

MANY MINISTERS OR ONE, UNIQUE MINISTER OF THE AGE? —W. Nee vs. the “Blended Co-workers”

During the past decade LSM’s “blended co-workers” have promoted the concept of one, unique “Minister of the Age.” In the 20th century they identify Watchman Nee and Witness Lee as successive “Ministers of the Age.”¹ Now that Witness Lee has passed away, the “blended co-workers” portray themselves as “Brother We,” the unique continuation of Brother Lee’s ministry. Take Brother Ed Marks’ speaking, for example:²

*“After Brother Lee went to be with the Lord, a brother came to our co-workers’ meeting, looked around and asked, ‘Who is in charge?’ When Brother Lee was here, we all looked to Brother Lee. **Now that Brother Lee was gone, this brother was wondering who the leader was. The leader is Brother ‘We,’ the blended co-workers.**”*

After years of systematic instruction, many local church believers now accept the view that the “Ministry of the Age” has been carried successively by “Brother Nee, Brother Lee and ‘Brother We’.” This is not merely an abstract theological point. Corollaries of this doctrine have serious ramifications for saints and local churches. LSM’s ‘One Publication’ pronouncement (June 2005) and the on-going campaign to purge Titus Chu and his co-workers are repercussions of the unique “Minister of the Age” concept. Because of these measures Christian families and local churches are currently being rent asunder. Brothers who walked together for decades in the way of recovery are becoming estranged from one another. Local church congregations are being fractured and (in some cases) resorting to litigation and the law courts. Federations of local churches through their leaders are pledging allegiance to the “blended co-workers.”

I addressed the uniqueness of the “Minister of the Age” on two previous occasions. One article asked, “What did Watchman Nee Teach?”³ I pointed out that Brother Nee never used the phrase, “the Minister of the Age” and never applied this phrase to previous servants of the Lord (e.g. Luther, Darby) or himself. Rather, Watchman Nee viewed himself as one, among many ministers in his era. The second piece examined, “What do the ‘Blended Co-workers’ Teach?”⁴ In contrast to Brother Nee, the “blended co-workers” affirm there is only one unique “Minister of the Age,” who is the wise master-builder supervising God’s work on the entire globe. These brothers venerate Brother Nee as the unique Minister and master builder in his era. Yet, there is an obvious contradiction between their position and W. Nee’s own teaching on this topic.⁵

DCP’s Tangled Web

The writers at LSM’s Defense & Confirmation Project (DCP) have recently responded with a piece entitled, “The Vision of the Age, the Ministry of the Age, and the Minister of the Age.”⁶ Unfortunately, the DCP-brothers cloud the issues by weaving a tangled web of accusations. They erroneously charge me with redefining the term “Minister of the Age.”⁷ They contend that rejection of a singular “Minister of the Age” is to “*deny the function of the five-talented members the Lord has given to His Body.*” Further, they claim rejection of a unique minister implies that “*all of the [perfected] saints ...would be ‘ministers of the age’.*”⁸ Sadly the DCP-brothers also resort to smear tactics by impugning the motives of myself and other (so-called) “dissenters.”⁹ As these brothers note, I was an academic for years.¹⁰ Participants in that sphere engage in intelligent dialogue from diverse view-points without resorting to personal attacks. I would expect a higher standard to prevail in the Lord’s recovery. However, the DCP-brothers seem unable to rise above the level of partisan debate to confront the real issues. The central issue is—Does God use only one exclusive channel, one unique vessel in each age, whether at the time of Acts, the time of Luther, Darby, of Brothers Nee and Lee or currently in the 21st century? Does the New Testament teach this? Watchman Nee was greatly used in the recent recovery; what did he teach on this topic?

One, Unique ‘Minister of the Age’—What Did Watchman Nee Teach?

