

A Look At Holiness And Perfectionism Theology

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I believe that it is fair to assume that when the reader sees the assigned title, “A *Look at* Holiness and Perfectionism Theology,” he will expect the essay to be an overview, a sketch, or an outline of what is generally believed and taught by that rather loosely connected group of associations and churches that we know as the “holiness bodies.”

A little closer look at the matter will establish the fact that an overview is precisely what it will have to remain, for no comprehensive statement of doctrine covering them all can be given. We are here dealing with a large number of fairly small denominations, no two agreeing exactly with one another in doctrine and polity, but yet united on enough basic issues and religious tenets to allow them to feel a fundamental attachment and kinship to one another.

If you consult Volume III of A.C. Piepcorn’s very useful *Profiles in Belief; The Religious Bodies of the United States and Canada*, you will there find listed and described some fifty-five holiness associations and church bodies.¹ If you include the Pentecostal Churches (as you well might, for reasons that will be adduced below), then you could add approximately 140 more church bodies to that total. When one notes that the holiness movement as we know it today is basically a development of the twentieth century, then it will be evident that the thing has grown like Topsy. Not surprisingly, there is enormous literature available on the subject. A bibliographic guide, such as Charles Jones’ *A Guide to the Study of the Holiness Movement* directs the reader to 918 pages of resource material — over 7000 entries!² Obviously we cannot treat any but the largest of the holiness bodies, and even there our resources will have to be to very general outlines.

Perhaps the best approach, both to find our bearings on the religious scene and also to serve as something of an outline for the essay, is to trace the general path by which the holiness movement has come to us. Though it is an oversimplification, yet it is fairly safe to generalize that the holiness movement of the past hundred years was basically a development in the Methodist Church. The Methodist Church, of course, reflects the peculiar genius of John Wesley more than that of any other man — and his theology was thoroughly Arminian. If there is one factor that has shaped the theology of the holiness bodies in their quest for perfection and in their optimism in the perfectibility of man, it is their having retained the distinctive features of the teaching of Jacob Arminius.

Arminianism

We sometimes are given the generalization that Arminian holiness theology is a development that was transmitted via the “reformed” branch of the great sixteenth century cleansing of the Church. The implication is that it is a Calvinistic phenomenon. That view is only partly correct. While it grew up in decidedly Calvinistic soil (the Netherlands), Arminianism is Calvinistic only in the sense that it was a violent reaction against strict Calvinism, notably its “horrible degree” of double predestination as that had been brought to its logical conclusion in the time of Theodore Beza, the successor of John Calvin.

The issue under hottest discussion was “supralapsarianism.” Beza taught that even *before* or *above* (“supra”) man’s fall into sin, God had designated some for reprobation in order that the glory of a sovereign God might be served not only by his grace in saving some, but also by the example of his just judgement upon those who oppose him and rebel against him.

When this strict view caused no end of dissention in Calvinistic circles, the irenic Jacob Arminius (1560-1609), professor of theology at the University of Leyden, was asked to defend the strict view. It was an assignment that was destined to change his life and the course of the Calvinistic churches, for in his study of the Scripture passages involved, Arminius came to question the whole idea unconditional predestination.

His work was cut-short by his early death at the age of 49, but his ideas were carried forward chiefly by Simon Episcopius and Hugo Grotius, who in 1610, the year after Arminius' death, drafted the *Remonstrance* setting forth the Five Points of Arminianism. They may be summarized somewhat as follows:

1. Against Calvin's teaching of the unconditional, arbitrary choice of a sovereign God, the Remonstrants taught that God's foreknowledge of man's faith was the condition of his election.
2. Against Calvinism's double predestination Arminius taught a universal atonement, effective for all believers.
3. Whereas the Calvinistic system taught that the elect were bound to be saved, almost willy-nilly, Arminius argued for human freedom and responsibility under a form of "preventing" or "prevenient" grace.
4. Whereas under Calvinism the elect perforce had to come under God's grace, the Remonstrants reflected Arminius' view regarding the resistibility of divine grace.
5. In opposition to Calvin's virtual "once saved — always saved" view, Arminius taught the uncertainty of perseverance and the possibility of final and total apostasy.

It will be apparent at once that the Remonstrance breathes the spirit of humanism and rests on an overly optimistic view of the free will of man and his ability to change his status before God. As such it was excellent soil for holiness Theology and "entire sanctification" to flourish in, but that development was not yet to come for about another 150 years. In the Synod of Dort (1619), packed as it was with strict Calvinists, the Remonstrance was overwhelmingly rejected. Its subscribers were condemned and outlawed in the Netherlands. True, Arminianism took its influence abroad and contributed to a general latitudinarian atmosphere that played down the value of creeds and confessional statements. Arminian adherents became susceptible to Socinianism and unitarianism. They contributed to pietism on the mainland and to deism in England, but in general one might venture to say that Arminianism as a movement would have remained a mere ripple on the religious sea if it had not been given second life by the remarkable career of John Wesley (1703-1791).

