

Spiritual Authority, by Watchmen Nee **Critiqued by Patrick J. Knapp**

My wife and I had spent 13+ years, 1970-1984, enraptured in an aberrant group called "Bethel Christian Fellowship." The group meet in various homes over the years, claimed to be a truly "New Testament" church, shunned outside believers, encouraged, and in most cases demanded separation from parents and friends outside the membership, heavily controlled peoples relationships within the group, and generally acted aberrant (see Aberrant Christianity for a definition of this term).

In January 84' we left and found ourselves very much in need of addressing "recovery" issues. In the years since we left, we've had to tackle many problems surrounding our involvement.

One of the key questions we have struggled with is why we involved ourselves in the first place. Looking back there were many unresolved dysfunctional family and co-dependent issues that we had never heard of, let alone addressed. There were also many issues as to what we believed about God and more particularly how He operates that brings me to the subject of this paper.

The central theological issue in the group that we exited had to do with the nature of spiritual authority. The key book which was pushed within "Bethel" was Watchmen Nee's *Spiritual Authority*. My purpose in critiquing this book is two fold:

- 1) Building a more articulate framework for my own healing and
- 2) Developing a practical paper to help others who have been greatly harmed by many of the false notions contained in this book.

I will critique this particular work from a perspective of what the logical consequences of the theology and teaching are, describing what I believe is an extremely dysfunctional way of relating to God and to people. My purpose is not to address the book from a theological or Biblical approach, but from a psychological perspective. I will then present what I consider to be a healthier approach to addressing what is True "Spiritual Authority" and offer the reader some suggested texts for further reading.

Background

To understand the significance of *Spiritual Authority* it is helpful to have a brief overview of Watchmen Nee himself and the cultural climate he was effected by.

Nee To-Sheng, or Watchman Nee, was a Chinese Christian who lived from 1903 to 1972. He became a Christian in 1920 while attending college. Nee's disenchantment with the sterile formalism of his Christian education led him to help start a "house church" of the Plymouth Brethren in Foochow, China in 1922. In 1927 Watchman Nee founded a church movement which was called the "Little Flock." By 1949 the Little Flock had over 70,000 members in 500 assemblies.(1)

The cultural climate itself was essentially anti-intellectual and during Nee's early ministry years: Throughout China there were anti-foreign demonstrations and kidnappings. Most missionaries had returned temporarily to their home countries. The future of mission-founded churches was uncertain. Many Chinese pastors had severed their links with western missions....

On the 10th April, 1952, in the middle of the "Accusation period" in China when dozens of pastors and workers were falsely accused before vast crowds in the various city centers, Watchman Nee was condemned by a Communist court and sent to a small cell in the Shanghai First Municipal Prison.(2)

Spiritual Authority

It was prior to his imprisonment in 1948 in Guling and Fuzhou that he gave his addresses on "Spiritual Authority" in which we see the final evolution of his ecclesiology.

Nee states:

"If God dares to entrust His authority to man, then we can dare to obey. Whether the one in authority is right or wrong does not concern us. The obedient one needs only to obey. The Lord will not hold us responsible for any mistaken obedience, rather He will hold the delegated authority responsible for his erroneous act" (SA, p.71).

Note that when Nee speaks here of God delegating authority, he is speaking of it as an absolute form. It is as if God Himself were giving the direction, command or whatever. He sees both delegated authority and direct authority as having the same level of power and importance to the Christian.

Moreover, he states, *"We should not be occupied with right or wrong, good or evil; rather should we know who is the authority above us"* (SA, p.23).

These two statements sum up what Nee defines as true "Spiritual Authority." Authority (delegated and direct authority by God) is given not only top billing but absolute, nearly exclusive importance.

The latter is seen in statements like:

"Sin against power is more easily forgiven than sin against authority, because the latter is a sin against God Himself. God alone is authority in all things; all the authorities of the earth are instituted by God. Authority is a tremendous thing in the universe—nothing overshadows it. It is therefore imperative for us who desire to serve God to know the authority of God" (SA, p.10).

He goes on further saying, *"If this matter of authority remains unsolved, nothing can be solved"* (SA, p.23).