What was Bro. Nee’s view? Let’s first establish a few facts based upon Brother Nee’s own writing:

- **FACT:** W. Nee taught there is a ministry (service) in each age. He wrote: “*The particular recovery and work that [the Lord] does in one age is **the ministry of that age.***”¹¹
- **FACT:** W. Nee did not use the term, ‘the Minister of the Age.’ He said, “*Luther was a minister of his age. Darby was also a minister of his age.*”¹¹ Note the indefinite article, “a minister...”

- **FACT:** W. Nee never claimed to be the unique “Minister of the Age.” Rather, he viewed himself, along with others (like T. Austin-Sparks) as one among a number of Ministers of his era.

The supporting evidence does not hinge solely on the meaning of the indefinite article (“a minister...”). The following passage (spoken less than 4 months after the words quoted above¹²) confirms W. Nee did not hold the concept of a singular ‘Minister of the Age.’ He wrote:

*“When God chooses a man to be a minister, and his revelation reaches a certain height, he will become **the ministry of the word in that age...In every age God chooses great vessels to meet His need.** These vessels have learned many lessons and have gone through many dealings. As a result they see what no one else in that generation has seen. **In a certain age God may choose five brothers to see what others in the same age have not seen.** They see a kind of extraordinary revelation.”* (W. Nee, Vol. 60, p. 282)

“God May Choose Five Brothers...in the Same Age”—W. Nee

In the quotation above Watchman Nee relates three crucial items—the Vision, Ministry and Minister(s) of the Age. He refers to the vision (“*They see a kind of extraordinary revelation*”), the Ministry of the Age (“*the ministry of the word in that age*”) and the Ministers of the Age (“*In every age God chooses great vessels*”). Notice, however that Brother Nee refers not to “a great vessel” [singular,] but to “great vessels” [plural] chosen by God to meet His need. Further, Watchman Nee did not assert “*God chooses one person [the unique Minister of that Age] to see what others in the same age have not seen.*” Instead, he illustrates, saying, “*In a certain age **God may choose five brothers** to see what others in the same age have not seen. They see a kind of extraordinary revelation.*” In W. Nee’s example, these “*five brothers*” are surely five “Ministers of the Age.” Watchman Nee’s writings clearly support the possibility of multiple ministers in an age. Conversely, they imply rejection of the notion that a singular “Minister of the Age” is the norm.

“Neither a One-Man Ministry, Nor an ‘All-Men’ Ministry”—W. Nee

It is clear that Watchman Nee envisioned multiple ministers in an age. His rejection of a singular Minister of the Age does not imply “*all of the [perfected] saints...would be ‘ministers of the age’.*” (as the DCP-brothers allege.) Rejecting one Minister of the Age does not mean every believer is a minister of the age. That false dichotomy, introduced by the DCP-brothers, only clouds the issue. As Brother Nee stated concerning ‘the ministry,’¹³ “*This ministry is entrusted to a group of people... It is neither a one-man ministry, nor an ‘all-men’ ministry...*” Brother Nee’s view concerning the “Ministry of the Age,” was that it is neither a one-man ministry, nor an all-men ministry. Rather (according to Brother Nee,) the “Ministry of the Age” is a “Many-Men Ministry.” This is consistent with the Apostle Paul’s word, “Therefore having **this ministry** (singular) as **we** (plural, the ministers) have received mercy...” (2 Cor. 4:1).

This view of multiple ministers contrasts sharply with the “blended co-workers” teaching of the uniqueness of the Minister of the Age. Consider Bob Danker’s statements, published on an LSM-endorsed website:¹⁴

*“In every age **God does not give His vision...to two men; He gives it to only one man... God does not give other ministers their own light and revelation.** All the ministers in a particular age must enter fully into the vision of that age, speak only the contents of the unique vision...This is a strong principle that holds in every age, including today.”*

