning a Master’s degree (1924) and Ph.D. (1926) in chemistry at Ohio State University, all with academic distinction.⁶ Although it

⁵ Among the publications that were listed in the previous note above, only two works actually deal with Sung’s theology and interpretation of Scripture, to a varying degree: Gwo, “Indigenous Preaching in China, with a Focal Critique on John Sung”; Ireland, “John Sung.” But see also Ka-Lun Leung, “A Defense for Spiritual Interpretation of the Chinese Church,” in *The Role and Interpretation of the Bible in the Life of the Church in China*, trans. Wai-Shing Chau, China Study Series 3 (Hong Kong: The Lutheran World Federation, 1997), who engaged with Sung’s exegesis quite extensively, although Sung was not the main focus of the article.

⁶ Both Sung’s M.Sc. and Ph.D. theses are still available in the Ohio State University libraries. See John Sung, “The Preparation of Primary Alcohols by the Action of Grignard’s Reagents on Olefine Oxides. A Contribution to the Mechanism of the Orginard’s Reaction” (Master of Science Thesis, Ohio State University,

seemed that, at this juncture, he would have a very bright career as a scientist or an educator, having received invitations to go to Germany for advanced studies or to Beijing to teach at the Union Medical College, Sung's state of mind was anything but peaceful and settled.⁷ One night, Sung heard the voice of Jesus warning him, "What does it profit a man if he gains the whole world, yet forfeits his soul?" (Matt. 16:26). As it happened, the next morning a pastor (probably a Union graduate, in some accounts identified as Wilbur Fowler) bluntly told Sung that he looked less like a scientist, and more like a preacher. Sung responded enthusiastically and appreciated the pastor's introduction to the Union Theological Seminary (UTS) in New York.⁸ Sung entered the famous seminary in 1926.

Sung recorded his early time at UTS as a period of confusion. He described the school as very open, inviting "both modernist and fundamentalist speakers," whom he and his fellow students treated "like stage performers, applauding those who pleased us, and shaking our heads at those who didn't."⁹ Regarding the seminary's stance on Scripture, he wrote: "If philosophy cannot explain the scriptures, then try the scientific approach. If science cannot prove it, perhaps it will fall to the categories of phenomenology, then try psychology as mission approach. If all disciplines cannot explain it, then do not believe in it."¹⁰ Sung's yearning for spiritual awakening led him through thorough studies on modernism, liberalism, comparative religion, the social gospel, Buddhism, and Taoism. But everything seemed only to add to

1924); John Sung, "The Constitution of Organo-Magnesium Compounds and the Mechanism of Grignard Reaction" (Ph.D. Dissertation, Ohio State University, 1926).

⁷ Reflecting on the years of intense study and religious searching in America, Sung once wrote: "My soul wandered in a wilderness. I could neither sleep nor eat. My faith was like a leaking ship, storm-driven without captain or compass. My heart was filled with the deepest unhappiness." See Leslie T. Lyall, *A Biography of John Sung*, 80th Anniversary Edition (Singapore: Genesis Books, 2004), 55–56. The remarks were Lyall's direct quote of Sung, but he did not reveal the original source.

⁸ Yu, "Uncovering Seeds for Awakening and Living in the Spirit," 154–155.

⁹ John Sung, *The Diaries of John Sung: An Autobiography*, trans. Stephen L. Sheng (Brighton, MI: no publisher, 1995), 14.

¹⁰ John Sung, compiled by Tian-Zeng Sung, *The Diary of His Spiritual Life* (Hong Kong: Eng Yu Evangelism Mission, 1995), 18. Cited in Yu, "Uncovering Seeds for Awakening and Living in the Spirit," 155.

Sung's state of disorientation and loss of certainty. In the five or six months he spent at UTS, he concluded: "I found that though it [UTS] had the name of 'theological,' it had no spiritual atmosphere at all. The students received a little head knowledge, but no spiritual insight."¹¹

During this time of confusion, Sung had a dramatic conversion experience on February 10, 1927 after attending evangelistic meetings in the city.¹² This experience caused Sung to reject the liberal theology of his professors at UTS, and he was said to have "stormed the seminary halls for the next few days either shouting the Lord's praises or castigating the professors that he blamed for enervating his faith."¹³ Leaders at UTS determined that Sung had become mentally unstable, and eventually he was voluntarily admitted to Bloomingdale Hospital, a psychiatric facility in White Plains, New York.¹⁴ In his reflection, Sung thought it was God's plan for him to rest and to spend time reading Scripture, so he accepted UTS president Henry Sloane Coffin's arrangement for him to be taken to the mental ward. However, he ended up staying for 193 days in the asylum, while being treated like a prisoner under strict supervision, with invasive physical and psychological examinations. These were the darkest

¹¹ Sung, *The Diaries of John Sung: An Autobiography*, 14.

¹² In his diary, Sung recounted the experience in this way: "It was 10 pm, February 10, and I was kneeling in tearful travail when there flashed before my mind scene after scene of my sins, even the forgotten, hidden sins. I reached for a Bible and turned to Matthew 23 and, as though in a trance, pictured myself weighed down almost to the breaking point by my load of sin, trudging after Jesus as He carried His cross to Golgotha. Then I saw Jesus hanging up on that cross, looking down at me while suffering unbelievably. I humbly knelt underneath Him and asked Him to forgive my sins, to cleanse me by His blood. I personally saw Jesus, with His face radiant and His hands nailed to the cross, speaking to me, "*Son, your sins are forgiven. From now on you shall be named John.*" Then He went on to explain that the name John meant a trailblazer. As the Apostle John was the trailblazer for Jesus in His first coming, many trailblazers will be needed for His second coming, to announce His imminent return. And I was to be one of these." Ibid., 15–16.

¹³ Ireland, "John Sung's Malleable Conversion Narrative," 49.

¹⁴ His diagnosis was "paranoid condition/paranoid dementia praecox," as put on the Bloomingdale Asylum discharge ledger for Sung, August 31, 1927, New York Weil Cornell Center Archives, New York, NY. The initial diagnosis appeared in the records of a meeting at the asylum on April 28, 1927, where Sung's case was discussed. The discharge ledger stated that his condition was much improved and that he was suffering from "psychosis with psychopathic personality." See Xi, *Redeemed by Fire*, 141, 269.

days of his life. The constant pain and confusion became so unbearable that he contemplated suicide.¹⁵

At the same time, Sung's later reflection portrayed this period of institutionalization as the most significant chapter of his life. "At the time I felt the experience too harsh," Sung admitted, "but in fact during that period America was suffering from flooding and many perished, but God preserved me from all the turmoil and gave me an unexcelled chance to study His Word undisturbed."¹⁶ In the hospital, he wrote, "I derived 40 methods of study, and I read the Bible 40 times. Of course, I did not read the Bible crudely word by word.... At first God taught me through pictures and diagrams, giving me the key verse to each chapter of the Bible. Then He showed me certain key words like 'love,' 'faith,' 'righteousness' which led me to link them up through the whole Bible."¹⁷ Beyond that, "there were also visions, pictures, miserable circumstances, all of which became material for instruction."¹⁸ "[T]he mental hospital," Sung concluded, "was actually God's personal Bible school for me." All this granted Sung the opportunity to narrate the events of his hospitalization in terms of a grander biblical motif. UTS "intended to harm me," so his story went, "but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives" (Gen. 50:20).¹⁹

¹⁵ John Sung, *John Sung: My Testimony*, ed. Michael Nai-Chiu Poon, trans. Ernest Tipton (Singapore: Centre for the Study of Christianity in Asia, 2011), 99.

¹⁶ Sung, *The Diaries of John Sung: An Autobiography*, 19. Sung was most likely referring to the Great Mississippi Flood of 1927, which was one of the most destructive floods in U.S. history. See Stephen Ambrose, "Man vs. Nature: The Great Mississippi Flood of 1927," e-magazine, *National Geographic*, May 1, 2001, <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/culture/2001/05/mississippi-river-flood-culture/> (accessed December 18, 2018).

¹⁷ Timothy Tow, *John Sung My Teacher* (Singapore: Christian Life, 1985), 81. While Sung never really elaborated these 40 methods of studying the Bible, including that of the linking of certain key words through the whole Scripture, one suspects that the list of the hermeneutical keys of each book of the Bible that he provided later on in his ministry has its origin in this revelatory event that he experienced in the mental ward. I will further discuss this approach to Scripture in the second part of this present chapter.

¹⁸ Sung, *John Sung*, 101.

¹⁹ Ireland, "John Sung," 62.

It is thus not surprising that Sung and some of his biographers later questioned the need for hospitalization and characterized this time in his life as a positive period of incubation and learning for his later ministry in China. Sung maintained throughout his life that he had never lost his mind: his born-again experience had been mistaken for insanity.²⁰ More recent studies, such as those led by Daryl Ireland, have examined previously inaccessible writings and diaries by Sung in their original form. These appear to show that, based on the entries of Sung's writings at the time, Sung was indeed seriously mentally ill.²¹ In other words, there is some disconnect between the narrative of Sung's conversion and hospitalization that came to be established through his published autobiography and the realities of historical fact that Ireland gathers from many different sources, most notably from Sung's own unpublished writings.²² While I will not go into the details of this inconsistency, Ireland's research shows that the truth about Sung's experience in New York was unclear at the time and remains obscure today. At the very least, it was definitely more complex than the popular conversion story that Sung and his hagiographers wanted to portray.²³ However, no historian or scholar has ever questioned

²⁰ Xi, *Redeemed by Fire*, 141.

²¹ Ireland offers some telling examples of this phenomenon from Sung's diaries. He writes: "Over the next six months Sung recorded his religious experiences in diaries. At first he found messages from God hidden in *New York Times* crossword puzzles and articles of *National Geographic*. Those messages faded, however, as he became obsessed with the idea that the four Gospels contained hidden radio schematics. Painstakingly, Sung correlated each word in the Gospel of Mark to a point on a graph and thereby drew and redrew radio designs that might catch the heavenly messages God was transmitting. What he heard was soporific: 'the Holy Spirit is the Spirit of the Eternal one; the Eternal one gives you the insight,' and so forth, until a few weeks later he recorded that 'Mother scolds us for our non-confidence and care and we ask her love and she forgives us ... it is the great news!' Sung became increasingly enraptured with the gospel of Mother or, at some points, the mothers: 'Mary, Mother of Jesus, Queen of Queens,' 'Mary Magdalene, Mother of Christ, the queen of queens,' and 'Mary of Susanna, Mother of Jesus Christ, the queen of queens, the eternal music leader.' Exactly which Mother, or 'Goddess,' Sung decided to wed is unclear, but before his 'zeal for mother ha[d] almost burn[ed] us up,' he married her on April 4, 1927, consummating the mystical ceremony with a 'holy kiss and holy union.' Around the time of this entry, Sung's copious notes on his revelations slipped toward incoherence, but before he altogether abandoned writing for florid drawings, he penned a letter to UTS, praising it as 'the best theological seminary' and exhorting it to 'follow the wisdom of turtle.'" Ireland, "The Legacy of John Sung," 350–351.

²² Ireland notes, "[Sung's] descriptions of what happened and what it meant do not correspond with the initial records. His story bears the marks of having evolved through his interaction with people and the historical forces that intersected his life, proving that his interpretation of the events in New York did not come ready-made." Ireland, "John Sung," 64.

²³ In sum, Ireland's argument is that Sung reconceived his New York experience in the context of the modernist-fundamentalist controversy in China in which he found himself upon his return from America. In the

that *something* did happen to Sung in New York that was formative for his subsequent ministry, even if the interpretation of that *something* came much later in his life and filtered through many theological and political agendas as Ireland pointed out.²⁴ For the purposes of this paper, it is enough to conclude that Sung's own version of the event, however misconstrued it was, served as his hermeneutical lens to conceive his future ministry as a revivalist preacher and shape his reading of Scripture.

After those 193 days in the mental ward, an American clergyman facilitated Sung's release from the hospital, and Sung returned to China in October 1927. Later that year, he married the woman his parents had chosen for him and briefly taught chemistry and religion at a Methodist high school in Fujian where he had graduated eight years earlier, before he was appointed as a Conference Evangelist in 1928 under the Hinghwa Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church. His preaching schedule was intense, demanding that he speak up to ten times

wake of this controversy, Western missions in China had dramatically split apart just months before Sung's return. Ireland concludes, "In that polarized and overheated context, Sung found a new explanation for his expulsion from UTS. Sung was not crazy, Union was. The seminary was so blinded by modernism, he began to suggest, that they mistook his old-time religion for mental illness. The story confirmed fundamentalist fears about modernists and thereby reversed the polarities of suspicion.... For Sung, what happened in China was not purely a conversion of convenience. Back in the hospital he had insisted, at least twice, that he had been born again at UTS on February 10, 1927. The difference was in how he responded to the new birth. In New York, Sung's spirit disintegrated under the power of the experience. His capacity to participate in the world slowly dissolved until he became isolated, eventually narrowing his interactions to an unseen Mother. In China, in contrast, his recharacterization of the events at the seminary and in the hospital put Jesus back at the center of his transformation and thereby enhanced his relationships with his parents, the missionaries, and the entire Christian community. Sung's new testimony revised, exaggerated, and silenced much of what transpired in New York, but its simplified form allowed Sung's spirit to testify with God's Spirit that he was now a child of God." Ireland, "The Legacy of John Sung," 352.

²⁴ Cf. Seitz, "Converting John Sung: UTS Drop-Out, Psychiatric Patient, Chinese Evangelist," 87–88, who offers a constructive comment from a different perspective: "Sung's 'insanity' is not unique in historical literature. Yale historian Jonathan Spence has written about a Chinese Catholic convert who was institutionalized while in Europe; in Spence's reading, insanity is often correlated with resistance to his Jesuit 'host,' the scholar Jean Francois Focquet. Psychiatric literature from Sung's era at Union also tended to relate immigration and insanity; indeed, the eugenic psychiatry of this generation produced 'scholarship' that associated immigrants with a higher incidence of insanity.... Scholars have long appreciated the power of a good insanity story. Insanity sits at the interstices of social control, culture, faith, and the individual. Asylum patients occupied a medicalized world designed to control and delimit their behavior. Defined by diagnosis, their condition redefines their other identities. Sung's case has been read in different ways.... We need not arrive at a correct understanding of Sung's experience. It is enough to acknowledge how formative his insanity was for his ministry."

in a single day as he went from village to village as an itinerant evangelist.²⁵ But his early years as an itinerant preacher in a few provinces in China were nothing compared to his later years as a revivalist who travelled throughout the nation and Southeast Asia in terms of both influence and message.²⁶ Ireland's fine studies in this area have shown that Sung underwent what Ireland calls "a second conversion" in his preaching career, from being "a curator of divine mysteries" to arguably "China's most powerful [revivalist] preacher."²⁷ We will look at this shift in more detail in the next section, but at this juncture it is important to mention that this shift took place when Sung joined the holiness evangelistic group called the Bethel Worldwide Evangelistic Band (or simply the Bethel Band) in 1931.²⁸

Sung's association with the Bethel Band introduced him to another aspect of his ministry that in time became a prominent feature of his revival meetings: healing ministry.²⁹ After his days with the Bethel Band, Sung almost always concluded his series of meetings, which could last for days or weeks, with a healing service. Sung meticulously recorded the names and the cases of those who asked to be prayed for in his own diaries. While some healing cases were of a dubious nature, Sung's reputation as a faith healer was firmly established for many people. Reports of hundreds of miraculous healings at each of Sung's revival meetings were told by personal witnesses and appeared in church periodicals.³⁰ After Sung left the Bethel Band in 1933, he continued to lead revival meetings for eight more years in China and

²⁵ Ireland, "John Sung," 82.

²⁶ The early and later periods of Sung's ministry can be roughly situated in 1928-1931 and 1931-1940.

²⁷ Ireland, "John Sung," 79, 85, 94.

²⁸ I will discuss the Bethel Band more fully in the next section. Suffice to say here that a "band" in the Chinese context at that time referred to an evangelistic team that usually traveled around villages and cities to conduct gospel rallies.

²⁹ Sung's healing ministry has been largely underplayed by many of his biographers, perhaps due to the attempt to emphasize Sung's preaching ministry as well as to preserve his more conservative theology. To date, to my knowledge, only Daryl Ireland's studies offer sustained critical attention to this significant part of Sung's ministry. See Ireland, "The Legacy of John Sung," 354; Ireland, "John Sung," 263-335.

³⁰ E.g., Shanghai-based *Chinese Christian Intelligencer* (*Tongwenbao*). See Xi, *Redeemed by Fire*, 147.

Southeast Asia, enduring strenuous travel and long periods of separation from his family.³¹ His health was compromised by severe anal fistulas, which later were found to be cancerous.³² Several operations conducted between 1940 and 1944 did not stop the cancer's advance.³³ He eventually died on August 18, 1944 at the age of 42.

John Sung's Influences

Sung's ministry was always centered on Scripture, even in its earlier phase. After experimenting with various methods of leading revivals in his hometown upon his return from the U.S., Sung came to a conviction that strong Bible teaching under the guidance of the Holy Spirit was the only way to revive the church. He called it the "Bible Revival."³⁴ Sung must have impressed his audience with his knowledge of Scripture, for a missionary wrote of him:

He seems to have the whole Bible on the tip of his tongue as well as engraved on his heart. Frequently as he came into the study room he would call for the class to choose the chapter for the hour's study. By the time they had read over the chapter taking

³¹ Li and Smalley, "A Chinese Christian Leader Revisited," 92. Xi notes interesting reports regarding Sung's tireless ministry that eventually contributed to the decline of his health and to the neglect of his own family: "When a fortune teller told Sung to his face in 1935 that he had an 'unfocused look' in the dilated pupils of his eyes and would therefore die young, he responded that he was 'already dead' in Christ and would labor for God as long as he was alive. And his neglect of his own family was almost complete: while fleeing a sinking ship in the East China Sea in 1931, he jumped into the lifeboat with his Bible and diary carefully wrapped in oilpaper and strapped to his back—but forgot his wife and left her behind" (Xi, *Redeemed by Fire*, 153–154).

³² Ireland chronicles the following regarding Sung's illness and the ways in which he treated himself: "Since his time in the United States, Sung suffered from the fistula, but after his evangelistic ministry began with the Bethel Mission, he had refused medical treatment. He believed to do so would undermine his message of divine healing. Instead, he redoubled his efforts at following his own prescription to receive divine healing. He furiously raked his own heart to uncover any unconfessed sins.... When confession of sin brought no relief, Sung turned to self-care. He used a sharp stick to puncture the abscess that would form near his anus, and thereby find some relief as the pus drained. He had become the illustration from one of his own sermons. He was the woman who had bled for twelve years until the day she touched the hem of Jesus' garment. Sung understood what it felt like to have vitality literally 'flowing out of you.' But no matter how many times he reached out to Jesus, to touch the Bible, he was not made well.... In December 1939, Sung was so sick he preached lying down on a cot. By January, he was on a steamship back to Shanghai, so ill that his career as a revivalist-healer was over" (Ireland, "John Sung," 330–331).

³³ Xi, *Redeemed by Fire*, 154.

³⁴ Ka-Tong Lim, *The Life and Ministry of John Sung* (Singapore: Genesis Books, 2012), 109. Lim further writes, "It is interesting to note that Sung had taken off his glasses since his return to China. He told his audience he was near-sighted, although his yearbook pictures in college showed him wearing glasses. He had made an amusing entry about this in New York: 'This morning as I woke up my glasses and my Bible were fallen to the ground at the same moment. [The] Bible is then my eyes.' Did he mean the glasses were smashed? Or had he simply found a deeper spiritual meaning connecting the two?" (Lim, 180).

verses in turn, he would have his objectives all in mind together with a teaching plan thoroughly mapped out. He seemed perfectly at home in any section of the Bible.³⁵

Sung often credited this familiarity with and love of Scripture to his time in the mental hospital, where he read his Bible intensively and believed he was receiving special revelations from God to unlock its meaning. “Why do I love this book?” Sung once told his student audience while holding up his Bible. And he answered, “When I had no other friend, God spoke to me through it,” referring to his “true seminary” days in the mental asylum.³⁶ Indeed, far from shying away from talking about his hospitalization, Sung repeatedly brought his experience in the asylum to everybody’s attention. It was not uncommon for him to begin his messages by referring to the circumstances under which he received them: “This teaching was given to me when I was in the wilderness, the asylum.”³⁷ “These are not my words,” Sung again informed his listeners, “When I was locked in the mental asylum God’s Spirit personally led me.”³⁸ Sung was so certain of the appeal of such a special revelation that he suggested “many people wish they could live in the asylum with me, because they dearly long for this kind of teaching.”³⁹

This is, according to Ireland, the primary way in which Sung narrated his experience in New York as part of the remaking of his ministerial identity in light of the political-theological situations in China in which he found himself. Siding with the fundamentalists in the modernist-fundamentalist controversy that was also dividing some parts of the Chinese church at the time, Sung was able to turn his diagnosis of mental illness into his greatest draw: his

³⁵ Winfred B. Cole, “Sienyu Notes,” *The China Christian Advocate*, June 1929. Cited in Lim, *The Life and Ministry of John Sung*, 99.

³⁶ William H. Hockman, “Whose Faith Follow,” *Moody Bible Institute Monthly*, August 1931. As cited in Lim, *The Life and Ministry of John Sung*, 122.

³⁷ Song Shangjie, “Chuangshiji yu yuehan fuyin [Genesis and the Gospel of John],” *Shengjie zhinan yuekan [Guide to Holiness]* 3, no. 6 (June 1931): 19. As cited in Ireland, “John Sung,” 87.

³⁸ Song Shangjie, “Gelinduo qianshu dishisanzhang [First Corinthians Chapter Thirteen],” *Shengjie zhinan yuekan [Guide to Holiness]* 3, no. 6 (June 1931): 6. As cited in *Ibid.*

³⁹ Shangjie, “Chuangshiji yu yuehan fuyin [Genesis and the Gospel of John],” 19, as cited in *Ibid.*

hospitalization was the ultimate evidence of his ability to “see/break through” the world.⁴⁰ As Ireland puts it, “The experts wrongly assumed Sung was insane, because they were unable to penetrate reality in the way he did. Flattering his audiences, Sung told his appreciative listeners that only they had the spiritual insight to recognize the truth: the deepest mysteries of the Bible were supernaturally revealed to John Sung in New York.”⁴¹ Sung’s spiritual (re)interpretation of his asylum experience, however, is consistent with his preoccupation with supernatural experiences throughout his life, from his childhood up to the end of his ministry. In fact, as Ireland himself notes, in the first few years of his return to China, Sung encountered many supernatural stories from local peoples throughout his journey in Fujian, which were arguably formative in shaping his theology and messages. This certainly adds to the complexity of determining how (in)accurate Sung’s own portrayal of his experience in New York might have been, a task which is beyond the scope of this study.

Our interest here, however, lies in the ways in which some of these experiences shaped Sung’s reading and preaching of Scripture. The entries from his journal at this period show that Sung encountered a number of events in which “the supernatural world penetrated the natural world” on a regular basis.⁴² These entries include accounts of answered prayers, miraculous healing, visions of angels and ghosts, people’s dreams that acted as divine messages, visits to heaven, demon possession and exorcism that were usually accompanied by removing idols from people’s houses.⁴³ What is astonishing is that these extraordinary stories of sickness and healing, of ghosts and angels, of dreams and visions, of idols and conversions, and of miracles and answered prayers, are treated in a similar manner to and are seamlessly interwoven with

⁴⁰ Ibid., 87–88.

⁴¹ Ibid., 88.

⁴² The quote is taken from Ibid., 85.

⁴³ See Levi Sung, ed., *The Diary of John Sung: Extracts from His Journals and Notes*, trans. Thng Pheng Soon (Singapore: Genesis Books, 2012), 39–79.

mundane stories of food and clothing, of quarrels and traveling, of gambling and opium addiction, of money and robbery, of death and childbirth, and of singing and Bible study. Thus, evil spirits were noted as regular afflictors of the sick, exorcisms ought to be accompanied by the actual removal of physical idols, and a transformed lifestyle must follow spiritual conversion. This interwoven reality was the world in which Sung found himself upon his return to China. It immediately became Sung's own world, too, in which he read and interpreted Scripture.⁴⁴

This reality translated into Sung's initial preaching ministry which some describe as based on "esoteric biblical expositions"⁴⁵ and preoccupied with "mysterious meanings"⁴⁶ of the Bible. Take his treatment of Genesis 1 at the National Christian Council's Five Year Movement in Shanghai in 1931, for example.⁴⁷ There Sung delivered six different sermons from Genesis 1 alone. When he started the first sermon with a cryptic line "[t]his afternoon's theme is something I don't even know, because it is very mysterious,"⁴⁸ he was introducing his listeners to the strange world of Genesis 1 as Sung conceived it. In particular, Sung drew parallels between each day of creation and the "seven children of the Kingdom of God," who appear in the rest of Genesis. In this reading, the first day of creation, where God created light and separated it from darkness, refers to the first child in God's kingdom: Abel. Abel represents light and humility, while Cain is full of darkness and pride. The two are literally separated from one another, as light from darkness. In a similar fashion, the fifth day of creation, where God

⁴⁴ Ireland aptly notes, "If his scientific training had ever eroded a notion that a supernatural dimension was somehow separated from this present world, his early years in China fused them back together. For Sung, the presence of extraordinary events in someone's testimony is what lent the story credence. Increasingly, therefore, he turned his attention to such supernatural activities in his own life." Ireland, "John Sung," 86.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 89.

⁴⁶ Lim, *The Life and Ministry of John Sung*, 167.

⁴⁷ For this example, I rely heavily on Ireland's analysis of Sung's sermons. See Ireland, "John Sung," 89–91.

⁴⁸ Song Shangjie, "Chuangshijide qi xiaohai [The Seven Children of Genesis]," *Shengjie zhinan yuekan [Guide to Holiness]* 3, no. 6 (June 1931): 13. As cited in *Ibid.*, 89.

created fishes and birds, signifies Isaac's experience in life. "Isaac plunged to the depths like a fish when he was bound and about to be sacrificed by his father (Gen. 22), but he also soared to the heights like a bird when he received God's promise that a savior would come through his descendants."⁴⁹

Sung's subsequent sermons then added more layers to this interpretation of Genesis 1. For example, in one sermon Genesis 1 was also a template for the first seven chapters of the Gospel of John. The first day is the creation of light, which summoned images of light and darkness, Abel and Cain. But it also corresponded with how the True Light entered the world, and was rejected by it, in John 1. On the fifth day, God created fish and birds, which signified Isaac's life experiences. But they were also a symbol of how the crippled man in John 5 felt as he moved from a lower to higher existence when Jesus healed him. As Sung added layer upon layer of interpretation, the sermons were getting both more convoluted and yet easier to follow, for they followed a certain pattern. As Ireland observes,

The methodology was consistent. The seven days of creation described at the beginning of the Genesis, were the "key" to the mysteries of the whole Bible. In his series of sermons, Sung used those seven days to explain many things: the creation account summed up the entire book of Genesis; it clarified the meaning of the first seven chapters of John; the seven days of creation acted as a concise summary of the seven narrative blocks Sung identified as comprising the Old and New Testaments; they also forecast all of church history; and, in his final presentation, Genesis 1 prefigured his own spiritual narrative, which moved incrementally from darkness to rest.⁵⁰

Ireland argues that throughout these early sermons, Sung's goal was not revival but "to intensify his audience's sense of wonder at the mysterious nature of the Bible."⁵¹ After all, Sung believed that each detail in the text had significance, and as those meanings were unearthed the listeners were expected to marvel at how God had buried such treasures in plain

⁴⁹ Ibid., 90.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 90–91.

⁵¹ Ibid., 91.

sight.⁵² It is also noteworthy that in his several treatments of Genesis 1 above Sung did not attempt to prove that the biblical creation account was in harmony with modern science, like fundamentalist preachers typically did. Rather, his attention fell elsewhere: to show that Scripture was filled with hidden meanings.⁵³ This was how Sung initially preached as “a wandering curator of divine mysteries,” as Ireland puts it. This contrasts with Sung’s later, and presumably more mature, preaching style as a revivalist proper, which began with his official involvement with the Bethel Band in May 1931.

At the time, the Bethel Mission, which was the parent organization of the Bethel Band, was a highly influential Chinese interdenominational network of revivalism, which also had some connections with the Wesleyan Holiness movement internationally.⁵⁴ The Bethel Band itself was an evangelistic team that traveled around major cities across China to conduct revival meetings. It consisted of four young, well-educated and multitalented men, who always brought a well-orchestrated and attractive program to their revival meetings. They were all seasoned masters of ceremony who could control a crowd of any size at ease with their modern music and structured talk. Once Sung joined the Band, he easily outshone the other four members of

⁵² Song Shangjie, “Song Shangjie boshi jiejing [Dr. Song Shangjie’s Explanation of Scripture],” *Shengjie zhinan yuekan* [Guide to Holiness] 3, no. 4 (May 1931): 2. As cited in *Ibid.*, 92.

⁵³ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴ Lian Xi provides an instructive historical backdrop of this group: “The Bethel Band was an outgrowth of the Bethel Mission of Shanghai founded in 1920 by Jennie V. Hughes, a Methodist Episcopal educational missionary, and Shi Meiyu (Mary Stone), a pioneering female surgeon. Shi and Kang Chen (Ida Kahn) had been brought by a Methodist missionary to study at the University of Michigan where they became the first two Chinese women to earn medical degrees (in 1896) from a Western university. . . . Over the years, Shi developed a close friendship with Hughes, then principal of a mission school for girls in Jiujiang. In 1920, Shi’s ‘increasingly literalist religious views’ led her and the like-minded Hughes to sever their ties with the Methodist Board of Missions. The two decided to move to Shanghai where they set up the independent Bethel Mission. . . . During the 1920s, the mission grew to include both a primary and a secondary school, a chapel, a hospital, a nursing school, a Bible school, and an orphanage” (Xi, *Redeemed by Fire*, 132).

The Bethel Band itself was an evangelistic hand of the Bethel Mission, and it consisted of initially four young men (before Sung joined the group) who, to varying degrees, were all products of mission education: Ji Zhiwen (Andrew Gih), Nie Ziyang (Lincoln Nieh), Li Daorong (Philip Lee), and Lin Jinkang (Frank Ling). Sung was invited by Shi and Hughes, the co-director of Bethel Mission, to join the Bethel Band after they learnt of Sung’s preaching ministry in Nanchang earlier before May 1931. According to Xi, the Bethel Band would remain perhaps the best-known preaching team in Republican China (see *Ibid.*, 133).

the Band, as he took the theological language and rhetorical techniques of Bethel's revivalism and perfected them. Thus, although Andrew Gih was still the appointed leader of the group, Sung's name was listed first in the press reports about the Bethel Band's activities⁵⁵—a testimony to both his charismatic influence and the changing of the group's dynamics that eventually led to Sung's dismissal from the Band. While Sung's Bethel period lasted less than three years, the influence it had on Sung was enormous. Thanks to the Bethel Band, he had not only a platform to go nation-wide, but more importantly a particular type of religious expression which he mastered extremely well. As Ireland puts it, “[Sung] now belonged to an international network of holiness revivalism.”⁵⁶

While it is undeniable that Sung was heavily influenced by Bethel's revivalism, it is nevertheless an overstatement to say with Ireland that Sung underwent a “dramatic shift” or a “second conversion” in his approach to preaching and Scripture through his involvement with the Bethel Band.⁵⁷ To be fair, Ireland does offer a few qualifications here and there. Yet his

⁵⁵ Ireland, “John Sung,” 104–105.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 106.

⁵⁷ Sung's own rhetoric, admittedly, does indicate that he underwent a kind of shift in his preaching ministry in 1931. For instance, in July that year Sung told his audience, “The three years I spent working in Hinghwa are a warning. At that time, I spent day and night busily applying learning to instruct people...but in the end it had no effect. But now I am careful. I do not know anything else, but Jesus and him crucified on the cross.” Song Shangjie, “Make Di'erzhang [Mark Chapter Two],” *Shengjie zhinan yuekan [Guide to Holiness]* 3, no. 9 (September 1931): 19, as cited in Ireland, “John Sung,” 94.

Sung's journal entry for that period (i.e., “Three Years of Ministry Work in Fujian [1928-1930]”), however, shows that from his early days back in China, Sung was already interested in spiritual conversion and was involved in evangelistic meetings, albeit in a sporadic manner and on a minor scale—compared to his days with and after Bethel. This fact alone should force us to nuance our interpretation of Sung's rhetoric above. Note also that this part of Sung's published journal is the same part Ireland used in his work and deemed as original. See *Ibid.*, 86 n. 26.

This, furthermore, was backed up with an assessment from 1928 Hinghwa Annual Conference minutes on Sung's ministry: “The answer to the persecution of our church and the attacks of the radicals has been a forward movement in evangelism. This is the outstanding feature of the year's work. Just when our preachers were, figuratively speaking, in hiding because of the ridicule heaped upon them every time they made a public appearance or ventured to say anything about Christianity, and while utter discouragement possessed the majority of them, Dr. Sang Siong Ceh [John Sung], one of our Hinghwa boys, came back after several years' study in the States. He came back with a Ph.D. in Science but that was hidden by the glow of a heart which like that of Wesley's had been ‘strangely warmed.’ *He began to preach and to sound the call to repentance on the part of the workers, for a turning from sin and a dedication of life to the work of the Kingdom.* This beginning work of his was well characterised by a visitor in our midst when he said, ‘The young prophet is a combination of the weeping

overall narrative seems to portray a complete break in Sung’s preaching ministry before and after the Bethel Band period. It seems to me that Ireland’s assessment is correct when he asserts that “Sung never completely abandoned his infatuation with biblical mysteries—throughout his entire career he uncovered any number of them in each text—but their purpose was now to mobilize a person to repent and experience rebirth or renewal rather than experience awe.”⁵⁸ Indeed, the Band’s spiritual ethos and its organized meetings provided a new center and a set structure for Sung’s reading/preaching of Scripture, as we will see later. But his basic approach to Scripture, I would argue, remained the same throughout his life. Thus, I see his appropriation of Bethel revivalism more as a *development*, rather than a conversion, from his initial approach to Scripture and preaching. Ireland’s bigger point, however, still stands and is an important one: Sung was a Chinese revival preacher who belonged to the holiness tradition, and thus he ought to be analyzed as such.

John Sung’s Homiletical Pattern

John Sung was known first and foremost as a preacher—an itinerant evangelist who conducted numerous revival meetings across China, Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Southeast Asia. A report notes that Sung was typically home only one month out of the year, spending the remaining eleven months on the road.⁵⁹ He pastored no congregation, founded no organization, and wrote no book—except his personal diaries and the short autobiography that he dictated to his scribe. Yet his preaching ministry in China alone resulted in the conversion of one hundred

Jeremiah and the thundering John the Baptist’ (Hinghwa 1928, 39).” As cited in Michael Nai-Chiu Poon, “Interpreting Divine Acts,” in *Handbook of Popular Spiritual Movements in Malaysia, Singapore, and Indonesia*, ed. Michael Nai-Chiu Poon and John Roxborough (Singapore: Trinity Theological College, 2015), 94. Italics mine. Note that this report was from 1928, about three years before Sung joined the Bethel Band in 1931.

⁵⁸ Ireland, “John Sung,” 104.

⁵⁹ Tseng, “Revival Preaching and the Indigenization of Christianity in Republican China,” 178.

thousand Chinese during the 1930s, about 20 percent of the half million Chinese Protestants estimated to be living in China in 1935.⁶⁰

Sung's preaching ministry, however, cannot be adequately examined based on his written sermons alone. As preachers and homileticians would argue, the delivery of a sermon is as important as the content of the sermon itself. This is especially true with Sung, whose preaching was, by all accounts, dramatic. His sermons were meant to be watched and heard, not read. Indeed, Sung rarely, if ever, spent time correcting the proofs of his sermons that others wrote down.⁶¹ For Sung, the written sermon was always secondary. The preaching event, on the other hand, was where the revival really occurred; it was "an audio, visual, and tactile experience of God's message to those who assembled."⁶² According to Barbara Andaya, Sung's "theatrical" delivery was the key factor in attracting audiences of thousands of people.⁶³ In the following section I will examine some elements and examples of Sung's method of preaching, as seen through the eyes of his witnesses and biographers. Yet I would also argue that his peculiar style of preaching implicitly suggests a certain understanding of Scripture that is worth exploring hermeneutically.

⁶⁰ Xi, *Redeemed by Fire*, 10. Sung himself declared that "[d]uring the last nine years of my travels I have seen several hundred thousand born again" (John Sung, "Forty John Sung Revival Sermons Vol. 2," trans. Timothy Tow, Home of Grace, chap. 14, accessed December 12, 2018, <http://www.hograce.org/eng/document/Song.Sermons/v2/index.htm>). Both Schubert and Ireland also have a more or less similar estimation. See William E. Schubert, *I Remember John Sung* (Singapore: Far Eastern Bible College Press, 1976), 23; Ireland, "John Sung," 142.

⁶¹ Ireland, "John Sung," 109. Ireland here refers to Song Shangjie, *Jiangjingji [Bible Study]* (Hong Kong: Bellman House, 1987), 1.

⁶² Ibid. Ireland draws from Russel Richey's studies on modern revivalism. See Russell E. Richey, "Revivalism: In Search of a Definition," *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 28, no. 1–2 (1993): 165–175.

⁶³ Barbara Watson Andaya, "'Come Home, Come Home!'—Chineseness, John Sung and Theatrical Evangelism in 1930s Southeast Asia," *Occasional Paper Series*, no. 23, Southeast Asian Studies at the University of Freiburg (February 2015).

1. Style and Delivery: Performative Dramatization

Dressed in a low-class Chinese gown,⁶⁴ Sung was first and foremost a master of dramatization. Although Sung made extensive notes before he preached, he rarely referred to these when he preached. As Timothy Tow puts it, unlike “some dry-as-dust lecture-type sermons based on some abstract truth, Dr. Sung clothed the doctrine he was putting across in vivid, lively figures.”⁶⁵ Sung could howl and wail for the dead Lazarus “like those in a village funeral procession,” or jump on and off the platform exactly seven times to illustrate how Naaman was healed of leprosy. He would pour out onstage “agonized prayer and ecstatic praise,” as one missionary observed, “all intensified by vivid acting, scathing sarcasm and exuberant humour.”⁶⁶ In his sermon on Luke 15, for instance, Sung acted out the behavior associated with “the lost sheep” by imitating: young dandies, with a cigarette dangling from their lips; coquettish girls in their high heels, giggling and flirting; fat businessmen, who enjoy the good life while sitting in their rocking chair; cinema-goers, laughing and screaming at the tantalizing pictures; and religious hypocrites, strolling to church on Sunday with their Bible and hymnal. “Without mercy everyone was made to look into a mirror. It was a painful to whomever it applied, but the atmosphere remained merry: time and again bursts of laughter

⁶⁴ Sung’s outfit frequently drew comments both from his contemporaries and from his biographers. Ireland writes, “From the time he returned from the USA, he noted in his journal the surprise people had when they found him wearing Chinese style clothes, and not Western suit or Chinese clothes associated with the educated class. Sung came to refer to his clothing as an appropriate status marker for his work: it symbolized his sacrificial ministry. When a wave of Chinese nationalism reinvigorated the market for traditional clothing in the 1930s, Sung’s well-known preference for it made him appear to be a stalwart supporter of the Chinese nation” (Ireland, “John Sung,” 110). Lim makes a similar, but more detailed, observation: “Sung once told his audience that he saw a completely different person in the pictures taken before 1927. He said, then, he was modernized; but now, indigenized. The reason he gave was most illuminating. He said, ‘This (the indigenized Sung) is proof of the crucifixion of my flesh.’ Many had commented on John Sung’s characteristic unkempt hair. But some yearbook pictures from Ohio Wesleyan and Ohio State Universities showed a bespectacled, Western suit-clad, moderately handsome Sung. He was well-groomed, definitely without the Hitler-style hairdo. Few knew the ‘Americanized’ Sung because of John Sung’s intentional portrayal of this ‘indigenized’ persona” (Lim, *The Life and Ministry of John Sung*, 180).

⁶⁵ Tow, *John Sung My Teacher*, 30.

⁶⁶ Cited in Xi, *Redeemed by Fire*, 144.

rang out.”⁶⁷ Obviously, the effective use of comic relief was a key method to keep Sung’s listeners attentive. Yet, usually at the end of his message, Sung could easily move to a more serious level, invoking remorse and weeping as he recounted the story of Christ’s death on the cross in our place. “Under Dr. Sung’s preaching,” Dutch missionary Cornelia Baarbé recalled, “we followed the whole crucifixion moment by moment, we heard the hammer blows and saw the nails being driven in.”⁶⁸ In Saigon, Sung was so carried away by his enactment of a gospel story⁶⁹ that he even spat in the face of his interpreter!⁷⁰

Sung was also a master of drawing and managing teaching props. He often drew what he was talking about. Consider for example his sermon on the Parable of the Lost Sheep, referred to above. There Sung made visible every section of the story with a few lines and strokes. Baarbé describes his drawing as follows:

Sung used two scenes: one, where we could see the self-important sheep walk around and graze, consciously disregarding the warnings of the shepherd; and another, where Sung transitioned to human life and portrayed, how that life in the midst of the world can so occupy a human being, how the struggle for survival, the lust for money and pleasure can control someone so completely, that the call of the great Shepherd of people cannot even reach the ears anymore.⁷¹

By doing this, Sung not only made the plot of the story clear to his listeners, but also framed the story in such a way that they could quickly realize that it was about them, too. In another sermon, Sung drew a hypocrite on a poster-size paper that he carried with him. The hypocrite was a person with bulging eyes, large nose, flapping ears, big mouth, and round belly, yet with tiny arms and legs. This pictorial aid provided his listeners with “a memorable caricature of

⁶⁷ Cornelia Baarbé, “Part Two: Cornelia Baarbé on John Sung,” in *John Sung in Indonesia*, ed. Michael Nai-Chiu Poon, trans. Francisca F. Ireland-Verwoerd (Singapore: Trinity Theological College, 2011), 30–31.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 35.

