

TOPIC: “The Minister of the Age”

One, Unique “Minister of the Age”? – What Did Watchman Nee Teach?

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Recently, three topics– “the Vision of the Age”, “the Ministry of the Age” and “the Minister of the Age” -- have been emphasized in the Lord’s recovery. By “Minister of the Age,” we mean a particular servant of God, who accomplishes God’s work in an era, like Noah or Moses in the Old Testament. These three matters – the Vision, Ministry and Minister of the Age -- are conceptually distinct. There can be a unique vision and one ministry in an age, yet, they may not belong to a particular “Minister of the Age.” Hence, someone may agree that there are a vision and ministry in an epoch, yet reject the idea that these belong to a singular “Minister of the Age.” Rather a number of ministers, perhaps widely dispersed over the globe, may share the same vision and ministry in an era. This corresponds with the apostle Paul’s word, “Therefore having **this ministry** (singular) as **we** (plural, the ministers) have received mercy...” (2 Cor. 4:1)

The concept of a unique “Minister of the Age,” has been strongly promoted in recent years. Consider, the following exposition from *The Ministry* magazine published by Living Stream Ministry, “*In every age there is a particular vision. This vision is released **not through many persons but through one person who is the minister of that age. There is the vision of the age, and the one who receives this vision becomes the minister of the age. All the others who are with him are led through this one, ... they speak ... according to the leading of the one whom the Lord has chosen to give the vision of the age.***” (*The Ministry*, vol. 7, No. 6, Aug., 2003, p. 34, emphasis added).

What we wish to examine here, is not mainly “the vision of the age,” and “the ministry of the age,” but, more importantly, the unique person, the “minister of the age.” We should ask, Is this teaching according to the New Testament? However, we defer that question to another occasion. Instead, at this time, we want to pose two questions:

- (1) **Did Watchman Nee teach that there is one, unique ‘Minister of the Age’?**
- (2) **Did Brother Nee see himself as the unique ‘Minister of the Age’?**

“In every Age there is a Ministry of that Age”

In 1948 Watchman Nee briefly addressed this issue. He said “*In every age there is the ministry of that age.*” (*Collected Works*, vol. 57, p. 260). Brother Nee explains “*In every age the Lord has special things that He wants to accomplish. He has His recoveries and His own works to do. The particular recovery and work that He does in one age is **the ministry of that age.***” (57, 260-1) Here brother Nee refers to “the ministry of that age,” explaining that God has a specific work or service He wants to accomplish in each era. He adds, “*It is God’s mercy that a person can see and come into contact with the ministry of that age.*” (57, 261) Clearly, Watchman Nee taught that there was a “Ministry (service) of the Age.” But the question remains, Is there one particular person, a special servant of the Lord, who is **the unique** ‘Minister of that Age’? In the same place Brother Nee says, “*Luther was a minister of his age. Darby was also a minister of his age.*”(57, 260) Note the indefinite article, “**a** minister of his age.” The Chinese can also be rendered, “Luther was **one** minister of his age, Darby was also **one** minister of his age” When directly addressing this issue, Brother Nee

does not refer to either Luther or Darby as **the** unique “minister of the age.” We cannot find a statement by Watchman Nee affirming one, unique “Minister of the Age.”

Martin Luther was not the Unique Minister in his Age

Elsewhere brother Nee elaborates on the theme of recovery in Church history. He says, “*not until the fullness of time did God release certain truths during particular periods of time and cause them to be revealed once more.*” (11, 844) He calls these truths “the present truth” for that era (2 Peter 1:12). Watchman Nee cites the example of Martin Luther saying, “*He was a vessel raised up by God to unveil the truth of justification by faith. ... this truth became the ‘present truth’ in that age.*” (11, 844) Brother Nee emphasises, “*the truth of justification by faith. This was Luther’s particular recovery.*” (11, 845) Yet, (according to Brother Nee) it was not the recovery of Luther alone. Elsewhere Watchman Nee writes, “*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.*” (57, 49 emphasis added) In Watchman Nee’s view, the recovery of justification by faith did not belong to Martin Luther alone. No doubt Luther was important, yet “**other people saw the same things that he did.**” In Brother Nee’s words, Martin Luther “*is merely taken as representative of the recovery of that age.*” Brother Nee does **not** teach (either explicitly or implicitly) that Luther was **the unique** “Minister of his Age.”

