

A PRESENTATION OF PERFECTION

By Dr. Mark Eckart

Chapter 3 Doctrinal Context

From this chapter I have selected the figures that were prominent in introducing problems....

This chapter will provide a general overview of the doctrine of entire sanctification within the Wesleyan theological tradition. Emphasis has been given to writings of those theologians who have given systematic treatment to entire sanctification or have been frequently cited by holiness movement preachers and teachers.

Revival of Holiness

By the early nineteenth century there had been a decline in the emphasis being placed on the doctrine of entire sanctification in American Methodism. Writing of the Methodist Episcopal Church, North, John L. Peters states:

Little was said about the doctrine, for instance, in the principal denominational journals between 1832 and 1840. In 1834-35 a spate of articles did appear in the New York Christian Advocate pointing out the differences between the Wesleyan doctrine of Christian perfection and certain antinomian teachings then receiving wide publicity. But, by and large, the “old Methodist doctrine” was becoming a denominational curiosity. [1]

However, the promotion of the doctrine of holiness did not stay in decline. Some holiness revivals and camp meetings came about to once again promote the second work of grace in the heart of the believer.

Phoebe Palmer

Other names will be mentioned later, but Phoebe Palmer, an effective preacher and writer, was greatly responsible for the revival of holiness that spread across America in the nineteenth century.

The “Tuesday Meeting” that she started was very effective in spreading revival and the doctrine of holiness. These meetings were similar to the early Methodist class meetings that were promoted by John Wesley. People met on Tuesdays to pray, worship, give accountability for their lives, and to especially seek and focus on the experience of sanctification.

A couple authors have given insight about these special meetings. Charles White has stated: Phoebe Palmer’s career as a revivalist began when she went downstairs to a women’s prayer meeting her sister Sarah was holding in the home their families shared. Soon the meeting was open to men, and Phoebe eventually took over leadership of the gathering. She called it, “The Tuesday meeting for the Promotion of Holiness.” In the almost forty years between 1837 and 1874, thousands of people drawn from the leading Evangelical denominations visited her parlors. There between walls hung with the mottoes, “The Lord Our Righteousness” and “Holiness to the Lord,” while the pictures of Wesley and Fletcher looked on, many professed entire sanctification.

Some left to establish similar “Tuesday Meetings,” so that by 1887 they were being held in 238 places, some as far away as England, India, and New Zealand. [2] Harold Raser has this to say about the “Tuesday Meetings” led by Phoebe Palmer. It was, “... a weekly religious meeting attended by clergymen and lay people from many denominations – sometimes swelling to over 300 in number – as the most significant agency for promoting the “holiness revival.” The Tuesday prayer meeting promoted holiness and was a significant vehicle [3] for many prominent persons to experience entire sanctification, but Palmer’s ministry also included creating a distinctive holiness theology.

Palmer was a dynamic evangelist and was very effective in making the message of entire sanctification prominent. Her primary interest was to lead people into the experience of entire sanctification. After noting Palmer’s theology was a “very practical theology which eschews strictly theoretical considerations,” Raser states: [4]

It was a “theology of holiness” which sought to develop the implications of two basic convictions: (1) ‘it is absolutely necessary that you should be holy if you would see God;’ (2) ‘holiness is a blessing which it is now your privilege and also your duty to enjoy.’ [5]

It was with these two foundational considerations in mind that Palmer constructed her theology.

The result of this distinctive theology was the well-known “altar theology.” An important aspect [6] of Palmer’s theology was the connection which she made between entire sanctification and the event of Pentecost. This connection was so definite that “baptism of the Holy Spirit” and other [7] expressions of Pentecostal language became the theological equivalent of entire sanctification. A further Palmer innovation was the association of power with purity. In her theology entire sanctification experienced as purity resulted, or issued forth, in spiritual power. It was this [8] particular understanding of holiness which became the norm for nineteenth and early twentieth century holiness preachers and teachers. Its influence was so pervasive that the older Wesleyan model was infrequently encountered in holiness teaching or preaching.

Camp meetings were also a tool used to revive the doctrine of holiness. For several decades camp meetings were a phenomenon that swept the country. Many communities had a tabernacle where holiness meetings would be held for several days or, sometimes, weeks.

There was concern about the decline of the doctrine of entire sanctification that caused some preachers to meet in 1866 to discuss ways to revitalize the doctrine. Peters talked about this when he wrote the following:

...a group of Methodist preachers met weekly in New York City to consider ways and means of responding to this crisis. Among the proposals offered was one by John A. Wood. He suggested that the ideal medicine for the restoration of vital spiritual life would be a camp meeting organized, advertised, and administered specifically for the promotion of holiness. [9] *(we are in a similar quandary today. How do we revitalize the knowledge of this work of grace??)*

This is just one example among many where camp meetings were organized to emphasize the message of holiness.

