

A Nazarene Roots Project Resource

An Interview with Thomas Noble
Professor of Theology at Nazarene Theological Seminary

Interview by Bob Broadbooks, USA/Canada Regional Director

“Reflecting on Our Nazarene Heritage”

BB: Dr. Noble, you grew up in Glasgow, which has significance in the Church of the Nazarene. How did growing up there affect your life and influence you?

TN: I grew up in the Park Edge Church, founded by George Sharpe in 1906. It was a great family church. My grandparents on my mother’s side were charter members from 1906, and my grandparents on my father’s side came along a little later. So, the second generation intermarried and thus, those of us in the third generation were all cousins. It was a tremendous extended family. It was also a greatly musical church. We used five different hymnals in the course of a week. It had a very strong democratic ethos. The annual general meeting consisted of the boss, and the board would not dare to change anything major until the general approved it. It was a great teaching church. While I was growing up, for 25 years Dr. Sidney Martin would preach in the morning and evening. I look at him as my first major influence in the area of theology. We had an annual Bible exam. Every year, we sat and took a two- to three-hour examination—throughout childhood and youth. All of this—the teaching, the music, the warmth, the Glasgow wit, et cetera—created a nurturing congregation.

BB: You have been drawn into a theological life, but as a layperson.

TN: I am a lay-theologian. That is not as uncommon as you might think. There are several of us teaching at Nazarene colleges who are lay people. As I said in talking about my upbringing, Dr. Martin was part of my initial education. He gave two sermons, each half an hour long, every Sunday, and these were expository—biblical sermons with spiritual challenge and practical application. Lay people are very interested in theological discussion. Theology is something too important to be left to ministry. I went to the University of Glasgow, which was founded as a Christian university in the middle ages. Outside of the States, there are few Christian universities, and this was a secular environment. The evangelical Christian students would get together in the Christian Union—intervarsity. There, I would mingle with Presbyterians, Baptists, and people from various backgrounds. This, of course, drew out theological questions, and that was why I went on to Edinburgh to do theology after I taught high school history for a few years. All of this helped to shape my interest in theology.

BB: You never felt a call to enter ministry, and yet your life has been one of ministry.

TN: The call is to use your gifts. You have to find out what your gifts are from the people of God and exercise them. I went to Edinburgh prepared to enter the ministry, but the way things worked out was that it turned into a teaching ministry.

BB: We are thankful you have given your life to these important areas. During your theological studies, you studied under Thomas Torrance, who is considered by many to be the greatest Scottish theologian of the 20th century. What impact did he have upon your thinking and faith?

TN: Tom Torrance was an intellectual dynamo. He was a kind of “Churchillian” figure. He was the son of missionary parents, born and brought up in China, but came to Scotland for his education. He was a great evangelical theologian. He did have tremendous influence. He was a tremendously erudite man, who was particularly interested in the relationship of theology to science. That was a breathtaking experience, to go into his lectures. It helped me to put my Wesleyan heritage in the tradition of the wider church and to try to think about the way our Christian emphases (on Christian holiness, for example) had to be understood in the context of the Trinity, of the doctrine of Christ, of the doctrine of the atonement. His influence and the influence of his brother, who was very concerned with ministry and preaching and that theological education should be devoted to producing preachers and pastors—all of this was enormously formative.

BB: Then there was David Hynd, who was a missionary who made a great contribution to the church. Tell us about him.

TN: David Hynd originally came from Perth, Scotland. He and his wife (the second daughter of Dr. Sharpe) went as Nazarene missionaries to Swaziland in 1925. All Nazarene missionaries are great, but he must be accounted as one of the greatest. It was an immense contribution to the kingdom and to the church. They spent 60 years in Swaziland, even after he retired. He built the original Raleigh Fitkin Memorial Hospital in Manzini almost with his own hands. He founded the hospital, the teacher training college, the nurses’ college, outstations, the Swaziland Medical Association, Swaziland Conference of churches, et cetera. He brought the Bible Society and the Red Cross to Swaziland as well. He had a close association to the British colonial government and then with the independent government of King Sobhuza II. So, he was a tremendously significant figure for Swaziland and in Nazarene missions. I think he has great contemporary relevance to us because of his philosophy of mission. His great text was from Matthew chapter four, when Jesus went throughout Galilee teaching in the synagogues, preaching the gospel of the kingdom and healing all kinds of diseases among the people. Preaching, teaching, healing. Every one of his outstations had a church, a school, and a clinic. This is a tremendous example for us of holistic ministry. It is important that each person should come to a personal knowledge of Jesus Christ, but you have to form the