John N. Darby was not the Unique Minister in his Age

When Watchman Nee considers “*John Nelson Darby and the revival which he represents,*” he says “*In 1827 a group of people were raised up in Dublin, Ireland. Among them were men like Edward Cronin and Anthony Norris Groves. ... A short time later, ...John Nelson Darby began to ...expound the Bible among them. Gradually, more and more expositors were raised up among them, such as William Kelly, C. H. Macintosh, B. W. Newton, and J. G. Bellett.*” (11, 850) Note that Darby is not presented as a single, isolated “minister of the age.” Rather, (in Brother Nee’s view) Darby was one, among many ministers with the Plymouth Brethren, including Groves, Macintosh, Newton and Bellett, and (we may add) George Muller and Robert Chapman. According to Watchman Nee, Darby was “**a** minister of his age,” and **not** “**the** Minister of the Age.” The evidence suggests that the concept of one unique minister of the age was not held by Watchman Nee. Hence, our answer to the first question, -- **Did Watchman Nee teach that there is one, unique ‘Minister of the Age’? – is “No.”**

Did Watchman Nee consider himself the unique minister of the age?

In recent LSM publications, Brother Nee has been designated “the Minister of the Age.” Consider, for example, the statement, “*The Lord raised up our brother Nee in approximately the first half of the twentieth century. The vision of the age was with him. **He was the minister of the age.***” (*The Ministry*, *ibid*, p. 35, emphasis added) Along the same lines, another brother says, “*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)

In the Lord’s recovery, we all respect and appreciate Brother Watchman Nee. He was a vessel greatly used by the Lord; we are not questioning that. However, we should ask, **Did**

Watchman Nee consider himself the unique minister of the age? Would Brother Nee agree with this designation? Would he accept the title, “Minister of the Age”?

Reviewing his own role in the early twentieth century, Brother Nee says “*From 1926 on, we began to release many messages concerning salvation, the church and the cross.*” (11, 856) He continues, “*Personally, I received much help from Mrs. Penn-Lewis. In England Mr. Austin-Sparks also received help from her.*” (11, 856) “*It was not until 1934 that we realized that ... Christ is God’s centrality and God’s universality. All God’s plan is related to Christ. This is the truth that God is pleased to reveal to us in these days.*” (11, 857) Did Watchman Nee claim that only he saw this? Was this his vision alone? He continues, “*This is what God showed Brother Sparks also.*” and adds, “*One elderly pastor, Dr. F. B. Meyer also saw this matter.*” (11, 857) In 1934, Watchman Nee did not claim to be the unique minister of the age. Rather, he viewed himself, together with T. Austin-Sparks, F. B. Meyer, and others, as ministers (plural) of that age.

This represents brother Nee’s earlier perspective. Fifteen years later, Watchman Nee again surveyed God’s current recovery. In 1948, he recalled, “*It was not until Brother T. Austin-Sparks wrote about resurrection in 1926 ... that the world knew for the first time what resurrection is. When Miss Barber and I read his writings, we began to pay attention to this matter.*” (57, 56-7) Brother Nee continues, “*About 1930 Brother T. Austin-Sparks went on further to see the Body. From that time on, he continued to speak on the Body.*” (57, 59) In 1948 Watchman Nee declared, “*The recovery has reached the stage of the Body. Perhaps this will be the last recovery.*” (57, 60) Again, Brother Nee made no claim that only he saw “the Body.” Rather, he recognized the portions of other New Testament ministers, especially T. Austin-Sparks.

We conclude from our investigation that, even in his later ministry, Brother Nee still valued the revelation of others, notably T. Austin-Sparks. Based upon his own writings, we assert that Watchman Nee did **not** claim for himself a unique status as **the** sole “Minister of the Age.” Rather Brother Nee regarded himself as one, among a number of ministers, carrying out the ministry of that age. Hence, our answer to the second question, -- **Did Brother Nee see himself as the unique ‘Minister of the Age’? – is also “No.”**

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.

NOTE: These are the author’s personal views, not necessarily those of any workers, elders or churches with whom he is associated.

References

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