⁶⁹ The story is probably that of Christ’s arrest.

⁷⁰ Lyall, *A Biography of John Sung*, 221. See also Andaya, “‘Come Home, Come Home!’—Chineseness, John Sung and Theatrical Evangelism in 1930s Southeast Asia,” 8.

⁷¹ Baarbé, “Part Two: Cornelia Baarbé on John Sung,” 29.

those who only see what is wrong with others, listen to flattery, speak critically, and gorge themselves on the mistakes of others, but who cannot actually do anything because of their shrunken limbs.” Sung ended the sermon with an invitation for the spiritually maimed in the audience to come forward, repent of their sins, and be healed.⁷²

Sung typically preached three times a day, for which he needed a platform or stage, since the standard pulpit was never enough for his dramatic preaching. The stage props he used included a coal-burning stove, which he would fan to send sparks flying in all directions to illustrate the power of the Holy Spirit: as the fire relit the dead coals, so the Spirit brought lost souls back to life.⁷³ Sung also used a huge rock which he struggled to carry on his back to demonstrate the weight of sin. He would then throw the rock on the platform with a loud thump and break into ecstatic singing to display the joy of divine forgiveness. His favorite furniture onstage, however, was a coffin—a ritually unclean object to Chinese people—which he would jump in and out of as he delivered a message on sin and death.⁷⁴ His most notorious use of the object was when he preached on Jesus raising Lazarus, as recorded below:

Sung pulled out a casket... and put it in the center of the platform. He taunted his audience that their hearts were like tombs, filled with the stink of rotten sin. “No! Don’t open it!” he parodied those obviously aghast by his frank disregard for propriety, “It will smell!” But open it he did. Reaching his hand into the casket, he pulled out a strip of cloth and dramatized his disgust as he dangled it before everyone’s eyes. “Oh! The first stink . . . *hatred*.” He warned the audience about the seductive power of hatred and then leveled his heavy stare. “Who has committed this sin?” Eyes dropped down, hoping to avoid Sung’s notice, but he paused, waiting, waiting, until finally someone indicated that she was afflicted by hatred. Then another and another raised their hands in confession. On and on it went, women and men weeping in repentance, until Sung was satisfied that hatred had been fully disgorged. Then he thrust [his] hand back into the box and drew out another cloth: “Visiting brothels! Who has committed this sin?” Thirty strips later, Sung concluded by inviting all who wished to be saved and washed clean of their sins to come to the front.⁷⁵

⁷² Ireland, “John Sung,” 110.

⁷³ Xi, *Redeemed by Fire*, 137; Baarbé, “Part Two: Cornelia Baarbé on John Sung,” 50.

⁷⁴ Xi, *Redeemed by Fire*, 137–138.

⁷⁵ Ireland, “The Legacy of John Sung,” 353.

In addition to the drawings and stage props that he often utilized in his dramatic preaching, Sung was also famous for his use of music and singing. Although he regarded preaching as the most important element of his meetings, Sung also considered hymns and songs sanctified by Scripture.⁷⁶ Prior to his sermon, chorus sheets were handed out so that the audience could practice several times and learn the tunes and words by heart before Sung began to preach.⁷⁷ In the middle of his message, Sung would often pause and ask the audience to sing one or two choruses as a way to reanimate themselves.⁷⁸ What others would see as an interruption of the flow of his message, Sung considered participation on the listeners' part, which was an integral component of his dramatic preaching. Furthermore, the songs, often composed by Sung himself, were closely connected with a selected Bible reading that Sung would preach. Thus, the singing before, in the middle of, and after the sermon could be seen as participatory events in Sung's dramatization of the scriptural passages.

The climax of the drama in Sung's revival meetings, however, was the final event of the altar call. Having been influenced by the theology and practice of the Bethel's holiness revivalism, Sung would almost always conclude his preaching by bringing his listeners to the climactic moment of crisis, where individuals were compelled to choose between salvation or damnation. Choosing salvation, in Sung's terms, entailed confession of sins, repentance, promise of restitution, and rededication to Jesus Christ, which were typically expressed through responding to the gospel call and the public confession of sin, often accompanied by tears.⁷⁹ "Before it was possible to attain new life, seekers had to nullify the old one. Sung told the

⁷⁶ He referred to the examples of Jesus (Mrk 14:26) and Paul and Silas (Acts 16:25) who also sang in Scripture. See John Sung, *Air Jang Hidup: Uraian Tentang Indjil Markus ("Living Water: Exposition on the Gospel of Mark")*, ed. Ong Lie Nio, trans. P. S. Naipospos (Jakarta, Indonesia: BPK Gunung Mulia, 1972), 181.

⁷⁷ Andaya, "'Come Home, Come Home!'—Chineseness, John Sung and Theatrical Evangelism in 1930s Southeast Asia," 7.

⁷⁸ Ireland, "John Sung," 111.

⁷⁹ Ireland points out that in this context, crying can be seen as a kind of baptism, since liturgically tears served to cleanse the repentant soul. See *Ibid.*, 112.

members of the audience, therefore, to separate themselves symbolically from their old sinful lives by leaving their seats, and walking to the front of the sanctuary.”⁸⁰ At this moment, “the teetering wall that had separated the actor from the spectators collapsed,” as Ireland nicely puts it. “Each person was suddenly aware that he or she was part of the service’s unfolding drama and was forced to play a role with eternal consequences.”⁸¹ Indeed, even those who refused to respond positively to the call were made aware that they actively rejected Jesus and his call, and thus were also playing their part in the drama, albeit negatively. I will return to this element of Sung’s sermons in the following section, but the point here is that the altar call moment at the end of Sung’s preaching was integral to his dramatic preaching.

What do we make of all this? How do we interpret Sung’s dramatic preaching, with its vivid acting, lively illustrations, creative props, emotional use of singing, and participatory altar calls? Sung biographers and scholars have attempted to explain his manner of preaching in many ways. There are, however, three main theories that have been widely circulated about Sung’s eccentric preaching. First, comments from Sung’s contemporaries that drew similarities between his preaching and that of Billy Sunday were taken by some scholars to imply that Sung was influenced by, and thus imitated, Sunday in his preaching. Those comments largely came from Western missionaries who observed Sung’s preaching and from local English newspapers that reported his revival meetings.⁸² Based on these reports, and through a formal comparison between several descriptions of Sunday’s and Sung’s “pulpit sensationalism,” Yun-Han Gwo, for instance, argued that Billy Sunday was Sung’s preaching inspiration.⁸³ To strengthen his

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ Ireland, “The Legacy of John Sung,” 353.

⁸² See Gwo, “Indigenous Preaching in China, with a Focal Critique on John Sung,” 64; Xi, *Redeemed by Fire*, 149; Andaya, “‘Come Home, Come Home!’—Chineseness, John Sung and Theatrical Evangelism in 1930s Southeast Asia,” 7.

⁸³ Gwo, “Indigenous Preaching in China, with a Focal Critique on John Sung,” 63–66, 78.

argument, Gwo also made the case that Sung must have heard Sunday's preaching in person, since Sunday held a gospel rally in the same city where, and around the same time when, Sung registered as a university student in the U.S.⁸⁴ This is possible. However, there is no mention of Sunday's name or his evangelistic events in either Sung's sermons or his meticulous diaries.

Second, some have argued that Sung's dramatic preaching style was a blatant adaptation of traditional Chinese entertainment, especially the form used by street storytellers. Again, this observation was initially made by some Western missionaries in China at Sung's time, but also by a few Chinese bystanders.⁸⁵ Today, mission historian Daryl Ireland has argued for this interpretation, albeit with one qualification: that Sung's preaching was *also* greatly shaped by the holiness revivalist theology and practices.⁸⁶ In this view, Sung's preaching ministry could be seen as a successful instantiation of a Christian adaptation of Chinese local cultural practices.

I will evaluate this line of interpretation more thoroughly below, as it also pertains to other elements of Sung's preaching that will be discussed in the following section. But for now, it is important to point out that the first two theories above assume that Sung *consciously* played out his role as a preacher in a theatrical, performative manner—either after Billy Sunday or after traditional Chinese storytellers. While this kind of performance-centered preaching was not necessarily wrong—as shown in the recent homiletic studies that suggest a close relationship between preaching and theatre⁸⁷—the overall tone of the above interpretations of

⁸⁴ Ibid., 63. Gwo basically noted two facts: 1) Sung registered at Ohio Wesleyan University, Cincinnati, shortly after his arrival in the U.S. in April, 1920; 2) Billy Sunday held an evangelistic campaign at Cincinnati, which lasted from March to May 1, 1920. Gwo connected these two with this assertion: "A religious person like Sung could not have missed such a long campaign held by the then most famous evangelist in America."

⁸⁵ See examples of this kind of observation, from a Western missionary and a Chinese bystander, in Ireland, "John Sung," 142, 136 n. 176.

⁸⁶ Ibid., 135–137.

⁸⁷ See, e.g., Alec Gilmore, *Preaching as Theatre* (London: SCM Press, 1996); Jana Childers, *Performing the Word: Preaching as Theatre* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1998).

Sung's preaching is negative: Sung was a great actor at best and a master of religious manipulation at worst.

The third interpretation is more sympathetic in nature. Many of Sung's biographers would fall within this category. They suggest that Sung's peculiar way of preaching was the result of his original creativity, his zeal for the salvation of the people, his sensibility to the Chinese people's need for visualization and emotional connection, or all of the above. One contemporary who held this view of Sung was the well-known Dutch missionary to Indonesia, Hendrik Kraemer.⁸⁸ It is noteworthy that Kraemer was not an admirer of Sung initially. He also never attended Sung's revival meetings in person, although he studied reports from his colleagues and other live witnesses about Sung's preaching ministry in Java. His conclusion, however, is perceptive and worth quoting in length as a contrast to the interpretations given above.

In the reports it is also very remarkable that the acting, the singing, and the collective repeating of Bible verses not only fulfilled a deep need of seeing and of self-expression, but that Dr. Sung apparently wanted to accomplish the indelible expression—in memories and souls—of the foundational truths of the Gospel regarding the salvific will of God and the destitution of humankind. While reading about the simple personality of Dr. Sung, completely submerged in his task, there is no reason whatsoever to assume that this is an evangelist who was also consciously a mass psychologist. One rather concludes, that it is the intensely spiritual desire to testify of salvation, which has led to a method of expression that is at the same time unintentionally psychologically brilliant. The care Dr. Sung displayed, according to the reports, to keep the remarkable results of his actions (healings and confessions) outside the public attention, thereby robbing it of all sensationalism, is an indication that his catching "method," which would degenerate quickly into shallow pursuit of success if it were a conscious approach, is rather the fruit of that love, which makes one ingenious but at the same time uninhibited.⁸⁹

⁸⁸ See Michael Nai-Chiu Poon, "Introduction," in *John Sung in Indonesia*, ed. Michael Nai-Chiu Poon, trans. Francisca F. Ireland-Verwoerd (Singapore: Trinity Theological College, 2011), 5.

⁸⁹ Hendrik Kraemer, "Part One: Hendrik Kraemer on John Sung," in *John Sung in Indonesia*, ed. Michael Nai-Chiu Poon, trans. Francisca F. Ireland-Verwoerd, CSCA Historical Reprints No. 2 (Singapore: The Centre for the Study of Christianity in Asia; Trinity Theological College, 2011), 18.

In Kraemer's view, Sung's dramatic preaching cannot simply be seen as a "conscious approach" to psychologically entertain or manipulate the audience, even if it may bear features similar to those of a "mass psychologist." Rather, it was a natural expression of Sung's intense desire for salvation and love for people, coupled with a deep sensitivity to the people's need of visualization and emotional connections.

To some extent, these are all plausible interpretations; I do not view them as mutually exclusive. What is missing, however, is an attempt to connect Sung's style of preaching with his theology of Scripture. It is natural to postulate that Sung's understanding of Scripture is reflected in his energetic, dramatic preaching. However, the reverse is also true: Sung's dramatic preaching may strongly suggest that he perceived Scripture as a divine drama that needed to be performed and enacted, not just spoken and read aloud. Kraemer came closest to this view when he asserts, "Sung's [pulpit] behavior, which makes the message of the gospel for many literally inescapable, reminds us of the prophets who use spectacular acts in order to demonstrate to the people of Israel the divine promises and threats, in order to speak more directly to heart and conscience."⁹⁰ I would further argue that what Sung did in his preaching was more than just mimicking the method of the prophets in order to make the ancient message relevant to his contemporary audience. Rather, Sung was *reenacting*—through various acts of dramatizing, illustrating, and even singing—the story of Scripture so as to draw the audience to indwell that story. Indeed, Sung's oft-repeated testimony about his own conversion seems to suggest that, for him, Scripture is the true story/reality into which our lives must be drawn, instead of the other way around. From this perspective, Sung's dramatic preaching style,

⁹⁰ Ibid., 17.

spectacular and uninhibited as it was, was just a natural expression of his underlying conviction about Scripture and reality.

2. Content and Structure: The Drama of Salvation

Like typical revivalist preachers, Sung preached extemporaneously. But he was surely atypical among preachers in asking his audience this question at the beginning of his revival meetings: “What chapter shall I preach on today?”⁹¹ He would write their choices on the blackboard, have them vote, and then he would preach on the winning chapter, after jotting down an outline and few notes on the spot. This impromptu variation was evidence of his agile mind,⁹² as well as of the breadth of his knowledge of Scripture, which was “the result of years of midnight oil, absorbing the Bible on his knees.”⁹³ However, careful observation of Sung’s sermons reveals that he had standard structures that helped him to build sermons on any given scriptural text. Ireland calls these Sung’s “stock materials” and identifies five of them: allegorizing the Chinese language; employing the body as metaphor; using personal stories—about himself or others—as illustrations; structuring the sermon in a set pattern around the theme of salvation; and moving towards an emotional decision-making moment.⁹⁴ In what follows, we will briefly survey these stock materials before analyzing them. This would help to illustrate some specific contents of Sung’s preaching and will also demonstrate the close relationship between Sung’s theology and his preaching.

First, Sung “was a master in a long tradition of seeing the gospel hidden in the Chinese characters.”⁹⁵ He liked to utilize the Chinese translation of a biblical text to highlight certain

⁹¹ Schubert, *I Remember John Sung*, 50.

⁹² Ireland, “John Sung,” 122.

⁹³ Schubert, *I Remember John Sung*, 50.

⁹⁴ Ireland, “John Sung,” 122–123.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 123. Ireland draws from Nathan Faries on this judgment. See Nathan Faries, *The “Inscrutably Chinese” Church: How Narratives and Nationalism Continue to Divide Christianity* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2010), 83–84. According to Faries, this “long tradition” of seeing the Gospel in the Chinese characters is

meanings or nuances that were otherwise unseen in the English text. The word “faith” in Chinese, for example, contains two characters: the first is a symbol for a person, while the second signifies a word. Sung would use this to emphasize the biblical teaching that faith comes when a person hears or relies on God’s word. Ireland provides another example of Sung’s use of this reading strategy:

The character 十, which means ten, opened the possibility for Sung to introduce set elements about the necessity of salvation through the cross of Christ. 十 is the first character in the word for the cross [十字架], and therefore whenever he came across a 10 in the Bible, Sung gave an impassioned presentation of the cross and its role in conversion. The text he was preaching from did not need to be related to the crucifixion. The Ten Commandments or the ten sections of John 14 could both segue into an impassioned description of Jesus’ death on the cross, or literally translated, his death on the wood-planks-in-the-shape-of-the-number-ten, because the character ten [十] provided the sufficient link between the material.⁹⁶

Second, Sung often drew and elaborated upon body imagery in his sermon. If his text was about the person who was possessed by a demon, for instance, Sung would describe this person as delivered to evil “from head to toe.”⁹⁷ Sung would then elaborate what that meant: the person’s mind was not clear, the eyes were used to watching movies, the mouth indulged in smoking, and the hands were employed to hit others. “The sins could change,” as Ireland observes, “but the body always remained a doorway through which Sung could enter to call people to repent of various evils.”⁹⁸ When he talked about Jesus’ salvific work, Sung would

part of the larger missionary (constructed) narrative whose goal is “to rewrite Chinese history according to a Christian narrative in order to show that the Christian God has been there all along.” For examples of this narrative, see Ethel R. Nelson and C. H. Kang, *The Discovery Of Genesis* (St. Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 1979); Ethel R. Nelson and Richard E. Broadberry, *Genesis And The Mystery Confucius Couldn’t Solve* (St. Louis, MO: Concordia Publishing House, 1994); Don Richardson, *Eternity in Their Hearts*, 3rd ed. (Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 2005). Faries’s argument notwithstanding, it appears that not only foreign missionaries but also Chinese Christians themselves often employed this kind of reading. See, e.g. Ronald Owen Hall, *T. Z. Koo: Chinese Christianity Speaks to the West* (SCM Press, 1950), 29; Ginger Tong Chock, *Genesis in Ancient China: The Creation Story in China’s Earliest Script* (Eastward Garden Publishing, 2014).

⁹⁶ Ireland, “John Sung,” 123–124.

⁹⁷ Song Shangjie, “Yongyuan shifang [Eternally Set Free],” *Budao zazhi [Evangelism]* 7, no. 3 (May-June 1934): 12. As cited in *Ibid.*, 124.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 125.

also often describe it in terms of bodily parts: “For the waywardness of our feet, Christ’s feet were crucified. For the evil and malicious thoughts of our mind, Christ had to wear the crown of thorns... We deserve to die by our covetous hearts, but Christ sorrowed in His heart for us even to be beaten and pierced in bitter suffering for all the sins of our bodies.”⁹⁹ In one of his sermons, Sung even found ways to talk about the cross of Christ through some of our body parts: “What are we doing with our two hands and ten fingers? To take hold of the cross! With our two feet and ten toes? To go the way of the cross! Our eyes are horizontally placed, our nose points vertically. That forms the cross, that we should preach the cross.”¹⁰⁰ Ireland concludes, “Bodies continuously provided Sung an opportunity to call people to repent and choose to walk in the way of Christ.”¹⁰¹

Third, the most recurrent features of Sung’s preaching were his sermon illustrations, which were mainly stories and testimonies. Ireland observes that they were usually “based on people he had met, a few were fictitious, but almost all the stories served his larger purpose of emphasizing the necessity of being born again.”¹⁰² Furthermore, “[t]hey were overwhelmingly didactic in nature, presenting positive and negative models of behavior, and they emphasized the normativity of conversion.”¹⁰³ While he was known to repeat the same stories in his various sermons, Sung also often creatively modified the details of the stories for his own theological purposes. Ireland tells us that

[t]he frequency with which he pulled out these stories made them akin to well-worn stones. They appeared almost by force of habit... Sung, for instance, enjoyed telling the story of a woman he healed in Shandong. She had been ill for eighteen years. What ailed

⁹⁹ John Sung, “Forty John Sung Revival Sermons Vol. 1,” trans. Timothy Tow, *Home of Grace*, chap. 6, accessed December 13, 2018, <http://www.hograce.org/eng/document/Song.Sermons/v1/index.htm>. This is part of Sung’s sermon on John 3, which is entitled “Be Born Again!”

¹⁰⁰ Sung, “Forty John Sung Revival Sermons Vol. 2,” 8. This is part of Sung’s sermon on Matthew 5, which is entitled “Pilgrim’s Daily Progress.”

¹⁰¹ Ireland, “John Sung,” 126.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, 127.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, 126.

her, however, changed depending on the text of his sermon. When Sung preached about Jesus' ability to cast out a legion of evil spirits in Mark 5, the woman he healed was diagnosed as insane; when he preached about Peter healing a lame man before the gate of the temple in Acts 3, she was paralyzed. The affliction did not matter as much as her instantaneous cure.¹⁰⁴

Fourth, Sung's sermons followed a certain basic structure that was centered around the theme of salvation. Sung almost always selected a whole chapter from Scripture as the basis of his message, for he believed that each chapter contains a complete divine thought that needs to be unearthed. Ireland offers an example of Sung's sermon on Mark 5 to show that Sung appropriated "the standard revival storyline" as the basic structure of his preaching.¹⁰⁵ The revival storyline to which Ireland refers is comprised of the threefold division, or stages, of Christian life that was fundamental in the holiness theology, namely conversion, sanctification, and spiritual victory.¹⁰⁶ The three mini-stories in Mark 5, in Sung's reading, clearly demarcate those three stages of spiritual life, and thus, they present a complete and succinct story of salvation history. Sung's peculiar exegetical decision to connect these three stories in Mark 5 to the three episodes of Israel's journey in the Old Testament was meant, according to Ireland, to emphasize the normativity of the threefold understanding of the Christian story. This interpretive strategy was where the influence of the holiness revival movement on Sung's reading of Scripture was most obvious. As Ireland puts it,

[Sung's] *ordo salutis* controlled his interpretation. That was the single most significant development in his maturation as a preacher. Sung moved from being strictly enamored with the mysteries he discovered in various verses, to controlling their meaning by inducting them into a fixed order of salvation, which he saw operating in every chapter. From that point on, virtually every sermon had the same basic skeletal structure; he told the same general story.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 127–128.

¹⁰⁵ We will revisit this rich example of Sung's sermon on Mark 5 in the next section (3.4.2.) for a detailed treatment.

¹⁰⁶ Ireland, "John Sung," 128–129.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 129.

Fifth, Ireland notes that Sung placed an inordinate stress on individual decision in his sermons. As alluded to earlier, Sung knew that at the end of his preaching he had to bring his listeners to a spiritual fork in the road where they needed to make a conscious decision for themselves regarding their fate. This is a basic form of the revival movement called “voluntarism.” In order to move from one spiritual stage to another, each person is required to make a choice: “the sinner needed to repent; the saved needed to consecrate themselves and be sanctified; the sanctified needed to evangelize. The revival invited each person to choose to take the next step in the order of salvation.”¹⁰⁸ This progression has to be an individual decision—one cannot rely on one’s family or clan in this matter.¹⁰⁹ What is more, it has to be now—the decision is a matter of urgency. “Today is the day of acceptance. Do not wait any longer!” Sung warned his listeners.¹¹⁰ Indeed, as Ireland points out, “the danger of waiting was an essential aspect of the message. It enhanced the crisis, which revivalism focuses upon. If a person missed the opportunity to complete all the steps, they risked dire consequences.”¹¹¹

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 133.

¹⁰⁹ Song Shangjie, “Shituxingzhuan Disanzhang [Acts Chapter Three],” *Shengjie zhinan yuekan [Guide to Holiness]* 3, no. 11 (November 1931): 10, as cited in Ireland, “John Sung,” 131.

¹¹⁰ Song Shangjie, “Shituxingzhuan Diyizhang [Acts Chapter One],” *Shengjie zhinan yuekan [Guide to Holiness]* 3, no. 9 (September 1931): 33, as cited in Ireland, “John Sung,” 133.

¹¹¹ Ireland, “John Sung,” 133. Ireland offers an interesting example of Sung’s rendition of the Passover story from the Egyptian point of view to show the sense of urgency Sung attempted to instill in his audience. In Sung’s imaginary account, there was a young Egyptian boy who heard about the coming Passover from an Israelite child:

The Egyptian boy said, “I am the eldest, but we don’t have any blood!” So he left his friend, and returned home. He told his father, and pleaded with him to kill a lamb. His father answered: “Do not be troubled by them, Jews are the most superstitious people. Come and eat!” Poor little child, he could eat but not swallow. His mother took him to sleep, but the child did not dare. His mother said, “Do not worry! I will sleep with you.” A little after ten the child woke up: “Mama! Quick, kill a lamb!” His mother once again patted him, and used comforting words until the boy once more fell asleep. All was quiet and still for an hour and a half, when suddenly the terrified boy once more woke up, yelling: “Mama! Hurry, kill a lamb!” His mother again comforted him, and his father said, “Son! Do not be afraid! If an angel really comes, your daddy will fight him off.” The boy once again relaxed.... Time flew by, and it was already 11:50. The child woke for a last time, and pleaded—as his whole body was drenched with sweat—saying, “Mama! Hurry, kill a lamb. The angel is coming soon!” The mother saw how anxious her son was, and told him a little lie: “I already killed it.” The child, who knew no better, fell back asleep, but soon thereafter his mother heard footsteps, and [saw] a flash of light like the sun, and she heard her precious child dying cry: “Mama!” That was his last sound. The mother hurriedly said, “Angel! Stop!” Unfortunately, it was too late! Dead!

The story can be found in Song Shangjie, *Lingcheng zhinan [A Guide for the Spiritual Journey]*, 12, as cited in Ireland, “John Sung,” 133–134.

Ireland's identification of these elements from Sung's sermons is helpful, but some of his analyses of them are less convincing. While Ireland is right to point out the possible sources from which Sung drew his stock materials, his analysis seems limited to the formal, and sometimes superficial, similarities between Sung's approach and that of the assumed resources. In Ireland's view, Sung's interest in finding hidden meanings in Chinese characters, utilizing body metaphors, telling personal stories, and bringing his audience to the crisis moment, can be explained away through an almost exclusively historical-cultural analysis. So, according to Ireland, Sung was simply part of the tradition that proclaimed the gospel through a particular focus on the Chinese translation of Scripture.¹¹² Sung's appropriation of the body "resonated with popular Chinese culture" that believed that "the mysteries of the spiritual world were embedded in the body,"¹¹³ while his sermon illustrations "mimicked standard tropes in Chinese literature."¹¹⁴ Sung's strategy of stopping in the middle of his sermon to ask questions designed to tap into the dissatisfaction experienced by his listeners to create a conducive atmosphere for the decision-making moment, were simply parallels of "techniques emerging in China's new advertisement industry."¹¹⁵ In short, "Sung's flexibility in creating, adapting, and changing his sermons should be understood in the context of traditional Chinese storytelling."¹¹⁶

¹¹² Ireland, "John Sung," 123.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, 125. Ireland makes references to: Richard J. Smith, *Fortune-Tellers and Philosophers: Divination in Traditional Chinese Society* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1991), 13; Susan Naquin, "The Transmission of White Lotus Sectarianism in Late Imperial China," in *Popular Culture in Late Imperial China*, ed. David G. Johnson, Andrew J. Nathan, and Evelyn Sakakida Rawski, *Studies on China* 4 (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1985), 276.

¹¹⁴ Ireland, "John Sung," 136.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 132. See also Wen-Hsin Yeh, *Shanghai Splendor: Economic Sentiments and the Making of Modern China, 1843-1949* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2007), 68.

¹¹⁶ Ireland, "John Sung," 135. Ireland appropriates the works of Vibeke Børdahl to argue about this. See Vibeke Børdahl, "Professional Storytelling in Modern China: A Case Study of the 'Yangzhou Pinghua' Tradition," *Asian Folklore Studies* 56, no. 1 (1997): 17; Vibeke Børdahl, "The Storyteller's Manner in Chinese Storytelling," *Asian Folklore Studies* 62, no. 1 (2003): 85.

While all this is possible, there is no concrete evidence, beyond similar formal elements, that Sung ever borrowed from Chinese storytelling traditions for his preaching ministry. He might possibly have been influenced indirectly by them, but to portray them as the major sources of Sung's stock material seems speculative at best. It appears that in Ireland's treatment of Sung's sermons, there is no room at all for exploring the possibility of Sung's spiritual experiences and/or theological convictions that might underlie his homiletical approach. The only exception is Ireland's instructive identification of the influence of the holiness revivalism in one or two of Sung's stock materials discussed above. But nowhere in his work does Ireland entertain the possibility that the subject matter of Sung's sermons, which is the God of the Bible, could be responsible for some, if not all, of Sung's stock materials. If Sung saw the nature of Scripture as something mysteriously given, and if Sung believed that spiritual realities as portrayed by Scripture were as real as physical ones, then would it not be natural for him to also seek Scripture's deeper meaning in its Chinese translation and in Chinese characters? And hence, it would also be natural for Sung to say that God had already provided Chinese people with clues to the gospel hidden in their own language, waiting to be deciphered under the light of Scripture. Similarly, Sung's use of the human body as metaphor can be interpreted as stemming from his theological beliefs, rather than the storytelling traditions of his culture. Since God is the designer of both Scripture and the human body, Sung naturally looked for divinely embedded parallels between Scripture and our bodies. As for his penchant for using personal stories—of his own but also of others—for sermon illustrations, Sung may or may not have consciously followed the tradition of popular Chinese storytellers as Ireland suggested above. But this penchant could also be indicative of Sung's theological understanding of the relationship between Scripture and the world—including the personal narratives of the people within it—in that Scripture narrates and gives meaning to the Christian life story. In this

account, testimonies—of individuals but also of community—naturally play a significant role in Scripture reading and preaching. Of course, this line of thought is also tentative in nature, just as Ireland’s hypothesis above. Yet it seems more congruent with Sung’s overall theology and is very plausible if the Christian tradition of figural understanding of Scripture and the world is taken seriously. At the very least, a fair reading of Sung and his preaching ministry needs to take this line of inquiry into account, even as it also incorporates the social-cultural analysis of Sung’s context.

John Sung’s Hermeneutical Features

Daryl Ireland is correct when he asserts that “Sung’s revival sermons were more an event than an exposition. That is why it is not sufficient to scour through Sung’s transcribed sermons and analyze his theology. To do that alone is to drain his power as a preacher. Sung’s revivals were first and foremost a dramatic event.”¹¹⁷ This is one reason why the previous section discussed his pulpit mannerisms in such detail. Sung’s dramatic preaching style, however, cannot be the *only* important reason for his extraordinary appeal. The fact that his *written* sermons are still one of the most sought-after works of devotional literature in many Chinese-speaking communities in China and beyond demonstrates the power of Sung’s messages, even in their “muted,” textual version.¹¹⁸ Although his delivery method matters—and it matters a great deal, as most of the original witnesses of Sung’s ministry would testify—one cannot overemphasize that aspect at the expense of the exegetical content of Sung’s sermons themselves. It might be argued that the way Sung engaged Scripture was as compelling a factor in his popularity as the way he engaged his audiences through his theatrical flair. Furthermore, as suggested earlier, his dramatic preaching might be indicative of his theological

¹¹⁷ Ireland, “John Sung,” 114.

¹¹⁸ See Tseng, “Revival Preaching and the Indigenization of Christianity in Republican China,” 178.

understanding of and hermeneutical approach to Scripture. Thus, although the majority of Sung scholarship focuses on his preaching style while brushes off his exegesis as simplistic at best and fanciful at worst, I contend that despite its simplicity and peculiarity, Sung's approach to Scripture betrays a popular understanding of how grassroots Chinese Christians read Scripture.

Some Key Features of John Sung's Exegesis

Allegorical Exegesis

Sung was known as one of the “wildest” allegorists China has ever had. He consistently interpreted Scripture allegorically, even if the text's historical references seemed obvious. As discussed earlier, for Sung scriptural truth is a mystery that needs to be decoded through allegorical exegesis by born-again Christians who are filled with the Holy Spirit. Sung would allegorize both the Old and the New Testaments, as he believed that every chapter, every verse, and every word had deeper spiritual meanings that were not always related to their literal sense. Despite some minor variations, I would argue that in general Sung's allegory is not that different than that of the Western premodern exegetes.

In Sung's reading of Exodus, for example, Egypt represented the world, whereas the Israelites signified Christians. Israelites in Egypt, specifically, were Christians who were not yet born. Pharaoh symbolized the devil, while Moses was Jesus, who redeemed his children from sin. Exodus, therefore, means coming out from sin.¹¹⁹ This was a rather standard reading in Christian tradition. Sung's take on the parable of the Good Samaritan—one of the prime examples of allegorical interpretation—was also similar to that of Augustine of Hippo. The person who went down to Jericho was having a spiritual downfall, while Jesus was the Good Samaritan who helped the half-dead man with all the resources he had. The inn where the man

¹¹⁹ See Leung, “A Defense for Spiritual Interpretation of the Chinese Church,” 52–53.

was put was the church to which the Lord would come again a second time, as signified by the promised return of the Samaritan.¹²⁰

In other examples, however, Sung’s allegorical reading seems novel. In his sermon on Haggai 1, Sung allegorized the temple as our body, which is the temple of the Holy Spirit. The call to rebuild God’s temple there symbolized the call to become a holy temple by seeking holiness in our life so that God might dwell in our heart and body, just as God would dwell in his house or temple. This line of interpretation is still quite traditional. But Sung really diverges from the expected by interpreting the call to bring wood on the top of the hills (v. 8) as the call to study God’s Word. Thus, Sung exhorted his listeners to do daily devotions with their Bibles in order to be holy people, for Scripture was the wood that made up the holy temple of God.¹²¹

Sung’s take on the ark in the story of Noah was even more remarkable.¹²² After studying the length, width, and height of the boat Noah made, Sung reckoned that the ark was rectangular—and looked rather like a Bible. Unlike many premodern exegetes who viewed the

¹²⁰ Ibid., 58. Leung has instructively summarized Sung’s allegory of this story as follows:

A person going "down" to Jericho:	Spiritual downfall
Jericho:	Place of death
Robbers:	The Devil
Robbed of riches:	Hearts grabbed away
Priest:	Church pastors
Samaritan:	Jesus
Oil:	Stirring of the Holy Spirit
Wine:	Blood of Jesus
Cloth:	Discipline of the Holy Spirit
Ass:	Guidance of the Holy Spirit
Inn:	Spiritual Church
Two denarii:	New and Old Testaments
Samaritan returning:	Parousia of the Lord

¹²¹ See Sung, “Forty John Sung Revival Sermons Vol. 1,” 11 part 1. This is Sung’s sermon on Haggai 1, which is entitled “On Building the House of God (Part 1).”

¹²² See Ibid., 8. This is Sung’s sermon on Genesis 6-7:15, which is entitled “Noah and the Building of the Ark.”

ark as a type of the Church, Sung concluded that the ark was a type of the Bible. Just as it was a three-story ark with a window on top, the Bible was also divided into three sections: 1) the Old Testament; 2) the Four Gospels; and 3) the Epistles; with the book of Revelation as the window on top. The whole ark was made of one type of wood, just as the whole Bible was written by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. The ark has only one door; similarly, there is also one narrow door to enter the kingdom of heaven as portrayed in Scripture, namely, Jesus. Interestingly, Sung also saw Jesus as prefigured in the ark. “The ark’s length is 300 cubits inasmuch as Jesus’ life span on earth was thirty years. Three stories also stand for Jesus’ three years of preaching. The window on top stands for the last year of Jesus’ work, and it also typifies the Cross.”¹²³ Thus, according to Sung, the ark was a type of both the Bible and the Christ. How is this so? Sung did not offer the reason, but there are at least two ways of explaining this. One is that Sung perceived the biblical text as having multiple spiritual-theological references. The other is that he really believed that the Bible and Jesus Christ were so intricately connected that he sometimes referred to them interchangeably. I think both explanations are correct.

Christological Exegesis

As indicated above, Sung’s allegorical exegesis was almost always Christologically focused. It was no mere random, or general, allegorical reading; rather, it was centered around the person and the work of Christ. Sung believed that Scripture contained divine mysteries, as mentioned earlier. But these mysteries were precisely the mystery of and about Jesus Christ, for Christ was the center of both the Old and the New Testaments. Thus, in Sung’s reading, the lamb that was provided to Abraham in Genesis 22 to replace Isaac’s place was Jesus.¹²⁴ This seems quite straightforward, as Sung connected most references to lambs in the Old Testament

¹²³ Ibid.

¹²⁴ See Ibid., 10. This is Sung’s sermon on Genesis 6-7:15, which is entitled “The Story of the Hero-Model of The Old Testament.”

with Jesus, the Lamb of God that takes away the sin of the world. In a similar fashion, Naaman's bathing in the river of Jordan to cleanse his leprosy was allegorically interpreted as the saving act of God to cleanse our sin in and through the blood of Jesus,¹²⁵ because Sung believed that Jesus was the reality to which all Old Testament stories pointed. Thus, he would link the bathing and cleansing references in Scripture to the salvific reality of baptism in the blood of Jesus.

The two spies who met Rahab in Joshua 2 were also a type of Christ. This was so because the spies appeared to possess power and authority to save Rahab and her family. The fact that Rahab begged them to spare her household from the destruction strengthened Sung's Christological reading, for only God in Christ is capable of true protection. He also found another Christological connection in the detail that the spies must hide in the hills for three days to outwit their pursuers (v. 16, 22). To Sung, this clearly signified the death of Christ and his subsequent resurrection on the third day, where he outwitted the Devil and the death itself.¹²⁶ Accordingly, the scarlet rope was a sign of the saving blood of Christ, through which we were spared and saved, not unlike the lamb's blood on the doorpost of the Israelites' homes in Exodus.

Needless to say, Sung also read the New Testament through his Christological lens. While this seemed obvious for the most part, some of his interpretations were quite unique and thus noteworthy. In general, whenever he read about a protagonist character in a Gospel account who underwent some kind of hardship, suffering, persecution, or martyrdom, Sung perceived them as Christ. The Lazarus in Jesus' parable in Luke 16, for instance, was a type of

¹²⁵ See Sung, "Forty John Sung Revival Sermons Vol. 2," 2. This is Sung's sermon on II Kings 5, which is entitled "The Story of the Leper."

¹²⁶ See Ibid., 6. This is Sung's sermon on Joshua 2, which is entitled "A Harlot Found Salvation."

Christ. Sung found several similarities between the two figures to justify his reading: both Lazarus and Jesus were poor, rejected, suffered, and endured humiliation and death. They were also vindicated by God (through Abraham in Lazarus' case) at the end, while the language of resurrection from the dead in verse 31 added to the Christological connection.¹²⁷ This Christological interpretation, however, was not only applicable to a character in a story, but was extended to items or things, as well. Thus, when Jesus broke bread to feed the multitudes, Sung interpreted the bread as Jesus' body and the action as his crucifixion.¹²⁸ In the same vein, the alabaster jar that was broken by the woman to anoint Jesus was also a sign of Jesus' body being broken and his blood poured out for the salvation of the world.¹²⁹

Perhaps the most revealing example, however, was Sung's treatment of Paul's famous discourse on love in 1 Corinthians 13. In it, Sung literally replaced every word "love" with the word "Jesus!"¹³⁰ Indeed, he entitled the sermon "The Wonder of the Cross."¹³¹ Essentially, Sung's argument was: since only Jesus truly loves, as evidenced in his willingness to leave the heavenly glory and to be crucified for others, thus Paul spoke of no other than Jesus and *his* love here. Sung also linked this with Paul's earlier remarks on preaching and knowing nothing except Christ and him crucified (1:23; 2:2). Once this was established, Sung's verse by verse

¹²⁷ Sung, "Forty John Sung Revival Sermons Vol. 1," 1. This is part of Sung's sermon on Luke 16, which is entitled "Heaven and Hell."

¹²⁸ Ibid., 14. This is part of Sung's sermon entitled "On Dedication." While the reference of the sermon was clear (on the story of Jesus feeding the 5000 people), there was no mention of which Gospel account that Sung based his sermon on.

¹²⁹ See Sung, "Forty John Sung Revival Sermons Vol. 2," 18. This is Sung's sermon on Mark 14, which is entitled "A Beautiful Gesture." See also John Sung, "Mary Breaks An Alabaster Jar," in *Strength for the Storm: Spiritual Lessons--from Wang Mingdao, John Sung and Other Chinese Preachers--Which Prepared the Church for Suffering*, ed. Arthur Reynolds, trans. Arthur Reynolds (Singapore: OMF Books, 1988), 15–22.

¹³⁰ Sung claimed that he made this move because of the revelation that he received in the Bloomingdale Hospital: "When I was locked in the mental asylum, God's Spirit personally led me, asking me to read sections of the Bible, replacing every word 'love' with the word 'Jesus!'" (Song Shangjie, "Gelingduo qianshu dishishanzhang [First Corinthians 13]," *Shengjie zhinan yuekan* 3, no. 6 (June 1931): 6, as quoted in Ireland, "John Sung," 63 n. 120).