Wesley and Methodism

To a greater or lesser degree we are all children of our time. We are influenced by and we react to the circumstances in which we find ourselves. Certainly that is true also of John Wesley. The England to which John Wesley came was one permeated by a deism and rationalism that sapped the established Anglican Church of its vitality and reduced it in many ways to a mere formalism incapable of holding the hearts of the average English hearer.

Add to the disaffection the tremendous social and economic changes that 18th century England was undergoing. There was a growing mass of poor and underprivileged, counterbalanced by a class of new rich who were generally closely connected with the Established church. The potential for violent popular reaction against both church and state, as indeed happened in France, was certainly present also in England. That it did not happen was due, in part at least, to the new view, the optimistic dream of the perfectibility of man, that John Wesley brought to the scene in this time of English crisis.

Whence did John Wesley gain his optimism at a time when the average Englishman was inclined to think that life was a "bummer"? Biographers are unanimous in giving a great deal of credit to John Wesley's mother. Born in a parsonage, married to a clergyman and mother of a sizeable family, she inculcated in her children at an early age the conviction that they must learn to live according to a carefully defined "method" of following prescribed rules of conduct. This method was urged as the road not only to a self-improvement but eventually even to perfection. To many, John Wesley's mother seems to be the real founder of Methodism.

Under this early influence Wesley took to reading and following the principles laid out in Thomas a Kempis' *Imitation of Christ*. The peace and quiet of the *Imitatio Christi* was broken, however, by a reading of Jeremy Taylor's *Rule and Exercise of Holy Living and Dying*. Wesley was enthusiastic enough about holy living, but the prospect of holy dying disturbed him, for he found himself wholly unprepared for that. In a state of agitation he addressed himself to two volumes that came to be most influential in the formation of his

perfectionist theology, namely, William Law's *Treatise on Christian Perfection* and its companion volume, *A Serious Call to a Devout and Holy Life*. These became a roadmap for life.

Enrolled at Oxford, John, his brother Charles, George Whitefield, and some other students, organized the "Holy Club" to further their own sanctification. John, however, found the attempt discouraging — so discouraging that in 1735 he took leave of England to become a missionary to the American Indians of Georgia. That this was indeed a quest for holiness becomes apparent from a letter in which he states, "My chief motive, to which all the rest are subordinate, is the hope of saving my own soul."³

Ignored by the Indians and distrusted by the whites, John Wesley returned England with little to show for his efforts, except that in the terrors of crossing the high seas he had become mightily impressed with the quiet serenity of his Moravian fellow-passengers. They shared with him their conviction that saving faith brings with it both dominion over sin and true peace of mind - both holiness and happiness.⁴

Wesley began to seek this dual gift with renewed earnestness. It was a search that ended on May 24, 1738 at a religious society meeting on Aldersgate Street in London. In his journal Wesley states:

In the evening I went very unwillingly to a society in Aldersgate St., where one was reading Luther's preface to the Epistle to the Romans. About a quarter before nine, while he was describing the change that God works in the heart through faith in Christ, I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone, for salvation; and an assurance was given me that he had taken away my sins, even mine, and saved me from the law of sin and death.⁵

Thus John Wesley described the turning point in his life. There was an experience in his life, at a precise point in time, where he felt himself to have been transported from one who had previously converted or justified to a person who was now also sanctified and perfected. He had received a "second grace." That much is plain.

Beyond that there remain many questions as to just how Wesley himself viewed all the implications of such a change in the Christians life. Some of the vexing questions are: Did Wesley actually equate "perfection" with "sinlessness"? Is sin eradicated or merely suppressed? Is the new perfection complete in an instant, or is it the result of a process?

Vinson Synan, of pentecostal persuasion, observes:

In a lifetime which spanned the eighteenth century, Wesley had time to develop and refine his ideas on theology, society, and ecclesiology. Partly because of the sheer volume of his writings, there have emerged several John Wesleys to whom different people refer for different reasons.⁶

The "different people" to whom Synan refers are largely the "holiness" and "pentecostal" advocates of the last hundred years who differ with one another in their exegesis of various passages in Wesley's writings. The differences are generally one of degree or extent, or of involving precise definition or description of spiritual processes. There is rarely any disagreement on the basic thesis that Wesley taught "perfection" or "entire sanctification" as something that can definitely be felt or experienced separate from and subsequent to a believer's conversion. The "Perfected man" is then central to Wesley's method and Methodism. We need to say a bit about both the theology of Methodism and also about the method Wesley used to disseminate and inculcate his distinctive teachings.