Nee has had much to offer in his example of uncompromising commitment to God in the area of obedience, however he does us a disservice when it comes to understanding human nature and its makeup.

Nee believed that human nature is tripartite (body, soul, and spirit). This emphasis in his teaching plays a major role in his determining how God works his grace in humanity. Because of his emphasis on the "spirit" of a person being the only source by which we can communicate/relate with God, subjectivity reigns throughout this book.

When determining how authority is to be expressed he says,

"there must be subjection. If there is to be subjection, self needs to be excluded; but according to one's self-life, subjection is not possible this is only possible when one lives in the Spirit. It is the highest expression of God's will" (SA, p.14).

How does one acknowledge and recognize authority? It *"requires a great revelation"* (SA, p.16) and again *"not a matter of outside instruction but of inward revelation"* (SA, p.38). While inward revelations are certainly good and necessary, so is using our reason in order that we find Truth regarding our world in which we live.

But, Nee further states, *"It is very true that we need to have the eyes of our reason put out in order to follow the Lord. What governs our lives? Is it reason or is it authority? When one is enlightened by the Lord he will be blinded by the light, and his reason will be cast aside"* (SA, p.93).

His supposed eradication of reason is again expressed in saying:

"I am beginning to learn that God often acts without reason. Even though I do not understand what He does I still learn to worship Him, for I am but a servant. Had I understood all His ways, I myself would have sat on the throne. But once I see He is far above me—that He alone is the God on high—I prostrate in dust and ashes, all my reasonings disappearing. Henceforth authority alone is factual to me; reason and right and wrong no longer control my life. He who knows God knows himself and therefore is delivered from reason" (SA, p.97).

The logical consequence is that you receive the distinct message of, do not think or think only so far as to obey the one who is your "delegated authority," and don't seriously question him. So according to Nee, "inward revelation" has priority over the rational mind as God cannot use our soul (rational mind) as it is part of our fallen nature.

Our nature requires that we make extensive use of our mental capacities. Nee feels reason is to be cast aside, but uses reason throughout this book to prove his point. So when one is up against this inconsistency how can we respond but to distrust ourselves? When we are hurt by those "delegated authorities" over us, emotionally, physically, financially, or spiritually how can we respond but in submission (if we are to be acting "in the Spirit")? One learns, in such situations, to mistrust others. We are also given the direct or indirect message that we really can't trust

ourselves and must rely on others to interpret our reality and become well behaved little "codependents'."

Don't think and don't trust, certainly what follows is don't talk about the conflict as you will be as Korah (Numbers 16) or Miriam (Numbers 12). Nee uses the rebellions of Miriam and those at Korah as prime examples of what happens when one doesn't submit to those that God has set up as "delegated authorities."

Nee writes further, *"Authority being the most central thing in the whole Bible, reviling against it constitutes the gravest sin. Our mouth should not talk inadvertently. As soon as we meet God our mouth will be under restraint; we will not dare rail at authorities"* (SA, p.91).

In order to cope with the don't think, don't trust, and don't talk you must, of necessity, learn not to feel to survive in the group.

Nee acknowledges a devaluation of ones feelings when he states:

"Authority is set up to execute God's order, not to uplift oneself. It is to give God's children a sense of God, not to give a sense of oneself. The important thing is to help people to be subject to God's authority.... Let us too be delivered from personal feeling, for the presence of it will damage God's affairs and bind God's hand" (SA, p.131).

More significant yet, Nee denies the necessity of legitimate emotions in describing the role of those who are "delegated authorities."

Nee writes:

"Let us therefore have a thorough dealing before God with respect to our being sanctified from the rest of the people. The world and ordinary brothers and sisters may continue their family affections, but God's delegated authorities must maintain the glory of God. They ought not set loose their own affections and act carelessly or rebelliously; rather, they must praise the Lord for seeing His glory.

Those who serve are anointed by God. They should sacrifice their own affections, denying even legitimate ones. All who would maintain God's authority must know how to oppose their own feelings, how to lay aside the deepest of their affections towards their relatives, friends, and loved ones. The demand of God is exacting: unless one lays aside his own affections he cannot serve God" (SA, p.183).