¹³¹ See Tseng, "Revival Preaching and the Indigenization of Christianity in Republican China," 180; Baarbé, "Part Two: Cornelia Baarbé on John Sung," 36.

exposition of this passage on love became an exposition of Jesus' life and death on the cross: Jesus was patient and kind; he did not envy or boast; he was not arrogant or rude; he did not insist on his own way; he bore all things; he believed all things; he endured all things. To be sure, Sung also talked about Christians (and himself) in the exposition.¹³² But they were brought up *not* to provide another example of how these principles of love work, *nor* even for the sake of exhortation to imitate Christ and his love. Rather, they were there in the sermon to show how they all had fallen short of the ideal picture of love, which was embodied only in Jesus Christ. The application of that sermon, in other words, was not "we should love like Jesus loves." Instead, it was: "Sinners, repent! Believe in Jesus Christ who is love crucified for you!" Hence, in Sung's hand, the love chapter of 1 Corinthians 13 was no poetic description of human, universal, generic love; it was rather a concrete description of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Sung ended his sermon fittingly with this word of praise: "Oh, wonderful, bleeding, suffering Love! How can we ever thank You? The freed sinners praise You. The redeemed worship You. Hallelujah."¹³³

Tropological Exegesis

Although Sung's exegesis was highly allegorical and usually centered around the Christ event—the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus—one cannot miss the strong tropological direction of his scriptural interpretation upon reading several of his sermons. One might even argue that Sung's allegorical and Christological reading almost always leads to a tropological sense of the text. Consider his treatment of the Beatitudes in the sermon entitled *Pilgrim's Daily Progress*.¹³⁴ He began by asking, "How shall we progress on the pilgrim's way to heaven? ...

¹³² See Baarbé, "Part Two: Cornelia Baarbé on John Sung," 36–41.

¹³³ *Ibid.*, 41.

¹³⁴ Sung, "Forty John Sung Revival Sermons Vol. 2," 8. All references from the two paragraphs below are taken from this sermon of Sung.

These nine steps are given by Jesus on a mountain. That mountain may be called the mountain of nine blessings.” With this kind of introduction, the audience would likely expect a direct tropological exposition of the Beatitudes, one in line with too many moralizing sermons on this text. It turned out, however, that Sung allegorized all nine beatitudes after the pattern of Jesus’ life. He asked his listeners, “What mountain do you climb? Is it the one Jesus is climbing?” In Sung’s reading, the nine steps of ascending to heaven in the Beatitudes referred first and foremost to Jesus himself.

The first step was to be poor in spirit: Jesus came down from heaven to the manger. The second step was to mourn so as to be comforted: Jesus was baptized and then the Spirit descended upon and comforted Jesus. The third step was to be meek: Jesus was led by the Holy Spirit into the wilderness, for Sung argued that the meek were those who obey the Holy Spirit. The fourth step was to hunger and thirst for righteousness: hungered by fasting, Jesus was tempted by Satan to change stone into bread. The fifth step was to be merciful: Jesus was compassionate upon seeing the lost. The sixth step was to be pure in heart so as to see God: Jesus was transfigured on Mount Hermon, where he saw God. The seventh step was to be a peacemaker: Jesus washed the disciples’ feet in the Upper Room, for “[t]o make peace is to love one’s enemy, conquering hatred with love.” The eighth step was to be persecuted for righteousness’ sake: Jesus decided to drink the bitter cup in Gethsemane for righteousness’ sake. The ninth step was an extension (or a “perfection,” as Sung called it) of the eighth: Jesus suffered and died on Golgotha.

This Christological reference of the Beatitudes, however, was not the exegetical end in and of itself. Rather, it served a tropological purpose: to exhort the congregation to progress in their spiritual journey, as the title of the sermon suggested. These nine steps that Jesus went

through were also those of Christians, although they took a different, albeit corresponding, form in Sung's tropological rendering: (1) repentance, (2) rebirth, (3) obedience to the Spirit, (4) desire for the word of God, (5) Gospel witness, (6) holiness, (7) love, (8) perseverance in the midst of suffering and obedience to the end, and (9) perfection in the form of martyrdom. Thus, the Beatitudes were both the allegory of Jesus' life as well as the tropology of Christian life.

Sung took a similar hermeneutical approach in his sermon on Mark 1.¹³⁵ This chapter contains several episodes of Jesus' early ministry, such as the ministry of John the Baptist, Jesus' baptism, his temptation, his first preaching, his calling of the first disciples, his healing and other public ministries in different locations. Sung offered his audience a conceptual and pictorial framework of a ten-level pagoda building to understand this chapter. This pagoda was God's work in Jesus Christ, Sung insisted early in the sermon. But as he progressed in the sermon, it was clear that Sung perceived this pagoda as a template for Christians as well, as he used the phrase "our pagoda" numerous times. The first level of the pagoda was repentance, as it was the core message of the preaching of John the Baptist. Just as John called the people to repent to prepare for the coming of the Christ into their midst, repentance was also Sung's first step to prepare for the coming of Jesus into people's heart. The second level, parallel to Jesus' baptism, was rebirth. In his baptism, "Jesus carried our sins; he died, drowned, but then he rose again."¹³⁶ Upon his coming out from the water, the Holy Spirit came upon him and the Father assured him, "You are my beloved child." To Sung, this was the prototype event of our spiritual rebirth. The third and fourth levels, taken from Jesus' sojourn in the wilderness, were the purification that comes through temptations and the overcoming of the Devil, respectively. The

¹³⁵ See Sung, *Air Jang Hidup: Uraian Tentang Indjil Markus* ("Living Water: Exposition on the Gospel of Mark"), chap. 1. This book is an Indonesian translation of Sung's sermons on the Gospel of Mark that he delivered in Surabaya, Indonesia. It was originally transcribed in Dutch by Ong Lie Nio before being translated into Bahasa Indonesian. Sung himself preached in either Mandarin or his own native Hinghwa dialect.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*, 17. My translation.

fifth level was evangelism, especially through the creation of local evangelistic groups, which Sung was famous for.¹³⁷ This, predictably, was linked with Jesus' preaching and the calling of the disciples. Levels six to ten of Sung's pagoda in this sermon were called, respectively: the church for Christ; the household for Christ; the whole people in the city for Christ; neighboring cities and villages for Christ; and the whole island for Christ.¹³⁸ The first two of these corresponded to Jesus' ministry in the synagogue (v. 21) and in the house of Simon (v. 29), whereas the last three were linked to three textual references to the location and the recipients of Jesus' ministry: the whole city (v. 33), the next towns (v. 38), and people from every quarter (v. 45).¹³⁹ For Sung, therefore, Mark 1 was not only a descriptive story of Jesus Christ but also a prescriptive story for Christians. Precisely because it was the story of Jesus Christ, it was also supposedly the story of every Christian: having been given the forgiveness of sins through repentance, spiritually reborn through the Spirit, sanctified through temptation, and finally having experienced victorious life over the Devil, Christians are called to spread the gospel of Jesus Christ—in the church, in the family, in the city, in neighboring cities, and finally to the end of the world. Here we see again Sung's hermeneutical movement from allegorical-Christological exegesis to a tropological interpretation.

However, the following final example perhaps best captures the dynamics between Sung's three key exegetical features that we have dealt with so far. This might be the case

¹³⁷ Sung modeled his own ministry after the same pattern of forming and training local evangelistic groups wherever he went to perform the revival meetings.

¹³⁸ After describing the first five levels of the spiritual pagoda as *repentance, rebirth, purification, victory, and evangelization*, Sung switched gears and sketched his last five levels of the pagoda in a very different fashion. This change, from a very individual focus to a very communal-missional understanding of the Christian life, came as a surprise to the reader of the sermon, for neither indication nor explanation for the change of focus was given by Sung. However, while Sung did not offer any connection between the two halves of the pagoda, one might easily observe that the second set of five pagoda links, corresponds directly to level five on evangelization above.

¹³⁹ See Sung, *Air Jang Hidup: Uraian Tentang Indjil Markus* ("Living Water: Exposition on the Gospel of Mark"), 19–23.

because all three features are conveniently present in a single brief interpretive comment that Sung made regarding the two gospel accounts of Jesus feeding the multitudes:

Jesus broke five loaves and two fishes to feed five thousand people. This signifies five continents. Jesus died on the Cross that the whole world may feed on Him. From the five loaves and two fishes there were twelve baskets left over, which signify twelve families or clans. Whatever Jesus did, he wanted His disciples to do likewise. The seven loaves are the seven churches, the four thousand to whom they were given are the four directions, meaning the whole world. Jesus died for us, gives us life, and so we must give it to the whole world, this is the spiritual meaning.¹⁴⁰

This allegorical reading (e.g., five thousand people as five continents and four thousand as the four directions, both signifying the whole world) coupled with its Christological focus (e.g., breaking the bread as giving up his life on the cross), subtly moved in a tropological direction by asserting the tropological axiom: “Whatever Jesus did, he wanted His disciples to do likewise.” This, according to Sung, is the spiritual meaning of the gospel texts.

An Extended Example of Sung’s Exegesis: Sermon on Mark 5

One hermeneutical strategy that Sung liked to employ to bring out the allegorical and tropological senses of Scripture might be called intertextual hermeneutic. This is a version of the principle of Scripture-interprets-Scripture found in many premodern exegetes and their descendants. While this reading strategy is not unique by any means, Sung’s appropriation of this approach was uninhibited and thoroughgoing. In what follows I will utilize Sung’s sermon on Mark 5 to flesh out this particular feature of Sung’s hermeneutics.¹⁴¹ At the same time, this

¹⁴⁰ This was taken from one of the sermons Sung preached at Maitrichit Church in Bangkok from July 22 to August 2, 1939. See Seung Ho Son, “Christian Revival in the Presbyterian Church of Thailand between 1900 and 1941: An Ecclesiological Analysis and Evaluation” (Ph.D. Dissertation, Stellenbosch: University of Stellenbosch, 2003), 114–115.

¹⁴¹ The sermon is taken from Sung, *Air Jang Hidup: Uraian Tentang Indjil Markus* (“*Living Water: Exposition on the Gospel of Mark*”), chap. 5. All the following quotations that come from this book are my own translation.

sermon will also serve as an extended example of Sung's exegetical practices outlined above under the categories of allegorical, Christological, and tropological exegesis.

Mark 5 consists of three stories: the restoration of a demon-possessed man, the healing of a bleeding woman, and the raising of a dead girl. Sung began the sermon by asserting, without providing any reason whatsoever, that he would explore these stories in conjunction with the story of Israel's exodus from Egypt and entrance into Canaan.¹⁴²

The First Story (Mark 5:1-20)

The first thing Sung noticed about the story was its location, the country of the Gerasenes, which Sung called "the land of the tombs."¹⁴³ This, in Sung's view, corresponded to the land of Egypt—which was, to Israel, the land of the dead. The demon-possessed man symbolized Israel, whereas the evil spirit was the Pharaoh. The story suggested that the evil spirit had bound the man for a long time, just as Pharaoh enslaved Israel for hundreds of years in Egypt. Jesus then came onto the scene and liberated the demon-possessed man just as Moses had liberated the people of God in Egypt. At this juncture, Sung made a general point that these two stories should be read together.

As the sermon progressed, Sung explained the relationship between the two in a detailed manner. In verses 6-7, he observed that the evil spirit fell before Jesus and worshipped him. Sung remarked, "Satan worships the Lord with his mouth only, not with his heart; Satan fears the Lord without loving him."¹⁴⁴ This resembled Israel's attitude in the desert: they were following Moses on their feet, but without sincerity, for their hearts were filled with complaints

¹⁴² Ibid., 58.

¹⁴³ Ibid.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid., 59.

and rebellions.¹⁴⁵ Furthermore, Jesus' powerful rebuke to the evil spirit (v. 8) was likened to God's mighty hand that handed over Pharaoh to Moses, just as the evil spirit's reluctance to immediately leave the man upon Jesus' rebuke (v. 10) bore a resemblance to Pharaoh's stubbornness to let the Israelites out of Egypt upon Moses' command.¹⁴⁶

The following episode in verses 11 to 14 was the climax of the story. While his reading of this event was multilayered, Sung ultimately interpreted the drowning of the two thousand pigs as an act of sacrifice for the liberation of the demon-possessed man. As in the region of the Gerasenes, there were also sacrifices made during Israel's exodus from Egypt. Sung mentioned the dead, that is, the Egyptians' firstborn, but his primary focus was clearly on the sacrifice of Israel's Passover lamb, which Sung identified as Jesus Christ, the Lamb of God that was slain from the foundation of the world.¹⁴⁷ Sung went on to use the event of Israel's crossing the Red Sea to explicate the Christological focus of the event. After the miraculous crossing, the Red Sea stood between the Israelites and the Egyptians, separating them once and for all. Like the Red Sea, Jesus stood between the newly free man and the evil spirits' Legion, making sure that the latter could not seize the former again. Later, Sung more explicitly claimed that the Red Sea signified Jesus' blood that freed Israel from the bondage of slavery by drowning the Egyptian soldiers, not unlike the pigs that were drowned in the sea in the region of the Gerasenes for the liberation of the man in Mark 5. Finally, the news of Israel's exodus was spread out to their neighboring nations; likewise, Legion's exodus from the evil spirits in the land of the Gerasenes was quickly known to the people in the city and in the country (v. 14).¹⁴⁸

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 59–60.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 60.

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 63.

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 64. In the sermon, Sung went on to make a connection between the story of post-exodus Israel and the condition of the man after being released from the evil spirit—sitting, clothed, and in his right mind, as seen in verse 15. Sung observed that, like the demon-possessed man in the story, Israel was also in a naked condition before receiving God's law on Mount Sinai. For Sung, the Law was likened to a clean cloth that covered the newborn Israel post-exodus. Moreover, in a manner reminiscent of Paul's understanding of the Law, Sung

The Second and Third Stories (Mark 5:21-43)

Sung found numerous parallels between the last two stories in Mark 5 and the story of the journey of Israel post-exodus. Due to space constraints, I will only very briefly highlight three. First, Sung observed that while there was a great crowd that gathered around Jesus upon his arrival to the other city (v. 21, 24), there were only two individuals who truly sought him and played a central role in the story, namely the sick woman and Jairus. Sung asked, “How many people among the whole Israelites who came out from Egypt were finally allowed to enter into Canaan the promised land?”¹⁴⁹ The answer: only two as well, namely Joshua and Caleb. This, to Sung, was another invitation to read the narratives in conjunction with each other. Thus, he could find a connection between the apparent motive of the woman and Jairus in seeking Jesus and that of the Israelites in seeking God. The two individuals in the Gospel story sought Jesus only because they were in desperate need of something—of healing. This was the same pattern with the Israelites post-exodus. When they were hungry and thirsty in the desert, they called upon God; in the days of bounty, however, they worshiped the golden calf.¹⁵⁰

Second, dealing specifically with the woman who had endured hemorrhages for twelve years, Sung drew a parallel between her suffering with Israel’s wandering in the desert. In the roving wilderness the Israelites bled too, as it were, and in the process, they lost their strength

perceived that the Law also served as a mirror to facilitate Israel’s self-awareness of their sin. For just as the man was unaware that he was naked before he met Jesus, Israel was also unaware of its nakedness before receiving the Law. The man was acting as if he was crazy before, but then he was in his right mind. Likewise, the Israelites lived by their own might before, searched for food on their own and often fell short, but now God provided them with manna every day.

Sung also found a parallel between the Gerasene people’s rejection of Jesus (v. 17) with that of Israel by the reaction of the people of Edom when Israel requested permission to pass through their country (Num. 20:21). The Edomites prevented Israel from entering their land, while the Gerasenes urged Jesus to leave their country; in the same manner, the enemy of Christ handed over Jesus to the cross outside of the city of Jerusalem. Finally, Jesus sent the now-free man back to his community to tell people how much the Lord had done for him (verses 19-20), just as the Israelites were commanded to tell and retell their children and others how much the Lord had done for them in the Exodus. See Sung, *Air Jang Hidup*, 65.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid., 66.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid., 66–67.

and source of life—what Sung believed was the Holy Spirit. At the same time, the desert experience was necessary for the purification of the Israelite’s sins before they entered the promised land. This, Sung would argue, was the pattern in many scriptural stories of both the Old and the New Testaments. However, Sung had another way of parallelizing the two stories in question. He first observed that the story of the hemorrhaging woman was actually an “interruption” of the ongoing story of Jesus’ journey to Jairus’ house to heal his daughter. Sung then mentioned that Israel’s journey from Egypt to Canaan was also filled with barriers or interruptions, most notably the Red Sea and the Jordan River. While crossing the Red Sea signified a sort of baptism in the blood of Jesus, as hinted earlier, the act of crossing the Jordan River specifically referred to the act of denying one’s own self, of carrying one’s own cross, and of faithfully walking the path to holiness.¹⁵¹ This latter act of self-purification and faithful obedience in holiness was the one that Sung perceived in the woman’s hemorrhagic suffering and her bold attempt to reach Jesus’ cloak. In other words, Jesus—with his blood shed—was the Red Sea, whereas the woman—with her blood drained—was the Jordan River. To put it in Sung’s theological-revivalist vocabulary, the Red Sea denoted spiritual rebirth, whereas the Jordan River symbolized holiness. Israel had to pass through the sea and the river before they could reach the promised land.

Third, and finally, Sung turned his attention to the story of Jairus and his attempt to bring Jesus to his dying daughter. Sung treated this as Jairus’ spiritual journey and linked it again with Israel’s journey to Canaan. He particularly noted the incident of Jairus’ servant who, because the sick girl was already dead, repelled Jesus from coming to Jairus’ house and thus became another obstacle that Jairus had to overcome. This, in Sung’s reading, was the city of

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 70.

Jericho with its strong wall that stands between Israel and the promised land. Accordingly, he found that Jesus' words to Jairus in verse 36 ("Do not fear, only believe") echoed God's command to Joshua to overcome Jericho.¹⁵² The commotion at the house of Jairus over his dead daughter (v. 38), furthermore, was taken as the Devil's last attempt to test Jairus' faith in Jesus. This, for Sung, was the joint enemy of the five kingdoms of the Amorites that stood against Israel right at the gate of Canaan. It is noteworthy that Sung saw the Devil who was at work behind all the commotion that hindered and mocked Jesus—a theological move that links back to the first story of the demon-possessed man—and set their power in contrast to Jesus who was able to raise the dead daughter of Jairus. Just as God delivered Israel from many enemies, Jesus would see Jairus through all the challenges to his faith.¹⁵³

The Tropological Move

As might be expected from his sermons, given their tropological thrust discussed earlier, Sung would add another parallel—a contemporary one—to the existing parallel that he had established between the two stories. Indeed, one might say that Sung's interpretive decision to read this New Testament story of Mark 5 in parallel with the Old Testament story of the exodus was never a mere academic interest on his part, even if it was to show the unity and the coherence of all scriptures. Rather, the intertextuality between these two narratives that he explored here served the larger tropological purpose of prescribing how one's Christian story ought to play out.

In the sermon, therefore, the demon-possessed man did not only represent the Israel of the past but also all sinners of all time. The man's helpless condition as portrayed in verses 3-

¹⁵² Possibly, Sung had Joshua 1:9 in mind here, or more likely the whole story of the battle against Jericho in Joshua chapter 6. See *Ibid.*, 71.

¹⁵³ *Ibid.*, 72–74.

5—living among the tombs, alone, night and day crying out and cutting himself with stones—was a portrayal of both Israel in Egypt *as well as* humanity in sin. The rest of the story followed accordingly, as Sung extended the parallel for his audience. Jesus was the savior and the liberator of the man in Mark 5, of Israel in the book of Exodus, *and* of all people everywhere. The sea in the land of the Gerasenes, or the Red Sea in Exodus, named the place where and the event when sinners drowned and died in their sins in order to rise with Jesus through the baptism in his blood—an event that Sung simply called “repentance and spiritual rebirth.” The suffering and the healing of the hemorrhaging woman, or the desert wandering of Israel’s journey along with the crossing of the Jordan River, named the subsequent sanctification process of all Christians. The raising of Jairus’ daughter, or the victory over Canaanite kingdoms and the entrance to the promised land, named the final state of the Christian life where a complete victory over sins was realized. Thus, the resurrection of Jairus’ daughter prefigured the resurrection of all Christians. In short, the three parallel stories can be outlined as follows:¹⁵⁴

The Story of Mark 5:

1. The delivery of the demon-possessed man from the land of the Gerasenes
2. The healing of the woman who suffered from hemorrhages
3. The raising of Jairus’ daughter

The Story of the Exodus of Israel:

1. The delivery of Israel from Egypt
2. The purification process in the desert
3. The victory over Canaanite kingdoms

The Story of Our Salvation:

1. Our conversion and spiritual rebirth
2. Our sanctification process
3. Our victory over sin

As should be clear by now, Sung’s exegesis was heavily tropologically driven. It is true that Sung was always interested in allegorizing Scripture, seeking the deep meaning of the text,

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 75.

which was usually related to the Christ event which he believed to be central to all scriptures. This, as the above example showed, was often done through a thorough intertextual reading, linking one passage of Scripture to another that bore similar figures, concepts, plots, places, or even words. These things, therefore, can be regarded as “types,” while the Christ event—his birth, life, passion, death, resurrection, and ascension—serves as the ultimate “antitype.” But all this endeavor almost always led to the text’s tropological force in his sermons. That is, Sung always wanted to make the Bible contemporary by emphasizing that the text is *for* us, because it is *about* us, too. It tells us the normative Christian story, and in that sense, it tells us *what we ought to do* as Christians.

In doing this, furthermore, Sung was not so much interested in extracting timeless principles out of scriptural texts to be applied to the contemporary reader. Rather, the direction usually goes the other way around: Sung invited his listeners to indwell the scriptural world of the Bible. Thus, we find that Sung often explicitly identified himself with one or more character(s) in the text he was preaching on. He was, to name but a few instances, the Eunuch of Acts 8 who initially did not understand Scripture but later received a revelation; the thief of Luke 23 who was hanged beside Jesus on the cross, yet saved by him; Naaman of 2 Kings 5 who suffered leprosy but was later healed in the Jordan, as well as the little servant girl of the same chapter who bore witness to the Lord of Israel to the gentiles. By the same token, Sung would also identify others with the character(s) from the text under discussion. Indeed, he even called them by the character’s name(s), as if the text or the story was really happening right there and then in Sung’s service! For example, in his sermon on Mark 14, after identifying that the liberals of Sung’s days were Judas, Sung went on crying: “Judas! Leave her alone! Why hinder her? It is the petty people today, I fear, who are bent on hindering the work. Is Mary disheartened? Indeed, she is not. Brother and sisters! Don’t be afraid! Just carry on! Bend every

effort and carry on!” Judas and Mary were in the midst of Sung’s congregation, so to speak. There was also a testimony about a youth Torrey Shih who refused to pay attention in one of Sung’s meetings. Midway through his sermon on John 11, Sung suddenly pointed a finger at the teenager, calling: “Get out of there, Lazarus! You are dead and full of the stench of death, wrapped and trapped in cloth covering. The Lord Jesus commands you to come out of there. Get out! Get out from the grave this instant!”¹⁵⁵ This, of course, can be read simply as a rhetorical strategy on Sung’s part to sustain the attention of his listeners. But it can be also interpreted as a genuine sermonic expression of Sung’s belief in the tropological character of Scripture. While both interpretations have some merit, and are not mutually exclusive, I nevertheless submit that the emphasis must fall on the latter rather than the former, especially given the overall narrative of Sung’s life and of his approach to Scripture as painted in this chapter. In short, Sung’s approach to Scripture, particularly with respect to the examples provided above, could be categorized broadly as “typological tropology.” According to Lindbeck, “Traditionally expressed... typological tropology or tropological typology was the chief interpretive strategy for making the Bible contemporary, for absorbing one’s own world into the world of the text.”¹⁵⁶ That is precisely what Sung was doing in his sermons: he re-described his life in light of Scripture and his world in Scriptural terms; the world of Scripture absorbed Sung’s world.

As suggested in the Lindbeck quotation above, this hermeneutical approach to Scripture is part of the Church’s traditional reading of Scripture, particularly in the patristic-medieval tradition. However, while his approach was traditional, the freedom and range with which Sung

¹⁵⁵ The story went on to reveal that Shih was converted that night and eventually became a pastor with an effective ministry. See Lim, *The Life and Ministry of John Sung*, 183.

¹⁵⁶ George A. Lindbeck, “Postcritical Canonical Interpretation: Three Models of Retrieval,” in *Theological Exegesis: Essays in Honor of Brevard S. Childs*, ed. Christopher R. Seitz and Kathryn Greene-McCreight (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1999), 31.

employed this traditional hermeneutic was quite unusual, as evidenced in his exegesis. Sung uninhibitedly roamed through the maze of Scripture while constantly making connections, which were not always obvious, from one Scriptural text to another and from the world of Scripture to the contemporary world. Interestingly, although he seemed unrestrained in his exegesis, the overall shape of his sermons almost always came down to several predictable themes or messages, such as sin and death, repentance and regeneration, the cross (or blood) and the resurrection of Jesus, Jesus as the Savior and the Healer, the gift of the Holy Spirit and the two basic spiritual disciplines (of prayer and Bible reading), holiness and the victorious life over sin and the devil, and evangelization and the Parousia of Jesus Christ. These themes, furthermore, were not either-or but interconnected, for quite often all these subjects were brought up in a sermon series within one weeklong revival meeting, or even in a single sermon! Whatever the text of Scripture that Sung preached from, he would end up talking about these things in one way or another. For Sung, these themes constituted the basic skeleton of the grand narrative of Scripture, and hence, the Christian story. Sung's basic outline of the scriptural narrative and its corresponding tropological movement can be summarized as follows:

The life in sin and death → grace through the cross and resurrection of Christ → the gift of the Holy Spirit → the second coming of Christ and life in heaven

The life in sin and death → repentance and spiritual rebirth in Christ → growing in holiness in the Spirit → gospel witnessing and the victorious life

This is but another form of Sung's *ordo salutis* referenced earlier, which Ireland rightly identified as part of the holiness theological framework. As a revivalist preacher par excellence, Sung would invite his listeners to make a decision at the end of his sermon to take the next step in the order of salvation, regardless of the text his sermon was based on. Indeed, the above example of his sermon on Mark 5 clearly reveals this. The detailed parallelism that Sung constructed there emphasize that God always seems to be saying the same thing throughout

Scripture. History, as Sung perceived it, appears to be the same process of sin and redemption, of death and resurrection, of conversion and transformation. The preacher's task is both to show the congregation how Scripture unfolds this process of salvation and to persuade them to be part of this ongoing process through the crisis moment of decision-making at the end of the sermon. In this respect, Sung was closer to modern evangelicalism in its holiness-revivalist form than to the premodern exegetical tradition.

John Sung's Theology of Scripture

As might be expected, Sung never explicitly revealed his theory of what Scripture is and how it ought to be interpreted. Based on a close reading of his sermons, I have attempted to categorize some of the key hermeneutical features of Sung's exegesis of Scripture, as outlined above. There is more to be said, however, regarding Sung's general treatment of Scripture and his understanding of the nature of Scripture in particular. We will discuss the former under three sub-headings: 1) the role of the Holy Spirit in scriptural interpretation; 2) Scripture as God's power and his effectual word; and 3) the unity of Scripture and its interpretive shape. A shorter discussion on Sung's ontology of Scripture will follow afterward.

First, the Holy Spirit is the primary interpreter of Scripture. We have seen earlier that Sung perceived Scripture as full of divine mysteries, waiting to be unearthed (read: allegorized) by perceptive readers. I have not, however, made it explicit that this perception was an outworking of Sung's belief in the divine inspiration of Scripture as God's word. Since it is *God's* word, Sung reasoned, it is God himself who will reveal the meaning to its readers. This conviction translated into Sung's interesting practice in preparing sermons, as recorded by Sung's associate:

If we will wait before the Lord, the Holy Spirit will reveal to us the meaning.
Sometimes it has been necessary for me to wait on my knees all day to find the meaning

of one word or phrase.... Then it would come in a flash like lightning revealing great sweeps of scenery, opening up great vistas of truth. Often this revealing would come just before [the] time to preach, sometimes while they were singing the first song, and me on my knees upstairs. So I must hastily jot down the main lines of thought, and trust the Holy Spirit to reveal the details as I preached. Most of my sermons on Mark came that way at Wuhu.¹⁵⁷

Here the practice of waiting, or the attitude of patience, worked as a hermeneutical virtue to understand Scripture as God’s word. But it is virtuous only because the Holy Spirit reveals his word in his own time; patience, in itself, is not a guaranteed formula to unlock Scripture’s mystery. The other detail worth mentioning here is the posture Sung was in when he received the revelation of scriptural meaning: “on my knees.” Sung’s biographers repeatedly note that *kneeling* was Sung’s natural posture in his personal reading of Scripture.¹⁵⁸ While we should not read too much into this detail, it is nevertheless safe to assume that this physical posture reflects his inner disposition of reverence and receptivity toward Scripture. This attitude, just like that of patience and waiting, is the necessary condition for the Spirit to do his illuminating work. Thus, Sung also emphasized the need to be a certain kind of person to get the Bible right.¹⁵⁹ But these attitudes or virtues are “passive” ones, as it were, in that they enable the reader to be a *recipient* of the Spirit’s illumination. The greater emphasis, in other words, is still on the agency of the Spirit. As KaLun Leung puts it, “In [Sung’s] view, the only proper way of studying Scripture is direct inspiration from the Holy Spirit through devotional

¹⁵⁷ Schubert, *I Remember John Sung*, 46–47.

¹⁵⁸ E.g. Schubert, who was a good friend of Sung, writes the following regarding Sung’s habit of Bible reading: “[Sung] was with us in 1931.... Our electricity went off at ten p.m., so we gave him a little night lamp, but the next morning the oil was all gone, and he asked if he could have a larger lamp. We gave him a big lamp, but the following morning that was empty too. I thought, ‘What does this man do at night?’ So I made an excuse to go in and see if he needed anything, and there, in the middle of the night, I found him on his knees by the desk, with his Bible and notebook, writing down the things the Lord gave him. Day and night he was in the Word of God.” *Ibid.*, 46.

¹⁵⁹ Sung once asserted: “The Bible is the Word of God. So only spiritual persons who are filled with the Holy Spirit can understand it.” As cited in Leung, “A Defense for Spiritual Interpretation of the Chinese Church,” 67–68. See also Sung’s sermon on Mark 4 in Indonesia. Sung, *Air Jang Hidup: Uraian Tentang Indjil Markus (“Living Water: Exposition on the Gospel of Mark”)*, 46–57.

studies.... He [the Spirit] is the only key to the mysteries of Scriptures. It is only through His enlightenment that humans can enter into the Scriptural mysteries.”¹⁶⁰

Second, Scripture is God’s power for God’s people. Sung’s conviction that Scripture is God’s word not only prompted him to give the Holy Spirit a prominent role in his reading of Scripture, but it also forced him to equate Scripture with the Spirit himself, especially in terms of its power. In other words, Scripture does not just reveal God’s truth, but also imparts his power. Thus, Sung often talked of Scripture as an object imbued with special power. Sung’s recitation of Scripture during his healings and exorcisms implicitly demonstrates that he saw Scripture as having authoritative power over sin, sickness, and evil spirits.¹⁶¹ But he also explicitly taught this in his sermons. For instance, at the end of his sermon on Mark 5 mentioned above, Sung turned his attention back to the hemorrhaging woman who now represented all sinners and exhorted his listeners: “If you want your issue of blood to be healed you must touch Jesus’ garment every day.... Jesus’ garment is the Bible. Just as power went out of Jesus when the woman touched him, so if we read the Bible every day, Jesus’ power is able to flow into our bodies.”¹⁶² Scripture is the source of divine power, transmitted to the readers as they read it like the woman received the healing power from Jesus. In this respect, reading Scripture, for Sung, was less an intellectual exercise in decoding a cryptic text than an act of engaging the actual power of God.

This understanding of Scripture, furthermore, helps to explain Sung’s belief that a *single* word of Scripture was effective for one’s salvation. Sung was often found emphasizing this notion in his sermons: “Beloved brothers and sisters, if Jesus’ Word, just only *one Word*,

¹⁶⁰ Leung, “A Defense for Spiritual Interpretation of the Chinese Church,” 67.

¹⁶¹ Ireland, “John Sung,” 325.

¹⁶² Song Shangjie, ““Zhiyao Yangwang Yesu [Just Look to Jesus],” *Budaozazhi [Evangelism]* 7, no. 1 (1934): 9, as cited in Ireland, “John Sung,” 325.

should cut into your heart, you will be saved.”¹⁶³ And again: “Beloved brothers and sisters, by *one Word* of Scripture, the Holy Spirit had taken hold of her, and got her saved.”¹⁶⁴ While the specific context of these two sermons spoke about salvation in terms of forgiveness of sins, this conviction can easily be extended to a broader sense of salvation that includes healing and freedom from evil spirits. That is to say, every single word of Scripture, by virtue of its relationship with God, has intrinsic divine power that is able to perform salvific works. The close association between Scripture’s words and the Spirit’s power, which was only implied in the quotation above, was even clearer in Sung’s sermon on the healing of a deaf and mute man in Mark 7.

There was a deaf and dumb man whom the Lord led out of the village. There the Lord put his finger into his ears. Why? Because his ears could not hear. Then the Lord spat and touched his tongue. What is spittle? The Word of the Lord.... The Lord's Word enters through the ear, the mouth and the eyes. Filled with the Holy Spirit, the devil is cast out. The deaf can praise the Lord. There is power in His Word. Such a person is now filled with the Holy Spirit.¹⁶⁵

Here Sung easily equated Jesus’s word—which he uses interchangeably with Scripture—with the Holy Spirit. The Spirit does not merely utilize, or speak through, the word; rather, the Spirit *is* the word and is *in* the word, so that receiving the word means being filled with the Holy Spirit, which in turn means being empowered to live a life that is holy, healthy, and victorious.

Third, Scripture is its own interpreter. While Sung stressed the sacramental power of Scripture, he still needed to interpret Scripture when he read it. And while his emphasis on the role of the Holy Spirit in interpretation led him to the brink of anti-intellectualism, Sung nevertheless did not argue against serious study of Scripture and having a method of scriptural

¹⁶³ John Sung, *Forty John Sung Revival Sermons*, trans. Timothy Tow, vol. 2 (Singapore: Alice Doo, 1978), 14. This is in Sung’s sermon on John 8.

¹⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 2:22. This is in Sung’s sermon on Acts 8.

¹⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 2:31.

interpretation per se. Rather, he dedicated many hours every day to the study of Scripture on his own—and spent them on his knees. He encouraged his listeners to do the same themselves, even as he led Bible studies amid the weeklong revival meetings.¹⁶⁶ He was adamant, however, “not to use human wisdom, not to use theological knowledge, [and] not to use scientific methods” in the study.¹⁶⁷ The only method that Sung endorsed was the so-called Scripture-interprets-Scripture method. It can be argued that this interpretive strategy was an extension of his belief that Scripture is God’s word and thus it has its own unity and coherence. Furthermore, this method can also be seen as the practical outworking of the first point above regarding the Holy Spirit’s role in scriptural interpretation. The Spirit is the One who unlocks the mystery of a scriptural text for a proper vessel—a believing, patient, humble, and receptive reader. But the Spirit unlocks it precisely through enabling the reader’s mind to see intricate connections between that text and other scriptural texts.

For Sung, this connection can be made with words just a couple of verses away within the same chapter of a biblical book, or it can be established throughout the whole Old and New Testament canon of Scripture. Moreover, this works either for the minor details of a story or for the broad thematic outline of biblical books. So, for example, Sung read the ten plagues of Moses in conjunction with the Ten Commandments, while he correlated the twelve years of age of Jairus’s daughter to the twelve tribes of Israel.¹⁶⁸ We have also seen earlier that he connected the seven days of creation in Genesis 1 to not just one but at least three other Scriptural narratives, and meticulously dovetailed stories in Mark 5 with the story of Israel’s exodus.

¹⁶⁶ The typical arrangement of his meetings in cities and villages was: Bible studies in the morning and/or afternoon and evangelistic services in the evening.

¹⁶⁷ Cited in Leung, “A Defense for Spiritual Interpretation of the Chinese Church,” 67.

¹⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 64.

There was really no consistent systematic procedure in Sung's intertextual reading, except that he consistently read Scripture in such manner. As Leung observes,

John Sung is the one who has used this principle of interpreting the Scriptures with Scriptures most consistently, even to the verge of danger. He employs the method of "narrative interpretation" to link up originally irrelevant New and Old Testament texts. As he believes the entire Bible is a unity and different parts are mutually supplementing, a group of numbers in one passage can be regarded as the internal structure of another book, and the theme of a certain New Testament passage can be the key to some Old Testament books.¹⁶⁹

This last point on ascribing certain New Testament texts or themes to some Old Testament books needs more elaboration, as it is one of Sung's favorite hermeneutical practices in his Bible studies. Sung was known to have a list of the key texts and key themes of the sixty-six books of the Bible, summarized in the footnote below.¹⁷⁰ Three things can be said here by

¹⁶⁹ Ibid.

¹⁷⁰ The following list is a compilation of notes of a one-month Bible study course held by Sung at Xiamen in 1936, taken from "Sermon Collections 1, 2, and 3", *Complete Collections of John Sung* (Taipei: Great Light Books, 1988) vols. 4-6, as cited in Ibid., 86-89.

Genesis: No connecting theme or sections.

Exodus: "Rebirth" as the theme.

Leviticus: "Life of encounter between believer and God."

Numbers: "Pilgrimage in wilderness," a figure of the spiritual sojourn of believers.

Deuteronomy: "Submit to God, look up to God."

Joshua: No connecting theme or sections.

Judges: Acts 8:26-40 as the key.

Ruth: "Parable of holiness."

1 Samuel: Song of Hannah as the key.

2 Samuel: No connecting theme or sections.

1 Kings: Mark 11 as the key, the topic is "authority of Christians."

2 Kings: The main message is "the baptism of the Spirit," i.e., the work of the Holy Spirit.

1 Chronicles: "Parable of sowing seeds" as the key.

2 Chronicles: Explained with "the nine spiritual stages."

Ezra: Mark 5 as the key.

Nehemiah: Ephesians 6:10-20 as the key.

Esther: Matthew 24:29-31 as the key.

Job: Mark 15 as the key.

Psalms: The five books correspond to the Pentateuch.

Proverbs: Sermon on the Mount as the key, Matthew 5-7; Proverbs 1-9 are the "nine blessednesses on the Mount."

Ecclesiastes: Luke 12: 15-21 as the key.

Song of Songs: No connecting theme or sections.

Isaiah: The 66 chapters correspond to the 66 books of the Bible. Chapters 1-39 correspond to the Old Testament, while chapters 40-66 correspond to the New Testament. Or magnify the Gospel of Mark to interpret the entire book.

Jeremiah: No connecting theme or sections.

Lamentations: No connecting theme or sections.

way of observation. First, Sung mainly appropriated the New Testament to interpret the Old, and did the reverse only in very special cases. He often utilized a New Testament passage as the theme of an Old Testament book, believing the teachings of that Old Testament book can be seen by magnifying the corresponding New Testament passage. Second, in the list Sung freely mixed scriptural texts and biblical/theological themes, which suggests that his approach here

Ezekiel: Corresponds to Acts, chapter by chapter. Repeat after chapter 28.

Daniel: No connecting theme or sections.

Hosea: Luke 15:11-24 as the key, one verse corresponding to one chapter. Also reveals the sins of the contemporary church.

Joel: The three chapters signify going with the Lord to the three mounts: Sinai, Calvary, and Zion.

Amos: The nine chapters correspond to the nine fruits of the Holy Spirit.

Obadiah: Connecting the book with "nine blessednesses."

Jonah: Similarly connecting the book with "nine blessednesses."

Micah: No connecting theme or sections.

Nahum: No connecting theme or sections.

Habakkuk: No connecting theme or sections.

Zephaniah: The three parables of Matthew 25 as the key.

Haggai: The theme is the crucifixion, burial, resurrection, ascension and glorification of the Lord.

Zechariah: No connecting theme or sections.

Malachi: No connecting theme or sections.

Matthew: The "love of Jesus" as the main topic.

Mark: The main topic is also the "love of Jesus," explained with 1 Corinthians 13:4-8.

Luke: The Magnificat and the Song of Zechariah as the key.

John: Psalm 23 as the key.

Acts: Chapter 1 as the key.

Romans: The "fundamental teachings of faith" as the theme.

1 Corinthians: The main message is the "unity of believers."

2 Corinthians: The main message is the "living exemplar of ministers."

Galatians: "Freedom" as the basic teaching.

Ephesians: "Christian hope" as the theme.

Philippians: "Christian joy" as the theme.

Colossians: The four main messages are "thirsty, come, drink, flow," i.e., understanding the mystery, getting the mystery, living abundantly in the mystery, and proclaiming the mystery.

1 Thessalonians: "Patience" as the theme.

2 Thessalonians: "Relationship between *parousia* of Christ and life on earth" as the theme.

1 Timothy: "Piety" as the theme.

2 Timothy: "Trial and faith" as the theme.

Titus: The three chapters are the triumphant proclamations of Paul, "I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith."

Philemon: "Christian intercession" as the theme.

Hebrews: The main message is that Christian faith, hope and love have to be established on the nine foundations of Jesus Christ.

James: "Behavior of faith" as the theme.

1 Peter: 2 Peter 1:5-7 as the key, "eight-story pagoda of Christianity."

2 Peter: No connecting theme or sections.

1 John: "Christian and spiritual encounter" as the theme.

2 John: "On truth and love" as the theme.

13 John: "Manifestation of the truth" as the theme.

Jude: No connecting theme or sections.

