

Article

The Interpretation of Watchman Nee's Anthropology and Its Corresponding Ecclesiastical Influence in Contemporary Chinese Mainland Churches

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Abstract: Watchman Nee's anthropology has been widely debated and polarized in academic fields. However, Watchman Nee's concept of human and the problem of ecclesiastical practices have often been overlooked in contemporary Chinese mainland churches. In the first three sections, this paper will start from different Chinese mainland denominations' interpretation of Nee's concept of human and their corresponding ecclesiastical practices. On the one hand, through the interpretive attitudes of different denominations toward the "concept of human" and their related ecclesiastical practices, we can see the situation of acceptance of Nee's anthropology in different contemporary Chinese denominations. On the other hand, we can also provide feedback for the academic research on Nee's anthropology from the reality of contemporary Chinese mainland churches. Then, this paper will make a comparison of anthropologies between Luther and Watchman Nee, referring to the current study of Martin Luther and the Third Enlightenment in China. The comparative study of these two men will not only open up new avenues for the study of their theologies but will also serve Chinese mainland churches by utilizing the results of the research on Nee's thoughts and Martin Luther and the Third Enlightenment.

Keywords: Watchman Nee; anthroposophy; interpretive tendency; Luther; Christ-centricism



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1. Introduction

The problem in this paper stems from the lack of practical and theoretical research on Chinese mainland Christian denominations' interpretations of Watchman Nee's concept of human and their related ecclesiastical practices. Watchman Nee's concept of human, as estimated by Jinlun Li, has directly or indirectly influenced the ecclesiastical practices of 70% of the Chinese churches today (Li 2004, pp. 315–16). The aim of Watchman Nee's texts is to provide guidance for the practice of Christian lives rather than academic research. However, the studies on Watchman Nee have generally been conducted within the theoretical rather than practical framework of systematic theology. Due to the length of this thesis, the author's personal experience in ministry and research, and various reasons, the target respondents of this paper will be limited to different denominations in the house church system that are not recognized by the government but have a wide range of influence. As for the Three-Self Church system, the mid-twentieth-century division with Watchman Nee's system and other house church systems led to a tendency not to mention Watchman Nee's ideas within the Three-Self Church, and at the same time simply to label Watchman Nee's system as a "small group". As a result, there is often a lack of acceptance of Watchman Nee's texts within the Three-Self Church system.

The most controversial part of Watchman Nee's concept of human has been the distinction between the "soul (mind, will, and emotion)" and the "spirit (intuition, conscience, and fellowship with God)". Among Chinese-speaking scholars, those who are extremely negative toward Watchman Nee's anthropology and who have labeled it as a heresy, Liang

(2003, p. 197) and Tang (2003, p. 84) are two famous ones. Correspondingly, Zeng (2012, p. 271), D. Wu (2016, pp. 193–203), J.-S. Hsieh (2018, p. 118), and others have made their own retorts to these extreme critiques. In addition to this, Zhou and Li (2012, pp. 271, 377), Xie (2012, p. 284), and others believe that Nee's anthropology should be viewed objectively in a historical context. However, if we limit ourselves to a rational perspective, while affirming or criticizing Watchman Nee's thoughts, we will overlook the perspective of individual believers and ecclesiastical practices. In this way, although the theoretical part of Watchman Nee's thoughts can be analyzed, the important problematic awareness of faith in Watchman Nee's thoughts will be ignored.

Watchman Nee's anthropology is not only an important dimension of his thoughts but also a central thread in his practical faith and pastoral practices. The first three sections of this paper will discuss the interpretation of Watchman Nee's anthropology in the Reformed Church, the Local Church (地方教会), and the Assembly (聚会处), three widely influential denominations on the mainland. The interpretations in the different denominations will show how the pastoral characteristics and limitations of these three denominations are closely related to Watchman Nee's anthropology. In the pastorates of the extreme Reformed system surveyed, an extreme legalistic anthropology was established by rejecting the "spiritual" dimension of Watchman Nee's anthropology. In the "Local Church" systems surveyed, an extreme humanistic anthropology was established in the pastorates by over-exalting the "spirit" dimension in religion. The problems that arise in the practice of faith as a result of these two denominational interpretations will also be listed in the text. In the following section, the "Christ-centered" anthropology of the congregational system headed by Pastor Yu Hongjie will be demonstrated, as well as the pastoral practices of his denomination through the sovereignty of Christ-centered pastoralism, which will provide a proper interpretation of Watchman Nee's anthropology and avoids the problems of the above two denominations in the actual practice of faith.

Therefore, the interpretation of Watchman Nee's concept of human by different denominations on the mainland is not only significant for research about Nee but is also a clue as to the characteristics (as well as the limitations) of the pastoral practices of these denominations. At the end of this paper, while using Watchman Nee's concept of human to sort out the pastoral thoughts and practices of the different denominations on the mainland, we will introduce Luther's concept of human in the series of studies on "Martin Luther and the Third Enlightenment" (Huang 2023b), which is currently emerging on the mainland. Scholars in this series of studies have compared Watchman Nee's and Luther's faith revolutions in their different times and cultural situations and have found consistency between them (Y.-Y. Wu 2022, pp. 125, 170, 193) because they both exalted Christ-centered anthropology and the way of the tripartite. The current study of "Martin Luther and the Third Enlightenment" rediscovers that Luther's concept of human breaks away from the "soul-flesh" dualism recognized by traditional Lutheran scholarship and gives a conclusion of the Christ-centered "spirit, soul, and flesh" tripartite. This was the original thinking of Martin Luther, which was clearly stated by Luther himself in LW 21:303–304. The conclusion is highly consistent with Watchman Nee's "spirit-soul-flesh" tripartite. In this way, it will bring about a new academic perspective on the comparison of Luther and Watchman Nee and further reveals the importance of Christ-centered anthropology both in theoretical research and in the pastoral practices of the Church. But the reception of Nee's theology is the object of this article. We will take Nee's similarity with Luther's theological anthropology as a point of reference and will not make a thorough comparison between them in this article.