Let's pretend then our feelings don't matter, as well as making a distinction between what God requires from those "delegated authorities" and the "ordinary brothers." **It sounds like a parent relating to very small children.** The problem here is that with this system, people must always (if to be "in the Spirit") remain a dependent child never truly growing up and living a life of continually pretending.

How about our relationship with God, how does that suffer? Simply put, we learn that God does not require us to be fully responsible for our actions and that He expects "blind faith." Our servant hood toward man and God becomes robotic, denying our very nature. As people are abused by such "delegated authorities" and yet hold to this theory of spiritual authority God becomes someone who hates a great deal or who just doesn't listen to his children's real thoughts and feelings. He becomes distant and a father figure to be avoided or actively fought (depending on the individual).

In working with many who have come out of groups advocating this form of spiritual authority, all have many resentments and fears toward God as well as authority figures. In addition, they carry the full blame for their "unspiritual feelings" until and if, they identify the real source. The real source is in a shared responsibility: 1) False beliefs being taught by those "delegated authorities" 2) perhaps some level of dysfunctionality originating from their family of origin and 3) choices are made by the individual himself.

On the Upside

What is the nature of True Spiritual Authority? While I have been very critical of Nee's *Spiritual Authority* I must in all fairness acknowledge the common ground I share with him. I would certainly acknowledge that "all authority comes from God" (Rom 13:1).

Second, I agree a high degree of self-denial and servant-hood is necessary, accompanied with an attitude of brokenness and dependence on God.

In SA pp.118-9, Nee clearly acknowledges this need, but he puts it in such a black/ white mindset that it gives little room for personal growth within this area of one's life. He also is inconsistent in his absolute insistence on the authority not being subjective yet denying the need of God revealing truth through our intellect and powers of rationale.

Third, Nee stresses the need for commitment to a consistent daily walk with the God of the universe. While with this I can agree, there are important items that Nee denies or neglects.

Fundamental to leadership is understanding how God works in us and how He works is not always identical with all people, in all times of our history. Central however, is the leaderships' view of God and humanity.

One who would exhibit true spiritual authority, I believe, would hold to a dichotomist's view of human nature, thus valuing the whole person and not devaluating his soul (mind, will, and intellect). There would be a clear vision for balance in the life of one exhibiting this spiritual authority. A black/ white mindset would be seen as a weakness, not as strength. All of us, the "ordinary brother" as well as the "delegated authority" should be seen very much "in process."

Last, but certainly not least, a true leader has a passion for seeing genuine growth take place in others and an acknowledgement of God's grace at work in oneself. The concept of "Authority", as Nee presents it, is not at the heart of such an individual. Instead the desire for the discovery of truth: within the world; with others; with themselves and with God is the heart felt yearning. God

speaking through the apostle Paul spoke of "pressing on" to full maturity in the faith (Phil. 3:12-14), and not remaining as "infants, tossed back and forth" by the waves of life (Eph. 4:14). Because God values all of our *parts* equally, such growth can and will take place.

"being confident of this very thing, that He who has begun a good work in you will complete it until the day of Jesus Christ" (Phil 1:6).

Suggested Bibliography for Further Reading

Being Human: The Nature of Spiritual Experience, by Macaulay and Barrs. Intersity Press, 1978.

Shepherds & Sheep, by Jerram Barrs. Intersity Press, 1983.

True Spirituality, by Francis A. Schaeffer. Tyndale House Publishers, 1985.

Voices From the Fringe, by Ronald Enroth. *Moody Monthly*, Oct. 1989.

The Power Abusers, by Ronald Enroth. *Eternity Magazine*, Oct. 1979.

Integrative Theology, vol.1, by Drs. Gordon Lewis and Bruce Demarest, 1987

Notes:

1) CRI (Christian Research Institute) Watchman Nee handout, prepared by Robert Lyle, 4/89
P.O. Box 500 San Juan Capistrano, CA 92693-0500.

2) *Ibid.*, page 2. (Sadly, CRI has inappropriately reversed their previous negative review of Watchmen and Witness Lee – several internet sources have rebutted their changed perspective).

Note: All Scripture references from: *The New King James Version*. Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1982, unless otherwise indicated.