Revelations: No connecting theme or sections.

was mainly topical. Thus, while some of the keys of certain biblical books are in the form of scriptural texts, it can be argued that those texts are chosen because they comprise similar themes with those of the books under consideration. Third, it is interesting that some of the biblical books were listed as “no connecting theme or sections.” This may suggest that Sung had yet to find the key to unlock those books, presumably because the Spirit had yet to reveal them to him. Or it may indicate that those books, in Sung’s view, are either less mysterious—thus, no key needed—or less unified—thus, there is no single key—than the others. In any case, at the very least these omissions, or admissions, from Sung’s part, call for a more nuanced interpretation of his approach to Scripture.

All this leads to the question of what Sung thinks about the nature of Scripture. While he never wrote about this systematically, nor did he perhaps think through this issue in a conscious-theoretical manner, both the general discussion of Sung’s use of Scripture above and his exegetical techniques that we have extensively analyzed earlier seem to assume a certain understanding of Scripture at play. We have briefly pondered this when I hinted that Sung’s dramatic preaching might be best understood as a homiletical expression of his theological understanding of Scripture as *theo-drama*—a divine narrative world that needs to be performed in order to be understood. Similarly, we can also say that Sung’s figural exegesis, with its intertextual intricacy, was perhaps best understood as a hermeneutical implication of his theological understanding of Scripture as the word of God. Scripture needs to be read intertextually because only God himself can interpret God’s word. The same logic applies to Sung’s insistence on the Holy Spirit’s illumination of Scripture. The reader of Scripture needs the Spirit’s guidance because the Spirit is the writer of Scripture. Scripture is powerful—a single word from it can save lives, heal sickness, and exorcise demons—because it is God at his word, which is to say that: Scripture is God at work. This divinization of Scripture explains

Sung's spiritual disposition and physical posture when he read it: prayerfully and on his knees. If Scripture is a written form of God's mind, then to approach Scripture is to approach God; thus, one needs to approach it appropriately. Indeed, only in light of this (very) high view of Scripture do many of Sung's sporadic assertions about Scripture start to make sense—assertions that equate Scripture with, for examples, Jesus' word, Jesus' garment, Jesus' blood, or the Holy Spirit.¹⁷¹ In short, Sung seemed to see Scripture as sharing the same ontological reality as that of God.

One final, if somewhat fringe, question lingers: where did Sung get this ontology of Scripture from? While there is no way to know this for sure, one possible candidate is in the mental ward of the Bloomingdale Hospital. Through his conversion experience and subsequent extensive readings of Scripture, which were accompanied by visions, dreams, and other spiritual experiences in the asylum, Sung allegedly received a revelation from God and perceived the Bible anew. There he found the secret of the mysteries of Scripture; he was taught how to read Scripture intertextually; he began to experience the saving power of Scripture as the word of God. Was this the case, as Sung himself and his popular biographers wanted to portray? Or was he really crazy, as the UTS professors, the Bloomingdale authorities, and some critical scholars have suggested? Several entries from Sung's recently discovered journals at that time period show indications of a strained mind at work. It seems difficult, however, to conceive of a madman who, within a period of ten years or so from his diagnosis, was able to attract and influence thousands of people through his preaching and teaching of Scripture. Then again, some studies have shown how similar the phenomena of dramatic conversion

¹⁷¹ Except for the reference to "Jesus' blood," the other references here have been documented earlier. For Scripture as Jesus' blood, consider, for instance, the following assertion from Sung: "I read 11 chapters of the Bible every day. After each chapter, I would ask the Lord to reveal my sins. The Bible is His Precious Blood meant to cleanse. I cannot leave the salvation brought about by His Precious Blood for even one minute" (Sung, *The Diary of John Sung: Extracts from His Journals and Notes*, 90).

experiences and mental illness cases can be.¹⁷² In addition, “[p]sychiatric literature from Sung’s era at Union also tended to relate immigration and insanity.”¹⁷³ All this to say, Sung’s case was a complex one and thus has been read in different ways, and perhaps rightly so. While we do not necessarily need to arrive at a correct understanding of his experience there, I would tentatively argue that Sung’s conversion was genuine, even if he at the same time suffered from some sort of a mental illness to some degree. The subsequent period of his life and ministry, however, seems to suggest that Sung’s mental problem in the United States, if it ever existed, was fully resolved once he returned to China.

Conclusion

John Sung was one of the most successful revival preachers China has ever had. There is no doubt about that. The question is: Why? In the eyes of many, friend and foe alike, Sung was a great preacher because he was a great performer. His unusually creative, energetic, and dramatic preaching was the main reason why thousands of people were attracted to his meetings. Yun-Han Gwo, for instance, maintains that Sung was simply a Chinese version of Billy Sunday—someone with a charismatic persona whose preaching and acting blend very well on the stage.¹⁷⁴ Other scholars cite the historical context in which Sung and his listeners lived as a crucial factor in Sung’s success. Focusing on Sung’s ministry in Southeast Asia, Barbara Andaya argues that “a primary reason for Sung’s extraordinary appeal was his innovative preaching style that spoke directly to Chinese concerns in an uncertain economic and political climate,” particularly as immigrants in a diaspora.¹⁷⁵ Others, like Lian Xi, put

¹⁷² See, e.g., Raymond J. Wootton and David F. Allen, “Dramatic Religious Conversion and Schizophrenic Decompensation,” *Journal of Religion and Health* 22, no. 3 (1983): 212–220.

¹⁷³ Seitz, “Converting John Sung: UTS Drop-Out, Psychiatric Patient, Chinese Evangelist,” 87.

¹⁷⁴ See Gwo, “Indigenous Preaching in China, with a Focal Critique on John Sung,” 3.

¹⁷⁵ Andaya, “‘Come Home, Come Home!’—Chineseness, John Sung and Theatrical Evangelism in 1930s Southeast Asia,” 1. Further on, Andaya makes this observation regarding Sung’s way of preaching: “[Sung’s] public humiliation of often prominent people through accusations of ‘sinfulness’ and his use of what one scholar has called an ‘abrasive’ and ‘rude’ style is actually remarkably similar to the reality shows so popular in

more weight on the social-cultural and religious milieu of modern China post-Boxer Rebellion and in the context of China's version of the fundamentalist-modern controversy.¹⁷⁶ Against this backdrop, Sung's unwaveringly conservative messages, packaged in a powerful theatrical delivery, easily found a ready audience. Ka-Tong Lim would concur, although his emphasis falls on Sung's ability to communicate to ordinary people. He wrote that Sung's messages "on personal holiness, spiritual warfare, prayer, and radical discipleship answered the deep yearnings of the Chinese people in the 1930s."¹⁷⁷ Speaking specifically for Sung's ministry in Indonesia, Hendrik Kraemer also thinks that Sung perfectly understood the felt needs of his audience—"the common Oriental person," as Kraemer calls it.¹⁷⁸ The Oriental person, Kraemer observes, is "emotional" rather than "intellectual." Sung's preaching was simply more holistic, and thus more fitted to the context, than the Dutch-European model.¹⁷⁹ In a similar vein, Cornelia Baarbé suggests that "Sung's strength lay in his ability to connect emotionally to his audience, rather than in his pulpit skills. His personal sacrifice, his dramatization of the Gospel message, the revival choruses, and testimonies of healing came together to touch the heart of common people."¹⁸⁰ Finally, Daryl Ireland takes all the above—pulpit mannerisms, charismatic personality, historical contexts, perfect timing, right audience, theological position, holistic approach, and incredible (and also malleable) life story—into account, while adding his own emphasis on the significance of the holiness-revivalist influence on Sung's preaching and

contemporary American television and radio. One cannot help but speculate if such confrontational methods, so opposed to fundamental Chinese traditions, attracted audiences simply because they were so shocking" (ibid., 5).

¹⁷⁶ See Xi, *Redeemed by Fire*, chap. 6.

¹⁷⁷ Lim, *The Life and Ministry of John Sung*, xiv.

¹⁷⁸ Kraemer writes, "The common Oriental person has to see things; then the most difficult spiritual concept often becomes clear to him. Things do not come to him through ordered thinking and reading—because that does not fit his sphere of life—but by seeing and acting. He needs expressions that portray the reality of life fully" (Kraemer, "Part One: Henrik Kraemer on John Sung," 18).

¹⁷⁹ As Kraemer puts it, "Dr. Sung's manner of preaching all of a sudden sheds a clear light on the great limitation of our Western notion of preaching the Word. The common man in the Orient is emotional.... Dr. Sung has literally acted out the Word of the gospel and the human need which it addresses, with inexhaustible ingenuity and mobility" (ibid., 17).

¹⁸⁰ Poon, "Introduction," 11–12.

healing ministries.¹⁸¹ All in all, Sung's success was a case of the right person in the right place at the right time with the right tool and directed to the right audience.

It seems obvious that Sung's revival success cannot be attributed to just a single element of his practice, or his context, but rather to the constellation of factors that worked for the advancement of Sung's ministry.¹⁸² However, scholars have overlooked some important factors that contributed to Sung's achievement. One crucial factor that has not been seriously considered by scholars is, surprisingly, Sung's exegesis of Scripture. This is surprising because one would naturally suspect that a preacher's success or failure is related to how the preacher handles, or mishandles, the scriptures.

This does not mean that no scholar has ever examined how Sung interpreted Scripture. A few scholars have discussed Sung's use of Scripture. But virtually all scholars referenced in this chapter seem to share a determination to brush off his exegesis and look elsewhere to explain the successful phenomenon of Sung's ministry. The only exception is perhaps Ireland, whose studies are partly concerned with tracking the hermeneutical shift of Sung's preaching through a close reading of some of his sermons. As we pointed out earlier, however, Ireland seems to give too much credit to Sung's involvement with the Bethel Band and the holiness revivalism that came with it. It seems to me that Ireland's conclusion regarding Sung's approach to Scripture can be crudely put this way: Sung's exegesis was simply weird, but the holiness-revival theology saved it by providing the spiritual language, the homiletical structure, and the voluntarist drive to make it presentable to the right audience.

¹⁸¹ See Ireland, "John Sung."

¹⁸² Of course, Sung himself, and others with a similar persuasion, would understandably acknowledge that there was a "fittingness" to God's providence, and thus, accredit God as the primary responsible agent behind Sung's revival success.

Other scholars, such as Gwo, Andaya, Xi, and Tseng, while somewhat appreciative of Sung's overall ministry, nevertheless categorize his exegeses as either simplistic, fanciful, problematic, or simply erroneous. Even those, like Lim and Leung, who appear to be very positive about Sung's theology of Scripture, nevertheless feel a bit embarrassed about how he handled the text. Lim admits that Sung's exegesis was simplistic, but maintains that his approach was appropriate, considering the simple-mindedness of the majority of his audience.¹⁸³ Leung, for his part, concedes that Sung did not follow the proper rules of interpretation and that his allegories were often arbitrary. Leung, however, defends Sung by assuring that his exegesis, however misleading it may have been, would not have been detrimental theologically. Leung's reasoning goes something like this: since Sung read his theology into his reading of Scripture, a practice technically called eisegesis, the conclusion of his interpretation will always be consistent with his theology; and since his theology was generally orthodox, at least in Leung's view, then his preaching and teaching would be theologically orthodox as well.¹⁸⁴ Thus, while Leung does not recommend Sung's hermeneutical approach as something to be emulated by Chinese preachers, he nonetheless plays down the concern over Sung's bad exegesis that was raised by some observers.¹⁸⁵ The net result of the above scholarly opinions about Sung's approach to Scripture is that his exegesis of

¹⁸³ Lim observes, "Sung's sermons presented the gospel message with little theological sophistication. He was not a great Bible exegete, although he had great oratorical skills. Yet a great number of people were converted or revived through Sung's ministry" (Lim, *The Life and Ministry of John Sung*, 2012, xvi).

¹⁸⁴ Leung writes, "Yet, even though we may say that John Sung and other spiritual interpreters have raped the original meanings of some of the texts, we do not worry that their spiritual interpretations will create heresies. What they undertake is theological exegesis, reading their theology into the texts. Exegesis itself is completely unimportant, and the key is in their original theological thoughts. Their theological thoughts are not changed in the process of exegesis, and the results are predetermined. As long as their theological thoughts are not heresies, the fruit of their spiritual interpretation, no matter how weird, will not be heresies. There is not even the possibility of creating heresies" (Leung, "A Defense for Spiritual Interpretation of the Chinese Church," 59–60).

¹⁸⁵ Tseng also makes a similar observation: "Sung's doctrine was orthodox, but his exegesis was consistently problematic" Tseng, "Revival Preaching and the Indigenization of Christianity in Republican China," 180.

Scripture must not be among those factors that were responsible for the largely positive reception of Sung's preaching ministry in China and Southeast Asia.

I mentioned above that this is a surprising discovery. On another level, however, this finding is not unexpected. Given the hegemony of the historical-critical methods in the modern biblical studies, it is somewhat foreseeable that most Sung scholars think that his approach to Scripture was simply unacceptable, and thus was not worth studying. But if Sung's theology and interpretation of Scripture were an integral part of his overall preaching ministry, as I have argued above, then there is simply no reason to dismiss the former while elevating the latter. Furthermore, if Sung's approach to Scripture belonged within the long tradition of the church's figural reading of Scripture, even if it was also highly influenced by the twentieth-century holiness-revivalist tradition (as I have argued in this chapter), then Sung has something to contribute to the current academic discourse on both Asian theology and biblical interpretation, especially given the renewed interest in the figural exegesis of Scripture. Ireland offers the following words on the conclusion of his work on Sung's legacy:

In some ways it is difficult to assess John Sung's legacy. His theological ideas had little currency, as he never wrote anything for the public; his books were but sermon transcriptions copied down by loyal listeners. He founded no denomination and started no school. He left virtually no institutional footprint. And yet, without John Sung it is difficult, virtually impossible, to explain Chinese Christianity.¹⁸⁶

This chapter has argued that one of the most important parts of John Sung's legacy was his theology and interpretation of Scripture, which has shaped Chinese forms of Christianity both within China and throughout Asia. The next chapter will discuss more thoroughly his (and Nee's) influences on the contemporary Chinese-Asian readings of Scripture.

¹⁸⁶ Ireland, "The Legacy of John Sung," 355.

Chapter 4

From East to West (and back): Asian Theology in a Scriptural Mode

The names of Watchman Nee and John Sung are rarely found in Asian theological discourses or handbooks on biblical interpretation. Fortunately, recent interest in popular Christianity in China has led academics to reconsider Nee and Sung's work.¹ For the most part, however, their theologies and interpretations of Scripture are still overlooked, as most Nee and Sung studies confine themselves within the boundaries of history or mission studies in China. The goal of this chapter is to counter that unnecessary confinement. I contend that Nee and Sung's approaches to Scripture were not just influential in the past but remain influential today. In other words, their hermeneutics should be studied not just in the context of Chinese history, but also to understand how grassroots Chinese Christians approach their Bible today.

To this end, I have structured the present chapter as follows. In the first section, I will bring Nee and Sung into conversation with each other, summarizing their approaches to Scripture by highlighting several key tenets that they share. I will then restate the argument I made in Chapter 1 by engaging a typical interpretation of Nee and Sung's work that dismisses their theology as non-indigenous. My aim here is to repeat that *that* was not the case.² In the second section, I will provide a sketch of contemporary Scripture readings and practices among Chinese Christians both in China and in Indonesia while pointing out Nee and Sung's direct and indirect influences along the way. At the end of these two sections, which comprise the bulk of the chapter, I suggest that many Chinese Christians today approach Scripture in a similar

¹ See Xi, *Redeemed by Fire*.

² I have argued this for Nee and Sung individually in Chapter 2 and Chapter 3, respectively. But here I will treat Nee and Sung together and summarize my argument rather briefly.

fashion to that of Nee and Sung. Lastly, I will offer some concluding thoughts on Nee and Sung's lasting influence on Chinese Christianity.

Nee And Sung's Approach to Scripture: A Summary

In previous chapters, I provided a multifaceted description of Nee and Sung's approaches to Scripture and suggested that theirs are grassroots hermeneutics that deserve to be explored further and seriously engaged with. While there are certainly differences between them, they are mostly minor and usually focus on questions of emphasis and expression.³ Indeed, I would argue that Nee and Sung share many fundamental theological-hermeneutical convictions about Scripture, which I will summarize under five points below. After the summary, I will briefly engage the work of one contemporary scholar who dismisses Nee and Sung's theology and hermeneutics as insignificant for Asian theology's self-understanding.⁴

³ Perhaps one significant exception to this claim pertains to ecclesiology (that is, if one considers ecclesiology as closely related to scriptural theology and interpretation, as I do). As we recall from his exegesis of Adam and Eve in Genesis 2, Nee has a very high view of the church as a divine-human corporate being. Sung, on the other hand, seems to have a rather low, instrumental ecclesiology—a subset of his (more important) evangelistic soteriology.

⁴ It should be noted here that Nee and Sung's approach to Scripture were not entirely unique to them. Many of their contemporaries, such as "the dean of the underground church" Wang Mingdao (1900-1991), the influential devotional writer Chen Chonggui (Marcus Cheng, 1883-1963), and the popular biblical commentator Jia Yuming (1880-1964), arguably shared these five basic convictions about Scripture as well. Like Nee and Sung, they were all influenced by a mixture of Western evangelical traditions and Chinese culture, and thus are too commonly dismissed by scholars as not truly indigenous theologians. Their approach to Scripture is typically classified as a kind of Chinese "spiritual interpretation" (*lingyi jiejing*), as with the case of both Nee and Sung (see Chapters Three and Four respectively), which is, as I have argued, a form of traditional figural reading of Scripture. For a quick survey of their hermeneutics, see Sze-Kar Wan, "Competing Tensions: A Search for May Fourth Biblical Hermeneutics," in *Reading Christian Scriptures in China*, ed. Chloë Starr (New York: T&T Clark, 2008). For a few studies that argue for their significant-yet-subtle indigenization theology, see the works of Wai-luen Kwok, Fuk-tsang Ying, and Thomas Harvey, on Jia Yuming, Marcus Cheng, and Wang Mingdao respectively. Wai-luen Kwok, "The Christ-Human and Jia Yuming's Doctrine of Sanctification: A Case Study in the Confucianisation of Chinese Fundamentalist Christianity," *Studies in World Christianity* 20, no. 2 (2014): 145–165; Fuk-tsang Ying, *The Praxis and Predicament of a Chinese Fundamentalist: Chen Chong-gui (Marcus Cheng)'s Theological Thought and his Time* (Hong Kong: Alliance Bible Seminary, 2001); Thomas Alan Harvey, "Challenging Heaven's Mandate: An Analysis of the Conflict between Wang Mingdao and the Chinese Nation-State" (Ph.D. Dissertation, Duke University, 1998).

1. Five Key Tenets of Nee and Sung's Approach to Scripture

As we compare Nee and Sung's approaches to biblical interpretation, there are at least five common key elements that are integral to their theology of Scripture. First, Scripture is taken to be the literal word of God. I have shown that Nee's conception of Scripture has some similarities to Barth's in that it emphasizes the dynamic character of revelation as divine encounter, whereas Sung never really lays out his theoretical understanding of Scripture. But there is no denying that both Nee and Sung see Scripture as divinely inspired and God as the ultimate author of Scripture. For them, Scripture is the full revelation of God, complete in itself—although Nee argues that it needs to be “re-spoken” again by the Holy Spirit, and maintains that the Spirit would not (indeed, cannot) speak from outside this Scripture. In this view, there is no need for anything outside Scripture, for Scripture, as *God's* word, encompasses *everything*—from theological knowledge, historical facts, scientific claims and spiritual truths to day-to-day realities. This does not mean that Nee and Sung simply perceive Scripture as a historical or scientific handbook. It means that when their interpretation of a given passage stands in direct conflict with the modern historical/scientific consensus, they always contend that (their interpretation of) Scripture has the last word on the subject in question. As God's word, Scripture holds final authority in all matters.

Second, Scripture reading is perceived primarily as a spiritual practice. This is closely related to the first point above. Since Scripture is God's word in a real, ontological sense, then approaching Scripture amounts to approaching God. This has at least two implications. First, since Scripture is *God's* word, the role of the Holy Spirit is crucial in the reading and interpretation of Scripture. Second, only those who are born of the Spirit can truly understand what they are reading in Scripture. Both Nee and Sung stress that the Holy Spirit is necessary in the whole interpretive process of reading Scripture. Sung's practice of waiting on his knees for

the Spirit to reveal the meaning of a passage during his sermon preparation, for instance, bears witness to his dependence on the Spirit's illuminative work. Nee, for his part, argues for the *continuous* inspiration of the Spirit, not just in the past but also in the present, without which Scripture remains a closed book whilst the reader remains in the dark. In both Sung and Nee's work, the underlying assumption is that only God can ultimately explain his own word to his people. As one observer puts it, "[N]o one could read the Bible rationally as if it were just one book among many; one must read it devotionally and piously. The real author of the Bible is the Holy Spirit; only the Spirit could illumine the readers and lead them to a deeper and higher understanding."⁵

This assumption also means that only Christians who have been born of the Spirit are able to understand Scripture. Moreover, the greater the presence of the Spirit in the reader's life, the bigger his/her capacity to interpret Scripture rightly becomes. Both Sung and Nee are very clear about this, although it is Nee who describes the character of "the spiritual person" in detail. His logic is straightforward: the spiritual Bible is only accessible by the spiritual person. Both, however, are adamant that scriptural interpretation does not primarily require the right reading technique; rather, it requires a relationship with the God whose word is active and ever-living. In short, Scripture reading is a Christian practice that seeks to encounter the God of the Bible through the power of the Spirit in order to be spiritually formed in Christlikeness.

Third, both men regard Scripture as a practical and personal book for edification. This is a logical continuation of the previous points: if Scripture reading is a spiritual practice, and if Scripture is God's word, then it is natural to assume that a reader of Scripture would expect to find spiritual truth every time he or she opened the book. This is why the reader turns to

⁵ Wan, "Competing Tensions: A Search for May Fourth Biblical Hermeneutics," 105.

Scripture in the first place. We can call this purpose encountering God, hearing God's word, knowing God's will, "touching the spirit of Scripture" as Nee does, or—as Sung sometimes calls it— "touching Jesus' cloak," or simply "to be saved." In short, Scripture exists for the salvation and edification of mankind. Nee and Sung have no interest whatsoever in a purely intellectual debate of a text's meaning or in a historical reconstruction of the world behind the text. For them, any text of Scripture simply has to preach—either to individual readers or, through the preacher, to a congregation. Indeed, Sung's emphasis on the sharing of the gospel (which is the climax of his *ordo salutis*: sin, confession, repentance, rebirth, holiness, and evangelization) and the overall framework of Nee's discussion on Scripture as "the ministry of God's word" bear witness to this practical focus. As we recall, their common Chinese upbringing, with its heavy emphasis on the ethico-pragmatic aspect of reality, may be partly responsible for this moral-practical orientation of Scripture and its uses. But it could also be argued that their evangelical faith plays an equally big, if not bigger, role in this approach to Scripture. Scripture is given by God precisely for salvation and sanctification and thus it needs to be read and used as such.

Furthermore, this approach also means that Scripture, for Nee and Sung, is a personal book. The term "personal" as used here does not necessarily mean "individual" or "private," although there is no denying that their reading of Scripture is quite individualistic. Indeed, this can be a problem in the evangelical tradition of which they are a part. Yet their evangelistic impulse mentioned above at least shows that there is always a communal dimension to their rather individualistic interpretation of Scripture. Sung, for instance, maintains that unless Christians share with others the meaning of a scriptural passage that they read and think they understand, they did not really understand it in the first place. Instead, "personal" here denotes the sense in which Scripture is *not* a foreign book for Nee and Sung; rather, it is *their* book. For

Scripture is not just written *for* their salvation, it is also *about* them, even as it is first and foremost about God in Christ. It is about what God in Christ has done, is doing, and is going to do, for them. In light of this “personal” understanding of Scripture, it is no surprise to find that Sung sees himself in multiple figures in the Bible, most notably in the figure of John the Baptist, whose name Sung appropriated after his dramatic return back to China. After all, the Bible is his personal Scripture—it describes and prescribes his name, his life, and his world. This understanding applies to Nee’s beliefs too, albeit in a more implicit and subtle way.

Fourth, each text of Scripture has deeper, spiritual meanings that can be unearthed through spiritual exegesis. This is, again, closely related to the previous points. If Scripture is God’s word, then it is perfectly reasonable to believe that God can embed multi-layered meanings within any given scriptural text. These deeper meanings of the text, moreover, are accessible only by the illuminative work of the Spirit and are only given to those Christians whose lives align with the Spirit. These meanings are there for the spiritual edification of the Christian reader. The way in which the Spirit conveys these meanings, however, is through so-called spiritual exegesis of Scripture, which traditionally consists of allegorical, tropological, and anagogical exegesis. In other words, the “practical” and the “personal” dimensions of Scripture that we discussed earlier are hermeneutically gained only by the spiritual exegesis of Scripture.

Thus, we saw that both Nee and Sung engage heavily in allegorical, tropological, and sometimes (albeit less extensively) anagogical readings of Scripture. Consequently, the spiritual meanings of the text may take the form of belief/doctrine, morality, expectation, or all three. For instance, in one of his Bible study plans, Nee maintains that there are “four great types” that the reader needs to find in virtually all the Old Testament texts, i.e. Christ, redemption, the

Holy Spirit, and the church.⁶ He also, as previously discussed, allegorizes the numbers mentioned in Scripture, seeking their spiritual meaning. Sung's allegorical exegesis usually takes a more direct form of Christological interpretation. This is not to say that Sung's hermeneutics more Christocentric than Nee's. Rather, it is a recognition that Sung's spiritual exegesis is almost always geared toward a Revivalist understanding of the order of salvation, so as to bring his listeners to the revival crisis moment where they have to choose between Christ or Satan, between life or death, and between progress or regress in their spiritual lives. However, both Nee and Sung's allegorical-typological findings typically have a tropological focus: Scripture, as God's word, ultimately tells the reader what to do or how to live, even if the text itself does not *explicitly* say so. In other words, even as they interpret the text Christologically, claiming that it is about Christ, they always find a way to "apply" that text to the reader/hearer, creating a moral demand out of the text.

Fifth, and finally, the primary way in which both Nee and Sung engage in spiritual exegesis is through the method of an intertextual reading of Scripture. This point is also dependent on the other hermeneutical rules discussed above. If Scripture is ultimately God's word, then it is reasonable to assume the unity of all Scripture, regardless of the various human authors, historical contexts, literary genres, and original recipients. If the Spirit unveils to a Spirit-filled reader the deeper meaning(s) of the text, then it does so primarily by illuminating the web of connections with which the whole of Scripture is providentially seamed. Nee speaks of the method of comparing the scriptural texts as one of the keys to unlocking the spiritual sense(s) of Scripture; indeed, it is the only key that seems to have a hermeneutical purchase, as the other three keys—searching, memorizing, and meditating—technically deal more with the

⁶ Nee, *How to Study the Bible: Practical Advice for Receiving Light from God's Word*, 103–106.

attitude and character of the reader. Furthermore, Nee argues that the reader must always compare, whether or not he or she can make sense of the given text by studying it on its own. Nee believes that comparative reading is the *natural* way of reading Scripture, given the unity of Scripture as well as the nature of God's progressive revelation in Scripture.

Sung, for his part, does not propose any hermeneutical theories, but we have seen in his sermons that he very much engages in intertextual exegesis of Scripture. Moreover, we also found that Sung likes to “match” the Old Testament to the New, suggesting certain New Testament passages or themes as the hermeneutical keys to certain Old Testament books, and hence performing intertextuality on a large scale. While the “matching” appears to be random, there is nevertheless an underlying logic at play: for Sung, God seems to be saying the same thing over and over again throughout Scripture, namely the gospel pattern of sin, redemption, holiness, and witnessing for Christ. Thus, by bringing another scriptural text into his exegesis of a particular passage (or more likely a chapter), Sung wants to emphasize that these texts—however different their human authors, historical contexts, and literary genres—are saying the same thing in a different way. It is not that Sung or Nee were unaware of these critical elements within Scripture; as a matter of fact, there is evidence that suggests they were aware of textual variations and higher criticism of the Bible, although the extent to which they understood it and its implications for interpretation is unclear. Despite all this, their theology of Scripture compels them to perceive the whole Bible as the *one* word of God, which has its origin, goal, and being from the Son of God himself. Indeed, for them Scripture is the Son of God “inscripturated,” in a similar way that Jesus is the Son of God “incarnated.” They are one and the same Word—the written and the living Word of God. Seen from this perspective, it is natural for Sung and Nee to go back and forth from one text to another in their reading of Scripture.

2. Nee and Sung's Approach to Scripture: A Further Engagement

What do we make of Nee and Sung's approach to Scripture? Is theirs simply an American fundamentalist approach dressed in Oriental clothes? To many scholars, that seems to be the case. Take, for example, Chloë Starr's recent work *Chinese Theology: Text and Context*.⁷ There she surveys several high-profile Chinese thinkers "who have taken seriously the 'Chinese' element to their theology,"⁸ such as Zhao Zichen (T. C. Chao), Xu Zongze (P. Joseph Zi), Wu Leichuan (L. C. Wu), and Ding Guangxun (K. H. Ting). Starr begins, however, with a passing reference to Nee and Sung as a way to explain her rationale in selecting and excluding thinkers:

It might be possible to read the writings of twentieth-century evangelists like Song Shangjie (John Sung) or Ni Tuosheng (Watchman Nee), whose theology presupposes a universal truth and universally applicable Christianity, while knowing little of the situation in China. It would be much more difficult to read the writers discussed here without knowing something of the history and political preoccupations of each era....

Ni Tuosheng provides, in fact, an excellent case in point to explain the focus of this volume. Ni was a widely read (in Chinese and English) and influential preacher and writer who suffered long imprisonment for his faith. His writings... are peppered with Chinese examples and cases, but he uses these primarily to illustrate Christian truths, rather than to determine them.... If we were to strip Ni Tuosheng's Chinese examples away, his point would almost always still stand.⁹

Starr basically discounts Nee and Sung's "Chineseness" because their theology does not take "the Chinese element" as their starting point. But what exactly is "the Chinese element" that Starr deems essential to an authentic Chinese theology? Her comment here is revealing: "The theology explored here is one of engagement: with historical theology, with Chinese

⁷ Starr, *Chinese Theology*. See also Daniel Bays's revealing comment on one episode of Nee's life: "In 1926-1927, at the height of national political drama in the 'Nationalist revolution', Nee barely paid attention. He was busy refining some of his basic ideas, applying the fruits of extended reading in works of the mystic Jessie Penn-Lewis and, holed up in Shanghai, writing the longest book he ever wrote, *The Spiritual Man*" (Daniel H. Bays, *A New History of Christianity in China*, Blackwell Guides to Global Christianity (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), 132-133).

⁸ Starr, *Chinese Theology*, 4.

⁹ *Ibid.*

textual traditions, with the World Council of Churches and international bodies, and most of all, with Chinese society and its governors.”¹⁰ In other words, Nee and Sung are not viewed as authentic Chinese theologians because they do not directly and explicitly engage “Chinese textual traditions” and “Chinese society” in the same way as her objects of study did. Perceptive readers of this work would soon find that most of the theologians she discusses—such as Chao, Wu, and Ting—have a generally positive outlook on Chinese textual traditions and a progressive view of the social-political realities in China.

This focus, however, privileges a certain approach to theological and political engagement over other possible approaches, in this case the liberal-accommodational approach over the evangelical-confrontational approach. To be sure, Starr is utterly justified in taking a side and choosing her theologians accordingly. Yet to imply that popular leaders like Nee and Sung, who take the latter approach to engagement, do not seriously take Chinese culture and contexts into their theology is simply misleading. The underlying assumption seems to be that there is only one legitimate form of social-cultural and political engagement; anything else is deemed “pietistic,” “otherworldly,” or simply “apolitical.” But this overlooks the basic logic of evangelicalism and the often subtle way it engages with the world, as shown in some recent studies of evangelicalism’s significant impact on society and public life.¹¹ For Chinese evangelicals like Nee and Sung, the first and foremost step of any social-cultural engagement is

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ For an apt overview of the political impact (and challenges) of evangelicalism in the Majority World, see Paul Freston, *Evangelicals and Politics in Asia, Africa and Latin America* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001). For the Latin American context, see Elizabeth E. Brusco, *The Reformation of Machismo: Evangelical Conversion and Gender in Colombia* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1995). For Asia in general, see David Halloran Lumsdaine, ed., *Evangelical Christianity and Democracy in Asia* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009). For China, see Gao Shining, “The Faith of Chinese Urban Christians: A Case Study of Beijing,” in *Christianity and Chinese Culture*, ed. Paulos Zhanzhu Huang and Miikka Ruokanen (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2010).

the individual's radical conversion to Jesus Christ.¹² Furthermore, Starr's observation is also yet another example of a simplistic reading of Nee and Sung's work. As I have argued in previous chapters, Nee and Sung are best interpreted as hybrid theologians with a delicate amalgam of Western *and* Chinese influences.

On the other hand, I think Starr is right to say that Nee and Sung do not regard their "Chineseness" (be it its culture, philosophical traditions, or social-political contexts) as *the starting point* of their theology. In this sense, they did presuppose "a universal truth and universally applicable Christianity." For them, the starting point of theology is God's revelation in Jesus Christ and Scripture that is transcultural in nature, even as its doctrinal formulations and practical expressions may vary depending on contexts and cultures. But this presupposition is neither necessarily Western nor uncritically modern; rather, it is simply scriptural, or traditionally Christian—i.e., in accordance with the apostolic tradition. Indeed, I would argue that the translatable nature of the gospel of Jesus Christ that Nee and Sung preached was an essential part of what made Christianity very appealing to the Chinese people they ministered to. I will revisit this argument in the next chapter but let me now briefly address Starr's concern about Nee and Sung's perceived lack of intentional indigenization.

The first thing to note is the fact that the process of Christian indigenization may take different forms and approaches. While it is true that Nee and Sung never deliberately put the

¹² Zhang Minghui's recent observation of Chinese urban Christians serves as one example of what this more subtle, long-term view of evangelical engagement with society may look like: "It is interesting that young educated people who are the most successful section of the population are embracing Christianity. Christianity can serve as an ethic for the new urban middle class: it gives a sense of respectability, plus it has an empowering capacity in that a person who is able to change his or her private life feels able to cope with the challenges of a changing society. Christianity also promotes the ethic of moderation; money is not wasted on gambling or drinking. Furthermore, a strict Christian lifestyle brings good health and appearance, and promotes hard work and good manners, all of which are an advantage in professional life." Zhang Minghui, "A Response to Professor Gao Shining," in *Christianity and Chinese Culture*, ed. Paulos Zhanzhu Huang and Miikka Ruokanen (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2010), 275.

“indigenization principle” at the forefront of their hermeneutics, it does not mean that their teachings and messages are not indigenized. As I have shown in previous chapters, some studies, albeit they are in the minority, consider Nee and Sung’s work as examples of a more subtle kind of indigenous theologizing.¹³ The same can be said for their apparent lack of social-political activities. Admittedly, Nee and Sung were preoccupied with helping others experience salvation and spread the gospel. But this does not mean that they were simply aloof from their own social-cultural milieus. Rather, as mentioned above, for them the gospel of Jesus Christ is the only way of properly engaging a fallen society.¹⁴ The numerous Chinese conversions that occurred because of their ministry, along with the subsequent underground churches that grew out of their revivals, bear witness to the social-political impact of their work. Furthermore, Sung’s zealous campaign to evangelize the Chinese in mainland China and abroad, which eventually cost him his own health, and Nee’s long and ultimately fatal imprisonment by the Communist government, are testimonies not only of their Christian faith but also of their love for China and the Chinese people in diaspora. It must be emphasized that in all their work, their theological interpretation of Scripture plays an integral part.

¹³ As previous chapters engaged with a large amount of scholarship on Nee and Sung, I think it would be helpful to recap here those who *directly* made this type of argument. For more general studies that portray *both* Nee and Sung as intentional Chinese indigenous leaders, see Xi, *Redeemed by Fire*; Yangwen Zheng, ed., *Sinicizing Christianity* (Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2017).

For Nee specifically, see Chang, “‘The Spiritual Human Is Discerned By No One’: An Intellectual Biography of Watchman Nee”; Gon Lee, “Exploring the Possibility of an Asian Way of Doing Theology: An Examination of Watchman Nee’s Life and His Theological Thoughts as a Model”; Woodbrigg, “Watchman Nee, Chinese Christianity and the Global Search for the Primitive Church.” To a lesser degree, see also Alexander Chow, *Theosis, Sino-Christian Theology and the Second Chinese Enlightenment: Heaven and Humanity in Unity* (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013). Chow argues that Nee advocated a fundamentalist theology, while also reflecting a particularly Chinese interest in the unity between heaven and humanity.

For Sung, see Ireland, “John Sung”; Thomas Alan Harvey, “Sermon, Story, and Song in the Inculturation of Christianity in China,” in *Sinicizing Christianity*, ed. Yangwen Zheng (Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2017); Tseng, “Revival Preaching and the Indigenization of Christianity in Republican China.”

¹⁴ On Sung’s social impact, see e.g. Lim, *The Life and Ministry of John Sung*, 100, 152–153, 168–169.

Bible Reading in the Contemporary Chinese-Asian World

I have argued that Nee and Sung, in their own ways, were figural readers of Scripture. Now I would like to suggest that present-day Chinese-Asian Christians, particularly those at the grassroots level, also tend to read Scripture figurally. I will do this by providing some contemporary examples of various popular approaches to Scripture in China and in Chinese communities in Southeast Asia, in the form of sermons, writings, testimonies, Bible study manuals, and official statements of faith from influential leaders and institutions. I do not wish to suggest that these popular grassroots Chinese-Asian approaches are all influenced directly by Nee or Sung, except for some obvious examples which I will make clear. Nevertheless, the following survey illustrates that the theology of grassroots Asian Christianity seems closer to Nee and Sung's than to that of most Asian theologians we discussed in chapter 1. In other words, Nee and Sung's figural reading of Scripture seems to be a more popular approach for the majority of grassroots Chinese Christians in Asia than either the historical-critical reading, postcolonial interpretation, or cross-textual hermeneutics prized by many of today's academic advocates of "Asian theology."

1. The Life of Scripture in China

How do ordinary Christians in China read the Bible? To answer this question, I first need to sketch, however roughly, an outline of the state of Christianity in contemporary China. This picture entails the story of the Three-Self Patriotic Movement (TSPM) and the China Christian Council (CCC), the two official Protestant bodies in China, which form the context to which many Chinese grassroots leaders are reacting.

The Tale of Two (or More) Churches in China

It is customary, as an outsider, to hear that China has two kinds of churches: the official, registered churches and the “underground” home churches. As one old Beijing Christian explained to a Western reporter: “Understand two men, and you will understand Chinese Christianity.” “Which two?” queried the reporter. “Wang Mingdao and Ding Guangxun [K. H. Ting]!”¹⁵ Wang Mingdao was considered by many as the “Dean of the House Churches,” whereas Bishop Ting was arguably the most prominent leader of the government-approved Protestant church in China, having been the Chairperson of the TSPM and President of CCC for about twenty years. The (in)famous rivalry between Wang and Ting is instructive for understanding the current state of Chinese Christianity, as explored by some scholars already.¹⁶ Given the focus of the present study, however, I will not rehearse the debate here. But Ting and his view of Scripture must be discussed, however briefly, as he played a crucial part in the formation and development of the TSPM/CCC’s theology of Scripture, which is an important part of the larger context of Christianity in contemporary China.

Bishop Ting and the TSPM/CCC on the Bible

Among many other attributes, Ting is known for his strong leadership of the TSPM/CCC, his staunch support of government socialist ideology, and his notion of “theological reconstruction” that led TSPM to launch a national campaign to construct a contextual theology that met China’s needs at the time.¹⁷ Given the ecumenical bent of his

¹⁵ Ron McMillan, “Bishop Ting and China’s House Churches,” *The Christian Century*, August 16, 1989 as cited in Harvey, “Sermon, Story, and Song in the Inculturation of Christianity in China,” 148 n. 29.

¹⁶ See especially Thomas Alan Harvey, *Acquainted with Grief: Wang Mingdao’s Stand for the Persecuted Church in China* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2002).

¹⁷ Ting had a remarkable career and rich national and international experiences in his life (1915-2012). He received a large portion of his formal education in China (BA from St. John’s University in Shanghai in 1937 and his BD from the School of Theology in 1942), with some advanced theological training in America (MA from Union Theological Seminary in New York in 1948). During his time overseas, Ting served as a missionary secretary of the Student Christian Movement of Canada and in administrative affairs for the World Student Christian Federation in Geneva. Upon returning to China in 1951, he was appointed general secretary of the

theology, it is easy to characterize Ting's view of Scripture as wholly liberal and progressive. His early writing on Scripture, however, reveals striking similarities with that of the conservative Christians whom he often criticizes. For instance, in *How to Study the Bible*, written in the mid-1950s as a series of short essays to young Chinese Christians and reissued in 1980, Ting approaches the Bible from a devotional perspective in a variety of ways. In a manner reminiscent of Nee's hermeneutics, Ting affirms the centrality of Christ in Scripture, the need for humility and obedience in interpretation, and the importance of paying attention to the silences in the text as well as what is said. Other hermeneutical principles are described in some of the essay headings: "Knock, And the Door Will Be Opened for You," "Listen to the Tiny Voices," "[Make] Comparisons," "Let the Whole Bible Speak," and "Let Personalities Come Alive."¹⁸ Indeed, Ting encourages his readers to regard the Bible as "a letter with my name on it which I myself receive from God each day."¹⁹ These features fit nicely with the perspectives of Nee and Sung.