Therefore, in this paper, we will use the theme of anthropology, which refers mainly to the concept of human, to sort out how different contemporary Chinese denominations accept or interpret this theme. The pastoral characteristics and limitations of each denomination can be clearly manifested, and the research on Watchman Nee's thoughts can give feedback and an examination of ecclesiastical practices rather than only purely rational discernment. This will also allow us to examine the problem of Watchman Nee's thoughts

in the context of the practice of faith, and, in the meantime, we will be able to connect the study of Luther's tripartite concept of human, so as to find the consistency between Luther and Watchman Nee, and open up a totally new horizon of research.

2. Prejudice in the Metaphysics of Religion and Legalistic Interpretive Tendencies

Herein, we will focus on the hermeneutic tendencies within the Reformed Church system, which is currently the most intense critic and denier of Watchman Nee's thought in contemporary China. The corresponding investigative materials come mainly from the first author, i.e., the first author's first- or second-hand actual interviews and the textual resources of his training in their theological seminaries, which are not recognized by the government, during the four or five years of the author's personal commitment to the Reformed Church in China.

In these field investigations, the author mainly selected the Reformed Church system in the three provinces of Northeast China, Beijing, Shanghai, and other regions. For the Reformed Church system in the three northeastern provinces, the author has been personally involved in serving in it for several years (2014–2017) and has gone deeper into its internal theological training system. During this time, the author visited different churches within the system and studied in depth the paper resources of its internal training (but because its system is not recognized by the government, its paper resources can only be circulated internally and cannot be published publicly). In addition to personal participation in ministry and several years of listening to and studying the sermons, the author has also personally conducted interviews and dialogs with different pastors and ordinary congregations within this system. In addition to the years of commitment in the Reformed churches in the three northeastern provinces mentioned above, the author also conducted interviews and dialogs with Reformed pastors and scholars in Beijing, Shanghai, and other important cities over several years. And the exposition of Watchman Nee's theology of man, which will be developed in this section, has consistent acceptance in all of the Reformed churches mentioned above. Therefore, it can be said that the content of this section is universal and consistent throughout the Reformed churches in mainland China.

Moreover, it needs to be emphasized in this paper that the author is neither able to represent all of the Reformed churches in mainland China, nor does he intend to provide a holistic examination of the Reformed Church's ecclesiastical (including pastoral) situation in all these regions. In the author's choices, the central point to be highlighted is their tendency to interpret Watchman Nee (and their ecclesiastical practices), which is widely spread in the Reformed Church cultural circles in mainland China with which the author has come into contact. And the back of this interpretive tendency is supported by an "extreme" pastoral system behind it (the voices of which are now more and more characterized as an "extreme Reformed Church" culture of religious, spiritual violence).

On the one hand, Watchman Nee's concept of human in his book *The Spiritual Man*, according to what has been said, has influenced about 70% of the Chinese churches. On the other hand, according to Fuchu Zhou and Yiyun Wu, Watchman Nee's concept of humanity's central motivation is to serve the practice of the faith, and therefore needs to be "de-jargonized" and "de-theologized". This is necessary in case it is easily twisted and misinterpreted and needs to be examined in a comprehensive and complete manner in the light of all of his writings (Y.-Y. Wu 2022, pp. 241–45). However, amidst the extreme religious cultural background described in the previous paragraph, an objective and dialectical way of interpreting Nee is often lacking. Among these, Jialin Liang's attacks on Watchman Nee's thoughts are the most intense and extreme. Moreover, some of these extreme negative views have been spread by well-known pastors, such as Chongrong Tang, and have gained wide influence and acceptance.

In the author's personal surveys and interviews of all the Reformed churches, Watchman Nee's thoughts are often denied in the same derogatory and negative manner as the above views (and are uniformly labeled as the "Little Flock" as a derogatory term). In the teaching of their pastoral and internal Reformed theological training systems, the critical

viewpoints led by Jialin Liang are often accepted wholeheartedly by their students. In Liang's critique, Watchman Nee's concept of human basically equals an anti-intellectual, anti-rational mysticism that relies only on "emotion" and "shouting". The most extreme view in the critique, which some extreme Reformed believers accept without reservation, is the outright condemnation of Watchman Nee as a heretic and as being approximately equivalent to gnosticism, and this extreme condemnation has now been widely criticized ([About He Qiwei and His Statements 2020](#)). Therefore, according to this kind of interpretation, the "spiritual life" dimension of Watchman Nee's concept of human is totally rejected. In the author's contact with many churches and pastors from Reformed backgrounds, Watchman Nee's concept of human has basically been damned, and there are very few people who have looked at Watchman Nee's primary spiritual writings seriously and studied them carefully. Even among those who have read his original writings, they tend to have preconceived and established critical conclusions, filtered through colored glasses¹.

