

# Noble – Winter Interview

Winter and Noble were both natives of Mississippi who had been personal and professional friends since the 1960's. They each talked together about civil rights from their shared perspective as well as from their diverse experiences in church and politics.

## TRANSCRIPT INDEX

Ruckus Films  
Anniston Tape 2A  
Tape at Calhoun County Library

### **Interviewees:**

Governor William Winter  
Rev. J. Phillips Nobles

### **Interviewer:**

Phil Noble, Jr.

## **INDEX**

Dr. Nobles' assessment of the current racial situation .....	2-3
Gov. Winter discusses racial misunderstanding, mistrust .....	3
Both give advice to a young person wishing to fight for racial justice .....	4,5
Dr. Nobles speaks about paradoxical views of the Bible .....	4-5
Gov. Winter talks about what the next 50 years may hold.....	5
Dr. Nobles shares his perspective on the next 50 years.....	6

01:27:34 – 01:33:18

TAPE BEGINS

(Mic noise – bad audio.)

01:33:30

DR. NOBLE

If I'm perfectly honest, my most profound answer to that question would be, "I don't know." But, then on two levels, on a personal level and on an institutional level, or whatever, public level, whatever we want to call it.

First on the personal, and that's where I am most of the time. That's where my life has been, working with people and trying to minister to people and dealing with people. And on that level, I'm not very optimistic about our ability to change to any major degree the attitudes that have been set in former generations about the racial situation. I think we'll, we get a lot of it sorted out, consensual agreement when we do something like this, but that is very much outward. And I detect that beyond that, there still is a strong measure of racism, whatever you want to call it, racial prejudice in people in my generation and some a bit younger than my generation. So while I'm glad to have some progress, what I call progress be made in them as individuals, my greatest hope is in terms of little children who, I think, can be reared in a way that they have very little if any racial prejudice.

Excuse my personal thing, but I think you and Nancy have done that in a remarkable way to your two children, J.P. and Lizzie, one in the 8<sup>th</sup> grade, one in the 6<sup>th</sup> grade. There's where I see the hope. Now the problem about that is, since I have said I don't have much real expectation of the generation, my generation and maybe the next generation, that makes it difficult for parents, if they have the kind of attitude that I have described, to convey real racial acceptance and tolerance to their children. But I think there is almost innate in the human being a sense of fairness and right and wrong about a lot of things. And with young people, children, fair is a big thing. It really is – "That's not fair. That's not fair." And that given a chance, that sense of right and wrong and fairness in racial situations and relationships can come through and hopefully then by the time they are raising children it will be a much easier kind of transition. So that's all on the personal level.

Stop

01:37:05

DR. NOBLES (CONTINUES)

On the public level and the institutional level, and again I'm speaking from the standpoint of the church. You've called me a politician, I've never been a politician except trying to get along with church members. But anyway, I think that programs like "Teaching Tolerance" need to be and can be done by churches and to whatever extent you can in the public schools, to be done in the public schools, but the churches primarily. I say that because that's a place where the Christian commitment ought to be without getting the confusion of other religions and that sort of thing. The churches need to teach, I think, very clearly the principles of the Christian faith as it relates to other people and as it relates to the racial situation. Now as John Dietrich, who is the Executive Director of our General Assembly Council now in his (?), what he said was that the patterns there, that we talk about in the book, of the way we are tolerant and the way we work together, those are patterns that might be a help to us as we approach the whole complex, more complex situation as William just said, it's going to more complex; it's not just black and white

anymore. With all of the other races now coming in it's going to be a much more complex thing. But some of the same kinds of doings that went on here as we tried to deal with the white and black are the things that might be able to be done in our society as we move into a more pluralistic kind of thing. I don't know whether, just, I don't recall exactly who said it today, but it struck me very vividly when they, one of the speakers quoted somebody as saying- oh, Connie Lynch, they were quoting Connie Lynch (?) that absolutely awful person as far as race relations, he said, "We need to go out and kill the niggers and do it in the name of Jesus," and he said that is the greatest blasphemy he can think of, and I feel the same way. Ku Klux Klan and all that, you see signs of Christian religion and the flag and all that and it is abhorrent to me because I think it is such a distortion, total distortion of the meaning of the Christian faith. And I think the Christian churches are going to have to do a more careful job and a better job of teaching what is real Christian faith. I reckon that subject to personal judgment, what's real and what's not, but teaching the Christian faith as it applies in those kinds of situations. And then if you want to go beyond that, I think that the political process is still a significant process in the matter of making change. And I think the churches, and I'm speaking of course as you see primarily, need to give some affirmation to political involvement in behalf of people that stand for the principles that we're talking about – better race relations and so forth. Now that's a long explanation for the fact that I really don't know.