Although Ting never retracted his early works, his later works clearly betray a change in his expressions of faith. As Ting himself remarks, this is due to "the result of the impact of historical changes upon inherited faith"; the historical changes he mentions are "those since the coming into being of the People's Republic of China in 1949, which marked the beginning of a

Christian Literature Society in Shanghai before becoming Principal of Nanjing Union Theological Seminary in 1952. In 1954 Ting was elected to the standing committee of the then newly founded TSPM and was consecrated as the Anglican Bishop of Zhejiang in the subsequent year. During the Cultural Revolution, he lost his positions but returned to prominence in the 1970s. In 1980, Ting became President of the CCC and leader of the TSPM, positions he held until 1997. In addition, he also held significant political posts: he was vice-chairman of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (1989–2008), and a member of the National People's Congress, China's legislature. Without doubt, Ting is one of the most influential leaders of the registered Church in the new Communist China. For examples of his work, see K. H. Ting, *No Longer Strangers: Selected Writings of Bishop K. H. Ting*, ed. Raymond L. Whitehead (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1989); K. H. Ting, *A Chinese Contribution to Ecumenical Theology: Selected Writings of Bishop K. H. Ting*, ed. Janice Wickeri and Philip L. Wickeri (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2002).

¹⁸ K. H. Ting, *How to Study the Bible* (Hong Kong: Tao Fong Shan Ecumenical Centre, 1981).

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 30.

period of direct encounter between Christians and communist revolutionaries.”²⁰ After 1949, Ting adjusted himself to fit in with the Chinese socialist context by revising his theological positions considerably.²¹ In his later work, he rejects the doctrine of original sin as foreign teaching, arguing that there is no basis for such teaching in traditional Chinese culture; he promotes the notion of a “cosmic Christ” that virtually denies the particularity and historicity of Jesus of Nazareth and plays down the difference between faith and unbelief; and his emphasis on love becomes the only real hermeneutical key to his whole theology and exegesis.²² Ultimately, Ting bases his theological reconstruction on a rationale that elevates appropriateness to context as a criterion for theological validity. Furthermore, he has narrowly chosen “a context that has much to do with politics; political zeal can be seen underlying almost all context described in his writings.”²³ While this is understandable, given his political alignment with China’s communist party, it nevertheless severely limits the fruitfulness of Ting’s theology. As one observer puts it, Ting’s theological project appears to be a “politically motivated theological reflection.”²⁴ In short, Ting’s theology became a *politicized theology* (in contrast to a *Christian theology of politics*).²⁵

²⁰ K. H. Ting, *God Is Love: Collected Writings of K. H. Ting* (Colorado Springs: Cook Communications, 2004), 108.

²¹ Chen Lu, “Ding Guangxun’s Critique of Fundamentalist Theology in Contemporary China and His Theological Construction,” *Transformation* 27, no. 2 (April 1, 2010): 102. As Ting himself admits, “The freeing of the Chinese Church from its tutelage under Western missions and its need to take into account somehow the Chinese context make certain theological affirmations and accommodations unavoidable, and that has had quite significant effects on the way the Bible is approached.” Ting, *God Is Love*, 80.

²² That love is the governing theme in Ting’s theology is apparent in some of the titles of his work. Ting’s two collected works are: K. H. Ting, *Love Never Ends: Papers*, ed. Janice Wickeri (Nanjing: Yilin Press, 2000); Ting, *God Is Love*. Two biographies about him are: Jia Ma, *Ai Shi Zhen Li: Ding Guangxun Zhuan (Discerning Truth through Love: Biography of K. H. Ting)* (Xianggang: Jidu jiao wen yi chu ban she, 2006); Jia Ma and Suyun Liao, *Incorruptible Love: The K. H. Ting Story* (New York: Peter Lang, 2018). And a festschrift for him is Peng Wang, ed., *Zai ai zhong xun qiu zhen li (Seeking Truth in Love)* (Beijing Shi: Zong jiao wen hua chu ban she, 2006).

²³ Lu, “Ding Guangxun’s Critique of Fundamentalist Theology in Contemporary China and His Theological Construction,” 105.

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ I loosely borrow this distinction from Charles Mathewes’s perceptive approach of doing “theology in a public life.” Mathewes contrasts his Augustinian approach to the more prevalent discourse of “public theology.” See Charles T. Mathewes, *A Theology of Public Life* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

Ting's theology is the foundation of virtually all TSPM/CCC projects and publications.²⁶ Although he officially retired from leadership in 1997, Ting was the brain behind the 1998 TSPM/CCC national campaign of "reconstruction of theological thinking" (*shenxue sixiang jianshe*).²⁷ The top priorities of this campaign include: "to stress that faith accords with the Bible," "to promote Christian ethics," and "to pay attention to individual spiritual development." However, the real focus of the first phase of the campaign is captured in the slogan "justification by faith should be played down,"²⁸ whereas the goal of the second phase of the campaign is to establish "the correct view of the Bible." Thus, in a meeting in July 2003, Ting refers to horrific events and cruel statements from the Old Testament and argues, in the typical historical-critical manner, that they are evidence of human interference in the text. He observes that there is confusion among Chinese Christians as to what is really "God's word" in the Bible and maintains that one must not believe the Bible is wholly from God; instead, it is only "inspired by God." He further argues that since the major revelation of Scripture is "God is love," then the scriptural texts that do not tell the reader about God's love are basically not "God's words."²⁹ Ting calls this approach "justification by love," and believes that it will

²⁶ Lu, "Ding Guangxun's Critique of Fundamentalist Theology in Contemporary China and His Theological Construction," 96.

²⁷ Fällman offers an apt illustration on this score. In 2000, under Ting's guidance, the CCC published a book entitled "The Modern View of the Bible" by Tang Zhongmo, who was president of the Central Theological Seminary in Shanghai, the Anglican seminary affiliated with St. John's University, Ting's alma mater. The book basically argues for the modern, evolutionary view of the Bible, and contrasts it with the evangelical view. The book found a substantial readership among Chinese Christian scholars. But, as Fällman also notes, "This is a specific choice for publication that fits the purpose of the campaign for 'building up theology.' It also reflects the background of Bishop Ding in promoting a Bible view and analysis on Anglican grounds, quite far removed from the experience and background of the majority of both lay believers and pastors in contemporary China." See Fredrik Fällman, "Hermeneutical Conflict? Reading the Bible in Contemporary China," in *Reading Christian Scriptures in China*, ed. Chloë Starr (London: T&T Clark, 2008), 53–54.

²⁸ Fällman notes that the term "played down" is the official English translation chosen by the TSPM/CCC. But the term could also be rendered as "weakened" or "diluted." "The Chinese word *danhua* originally means 'desalinate,' and one could interpret this as making the Christian message less of 'salt and light.'" Ibid., 52.

²⁹ On this score, Yieh comments: "It appears that the Gospel of John, which reveals God's love for the world and features Jesus' commandment to love one another, has served as 'the canon within the canon' for him to construct his cosmic Christology and inclusive missiology." John Y. H. Yieh, "The Bible in China: Interpretations and Consequences," in *Handbook of Christianity in China*, ed. R. Gary Tiedemann, vol. 2: 1800-present (Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2010), 905.

change the Chinese church into something new: “a [c]hurch that conforms with the historical tide and with the needs of the people... I believe that this Christianity will be welcomed by the Communist Party.”³⁰

While many Chinese registered leaders and pastors adhere to Ting’s approach to Scripture, the larger number of Christians, even within TSPM/CCC circles, do not. Several observations and examples can be offered to support this claim.³¹ First, by the year 2008, the TSPM/CCC managed eighteen theological seminaries nationwide. However, many of them were “in reality Bible schools, and scarcely conform to [Ting’s] ideas of ‘building up theological thinking.’”³² Second, the TSPM/CCC Council for Rural Work has produced a series of booklets for volunteer training, which includes one with the title “18 points for explaining the Bible.”³³ It is meant to be a key source of basic hermeneutics for rural preachers. However, this booklet, which was published in 1996, was based on the correspondence course *Shijingxue* (Hermeneutics), which was published in 1993 by the Far East Broadcasting Centre in Taiwan—a popular Taiwanese evangelical organization which was undoubtedly critical of the theology of the TSPM/CCC.³⁴ The principles explained in the booklet include why one must interpret Scripture and the importance of historical and literary contexts. But it also emphasizes the need for prayer and spiritual guidance in the interpretive process, while cautioning against using

³⁰ K. H. Ting, “Shenxue Sixiang Jianshe Jinru Yi Ge Xin Jieduan [The Reconstruction of Theological Thinking Enters a New Stage],” *Tianfeng*, no. 9 (2003): 4–7. As quoted in Fällman, “Hermeneutical Conflict? Reading the Bible in Contemporary China,” 52.

³¹ I am drawing heavily from Fällman’s keen observation for these examples. See Fällman, “Hermeneutical Conflict? Reading the Bible in Contemporary China,” 52–54.

³² *Ibid.*, 53. Fällman uses the term “building up” to translate the original “*jianshe*” in the *shenxue sixiang jianshe* campaign. But the literal translation of the term, as well as the official TSPM/CCC translation, is “to reconstruct” or “reconstruction.”

³³ Yu Cheng, *Nongcun Shiyong Jiangdaofa [Practical Rural Preaching Methods]* (Nanjing: Zhongguo jidujiao xiehui, 1996), 92–144.

³⁴ According to Fällman, this source acknowledgement comes in very small print on the last page of the booklet. The Taiwan-based organization is closely related to “Brother David” (code-name for Doug Sutphen, 1936-2007), one of the foremost Bible smugglers into China in the 1970s and 1980s. See Fällman, “Hermeneutical Conflict? Reading the Bible in Contemporary China,” 54.

Scripture for political purposes. Again, the source and content of this hermeneutics booklet reveal the gap separating the leadership of the TSPM/CCC and those who were working in the forefront of grassroots Christianity (in this case, particularly in rural areas).

Finally, consider the wide circulation of *The Dew* (Ganlu), a magazine published by Zhongnan Theological Seminary in Wuhan—one of the seminaries that is managed by the TSPM/CCC. The magazine reaches beyond the six provinces of the Zhongnan area to Beijing and the northeast of China, while the seminary attracts students from all over the mainland. From 2004 to 2005, the magazine ran a series of articles on biblical interpretation, which formed a basic course for Bible readers within the official, registered churches in China. Despite the magazine’s provenance, its focus and content are very conservative and traditional. In one article entitled “The Proper Qualifications of an Exegete,” for instance, the author begins by boldly asserting: “Only a saved and born-again person can fully understand the Bible.” As Fällman puts it, “This is quite contrary to the ideas of the campaign for ‘building-up theological thinking,’ and shows the disparity also within the TSPM/CCC when it comes to Bible teaching and interpretation.”³⁵ In a similar vein, Jason Kindopp judges that the campaign as a whole was a failure, precisely because of the disparity between those high-ranking TSPM officials who promoted it and the grassroots Christians who rejected it.³⁶ Indeed, Kindopp shows that it was so unpopular on the grassroots level that even the Religious Affairs Bureau “opted for

³⁵ Ibid., 55. His verdict on the TSPM/CCC campaign and its actual implementation on the ground is also worth noting: “The recent campaign and the directives from the TSPM/CCC may have had a reverse effect to the one intended. One of the original goals for the campaign was to root out sectarian tendencies, primarily in the rural churches, and to establish a modern church, ‘with the times,’ adhering to and promoting the development of a socialist society. Acting against sectarian tendencies is a well-founded fear, and promoting the ‘correct Bible view’ has validity in a country where heresies and misinterpretations occur frequently. However, it is also obvious that many unregistered churches have seen this campaign as yet further proof of government interference in the TSPM/CCC.”

³⁶ See Jason Kindopp, “The Politics of Protestantism in Contemporary China: State Control, Civil Society, and Social Movement in a Single Party-State” (Ph.D. Dissertation, The George Washington University, 2004), chap. 7.

preserving stability over hammering down an unpopular campaign within the church” for fear of social unrest!³⁷

Unregistered/House Church View on Scripture

It should be clear by now that far from being homogeneous, there exist important differences within the individual churches which are registered under the TSPM/CCC. Thus, the popular perception that the registered churches in China are theologically liberal, whereas the house churches are conservative, is not entirely true. The fact is that the majority of Chinese Christians, even within the registered churches, are evangelical Christians of some sort, as Ting himself admits.³⁸ This explains the disparity between the more progressive officials of the TSPM/CCC and the more conservative pastors and lay members of the registered churches that Fällman mentioned above. But just as the registered churches in China are not homogeneous, such is also the case with Chinese house churches. As studies have shown, the house church is a multifaceted movement with an uncountable number of autonomous churches existing and growing in different parts of China.³⁹ On the periphery of the underground church, new unorthodox sects are sometimes formed,⁴⁰ which are often censured not only by the TSPM/CCC but also by mainstream orthodox house churches. Furthermore, recent decades have witnessed the rise of *urban* house churches, which have different characteristics than the rural ones.⁴¹ However, although some of their doctrinal convictions, social engagements, and

³⁷ Ibid., 334–335.

³⁸ Ting, *God Is Love*, 79–80, 91.

³⁹ Yieh, “The Bible in China: Interpretations and Consequences,” 905. See also Jie Kang, *House Church Christianity in China: From Rural Preachers to City Pastors* (Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016).

⁴⁰ Fällman, “Hermeneutical Conflict? Reading the Bible in Contemporary China,” 55. The most prominent example of this group is perhaps *Eastern Lightning* (more commonly known as *The Church of Almighty God*) that teaches that Christ has returned to earth and is presently living as a Chinese woman: Yang Xiangbin. For more on this, see Emily Dunn, *Lightning from the East: Heterodoxy and Christianity in Contemporary China* (Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2015).

⁴¹ For more on this phenomenon, see Brent Fulton, *China’s Urban Christians: A Light That Cannot Be Hidden* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2015).

political relationships with the government differ, virtually all Chinese house churches hold a very high view of the Bible.⁴²

In 1998, several larger unregistered churches in China made a joint declaration of faith, which was the first official document created by the house church movement.⁴³ Their statement on the Bible, which was the first in order, reads:

We believe the sixty-six books of the Bible to be inspired of God and that they were written by the prophets and apostles under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. The Bible is the complete truth and without error; it will allow no one to change it in any manner.

The Bible clearly describes God's plan of redemption for man. The Bible is the highest standard of our faith, life, and service. We are opposed to all those who deny the Bible [as the Word of God]; we are opposed to the view that the Bible is out of date; we are opposed to the view that the Bible has error; and we are opposed to those who believe only in selected sections of the Bible. We want to emphasize that the Scriptures must be interpreted in light of their historical context and within the overall context of Scriptural teachings. In seeking to understand Scripture, one must seek the leading of the Holy Spirit and follow the principle of interpreting Scripture by Scripture, and not taking anything out of context. In interpreting Scripture, one ought to consult the traditions of orthodox belief left by the church throughout her history. We are opposed to interpreting Scripture by one's own will, or by subjective spiritualization.⁴⁴

This statement could probably be agreed upon by the majority of Christians in China regardless of whether their church is registered or unregistered. The lines that start with “opposed to,” however, are likely intended to criticize the TSPM/CCC and its *official* view of the Bible orchestrated by Ting and his colleagues. In effect, the statement maintains that the whole Bible in its entirety is God's word, inspired by God, without error, and wholly relevant for our

⁴² Yieh, “The Bible in China: Interpretations and Consequences,” 905. Yieh, 905.

⁴³ According to Yalin Xin, this statement of faith served two purposes primarily: (1) as a practical step in the house church unity movement, and (2) as clarification over controversies, primarily fabricated accusations from the authorities against these large house church groups. Yalin Xin, “Contemporary Expressions of a Spirit-Led Christian Movement: A Chinese Case Study,” in *Global Renewal Christianity: Spirit-Empowered Movements Past, Present, and Future*, ed. Amos Yong and Vinson Synan, vol. 1: Asia and Oceania (Charisma House, 2015), 419 n. 30.

⁴⁴ The English version of the statement is available in, e.g., David Aikman, “Appendix B,” *Jesus in Beijing: How Christianity Is Transforming China and Changing the Global Balance of Power* (Washington: Regnery Publishing, 2006), 313–325. It is also available online (both the English and Chinese versions) in “Statement of Faith of Chinese House Churches,” accessed July 10, 2020, <http://www.chinaforjesus.com/StatementOffaith.htm>.

salvation in God's economy—all central tenets of evangelical Christianity that are shared by Nee and Sung as well.

On the issue of the interpretation of Scripture, the brief guidelines that the statement offers do not appear, at first, to differ substantially from TSPM/CCC criteria, especially with regard to subjective interpretations and emphasis on the text's historical context. There appears to be an equal eagerness to establish the correct view of the Bible, similar to that of TSPM/CCC ideals. But the statement does so on quite different grounds. As Fällman observes, the TSPM/CCC wanted to arrogate interpretive authority to themselves, whereas the house church leaders claimed to have a higher spiritual authority due to their uncompromised stance on the matters of faith. From the perspective of the house church leaders, those who have aligned themselves with the TSPM/CCC have already lost their ground for claiming interpretive authority, for they have sacrificed their spiritual birthright and moral standard as Christians—qualities the house church leaders deemed as essential to the very task of scriptural interpretation.⁴⁵ In other words, the questions of the nature of Scripture (what is Scripture?) and interpretive authority (who is authorized to interpret it?) are the main issues underlying the debate between the house church leaders and the TSPM/CCC. This also explains the statement's emphasis on seeking the leading of the Holy Spirit, following the principle of interpreting Scripture by Scripture, and utilizing historic orthodox belief as an interpretive guide to reading Scripture as God's word.

Following the legacy of Wang Mingdao, Watchman Nee, and John Sung, today's house church leaders refuse to compromise with what they call the *buxin pai* (the group of

⁴⁵ Fällman, "Hermeneutical Conflict? Reading the Bible in Contemporary China," 57.

unbelievers)—that is, the TSPM/CCC.⁴⁶ From their perspective, the crux of the matter is whether one is loyal to Christ *and* Scripture, or not. This tension can be found in the writings of Wang and his critiques of Ting, whom he viewed as both Christ’s betrayer and a Bible skeptic.⁴⁷ This same sentiment is shared by many contemporary house church leaders. There is “a sense of betrayal among those who chose not to register their churches with the government... and who may have served long prison sentences, suffering greatly in comparison with those who both registered and acceded to the party line on religious matters.”⁴⁸ In all this, the authority of Scripture is at the heart of the tension. A case in point is the second part of the joint statement of house church leaders in 1998, entitled “Attitude of Chinese House Churches toward the Government, Its Religious Policy, and the Three-Self Movement.” This five-page document aims to answer the burning question of “Why do we not register with the state or join the TSPM?” While the answer is a complex one, it is particularly revealing that the document uses the expression “but the Bible teaches us that...” (or its equivalent) no less than eleven times. The house church leaders did not join the TSPM/CCC because, ultimately, they believed that the state-sponsored “church” organization is not scriptural enough—or even at all.

The house church’s high regard for Scripture, however, does not necessarily always involve actually reading and studying the Bible, particularly in rural areas, where many of the

⁴⁶ Yieh, “The Bible in China: Interpretations and Consequences,” 905; Kang, *House Church Christianity in China*, 3.

⁴⁷ The (in)famous debates between Wang and Ting have been documented and interpreted by many scholars. One of the most perceptive analyses is Harvey, *Acquainted with Grief*; Richard R. Cook, “Wang Mingdao and the Evolution of Contextualized Chinese Churches,” in *Contextualization of Christianity in China: An Evaluation in Modern Perspective*, ed. Peter Chen-Main Wang (Sankt Augustin, Germany: Institut Monumenta Serica, 2007). For Wang’s own work, see his collected work (in Chinese): Wang Mingdao, *Wang Mingdao Wenku (Treasures of Wang Mingdao)*, ed. C. C. Wang, vol. 1–7 (Taiwan: Conservative Baptist Press, 1996). For a sample of his translated sermons in English, see Wang Mingdao, *Looks at These People* (Taiwan: Conservative Baptist Press, 1984).

⁴⁸ Chloë Starr, “Introduction,” in *Reading Christian Scriptures in China*, ed. Chloë Starr (London: T&T Clark, 2008), 6.

people are still illiterate.⁴⁹ For these Christians, their Scripture intake comes orally from sermons, testimonies, and songs, all of which are typically saturated with Scripture verses.

“Through frequent singing of hymns, through the association of texts with emotionally powerful music, Christians internalize biblical passages, stories, and doctrines.”⁵⁰ Moreover, for all of them—literate and illiterate—Scripture as God’s word is not only an authoritative document but also a powerful artifact. This is especially the case when Scripture is believed to assist in miraculous events, such as exorcism, healing, conversion, or even walking a great distance in an instant. Consider two instances below:

“Brother Yun” (Liu Zhenying), one of the best-known unregistered Christian leaders... has explained how he once was simply walking along a countryside road, chanting Bible verses, when he suddenly travelled a great distance in an instant. He has likened this experience with that of Philip in Acts 8.39-40. Brother Yun is now living in Germany, but during his life in China he experienced many miraculous events, often accompanied by Bible chanting or by messages from the Bible.⁵¹

Tang Chuiyin from Tang Shan city in Jiangsu is an elderly believer who testifies that she came to believe in Jesus after her nephew encouraged her to read the Bible. Struck by the countless passages that revealed a God who had profound love for all of creation, including herself, her faith grew and she found strength to start a house gathering for prayer and Bible study with two other women. The group soon began to grow, leading to the purchase of an old house for larger meetings and worship. This old house grew into what is now known as Jiangsu’s Tang Shan Protestant Church. One unassuming grandma who read the Bible and started a small group has grown into one of the bigger churches in Jiangsu today: Tang’s testimony exemplifies the Bible’s impact on church growth in China.⁵²

These accounts are not unlike those we heard from Sung’s sermons and testimonies, which among other things exemplify the belief in the supernatural power of Scripture. “So great is the

⁴⁹ According to Pamela Choo, “Many Christians in China are adults residing in rural areas and belonging to the group of people classified as ‘illiterate.’ Using the Bible as its main text, the Church in China organizes Bible Literacy Classes to teach older adults how to read and write the Chinese script. These literacy classes ‘not only help rural church-goers recognize words to enable them to read the Bible; they also bring about a greater pursuit of the Word of God and truth’” (Pamela Wan-Yen Choo, “The Bible’s Impact On Christianity In China,” in *Bible in Mission*, ed. Pauline Hoggarth et al. [Oxford: Regnum, 2013], 190).

⁵⁰ Jenkins, *The New Faces of Christianity*, 31.

⁵¹ Fällman, “Hermeneutical Conflict? Reading the Bible in Contemporary China,” 55–56.

⁵² Choo, “The Bible’s Impact on Christianity In China,” 188.

power of the text that for some Christians, the physical object of the Bible itself becomes a locus of spiritual power, which in some circumstances can become superstitious or near-magical.”⁵³

Some unregistered Christian groups often conduct “secret” Bible classes, a central part of which is dedicated to memorizing scriptural passages or sometimes even whole books of Scripture. Just as with the classical texts of the Confucian and Daoist canons in earlier times, there is a tradition in China of memorizing long passages of Scripture. This had an upsurge during the Cultural Revolution, when it was a necessary way of preserving Scripture and keeping faith alive in the midst of strict censorship and constant persecution.⁵⁴ Around that time, the Bible was also often hand copied as a means of spreading the word, and the rarity of copies increased its symbolic value. As Fällman remarks,

This idea of memorizing the Bible... is not just a feature of the unregistered Church, but in that context it conveys a certain view of the Bible. A majority of believers in these groups would adhere to the view that the whole Bible is ‘God’s Word,’ and that any exposition of the Bible must be done through the work of the Holy Spirit. Every word in the Bible is thus important and memorizing will assist in keeping one’s thoughts on the right track.⁵⁵

⁵³ Jenkins, *The New Faces of Christianity*, 36. Writing more broadly on the power of Scripture in the Global South (especially Africa and Asia), Jenkins provides an illuminating true story: “In India, [Sathianathan] Clarke tells how, while visiting a Christian Dalit community, he was asked to help a poor Hindu woman who was sick, and to grant her the healing powers of the Bible. He prepares to read an appropriate text, but those assembled tell him not to bother, because the woman is illiterate, and anyway knows nothing of the Christian scriptures. Instead, he should place the Bible on her head as he prays for her. ‘I could not resist slightly opening my eyes at some point of the prayer to catch a glimpse of the intense and expectant posture of trust that was expressed by all those in the room, Christian and Hindu Dalit alike. Truly, it was a picture of reverence, awe, and mystery.... In this instance, the Bible was not read but there was a distinct view of what it was and what it could perform’” (Ibid.).

⁵⁴ Speaking specifically on this period of Church history in China, Thor Strandenaes notes the following: “In spite of the mass confiscation and burning of Christian scriptures people managed to hide away individual copies, subsequently read in secret and divided into portions for wider circulation. Many learned portions or large parts of the Bible by heart, not least by memorizing and singing the so-called gospel songs (*fuyinge*) or short songs with biblical texts (*duange*), some of which existed before the Cultural Revolution, others which were written by Chinese Christians during this difficult period for the Church. In this way texts from the Bible in the words of the CUV [Chinese Union Version] version were transmitted orally, especially passages considered central to the understanding of the Christian faith and ethos.” See Thor Strandenaes, “The Bible in the Twentieth-Century Chinese Christian Church,” in *Reading Christian Scriptures in China*, ed. Chloë Starr (London: T&T Clark, 2008), 71.

⁵⁵ Fällman, “Hermeneutical Conflict? Reading the Bible in Contemporary China,” 56. In a similar fashion, Choo reports: “The incredible growth of Bible mission in China can also be attributed to the Chinese Christians’ intrinsic love and high regard for the Bible. Some believers have even committed large portions of text to memory

Again, we can note that this practice of Scripture memorization and its underlying theological presuppositions are very much in line with Nee's approach to Scripture.⁵⁶

The Preaching and Interpretation of Scripture in China

Having provided detailed examples of how registered and unregistered churches read Scripture, I would like now to take a step back and offer a more general outline of Chinese Christians' approach to Scripture through the lens of preaching practices in China. For this task I will draw heavily from Ji Tai's expositions on "Preaching in the Church in China."⁵⁷ Ji's own background and life story, however, is also instructive for our purpose. Ji wrote the article in 1996, when he was still a professor of Old Testament and Homiletics as well as the Director of Research at Nanjing Union Theological Seminary. As the most prestigious of China's licensed Protestant theological schools, Nanjing Seminary, under the leadership of Bishop Ting himself, should have been the Theological Construction Campaign's "model unit." But the Seminary's student protest in the period of 1998-2001 reveals that *that* was not the case. This well-known protest followed several incidents where Ting forced his political agenda into the Seminary's curriculum and dismissed some senior students and key lecturers there because they were considered "too conservative." Ji was one of the faculty members who was fired due to his resistance to Ting's program. In 2001, a journalist told his story as follows:

in order to preserve God's word. It was this practice of Scripture memorization that kept many Chinese believers, like the late Bishop Aloysius Jin Luxian, 'alive' during his imprisonment from the 1950s to the 1970s." Choo, "The Bible's Impact on Christianity In China," 191.

⁵⁶ See the previous chapter on Nee's approach to Scripture, especially the four hermeneutical keys section. Radner, in his discussion on the role of lectionary reading in the Church's figural reading of Scripture, points out that historically the practice of memorization of Scripture has almost always accompanied the figural approach to Scripture. See Radner, *Time and the Word*, 231–233.

⁵⁷ Ji Tai, "Preaching in the Church in China," *Chinese Theological Review* 11, no. 1 (1996): 21–30. For a complementary overview of this account, see also Ji's other article: Ji Tai, "Hermeneutics in the Chinese Church," *Chinese Theological Review* 12 (1998): 137–147. Due to space limitations, I will peruse only the former material in this section.

A Nanjing graduate himself, he began teaching there in 1991. He was a promising addition to the faculty, and the administration sent him to Germany for further study. Upon his return, it made him director of graduate studies and associate editor of the quarterly theological review. Beginning three years ago, when Bishop Ding adopted a new slogan for the seminary, “Construct Chinese theology,” and called for “theological adaptation to socialism,” Ji Tai protested. He seized opportunities to preach on original sin, the second coming, and justification by faith—tenets that are criticized in *The Collected Essays* of Ding Guangxun, a text now working its way into the standard curriculum at Nanjing and other seminaries. Ji Tai avoided mandatory political study groups and weekly flag raising ceremonies, believing them to be a distraction from the school's purpose. He refused to publish articles in the review that argued in favor of “process theology,” the attempt to conform Christian teaching to socialist and Marxist philosophy. When Ji Tai accepted invitations to preach and perform baptisms at unregistered house churches, the seminary charged him with misusing his status as seminary professor and pastor to engage in “illegal religious activities.” Bishop Ding publicly dismissed him last summer.⁵⁸

Upon his dismissal, Ji and his wife Peng Yaqian, who was also a faculty member, expressed their disappointment and said that they “would like to have a middle way between Three Self and house churches.”⁵⁹ As longtime adherents to the official Three Self church, they were simply unable to see themselves completely joining the house church movement, even though they were theologically closer to the movement. In any event, Ji's case is instructive because it shows that the theological gulf I have pointed out in the previous sections occurred not only between Ting's TSPM campaign and the pastors and members of the house churches, but also between the campaign and the members of academic communities, including the Nanjing Seminary itself. Furthermore, it also sheds new light on and gives more credence to Ji's analysis that I will peruse below.

⁵⁸ Mindy Belz, “Caesar's Seminary,” *WORLD Magazine*, January 27, 2001, accessed July 22, 2020, https://world.wng.org/2001/01/caesars_seminary. Jason Kindopp, of the Brookings Institution, has nicely chronicled the ensuing event:

Still unable to fill the vacancies left by purged faculty, the seminary finally hired two American theologians to instruct the students through interpreters. When one faculty member asked Bishop Ding why not hire Chinese theologians from Hong Kong, Singapore, or Taiwan, he replied that all the theologians in the Chinese speaking world were “too conservative.” Herein lies one of the campaign's great ironies. Although the rhetorical basis for launching the TCC was to replace the Chinese church's “foreign” doctrines with a “Chinese theology,” the campaign's primary victims were the church's best and brightest theologians; moreover, seminary officials trusted no theologians in the Chinese-speaking world to support Ding's theology, compelling them to hire American theologians to promote the campaign to construct a “Chinese theology.” (Kindopp, “The Politics of Protestantism in Contemporary China,” 343).

⁵⁹ Belz, “Caesar's Seminary.”

Ji divides his discussion on Chinese preaching in terms of *content* and *style*. I will deal with the former very briefly as the focus will be on the latter. Ji highlights three dominant features of the contents of Chinese preaching in both urban and rural churches. First, the preaching most often relates to the basic teachings of Christianity, particularly the doctrine of salvation in Christ.⁶⁰ Secondly, and closely related to the first, there is a clear emphasis on the individual and personal gospel (as opposed to the communal and social dimension of the gospel).⁶¹ Finally, there is also a consistent theme of morality; preachers consistently stress the moral dimension of the Bible and how Christians should conform to it.⁶²

Regarding the style of preaching, Ji outlines four features that are characteristic of Chinese preaching. First, the significant length of sermons. The average length of a sermon in urban churches is forty-five minutes and usually more than an hour in rural churches. Ji offers some sociological factors that help explain this phenomenon, the primary of which is the slow pace of life among many Chinese Christians, especially in rural areas where they follow the

⁶⁰ Ji further offers his analysis on this point: “The main reason why the great majority of Christians and pastors in the Church in China emphasize basic faith, especially the doctrine of salvation, is primarily due to the fact that they are heirs to the evangelical and fundamentalist traditions. *It is possible to say that there does not exist in the Chinese Church a ‘liberal wing’ as there does in Western Christianity.* Secondly, this is also connected to the composition of the body of Christians. Prior to the Cultural Revolution, it was the case that there were mostly elderly believers left in the Church. Today the majority of Christians in the Church have become Christians only in the past ten or so years, and at every service there is a large number of inquirers. We need to enable them to understand the basic teachings of the Christian faith through their hearing of the Word.” Tai, “Preaching in the Church in China,” 27–28. As a side note, it is interesting that Ji writes the statement that I emphasized above (see the italicized section of the quotation), given his background and status when he wrote this article.

⁶¹ According to Ji, “The way in which preachers and believers in the Chinese Church emphasize the personal gospel is the effect of their embracing a particular attitude that characterized both the evangelical movement at a comparatively early period and the traditions of pietism. Secondly, this is also related to a deficiency in the social consciousness of Christians in China. For these people, it appears that individual salvation is the entirety of Christian faith, and therefore there is no need to think about Christians’ responsibility to society” (Ibid., 29).

⁶² Further on this point, Ji writes: “This emphasis on morality reflects a combination of Christianity with Chinese cultural tradition. Historically we Chinese have placed great importance on ethics and morality, yet Confucianism, the traditional mainstream of our values and ethical system, appears ill-equipped to adapt to the demands of modernization. In this time of rapid change, people need to know good from bad, what has value and what does not. We believe that the emphasis on morality is one of the most important ways in which Christians can bear witness in society, and especially in Chinese society. However, we should be careful: if we only preach morality, we may water down Christianity until it becomes simply another moral theory” (Ibid., 29-30).

customs of agricultural society.⁶³ This is of course a helpful explanation. But I would argue that Chinese Christians' spiritual thirst for the word of God, as commonly reported by many observers and missionaries,⁶⁴ is one of the main reasons for such substantial sermons. In fact, Ji himself later makes a connection between the vitality of the Church and the preaching that its members receive: "we feel that the sermons at the center of our worship should not become too short, as an abundance of preaching is the key to ensuring the vitality of the Church. One of the principal reasons for the decline of some churches in America and Europe is that they do not have enough preaching."⁶⁵

Second, there is a greater use of quotations from Scripture in Chinese preaching. Preachers in the Chinese church place particular emphasis on the direct reading of and quoting from Scripture. Although most churches do not usually follow a lectionary reading, Ji observes that preachers have a habit of choosing a few texts for their sermon. "Two or three passages is quite normal, and four or five is fairly common. There was even one sermon which used no less than nine passages from the Bible as the basis of the sermon."⁶⁶ Furthermore, a Chinese sermon typically contains many Scripture references, from its title and outline to its exposition and conclusion. This is a style of sermon known in China as a "string-of-pearls" sermon. Despite some weaknesses that may accompany this excessive use of Scripture in preaching (e.g., "too many scripture quotations in a sermon can often obscure its main point"), Ji notes that

⁶³ Tai, "Preaching in the Church in China," 22. Furthermore, in the countryside, people sometimes need to walk for one or two hours to go to the neighboring village in order to participate in a worship service and listen to a sermon; it is only natural that they demand a long sermon, or sometimes multiple sermons.

⁶⁴ The reports and testimonies on this are abundant and can easily be found in books and on the internet. For an example, see "Bibles for China | Bringing God's Word to Rural China," *Bibles for China*, accessed April 2, 2021, <https://biblesforchina.org/>. It is also noteworthy that the phenomenon of longer sermons is a common feature for many Majority World churches.

⁶⁵ Tai, "Preaching in the Church in China," 23. Based on my personal observation, the length of sermons in China that Ji describes is similar to that in Indonesia. Indeed, a one-hour sermon is a standard practice in many Pentecostal churches in Indonesia, even in urban areas.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

[t]he increased use of the Bible primarily reflects the fact that for the preachers and Christians in China scriptural revelation is the principal authority for faith, and that the Bible is the highest standard in their lives. In this they are heirs to the principle upheld by Luther and other reformers, that is “Scripture Alone” (*Sola Scriptura*) and the exegetical method of “using the Bible to expound the Bible.”⁶⁷

Third, there is also a greater use of testimonies in Chinese preaching. Testimonies make up a large proportion of church sermons, especially in rural areas. In a sermon, it is often possible to hear three or four such testimonies, and sometimes even more. “These testimonies consist either of the preacher recounting his or her own experience of rebirth and salvation, some instance when brothers or sisters in the congregation received the grace of God, or else some other moving example from another church.”⁶⁸ According to Ji, the preference for utilizing detailed testimonial stories in the sermons—instead of propositional statements or logical arguments—reflects both the limited training that pastors receive as well as the generally practical-minded attitude of Chinese people. This might be true, but one can also argue that testimony is a subtle way of appropriating and sharing Scripture in a realistic narrative form.⁶⁹ For Chinese Christians, testimony is one of the most convincing and effective ways of bearing witness to the Word of God and is especially suited to congregations of a low educational level.⁷⁰

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 24.

⁶⁹ On this point, Harvey makes an instructive observation regarding Sung’s practices of testimony: “Reading through Sung’s diary, one notes that his testimony and those of his converts followed a pattern. Revival began in ‘earnest prayer’ that led to a period of intense introspection. Here individuals would ecstatically call upon the Spirit to ‘search their hearts for sin.’ Emotional confessions of sin were followed by petitions for divine intervention and purification. This emotional tide would crest with the reception of the Spirit and the experience of purification from sin. Testimony, then, would draw these steps into a narrative whole, and subsequent testimony would reinforce the pattern of a life transformed. In this way, lived experience took on narrative shape. The individual’s story was now the story of divine intervention and vice-versa. The validity and integrity of that testimony did not rest on propositional truth, but in the emotional discovery of a new life and a new identity in Christ that required vocalization” (Harvey, “Sermon, Story, and Song in the Inculturation of Christianity in China,” 151).

⁷⁰ This is *not* to say that testimonies, or preaching that is imbued with testimonies, are *only* suitable for uneducated people in China. I am just suggesting, based on Ji’s observation, that testimony is one of the key features of many Chinese Christian sermons because (1) it “fits” with the narrative framework of figural reading of Scripture and because (2) it is also consistent with the supernatural framework of ordinary Christians on the grassroots level. Consider Harvey’s astute comment on this (in relation to Sung’s preoccupation with testimony):

Fourth, there is frequent use of allegorical interpretation in Chinese preaching. Although Ji believes that the preacher needs to explain the scriptural text for the spiritual life of the hearers (he calls this “genuine allegorical interpretation” or simply “spiritual meaning”), he thinks that the allegorical reading that most Chinese preachers employ is misguided because the method “allows too much leeway for individual interpretations,” and is thus akin to the practice of eisegesis.⁷¹ Ji mentions John Sung and Jia Yuming as popular Chinese preachers in past generations who were fond of this method. But allegorical interpretation appears to be a popular method in the contemporary Chinese church as well. Ji offers his analysis of why this is the case:

One reason is that perhaps this technique has a special affinity for Chinese Culture. Due to the fact that Chinese writing is largely made up of ideographic elements, [the characters] have a certain symbolic [meaning]—it is possible for instance to analyze the character for sin/crime (*zui*) as consisting of “four wrongs” (*si + fei*). In the past there were people who told fortunes by analyzing Chinese characters. A second reason is the fact that preachers in the Church in China have not studied enough of Biblical history and language. While a few preachers may have the qualifications and opportunity to research different translations or commentaries, the great majority of preachers in churches at the grassroots level have neither the time nor the opportunity to do this.⁷²

As is made clear in this quotation, Ji’s observation is based on the presumption that allegorical reading is a bad exegetical practice. While I disagree with this presumption, I think Ji makes two interesting points in his analysis above. First, allegorical reading has a special

“Themes in Sung’s use of testimony reveal many of the distinguishing marks that have come to define Chinese Christianity. Much to the chagrin of some religious officials, Christianity in China is both revivalist and evangelistic. Appeals to supernatural power and the experience and testimony of spiritual ecstasy are common. . . . By its very nature, testimony is the articulation of spiritual intervention to transform the person and the situation. In the minds of the faithful, it is not mere psychological comfort or philosophical recognition of the need for the divine, but appeal to what they regard as real spiritual power that transforms potential tragedy into triumph. Thus, attempts to remove ‘superstition’ in the church by religious and government officials have largely fallen upon deaf ears in China. Treating this simply as a matter of education versus ignorance does not get at the deep-seated influence that testimony has had on belief and action in the life of everyday believers in China” (Ibid., 152).

⁷¹ Tai, “Preaching in the Church in China,” 26.

⁷² Ibid. The example that Ji mentions here is technically called “Chinese figurism,” which I have already touched upon in the previous chapter on Nee’s hermeneutics. For more on figurism, see Collani, “Figurism,” 668–676.

affinity with Chinese people. One reason why the allegorical method is popular in China is because it fits seamlessly with certain Chinese textual and philosophical traditions that assume the symbolic nature of Chinese characters. This means that for those who are accustomed to this way of reading a text, an allegorical reading of Scripture is the most natural and sensible option to be employed.