Here is a strong claim of exclusivity—God gives His vision to “**only one man...God does not give other ministers their own light and revelation.**” To the “blended co-workers,” the “Ministry of the Age” is a one-man ministry, belonging exclusively to the unique Minister of the Age. In their view other ministers should serve as “tape recorders” reiterating his words. A stringent application of this view implies that any teaching other than this is a “different teaching” to be denounced; any other publication is a distraction to be terminated and any other minister (who appears to teach differently,) should be quarantined! Yet this is not the New Testament pattern. Paul was not a “tape recorder,” repeating Peter’s messages; nor vice versa. Even Stephen’s message in Acts 7 was not a repetition of Peter’s ministry. Rather, Stephen had his own distinctive style and ministry, divinely endorsed through its inclusion in the New Testament canon.¹⁵

God’s Instruments for His ‘Dispensational Moves’

The DCP-brothers seek to establish that Luther and Darby were each uniquely the Minister of the Age. Focusing exclusively on W. Nee's one-page, 300-word exposition on the Ministry of the Age, they say:¹⁶ *"It is noteworthy that in Brother Nee's identification of Luther as "a minister of the age" and of Darby as "a minister of the age," there is no overlap and **no one else identified as a minister of their respective ages**, even though there were many others serving and speaking contemporaneously with them."* Strictly speaking the DCP-writers are correct in saying "no one else [is] identified [in this particular one-page article] as a minister of their respective ages." However, why would anyone limit themselves solely to this one piece, when W. Nee talks about Luther and Darby extensively elsewhere? Are the DCP-writers being fair? Are they doing justice to Bro. Nee?

"Darby, Groves, and Grant were God's instruments"—W. Nee

Elsewhere, W. Nee used the term "dispensational instrument" to describe the vessels God uses to change the age. This term is surely related to the idea of "Minister of the Age." In Brother Nee's own words, he says,¹⁷ *"When God changes His attitude towards a certain matter, He makes a dispensational move. Every dispensational move brings in God's new way....How can God bring this age to a close and bring in another? He must have a dispensational instrument..."* Looking at the last 500 years, W. Nee says,¹⁸ *"In church history the first special move was the Reformation. God used Luther in this dispensational move. **The Brethren were also used. Darby, Groves, and Grant were His instruments.**"* It is noteworthy that when Watchman Nee talks about God's move in the 19th century among the Plymouth Brethren, he does not refer exclusively to John N. Darby. Rather W. Nee says: *"Darby, [Anthony N.] Groves, and [F. W.] Grant were His instruments [plural]."* This confirms his speaking elsewhere that¹⁹ *"among the brothers, the number of all who were greatly used by the Lord would exceed at least a thousand."* When measured against Brother Nee's other expositions of the British Brethren, the DCP-brothers' assertion that: *"there is no overlap and no one else identified as a minister of their respective ages" is false.* On the contrary, A. N. Groves and F. W. Grant are identified (in addition to Darby) as "dispensational instruments." Hence, Darby is viewed, by Bro. Nee, as "a minister of his age," and not "the Minister of the Age."

God's New Move--Evan Roberts & Mrs. Jessie Penn-Lewis

Moreover, when Brother Nee considers the early 20th century he says,²⁰ *"After the Welsh revival, a new move of God began. Both Evan Roberts and Mrs. Penn-Lewis knew about spiritual warfare; they knew how to deal with Satan. ...Every time God wants to make a dispensational move, He must obtain His instrument."* It is significant that Brother Nee referred to two of the Lord's servants, Evan Roberts and Mrs. Jessie Penn-Lewis. They were contemporaries whose lives and ministries overlapped.

Luther—Representative of the Recovery in the Reformation

Lastly, to return to Martin Luther, W. Nee wrote,¹⁸ *"In church history the first special move was the Reformation. God used Luther in this dispensational move."* Taken in isolation, it seems from this that Luther was alone. Yet, elsewhere, Bro. Nee clearly indicated that Luther was not alone.²¹ *"God's work of recovery began with Martin Luther. ...This, of course, **does not mean that the recovery began with Luther alone.** At the same time that he was raised up, **other people saw the same things that he did.** He is merely taken as representative of the recovery of that age."* In the same vein, W. Nee writes,²² *"**this does not mean that only Luther** made progress towards recovery. Among his contemporaries, there were **others who saw the same thing.** Luther was a representative of God's recovery work in that age."* Although Bro. Nee does not name specific people, it is crystal clear that Luther had contemporaries who saw the same things and also "made progress towards recovery." Hence, Martin Luther "is merely taken as representative of the recovery of that age."

