

Noel Weeks: A Memorial

By Peter Barnes

On 14 March 2020 a memorial service for Dr Noel Weeks was held at the Shire Christian School, the school he did so much to help set up in and which opened in 1977 with eleven students. He was born in 1943 in Grafton in the area of the northern rivers of New South Wales. Indeed, at the time of writing, his father, Ken, is still living, aged 106. Being raised in a rural area gave him a love of nature, and a lifelong love of long bushwalks. One learns surprising things at funerals – Noel had a short career as a front-row forward while at school. In fact, he maintained an interest in sport, although I rarely heard him talk about it. His first degree was from the University of New England, in zoology. It was here too that he became a Christian.

Noel then moved to the United States to obtain a BD and a ThM from Westminster Theological Seminary (Philadelphia), although he did spend a summer break doing research on rat poison. His PhD was earned in Mediterranean Studies at Brandeis University, Massachusetts. After marrying Gwen Cummings, Noel began lecturing at the University of Sydney, specializing in Ancient Near Eastern History, and the Akkadian language, until his retirement in 2012. Three children were born – Eunice, Colin, and Keith – but great sadness struck the family when Gwen died of cancer in 1985.

In 1988 Noel married Jan Bryan, who had lost her husband (also called Noel) and one daughter (Jenny) in a car accident. Her remaining children – Sharyn, Lisa, Adam and Nathan – therefore became a part of Noel's family. As a father and grandparent, he was loving and most interested in the development of the generations that followed him.

Noel's interests were wide-ranging. His books could be either academic or popular. They include: *Early River Civilizations;*

The Sufficiency of Scripture; The Christian School; Gateway to the Old Testament; Admonition and Curse; Sources and Authors: Assumptions in the Study of Hebrew Bible Narrative; and, edited with a former student, Joseph Azize, *Gilgamesh and the World of Assyria*. Christian schooling was of deep concern for him, and it led him into a number of roles, including chairman of the Shire Christian School Board and conflict with increasing government interference in the private school sector.

Noel was also a strong supporter of Middle East Reformed Fellowship. Towards the end of 2005, the MERF Australia Board changed from being a Queensland-based body to one based in New South Wales. At the very first meeting of the NSW based MERF Australia Board, on 21 December 2005, Noel was appointed as its Chairman. He served in that capacity till his death. The last meeting he chaired was on 14 November 2019. Noel also gave presentations about the work of MERF at church, and other gatherings.

As a preacher and a conference speaker, Noel excelled. He was always biblical, always probing the text, always seeking to challenge and encourage, and always desiring to make Christ known. His memorial service on 14 March 2020 began with Psalm 100 ('All people that on earth do dwell') and concluded with a paraphrase of Psalm 46 ('God is our strength and refuge'). The other hymns were Luther's 'Christ Jesus lay in death's strong bands'; a Dutch hymn with wonderful words although I struggled with an unfamiliar tune, 'Come ye here in adoration'; and William Cowper's splendid 'God moves in a mysterious way'.

Not long before his death, while on a hospital bed, Noel penned what he called his cogitations, with the subtitle: 'Old,

bewhiskered wimp who cannot stand a little pain or beloved Christian mentor: Stumbling through the valley of death.' It is a most moving human meditation on weakness in death, but hope in the resurrection. I was with him once when the pain was quite strong, and he asked an Asian nurse if she could 'get her skates on' in getting him some relief. She hesitated, as only a doctor could prescribe the medicine that Noel was asking for. Keeping his straight face, Noel said: 'Have you never read that men with married eyebrows are more likely to have a criminal record?' I was busy trying to suppress a laugh, and the poor nurse looked blank for a moment, then picked up the dry humour.

For most of his life, Noel was a member of the Christian Reformed Churches, but his funeral sermon – a wonderful exposition of Ezekiel 37:1-14 - was preached by Kevin Gladding from the Presbyterian Reformed Church, a church that Noel had

previously clashed with. This was most fitting as Noel was a man who believed in the gospel of forgiveness and reconciliation. He did justly, he loved mercy, and he walked humbly with his God (Mic.6:8). Noel possessed an intellect, and a capacity to work through the underlying assumptions of any philosophy or worldview, that was beyond the capabilities of the rest of us mere mortals. But that is not the conclusion of the matter. He was a man both of gifts and of grace. As John Calvin commented on Psalm 105, 'Whatever men do for the welfare of the church, they owe the power of doing so to God, who, of his free goodness, has been pleased thus to honour them.'

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