Second, Ji also mentions that many preachers in China read Scripture allegorically because they “have not studied enough Biblical history and language.” Put differently, it is because most Chinese preachers have not been introduced to textual criticism and other historical-critical approaches. They still operate, in other words, within the *precritical* world of reading Scripture. Although some may criticize this approach as primitive and naïve, others argue that it is simply natural and indigenous. If the Enlightenment, with its influence on modern biblical studies, is indeed a predominantly Western phenomenon and arguably has had a detrimental effect on Christian faith in the West, then there is no good reason to impose Enlightenment historical-critical approaches to the Bible on Chinese Christians. Furthermore, given the gravitational shift that is happening in global Christianity today, where Christianity is declining in the North while growing in the South, one might ask whether the transition from a precritical to a critical reading of Scripture is a desirable move in the first place. In any case, this brief analysis of the practice of preaching and interpretation in China confirms my initial thesis that many, perhaps even a majority of, grassroots Christians in China are figural readers of some sort—people who approach Scripture in a manner similar to that of Nee and Sung. We now turn our attention to Chinese Christians in the diaspora.

2. The Life of Scripture in the Chinese Diaspora in Indonesia

As indicated previously, John Sung's ministry has been vital to the life of Chinese churches in Southeast Asia, as well as in China.⁷³ This is particularly true for Singapore, Malaysia, and Indonesia, where Sung's revivalist meetings drew large audiences and attracted media coverage.⁷⁴ Sung's strategic method of forming evangelistic groups as a follow-up to his revival meetings was one of the main reasons for his lasting influence in those countries.⁷⁵ The inclusion of women participants, both in his revival meetings and the evangelistic groups, was another reason for his influence, especially given the marginal status that women have in Chinese culture and society.⁷⁶ The healing services that sometimes accompanied his meetings were also a factor.⁷⁷ But, as I have suggested in the previous chapter, his preaching ministry itself—with his dramatic style, his creative use of stage props, illustrations, songs, and testimonies, as well as his peculiar way of exegeting Scripture—was arguably the main factor in his popularity.⁷⁸ Sung's figural preaching of Scripture, in other words, captured the popular

⁷³ See the previous chapter on John Sung.

⁷⁴ See Poon, "Introduction: The Theological Locus of Christian Movements in Southeast Asia"; Hwa Yung, "Sung Revivals in Southeast Asia," ed. Scott W. Sunquist, *A Dictionary of Asian Christianity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2001). However, reports on Sung's formative influence in other Southeast Asian countries are also available. For Thailand, see Son, "Christian Revival in the Presbyterian Church of Thailand between 1900 and 1941." For Vietnam, see Vince Le, *Vietnamese Evangelicals and Pentecostalism: The Politics of Divine Intervention*, electronic resource, *Global Pentecostal and charismatic studies volume 29* (Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2019), 57, 123. Le also mentions Watchman Nee as an influential figure in Vietnamese evangelical and Pentecostal churches. For the Philippines, see the Missions Pulse's video interview with David Lim: David Joannes, *China's John Sung Revival Fueled David Lim's Life Ministry*, YouTube Videos (Missions Pulse, 2019), accessed July 17, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZmREptZzE5Q&t=93s>.

⁷⁵ See Terence Chong and Daniel P. S. Goh, "Asian Pentecostalism: Revivals, Mega-Churches, and Social Engagement," in *Routledge Handbook of Religions in Asia*, ed. Bryan S. Turner and Oscar Salemink (Abingdon: Routledge, 2014), 402. They write, "Sung... was not simply an itinerant revivalist preacher. He was an organizer who introduced radical new social practices and self-reliant grassroots evangelical bands into a landscape dominated by Western missionary patrons and their Chinese pastoral clients. The care of the self was at once communitarian and democratic. The Christian subject was torn from the oversight of pastors and placed into pastoral bands of self-regulating spiritual nomads. His revivalism threatened established missionary churches by being charismatic, evangelistic and indigenizing, especially when these churches were settling into middle-class respectability."

⁷⁶ For more on this, see Daryl R. Ireland, "Finding a Home: John Sung's Evangelistic Bands as the Location for a New Female Identity," in *Handbook of Popular Spiritual Movements in Malaysia, Singapore, and Indonesia*, ed. Michael Nai-Chiu Poon and John Roxborough (Singapore: Trinity Theological College, 2015).

⁷⁷ See Ireland, "The Legacy of John Sung," 354.

⁷⁸ Other scholars who in general also share this judgment, albeit for perhaps different reasons, include: Ireland, "John Sung"; Lim, "The Life and Ministry of John Sung"; Kraemer, "Part One: Henrik Kraemer on John

imagination of his Chinese audience in those countries. While he produced no writings of his own nor did he create any organization under his name, the impact of Sung's revival ministry upon Chinese churches in Southeast Asia continues to the present day. Thus, although his name is usually absent in academic discourse on Asian theology or handbooks of Asian biblical interpretation, Sung is still very much alive in the memories of many older leaders of Chinese churches in Southeast Asia. Many of these leaders would name Sung's revivalist meetings as one of the formative events in their church ministry or even their own journey to Christian faith.⁷⁹

The influence of Watchman Nee on Chinese communities outside China is also immense, although it took a very different route than that of Sung. While there is a record of Nee accompanying his mother on a preaching tour in Malaysia and Singapore in 1924, Nee never really exerted his influence through mass evangelistic meetings like Sung. His influence rather came through his many co-workers⁸⁰ and his prolific literature ministry.⁸¹ By the time

Sung"; Andaya, "'Come Home, Come Home!'—Chineseness, John Sung and Theatrical Evangelism in 1930s Southeast Asia."

⁷⁹ See, e.g. Tow, *John Sung My Teacher*; Michael Nai-Chiu Poon, "Introduction," in *John Sung: My Testimony*, ed. Michael Nai-Chiu Poon, trans. Ernest Tipton (Singapore: Centre for the Study of Christianity in Asia, 2011); Harvey, "Sermon, Story, and Song in the Inculturation of Christianity in China," 140. Moreover, this judgment also confirms my own personal observations of Chinese church leaders in Indonesia and Singapore. These leaders often mention that their churches or institutions were born out of the revival trips of John Sung or his co-workers. This will be discussed in more detail below, in the sub-section on Peter Wongso and Stephen Tong.

⁸⁰ Concerning this, Liu Yi notes: "Early in the 1940s, Nee developed a blueprint of church building in China. However, the war and turmoil in the church prevented him from implementing his program. In 1948, he began to plan the evangelization of China. The new meeting hall in Shanghai and the training in Guling Mountain of Fujian province were symbols of a coming revival. He even traveled to Southeast Asia during this period. But, as the civil war between the Nationalists and the Communists was ending, he saw no hope for this great dream. Nee had to devise another plan, which was to send one of his most intimate co-workers to explore development overseas while he himself chose to stay with his followers in mainland China as a martyr." See Liu Yi, "Globalization of Chinese Christianity: A Study of Watchman Nee and Witness Lee's Ministry," *Asia Journal of Theology* 30, no. 1 (2016): 100.

⁸¹ E.g. Chang, "'The Spiritual Human Is Discerned By No One': An Intellectual Biography of Watchman Nee," 133–134: "On this first trip, Nee probably distributed his writings, because the Southeast Asian congregations began to order his publications. The very first issue of *The Christian* included fees not only for Chinese readers but also for overseas subscribers: one US dollar or two shillings six pence for a twelve-issue subscription. Likewise, the first query in *The Christian's* inaugural 'Question and Answer Box' was from 'Huang' in Singapore, who asked about the apocalyptic schedule of the book of Daniel."

Nee was arrested in 1952, there were over thirty Local Churches⁸² in several Southeast Asian countries, including the Philippines, Thailand, Malaysia, Singapore, and Indonesia, that were directly or indirectly associated with Nee's ministry.⁸³ Reports abound about the success of many of Nee's associates outside China, such as Simon Meek in the Philippines, Faithful Luke in Singapore, Malaysia, and Indonesia, and Wei Guangxi (K. H. Weigh) in Hong Kong.⁸⁴ But the most significant figure in this group is undoubtedly Nee's closest colleague and disciple Witness Lee, who started his ministry in Taiwan before moving to Anaheim, USA, and from there extended his influence all over the world.⁸⁵ While to date there are no exact statistics available, in 2010 it was estimated that there were about 3,500 Local Churches and 500,000 baptized members outside mainland China.⁸⁶ The written works of Nee and Lee are still widely circulated today in many languages, whilst Local Church conferences and programs for

⁸² As mentioned in Chapter 2, the ecclesial movement associated with Nee is variously called "Christian Assembly," "Little Flock," or simply "Local Church." I use these terms interchangeably, but in this chapter, I deliberately use the term "Local Church" (or "Local Churches" when referring to many Local Church congregations), because it is the term used by Nee's followers in Indonesia.

⁸³ Lee, *Watchman Nee: A Seer of the Divine Revelation in the Present Age*, 277.

⁸⁴ See Chang, "'The Spiritual Human Is Discerned By No One': An Intellectual Biography of Watchman Nee," 239; Kinnear, *Against the Tide*.

⁸⁵ On Lee's significant expansion of the Local Church ministry outside China, see the following comment from Chang: "Lee quickly gained a significant audience, drawing thousands of followers from all across the United States. The new Christian Assemblies in the United States were disproportionately young and drawn from the evangelical subculture. As in China, many of them came from college campuses. Nee and Lee's extensive production of literature proved especially attractive to educated Christians. Just as Orange County, California was developing into a base for American and international evangelicalism, Lee made his own headquarters in Anaheim. There, he continued to develop his ideas, adding new teachings and practices to the tradition he had inherited from Nee. Lee also directed the international spread of the local churches and their printed publications. Largely due to Lee's influence, Christian Assemblies with indigenous leadership can now be found on all six continents and in all fifty states and Nee and Lee's writings have been translated into dozens of languages" (Chang, "'The Spiritual Human Is Discerned By No One': An Intellectual Biography of Watchman Nee," 240).

⁸⁶ These figures come from Liu Yi, who records: "By the end of the first decade of the twenty-first century, it is estimated that there are about 173 churches in Taiwan with two hundred thousand baptized believers, among whom 120,000 are keeping normal contacts with the church and about 60,000 are participating in the church affairs regularly and actively. There are 60,000 baptized believers in the Philippines, 3,500 in Singapore, 11,000 in Malaysia, 1,500 in Thailand, 2,800 in Hong Kong, 3,000 in Japan, 50,000 in South Korea, 4,500 in India, 80 in Sri Lanka, 50 in Saipan, 1,500 in Vietnam, and 160 in Cambodia. In South America, there are about 600 churches and 20,000 believers; there are 1,500 in Ghana, 800 in Nigeria, and 200 in South Africa. There are about 500 in Australia and 1,100 in New Zealand. In total, there are about 3,500 churches and 500,000 believers" (Yi, "Globalization of Chinese Christianity: A Study of Watchman Nee and Witness Lee's Ministry," 110). Yi himself drew this number, in part, from Zhuo Zunhong, Zhuo Xiuhuan, and Lin Xiuhua, *Jidu Yu Zhaohui: Li Changshou Xiansheng Xingyi Fangtanlu [Christ and Church: An Oral Record of Witness Lee's Journey]* (Taipei: National Institute of History, 2010).

leadership training are conducted regularly around the globe.⁸⁷ Given the wide-ranging influence of their ministry, members in each Local Church comprise people of local origin rather than exclusively Chinese immigrants.⁸⁸ This is another feature that distinguishes Nee's legacy from Sung's: whereas Sung's intensive influence outside China mainly extends to the Chinese diaspora in Southeast Asia, Nee's influence is more extensive both geographically and ethnically. I will now turn to a discussion of the influence of Nee and Sung on the Chinese diaspora in Indonesia, whilst surveying ways that Chinese Indonesian Christians engage with Scripture.

Scripture Reading in Chinese Indonesian Churches

With more than 126 Local Churches and 14,000 active members in 2015,⁸⁹ the Local Church movement in Indonesia is alive and well.⁹⁰ In addition to the weekly Sunday gathering, the members of Local Churches meet for Bible study mid-weekly and have various levels of training in regional, national, and international contexts—all of which are usually centered around detailed exposition on assigned biblical books. This exposition, of course, closely follows the expository teachings of Nee and Lee: using their own translation of the Bible, which

⁸⁷ See the numerous recent conferences and training sessions of the Local Church (or its equivalent) that have been catalogued in a blog post by a Local Church member: Stefan Misaras, "Conferences in the Church Life in 2020," *A God-Man in Christ*, n.d., accessed July 14, 2020, <https://www.agodman.com/blog/conferences-church-life-2020/>.

⁸⁸ Yi, "Globalization of Chinese Christianity: A Study of Watchman Nee and Witness Lee's Ministry," 110.

⁸⁹ These numbers are taken from the official Local Church's video presentation in 2015. See *The Lord's Recovery in Indonesia and FTTI-IFBC 2015*, YouTube Videos, 2015, starting minutes 7:30, accessed July 15, 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HVyovBRT_nw. This was an opening video for the *International FTT (Full-Time Training) Blending Conference* in Jakarta in 2015. As of June 2020, the numbers have risen to about 145 local churches and 17,000 members, based on my personal conversation with one of the leaders of the Local Church in Jakarta.

⁹⁰ There are records that indicate the Local Church movement entered Indonesia in 1936 or 1937. See Witness Lee, "The Lord's Recovery in Southeast Asia," *Ministry Digest vol. 1 no. 3*, October 2019. See also the Local Church Indonesia's version of its history in this video: *The Lord's Recovery in Indonesia and FTTI-IFBC 2015*.

is called *The Recovery Version*,⁹¹ and basing their interpretation from Lee's Biblical commentary, *The Life-study of the Bible*.⁹² Local Church members typically are very conversant in Scripture and are fond of quoting Nee's and/or Lee's treatment of any given passage. In fact, the curriculum of the two-year full-time training program for church workers basically consists of two textbooks: the Bible, and the works of Nee and Lee.⁹³ Even so, this is not simply a form of indoctrination of Local Church members. Although they are trained to read through the hermeneutical lenses of their founding fathers, members are nevertheless encouraged to read Scripture for themselves and judge, at least in theory, even Nee and Lee's teachings, treating Scripture as the final authority.⁹⁴

In reality, of course, Local Church members faithfully follow the scriptural interpretations of Nee and Lee. But more than just parroting Nee and Lee's commentaries on scriptural texts, they are also, and more importantly, trained to *see* Scripture in a particular way, to *employ* certain hermeneutical keys, and to *exercise* several scriptural practices peculiar to the movement. Most essentially, Scripture is to be seen as spiritual in nature, consisting of three parts in accordance with the divine tripartite design of human beings, with the spirit acting as the locus of communion between the human and the divine. Scripture thus ought to be approached in a spiritual manner by a spiritual person through spiritual exegesis. This

⁹¹ The New Testament of this translation is available online: "The Holy Bible: Recovery Version," accessed July 15, 2020, <https://www.recoveryversion.bible/>.

⁹² The 38 books of *The Life-study of the Bible* can be accessed online here: Witness Lee, "Books on the Life-Study of the Bible by Witness Lee," *Living Stream Ministry*, accessed July 15, 2020, <https://www.ministrybooks.org/life-studies.cfm>.

⁹³ There are many regional centers that offer this two-year training program. However, the most rigorous program is the one at their headquarters in Anaheim. See "Full-Time Training Curriculum," *Full-Time Training in Anaheim*, accessed July 15, 2020, <https://www.ftta.org/prospective-trainees/life-ftta/curriculum.php>. For a video introduction to the FTT (Full-Time Training) in Indonesia, see *The Lord's Recovery in Indonesia and FTTI-IFBC 2015*, starting at minute 3:50.

⁹⁴ In addition to their commitment to the Reformation principle of *Sola Scriptura*, the academic presence of their journal *Affirmation & Critique* is also a testament to their openness to engaging with alternative views in a constructive dialogue. See "Counterpoint," Online Journal, *Affirmation & Critique: A Journal of Christian Thought*, accessed July 15, 2020, <https://www.affcrit.com/counterpoint.html>.

hermeneutical framework is then accompanied by and embodied in scriptural *practices* that are regularly exercised by the members.

One practice that is peculiar to this group is the so-called *Doa-Baca Firman*, which literally means “reading-praying the Scripture.” This can be perceived as a form of prayer or a form of reading Scripture. But it is perhaps best interpreted as both: the practice of praying *and* reading Scripture simultaneously. The practice typically proceeds in the following pattern: selecting a small portion of scriptural text (usually only one or two verses); reading them out loud repeatedly; adding “the calling on the name of the Lord” at the beginning of the reading, which practically transforms the reading into a prayer; personalizing the reading-praying by modifying certain parts of the text (for instance, by substituting the text’s pronouns with the reader’s own name); and ending the practice by offering a prayer of consecration related to the message of the text. In each of these “steps,” the reader takes time to read out loud while emphasizing different parts/words of the text and speaking in an increasingly loud voice. Indeed, at times the reader sounds closer to *shouting* Scripture than reading or praying it.⁹⁵ This is linked with Lee’s teaching of “the calling on the name of the Lord,” which is integral to the Local Church’s worship and spiritual practices.⁹⁶ But in this context, it is scriptural text, as well

⁹⁵ Interestingly, this part of the practice is sometimes associated with the infamous “Christian” group in China called “the Shouters,” which is commonly regarded as a sect and is known by its noisy and disorderly practice of shouting Bible verses in public. Witness Lee’s teaching of “the calling on the name of the Lord” is sometimes accused of being responsible for the genesis of the Shouters, although Lee himself rejected the accusation. In the public’s eyes, however, the association between the Local Church and the Shouters remains a contested issue. One observer, for instance, called the Local Church by “the other name” (i.e., the U.S. name) of the Shouters in China. See Peregrine de Vigo, “Chinese Cults, Sects, and Heresies,” *ChinaSource*, last modified March 13, 2015, accessed July 15, 2020, <https://www.chinasource.org/resource-library/articles/chinese-cults-sects-and-heresies/>. In another entry on the same website, however, the two “organizations” are clearly differentiated, with the Local Church deemed orthodox Christian, and the Shouters as a heterodox cult. See ChinaSource Team, “Cults and Christianity in China,” *ChinaSource*, last modified March 31, 2015, accessed July 15, 2020, <https://www.chinasource.org/resource-library/chinese-church-voices/cults-and-christianity-in-china/>. I tend to agree with the latter assessment, while entertaining the possibility of an unintended connection between the two religious groups.

⁹⁶ See Witness Lee, *Calling on the Name of the Lord* (Anaheim: Living Stream Ministry, 1991), accessed July 16, 2020, <https://www.ministrybooks.org/books.cfm?id=2358>.

as the name of the Lord Jesus, that is being read/shouted aloud in an almost mantra-like manner. Despite its eccentricity, the practice allows the readers to search, memorize, and internalize the text in a way that helps them meditate on, pray about, and enjoy it—elements that are deemed essential for Nee’s spiritual hermeneutics of engaging Scripture, as we recall.⁹⁷ I have also suggested that this hermeneutical approach is similar to the ancient practice of *Lectio Divina*, even though the latter does not seem to presuppose a trichotomous metaphysics of Scripture like the former. Indeed, one Local Church teacher likens the practice of *Doa-Baca Firman* with that of eating food⁹⁸—a metaphor that was often employed by medieval practitioners of *Lectio Divina*. It should also be noted that the *Doa-Baca Firman* is exercised not only in private but also often in groups. When this is practiced in community, the “steps” described above for individual practice are still in place, although there are times when individual readers take turns to lead the reading-praying of the text while the rest participate by responding, or “shouting back,” with affirmative words such as “amen,” “yes, Lord Jesus,” and the like.⁹⁹ This will naturally create a participatory atmosphere which in turn feeds into the dynamic of the practice. The communal aspect of this *Doa-Baca Firman* practice is another feature that distinguishes it from *Lectio Divina*, which is mostly an individual exercise.

As mentioned, the practice of *Doa-Baca Firman*, at least as described above, is peculiar to Local Church circles. The practice is hardly ever observed, or even approved, by other Indonesian Christians. But the main thrust of Nee’s approach to Scripture can still be discerned in many Chinese Indonesian Christian groups, which are predominantly evangelical and/or

⁹⁷ See chapter 2 on Nee’s hermeneutical keys.

⁹⁸ Audy Efraim, *MAKAN TUHAN: Doa-baca Firman (EATING THE LORD: Scripture Reading-Praying)*, YouTube Videos, 2020, accessed July 16, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=onGulF2EpBA>.

⁹⁹ For a video example of this practice in a group context, see Audy Efraim, *Praktek Doa Baca Firman (The Practice of Scripture Praying)*, 2020, starting at 6:44, accessed July 15, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9ceXDfAmgiU>.

Pentecostal in nature. I will provide more specific examples below, but some general observations can be briefly mentioned here. Chinese Indonesian churches generally have a high regard for the Bible as God's word; they believe it is infallible and authoritative for Christian teaching and Christian life. They believe that reading Scripture requires certain spiritual qualities and results in a Christlike character. While they are quite receptive to a grammatical-historical approach to Scripture, many of them still practice forms of spiritual interpretation. Regardless of the methods employed, they maintain that Scripture contains deeper spiritual meanings that are relevant to their life as Christians. In terms of scriptural practices, they observe standard evangelical spiritual disciplines, such as the practice of daily individual or family devotional time centred around Scripture reading, weekly group Bible studies that often use inductive study methods, the practice of Scripture memorization, and worship services that feature a long expository type of preaching.¹⁰⁰ These practices are all in line with Nee's approach to Scripture. It is hard to tell what extent *non-Local Church* Christians have been influenced by Nee through his many books that are available in the Indonesian language. But the vast majority of Chinese Indonesian Christians certainly share many similarities concerning their high view on Scripture and some of their scriptural practices (bar the *Doa-Baca Firman* practice).

While Nee's direct influence in Indonesia is limited to Local Church circles, Sung's influence reaches to the broader Chinese Christian community in Indonesia.¹⁰¹ As indicated above, there are several indigenous Chinese churches that owe their existence or growth to the

¹⁰⁰ These practices all can be found in both urban and rural areas in Indonesia, regardless of denomination. Although the subject of this study is specifically Chinese Indonesian churches and Christians, the above scriptural understanding and practices can also be applied, to some extent and with some qualifications, to the non-Chinese Indonesian churches and Christians as well.

¹⁰¹ See Jan S. Aritonang and Karel A. Steenbrink, "The Spectacular Growth of the Third Stream: The Evangelicals and Pentecostals," in *A History of Christianity in Indonesia*, ed. Jan S. Aritonang and Karel A. Steenbrink (Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2008), 873.

ministry of Sung, thanks to his many visits to Indonesia in 1930s.¹⁰² The reports of some Dutch missionaries in Indonesia at the time also suggest the lasting impact of Sung's ministry in the country.¹⁰³ His influence can also be traced through several influential people and institutions that have been formative in the development of the current state of Chinese Christian communities in Indonesia. I will discuss two significant figures below: the Wesleyan leader Peter Wongso and the Reformed preacher Stephen Tong. In what follows, I will briefly introduce each of them before offering a survey of their approaches to Scripture. At the risk of oversimplification, I would suggest that Wongso and Tong's approaches serve as adequate illustrations of the ways in which many Chinese Indonesian evangelicals read Scripture. A brief discussion on the Chinese Indonesian Pentecostal approach to Scripture will follow.

Peter Wongso

Peter Wongso was born in the Chinese province of Fujian in 1931. His family migrated to Medan, Indonesia, while he was in his youth. Wongso converted to Christianity through the evangelistic crusade of Andrew Gih¹⁰⁴ in 1951 in the Methodist Church in Medan. As

¹⁰² In addition to the works cited in footnote 65 above, see Michael Nai-Chiu Poon, "Menafsir Warisan John Sung Di Asia Tenggara (Interpreting John Sung's Legacy in Southeast Asia)," in *Menerobos Batas - Merobohkan Prasangka*, ed. Pual Budi Kleden and Robert Mirsel, trans. Yosef Maria Florisan, vol. 1: Pendasaran dan Praksis Dialog (Maumere: Penerbit Ledalero, 2011). The mere fact that this piece from Poon is translated into the Indonesian language is a testimony to Sung's significant legacy in Indonesia. See also a four-part series of videos about Sung's life and ministry, which were created as part of the celebration of the formative ministry of Sung in GKA Gloria church, one of the largest Chinese churches in Surabaya: *John Sung*, YouTube Videos, 4 vols. (Surabaya: GKA Gloria Kota Satelit, 2017), accessed July 17, 2020, https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PL4iuJ_Bc_fGItLWDpDrRyBd5pnkHza1L3. For moving testimonies (in Mandarin but with Indonesian subtitles) from those who have met Sung personally and benefited from his ministry, see part 4 of the video playlist above, starting at 4:15ff.

¹⁰³ See Kraemer, "Part One: Henrik Kraemer on John Sung"; Baarbé, "Part Two: Cornelia Baarbé on John Sung."

¹⁰⁴ Andrew Gih (1901-1985) is sometimes also called Andrew Ji, from his Chinese name Ji Zhi-wen. For examples of his work, see Andrew Gih, *Twice Born--and Then? The Autobiography and Messages of Rev. Andrew Gih*, ed. J. Edwin Orr (London: Marshall, Morgan & Scott, 1954); Andrew Gih, *Into God's Family: A Fascinating Account of the Lives and Work of Members of the Famous Bethel Evangelistic Bands and Some of Their Inspiring Messages* (London: Marshall, Morgan & Scott, 1955). For a short dictionary entry on him, see Peter Wongso, "Andrew Ji," ed. Scott W. Sunquist, *A Dictionary of Asian Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 418–419. The fact that Gih's entry in the dictionary is written by Wongso testifies to the influence of the former on the latter.

previously mentioned, Gih worked with Sung in the *Bethel Evangelistic Band*, one of the most popular preaching teams in Republican China,¹⁰⁵ with Gih serving as its appointed leader despite Sung's more charismatic influence within and without the group.¹⁰⁶ Like Sung before him, Gih traveled to Indonesia several times between 1950 and 1952 to conduct evangelistic meetings in several big cities such as Medan, Jakarta, and Bandung. As well as leading these evangelistic crusades, Gih also founded a local Chinese mission organization which eventually birthed a Bible seminary and a Chinese-based church in 1952.¹⁰⁷ Upon his conversion, Wongso enrolled in the seminary Gih founded, which is called *Seminari Alkitab Asia Tenggara* (Southeast Asia Bible Seminary), or more commonly known as SAAT. Wongso became the first student at SAAT and earned his Bachelor of Theology in 1955 before completing an M.A. and a Th.D. at Fuller Theological Seminary (1976) and Trinity Theological Seminary in Indiana (1981), respectively. He served as a SAAT faculty member from 1958 and was the president of SAAT from 1964 to 1980, whilst serving as guest lecturer in numerous Bible colleges in China, Taiwan, and Southeast Asia.¹⁰⁸ After his retirement in the 1990s, Wongso focused his ministry on Chinese-based seminaries and churches in Australia,¹⁰⁹ where he now resides. But his major

¹⁰⁵ Xi, *Redeemed by Fire*, 133.

¹⁰⁶ As hinted in the previous chapter, Gih and Sung's relationship was a complex one. But suffice it to say that they mutually influenced each other: Sung inherited Gih's polished holiness approach to revival, whereas Gih absorbed Sung's fervent evangelistic zeal along with his use of Scripture. Gih also acknowledged Sung's formative ministry to the Chinese diaspora in Indonesia. See e.g. Andrew Gih, *Revival Follows Revolution in Indonesia* (London: Lakeland, 1973), 23.

¹⁰⁷ The seminary's initial name was: *Madrasah Alkitab Asia Tenggara* (MAAT), founded in Bandung in 1952. In 1954, the seminary moved to Malang and subsequently changed its name to *Seminari Alkitab Asia Tenggara* (SAAT). The local Chinese-based church founded by Gih is called *Gereja Kristen Kalam Kudus* (Holy Word Christian Church).

¹⁰⁸ For the full list of his ministries and published work, see Daniel L. Lukito, Amy Kho, and Andreas Hauw, eds., *Hamba yang Melayani: Sebuah Bunga Rampai dalam Rangka HUT ke-80 Pdt. Dr. Peter Wongso (The Serving Servant: A festschrift for Peter Wongso)* (Malang: Seminari Alkitab Asia Tenggara, 2011), 303–305.

¹⁰⁹ For instance, Wongso served as minister in West Sydney Chinese Christian Church for more than seven years. See "Our Story | WSCCC," *West Sydney Chinese Christian Church (WSCCC)*, accessed July 20, 2020, <https://wsccc.org.au/our-story/>. As for seminaries in Australia, see the website of Chinese Theological College Australia, where Wongso is named as the Principal Emeritus. "Our Team – 澳洲華人教牧神學院," *Chinese Theological College Australia (CTCA)*, accessed July 20, 2020, <https://www.ctca.edu.au/our-team/?lang=en>.

influence on Chinese Christian communities was certainly his long-term leadership and teaching ministry at SAAT, which was and still is one of the largest evangelical seminaries in Indonesia.¹¹⁰

Despite his influence, to date there is no academic work that studies Wongso's works or his legacy. This is partly due to the language barrier, as his works are only available either in Mandarin or in Bahasa Indonesia (the official language of Indonesia).¹¹¹ But this is also because the nature of his influence is subtle, as he formed many Chinese Indonesian pastors and leaders through seminary education. His best-known published works are perhaps those on the subject of pastoral ministry and his commentary on the book of Revelation.¹¹² Among his former students and in SAAT circles, he is known for his Arminian-Wesleyan theological outlook and his often-allegorical interpretation of Scripture, among other things. In any case, Wongso is a

¹¹⁰ In the interests of scholarly full disclosure, I must mention that I currently work at SAAT as a faculty member (since August 2019). SAAT is one of the largest and oldest Chinese-based evangelical seminaries in Indonesia. To date, it has produced more than 1,300 alumni who have served across Indonesia and in other parts of the world. While it is historically a Chinese-based seminary, SAAT now accepts all ethnicities as students and faculty members. For its official website, see "Sekolah Tinggi Teologi SAAT," *Seminari Alkitab Asia Tenggara* (*Southeast Asia Bible Seminary*), accessed July 22, 2020, <https://seabs.ac.id/>.

Besides SAAT, Wongso's ministry in Indonesia was also influential in *Gereja Kristen Kalam Kudus* (Holy Word Christian Church), a Chinese Indonesian church that Gih founded, as mentioned above. This church now has more than 34 independent churches and 38 mission posts across Indonesia, with around 18,000 members. This number is taken from personal correspondence with Mr. Bambang Wiyanto, an ex-general secretary of this church. For more on this church, see their official website: "Kalam Kudus Indonesia," accessed July 21, 2020, <https://kalamkudusindonesia.org/>.

¹¹¹ Beside his written works, Wongso also preached quite regularly up until recently. For a YouTube channel that has many videos of Wongso's sermons (in Mandarin) preached in Chinese churches in Australia, see *Firman Allah* (*God's Word*), YouTube Channel, n.d., accessed July 21, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/user/firmanallah/videos>.

¹¹² For the former, see Peter Wongso, *Theologia Penggembalaan* (*Pastoral Theology*) (Malang: Seminari Alkitab Asia Tenggara, 1991); Peter Wongso, *Obrolan Seorang Gembala* (*Shepherd's Table Talk*) (Malang: Seminari Alkitab Asia Tenggara, 1995). For the latter, see Peter Wongso, *Eksposisi Doktrin Alkitab Kitab Wahyu* (*Exposition of the Biblical Doctrines of the Book of Revelation*) (Malang: Seminari Alkitab Asia Tenggara, 1996). For an example of a rare scholar who has studied Wongso's work on the book of Revelation, see Antoninus King Wai Siew, *The War Between the Two Beasts and the Two Witnesses: A Chiastic Reading of Revelation 11:1-14:5* (London: T&T Clark, 2005).

student of the whole Scripture, as evidenced in his lecture notes that encompass many books of the Old and the New Testaments which he taught for years at SAAT.¹¹³

While he taught many subjects on the books of the Bible, Wongso was not a typical Bible scholar. His formal training was in theology and missiology, although he always saw Scripture as integral to those disciplines. The hermeneutics handbook that he wrote shows his familiarity with the history of interpretation and the standard discussions on modern biblical scholarship, including the challenge that higher criticism poses to his evangelical faith in the authority of Scripture. While he is sometimes apologetic and thus provides the usual arguments about the reliability of the Bible, Wongso almost always resorts to the primacy of faith and the role of the Holy Spirit in the formation of scriptural authority for Christians. He basically adopts evangelical grammatical-historical methods in interpreting Scripture, even as he makes ample room for typological and allegorical interpretation. Although he speaks about finding the intention of the biblical authors as the primary task of exegesis, Wongso also emphasizes utilizing as many scriptural references as possible—regardless of their various human writers—to interpret a single passage of Scripture. He is clearly an advocate of viewing the unity of the whole Scripture as God’s single word, and often argues for its coherence. The focal point of his exegesis is Christological and tropological, marked by his practical and pastoral orientation to showing the usefulness of Scripture for Christian ministry and personal growth.¹¹⁴

Because Wongso believes that the whole of Scripture is God’s word, and that God’s word is always a revelation about himself and his will for his church, Wongso maintains that

¹¹³ He has published more than seven lecture notes on biblical books in Indonesian and several more in Chinese. Biblical books he taught include Ezekiel, Psalms, Numbers, the Gospel of John, 1 Corinthians, Hebrews, and Revelation. These lecture notes are available in the library of SAAT, Malang.

¹¹⁴ See Peter Wongso and George Sanusi, *Hermeneutics: Ilmu Penafsiran Alkitab (Hermeneutics: Studies of Biblical Interpretation)* (Malang: Seminari Alkitab Asia Tenggara, 1983).

every book and part of the scriptures are edifying for theological knowledge and spiritual training. His detailed exposition of the Book of Numbers, for instance, is entitled *Latihan bagi Umat Allah: Pendidikan Teologi dalam Kitab Bilangan (Training God's People: Theological Education in the Book of Numbers)*.¹¹⁵ In it, Wongso outlines a sort of comprehensive theological curriculum for God's people, centring around the nature of God and the identity of the people described in Numbers. He is at pains to show that this odd ancient book of Israel's history is very much theological and practical at the same time. The underlying assumption behind Wongso's approach seems to be that the people of God in the past (i.e. Israel) are somehow the people of God today (i.e. the Church). Thus, Numbers is just as much a book for the Church today as it was for ancient Israel in the past. Furthermore, Wongso draws freely from many other passages—from the Old and New Testaments—to explain his reading, confident that the whole Scripture came from one source, talks about one subject matter, and is intended for one people. In addition to this conviction about the nature of Scripture and its unity, Wongso has another reason for his Scripture-interprets-Scripture practice: he believes that God's revelation is complete in itself and thus, has an internally coherent nature.¹¹⁶ Therefore, he encourages students to read and re-read the whole of Scripture (or the entirety of the particular book of Scripture under study) as a unified whole, in order to find the basic pattern of God's revelation while discouraging a novel interpretation that has no basis in other parts of Scripture.

¹¹⁵ Peter Wongso, *Latihan bagi Umat Allah: Pendidikan Teologi dalam Kitab Bilangan (Training God's People: Theological Education in the Book of Numbers)* (Malang: Seminari Alkitab Asia Tenggara, 1992).

¹¹⁶ Peter Wongso, *Tafsiran Kitab Yehezkiel (Exposition on the Book of Ezekiel)* (Malang: Seminari Alkitab Asia Tenggara, 1998), 3–4.

Stephen Tong

Like Wongso, Stephen Tong was also born in the Chinese province of Fujian, albeit nine years after, in 1940. Upon the death of her husband and because of the hardships of the Chinese Communist Revolution era, Tong's mother brought Stephen and his siblings to Surabaya, Indonesia, in 1949. Tong converted to the Christian faith in 1957, also through the evangelistic preaching of Andrew Gih, and enrolled in SAAT seminary in 1960 for his theological training. Tong's bright mind and eloquent tongue were such that the board of SAAT persuaded him to join the faculty immediately after receiving his Bachelor of Theology in 1964. He served as a lecturer in theology and philosophy at the seminary until 1988, overlapping for most of the period with Wongso. While clearly a gifted teacher, Tong was (and is) more of a preacher than a lecturer, especially compared with Wongso. Even while serving as a faculty member of SAAT, Tong was almost always to be found traveling across Indonesia and around Asia, preaching at many churches and conducting revival meetings not unlike John Sung. Indeed, Tong speaks highly of Sung and often uses his life story as a brilliant example of what it means to offer one's life wholly to God's cause. Tong's strong presence at the seminary attracted many young minds, particularly those with a Reformed leaning.

In 1984, Tong started the Indonesian Reformed Evangelical Movement, whose purpose is twofold: to restore an understanding of theology based on God's revelation in Scripture in the tradition of John Calvin *and* to rekindle Christians with zeal for personal evangelism while at the same time mobilizing churches to practice mass evangelism.¹¹⁷ This was the beginning of a new era in Tong's ministry, in which he cut ties with SAAT and founded his own seminary,¹¹⁸

¹¹⁷ See "Sekilas Visi GRII," *Gereja Reformed Injili Indonesia (Indonesian Reformed Evangelical Church)*, accessed July 21, 2020, https://www.grii.org/visi_grii.

¹¹⁸ "STTRII » Sekolah Tinggi Teologi Reformed Injili Internasional," accessed July 21, 2020, <http://sttrii.ac.id/>.

church denomination,¹¹⁹ several research centers,¹²⁰ a Christian publishing house,¹²¹ television channel,¹²² a Christian school,¹²³ and most recently a Christian university.¹²⁴ Tong planted more than forty Reformed Evangelical churches throughout Indonesia and about thirty additional branches around the world, with a total membership of around 17,000 people.¹²⁵ Tong's main campus in Jakarta, hailed as the world's largest Chinese church building,¹²⁶ averages four thousand attendees each week. Tong also holds annual gospel rallies across the Indonesian archipelago, where he preaches to thousands in stadiums and other open-air settings.¹²⁷ To give an example of his grueling speaking schedule, the following is what Tong did on a *weekly basis* from the year 2000 until fairly recently: he delivered expository Bible teaching at "two Sunday services in Jakarta; every Sunday evening at two services in a church in Singapore; every Monday evening at a church in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia; every Tuesday night at a church in Hong Kong; and every Wednesday night at a church in Taipei, Taiwan."¹²⁸ According to one estimate, Tong has introduced twenty-nine million people to Christ over his sixty years of ministry.¹²⁹ Recordings of many of his lectures and sermons have been widely circulated throughout Chinese-speaking communities across Asia but particularly in China and Taiwan,

¹¹⁹ "GRII Pusat," accessed July 21, 2020, <https://sites.google.com/grii.org/pusat/home>.

¹²⁰ For instance, see "Reformed Center for Religion & Society," n.d., accessed July 21, 2020, <https://reformed-crs.org/>.

¹²¹ "Momentum Christian Literature," accessed July 21, 2020, <https://www.momentumcl.net/momentum/public/>.

¹²² "Reformed 21 TV," accessed July 21, 2020, <http://reformed21.tv/>.

¹²³ "Sekolah Kristen Calvin (Calvin Christian School)," accessed July 21, 2020, <https://www.sekolahkristencalvin.org/>.

¹²⁴ See "Calvin Institute of Technology – God's People for God's Glory," accessed July 21, 2020, <https://calvin.ac.id/>.

¹²⁵ These figures are partly drawn from personal conversation with one of the clergy members of GRII (*Gereja Reformed Injili Indonesia*) [Indonesian Reformed Evangelical Church], Hanny Saloh, of GRII Malang.

¹²⁶ See Chang-Yau Hoon, "Contested Religious Space in Jakarta: Negotiating Politics, Capital, and Ethnicity," in *Handbook of Religion and the Asian City: Aspiration and Urbanization in the Twenty-First Century*, ed. Peter van der Veer (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2015), 205.

¹²⁷ Jeffrey K. Jue, "The Gospel in Asia," *Ligonier Ministries*, n.d., accessed June 16, 2017, <http://www.ligonier.org/learn/articles/gospel-asia/>.

¹²⁸ Paul Schwarz and Samuel Larsen, "Ministry and Leadership," *Reformed Theological Seminary*, Fall 2009, 9, <http://www.rts.edu/Site/Resources/M-L/issues/ML-Fall-2009.pdf>.

¹²⁹ "Honorary Degree to Rev. Dr. Stephen Tong," *Westminster Theological Seminary*, accessed June 16, 2017, <https://students.wts.edu/stayinformed/view.html?id=161>.

earning him the reputation of being the “Billy Graham of the East.”¹³⁰ Along with Jonathan Chao (Zhao Tienen, 1938-2004) and Samuel Ling (Lin Cixin, b. 1951), Tong is considered responsible for the recent growth of Calvinism in urban China¹³¹—a phenomenon that has recently attracted scholarly interest.¹³²

Tong’s published works touch on various topics, ranging from biblical studies, doctrinal issues, cultural matters, Chinese philosophy, and Christian education to family life—a witness to his many diverse interests and talents. His books were recently collected into six volumes and run to a total of more than 3,300 pages, although virtually all of them are Tong’s transcribed sermons and lectures instead of his actual writings.¹³³ Tong’s message centers around themes of repentance and conversion, the truth and identity of Jesus Christ, Christian sanctification, and the Reformed worldview on culture and society. In all this, his commitment to scriptural authority is clear and always takes primacy.