In the author's interviews with various pastors within this system, and also in the Reformed Church's internal theological training, the reason for this interpretation and criticism, and what it relies on and trusts in, is metaphysical anthropology, which is called "reformed knowledge" and a corresponding system of religious practices/laws. The irony of such an approach for pastoral and faith practices is that, after Christians are saved, they no longer need Christ, although they insist that people are saved by the grace of Christ alone. The pastoral practices advocate a whole set of self-inflated legalism and religious practices. They consider justification as the work of Jesus Christ, and sanctification has been understood by them as the works of Christians rather than the works of the Holy Spirit (Galatians 5:22–23). Such an interpretation differs totally from Martin Luther, who understands justification and sanctification as non-separated divine works of Jesus Christ, even though sanctification often seems to be the human work of Christians ([Huang 2023a](#)).

The so-called "good Christians" and "reformed Christians" are those who day after day learn the metaphysical theories of their own systems and at the same time fulfill their daily prayers and Bible readings' as their "religious requirements", as well as regularly complete their church ministries, evangelism, and other "religious tasks". If a Christian does not fulfill these "religious tasks" and does not meet the requirements of this rule, he is a "Christian who needs to be corrected" and is a "bad Christian". Such pastoral practices have given rise to many smug "popes" who take pleasure in belittling and attacking other denominations every day and who think that they are "glorifying God" when they go around cursing and condemning other denominations. Such behavior is not different from the Pharisee in the Gospels who counted the number of religious tasks he had accomplished before God and then despised the tax collectors from on high².

These kinds of power of condemnation and religious systems that spawn proud and inflated religious inquisitorial-style discourse are also spreading online through the internet among the Chinese world. Within the author's contact, many Christians of other denominations have strongly resisted this "culture of reformation" through the internet, which has been hurled around³. This opposition between Pharisees and tax collectors is likewise the opposition between the Roman Catholic theology of Glory and the Lutheran theology of the Cross, between anthropocentrism and Christocentrism during the time of Luther's Reformation in the 16th century.

In the author's several years of listening to sermons within his system, it was very common for a Sunday sermon to be spent attacking other denominations. In fact, in the Sunday worship of related churches to which the author has long been exposed and involved, the majority of a Sunday sermon is often devoted to hurling insults at other denominations and churches or convicting certain believers because these believers have not recently fulfilled this set of "religious requirements"⁴. A typical case is an author's conversation with a pastor who is self-reflective in this religious system. This pastor made it clear that those who are bound by this system of religious legalism may be faced with the suffering of others in front of their eyes, but in their minds, they are thinking about some of "reformed" theological discernment, i.e., they seem to have "divinity" but there is no "humanity" in

them⁵. Christ's grace on the cross condescends to be a substitute for every one of us who is guilty of sin, so that everyone who labors and carries heavy burdens does not need to be condemned again. But this system of "religious practices" implicitly expresses the idea that, after salvation, one no longer needs Christ but only one's own will and rationality to achieve self-sanctify.

Professor Jialin Liang has been largely recognized as an attacker of Nee in such a religious culture, and his various criticisms have created a great impact; however, many later scholars find that his criticisms actually lack depth (Y.-Y. Wu 2022, pp. 238–48). In particular, accusations of plagiarism, immorality, etc. about Watchman Nee were not based on serious facts but were more like "convictions for the sake of convictions". Watchman Nee himself has clearly stated, "What we deplore in our hearts is that some of God's children like to falsely say what is wrong with man and then attack that wrong with all their might" (Nee 2005, pp. 8–9). And Jialin Liang himself has made it clear that he does not reflect on others' criticisms about himself but rather that the criticisms of others make himself feel that these attacks are valuable in bringing him "a sense of joy" (Liang 2003, p. 96). This kind of "self-righteousness" is not a matter of knowledge but of the heart. This kind of "self-righteousness" has similar characteristics to those "extreme Reformed Church persons": while their mouths are lofty in order to glorify God, in reality their inner motives may be self-glorification, and they may take great pleasure in abusing people and defeating them.

This self-righteous "bottom-up" path of religious practices, according to Associate Professor Q (one of mainland China's experts on studying the extreme Reformed system), is essentially no different from Catholic monasticism and the theology of Glory; from Calvin onwards, this ideology implies a reversion to Catholicism⁶. Such a religious culture is highly consistent with the Catholic theology of Glory and its system of religious administration was centrally targeted by Luther's Reformation. In the author's conversation with Associate Professor Quan Li, who has personally experienced the "invasion and Reformation" of this religious law, he considers its violence to be "religious fascism"⁷.

It should be emphasized again that this article does not refer to all of the Reformed churches in contemporary China, nor does it intend to reject the ideas of the Reformed Church entirely. In the course of the author's actual fieldwork and Church services, the author has also come into contact with many Reformed Church believers who have a favorable attitude toward Watchman Nee's thoughts. What is emphasized in this paper, as can be found at the beginning of the title, is the general hermeneutical tendency and corresponding ecclesiastical (including pastoral) practices embedded in many of the churches that subscribe to the "extreme Reformed background" in the cities that the author has participated in and surveyed. This tendency is in no way equated with any specific person or church.

To summarize, in this hermeneutical tendency and pastoral practices, Watchman Nee's thoughts are first "filtered" through their own creed, that is, intellectual-metaphysical presupposition. What such a hermeneutical tendency perhaps needs most is probably Watchman Nee's original thesis about faith, namely, whether all that we do and say after salvation is really in relationship with Christ. As mentioned above, the more one "learns" in the metaphysical system of knowledge, and the more one participates in the religious "work", the more one's outward behavior may be directed toward a level of life that merely glorifies one's own self. The squeeze on the spiritual life brought about by an inflated ego can only lead to a believer's falling away from his or her relationship with Christ.

