

## A Nazarene Roots Project Resource

An Interview with Paul M. Bassett  
Professor Emeritus of the History of Christianity,  
Nazarene Theological Seminary

Interview by Bob Broadbooks, USA/Canada Regional Director

### “Reflecting on Our Nazarene Heritage”

**BB:** It is a great privilege to be able to visit with Dr. Paul Bassett today. Dr. Bassett taught at Nazarene Theological Seminary in Kansas City, Missouri, for 40 years. What a joy it is to be with him here today and to ask him some important questions. Dr. Bassett, what attracted you to a life of Christian scholarship?

**PB:** This will take a moment because it is not so much a matter of attraction as it is call. When I was 17, I was called into ministry. I had thought of going into medicine because I had a grandfather who was a physician. My father was a minister, so I knew some of the labors he had to engage in, and I wasn't sure whether I was that energetic. Then in my first pastorate, which was after I had graduated from seminary, I was convinced that pastoring really was a part of my call. I also taught in a high school full-time that year along with pastoring that church. That gave me a clue that perhaps teaching was something I could do and ought to do. Then I was invited to go back to Duke University and finish a doctorate, which I did, and I was called to Trevecca. In my mind, that nailed down the idea that I was to teach undergraduates in higher education. I was then asked to teach religious studies at West Virginia University. I was there for over three years. That convinced me that I was to teach not history, not Greek, and not the classics, but to teach religion. It is funny that this realization should come in a state university. I was then called to Nazarene Theological Seminary. I had been there about three years and finally, I woke up to my calling of education to the ministry for the church. I have been delighted that the Lord called me to something that I wanted to do. I have tried to be a faithful servant and give myself to it. However, it is other persons that will have to answer the question about how well that was done.

**BB:** Well, I know from first-hand experience, it was done very well, seeing as I was a student of yours a very long time ago. I know that many of the classes you taught were related to church history. What does church history mean to you?

**PB:** There is a verse in Isaiah chapter 30 that says, I am going to send you a teacher (this is the Lord speaking through Isaiah) so that when you go to the right or to the left you will hear a voice from behind you say, “This is the way. Walk in it.” I have also been very conscious of the fact that the church has been at its

best when it has kept in mind the other end of history. That is, that Christ is coming back again. It has taken its responsibilities seriously and that includes its social responsibilities—to feed the hungry, clothe the poor, et cetera. I have learned from church history that it works for the “rowers mentality”—when you row a boat, you do not sit facing the direction you are going; you face the opposite direction. When you are rowing like this, you are using landmarks to know where you are, and landmarks will tell you what is to come. Church history is the story of the call of God and the work of God on earth since Christ. It is a story of the call and also of the human response. The human response has sometimes been good, sometimes bad, sometimes indifferent, sometimes misunderstood one way or another, but I think that is one way church history has something to tell us. It helps us know where the way is and how to walk in it.

**BB:** So, history gives us a sense of perspective. Here is an interesting question: What two or three Nazarenes have left the deepest imprint on your thinking and your faith?

**PB:** Outside of my home, particularly my mother and father, I think I would have to point to Lloyd Byron, who was my district superintendent in North Carolina. I will also mention Dr. Greathouse. During the time I was at Olivet, Carl Bangs was in the church. We remained lifelong friends, and I had the privilege of eulogizing both he and his wife at their memorial services after their deaths. He had a great influence on my thinking. There is one other person that you might not expect from a character such as I. I am speaking about my district superintendent from the time I was about 10 years old until I graduated from seminary. His name was W. E. Albee. Albee came to us from the Evangelical United Brethren Church. He pastored at the Newport, Kentucky, First Church of the Nazarene, then Indianapolis First Church of the Nazarene, and then he was pastor to my grandparents at Columbus, Ohio, First Church of the Nazarene, then he was district superintendent of the western Ohio district. He was a model of Christian character and preaching. He had a capacity for leading without being the autocrat of the platform. I had the deepest admiration for him.

**BB:** It is interesting to me that you mentioned two district superintendents in that list. Well, the name Mildred Bangs Wynkoop is familiar to many of us. She had a phrase that she used, and it was “the holiness credibility gap.” What did she mean by that? How has this shaped the denomination’s understanding of sanctification?

**PB:** I had the privilege of knowing Mildred well. I think she meant three things. One, she was working with her own history. She had been treated badly by persons who had great reputations as preachers of entire sanctification. She was fully committed to the doctrine and the experience of entire sanctification. Secondly, I think it comes from her dealing with streams of thought in the Wesleyan holiness tradition. That is one of the things we have tended to forget, partly because we haven’t read as much as we should about and within our own

tradition. This is my fault and the fault of other historians—that we have not talked about the variety of holiness preaching and teaching within the denomination. I think she was working with that and seeking to bring all of those streams together so that they would correct each other and yet remain fully biblical and remain responsible both to Scripture and to the Lord of Scripture and to each other and to the church. I think the third thing she was dealing with was that she was hearing a lot of preaching that was setting the wrong goal for the life of entire sanctification. People were yearning for this great experience and they weren't getting what they were told it would give them. She wanted to help people understand what it is that really is given to them: that the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of love comes to them.

**BB:** Thus the name of one of her books, *Theology of Love*.

**PB:** That is correct. Her other interest was also the interest of her brother, which was Arminius and the freedom with which grace has enabled us to live the life of holiness. Your freedom will be spelled differently from mine, but one of the things both of us are free to do is to become bound for the sake of the other one. For instance, where I see a weakness that I probably would show you and you might take too seriously, I would need to work on that weakness and not become an excuse for your bad behavior or let you become an excuse for mine.