We regard²³ *"Brother Nee as a unique gift of the age given by the Lord..."* As such his writings are foundational. Hence recent theological innovations—like one "Minister of the Age," and "one master builder who is the acting God"—should be evaluated against them. Watchman Nee's views on the Ministry of the Age and of Church History do not support the LSM—"blended co-workers'" teaching about one, unique "Minister of the Age." The "shoe does not fit"! Only by performing a drastic amputation on Brother Nee's writings can the DCP-brothers force his ministry

into their "unique Minister of the Age" mold. This fact should sound an alarm and raise the question whether this is an extra-biblical "wind of teaching."

Nigel Tomes, December, 2006

NOTES:

1. For example: "***In the twentieth century the minister of the age was Watchman Nee and then Witness Lee as the continuation of Watchman Nee. These brothers were ministers of the age. There is no doubt about this.***" [***The Ministry***, vol. 9, no. 6, June 2005, p. 114, emphasis added]
2. The DCP-brothers assert, "*The dissenters also attack the speaking of Ed Marks when he said that with the departure of Brother Nee and Brother Lee, the responsibility for carrying out the vision of the age now rests with "Brother We," meaning all of the saints in the Lord's recovery.*" They cite Ed Marks, as defining "Brother We" in terms of "all the members, the one-talented ones." (***The Ministry***, vol. 7, no. 6, August, 2003, pp. 14-15). However, consider the statement quoted above (also by Ed Marks) "*After Brother Lee went to be with the Lord, a brother came to our co-workers' meeting, looked around and asked, "Who is in charge?" When Brother Lee was here, we all looked to Brother Lee. Now that Brother Lee was gone, this brother was wondering who the leader was. The leader is Brother "We," the blended co-workers.*" [Ed Marks, ***The Ministry***, vol.8, no. 6, p. 214] This statement unambiguously equates "Brother We" with the "blended co-workers."
3. "One, Unique "Minister of the Age"? – What Did Watchman Nee Teach?" (November, 2005) on <http://www.concernedbrothers.com/MA/Minister%20Of%20The%20Age.pdf>
4. "One, Unique 'Minister of the Age' – What do the "Blended Co-workers" Teach?" (May, 2006) on http://www.concernedbrothers.com/MA/BlendedCo_workersTeachMinisterOfTheAge.pdf
5. My article on "What Did Watchman Nee Teach?" concluded with the words: "*Recent LSM publications have assigned the title, "Minister of the Age," to Watchman Nee. However, we should ask, would Watchman Nee have accepted this designation? We think not. His own writings suggest that **Brother Nee would have rejected this designation**, not because of humility, but because it did not match his view of God's recovery work throughout history and in his own era.*" Nothing the "blended co-workers" or DCP-brothers have written thus far has caused me to change this view.
6. "The Vision of the Age, the Ministry of the Age, and the Minister of the Age" Posted on AFaithfulWord.org December 22, 2006 According to the website this article was "written by serving ones in DCP containing extensive answers to dissenting opinions" DCP serving ones are identified as Bill Buntain, Dan Sady, and Dan Towle (DCP President and a "blended co-worker"). The entire article contains 11,000 words (approx. 22 pages). Here we only respond to selected points.
7. Consider DCP's repeated assertions: (1) "*These critics substitute their own watered down definition of 'minister of the age'.*" (2) "*The dissenting ones alter the definitions of these terms, particularly the definition of "the minister of the age," to justify their own agenda.*" (3) "**he has supplied his own definition**, as opposed to using the term as it was defined in the co-workers' fellowship."
8. The DCP-brothers allege: "*the dissenters broaden the term ['Minister of the Age'] to mean **any worker involved in carrying out God's work in an era.***" Later they assert, "*Had the term "minister of the age" been **defined as anyone** participating in carrying out the ministry of the age, then **all of the saints** who have been perfected "unto the work of the ministry" (Eph. 4:12), who are standing with the Lord according to the vision of the age, **would be 'ministers of the age'.***"
9. The DCP-writers repeatedly impugn their "critics" intentions. For example: (1) "*The dissenting ones alter the definitions of these terms, particularly the definition of "the minister of the age," **to justify their own agenda.***" (2) "*These critics substitute their own watered down definition of "minister of the age" in what would appear to be **an attempt to justify applying that appellation to themselves or to a certain worker associated with them.***" [Presumably the "certain co-worker associated with them" refers to Brother Titus Chu.] (3) "*It seems that those who seek to designate "many different ministers of the age" are **seeking to establish their own credentials to lead the Lord's recovery** in a direction different from the one delivered to us by Brother Nee and Brother Lee as the vision of the age.*" May we ask: Since only God knows our hearts, on what basis do these brothers claim to accurately discern the motives and intentions of their brothers?
10. They note: "*The author of this dissenting article is an academic by training...*"
11. Collected Works of Watchman Nee, vol. 57, p. 261