01:40:41

INTERVIEWER

Both of you talked about how traditional Christian values can be perverted by racist groups to support their position. How do you address the issue that people can look at the same Bible and see two entirely different things regarding race relations?

01:41:45

GOV. WINTER

It's a matter, I think still, of misunderstanding of the relationship that we have as human beings. And it's because we don't know each other. There is a huge element of trust out there that is lacking. It's lacking particularly among black people toward white people, and because it's lacking there, white people see it, I think, in many situations as black people not wanting to assimilate, not wanting to associate. I go to black churches in Jackson, Mississippi and speak and I'm warmly received there. But I have been very distressed to find the general attitude among those black congregations that if they went to my church they would not be well received. There still is that huge chasm between perceptions of people of the opposite race. I was at the Fannie Lou Hama (?) program at Mississippi Valley State University this weekend and there were several black political leaders there. And they were, the message there was as far as we've come, and obviously no state has made more advance politically than Mississippi has or Alabama has with almost 50 members of the legislature of Mississippi are black members now. But these black political leaders were saying that they found more frustration and really more animosity now about the system – about the political system, about the economic system, the educational system – than they had earlier, because they did not see the fulfillment of the expectations that they felt they reasonably had about what was going to take place. That the same old barriers were there, the lack of understanding in the white community in so many places of their needs and that they, even though they conceded that they had made a great deal of progress, they see us now having reached something of a plateau and now they feel, given the economic recession, the downturn in the economy, the loss of jobs, loss of economic opportunity, cutbacks at funding of education that they see us going back down in the wrong direction.

01:44:59

GOV. WINTER (CONTINUES)

And that's why it's so important. I think this is a very critical time in terms of race relations not only the South, but in the country. And unless we get a handle on it, unless the national political leadership gets a handle on it, I see us going backward in terms of creating the "One America" spirit that I thought was beginning to prevail in this country. So it's, we need to do more than just give lip service now to this concept of equal opportunity, of one nation, one country, one America. It has to be backed up by policies, public policies and private commitment to see that more people share in the opportunities that come with living in this great rich country in which we find ourselves.

01:46:12

INTERVIEWER

Assume for the moment a white or black 22-year-old kid approached you and said they agreed with what you said and that they were committed to the cause of eliminating racism in the South and wanted to spend their life working toward it. What would you advise them to do?

01:47:06

GOV. WINTER

Well, I teach one day a week at Mississippi Valley State University, which is historically a black university up in the middle of the Mississippi Delta. The poorest of the poor black students in the state go to Mississippi Valley. Most of them are the sons and daughters of people who have never gone to college, and many of them never finished high school. And yet these are the survivors. These are the ones that fit the profile that you just described. They're 21, 22 years old, still have that gleam of ambition in their eyes, and I get asked that question all the time by them. And what they don't see are doors opening to them now, and it's partially the result of the tight job market, admittedly, but they also have almost opted out of the political system. They don't see it making any difference as to who holds public office. And they don't see where public policies are affecting their lives. And they're further disillusioned, frankly, when they see policies such as cutback in Americorps. A lot of these kids are really committed to participating in building this country up through volunteer service such as that. And they see that being cut back and it is sending exactly the wrong signal to a new generation of young people just beginning to emerge out of the shadows of the past.

01:49:08

DR. NOBLES

I agree with what William's said first about the race relations presently and in the near future. It's distressing right here in Anniston this weekend to realize what I've heard before, but I realize it a little bit more deeply now that race, reverse segregation is really taking place in the school systems right here. Nearly all the public schools in Anniston are nearly totally black, and the whites have gone to private schools almost entirely. I don't know what that means, but it's just about the same situation that we had before we got rid of segregation except now that black people have better schools in the public than when it was separate but unequal schools. So I'm concerned about the tendencies on that line. I don't know what I would say, exactly to a 22-year-old fighter, as you described them, except to say to them I couldn't say to them where to go to do that, but I think I would want to say to them, if you can make a commitment to what you believe is right and to fairness for people and to work in order to promote that, then I would say, first place, get all the education you can get. A 22-year-old may be through college, may not (?) so get all the education you can get and then you try to find your way as your education enlarges, find your way in an area that you think your personality, your commitment can do the most good. Now that doesn't really answer if they're asking for a specific field that they ought to go in. I don't think that's possible to make that decision or give that advice to a person. I think that's something that they have to determine. But if they really have that internal commitment

and they then add to it all of the education they can get, then as opportunities open, not to lose sight of their dream to do things and find the best, as time goes on, the best place to do them.

**01:51:52** INTERVIEWER

I've got one more question . . .