In the next section, another hermeneutical tendency that will be discussed is completely opposite to the "extreme Reformed Church". If the hermeneutical tendency represented in this section is an extreme devaluation and rejection of Watchman Nee's concept of human, the "Local Church" system of Taoshu Zhu, Witness Lee, and others that is discussed in the next section is an absolute exaltation and non-dialectical acceptance of Nee's concept of human. In this absolute acceptance, although the emphasis is on whether or not

the believer's words and actions are "spiritual" and whether or not they are in connection with Christ, there is also an implicit expression of "self-righteousness".

3. The Tendency to Interpret "Spiritual Practices" in the "Local Church" System and Its Pastoral Practices

The church system initiated by Watchman Nee has been passed on to the present day for almost a century, and it is difficult to keep track of all the different branches, both large and small. However, in recent years on mainland China, the "Assembly" (juhuichu 聚会处) and "Local Church" (difang jiaohui 地方教会) have become more prominent in terms of numbers and influence. The believers, who split off because of Witness Lee, often called themselves the "Assembly" (juhuichu 聚会处). On the one hand, the Witness Lee system and the Taoshu Zhu system, which subsequently split from the Witness Lee system, often called themselves the "Local Church" (difang jiaohui 地方教会). The pastoral practices and the theology of scripture of the "Assembly" in various places were completely separated from the "Local Church" system. On the other hand, the system of Taoshu Zhu and others, although split from the system of Witness Lee, both call themselves "Local Church" and retain a great deal of consistency in their pastoral practices. The author has personally witnessed that its internal seminary teachers still use Witness Lee's "Recovery Bible".

The "Local Church" system that will be discussed in this section is one in which the author has also been committed and involved in ministry for several years (2017–2019). During these years of service, the author moved around and came into contact with this system's churches in Shenyang, Dalian, Beijing, Shanghai, and other places, and was devoted in its internal theological training system for a long time. In the course of attending and training, the author also conducted in-depth interviews and communications with pastors and ordinary believers of different churches. Similarly, the pastoral events of the system that will be exhibited in this section are also based on the author's personal experience and participation. On this basis, the interpretation of Watchman Nee's theology of man by the different churches in his system also shows the same consistency.

In all of the churches that the author surveyed in this system, the "spirit" dimension of Watchman Nee's concept of human has been placed at the center of their pastoral practices. In fact, in the "Local Church" system of Taoshu Zhu and others, the problems of the "extreme Reformed Church" culture mentioned above are clearly seen and criticized. However, in the pastoral care of their system, the solution to the problems in the "extreme Reformed Church" is a different kind of religious practice, i.e., "spiritual practices". At the same time, it should be emphasized again at the beginning of this section that what has been developed in this paper is only an "interpretive tendency and pastoral characteristic" of different denominational systems and in no way represents all of the churches and believers of that system.

In the "Local Church" system of Taoshu Zhu and others, the distinction between "spirit" and "soul" are mostly emphasized. The importance given to the distinction between "spirit" and "soul" and the dimension of "spirit" is deeply reflected in every aspect. With regard to the problem of extreme religious law, religious dogma, and ego-inflation described in the previous section, the pastoral teaching of the "Local Church" considers that the core of the matter in last section is the fact that these Christians have sunk into the life of the "soul", which is the "mind", "will", and "emotions" of the natural self. Only the spiritual dimension of man, which is "conscience", "intuition", and "communion (or fellowship) with God", can fulfill God's will and is the central dimension in Nee's theory. In Nee's theory, before the Christian's salvation, the human spirit is dead in sin. It is only by the grace of Christ's Cross can the spirit of a person be "resurrected" to receive the new life that comes from Christ. But in the "Local Church" system, what causes great controversy and criticism, is the opposition between the "spirit and soul" and the issue of "continuous spirit practice"⁸.

In this interpretive tendency, the absolute exaltation of the "spirit" dimension and the overemphasis on the distinction between the "soul and spirit" of man have brought about

the effect of pastoral practices, i.e., the absolute exaltation of the “spirit of religion and practice” and the implicit suppression of the so-called “soul life” in daily life. Therefore, even though Watchman Nee’s writings are often re-read in this denomination, the preconceived conclusion of the interpretation has already been predetermined⁹.

During the author’s several years of hearing sermons and studying theology within this system, although the so-called “spiritual life” emphasizes direct communion (or fellowship), intimacy, and enjoyment of God, the “form” of expressing the intimacy with God are also predetermined in the religious operating system. Whether in worship or in the daily lives of believers, if they want to get closer to God and have a deeper relationship with Him, they “must” do six to nine predetermined “religious practices”, which vary somewhat from one church to another church: for example, calling out the Lord’s name in a loud voice over and over again, saying “Amen” in one voice, “enjoying” the Lord’s words, praising out loud, etc. Any believer who wants to have a closer relationship with God must perform this set of regular daily exercises¹⁰.

This pastoral practice of exalting the “spiritual life” certainly has an important value compared to the extreme Reformed Church’s philosophy of binding people to extreme laws and practices. In this system, there are typical cases where the author has met Christians who were previously “tortured” by the extreme Reformed Church’s laws and practices and who were released and established a healthy and lively spiritual relationship with Christ through the renewal of their spiritual life and exercises¹¹.