12. Watchman Nee's brief speaking on "The Ministry of the Age" (vol. 57, pp. 260-1) occurred on April 30, 1948 at the Shanghai meeting Hall. The passage quoted below (Vol. 60, p. 282, emphasis added) was spoken less than 4 months later, on August 21, 1948 at the Kuling Training.
13. W. Nee, Normal Christian Church Life, Collected Works of W. Nee, vol. 30, p. 8 The quote in context reads: God "has chosen a number of men for a special ministry—the ministry of the Word for the building up of the Body of Christ. Since that ministry is different from others, we refer to it as "the ministry." This ministry is entrusted to a group of people of whom the apostles are chief. It is neither a one-man ministry, nor an "all-men" ministry, but a ministry based upon the gifts of the Holy Spirit and an experimental knowledge of the Lord."
14. Bob Danker's statement in context reads: "...**in every age God does not give His vision, the design of His building, to two men; He gives it to only one man.** The man who holds the blueprint of God's building and supervises the building work is the **wise master builder; he is the minister of the age. In God's unique work of building His eternal habitation, only the word of the master builder counts.** Anyone who speaks for God in any particular age must speak according to the design and the blueprint that the master builder has unveiled. **God does not give other ministers their own light and revelation. All the ministers in a particular age must enter fully into the vision of that age, speak only the contents of the unique vision, and carry out their portion of the building work strictly according to that vision. This is a strong principle that holds in every age, including today.**" Bob Danker, "On the Minister of the Age and the Wise Master Builder" In "Contributions" on the web-site: AFaithfulWord.org
15. These statements are consistent with Watchman Nee's words: "The character which the Holy Spirit constitutes within man is different from person to person. ...Paul's preaching carried his distinctive features. Peter's message carried his distinctive flavor. His epistles are very different in style from Paul's epistles. John's writings are also different from others' writings. Everyone has his own style. The styles are personal. Yet...the Spirit would take up the style of those who are constituted with Him....God's glory is manifested in man's various styles" (W. Nee, vol. 53, p. 57).
16. DCP's "The Vision of the Age, the Ministry of the Age, and the Minister of the Age" Posted on AFaithfulWord.org. W. Nee's exposition consists of approx. 300 words (vol. 57, pp. 260-1)
17. W Nee, Collected Works, vol. 34, p. 153
18. W Nee, vol. 34, p. 156
19. W. Nee vol. 47, p. 69
20. W Nee, vol. 34, p. 156
21. W. Nee vol. 57, p. 49 emphasis added
22. W. Nee 61, p. 76 emphasis added
23. Witness Lee's biography: "Watchman Nee—A Seer of the Divine Revelation" p. 279.