whole culture and influence the whole society. I have been working on a biography of David Hynd.

BB: Dr. Noble, you come alive when you talk about David Hynd. Did you know him personally? Were there any kind of idiosyncrasies about his life or any other points of interest?

TN: Oh, yes I knew him. He was very much a Scot. He was a very matter-of-fact person. He wasn't an emotional person; therefore, I think many Americans thought he wasn't very spiritual. He was very much about getting the job done. He was a very caring doctor and a very efficient administrator. In many ways, he was the quintessential Scot of his generation. He was a man to be greatly admired.

BB: Wonderful. Nazarenes are theological heirs of John Wesley. What important contributions can Wesleyan theology make to contemporary Christianity?

TN: That is a huge question. Taking just a few moments, let me pick out some things. First of all, let me start out with this: Wesley was one of the world's great evangelists. If you look at the way he himself organized his theology in his standard sermons, it begins with an emphasis on justification by faith, the new birth, the preaching of the gospel. So, for Wesleyans and for Wesleyan mission, the gospel has to be central.

Although Wesley was an heir of the Reformation under the evangelical tradition and was an evangelistic preacher, he did see some dangers in the Reformation tradition: the emphasis on faith alone and the emphasis on election in Calvinism could lead to carelessness, antinomianism, and not being concerned about holiness. So, the emphasis on holiness is tremendously important—on holiness through the whole of the Christian life, on holiness in spiritual formation, on the disciplines, and, of course, on perfect love. Today, that is something Wesleyans also need to emphasize in a day when the evangelical church worldwide is flourishing. We need to remind them that holiness is an important part of that.

The third thing I would say is that though Wesley's preaching was to bring individuals to the new birth, in his Methodist society, he gave us a great model of the corporate church. People came to faith, people moved on to perfection within the weekly meeting of the class and the band, where they all testified to each other. That is the corporate expression of Christianity, which is something today's church needs.

Lastly, Wesley, like David Hynds, believed in holistic ministry. His great love was for the poor. In his 80s, he was seen out in the snow collecting pennies for the poor. He wrote a whole sort of self-doctor book because people could not afford medical treatment. So, the holistic ministry to the whole person is very much part of the Wesleyan tradition.

BB: Your comment about the need of the church today about incorporating some of Wesley's strategies—the bands, classes, et cetera, in order to increase our abilities in discipleship really is an issue for us. May the Lord help us figure out how to more effectively disciple the believers in the church. As a theologian, what are your perceptions and thoughts about the emerging church? The emerging church/Emergent Movement is an issue in contemporary Christianity.

TN: I don't claim to be an expert in this area. I think there are things to be said very positively about the Emergent Church Movement and other things we need to be careful about. Being careful about things, I tend to be concerned about the tendency of our culture to jump on every band wagon. It has always got to be "the latest." We need to recognize the continuities as well as the new things. There are some things about the emergent church that are good and new, but a lot of it is actually re-emphasizing things Christians have often come back to. Among the good things is an interest in the ancient church of the early centuries. Having done my own studies on the Greek followers, I think there is a great amount to be learned from them. They were before Christendom; we are after it.

There is also an influence on mission. There is an emphasis on the practice of Christianity, not just doctrine. This is totally Wesleyan—orthopraxis as well as orthodoxy. There is an emphasis on community and discipleship; this is Wesleyan as well. There is also an emphasis on contextual relevance. I find all of these points to be good.