However, in the author’s survey, it is precisely this “practice system”, that implicitly neglects the fact that we are still “us” after salvation, and that no matter how long we have been “practicing”, we are still under the dominion of sin. Even if a Christian has been saved for a long time, he still needs the Lord to bear his weaknesses and strengthen him. However, in their pastoral teaching, they still equate the grace of the “spiritual” life of Christ with a “humanistic” and pre-determined religious operating system and believe that this operating system can solve all problems of faith. Its understanding of “spiritual life” in anthropology is similarly mixed with a self-sovereign anthroposophical approach and a preconceived metaphysical concept of human.

In this predetermined “humanistic” system of practices, if a believer has a weakness in faith, although it is also advocated to return to their actual spiritual relationship with Christ, how does one enter into the relationship with Christ that is also “absolutized” with this “operating system”. The “absolute” bondage, that is, if a believer feels all kinds of negative emotions, the “path” to return to Christ is to keep “crying out”, “enjoying the Lord’s word”, and other predetermined “self-correcting” behaviors. In the author’s contact with the rest of the pastors, the “spiritual practices” in daily life also incorporate the Chinese breath exercise practice of sinking your breath to the lower belly (*qi chen dantian* 气沉丹田).¹²

And this set of presupposed “human theory” and “exercise system” has also branded itself as a closed metaphysical system, i.e., whenever anyone questions this “operating system” with discernment and reason, they are often labeled as “soulful”, and the “soulful” man does not deserve to discuss “spiritual” issues. In the pastoral practices of this system, they have simply and brutally categorized philosophy, psychology, and other fields of thought as belonging to the “soul” sphere. However, the more one denies the discernment part, the more the discernment part will inevitably turn “ghostly”. The more this system of discipline rejects reasoning and discernment, the more the conclusions presupposed by reasoning in its theories become the implicit hegemony of metaphysical discourse. The evaluation of this system of practices by other sects as anti-intellectualism and mysticism cannot be said to be entirely wrong. Already, Wenyu Xie has written an article specifically to criticize this practice system (W.-y. Hsieh 2012, p. 284).

The absolutization of “spiritual life” in this set of religious practices also brings about an implicit devaluation of the believer’s daily life and work. In the author’s various interviews with the pastors in this system, a “good Christian” is often defined as one who comes to the physical church more often to “practice the spirit”. While believers who are

overly involved in life and work and do not come to “practice the spirit” may be labeled as “non-spiritual” and “bad Christians”. During the interviews, the author seriously asked the pastors concerned how they viewed the status of daily work and life in believers’ faith. The pastors clearly believed that compared to “practicing the spirit”, daily work and life are of secondary importance¹³.

Therefore, with regard to this “concept of human” that absolutizes “external practices” in the “Assembly” system that the author came into contact with, some pastors in the “Assembly” specifically criticized the “Local Church”, expressing that although it is right to pursue spiritual life, their manifestation of “spiritual” life is presupposed to be in the “human” form¹⁴. Another pastor in the “Assembly” interviewed by the author further expressed his concern, stating that all of the extremists, such as the Shouting Sect, Eastern Lightning, and others, have something to do with this practice system of Witness Lee, i.e., the approach that over-exalts the sovereignty of man and the “human spirit”¹⁵.

In next section, this article will expand to the “Assembly” systems, which also have their roots in Watchman Nee’s tradition. Among them, Hongjie Yu’s “Silicon Valley Christian Assembly” will be the first one to be discussed. Although the idea of this system is also directly inherited from Watchman Nee, it has a completely different interpretive perspective from the “Local Church”. Meanwhile, in recent years, the Finnish School of Lutheran Studies and the Sino-European Center at Shanghai University, led by Paulos Huang in arranging the forum on Martin Luther and the Third Enlightenment, have broken through the traditional dualism of Luther’s concept of human. And through the “paradoxical” way of interpreting the concept of human, it has a “tripartite” concept of human, which is more similar to Watchman Nee than traditional Lutheran research.

4. The Christ-Centered Interpretive Tendencies in the “Assembly” Headed by Hongjie Yu

The object of study in this section is the “Assembly” system headed by pastor Hongjie Yu (again, one of the most influential denominations on the mainland). The content presented in this section is also drawn from the author’s church ministry and deep theological study during several years in this system (2019–2024). The interpretation of Watchman Nee’s anthropology and his pastoral thoughts are also consistent in all of the churches in the system. In the “Assembly” system headed by pastor Hongjie Yu, the Christ-centered hermeneutical progression presents an essential difference from the progression of the two sects mentioned above.

In many narrow and prejudiced views, the churches under Watchman Nee’s name are all unified, and there is no separation between the “Assembly” and the “Local Church”. In reality, however, the two are basically separate at present. In the author’s interviews with the “Local Church” systems in Shenyang, Beijing, and Shanghai, there has not been any motivation to engage in deep dialog with the neighboring “Assembly” church systems. In the author’s interviews with pastors in the “Shanghai Assembly”, for example, the pastors said that, among the “Assembly” church system in Shanghai and its surrounding areas, only at the beginning of the twenty-first century had the “Local Church” system of Taoshu Zhu had a dialogue with the “Shanghai Assembly”; however, after that, due to irreconcilable contradictions in the interpretation of Watchman Nee’s anthropology, they have not been in contact with each other for almost twenty years.

