

# People of the Paradox

*Inaugural Address of Dr. John M. Nielson, D.D.*

*April 7, 1990*

Dr. Nease, Dr. Kim and members of the Board of Trustees, honored guests, including Dr. Rulloa and Dr. Macainan, presidents of our sister institutions here in the Philippines, members of the APNTS family, and friends in Christ.

I thank you with deep appreciation for the high honor you have bestowed upon me by entrusting to me the Presidency of Asia-Pacific Nazarene Theological Seminary. I humbly accept the responsibilities and the charge placed upon me today; but I do so only in the promise of the sufficiency of God's grace and the adequacy of His guidance and your willingness to stand beside me in this important endeavor.

Time today does not permit a long treatise on educational philosophy, inter-cultural sociology, institutional ecclesiology, Wesleyan theology, or even the combination of all of those. But I do feel compelled to share a few thoughts about what brings me to this time and this place in my life and about the nature of the challenge I believe we face.

The journey on which God has led me over these years of my ministry has brought me into intimate contact with the pastorate, with Nazarene Higher Education, with Ministerial Preparation, and with Cross-cultural Ministry.

It has also exposed me to the convergence of those interests in these few, special institutions in the Church of the Nazarene where many cultures meet together for theological training.

Because of all this, I have become a firm believer in three things:

1. The indisputable importance of a well-trained ministry.
2. The indispensable mission of a regional seminary.
3. The inestimable value of an international institution.

At the risk of stating the obvious and the trite, let me say a few words about each of those ideas.

*The Indisputable Importance of a Well-trained Ministry*

God has always needed people of high quality and deep commitment as his servants. While acknowledging that it is not only formal training that qualifies and equips a person for ministry, we also understand that God always demands our best. To be called by God places an awesome responsibility upon us. We dare not respond to such a calling with careless preparation or shabby service. Therefore, if we feel called to serve Him, we must also understand that we are called to prepare as well as possible and as completely as possible for that ministry.

These are days of unprecedented change in our world. The cocoons of Eastern Europe are bursting open and releasing beautiful but fragile butterflies. China and Russia are opening doors to the proclamation of the Gospel. Walls of separation are tumbling down. Third world countries are growing, expanding, and rising in productivity and importance. The prophets of our day predict that the center of the world power and influence is shifting from Europe and America to the Pacific Rim. Self-determination and nationalism are constantly on the rise. Life is more complex, more fast-paced, and more rapidly changing than at any time in history. We are constantly confronted by new ethical and moral challenges as well as by constant social change.

In the midst of all this turbulence, our lay people are becoming more highly educated and have higher expectations of their pastors and leaders. Such times demand that our best and brightest young men and women must hear and accept God's call to ministry and that the church must offer them the best possible education. They must be persons of strong character. They must transmit our holiness heritage to a new generation. They must be ministers who know the Word of God well enough, and who can think clearly enough; that they can face the new and unanticipated challenges of tomorrow, create new approaches to ministry, and yet remain faithful and true to the heritage that has been entrusted to them.

*The Indispensable Mission of a Regional Seminary*

First, I firmly believe that APNTS is needed within this region of the world because it is in this context that our young people can best be trained to reach the nations of this region. Schools in the USA do not know how to reach the mountain tribes of the Philippines, or those whose lives are steeped in Hinduism.

Secondly, this seminary must become a center where an understanding of the cultures of the region can be developed. We need this institution here where students from this region, and faculty members from this region, and those who have devoted a lifetime to studying this region, can gather together to learn how to reach the people of this region for Christ and the Gospel.

Thirdly, we must do all we can to keep the leaders for tomorrow within this region. It is all too-well documented that training our young people in areas other than their own region means that a large percentage of them will never return. It is our prayer that the convincing power of God's Holy Spirit will be at work in the lives of our young people and our emerging leaders — convincing them of the utter importance of their staying to minister in their own nations — revealing to them any motivations that arise from a desire for status, adventure, temporal security, or material advantages that would tempt them away from ministry to their own people.