**01:51:58** DR. NOBLES

I want to go back to one that I didn't get to answer to a little bit earlier about two people see the same thing differently and how do you do about that. As long as you've got freedom, I don't think there's a lot that can be done about that. A person gets their opinions by their training, by their experience, and by their education and the environment in which they work and the dynamics of their making a livelihood and all of that sort of thing. And I don't think there's any way you can keep two people from looking at the same thing and coming out in different places. I think basically, the only thing you can do is to try to give the best quality education and the best quality religion, whatever that means, to them and hope that there would be some enlightenment that would cause them to see, read things and see things from a more open perspective rather than a prejudicial. Alfred Adler wrote a book about prejudice a long time ago and he, the basic theme of his whole book is you really can't get rid of prejudice. When you try to deal with a person with prejudice and you use all the logical argument that makes sense about it, that person immediately shifts to some other thing. You deal with that issue after some other thing. It's a phenomenon that you cannot just very easily just reason and have it to go out of existence. And I think that's part of the mindset where some of these idiot type religionists can twist the Christian faith in such a way that they say these absolutely unbelievable things (?). Does that make any sense?

**01:54:05** GOV. WINTER

Let me add one paragraph to the last question you asked about what do you say to these young people. I get asked that question a lot. And my answer has been find somebody whom you admire, whose career you would like to emulate, who has the qualities that you think are important, valuable and give meaning to your life and then try to do the things that will lead you on that sort of a career.

**01:54:44** INTERVIEWER

One final question. Look forward 50 years. Are you optimistic, pessimistic? What are the two or three factors that will determine what the future will hold? Where do you think the South will be in 50 to 75 years?

**01:55:22** GOV. WINTER

It's going to be a South that looks very different from the South now. I have to be an optimist, and I am an optimist based on looking at where we've come from. We all have to see that we are light years ahead of where we were in Anniston, Alabama or in Jackson, Mississippi in the middle of the 1960's when I first went to the legislature. We've come such a long way. And if we can make proportionately the same kind of progress in the next 50-60 years as maybe the last 50 years, then obviously this is going to be a much better place to live for everyone. But it won't automatically happen. It will happen only, I think, if there is enough commitment on the part of enough people that created the kind of change that took place here in the South in the 1950's and the 1960's and the 1970's. And how that is going to take place is obviously hard to fathom right now. I think it will take place, but I think it will take place only out of the religious community, out of the genuine religious commitment and civic commitment. We have enough people who will provide that inspiration for us to make that progress. If we succumb to cynicism and skepticism and defeatism and saying that we don't see how we're going to handle these problems, then that will be a self-fulfilling prophecy, I think, and we will wind up worse off than

we've ever been. I don't think that's going to happen because I think that the human spirit is so great that we will wind up moving ahead but at the same time, there's a lot of people that's still not going to be included in that progress.

01:57:40

INTERVIEWER

(to Dr. Nobles) 50 years?

01:57:46

DR. NOBLES

Well, I'm an optimist, based a little bit on what kind of progress we've been having to make, but my optimism comes from a belief in the providence of God. A lot of people would dismiss this I'm sure in a lot of ways, but when I see what happened for instance in the Christian church in China during that period of time, when they, I forgot what you call that thing (Cultural Revolution?) Cultural Revolution, when they sought to exterminate Christianity and that sort of thing and shut down all the churches and sent all the preachers and the professors and everything else out on the farms to work and everything like that, and forbid any kind of gathering in the churches, they just had to gather in their homes. When the Cultural Revolution ended, there were, they discovered, they never did have a real clear way how to take a census or that kind of thing. But all indications were there were 15 or 20 times more Christians than there were when the Cultural Revolution started. And I don't think anybody could have believed that that sort of thing would happen. In spite of the way that things often look – very dark and no hope and all like that, I think somehow through the inexplicable providence of God, good things finally happen in a lot, in a lot of cases. Who would've ever believed that communism would have collapsed? But I think unless we can, in the world, and I'm talking about the world, I usually talk about the whole world, and it is a specific something, but I think until the whole world can get something done about this rich/poor situation, the dichotomy between those two, and trying some way to deal more effectively with the great poverty in so much of the world, I think that problem is going to impose itself to some extent even on our sight, certainly on America and I think to some extent the South. I think there are a number of world problems like that that I don't see us getting solved in any real significant way, but any progress that's made toward that will help us to have a better society in the South and in America. I'm optimistic. I think, William mentioned the human spirit. I have such a high opinion of the, what'd I say, not just the flexibility, but the endurance of the human spirit. What the human spirit can endure is just unbelievable sometimes. And I think that that is going to come through, and basically I think things are going to be a lot better for most people of all races. But there's some huge problems that I fear are not being dealt with in effective ways sometimes and particularly right now.

02:01:23

END OF TAPE