

Timothy Smith and the Recovery of the Nazarene Vision

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No one tracked the footprints across the Nazarene landscape better than Timothy L. Smith. Historian, pastor, teacher, and preacher, Smith embodied one of John Wesley's noblest ideals—the union of “knowledge and vital piety.”

Smith was the product of a Nazarene home, and both parents, in fact, were ministers. He began conducting revivals well before he graduated with honors in history from the University of Virginia, displaying an early commitment both to church and to learning.

He earned advanced degrees in American history at Harvard University, inheriting the interests of his mentor, Arthur Schlesinger, Sr., in urban America, social ferment, and reform. Smith's first book, *Revivalism and Social Reform*, was a major publication and has been in print nearly continuously since 1957. In it, Smith countered then-prevalent ideas about revivalism.

At the time, many scholars assumed that revivalism was a conservative force that impeded change, but Smith argued that revivalism often expanded visions and created energies that initiated, rather than hindered, social reform. He underscored the role of evangelical abolitionists like Charles Finney and Orange Scott in the antislavery campaign, and men and women with hearts for the poor like Phoebe Palmer and B. T. Roberts, who refused to forsake the city but saw it, instead, as their venue for service. Moreover, Smith was the first to draw attention to Mrs. Palmer's leadership of the early Wesleyan-holiness movement.

Revivalism and Social Reform established Smith's reputation as a scholar and catapulted him into the ranks of evangelical leadership. While scholars debated its theses, evangelicals used it as a resource for rediscovering their heritage. Smith's book, coupled with Carl F. H. Henry's *The Uneasy Conscience of Modern Fundamentalism* and David Moberg's *The Great Reversal*, helped evangelicals rediscover social ministry in Christ's name—a dimension of ministry largely abandoned during evangelicalism's fundamentalist phase.

Smith continued probing. He wrote pioneering essays on religion and higher education and the role of ethnicity in shaping American religion. And he climbed to the highest rungs of his profession, eventually teaching American history at Johns Hopkins University and serving as president of the American Society of Church History.

So what did he regard as his most outstanding professional achievement? In 1981 or so, he responded directly to this question, citing his second book, *Called Unto Holiness* (1962), a history of Nazarene origins and early development.

Called Unto Holiness was a remarkable achievement in many ways. The basic materials for understanding the church's origins were scant and fugitive. Smith's challenge was not

only to write the history but to actually discover and assemble adequate original sources to support the project. Many of the diaries, record books, and letters that he found in private hands were eventually donated to the Nazarene Archives.

Moreover, Smith developed a clear and cogent thesis about Nazarene origins and development that held his book together. He argued that the Church of the Nazarene cannot be understood unless we first realize that there always has been more than one holiness tradition at work in our midst. Specifically, he saw two holiness traditions at work among early Nazarenes—one rural, and one urban. Smith contended that the marriage of these two traditions goes far toward understanding how the church originated and explaining some of the ongoing tensions that have characterized its life. That book—so richly populated with people named Bresee, Reynolds, Jernigan, Cagle, Chapman, Fitkin, Williams, Hoople, and many other names—is basic reading for anyone who wants to understand this church.

Timothy Smith's fruitful life ended in 1997 but his influence lives on. And he is worth remembering by the others who also track the footprints left on the Nazarene landscape.

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A Bibliography of Timothy Smith's Publications.

Read Timothy Smith online.

To order Timothy Smith's Called Unto Holiness (ISBN 083-410-282) [Click Here](#) or phone the Nazarene Publishing House at 1-800-877-0700.