How can the work of God survive in Korea, in Japan, New Guinea, in the Philippines, if our best and brightest go off to minister in the USA, or in Canada, or Europe? How can we face God if, while He is sending unprecedented revival to this region, we in turn send those who should be gathering the harvest to other fields? I am a strong believer in missions. If I were not, I would not be here. But how is God's kingdom strengthened if we are all called to minister in each other's country within this region — and in each other's language — if we are somehow deluded into thinking that missions is more important than evangelism or that winning strangers is more important than winning a friend or our own families?

It is almost trite to say it, but national leaders will be far more effective than missionaries in the countries of this region. They know the languages, cultures, religions, and challenges of their own country. But we can only shift

away from reliance on missionaries if our best qualified and best trained nationals stay at home to take their places.

*The Inestimable Value of an International Seminary*

I am also a strong believer in the benefits of theological training taking place in an international setting such as this one. If we remain only within the confines of our own culture and language and customs, if we never travel beyond the outskirts of our home towns, if we only read one translation of the Scriptures, if we are never exposed to someone else's way of worshiping, thinking or expressing biblical truth; then we will always be limited in our service to God.

But whenever men and women allow the process of internationalization to take place, whenever they are willing to climb out of the confines of the box into which they were born, they become bigger persons \_ more usable to the Kingdom of God. I wish time would permit the sharing of some beautiful ways in which I have watched that happen in individual lives, but perhaps a biblical example will suffice. Paul was a Jew. He was educated in Jerusalem. He knew the thinking of the Scribes and Priests. He had no doubt spent time arguing with the Sadducees. He was raised in Asia Minor but he learned the Greek culture and language. He was a citizen of Rome and was acquainted with the Roman philosophers. He may well have known Latin, in addition to Greek, Hebrew, and Aramaic. And he had come to be a follower of The Way.

No wonder God chose him to play such a significant role in the formation of the Church! He too belonged to, or understood, or had a point of contact, with most of the groups God wanted to reach. He was not a man who understood nothing other than fishing a small lake in Galilee. He was not confined to one way of thinking and doing. He had climbed out of his narrow box.

Here at APNTS we have the unique challenge and the unprecedented privilege of helping to develop people like Paul \_ men and women who by the broadening of their minds and hearts can be used to reach deeply into the heart of their own culture. And because of the fact that in their own

experience cultures have been Bridged in Christ, they will be able to join those who are "Bridging Cultures for Christ."

As that miracle happens, the day will come when gatherings of the Church of the Nazarene in the Asia-Pacific Region will be filled with pastors and evangelists and Bible College professors and District Superintendents who can speak together, and think together, and reminisce together, and plan together, and worship together, and evangelize together \_ because one day they studied at APNTS where they outgrew the confines of their yesterdays to become international citizens of a heavenly kingdom whose horizon stretches as far as their tomorrows.

So you see, I believe in this place and this mission. I believed in it before it came into being and before I was called here to serve. I believe in it more passionately than I can put into words today. But I also know that in the fulfilling of that dream, we face many challenges. Perhaps chief among those challenges is the one of being, and helping our students to become, People of the Paradox.

Many years ago, Dean Bertha Munro of Eastern Nazarene College penned some words that have been guiding for Nazarene Higher Education: "There is no conflict between the best in education and the best in our Christian faith." She was saying that where others find paradox, we find synthesis \_ the unique opportunity to forge into new territories, to give the world something it has never seen before and cannot experience apart from the transforming power of God's grace. She was calling us to be "People of the Paradox."

The ultimate paradox, of course, is the Incarnation. John tells us in the first chapter of his gospel that "the Word was God" and "the Word became flesh." Those two statements were impossible to Scribes and Pharisees, incredible to Greek philosophers, inconceivable to Gnostics, and illogical to Philo. But John was telling us that to be Christians, we must believe both statements. We must accept what appears to be impossible. We must be People of the Paradox. The Gospel is filled with paradoxes: The first are last. The weak are strong. The Invisible is visible. The Immortal dies. The Boundless is contained. The Master is a Servant. A Samaritan is a good

neighbor. The enemy is loved. The Meek rule. Dying means living. God is in a womb. Love is crucified. Life is in a tomb. It is paradox that lies at the very heart of *scandalon*.

Although the world has great difficulty understanding it, there is no inherent discord between leadership and servanthood, relationship and achievements (people and goals), grace and obedience, faith and works, pursuing theological knowledge and practicing ministerial service (Academic Theology and Applied Theology), revelation and education, holiness and humanity, and justice and mercy.