Therefore, in fact, many pastors in the “Assembly” system are not only critical of the “extreme Reformed Church” but are also critical of the “humanistic” interpretation of the “Local Church” system. The interpretations of Watchman Nee’s anthropology that the author has come across during his commissions and interviews in the “Assembly” system are generally Christ-centered. Among the “Assembly” churches in different regions, the Silicon Valley Assembly led by Hongjie Yu is the most influential among Chinese Christians in adhering to this interpretive approach. The most significant feature of Hongjie Yu’s system is the online “Cedarwood Training Center” in the last decade or so. With the online platform as the center, the “Assembly” churches led by Hongjie Yu have contacted

and united churches of the “Assembly” system in almost every big city in mainland China and have great influence.

The Christ-centered concept of human held by Hongjie Yu’s “Assembly” system opposes the discussions that separate “spirit, soul, and flesh” into three individual and unrelated parts. In their concept of human, they believe that “spirit, soul, and flesh” should be examined holistically and paradoxically in the Resurrection of Christ. The “spirit, soul, and flesh” are integral and flow out in combination and influence with each other. For example, the “Assembly” opposes the contradiction between “spirit of religion” and the “soul and flesh”, since such a contradiction is a deviation from Christ. And the function of the “spirit” in fellowship with Christ is precisely what needs to be examined in a “paradoxical” way. Like “extreme Reformed humanism”, by denying the “spirit”, the righteousness in Christ after salvation is implicitly denied.

In such an interpretive approach, i.e., while emphasizing the wholeness of the three parts of the anthroposophy, the concept of Christ-centered practice of faith is also emphasized in actual pastoral practices. Most emphasized in sermons and pastoral services is “Christ is all and in all (Col3:11)”. In the teaching of the believers, all legalistic and dogmatic presuppositions of religious metaphysics are rejected by Hongjie Yu’s “Assembly” system, and the believers are encouraged to depart more from religious rituals to practice the life of Christ. And in the practice of faith, the first and foremost thing is to deny and surrender one’s sovereignty to seek Christ’s guidance and witness to His life, that is to say, “from Him, through Him, and for Him (Rom11:36)”.

Central to the practice of Christ-centered faith is the “paradoxical” dimension of the life of faith. After salvation, no matter how long we have believed, it is through the eternal effect of the Cross that Christ condescends to connect with us in the spirit, giving us “righteousness”. At the same time, no matter how long we have believed, we are still all sinners, and “sanctification” by our own will only “add to our sins”, and the Cross of Christ is the only way. The central emphasis in the pastoral care of pastors and in their teaching to believers is not to allow themselves to be immersed in any religious presuppositions or self-justification. Our “efforts” to be holy and perfect will inevitably be mixed with our own sin. Only Christ, through His cross, in His time and way, reveals our limitations and works His righteous life through us. This “paradoxical” conclusion emphasizes “theo/Christocentricism”, negates “anthropocentricism”, and is close to Luther’s emphasis that a believer is simultaneously righteous and a sinner (*simul peccator et iustus*) (Mshanga 2005), which has been especially emphasized in the current study of the Finnish School of Lutheran Studies’ concept of human and in the studies on “Martin Luther and the Third Enlightenment”.

5. The Acceptance of Nee’s Anthropology and the Study of “Martin Luther and the Third Enlightenment” as Complementary

In addition to the interpretation and acceptance of Watchman Nee’s anthropology by the various denominations mentioned above, a tendency to interpret Nee’s anthropology has also arisen in recent years in the academic circles of mainland China and has attempted to serve the pastoral practices of the churches in mainland China. This interpretive tendency comes from the series of studies on “Martin Luther and the Third Enlightenment”. In recent years, the studies on “Martin Luther and the Third Enlightenment” inherited from the Finnish school, led by the Sino-Europe Center of Shanghai University, have broken through the traditional dualistic viewpoint of Lutheran studies in the past and widely promoted the new “Christ-centered” way of the “tripartite” viewpoint (Huang 2022, pp. 30–100). In this way of the latest Lutheran anthropological studies, “Christ-centered”, “tripartite”, and “paradox” are the three most prominent features, which show a high degree of similarity with the Hongjie Yu’s Assembly’s interpretation of Nee. By comparing Watchman Nee’s thoughts with Luther’s, this series of studies hopes to further the dialog between the various denominations in mainland China that are related to Watchman Nee’s thoughts and to serve the pastoral practices of the churches in mainland China

by explicating this approach. Therefore, the interpretive approach of this series of studies is highly relevant to the theme of this paper, both in regard to theology and the pastoral practices of the churches, and therefore this section will be devoted to it.

About the “tripartite” feature in traditional “concept of human” studies, there is a tendency to focus on the functions of each of the three parts, “spirit, soul, and flesh”, and the distinction between “dualism”. However, it is argued in this series of studies that neither can the spirit dimension be completely denied as in the “extreme Reformed Church” nor can the spirit and soul be considered in opposition as in the “Local Church”. The soul is the state of the union of the spirit and the flesh, and both the spirit and the flesh can influence the soul. The separation of the two is the first death, and the second death spoken of in *The Book of Revelation* is the eternal separation of the human spirit from God (Rev. 20:6). As said in the studies on “Martin Luther and the Third Enlightenment”, the difference between the individual human spirit and the Holy Spirit in the third person of the Trinity is something that needs to be clearly distinguished. God and the devil are both spirits, angels and the devil’s minions are created spirits, and a person’s flesh and spirit are both created. Therefore, a person consists of two “entities”, spirit and flesh, and the soul is the “living” state of the combination of the two entities and the soul itself is not an “entity” but a “state of existence” (Huang and Lee 2020; Yang 2023). The actual living life of the believer as both sinner and righteous in Christ needs to be examined in the context of the “paradox” approach, as Luther interprets in the saying of *simul peccator et iustus*. This interpretive approach is very similar to Watchman Nee’s concept of human, which is held by the “Assembly” system, headed by pastors such as Hongjie Yu. At present, the two sides have begun to have a convergence and a dialog.