The things of which I believe we need to be careful are the tendency to demote doctrine. Because of the reaction against rationalistic, dry-as-dust theology, there is a reaction against doctrine. Really, this has always been part of the pietistic tradition. That can have its dangers, because every church needs its doctrinal bearings. And then there is anti-institutionalism. This has also occurred in history numerous times. So, it is nothing new, but it is good to remind us that the church is more a movement than just a static institution. The Holiness Movement, after all, was a movement.

Moving on to contextualization. The church has to contextualize, so we have to speak to postmodernity. But, contextualization always has a danger that it may fall into syncretism. In J.B. Phillip's famous phrase, "The world begins to squeeze us into its mold." There are excellent features we should welcome, but there are areas where we need to be careful. I will mention a book I came across by Mark Liederbach and Alan L. Reid called *The Convergent Church* (Kregel, 2009). They are Southern Baptists, but they present both the positives and the critical points. I would recommend this as a good read on the subject of the emergent church.

BB: You are a systematic theologian, and I would love for you to talk about this. What role should systematic theology have in the life of the Church of the Nazarene?

TN: Well, the church is engaged in mission. At the heart of Wesley's mission—and all Christian mission—is the gospel. Systematic theology is concerned with

articulating our knowledge of God. This is also central to the mission of the church. If it is not just going to be a human exercise, we are talking about God. We are talking about the One who sent his son to die for us and who sent his Holy Spirit to fill us.

So, I see theology as the articulation of our knowledge of God—not just our knowledge *about* God, because that is abstract doctrine/formation/concepts. It is knowledge *of* God. It has got to begin in the relationship that we each, and altogether, have with God. However, if you come to know a person, you come to know things about that person. As soon as you are in a personal relationship with someone, you can write down the color of their eyes, how tall they are, et cetera. It is similar with God. As we come to know God through the story of the gospel, through reading the Scriptures, through the preaching of the Word, through prayer, through the corporate life of the church, we come to know what kind of God he is. In the story of Scripture, his character comes through to us.

Systematic theology is simply coherently expressing what we come to know about God. Therefore, it is essential to the life and mission of the church. It does have a critical role. I talked about contextualization a few moments ago and the danger that in speaking to the context/culture, we become shaped by the culture. That is where the theologian has to exercise a critical role: Are we really preaching the New Testament gospel, or are we allowing the culture to shape us into something else—a prosperity gospel, a political message, et cetera? It also has a positive enforcing role. We come to think deeply and drink from the richness of Christian theology. That should inform our preaching and our mission.

BB: Because of your love of systematic theology, you have been commissioned to write a three-volume systematic theology for the church. What is your goal for this project?

TN: This is an enormous project, and I sometimes think I am mad to have said yes. My goal will be to express coherently our theology. We are talking about intellectual coherence. That is vitally important for the mission of the church. There is a lot of anti-intellectualism about—opposition to learning and a fear of theology. That is completely un-Wesleyan. Wesley was deeply concerned to unite piety and learning. Those who think we can do without theology are actually doing the church great damage. We need a coherent understanding of our theology.

It also has to be comprehensive. A coherent, comprehensive theology has to take into account all the work that is going on in biblical study, and biblical studies do not stand still. History of the church, historical theology, practical theology—all of this has got to find unity and be comprehensive in that way. Now that is an impossible task. So much is being written in these areas with many experts and specialists in these areas, but it must try to be comprehensive.

I think it also must be contemporary. This is why we cannot just use the excellent theologies written 50 or 60 years ago. We have to speak to today's generation. True to the tradition, we have to express it in a way that can be understood today—society and culture do not stand still.

I also think our theology has to be global. Up until this point, most systematic theologies that have been written have been European or American. This is no longer the case. Today, most Christians are outside of Europe and America, and the majority of Nazarenes are outside Europe and America. So, what is being written in theology around the world has also got to be taken into account. Putting all these things together, it is an impossible task, but I'm having a go at it anyway.

BB: Dr. Noble, we are grateful for you, and you are a great gift to the church. We want to thank you for your contributions. We are looking forward to this three-volume set of systematic theology.

TN: Thank you. It has been a pleasure to be with you.