But we must also understand that there is never any harmony between Servanthood and Arrogance, Leadership and Passivity, Relationships and Complacency. There is no compatibility between Grace and Legalism, Obedience and Antinomianism, Faith and Self-righteousness, Works and Believism. There is no common ground between Theology and Utilitarian disregard for truth, Ministry and Cloistered erudition, Education and Gullibility, Revelation and Relativity. There can be no compromise between Holiness and Unrighteousness, Humanity and Perfectionism, Justice and Permissiveness, Mercy and Unforgiveness. At the risk of further redundance, let me state that again but a bit differently.

Servanthood must never let us become passive. Leadership must never make us become arrogant. Concern for relationship must never disguise complacency. Striving for achievement must never make us unkind..

Reliance on Grace must never shield disobedience. Obedience must never degenerate into legalism. Faith must always mean more than mental assent. Works must never make us self-righteous. Theology must never become impractical theorizing. Ministry must never promote unbiblical platitudes and it can never say that whatever works is good. Education must never take us down the road to relativity. Belief in revelation does not demand closed-mindedness or irrationality. Christian Perfection does not mean perfectionism. Our human-ness must never excuse unrighteousness, because God is Just does not mean He is unforgiving, and because God is Merciful does not mean He is permissive.

We are called to be people in whom all these seeming paradoxes of the Gospel find their resolution. We must hold them in that creative tension that brings balance. By the power of the Spirit, we must tune our lives to remove all discord except that which comes when the Gospel stands in contradiction to the world. The elimination of discord and the achievement of harmony in the face of apparent paradox is at the heart of wholeness and holiness in both their negative and positive dimensions.

And so we are called to be people of the paradox. We must incarnate Christ in what we preach and in how we live. We must demonstrate to a disbelieving world and a doubting church that humanity can be holy, that servants can lead, and that scholars can preach. Let us remember that neither education nor diplomas nor even theology are ends in themselves, but are means by which we are to achieve the greater end of *knowing* Christ and *sharing* Christ with a needy world.

To that end, let us be a community of scholars - both professors and students - who are seeking to know Christ (Phil. 3:10), to have the mind of Christ (Phil. 2:5), to equip the saints (Eph. 4:12), to be shepherds after His own heart (Jer. 3:15), and to be servants of Christ and of each other (Matt. 20:27).

Graduates, let me remind you that you are the only face of this ministry that most people will ever see. As you return to your country and enter your area of ministry, remember that their understanding and support of this institution will be based on what they experience of your competence, your effectiveness, your fruitfulness, your servanthood, and your Christlikeness.

Come to think of it, that is the only way many people will ever experience Christ Himself. Thus, the ultimate success of APNTS as an institution of the Church of the Nazarene is not dependent on the quality of the faculty or the dreams of the President, but upon the character and accomplishments of her graduates.

Students, grasp this opportunity and make the most of it. Draw strength and inspiration from the diversity of an international institution. Remain committed to the call of God and to your own people. Unless God

COMPELS you otherwise, find your ministry within this region of the world. Always give your best. He deserves nothing less. He demands nothing more. Be the best person and the best Christian, and the best student that His power and grace can help you to be.

Colleagues, these students, the Church of the Nazarene, the congregation of Asia and the Pacific, and God Himself are counting on us to make this institution all that I have tried to share briefly today. It cannot happen without God. It is equally true to say that it cannot happen without committed students. But you and I need to remember that it cannot happen without us.

We must always be Competent Scholars, Committed Churchmen, Caring Prophets, Concerned Preachers, Compassionate Servants, and Consistent Models. So then, as we seek to be an International Seminary serving the Asia-Pacific Region by offering a quality, holiness education to our best and brightest young people, I call on us all, faculty and students alike, to welcome the paradox---to learn how to handle and live out the paradox---to show the world a new creation, and a new culture---that is not bound by borders, or language, or color, or economic status; but is bound only by the length and breadth and depth and height of the love of God. And may we all "know this love that surpasses knowledge"---that we may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God.

Now to Him who is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, to Him be glory in the Church, and this Seminary, and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever! (Eph. 3:19-21)

And may the Grace and Peace of our Lord be with you all! AMEN.