About the “Christ-centered” feature, the two sides’ critique about the “extreme Reformed Church” system and the “Local Church” system is the paradoxical “Christ-centred” concept of human. As said by the two pastors of the “Assembly” quoted at the end of the previous section, the “Local church” system, while rejecting religious law and rationalism, still absolutizes the religious life of man. The spirit of man, even if it has been saved for a long time, cannot be presupposed to be complete in religion, as the Bible says several times about the “spirit of lies” (1 Kings 22:21-23) and “my spirit faints in me” (Psalm 143:4). In the studies on “Martin Luther and the Third Enlightenment” and the “Assembly” churches’ actual pastoral practices headed by Hongjie Yu, they both advocate a departure from “anthropocentrism”, which focuses on the function of human beings themselves.

About the paradoxical dimension, in the studies on “Martin Luther and the Third Enlightenment” and “Assembly” churches’ practice of faith, the core of the “concept of human” is the “paradoxical” nature of Christ’s Cross, that is, believers are both sinners in the world’s power and righteous in Christ (*simul peccator et iustus*). The believer, as a sinner, no matter how long he has nominally believed, is still dead in sin (Romans 6:2). And a dead man will not respond to all the riches and righteousness, even though they are placed before his eyes. Therefore, it is impossible for a person who is dead in sin to rely on his own abilities and merits to know God. And the believer can only truly submit to God’s will through the Cross of Christ, which allows Christ to replace the believer’s whole person. Therefore, in the ontological dimension of anthroposophy, it is Christ who is the savior, the doer, who actively removes man’s sins and gives him grace, and it is also Christ who causes man to passively accept the Grace and submit to God’s will after salvation. Any mixture of “humanistic” things into the grace of Christ will only leave a gap for self-glorification. Watchman Nee’s words, often quoted in Hongjie Yu’s sermons, are “True work is the outpouring of life, and service that counts is always the living out of Christ”¹⁶. And such a way forward is the same as the summary of Luther’s concept of human in the studies on “Martin Luther and the Third Enlightenment”: “The true work is the outpouring of life that the Father has enabled me to do in my life after Christ. The true work is that the Father causes me to shed the fruits of the Spirit in my life of following Christ, and the service that counts is always Christ living out in me”. (Huang 2021a, 2021b).

Traditional studies of Luther have largely positioned Luther as a religious reformer, ignoring his influence in other fields such as intellectual history. And his concept of human has mostly been identified by researchers as dualism. Further, in traditional Luther studies, his intellectual contribution is often viewed only in a particular denomination at the time of the Reformation. This also limits the possibility of Luther's dialog with other humanistic fields. It is even more unprecedented to compare Luther's thoughts with the mainstream pastoral thoughts of the contemporary Chinese church. Referring to "Luther and the Third Enlightenment", this paper also hopes to focus on the value of Luther's concept of human for the Chinese-speaking church. And there are already some scholars in the study of "Martin Luther and the Third Enlightenment" trying to promote Luther's theory to the Chinese mainland churches in recent years.

On the one hand, Luther's tripartite concept of human is that a person is the unity of body, soul, and spirit. On the other hand, it is hoped that Luther's concept of human will be evaluated in all fields of humanities and in contemporary Chinese churches. The series of studies' core emphasis is on the sovereignty of Christ in the "paradoxical" approach, partially as in the "Assembly" churches headed by Hongjie Yu mentioned above. The central focus of the concept of human should be the paradoxical nature of the believer in Christ. The believer, no matter how long he has believed, is both a sinner and a born-again righteous person in Christ. The believer is both a sinner who relies on his natural self all the time and a new man who is saved and justified by Christ all the time.

Thus, total reliance on Christ and the denial of human sovereignty does not mean the denial of the active and decisive part of the believer, nor is it in any way equivalent to some mysticism that denies the human will. Rather, according to Luther's "paradoxical" way of proceeding, the believer's active life is both part of our old self and part of the Holy Spirit's life. Only the power of Christ can unravel such a paradoxical dimension in life situations. Therefore, the spiritual part of the believer must not depend on his own "spiritual sovereignty", but solely on the Holy Spirit. Even our prayers are the ones done for us by the Holy Spirit with unutterable sighs (Mandoma 2018, p. 88). Also, as stated in Ephesians, "Strengthen the inner being of your hearts according to the riches of His glory by His Spirit".(Eph. 3:16).

6. Conclusions and Prospects

Among the three church systems in contemporary China that are more closely related to Watchman Nee's theology, their interpretive tendencies are completely different and even opposite. These different interpretive tendencies also reflect the pastoral practices and theological framework of the three church systems. Through the limitations reflected in these practices, when its core mixes with anthropocentrism, the pastoral practices related to the anthroposophy tend to inevitably deviate from Christ. Thus, it can be seen through the study in this paper that both the interpretation of Watchman Nee's anthroposophy and the corresponding pastoral practices need to be Christ-centered. At the same time, the dimensions of "paradox" and "tripartite" in frontier Lutheran studies can be of great value to Watchman Nee research and pastoral practices.

Whether in theological thought or in pastoral practices, if one thinks that man himself has any power or sovereignty before God, then the result will inevitably be a deviation from the grace of Christ and will thus be self-justification. Therefore, no matter how long a believer has believed or how long a physical church has been established, he should always see that he is a totally corrupt sinner at the same time, and that the only right way is the grace of Christ and the cross, so that we can no longer rely on ourselves, but live wholly through Christ.