...Randolph Foster in his (The Nature and Blessedness of Christian Purity -1851) was also concerned about what he considered negative aspects of Palmer’s “altar theology.” She encouraged seekers to come to the altar to literally present their bodies a living sacrifice to God. Foster, among others, felt that sometimes this methodology caused people to experience sanctification by mental assent only. He believed there was more to becoming entirely sanctified than just believing and the work would be done. Foster says, Those who teach this new doctrine tend to substitute ‘mere belief’ for ‘confiding trust.’ For Wesley, sanctifying faith, like justifying faith, is more than intellectual assent; it is the warm trust of the heart. [19]

Asa Mahan/Charles G. Finney

In the middle of the nineteenth century Asa Mahan served as president of Oberlin College in Ohio, and Finney was the professor of theology at the College. They were responsible for what became known as Oberlin Perfectionism. These men put a great deal of emphasis on power and experiencing a baptism of the Holy Spirit. “This new doctrine was an attempted synthesis of New School Calvinism and the Methodist doctrine of entire sanctification.” Wesley had seen the Holy [26] Spirit working throughout the stages of faith (i.e., prevenient grace, new birth, and sanctification).

Mahan and Finney believed that the Spirit is “with” believers from their new birth, but is not “in” them until they receive the baptism of the Holy Ghost. [27] Oberlin Perfectionism became very popular as a result of these two men, especially since Finney was such a well-known evangelist. This doctrine was also widespread, in part, because it reached out to both the Wesleyans as well as the Calvinistic thinkers. Finney developed this doctrine in his 1838-39 lectures on Christian perfection published in The Oberlin Evangelist, and Mahan espoused this view in a book, The Baptism of the Holy Ghost, published in 1870.

Oberlin Perfectionism does not hold, as Wesleyans do, to the cleansing of sin in the heart of the sanctified believer. This teaching by Mahan and Finney is, for the most part, taught today by a group called the Keswickians (they have met since 1876 at the Keswick Convention in England). This [28] quote explains what they believe:

For this school, the baptism with the Holy Spirit does not cleanse the heart from sin; it is only empowerment for victorious living and effective witness. While their teachers deny the possibility of sin’s destruction prior to death, they do advocate the possibility of a life of victory over “the old nature” for those who put themselves under the

direction and control of the indwelling Spirit. But as long as Christians inhabit this mortal body, they must contend with the sin nature. [29] The Oberlin position contends for the work of the Holy Spirit, but more emphasis is put on power than purity.

(A. M. Hills -his critique of Finney. I really appreciate Hills writing except for remaining influences from Finney and Palmer.)

Hills, a great holiness writer and preacher, was influenced by Finney and Mahan. In fact he wrote a book called Life of Charles G. Finney. Hills also wrote a book called Homiletics and Pastoral Theology which he dedicated to Finney. The dedication reads: To the sacred memory of Charles G. Finney, at whose feet we sat and whose voice we heard, Sabbath after Sabbath, during the four formative years of our college course and the equal of whom as an effective ambassador for Christ, after studying preachers for more than half a century, we are free to say we never saw either in America or Europe. [32]

Even though Hills highly respected Finney and believed strongly in Pentecostal understanding of sanctification, he did not embrace all of what Oberlin Perfection proposed. Hills endorsed and strongly believed in the baptism of the Spirit but had difficulty with Oberlin's definition and treatment of sin. In Hills' book Holiness and Power several weaknesses with the Oberlin position were pointed out. Hills stated the Oberlin theory and then gave several critiques to the doctrine as Finney and others proclaimed it:

President Finney, than whom no man of the century has been more revered by the writer, and no other has experienced a greater influence upon his life, as we have seen, held a peculiar theory of sin and depravity, denying that man's nature was depraved. All sin was in the wrong use of the will; moral quality could be affirmed of nothing else. [33]

Hills continued his critique:

If, as President Finney contended, man had absolute freedom of will to choose the right and reject the wrong, and that choice, when made, secured his holiness and sanctification, then it follows logically that any man can regenerate and sanctify himself in a moment by a simple act of will. Nothing can be more opposed to the teaching of Scripture upon this subject of sanctification, or to all human experience. [34] Hills wrote another book called Scriptural Holiness and Keswick Teaching Compared. In this writing he argued strongly for the Methodist view of sanctification and the idea that all sin is done away with when a person is sanctified. He stated:

Entire Sanctification is a second definite work of grace wrought by the baptism with the Holy Spirit in the heart of the believer subsequently to regeneration, received instantaneously by faith, by which the heart is cleansed from all inward corruption and filled with the love of God. [35]

John Miley

John Miley was a professor of systematic theology at Drew Theological Seminary. His two-volume Systematic Theology was published in 1894 and was reprinted as recently as 1989. The conclusions he arrived at had a far-reaching effect in the religious world, especially in Methodism.

This scholar did not hold to the same views as Wesley did concerning Christian perfection. He really did not see the need for a definite second work of grace. Peters has written: Miley inclines to question the doctrinal necessity of such a work as entire sanctification as it was customarily presented. He sees no reason to assume that what is postulated for this "complete" work cannot be and is not accomplished in regeneration. Moreover, he states that there is no explicit scriptural support for the idea of an "incompleteness of regeneration." As a consequence, he says, "there is perplexity in the notion of entire sanctification," and "it should not be thought strange that some question the truth of this doctrine, or even oppose it." Second, and more emphatically, he opposes the view that entire sanctification must always be considered a second blessing. He holds that such may be a possible mode, but he objects to the insistence that it is the only mode. [23]

Miley saw Christian Perfection as being a maturity process. He said that there should always be plenty of time allowed for this process to take place. He admitted that a certain level of perfection could be reached, but that this perfection would vary with the personalities and temperament of each individual.

(Indeed. Lots of time. You will never get there like that! Miley obviously had no personal experience of entering His Rest.)

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