In general, Tong’s approach to Scripture follows evangelical grammatical-historical hermeneutics. He pays attention to the literary structure of the text, often resorts to the original language, and makes use of word study and historical-cultural context to unearth the text’s authorial intention. Tong is not interested, however, in reconstructing the world behind the text

¹³⁰ G. Wright Doyle, “Editor’s Introduction,” in *Wise Man from the East: Lit-Sen Chang (Zhang Lisheng): Critique of Indigenous Theology; Critique of Humanism*, ed. G. Wright Doyle (Wipf and Stock, 2013), xii.

¹³¹ See Jonathan Calvin Ro, “Globalization’s Impact on the Urban Church in China: A Multiple Case-Study of Four Churches in a Major Urban Center” (Ph.D. Dissertation, Trinity International University, 2013), 131; Alexander Chow, “Calvinist Public Theology in Urban China Today,” *International Journal of Public Theology* 8 (2014): 170; Alexander Chow, “Jonathan Chao and ‘Return Mission’: The Case of the Calvinist Revival in China,” *Mission Studies* 36 (2019): 450.

¹³² In addition to the works cited above, see also: Alexander Chow, *Chinese Public Theology: Generational Shifts and Confucian Imagination in Chinese Christianity* (Oxford, United Kingdom: Oxford University Press, 2018); Li Ma, *Religious Entrepreneurism in China’s Urban House Churches: The Rise and Fall of Early Rain Reformed Presbyterian Church* (New York: Routledge, 2020).

¹³³ See Stephen Tong, *Hati yang Terbakar: Pelayanan yang Mencetuskan Gerakan Reformed Injili dalam Masa Kini (The Burning Heart: A Ministry that Begins the Present-Day Reformed Evangelical Movement)*, vol. 1–5 (Surabaya: Momentum Christian Literature, 2007). Volume 1 actually consists of two parts (1a and 1b) and is presented as two separate books, which make this collected work number six volumes in total.

for the sake of historical knowledge or intellectual curiosity. His evangelistic zeal almost always drives him to the twin themes of repentance and the atoning work of Jesus Christ, whereas his impulse for apologetics steers his sermons—from any given texts of Scripture—to show the truthfulness of Christian faith in general and the beauty of the Reformed tradition in particular. Accordingly, Tong puts a lot of theological weight on, and argues from Scripture for, the internal consistency and unity of Scripture as God’s word. When he argues for the supremacy of Jesus as the Savior of the world, for instance, Tong is at pains to show how Jesus fulfilled every detail of Old Testament prophecies about the Messiah.¹³⁴ Thus, Tong sees Christ’s cross foreshadowed in God’s act of providing garments of skin for Adam and Eve in Genesis 3. He reasons that a blood-shedding event must have taken place behind, or before, this action, for “without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sins” (Heb. 9:22). Tong then suggests that John the Baptist had this ancient story in mind when he pointed to Jesus as “the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world” (John 1:29).¹³⁵ This shows how Tong applies the hermeneutical principle of Scripture-interprets-Scripture in his exegesis—a prominent feature that is shared by Wongso, Sung, and Nee among many others.

While intertextuality is one common strategy that Tong uses to read Scripture, a perhaps more distinctive feature of his approach is the use of logical thinking, or common sense, in his exegesis. That is, he often presents himself as using rigorously logical reasoning when offering his interpretation of Scripture or when refuting his enemies’ readings, most notably those of the liberals and the charismatics. This approach is, of course, tied to his apologetical impulse to defend his Reformed Christian faith amid its modern despisers, both within and without the

¹³⁴ Stephen Tong, *Hati yang Terbakar: Pelayanan yang Mencetuskan Gerakan Reformed Injili dalam Masa Kini*, vol. 1a: *Dasar Iman Kita Bersama* (The Foundation of Our Faith) (Surabaya: Momentum Christian Literature, 2007), 367–368.

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*, 1a: *Dasar Iman Kita Bersama* (The Foundation of Our Faith), 368–69.

church. Thus, in the example of Genesis 3 above, Tong reasons that an animal must be slaughtered by God for him to make the garments out of its skin for Adam and Eve. This is but a strict application of common sense to a close reading of a Scriptural passage, according to Tong.

One more example should suffice to illustrate what I call Tong’s “(theo)logical common sense” reading of Scripture. When defending Christ’s virgin birth as a true Christian doctrine, Tong interestingly refers to the creation story, specifically the creation of Adam, Eve, and the rest of humanity. In a nutshell, this is how Tong’s argument unfolds: (1) Adam was created directly by God, without the involvement of man and woman. (2) Eve, however, was created by God out of the man Adam, but without the involvement of a woman (Gen. 2:23). (3) The rest of humanity, in turn, was created by God through the “natural” biological process that involves both a man and a woman. (4) But this leaves out one more logical possibility regarding the ways in which God creates human beings: out of a woman but without the involvement of a man. And *that* is precisely how the God-Man Jesus was born into this world: through the virgin womb of Mary and without the sperm of Joseph, as attested in Scripture.¹³⁶ This can be vividly outlined as follows:

- Mode #1: without man, without woman → Adam
- Mode #2: with man, without woman → Eve
- Mode #3: with man, with woman → the rest of us
- Mode #4: without man, with woman → Jesus Christ

While suggesting that Jesus is a member of the human race like Adam, Eve, and the rest of us, Tong is careful to employ the term “born” and not “created” for Jesus. Tong also points out that the Holy Spirit is “directly involved” in Jesus’ case only, showing that Jesus is unique

¹³⁶ Tong cites several texts for this claim, such as Isa. 7:14; Mic. 5:1-2; Mat. 1:20; and Gal. 4:4. See *ibid.*, 1a: Dasar Iman Kita Bersama (The Foundation of Our Faith), 494–97.

by virtue of his mode of coming into this world.¹³⁷ He believes that this is not accidental but is rather providential, as it reveals divine wisdom in both Scripture and nature. In short, through this kind of “theological common sense” reading of Scripture, Tong manages to show to his listeners the logical consistency of Scripture and its traditional doctrines in an engaging manner. This seems to be a major factor in his popularity among educated middle-class Chinese Christians in Indonesia as well as among urban Christians in China.¹³⁸

Chinese Pentecostal-Charismatic Christians in Indonesia

Both Wongso and Tong are Chinese evangelical leaders in Indonesia; the former represents the Wesleyan and more generic strand of Chinese evangelicalism, whereas the latter exemplifies the growing Reformed evangelical presence within Chinese Indonesian communities. There is, however, another large expression of Chinese Christianity in the country that is neither Reformed nor merely evangelical in orientation. As with many other countries in the Majority World, currently the majority form of Christianity in Indonesia is the Pentecostal-Charismatic Christian tradition.¹³⁹ While Indonesian Pentecostal churches are usually not based

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*, 1a: *Dasar Iman Kita Bersama* (The Foundation of Our Faith), 495–96. Tong’s reading here is reminiscent of Augustine’s famous scheme of human nature in its fourfold state: before the fall (*posse peccare*); after the fall (*non posse non peccare*); after redemption (*posse non peccare*); and after glorification (*non posse peccare*). See Augustine, “On Rebuke and Grace,” chap. 33, *Newadvent.org*, accessed August 2, 2017, <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/1513.htm>; Augustine, “Handbook on Faith, Hope, and Love,” *Christian Classics Ethereal Library*, para. 118, accessed August 2, 2017, <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/augustine/enchiridion.chapter31.html>.

¹³⁸ See, e.g. Sarah Eekhoff Zylstra, “Young, Restless, and Reformed in China,” *The Gospel Coalition*, March 27, 2017, accessed July 22, 2020, <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/young-restless-and-reformed-in-china/>. Most recently, Zylstra also reported on a Calvinist-based conference for Chinese house church leaders in January 2020 in Malaysia, which featured Stephen Tong, Tim Keller, Don Carson, and a dozen mainland Chinese speakers. About 2,000 Chinese leaders attended the conference. See Sarah Eekhoff Zylstra, “How Chinese Pastors Developed Their Theology for Suffering,” *The Gospel Coalition*, April 22, 2020, accessed July 22, 2020, <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/how-chinese-pastors-developed-their-theology-for-suffering/>. In this conference, the focus was on how Chinese churches endure the persecution they are experiencing, and on how the specifically Reformed tradition seems to be a fitting resource for them in the midst of their suffering.

¹³⁹ Pentecostalism and the Charismatic movement can be treated as two different, albeit closely related, movements. The former is commonly associated with the revival led by William J. Seymour at Azusa Street, California in 1906 and subsequently formed their own Pentecostal churches and organization. The latter is generally considered to be an extension of the influence of the former to the mainline Protestant denominations (but also to Roman Catholicism) that began in the 1960s. Unlike the first wave of Pentecostalism, the second wave of Charismatic movements do not usually separate themselves into separate denominations. For more on the

on ethnicity and are more multiracial in membership, a significant number of their members are of Chinese descent. A recent survey of some 3700 Pentecostal churches in five big cities in Indonesia reveals that 34% of the respondents are of Chinese descent.¹⁴⁰ On the flip side, it has been estimated that around 70% of Chinese Indonesian Christians are members of Pentecostal churches.¹⁴¹ Indeed, the connection between Pentecostal Christianity and Chinese descent has led some scholars to attempt to explain the particular appeal that Pentecostalism has to Chinese Christians in Indonesia.¹⁴²

The history of Pentecostalism in Indonesia is a complex one and is beyond the scope of this study.¹⁴³ But it is important to note here that Sung's revival meetings played a part in the early formation of some Pentecostal churches in the country.¹⁴⁴ In fact, it was a Pentecostal group in Surabaya which invited Sung to the city in 1939. In that same year Sung returned to Indonesia for a two-month tour, drawing large crowds of Chinese Christians of many ecclesial

differences, see Stanley M. Burgess, ed., *The New International Dictionary of Pentecostal and Charismatic Movements*, Rev. and Expanded Ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002). In the Indonesian context, however, the two terms are regularly used interchangeably and the two movements are generally considered as one. For this reason, I will not differentiate between the two in this section and will use the term "Pentecostal/Pentecostalism" as a blanket term for both Pentecostal and Charismatic traditions.

¹⁴⁰ The survey is conducted by the Center of Religious and Cross-cultural Studies (CRCS) of Universitas Gadjah Mada (UGM), Yogyakarta. They surveyed 3748 Pentecostal-Charismatic churches in Jakarta, Surabaya, Yogyakarta, Medan, and Manado, between the years 2010 and 2012. The result of the survey is analyzed in Christine E. Gudorf, Zainal Abidin Bagir, and Marthen Tahun, eds., *Aspirations for Modernity and Prosperity: Symbols and Sources Behind Pentecostal/Charismatic Growth in Indonesia* (ATF Press, 2014). For the percentage of Chinese descendants cited above, see *Ibid.*, 62.

¹⁴¹ See Barbara Watson Andaya, "Contextualizing the Global: Exploring the Roots of Pentecostalism in Malaysia and Indonesia," *Unpublished paper presented to a symposium on Management and Marketing of Globalizing Asian Religions at University of Hawai'i* (August 11, 2009): 7.

¹⁴² See, e.g. Juliette Koning, "Singing Yourself into Existence: Chinese Indonesian Entrepreneurs, Pentecostal-Charismatic Christianity and the Indonesian Nation State," in *Christianity and the State in Asia: Complicity and Conflict*, ed. Julius Bautista and Francis Khok Gee Lim (London; New York: Routledge, 2009); Juliette Koning, "Chinese Indonesians: Businesses, Ethnicity, and Religion," in *Routledge Handbook of Contemporary Indonesia*, ed. Robert W. Hefner (Abingdon: Routledge, 2018).

¹⁴³ For a brief but adequate historical sketch on this, see Gani Wiyono, "Pentecostalism in Indonesia," in *Asian and Pentecostal: The Charismatic Face of Christianity in Asia*, ed. Allan Anderson and Edmond Tang, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Regnum, 2011); Gani Wiyono, "Pentecostalism in Indonesia," in *Asia Pacific Pentecostalism*, ed. Denise A. Austin, Jacqueline Grey, and Paul W. Lewis (Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2019). For a more detailed account, see Unknown Author, "A History of the Pentecostal Movement in Indonesia," *Asian Journal of Pentecostal Studies* 4, no. 1 (January 2001): 131–148.

¹⁴⁴ See Unknown Author, "A History of the Pentecostal Movement in Indonesia," 142.

stripes in Java's major cities as well as in Ujung Pandang and Ambon.¹⁴⁵ Thus, it could be said that Sung's preaching ministry was formative not only for Chinese evangelicals in general but also for their Pentecostal counterparts, although his name is seldom invoked in Pentecostal circles.¹⁴⁶ I will now briefly introduce some influential individuals in the older and the younger generations of Pentecostal leaders in Indonesia, before looking more specifically at certain hermeneutical practices of a key figure from each group.

A list of highly influential Pentecostal leaders in Indonesia must include the late Ho Lukas Senduk, who was the founder of GBI (*Gereja Bethel Indonesia* [Bethel Church of Indonesia])—the largest Pentecostal denomination in Indonesia today.¹⁴⁷ Other prominent names in the older generation include Abraham Alex Tanuseputera, Yesaya Pariadji, Jusuf Soetanto, and Erastus Sabdono, all of whom were part of Senduk's GBI before starting their own megachurches and ministries. The two main protégés of Senduk who are still part of the GBI circle are Jacob Nahuway, the Chairman of the Communion of Pentecostal Churches in Indonesia (*Persekutuan Gereja-gereja Pentakosta Indonesia*, PGPI), and Niko Njotorahardjo, the leader of GBI *Jalan Gatot Subroto*—the fastest growing network of GBI congregations in Jakarta. Along with other well-known figures such as Gilbert Lumoindong and Eddy Leo, they all are influential Pentecostal leaders who have been formative in the growth and expansion of Pentecostal Christianity in late twentieth-century Indonesia. The younger generation of

¹⁴⁵ Andaya, "Contextualizing the Global: Exploring the Roots of Pentecostalism in Malaysia and Indonesia," 7; Yusak Soleiman and Karel A. Steenbrink, "Chinese Christian Communities In Indonesia," in *A History of Christianity in Indonesia*, ed. Jan S. Arifonang and Karel A. Steenbrink (Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2008), 914.

¹⁴⁶ See, however, Mark Robinson, "The Growth of Indonesian Pentecostalism," in *Asian and Pentecostal: The Charismatic Face of Christianity in Asia*, ed. Allan Anderson and Edmond Tang, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Regnum, 2011), 268.

¹⁴⁷ According to the 2013 statistics provided by the Department of Religion of Indonesia, the total number of GBI members is estimated to be around 2,000,000 people with more than 5,400 GBI churches across the country. See Lowerison S. Berutu and Yohanes Berutu, *Direktori Gereja- Gereja, Yayasan, Pendidikan Dan Keagamaan Kristen Di Indonesia 2013* (Jakarta: Direktorat Jenderal Bimbingan Masyarakat Kristen Kementerian Agama Republik Indonesia, 2013) as quoted by Wiyono, "Pentecostalism in Indonesia," 256.

Indonesian Pentecostal leaders are too many to name, but two increasingly popular names need to be mentioned here, however briefly: Philip Mantofa of Mawar Sharon Church and Jeffrey Rachmat of JPCC (Jakarta Praise Community Church).

Generally, these leaders hold the standard/classic Pentecostal beliefs that originated in Pentecostal institutions in North America and can be observed in many Pentecostal churches around the globe. While they distinguish themselves from the evangelical streams of Indonesian Christianity, they essentially agree with basic evangelical convictions about Scripture—its divine origin, authority, and unity. Their Pentecostal belief in the direct experience of God, along with its emphasis on signs and wonders, which is sometimes expressed in the form of prosperity gospel teachings, seems to overshadow their doctrinal confession on the authority of Scripture.¹⁴⁸ This is certainly a common perception, especially among more critical evangelical leaders such as Tong, who often publicly criticized them as non-biblical or even false prophets.¹⁴⁹ Indeed, as one GBI pastor puts it, “the Pentecostals muse on the presence of God; the Evangelicals focus on the Word and the Truth of God; and the [Ecumenical] Protestants emphasize social gospel and liberal theology.”¹⁵⁰

¹⁴⁸ Cf. Edmund Rybarczyk, “New Churches: Pentecostals and the Bible,” in *The New Cambridge History of the Bible*, ed. John Riches, vol. 4: From 1750 to the present (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 588: “Pentecostals are stereotypically viewed as spiritual enthusiasts who blindly follow the Spirit more regularly than they follow the Bible.”

¹⁴⁹ Although Tong regularly criticizes Pentecostal-Charismatic teaching, his most recent critique (April 2020) of the popular Pentecostal pastor Niko Njotorahardjo went viral on social media—partly due to the Covid-19 pandemic that forced churches to make their preaching and teaching available online. Tong basically reacted to Njotorahardjo’s claim that the coronavirus can be exorcised through prayer and speaking in tongues by calling Njotorahardjo a “false prophet” and challenging him to set up a healing service for all Covid-19 patients in Jakarta. Needless to say, the incident sparked online debate between the “disciples” of the two leaders and got the attention of many social media “influencers” in Indonesia. Reports and discussions about this incident abound in Facebook posts and YouTube channels of Indonesian users. Among many others, see *Pdt. Dr. Stephen Tong | Tanggapan keras hardikan Pdt. Dr. Ir. Niko Njotohardjo terhadap COVID 19.*, YouTube Videos, 2020, accessed August 1, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sVFO9ISptvo>.

¹⁵⁰ As cited in Chang-Yau Hoon, “Pentecostal Megachurches in Jakarta: Class, Local, and Global Dynamics,” in *Pentecostal Megachurches in Southeast Asia: Negotiating Class, Consumption and the Nation*, ed. Terence Chong (Singapore: ISEAS Publishing, 2018), 32–33.

For the most part, however, this view of Pentecostalism is a misperception. While it is not usually stated as clearly as it should be, Scripture does occupy a central role in Pentecostal teaching and worship. Pentecostal emphasis on miracles, healings, visions, and dreams, for example, was usually prompted from and followed the pattern of Scripture.¹⁵¹ The prosperity gospel that some Pentecostals advocate is deeply problematic, admittedly. But even that teaching also stems primarily from their reading of Scripture. Although it is deemed to be a *misreading* by many, it ought not to discredit their attempt to be biblical Christians in the first place. As argued by some scholars, Pentecostal Christians are not only Bible believers, in that they have a strong sense of biblical authority, but they are also actual Bible readers—they read and use their Bibles on a regular basis. The proliferation of their “family altar” programs, “konsel” (cell groups), Bible schools, and the popular “lomba cerdas cermat Alkitab” (Bible quiz competition) for children and young people which is held on a regular basis, testifies to their close engagement with Scripture.¹⁵²

Thus, while it is true that Pentecostals “muse on the presence of God” and evangelicals “focus on the Word and the Truth of God,” it is also true to say that Pentecostals focus on the Bible, just as evangelicals value the presence of God. The difference is a matter of emphasis, to be sure. But it is also a matter of fundamental theological sensibility about *God* and his way of speaking in *Scripture*—two basic beliefs that constitute what Vanhoozer called a “first theology.”¹⁵³ For evangelicals, the primary locus of the presence of God is in and through the mediation of Scripture, especially through the Church’s preaching and individual reading of the

¹⁵¹ See Rybarczyk, “New Churches: Pentecostals and the Bible.”

¹⁵² These programs/practices are usually run by many, if not most, Indonesian Pentecostal churches on the individual or local level. For more information on these programs, consult the churches’ websites, or more likely their weekly bulletins. Some of these programs (especially the Bible schools and Bible quiz competitions) are also mentioned in Edmund Rybarczyk’s observation on Pentecostalism’s relationship with the Bible in the North American context as well as globally. See *Ibid.*, 599–604.

¹⁵³ See Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *First Theology: God, Scriptures & Hermeneutics* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2002).

Bible. For Pentecostals, these scriptural practices are important, but they serve a higher goal: to experience directly the presence of God.¹⁵⁴ In short, for Pentecostals, Scripture is important because it is a means for experiencing the presence of God.

One figure who is seldom in the media spotlight, although he is arguably as influential as some of the Pentecostal leaders mentioned above, is Jusuf B. S.—the lead pastor of GTI Bukit Zaitun (Mount Olive Tabernacle Church in Indonesia), a prominent Pentecostal church in Surabaya.¹⁵⁵ Jusuf is unique because his style of preaching is unlike that of the typical Pentecostals preachers, with their sophisticated staging and high emotionalism. His instead is a quiet and rather cerebral exposition of Scripture, peppered with drawings and diagrams projected onto the wall with an old-fashioned analogue projector. Although he is more of a teacher than a preacher, and a very old-fashioned one in that regard, Jusuf’s message is vintage Pentecostalism, and thus attracts a large audience inside and outside his church.

However, he is most influential through his writings, particularly through the popular periodical called “Majalah Tulang Elisa” (the Magazine of Elisha’s Bone).¹⁵⁶ This magazine is mainly comprised of topical Bible studies that are geared towards lay people and new Christians for their spiritual nourishment. As such, the topics covered by the magazine are wide-ranging, although they center around issues of salvation, sanctification, practical ministry, and the End Times. One interesting feature of the magazine is its extensive use of Scripture, particularly its allegorical readings of Scripture, to address any topics in question. Jusuf’s allegorical readings are based on his understanding of the relationship between Jesus and

¹⁵⁴ Cf. Rybarczyk, “New Churches: Pentecostals and the Bible,” 604.

¹⁵⁵ See Jusuf B. S., “Tulang Elisa | Wwww.Tulang-Elisa.Org,” *Tulang Elisa | Wwww.Tulang-Elisa.Org*, accessed April 3, 2021, <https://www.tulang-elisa.org/>.

¹⁵⁶ Presently, Jusuf has published 92 series of this magazine. See Jusuf B. S., “Majalah Tulang Elisa | Toko buku dan majalah rohani Kristen,” accessed April 3, 2021, <https://www.tulangelisa.com/majalah-tulang-elisa>.

Scripture: the Word of God became flesh in Jesus and the same Word became book in the Bible. For Jusuf, Scripture is uniquely divine, ontologically bound together with Jesus, and authoritative for the church. Accordingly, Jusuf emphasizes the necessity of holiness of life as a prerequisite for understanding the spiritual meaning of Scripture. Jusuf often speaks about the “secret of the kingdom of God” that the Spirit reveals only to those close to him. But Jusuf encourages his readers to keep reading and be immersed in Scripture, even if they do not understand what the text means.¹⁵⁷

A careful examination of his many books and talks, however, reveals that Jusuf believes that there is a basic pattern of God’s revealed Kingdom in Scripture—a pattern that he sees most clearly in the design of the Tabernacle of Moses in the book of Exodus. Indeed, he wrote a three-volume exposition of the spiritual meaning of the Tabernacle that totals 1,700 pages.¹⁵⁸ In it, he examines every detail of the Tabernacle—from its overall design, the furniture within, the tools used, to the tiniest minutiae of each of the twelve stones in the high priest’s garment—and argues that they all have a spiritual meaning relevant to believers today. More importantly, the Tabernacle serves as a hermeneutical lens to interpret the whole Scripture as well as a kind of paradigmatic pattern for the spiritual journey of every Christian.

One of Jusuf’s key reading strategies is to find hierarchical levels, or steps, within the structure and design of the Tabernacle that correspond to the spiritual progression (or regression) of other scriptural figures or events, which then serve as models or warnings for contemporary Christians. Thus, he sees four kinds of people represented by the four levels of

¹⁵⁷ Many examples of his preaching and teaching can also be accessed through his church’s YouTube channel: Jusuf B. S., *GTI Bukit Zaitun Surabaya*, YouTube Channel, n.d., accessed August 5, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/c/GTIBukitZaitun/videos>. For his view on Scripture, see e.g. Jusuf B. S., *Alkitab (Cuplikan Khotbah “Yesus itu Tuhan & Kristus, Firman Allah”)*, YouTube Videos (GTI Bukit Zaitun Surabaya, 2019), accessed August 5, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6OkmkKEYdUA>.

¹⁵⁸ Jusuf B. S., *Kemah Suci: Pelajaran Alkitab dalam Keluaran 25-40*, 3 vols. (Surabaya: Penerbit Bukit Zaitun, 1985-2004). Jusuf mentioned that the fourth volume is in the process of being written.

the Tabernacle: (1) the Gentiles who live outside of the Tent represent sin (non-believers); (2) the Israelites who gather in the courtyard of the Tent represent righteousness (forgiven Christians); (3) the priests who serve at the Holy Place represent holiness (holy Christians); and (4) the High Priest who enters the Most Holy Place represents perfection (perfect Christians). Jusuf fits many scriptural references into this key paradigm, but he seems to have a special affinity for the books of Daniel and Revelation, arguing in effect that the secret of the End Times was already unveiled in the providential design of the Tabernacle of Moses. For Jusuf, Christian life is a continuous journey to enter the Holy of Holies, even though he teaches that only the selected 144,000 people (of Revelation 14) will gain the state of Christian perfection in this world. In short, Jusuf's hermeneutics is a fine example of classic Pentecostalism with its emphasis on deeper spiritual meaning, allegorical interpretation, hierarchical Christian holiness, and preoccupation with the Millennium and the End Times.

While the older generation of Pentecostal leaders tends to emphasize the difference between Pentecostals and evangelicals, the younger generation seems to prefer to critically assimilate the evangelicals' conception of Scripture into their own theology and practice. Philip Mantofa, for example, emphasizes the critical role that Scripture has in both his teaching and spiritual life.¹⁵⁹ He calls for a more rigorous biblical basis for many Pentecostal practices, such as visions, dreams, healings, and speaking in tongues, and maintains that the Holy Spirit *always* works with and through Scripture. While still stressing the crucial role of the Holy Spirit in the interpretation of Scripture like Jusuf above, Mantofa seems more cautious with the allegorical method, less concerned with eschatological issues, and more pragmatic in his exegetical

¹⁵⁹ Mantofa is one of the rising leaders among Pentecostal pastors in Indonesia. For an example of his teaching on Scripture, see Philip Mantofa, *Saat Teduh Bersama - Kegunaan Alkitab (Quiet Time Together: The Function of Scripture)*, YouTube Videos (Philip Mantofa, 2020), accessed August 5, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rzW7JkSA5uU&t=3201s>.

orientation than Jusuf. In short, his biblical hermeneutics is generally more evangelical than Pentecostal,¹⁶⁰ even if many aspects of his theological outlook suggest otherwise. For many young Indonesian Pentecostal leaders like Mantofa, the line between Pentecostal and evangelical hermeneutics is becoming increasingly blurred as the two ecclesial communities share and borrow resources from each other, despite the theological tension between them.

Chinese Indonesian Christians' Approach to Scripture: A Summary

As the majority of Chinese Christians in Indonesia are of evangelical and/or Pentecostal persuasion, they share similar basic viewpoints about Scripture—viewpoints that I have shown to be shared by Nee and Sung as well, such as the nature of Scripture as God's word, the authority of Scripture in doctrine and practice, the unity of Scripture as a single divine work centered around Jesus Christ, and the necessity and relevance of Scripture for the Christian life. To be sure, there are differences in how they conceptualize and apply these theological convictions in their teachings and exegetical practices. Tong's Reformed evangelistic approach attracts many young educated middle-class Chinese Indonesians with his uncompromising faith and his energetic preaching in the context of a Muslim-majority country—not unlike Sung's impact on his own religio-cultural milieu in China at the time.¹⁶¹ For those Chinese Indonesian evangelicals who shy away from Tong's version of Reformed faith, Wongso is a more representative leader. Indeed, Wongso's leadership through SAAT was instrumental in “the

¹⁶⁰ Jeffrey Rachmat is another popular leader that seems to draw a lot from evangelical theology and hermeneutics. Michael Chrisdion, of GBI Gibeon, is self-proclaimed as Reformed in theology and is quite popular even among evangelical Christians. While Rachmat's treatment of Scripture sometimes falls into some sort of a moralistic exegesis, Chrisdion's is consistently Christological in a Reformed way. For a brief bio on Rachmat, see “About: Our Pastors,” *Jakarta Praise Community Church*, accessed August 11, 2020, <https://jpcc.org/jpcc-wp/about/>. For Chrisdion, see “About: Our Pastors,” *Gibeon Church*, accessed August 11, 2020, <https://gibeon.church/pastors>.

¹⁶¹ Although Tong never heard Sung directly, Tong is definitely aware of Sung's formative work in China and Indonesia, as he often utilizes Sung's life as the example of true sacrifice for God's cause in his preaching. Tong is also known to utilize hymn singing at the end of his evangelistic preaching—a practice that was characteristic of Sung (see my brief discussion on this in the previous chapter on Sung's preaching). Could it be that Tong adopted this from Sung (via Gih, perhaps)?

spectacular growth” of Chinese Indonesian evangelical Christianity in the second half of the 20th century.¹⁶² While Tong’s apologetical hermeneutics captures the imagination of many Chinese Indonesian Christians who long for a rational foundation for the Christian faith, Wongso’s pietistic reading of Scripture is embraced by many evangelicals who are more inclined to the affective side of the Christian faith.

This characterization is, of course, a matter of emphasis only. Tong is very much concerned with the conversion of the heart and not just with the discipleship of the mind. Wongso, for his part, also appropriates several apologetic strategies for his defense of the reliability of the Bible. Such similarities are not surprising. After all, they are both products of the same seminary and were influenced, to some degree, by Gih (who was, again, Sung’s evangelistic partner). Hence, although their biblical hermeneutics generally follow the standard evangelical grammatical-historical method, Wongso and Tong often take the liberty of spiritualizing biblical texts to ensure that the Bible speaks to contemporary Christians. Their hermeneutical habit of interpreting one text with other scriptural texts—often drawn from very different contexts—also defies their otherwise authorial-intention centered hermeneutics. This is so because ultimately what is primary for them is the divine author, and thus the divine intention, of the whole Scripture as God’s word for his church. Thus, the holiness of life is an important hermeneutical category for both Wongso and Tong.

¹⁶² Some scholars note that SAAT’s influence even goes beyond evangelical circles and reaches many mainline Protestant churches as well. Consider the remarks made by noted Indonesian church historian Aritonang: “Since there are many members of the mainline churches—especially the churches with a strong Chinese background—who are influenced and attracted by Evangelical Christianity, the role of this seminary [SAAT] with its ‘children’ in promoting the evangelical spirit among the ‘traditional’ and Evangelical churches is remarkable. Not a few of the congregations of those churches send their members to study here or called their pastor-candidates from this seminary” (Aritonang and Steenbrink, “The Spectacular Growth of the Third Stream: The Evangelicals and Pentecostals,” 875). While Aritonang does not mention Wongso’s name in his discussion about SAAT, it is commonly understood that Wongso’s work is foundational to SAAT’s formation.

In this regard, Indonesian Pentecostals are perhaps closer to the spirit of Nee and Sung's spiritual hermeneutics than their non-charismatic evangelical counterparts. First, the Pentecostal notion of *rhema* as the living word of God (in contradistinction to *logos* as the mere written word of God) bears a striking similarity to Nee's conception of the inspiration and revelation of Scripture. Secondly, Pentecostals are accustomed to the same practices that often accompanied Sung's preaching ministry, such as the giving of testimonies, healing prayers, and exorcism.¹⁶³ Thirdly, and perhaps most important, Indonesian Pentecostals are far more open to and consistent in practicing the figural reading of Scripture than most Indonesian evangelicals, particularly in the form of allegorical interpretation. While some Pentecostal theologians and pastors, especially the younger ones, are more conversant with modern biblical scholarship and readily adopt the evangelical grammatical-historical method of interpretation, it is still safe to say that Pentecostal communities are more receptive to the practice of the figural reading of Scripture as exemplified by Nee and Sung, than that of their evangelical counterparts.

Notwithstanding the evangelical influence, Indonesian Pentecostals, both old and young, continue to uphold the basic "Pentecostal worldview" that is generally shared among Pentecostals around the globe, especially in the Majority World. Edmund Rybarczyk has outlined three main characteristics of the Pentecostal worldview that are pertinent to their approach to Scripture. First, they believe that they live in "an open universe"—one where God and other spiritual beings "*continue* to break into this realm to both influence people's lives and impact the course of history."¹⁶⁴ Second, they are "consistently not ensnared by the

¹⁶³ Pentecostal preachers also often utilize stories, illustrations, and stage props, and are usually very dramatic in their preaching—elements that were characteristic of Sung's own preaching.

¹⁶⁴ Rybarczyk, "New Churches: Pentecostals and the Bible," 589. He further comments: "It is a matter of dispute whether belief in an open universe pre-dated Western Pentecostals' interpretation and use of the Bible or whether the Bible itself shaped that belief. In developing countries it is quite clear that belief in an open universe pre-dated Pentecostal Christians' use of the Bible. Given the latter situation, it is not difficult to understand why Pentecostal Christianity has exploded in underdeveloped countries and that historical Protestant Christianity, because it is dramatically more rational, has been slower to take root therein. In all of this, Pentecostalism presents

epistemology of philosophical modernism” with its emphasis on “rationality, logic, quantifiable measurement and cause-and-effect verifiability.”¹⁶⁵ Instead, Pentecostals tend to focus on the more mystical and transcendent dimensions of Christian life, with which modernism is not comfortable. Third, Pentecostalism has “a strong populist character” in that there is a kind of “biblical egalitarian spirit”¹⁶⁶ among all the members of the church community, whereby the church is not primarily structured around a centralized system of clerics but instead functions as a voluntary fellowship of Spirit-filled Christians. Underlying this characteristic is the key conviction that the “Holy Spirit comes to and for all believers, and this not least concerning Bible reading.”¹⁶⁷

The net result of all this is a particular biblical hermeneutic that is deeply embedded in the Pentecostal worldview. Frank Macchia describes this hermeneutic as a “biblicist” approach, in that the Pentecostals “believed themselves capable of entering and living in the world of the Bible through the ministry of the Spirit without the need for consciously engaging the hermeneutical difficulties of reading an ancient text from a modern situation.” Thus, he continues, “[t]here is for Pentecostals a certain ‘present-tenseness’ to the events and words of the Bible, so that what happened then, happens now.”¹⁶⁸ Other Pentecostal scholars, such as Amos Yong, would refer to this as “this is that” hermeneutics. This expression is taken, of

the open universe of biblical Christianity without the constraints of Western rationalism. The strength of this is that Pentecostalism is sociologically and epistemologically fluid, showing amazing adaptability within varying cultural contexts. The weakness is that Pentecostalism is susceptible to both religious syncretism and manipulation by charismatic leaders, in both Western and non-Western contexts” (ibid.).

¹⁶⁵ Ibid., 589–590. He further writes: “Pentecostalism originally was rather paramodern in that it paralleled modernism as a historical movement. Nevertheless it did not accept modernism’s thoroughgoing rationalism. Certainly Western Pentecostals are more rational a century after the advent of their movement, and that does affect their biblical hermeneutic. But, in developing countries, modernism still has not taken root sufficiently to preclude widespread belief in the more mystical dimensions of human experience” (ibid., 590).

¹⁶⁶ This is my own term (not Rybarczyk’s) that I think captures the populist character of Pentecostalism while at the same time managing to differentiate it from the western notion of egalitarianism that is usually more political and ideological in orientation (thus, the qualifier “biblical”).

¹⁶⁷ Rybarczyk, “New Churches: Pentecostals and the Bible,” 590.

¹⁶⁸ Frank D. Macchia, “Theology, Pentecostal,” in *The New International Dictionary of Pentecostal and Charismatic Movements*, ed. Stanley M. Burgess, Rev. and Expanded Ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002), 1122.

course, from Peter's oration in Acts 2:16-17: "*This is that* which was spoken by the prophet Joel: 'And it shall come to pass in the last days, says God, I will pour out my Spirit upon all flesh; and your sons and daughters shall prophesy'" (KJV). The catchphrase "this is that" aptly shows the experiential dimension of Pentecostal hermeneutics: what happens now as we see it (the "this") *is* exactly what happened then/there as Scripture narrates it (the "that").

While many Indonesian Pentecostal preachers might not explicitly say so, the hermeneutical assumption behind their preaching and reading of Scripture is practically the same. Furthermore, this is, I suspect, the crux of their biblical hermeneutics that sets them apart from their evangelical cousins. I mentioned above that the two groups share many fundamental beliefs about Scripture and that the younger Pentecostals tend to learn from, or are influenced by, evangelical biblical scholarship. I also showed that in general Chinese Indonesian evangelicals are at odds with many of the theological presuppositions behind the Western historical-critical approach to Scripture. Yet it is nevertheless true that some evangelical leaders, like Wongso and Tong, are highly influenced by Western modern biblical scholarship and its underlying assumptions. They essentially read Scripture historically, albeit always with a view to Christ or his church. This is most evident in the work of Tong and other evangelicals like him who are preoccupied with Biblical apologetics. While these evangelicals would marshal evidence to argue for the reliability (read: historicity) of the Bible, many Pentecostals are not primarily interested in the apologetic and historical task of defending the text with the modernist canons of plausibility, even as they firmly believe in the text's historicity. Instead, Pentecostals' interest is elsewhere: what is important to them is not so much what-happened-back-then, but rather, how the here-and-now and the back-then are connected. Yong aptly analyses the contrast this way:

If modern interpreters approach the Bible as a historical document containing objective truths (facts) about the world (the past, in the case of historical references), Pentecostals view the Scriptures as a narrative that invited [sic] its readers and hearers to receive, inhabit, and participate in the world of God. And while modern approaches emphasize the critical distinction between what the text meant in its original context (which was the task of the biblical critic to uncover), as opposed to how such meanings might be applied to our contemporary lives (the task of the homilist), Pentecostal approaches see first and foremost the *rhema* or living and revelatory Word of God making demands on each generation of readers in a way that collapsed [sic] the horizons of what the text pointed to and that of the text's later readers.¹⁶⁹

I submit that it is this basic hermeneutical-theological orientation that makes Pentecostals readier recipients of Nee and Sung's spiritual approach to Scripture than evangelicals. Thus, despite the Chinese Indonesian evangelicals' connection to Sung—as attested in the stories of Wongso and Tong above—it is the Pentecostals who seem to be closer to Sung's overall vision of the Bible and its hermeneutical relationship to the world and the reader.¹⁷⁰ The same could be said about Nee's influence as well. While Nee's direct heir in Indonesia is obviously the Local Church movement—which is active and growing—his theological and hermeneutical ideas seem to find a more natural home in Pentecostal churches than in evangelical ones.¹⁷¹

¹⁶⁹ Amos Yong, "Reading Scripture and Nature: Pentecostal Hermeneutics and Their Implications for the Contemporary Evangelical Theology and Science Conversation," *Perspectives on Science and Christian Faith* 63, no. 1 (March 2011): 5. See also Kenneth J. Archer, *A Pentecostal Hermeneutic for the Twenty-First Century: Spirit, Scripture and Community* (London: T&T Clark, 2004), 122. Archer writes that for Pentecostals, "the horizons of past and present were fused, or from a critical perspective, confused."

¹⁷⁰ The Malaysian Methodist Bishop Hwa Yung, however, downplays the sharp distinction between the two groups/traditions in an Asian context. Nevertheless, Yung agrees that John Sung serves as a fitting representative of Asian indigenous Christianity that both evangelicals and Pentecostals need to rediscover and appropriate. He writes, "[T]he sharp distinction drawn between Pentecostal/Charismatic churches and non-Pentecostal/Charismatic ones is again a western one. The reason is that indigenous Christianity in Asia and Africa have [sic] invariably borne the marks of Pentecostalism. This is not because they were directly or even indirectly influenced by western Pentecostalism, although some would have been. Rather it is because these indigenous Christians, like Sundar Singh and John Sung, merely read the Bible from within the context of their own cultures and worldviews, and in simple faith put its teaching into practice. The result was indigenous Christianity which bears great similarity to western Pentecostalism, simply because both bear similarities to New Testament Christianity!" Hwa Yung, "Pentecostalism and the Asian Church," in *Asian and Pentecostal: The Charismatic Face of Christianity in Asia*, ed. Allan Anderson and Edmond Tang, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Regnum, 2011), 41.

¹⁷¹ The reception of Nee's work in the Indonesian *evangelical* community is mixed and varied. Many read his books for devotional purposes, but the majority seem to be critical toward his theology (especially his tripartite anthropology, his anti-denominational ecclesiology, and his thoroughly allegorical reading of Scripture), while some denounce his teaching as unorthodox. Furthermore, there is ongoing debate over whether the current Local Church movement and its teaching, which are heavily influenced by Witness Lee, faithfully represent Nee's original thought. The issue is whether Lee's teaching is a faithful development of or unfaithful digression from Nee's. Some evangelicals, like Tong, for instance, would say that Nee's theology is still considered orthodox,

Conclusion

In conclusion, I would like to revisit the question posited at the beginning of this chapter: Why have Nee and Sung been ignored by historical scholarship, despite their pivotal influence on Chinese Christianity? I have demonstrated that the typical reading of Nee and Sung's work is inadequate, not least because it betrays predispositions toward certain kinds of theology and theological engagement with society. Since Nee and Sung were deeply influenced by Western theological traditions that emphasized the primacy of scriptural texts over and against social-cultural contexts, so it is argued, then their form of Christianity was not truly indigenous. The overall tremendous reception of their ministry in Chinese grassroots communities, however, suggests otherwise: their message is more than effective in reaching Chinese people, both in China and in Southeast Asia. While there are many factors that account for this phenomenon, I would like to suggest that the main one is precisely their insistence on being thoroughly scriptural in their theologizing. In short, their theology is "indigenized" precisely because they are scriptural. This indigenization is a result—perhaps accidental, or better, providential—of the "scripturalization" of their theology. For Lim, the studies of such underrated-yet-popular figures like Nee and Sung

may shed some light on how mission and church histories are written and possibly reveal some established bias in scholarly research.... Early twentieth-century efforts at indigenization of Christianity dwelled too much on theologizing at the elite level. However, theological contextualization occurs when local Christian leaders, under the leadership of the Holy Spirit, live and serve out biblical principles in their particular contexts. It brings about a more genuine presentation of the gospel.¹⁷²

whereas Lee's is outright heretical. The specific issue at stake in this debate is Lee's understanding of the nature of Christ's human nature/body which is allegedly Arian (i.e., in line with Arianism). See "The Teachings of Rev. Stephen Tang's (Tong) Christology," *Reformed Theology Institute*, n.d., accessed August 11, 2020, <https://www.tapataalk.com/groups/rti/the-teachings-of-rev-stephen-tang-s-tong-christolo-t1800.html>.