**BB:** What lessons can Nazarene clergy learn from John Wesley about preaching?

**PB:** Many. One is to take the Scriptures seriously. Understand that it is the Spirit who speaks through the Scriptures and that Scripture is the written Word. It was inspired by the living Word, Christ Jesus, who worked through the Spirit. Then there is the proclaimed Word where those two Words come together. In coming together, Wesley does not leave room for people to say they do not understand. He insists that you should understand. He doesn't go out of his way to make things difficult for people, but he is not afraid to say we need to follow a logical chain and pay attention because this is the Word of God. It is sufficient for you, take it up, read it, discuss it, teach it, and live by it. He also was very conscious of the fact that one does not preach in a vacuum—one is always preaching in a human context. It should be a worshiping context. We do not just have a service of the Word; there are other aspects to the service of the Word. I am speaking of aspects such as the great hymns of Charles Wesley that had strong declarations, the clarity with which John Wesley laid out what he was going to say, the clarity with which he said it and his carefulness in sticking with Scripture.

**BB:** He also said there is no holiness, but social holiness. What did he mean by that?

**PB:** Here he was arguing against what had become a trend in the 18th century, where it was thought that the medieval monk lived only for his own salvation.

Now, this was a distortion that had come through. There were monks who only lived for their own salvation and all kinds of crazy things were done in the name of purity and such. Wesley was trying to say that we live this life of holiness in a community, and the community is to help each other to live this life of holiness. This is also part of the human community, which means we do not simply live it in the church, but through the church, out into the world. So, social holiness is the love of God with all the heart, mind, soul, and strength, and the neighbor as self; neither part of that commandment is to be forgotten.

**BB:** You have been a life-long reader of *The Book of Common Prayer*. What value do you find in this discipline and how has this practice shaped your faith and life?

**PB:** It has done two things. One, it has helped me to be very aware of the fact that Christianity is a religion for this life. It is not simply a hope of heaven. It is not simply avoiding “the other place.” It is a matter of life here. We need the whole Scripture, and it helps me to develop programs of reading whole Scripture. It reminds me of the basic, fundamental doctrines of the church. The doctrines are not Scripture, but they arise from Scripture. The 39 Articles help me to think about Scripture.

It is also helpful in this matter of social holiness. For instance, the rituals are very conscious of the fact that you have a congregation out there. I prefer the prayer book that Wesley himself would have used versus the most recent American one. It also brings a certain stability to how you can pray and think at the same time, and you aren’t repeating phrases as the heathen do. One of my favorite phrases is in a prayer that I often use. The phrase is, “Grant to us, O Lord, such a sense of your goodness to us and such a dread of your judgments as shall make us both ashamed and afraid to offend you.”

**BB:** May the Lord answer that prayer in our lives. You are an expert in medieval church and culture. What has your study of those issues taught you about the issue of Christian holiness?

**PB:** One of the most delightful things to have discovered is that there was a very strong yearning for holiness in the medieval church. It got sidetracked sometimes. It got into the hands of people who had programs for how we can be holy. Now, these programs were not printed as if there was a publishing house, but people would imitate the saints. The church sometimes used this yearning for holiness to serve the church, rather than to serve and obey God through the church. They forgot that the church is Christ’s body and that it belongs to God, not to us. It has great power, but that power is delegated by God. The search for holiness is not seen simply in the Mystics or the Monastics. The search for holiness is seen in such people as the blessed Henry Suso, who lived in the 14th century. He thought that to be holy, he needed to carry a cross around and that this cross should give him pain. So he had a cross made that was three feet long vertically and less than that horizontally. He pounded nails into it and carried it on

his back, with the nails pointing at him! He would deprive himself of sleep, constantly be standing, et cetera, and he did this for about 18 years. Then he said he came to the school of Christ, in which his previous actions were not a way to become holy. To those who perceived him to be holy, he attempted to make amends by truly preaching the gospel of sanctification—not as something you do to please God, but something that God does in renewing you for fitness to live in his kingdom forever. Suso died a happy man.

**BB:** When we are part of a faith tradition, we always stand on the shoulders of those who have come before us. What do we owe to those Nazarenes who have preceded us in the faith?

**PB:** We owe them our deepest gratitude. I am more and more aware of the shoulders that I stand on. I feel more and more my responsibility and accountability to them and to generations to come. What do I see in the past? I see faithfulness through and through. I see faithfulness lived in many contexts. I see faithfulness having been lived by people who called the faithful person “unfaithful.” Sometimes the person who did the calling came to understand differently and sometimes not. I remember when my father was a pastor in Toledo; we lived in a neighborhood where there were a lot of Polish people. We had one woman who was of Polish extraction who would say the same thing in testimonies every Wednesday night. Finally, one Wednesday night, she said, “You know what I am going to say. I am going to say the same thing. But I have been through a week that was very different from all the rest. I am saying it is the same God, and God is still true to his promises.” The willingness of the people that I heard (and this is where I think we need to work again) to testify to the grace of God—not to the goodness of the church or the wonderful music—but to the grace of God in justifying grace, in sanctifying grace, in keeping grace, and the grace of hope that the promise of God will be kept. “There hath not failed one word of his promise.”

**BB:** Thank you for taking time to be part of this. May the Lord bless you and the church in the days ahead.