Returning to the history of theological development, the relevance of research on Luther's anthropology to the actual pastoral problems of contemporary Chinese churches cannot be said to be coincidental. For the core problem of Luther's Reformation period was also the proliferation of various "humanistic" tendencies in Catholicism. Whether it is the

theology of Glory or the pastoral practices of the Catholic Church, Luther's core criticism is the problem of human self-righteousness.

The revival of Luther's thoughts at the beginning of the twentieth century because of important thinkers, such as Heidegger and Karl Barth, was also due to this problem. In the nineteenth century, when translations of Luther's original writings from the Weimar edition continued to come out, although Luther's thoughts were constantly being emphasized, researchers were often unconsciously caught up in the framework of the humanistic interpretation of the modern intellectual background. Luther's core concepts, such as "justification by faith", have been incorporated into the interpretive tendency of the subjective approach. Heidegger, Karl Barth, and others re-exalted Luther in order to emphasize the doctrines such as Christ alone and the total corruption of man before God in Luther's thoughts. In Luther's thoughts, the core problem is not any rational analysis or theoretical discernment, but rather that all righteousness and holiness can only originate from Christ; that man, no matter how long he has believed, is still under the power of sin, and the Cross of Christ is the only way for human salvation and sanctification.

Back to the current pastoral issues of the churches in contemporary China, the situation is the same. The consistency of the concept of human between Watchman Nee and Luther in contemporary cutting-edge research and interpretation also indicates that both men have the same problem, namely, the total corruption of man and Christ alone. In fact, Watchman Nee's ministry in his whole life and attitude toward the faith has led some to refer to him as the Luther of the local Chinese church (Y.-Y. Wu 2022, p. 36). Through the concept of human, it is also possible to see more clearly the consistency between Watchman Nee and Luther. On the one hand, they both divided human into body, soul, and spirit; on the other hand, especially the distinction between soul and spirit makes them similar. In addition, the importance of conducting research of their theories and pastoral practices from a Christ-centered perspective is clear.

On this basis, we can also see the potential value of the current cutting-edge series of studies on "Martin Luther and the Third Enlightenment". By revealing the light in Luther's thoughts, not only can Luther's thoughts be re-positioned for dialogs in different fields of humanistic thought, but they can also be connected to the issues of pastoral care and faith practices in different denominations of contemporary Chinese churches. In this way, such dialogs can, on the one hand, continue to bring help to the practical pastoral problems of different churches, and on the other hand, continue to unveil the light of Luther's thoughts and bring practical significance and contribute to more humanistic fields.

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Notes

- ¹ Target: Reformed Churches; Survey Period: 2015–2023; Location: Reformed Churches in Shenyang, Panjin, Shanghai, Beijing, etc. All surveys are conducted by Ruixiang Li unless it is explained separately.

- 2 Object of survey: Reformed Churches; Time of Investigation: 2015–2023; Place of Investigation: Reformed Churches in Shenyang, Panjin, Shanghai, Beijing, etc.
- 3 Object of survey: Reformed churches; Survey period: 2015–2023; Survey locations: Reformed churches in Shenyang, Panjin, Shanghai, Beijing, etc.
- 4 Survey Respondents: Reformed Churches. Object of survey: Reformed churches; Survey period: 2015–2023; Location: Reformed churches in Shenyang, Panjin, Shanghai, Beijing, etc.
- 5 Object of survey: Reformed Churches; Time: 2015–2023; Place: Reformed Churches in Shenyang, Panjin, Shanghai, Beijing, etc.
- 6 Object of survey: Professor Q; Date: 2021–2022; Place: Online.
- 7 Survey respondent: Li Quan; Date of survey: 2021–2022; Place of survey: Online.
- 8 Object of survey: Localchurches; Time: 2017–2019; Place: Shenyang, Beijing, Shanghai, etc. The system of Localchurches headed by Taoshu Zhu, Witness Lee, and others.
- 9 Object of survey: Localchurches; Survey Period: 2017–2019; Location: Shenyang, Beijing, Shanghai, etc. The Localchurch system headed by Taoshu Zhu, Witness Lee, and others.
- 10 Object of survey: Localchurches; Survey Period: 2017–2019; Location: Localchurch systems led by Taoshu Zhu, Witness Lee, and others in Shenyang, Beijing, and Shanghai.
- 11 Object of survey: Localchurches; Survey Period: 2017–2019; Location: Shenyang, Beijing, Shanghai, etc. The Localchurch system headed by Taoshu Zhu, Witness Lee, etc.
- 12 Object of survey: Localchurches; Time of investigation: 2017–2019; Place of investigation: Localchurch systems led by Taoshu Zhu, Witness Lee, and others in Shenyang, Beijing, Shanghai, etc.
- 13 Object of survey: Localchurches; survey period: 2017–2019; survey location: Localchurch systems led by Taoshu Zhu, Witness Lee, and others in Shenyang, Beijing, and Shanghai.
- 14 Survey respondents: Pastors of a Assembly church in Shanghai; Survey period: 2021–2022; Survey location: Shanghai Assembly church.
- 15 Object of survey: Pastors of a Assembly in Shanghai; Survey Period: 2021–2022; Location: Shanghai Assembly.
- 16 Object of survey: Assemblyal churches; Survey Period: 2015–2023; Location: Silicon Valley, Shanghai and other Assemblyal churches.

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