¹⁷² Lim, *The Life and Ministry of John Sung*, xvi–xvii. See a similar observation made by Hwa Yung in footnote 164 above, although the subject at hand is on Asian forms of Pentecostalism.

Nee and Sung were not scholars in the modern sense of the term. “They were not attempting to produce Asian or Chinese theology. They were consciously working to establish a Chinese church, yet that desire flowed from a conviction that such was the mandate of the Christian Gospel.”¹⁷³ Through their spiritual exegesis couched in sermons, writings, training, and testimonies, that message was made accessible to common people in a practical manner that was applicable to daily life and the challenges faced in their particular context. Harvey’s apt description of Wang Mingdao’s sermons in Maoist China can be applied to Nee and Sung’s too:¹⁷⁴

Wang’s sermons artfully brought together Scripture and current events. In doing so, the Bible was no longer a tale of the past, but one unfolding before his congregation’s eyes. As such it could not be ignored either by his audience or his antagonists.... Paradoxically, his relevance in many ways gained traction from his rejection of modernism and liberalism. Like the Swiss theologian Karl Barth, he had no desire to recast the gospel according to the political ideologies of his day, but to challenge these ideologies. In so doing, he threatened the political status quo and biblically deconstructed the rhetoric of the TSPM and the CCP. In turn, biblical stories, figures, and exegesis had immediate political, social, and cultural impact in a language that made public and religious officials wince and lead [*sic*] to his ultimate arrest and imprisonment.¹⁷⁵

We have seen, furthermore, that Nee and Sung have had a lasting influence not only in China but also in Indonesia (among other Southeast Asian countries). While their names are rarely mentioned in biblical hermeneutics discourse in China and Indonesia, many, and perhaps even the majority, of today’s popular Chinese leaders in both countries show remarkable similarities with, if not the direct influence of, the scriptural approach of Nee and Sung. Among other things, this finding calls for a rediscovery and a critical appropriation of their work and

¹⁷³ Harvey, “Sermon, Story, and Song in the Inculturation of Christianity in China,” 161. Harvey’s essay particularly examines the subtle indigenization present in the works of Wang Mingdao (on sermon), John Sung (on testimony), and Jing Dianying (on song).

¹⁷⁴ Of course, Sung died before Mao’s communist party ruled in China and the establishment of TSPM and CCC. But in many ways, Sung’s sermons and testimonies bear similar features to Wang’s, not least his total commitment to scriptural faith and his rejection of modernism and liberalism.

¹⁷⁵ Harvey, “Sermon, Story, and Song in the Inculturation of Christianity in China,” 160–161.

legacy for the future of an authentic Chinese-Asian theology that starts from and ends with Scripture as the word of God for all nations and all people.

Chapter 5

Conclusion

I began this dissertation with a story about a devout *Nenek* whom I encountered almost twenty years ago. This encounter inspired me to think of her as a good Scripture reader, perhaps even a better one than many of today's professional Bible scholars, myself included. This assumption at the time of our meeting was instinctual: given her genuine faith and godly character, I just knew that she must be a good Bible reader. Upon deeper reflection, I have learned that this intuition has something to do with my preunderstanding of the nature of the Bible as Christian Scripture. My study of Watchman Nee and John Sung's theology and interpretation of Scripture has helped me articulate this preunderstanding in a more concrete form.

On a very basic level, I assume that (1) the Bible is God's word that is given to the whole people of God, regardless of their age, gender, social status, level of education, race, ethnicity, or nationality; (2) as God's own word, the Bible is sacred and sacramental, in that it not only communicates divine truths but also carries divine power that performs miracles, convicts us of sin, feeds souls, changes lives, transforms society, sends people to mission, creates worshipers out of idolaters, and makes present God's presence in a real and powerful manner; (3) Scripture reading is primarily a spiritual practice, where faith, holiness, and the Holy Spirit play a more significant role than critical thinking and applied scholarly apparatus. Based on these basic presuppositions, I suggest that the *Nenek* I referred to above, along with many other ordinary faithful Christians, is the divinely intended reader of Scripture. As such, she is in a better place to understand Scripture than many modern professional theologians or biblical scholars who are often indifferent to the subject matter of the Bible and thus approach it

like any other book. It is in this particular sense that my earlier remark about the superiority of that *Nenek*'s reading ought to be understood. There is, of course, another sense in which she is less qualified to read Scripture than those who have undergone scholarly training in biblical languages, literary devices, hermeneutical theories, and theological and exegetical studies. She might well need the help of more highly trained persons to understand some of the Bible's terms, concepts, metaphors, and references. But the sense on which the *Nenek*'s "superior" reading is founded—which is a theological and spiritual sense—is primary and is the focus of this study.

In this study, I have argued that despite their differences, Nee and Sung's approaches to Scripture belong to the same theological-hermeneutical tradition which I have called, following Ka-Lun Leung's characterization, "Chinese spiritual interpretation."¹ I have pointed out that they share at least five interrelated key tenets on the nature of Scripture and its interpretation: Scripture is the authoritative word of God that demands utmost obedience; Scripture is a practical and personal book for salvation and edification; Scriptural interpretation is primarily a spiritual practice; Scripture has multiple senses and its deeper meaning is usually primary; and Scripture is a unified book that needs to be interpreted intratextually by means of allegory or tropology. I have also demonstrated the similarities of their notions of Scripture and their exegesis with that of the church fathers. Considering this, I have proposed to set Nee and Sung's Chinese spiritual interpretation within the larger framework of a Christian hermeneutical tradition called figural reading of Scripture. In all this, I have also established that both Nee and Sung were indigenous Chinese Christian leaders who gained respect and followers because of their unwavering commitment to scriptural authority and their unique

¹ Leung, "A Defense for Spiritual Interpretation of the Chinese Church."

approach to scriptural interpretation. Their approach to Scripture, in other words, is essential to understand if one is to understand not only their overall theology but also the indigenization of their teachings and ministry to the Chinese in the first half of the twentieth century. I have also argued for their lasting influence on today's grassroots Chinese Christianity in mainland China and abroad. At the very least, I have shown that a vast number of contemporary Chinese Christians in China and Indonesia approach the Bible similarly to Nee and Sung.

These findings have at least three important implications. First, with regards to scholarship on Nee and Sung, there needs to be a renewed appreciation of their exegetical works and theological legacy. Sung's overall life and theology is still largely understudied, whereas Nee scholarship has yet to pay serious attention to his theology and interpretation of Scripture. Nee was not only a famous devotional writer and founder of the Local Church movement, while Sung was not only a popular itinerant mass evangelist. They were Scripture readers first and foremost, and their readings of Scripture were practically oriented and yet theologically interesting, as we have seen in previous chapters. Scholarship on these figures must go beyond the scope of mission studies, Chinese history, or practical fields of leadership, preaching, and spirituality. Nee and Sung's theology and biblical exegesis are worth studying as well, especially given how central Scripture was for their life and ministry. While they did not write any systematic theology or formal biblical commentaries, their teaching and preaching was no less theological and scriptural. It is time for scholars to turn to "the vast reservoir of implicit or 'primary theology' (*theologia prima*) found in sermons, hymns, poetry, testimonies, etc. of the practitioners of the faith," in addition to the second-order theology found in the essays and critical reflections of institutionally accredited theologians.²

² Chan, "Evangelical Theology in Asian Contexts," 226.

Second, *Asian* theologians and biblical scholars need to start engaging more with the works of grassroots Asian leaders, such as Nee and Sung. The typical list of names that often appear in the handbooks of and the introductions to Asian Christianity require substantial additions, if not revisions, to better represent the actual character of many Christians in Asia. This is *not* to say that the ecumenical and “mainline” scholars who have been dominant voices in Asian theological discourses, such as C. S. Song, Bishop Ting, Kazoh Kitamori, Kosuke Koyama, M. M. Thomas, or Stanley Samartha, should simply be replaced on the list of “Asian theologians” with more evangelical and charismatic leaders like Sung, Nee, Wang Mingdao, David Yonggi Cho, Sadhu Sundar Singh, or Bakht Singh. That would be too simplistic and does not accurately reflect the complexities of Asian Christian reality. But the selective treatment of Asian theology that has predominantly characterized the discourse needs to be addressed soon, especially in light of the global shift of Christianity toward the South and the East as well as the ongoing rise of evangelical and Pentecostal forms of Christianity in these regions.

The usual argument, that Asian evangelical and Pentecostal leaders are merely products of their Western counterparts and thus their theologies are either not authentically Asian or irrelevant to the Asian context, is inadequate at best and misleading at worst. For one thing, this common narrative seems to assume a kind of ideological essentialism with respect to Asian identity that is both self-defeating and unrealistic, as I have shown in chapter 1. For another, it assumes a clean transfer of belief and practice from the West to the East, and thus it presupposes—perhaps inadvertently—that Asian Christians are merely the passive recipients of Western brands of Christianity. But I have argued that neither Nee nor Sung were uncritical in their adoption of certain Western theological traditions; their cases instead are best interpreted as examples of creative adaptation of Western influences in light of both their commitment to

Scripture and their immediate Chinese milieu. To be sure, they are *not* “contextual theologians” in the modern sense of the term—that is, those who believe that their theological task is primarily to exegete the context, often in contrast to or with the same urgency as the task of exegeting the text of Scripture. Yet their theology is no less contextual with respect to the Chinese people in China and the diaspora, if their popularity and influence are any indication. The question, therefore, is not whether Asian Christian leaders such as Nee and Sung were influenced by European evangelical missionaries and/or American Pentecostal preachers; all of them were, to some extent. Rather, the more pertinent questions are: what is it about the evangelical faith and the Pentecostal movement that made them so popular so quickly on the grassroots level in Asia? And how, or how much, do these Asian leaders critically adopt and creatively adapt the evangelical/Pentecostal tradition they inherited from the West while traversing and engaging with the local needs of their own people and the uniqueness of their own context?

Third, if my characterization of Nee and Sung’s “Chinese spiritual interpretation” as a form of traditional figural reading of Scripture is correct, then it appears that there are some new ways to think about the relationship between a contemporary approach to Chinese spiritual interpretation and the figural reading of the church fathers. First of all, Chinese/Asian scholars do not need to shy away from making connections between the two by arguing that the Chinese type of spiritual and allegorical reading is categorically different than that of the church fathers, as some Nee and Sung scholars have done. In light of the Catholic *Ressourcement* movement³

³ The French term *ressourcement* (“return to the sources”) is a technical term used by the proponents of the so-called *Nouvelle théologie* (“new theology”)—a twentieth-century Catholic renewal movement—to denote their theological-methodological move to return to the sources of the Christian faith, namely Scripture and the writings of the church fathers. In its development, the term *ressourcement* is sometimes used synonymously with the Catholic renewal movement itself. While its concerns are much more than just renewal of biblical interpretation in modern Catholic theology, recovering the ancient forms of biblical exegesis does play a central part of the whole movement. The key thinkers of this movement who are particularly influential in biblical hermeneutical discourses include figures like Henri de Lubac and Jean Daniélou. For more on this movement, see

and the (largely) Protestant *Theological Interpretation of Scripture* movement,⁴ in which premodern exegesis and patristic hermeneutics are being rediscovered for contemporary use and appraisal, whether or not there is a connection between Nee and Sung and the deep tradition of Bible reading among the church fathers needs to be established and not presumptively dismissed. What we must do to “save” Nee and Sung (and many other Chinese/Asian spiritual interpreters) is *not* to exclude them from the larger and older tradition of Christian figural reading of Scripture. Rather, we need to critically reevaluate our modern bias *for* historical-critical reading and *against* the traditional figural practice of reading Scripture. One practical implication of this insight for Chinese-Asian scholars is that they can go to people like Nee and Sung as exciting resources for constructing figural interpretations of Scripture that are particularly Asian.

In previous chapters, I have hinted that Nee and Sung might have adopted their figural approach directly from the work of the church fathers, to whom Nee especially had access. But it is more likely that Nee inherited the tradition from several intermediary figures or movements, such as Anglican missionary Margaret Barber, French mystic Madame Guyon,

Gabriel Flynn and Paul D. Murray, eds., *Ressourcement: A Movement for Renewal in Twentieth-Century Catholic Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011). For de Lubac’s significant contribution to biblical hermeneutics, see his multivolume *Medieval Exegesis: The Four Senses of Scripture*, 3 vols., *Ressourcement: Retrieval & Renewal in Catholic Thought* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998-2009).

⁴ The *Theological Interpretation of Scripture* (often called as *TIS* for short) is a (largely Protestant) contemporary movement that seeks to reclaim and to (re)read Scripture as God’s word for the church. The movement can be understood as a reaction to the secularized hermeneutics that plagues much of modern biblical scholarship. As such, the movement often resorts to the older, classical hermeneutics and appropriates much of premodern exegesis. The extent and the ways in which each proponent of *TIS* performs such tasks vary, depending on many factors, such as ecclesial traditions, theological orientations, academic backgrounds, etc. Some key players in this movement include theologians like Stephen Fowl, Kevin Vanhoozer, and Hans Boersma, as well as biblical scholars such as Joel Green, Francis Watson, and Walter Moberly. For a good introductory survey of the movement, see Daniel J. Treier, *Introducing Theological Interpretation of Scripture: Recovering a Christian Practice* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2008). For a sample of different (yet complimentary) voices from *TIS* proponents (e.g., Adam, Vanhoozer, Fowl, and Watson), see A. K. M. Adam et al., *Reading Scripture with the Church: Toward a Hermeneutic for Theological Interpretation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2006). Biblical commentary series that are dedicated to the project of *TIS*, broadly conceived, include *The Brazos Theological Commentary on the Bible* (with R.R. Reno as the general editor) and *The Two Horizons Commentary* (with Joel Green as the New Testament series editor and J. Gordon McConville and Craig Bartholomew as the Old Testament series editors).

Plymouth Brethren and dispensationalist leader J. Nelson Darby, and holiness authors like Jessie Penn-Lewis and T. Austin-Sparks. Sung's knowledge of the church fathers is less certain, although I have indicated that he is also highly influenced by holiness teaching via his involvement with figures such as Andrew Gih and the Bethel Band. Historical and theological influences notwithstanding, both Nee and Sung were avid Bible readers and claimed that their teachings were taken directly from the Bible. This last point is, of course, not completely true. But their explicit commitment to scriptural authority needs to be respected, especially considering that their lives and deaths bear witness to such commitment. Moreover, Scripture's own power and agency to move and direct people, as understood in the figural reading of Scripture that Nee and Sung practiced, also needs to be taken into account. Sung's time in the mental ward of Bloomingdale Hospital, where he allegedly read the entire Bible 40 times in his 193 days there, is particularly pertinent here. As I narrated earlier,⁵ in the asylum Sung developed his obscure fascination with Scripture's mystery, figures, and their all-encompassing relationship with the world, even before he joined the holiness-influenced Bethel Band crew. Thus, while it is true that figural reading is *not* a free-floating practice, free of any theological or ecclesial attachments, it is equally true that the canonical Scripture *itself* "pressures forth" its faithful reader in a figural direction.⁶ This possibility, of course, assumes Scripture's own power and agency, which is in turn one basic presupposition of the figural practice itself. It is also understood that *not all* reading will yield this result; there are various factors involved in reading the Bible, including those of divine grace, the role of the Holy Spirit, and the faith and

⁵ See chapter 3 on John Sung.

⁶ The term canonical "pressure" of the biblical text, particularly of the Old Testament, is usually associated with the works of the late Brevard Childs and his student Christopher Seitz. They argue that the Old Testament's literal sense *naturally* leads to a Trinitarian, figural reading of Scripture. For more on this, see e.g., C. Kavin Rowe, "Biblical Pressure and Trinitarian Hermeneutics," *Pro Ecclesia* 11, no. 3 (2002); Christopher R. Seitz, *The Elder Testament: Canon, Theology, Trinity* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2018).

holiness of the reader her/himself, all of which are major elements in figural reading. Hence, figural reading of Scripture begets (more and thicker) figural reading of Scripture.

All this is to say that Nee and Sung's figural reading of Scripture is derived as much from their reading of Scripture as it is from the Western traditions they inherited. Given the reception and popularity of their messages to the Chinese people in China and Southeast Asia, as well as my earlier argument that their figural understanding of Scripture is central to their overall theology and ministry, it is reasonable to say that their figural approach to Scripture managed to capture the theological imagination and spiritual needs of many Chinese Christians then. As my last chapter has shown, this is still in fact the case with many Chinese Christians today. The figural reading of Scripture, in other words, is a popular approach followed by many grassroots Chinese Christians. It is "popular" in the sense of pertaining to the *populace*; it is a "natural" or "normal" reading of the Bible by ordinary Christians, because it is evolved from the Christian faith and the Scripture itself.

This does *not* mean that the ordinary hermeneutics of Chinese Christians are homogeneous. Neither does this mean that many of these grassroots Christians engage in figural reading of Scripture in its fullness and in a consistent manner. They do not, to be sure. But as I argued in chapter 4, many of them do hold basic understandings of Scripture that are figural in nature and they often engage, either consciously or unconsciously, in figural interpretation of Scripture. It is difficult for Chinese Christians to regard the Bible as a set of historical texts about the life of foreign ancient people and their experience about God, whose messages need to be dissected in a certain technical manner in order to be understood and applied today. It is more natural to them to take the Bible at face value, as the Divine address about God in Christ and about what the Holy Spirit is saying to Chinese churches here and now. In other words, at

least for Chinese-Asian grassroots Christians, the figural approach to Scripture seems more “natural” and “popular” than the historical-critical approach to Scripture and its variations. The same goes with regards to theology in Asia: the kinds of theology (or theologizing) that center on Scripture as the creative word of God that holds primacy in teaching and life, such as the theology embodied by Nee and Sung, seem to be better received on the ground than the kind of theology that is centered on contextual issues of liberation, religious pluralism, and Asian culture, often in a manner that disregards scriptural authority and primacy, as exemplified by some contemporary Asian theologians today.⁷

Majority World Christianity

In *The New Shape of World Christianity: How American Experience Reflects Global Faith*, Mark Noll deals with the issue of the relationship between American Christianity and Majority World Christianity. Why is it that Majority World Christians develop and exemplify many characteristics of American faith, especially in its evangelical and Pentecostal forms? Noll offers an interesting and nuanced answer:

[T]he primary reason for that development is not the direct influence of American Christians themselves. It is rather that social circumstances in many places of the world are being transformed in patterns that resemble in crucial ways what North American believers had earlier experienced in the history of the United States.... Without discounting the importance of direct American involvement around the world, the appearance of Christianities similar to forms of American Christianity highlights parallel development rather than direct influence.⁸

In short, similarity of social-historical conditions, rather than direct influence, is what links American Christianity with much of Majority World Christianity today. More specifically, Noll argues that the real influence of American Christianity lies in its principle of voluntarism,

⁷ See chapter 1 where I categorize three major strands of contextual Asian theology as (1) Asian liberation theology, (2) Asian religious pluralism, and (3) Asian inculturation theology.

⁸ Mark A. Noll, *The New Shape of World Christianity: How American Experience Reflects Global Faith* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2009), 109.

which Majority World Christianity has also found to be the most effective means to spread the gospel. Noll proposes this thesis as a third/middle way between the “extreme triumphalism” and the “self-flagellation” associated with the American hegemony in contemporary global Christian mission.⁹

Global Pentecostalism as a Case Study

Noll draws from earlier works of seminal thinkers on Majority World Christianity, such as Lamin Sanneh, Andrew Walls, and Phillip Jenkins, to develop his thesis. But it is his use of the Nigerian scholar Ogbu Kalu on the history of African Pentecostalism that is particularly intriguing to me in the context of my larger argument. Kalu has appealed for a new perspective on the development of “global Pentecostalism” which, as he describes it, looks different from an “African perspective.”¹⁰ He wishes to revise accounts that treat “world-wide Pentecostal churches [as] American outposts” or that picture the Majority World as a “blank tablet” waiting for new programming from America. Kalu views these goals as necessary for a proper understanding of Christian history, but also as a response to critics who see evangelical or Pentecostal expressions anywhere in the world as a direct product of American hegemony. Noll helpfully offers his own summary of the long and complex argument of Kalu’s pathbreaking study, of which I will highlight only four points as the most relevant for our purposes:

- Regardless of where the spark came from that ignited Pentecostal movements around the world, *these movements have almost always defined themselves as inspired by the Bible*, especially accounts in the Book of Acts about the Holy Spirit’s direct power in the early church.

⁹ I freely borrow the apt terms “extreme triumphalism” and “self-flagellation” from Daniel Bays’ blurb of the book under discussion.

¹⁰ Ogbu Kalu, “Modeling the Genealogy and Character of Global Pentecostalism: An African Perspective,” *Ned Geref Teologiese Tydskrif* 47 (December 2006): 506–533. This is the main source which Noll draws from. For more on Kalu’s work, see also Ogbu Kalu, *African Pentecostalism: An Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

- The world's incredibly diverse range of Pentecostal expressions have been fed *by many earlier streams of Christian thought, biblical interpretation and practice*; some of them did originate in America, but many did not.
- Most significantly, in many regions during the years, or even decades, *before Azusa Street*, Pentecostal-type phenomena were proliferating rapidly. As scholars quoted by Kalu put it for Brazil, Chile and Central America, “outside missionaries helped to spark, not create, a Latin American institution.” In addition, significant revivals that can be seen as Pentecostal or Pentecostal-like movements took place in 1903 and 1906 (Korea), 1904 (Wales) and 1905-1906 (Mukti, India). These revivals received a boost and may have been redirected in belief and practice once news of Azusa Street arrived, but they were well underway *before* that awakening in America took place.
- In Africa, a whole series of churches, revivals and movements that now are rightly viewed as Pentecostal were up and running before Azusa Street, or, if they developed later, did so *with a clearly African character*.¹¹

In short, Kalu insists on an account of global Pentecostalism that takes the global diversity of Pentecostal movements utterly seriously. For his own African context, Kalu stresses that African Pentecostalism must be viewed first in terms of African history before it is connected to American history. “[T]he American connection is more important in studying the character of the movement... than in tracing its genealogy,” as he puts it.¹²

This finding basically affirms what several other scholars have argued in their search for the origin of Pentecostalism in the Majority World. As Everett Wilson has observed, Pentecostalism is not just another American phenomenon which then became globalized in the twentieth century. Rather, it “has broken out or has been rediscovered or been appropriated recurrently since the beginning of this century—if not before.”¹³ Thus, the study of global Pentecostalism “need not focus exclusively on U.S. precedents, since... non-Western groups have cultivated their own analogous, cognate forms (including their own founders, origins and

¹¹ Noll, *The New Shape of World Christianity*, 123–124. Emphases are mine.

¹² As cited in *Ibid.*, 125.

¹³ Everett A. Wilson, “They Crossed the Red Sea, Didn’t They? Critical History and Pentecostal Beginnings,” in *The Globalization of Pentecostalism: A Religion Made to Travel*, ed. Murray W. Dempster, Byron D. Klaus, and Douglas Peterson (Oxford: Regnum, 1999), 107–108.

subcultures), but in a variety of settings, in different ways and with their own spiritual achievements.” Wilson then concludes with a pointed question: “Because of their chronological priority and large and rapidly growing memberships, should non-Western movements not be considered in assessing the formative years of the movement?”¹⁴

For the context of Pentecostalism in Asia, British scholar Allan Anderson and Malaysian Methodist Bishop Hwa Yung have essentially made the same point in their fine studies.¹⁵ Yung’s findings are particularly germane for our purposes. He finds that many indigenous forms of Christianity in Asia have often been characterized by Pentecostal/Charismatic experiences. Yung provides some evidence of *pre*-Azusa Street Pentecostal-like movements and incidents in some parts of Asia, such as indigenous movements in Tirunelveli (1860-65) and Travancore (1873-81), both in India, among the Bataks in Sumatra under Rhenish missionaries, in Central Java under the indigenous leader Sadrach Surapranata, among Karens in Myanmar, and the indigenous ministry of Pastor Hsi (or Xi Shengmo) in China.¹⁶ But Yung also offers evidence of *post*-Azusa Street Pentecostal-like experiences in Asia, whose origins owe little or nothing to Western Pentecostalism. His two preeminent examples of this category are Sadhu Sundar Singh of India and, interestingly albeit not too surprisingly, John Sung.¹⁷ Yung briefly recounts how Sung consistently displayed and

¹⁴ Ibid., 109–110 as cited in Hwa Yung, “Pentecostalism and the Asian Church,” in *Asian and Pentecostal: The Charismatic Face of Christianity in Asia*, ed. Allan Anderson and Edmond Tang, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Regnum, 2011), 34.

¹⁵ See respectively Allan Anderson, “Pentecostalism in East Asia: Indigenous Oriental Christianity?,” *Pneuma* 22 (Spring 2000): 115–132; Yung, “Pentecostalism and the Asian Church.”

¹⁶ Here Yung draws largely from the accounts provided by Gary B. McGee, “Pentecostalism,” ed. Scott W. Sunquist, *A Dictionary of Asian Christianity* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2001), 646–650.

¹⁷ Terence Chong and Daniel Goh also feature Sung as an example of an indigenous Pentecostal-like leader who is instrumental in the origin or growth of Southeast Asian Pentecostalism. They remark, “Sung’s revivalist foray into Southeast Asia suggests that it is crucial to understand Asian Pentecostalism as *sui generis* instead of an offshoot of Western Pentecostalism.... Sung’s impact on Malaysian and Singaporean Christianity is palpable in fostering a strong evangelical orientation and independent streak, setting the stage for the widely felt charismatic renewal among mainline churches in the 1970s and the explosion of independent and neo-Pentecostal mega-churches in the 1990s.” (Terence Chong and Daniel P. S. Goh, “Asian Pentecostalism: Revivals, Mega-

performed many Pentecostal-like gifts and activities, such as praying in tongues, his healing ministry, and the gift of prophecy. Yet Yung is adamant that Sung was not a *classical* Pentecostal in the traditional/American sense of the term. Indeed, Sung often distanced himself from Pentecostal association and was very critical of many Western missionary enterprises, including Pentecostal ones. As Yung puts it, “[Singh and Sung] were examples of indigenous Christianity in Asia. Yet they were fully Pentecostal in the New Testament sense of exercising a ministry of ‘signs and wonders,’ and represented Primitive Christianity at its best in the modern world.”¹⁸ For his part, Anderson’s studies on indigenous Christianity in China add Watchman Nee’s Local Church to the category of indigenous Christian movements that manifest Pentecostal-like characteristics.¹⁹

Among other things, these findings confirm my earlier arguments that both Sung and Nee are fitting instantiations of the hybrid character of Chinese-Asian Christian indigenization. But if they both can be indigenous Pentecostal-like leaders without being/becoming Americanized Pentecostals, can they not be indigenous evangelical-like leaders without the label of the Chinese version of American evangelicalism, too? In other words, a similar case can also be made for a distinctive Chinese/Asian evangelicalism that may or may not be genealogically linked with Western evangelicalism. I have made precisely that argument with regards to Nee and Sung’s theology and interpretation of Scripture, and have claimed that their approach to Scripture is both evangelically figural and indigenously Chinese. Scholars like Anderson and Yung now add that Nee and Sung’s approach is unmistakably Pentecostal as

Churches, and Social Engagement,” in *Routledge Handbook of Religions in Asia*, ed. Bryan S. Turner and Oscar Salemink [Abingdon: Routledge, 2014], 403).

¹⁸ Yung, “Pentecostalism and the Asian Church,” 40.

¹⁹ Cf. Jiayin Hu, “Spirituality and Spiritual Practice: Is the Local Church Pentecostal?,” in *Global Chinese Pentecostal and Charismatic Christianity*, ed. Fenggang Yang, Joy Kooi-Chin Tong, and Allan Anderson (Leiden: Brill, 2017).

well, and rightly so. While Nee and Sung were never seen as Pentecostals themselves, and while many Asian Pentecostal leaders today would not regard them as their forefathers, many of their theological impulses and hermeneutical moves are naturally embodied in an Asian Pentecostal reading of and approach to Scripture, as I have shown in the survey of Indonesian Pentecostal hermeneutics in chapter 4. This suggests an interesting equation between Nee and Sung's professed evangelicalism and their inherent Pentecostalism. Are they more accurately described as indigenous evangelical heroes *or* Chinese Pentecostal forefathers? Or perhaps the very distinction between Majority World evangelicalism and Pentecostalism needs to be questioned in the first place. Indeed, *that* is one significant finding of Yung's essay.

[T]he sharp distinction drawn between Pentecostal/Charismatic churches and non-Pentecostal/Charismatic ones is... a western one. The reason is that indigenous Christianity in Asia and Africa have invariably borne the marks of Pentecostalism. This is not because they were directly or even indirectly influenced by western Pentecostalism, although some would have been. Rather it is because these indigenous Christians, like Sundar Singh and John Sung, merely read the Bible from within the context of their own cultures and worldviews, and in simple faith put its teaching into practice. The result was indigenous Christianity which bears great similarity to western Pentecostalism, simply because both bear similarities to New Testament Christianity!²⁰

Yung has certainly oversimplified the matter here. Many in Indonesia, for example, do make a sharp distinction between Pentecostal churches and evangelical ones. I have also shown how Sung was influenced by Western Holiness teaching, not least in his reading of Scripture. But one does not need to agree with everything Yung has said here to appreciate his basic insights. Yung is right that Pentecostal Christians and non-Pentecostal evangelical Christians in the Majority World are closer to each other than is usually perceived, especially compared to their Western counterparts. This is especially true with regards to their theology and interpretation of Scripture. Part of the reason for this closeness is because many Majority World

²⁰ Yung, "Pentecostalism and the Asian Church," 41.

Christians—both Pentecostals *and* evangelicals—are still inhabiting a supernaturalistic worldview, where the realm of the spirits (divine, angelic, or demonic) and the realm of matter are intertwined in a complex manner. To put it in another way, many Majority World Christians have not experienced the full effect of modern Enlightenment philosophy, with its naturalistic and dualistic worldview. Thus, while many Majority World evangelicals (and some Pentecostals) often uncritically apply some version of Western historical-critical methods to biblical interpretation, they do not usually embrace its theological presuppositions, nor do they easily follow its practical implications. As Yung puts it, “Most non-westerners possess a supernaturalistic worldview, which even a modern western scientific education could not fully eradicate easily. It is part and parcel of their cultural and religious background.”²¹ In such a worldview, the figural claim that world events, down to the tiniest detail in an individual life, unfold in accordance with Scripture as God’s creative word would be more acceptable than the critical stance that perceives the Bible as merely a set of historical documents of ancient people’s religious experience or ideological texts that perpetuate oppression and colonialization. Indigenous Majority World Christians—Pentecostals or otherwise—are largely in agreement on this.

Beyond Missionary Influences and Indigenous Sources: The Power of the Book

Yung’s observation above is also insightful in that it directs our attention to the power of Scripture in the proliferation of indigenous Christianity in the Majority World. The late Lamin Sanneh has been influential in positing that Bible translation is one of the major factors in the vast spread of Christianity in Africa but also globally. In *Translating the Message: The Missionary Impact on Culture*, Sanneh observes that the very activity of Christian translation has brought unique spiritual empowerment to those who, often for the first time, hear the

²¹ Ibid., 43.

message of Scripture in their mother tongue.²² It has been a liberating experience, because it has given to peoples all over the world a sense of being themselves the hearers of God's direct speech. Africans, for example, are drawn into stories about Jesus and are not surprised when Jesus speaks to them in dreams and visions—as, according to the New Testament, he did to the early apostles. But the experience has also had a conservative character because “once marginalized people are given literature in their own language, they receive a tool that anchors them to their own past, their own traditions and their own culture.”²³ Indeed, one of Sanneh's key arguments is that while the spread of Islam has drawn ever-increasing numbers to the globalizing influence of Arabic, the spread of Christianity binds ever-increasing numbers to their own local languages, and thus to the whole process of indigenization. As Noll puts it, translation “implies that the receiving cultures, with their languages, histories and assumptions, are worthy of God's attention; they are valuable entities that the entrance of God's word can change into something even better.”²⁴ Indeed, underlying the notion of translation is none other than the character, or the truth, of God himself in relation to “the universe of cultures.” Sanneh aptly writes,

The characteristic pattern of Christianity's engagement with the languages and cultures of the world had God at the center of the universe of cultures, implying equality among cultures and the necessarily relative status of cultures vis-à-vis the truth of God. No culture is so advanced and so superior that it can claim exclusive access or advantage to the truth of God, and none so marginal and remote that it can be excluded.²⁵

Furthermore, the very notion of translation also assumes the adaptability of the Christian faith (or Scripture) itself. The Bible might be introduced by foreign missionaries, but the Bible

²² Lamin O. Sanneh, *Translating the Message: The Missionary Impact on Culture* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1989).

²³ Noll, *The New Shape of World Christianity*, 24.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 26.

²⁵ Lamin O. Sanneh, *Disciples of All Nations: Pillars of World Christianity*, Oxford Studies in World Christianity (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 25.

itself is not foreign to the local recipients who accept its claim and teachings and adopt them in their own contexts. Along with Sanneh, Philip Jenkins has also been vocal about this. He argues that “[t]here must have been a great deal more to Southern Christianity than the European-driven mission movement,” or else Christianity would have contracted when European colonization came to an end.²⁶ While admitting the role of the foreign missionary in the way in which Christianity and its Scriptures have been appropriated by the local recipients, Jenkins offers a balanced perspective on the issue, which is often lost in today’s rhetoric of colonialization. His illuminating discussion is worth quoting in full:

We must be cautious of perpetuating stereotypical notions of the white missionary drilling his ideas into the heads of his obsequious native listeners, almost literally at gunpoint. While missionaries began the process of Christianization, they had little control over how or where that path might lead. As we trace the spread of Christianity across Africa and Asia from the nineteenth century onward, we see the role of grassroots means of diffusing beliefs, through migrants and travelers, across social and family networks. As it passed from community to community, the message was subtly transformed. Missionaries might introduce ideas, but these would only succeed and gain adherents if they appealed to a local audience, if they made sense in local terms. Sometimes missionaries themselves were appalled at the radically different and radical forms that the Christian message took as it was absorbed into local societies.... At the same time, ideas that clashed with local sensibilities failed to develop local roots, most obviously the injunctions to be faithful subjects of the respective colonial empires. Missionaries could successfully introduce the Christian framework and the texts that supported it, but once they had done so, these beliefs acquired lives of their own.²⁷

Indeed, as Gerald West’s studies on the Bible in Africa have shown, African Christians generally perceive the Bible as “their own Scripture.”²⁸ “Africans have not negotiated with the Bible empty-handed, nor have they been passive receptors.”²⁹ To a certain degree, the same can be said for Asian Christians too. David K. Suh of South Korea, for example, maintains that

²⁶ Jenkins, *The Next Christendom*, 55.

²⁷ Jenkins, *The New Faces of Christianity*, 20.

²⁸ See Gerald O. West and Musa W. Dube, eds., *The Bible in Africa: Transactions, Trajectories, and Trends* (Boston: Brill, 2001); Gerald O. West, *The Stolen Bible: From Tool of Imperialism to African Icon* (Leiden: Brill, 2016).

²⁹ Gerald O. West, “Response,” in *Navigating Romans through Cultures*, ed. K. K. Yeo (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2004), 89.

“Christianity in Korea has been and is thoroughly indigenized into the Korean religious cultures.... The literary Biblical fundamentalism of many Korean Christians is in fact deeply rooted in the old ethos of neo-Confucian literalism rather than in influences from outside sources.”³⁰ The fact of the matter is that in many African and Asian contexts, it is difficult to make the familiar Euro-American argument that the Bible was clearly written for a totally alien society with which moderns could scarcely identify, so that its obsolete teachings and ancient moral laws cannot be applied in the contemporary world. Instead, as I have suggested earlier, cultures that readily identify with biblical worldviews find it easier to read the Bible not just as historical fact, but as authoritative divine address that is relevant for daily guidance.³¹ Thus, with Noll and others, I agree that while Western missionaries have their share of influence—for better or worse, or more likely both—on global Christianity, “the primary agency in recent movements of Christianization has not been the missionaries but the new converts themselves.”³²

Deeper questions now need to be tackled, however briefly: why have many Majority World people converted to Christianity in the first place? And more specifically, why do they accept the Bible as their own Scripture and largely follow the traditional Christian understanding of Scripture? Why do evangelical and Pentecostal forms of Christianity flourish so rapidly in the Majority World?³³ Jenkins answers, “We can suggest all sorts of reasons why

³⁰ As cited in Jenkins, *The New Faces of Christianity*, 21.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 5–6. Or as Andrew Walls once remarked, “there is no need to interpret the Old Testament to Africans, because they are still living in the Old Testament world, a world that has long been dear to African Christians.” Cited in K. K. Yeo, “Biblical Interpretation in the Majority World,” in *The Oxford History of Protestant Dissenting Traditions*, ed. Mark P. Hutchinson, vol. 5: The Twentieth Century (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 147.

³² Noll, *The New Shape of World Christianity*, 106.

³³ Yeo’s observation on this is worth noting: “There are wide-ranging ways in which biblical reading in the Majority World, in contrast to the North Atlantic region, tends to be more respectful to the inspiration of the Bible as the Word of God, and so more respectful of the authority of the Bible in matters of religious and ethical living. Increasingly, lay and congregational readings of the Bible in the Majority World—lived theologies—continue to shape the nature of the Church. More and more, oral and rhetorical ways of understanding the biblical

Africans and Asians adopted Christianity, whether political, social, or cultural; but one all-too-obvious explanation is that individuals... came to believe the message offered and found this the best means of explaining the world around them.”³⁴ The Christian message as embodied in Scripture, in other words, has an intrinsic value that attracts and compels people to itself. This value has something to do with the recipients’ primal worldviews that are similar with the worldview of Scripture, as I suggested above. But there must be something more than just this fundamental similarity between original religious cultures and the biblical faith—otherwise why would one switch from the former to the latter? Again, one can tackle this question from various angles while considering many interrelated factors at play. Contextual factors notwithstanding, theologically, the answer must resort to the work of the Holy Spirit vis-à-vis Christian Holy Scripture. Christian proclamation of the Gospel is widely received by the people because the Gospel is *God’s* power to save people. The (translated) Bible is eventually owned by indigenous receptors because the Bible is God’s very word addressed to them as well. To put it somewhat crudely, Christian faith attracts adherents because Christian faith is true. That, at least, is a comprehensive theological answer that takes into account many of the perplexing dynamics we have been considering. The Christian truth, which is embodied in the person and work of Jesus Christ, has intrinsic value and power to draw people of all races and languages to itself/himself because this truth is the divine Word that created all people in the first place—or “in the beginning.” Thus, forms of Christianity that epitomize the “allness” of this particular Truth named Jesus Christ will gain traction, by virtue of their being truthful, to the faithful,

text—and less reliance on the historical-critical focus of (Post-)Enlightenment issues and methods—determine the view of the Bible as authoritative. There is greater interest in supernatural events in the Bible because of sensitivity to spiritual worlds in which readers live, prioritizing dreams, visions, miracles, exorcism, healing, and prophecy—because of the context of sociopolitical oppression, disease, and poverty/debt—as confirmations of the relevance and authority of the Bible. Biblical reading in the Majority World, in short, is more a source of help and hope for daily living than it is the intellectual speculation on systems of meaning, which it has become in the epistemological crises of nations permeated by Enlightenment thought” (Yeo, “Biblical Interpretation in the Majority World,” 167). Cf. Jenkins, *The New Faces of Christianity*, 4.

³⁴ Jenkins, *The Next Christendom*, 57.

either in the metropolitan city of Jakarta or in the countryside village of Xiamen. Likewise, forms of reading the Bible that epitomize the ontological relationship between the Word and Scripture, and thus emphasize the “allness” of the Scriptures as God’s omnipotent word, will gain the attention of the faithful across the globe and across time, from the earliest church to the present, drawing together the Bishop of Hippo and the *Nenek* of Indonesia.³⁵ In the final analysis, these ways of reading the Bible have this power of assembly across space and time because God is present in the reading itself and he is not silent, and because God’s word is living and active, and it does not return void. The word of God, instead, forms an eschatological people of his own, gathered from every nation and from all tribes and tongues, which is called the church. And this church will be faithful to the Lamb of God and to his word.

³⁵ For more on the notion of the “allness” of Scripture, see Radner, *Time and the Word*.

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