Wesley's Theology

F.E. Mayer's fourfold division of Wesley's theology of perfectionism or sanctification is perhaps as workable as any. He notes these four main emphases: *universal* salvation, *free* salvation, *full* salvation, and *sure* salvation.⁷

In his idea of the *universality* of salvation Wesley was not only in line with the Arminians but even outstripped them in his revulsion at the thought of a double predestination in which a sovereign God on principle had from eternity doomed some men to hell. Influenced perhaps by his reading of Origen, Wesley believed that actually all men are in God's kingdom. In Wesley's view God's kingdom could be presented as three concentric circles. The largest circle is the Father's kingdom, which includes all men. In this kingdom men are guided in their actions by their reason and will therefore be judged solely on what use they made of the

opportunity to “live by their lights.” Those who have heard and accepted the Gospel are in the Son’s kingdom and will be judged by the Gospel’s standards, whereas those who have felt the direct intervention of the Holy Spirit in their lives are in the Spirit’s kingdom and enjoy an “experiential knowledge” of Christ which must henceforth control their lives. As men’s knowledge varies in the three dispensations, so also does the standard by which they will be judged. What opportunities this open up for flexibility in defining “Perfection” in the case of individuals will be apparent at once.

Free salvation generally suggests to us that salvation is by grace, that it comes to us solely as a gift from God without our contributing in the least toward its acquisition. That is far from Wesley’s Arminian view. With the Arminians, Wesley held a very optimistic view of man and his abilities. To him free “salvation” implied that man has free will, i.e., man is a free agent. He is free to accept or reject salvation. Not divine decree but human choice determines a man’s destiny.

Wesley recognized the Fall, but he denied that in it man had lost entirely the divine image, for to Wesley the image of God consisted of two parts: the moral endowment of perfect holiness, and the natural endowment of reason and free will. Admittedly, the former was lost in the Fall, but not the latter. By the use of reason and free will, Wesley argued, the former perfect holiness can be regained. That is the heart of perfectionist theology.

To be sure, man’s abilities, weakened in the Fall, need a bit of help from “preventing grace,” but even this need for grace is no insurmountable barrier, because God’s grace is universally present. In a sermon Wesley declares:

There is no man that is in the state of mere nature; there is no man, unless he has quenched the spirit, that is wholly void of the grace of God. No man living is entirely destitute of what is vulgarly called natural conscience. But this is not natural: it is more properly termed preventing (prevenient) grace. Every man has a greater or less measure of this, which waiteth not for the call of man. Every man has, sooner or later, good desires, although the generality of men stifle them before they can strike deep root, or produce any considerable fruit. Everyone has some measure of that light, some faint glimmering ray, which sooner or later, more or less, enlightens every man that cometh into the world. And everyone unless he be of the small number whose conscience is seared as with a hot iron, feels more or less uneasy when he acts contrary to the light of his own conscience. So that no man sins because he has not grace, but because he does not use that grace which he hath.⁸

Choosing to use “that grace which he hath” allows a man to attain full salvation or Christian perfection here in this life on earth. But in what does Christian perfection consist? Though the point is debated, often more vehemently by friends and followers of Wesley than by historians, Wesley seems generally to have been loathe to equate “perfection” with “sinlessness” in the absolute sense of the term. There are many passages in which he holds that only willful transgression of a known law is “sin.” Acts done in ignorance or weakness, he maintains, do not involve guilt and hence are not really sins, strictly speaking, but he seems never to have envisioned a utopia on earth where there would be no such lapses.

What seems to emerge as a more consistent definition of “perfection” is that it is the attainment (or obtainment) of perfect love. Typical, though somewhat problematical, is the following statement:

A will steadily and uniformly devoted to God is essential to a state of sanctification, but not a uniformity of joy or peace or happy communion with God.... Rapturous joy is a great blessing; but it seldom continues long before it subsides into calm, peaceful love.⁹

To be sure, some pentecostal denominations, particularly those that mushroomed after 1910, will adduce other passages from Wesley, to substantiate their claim that joy and rapture must indeed be prominent in the perfected Christian life, but does not detract from the point under discussion, namely, that Wesley does not seem to view absolute sinlessness as the *sine qua non* of perfection.

Another vexatious question has been the timing of this perfection in a Christian’s life. Does it occur in a moment? Or is it a process? Is it an “attainment” or an “obtainment”? Wesley seems to have written on both sides of the point. He states:

I believe this perfection is always wrought in the soul by a simple act of faith; consequently in an instant;

and yet he adds:

But I believe a gradual work, both preceding and following that instant. As to the time, I believe this instant generally is the instant of death, the moment before the soul leaves the body. But I believe it may be ten, twenty, or forty years before. I believe it is usually many years after justification; but that it may be within five years or five months after it. I know no conclusive argument to the contrary.¹⁰

Again, questions of timing aside, the basic thrust is clear. Wesley and all holiness bodies believe that entire sanctification is a “second grace,” separate from and subsequent to the first grace of justification or conversion. It is the “second grace” that makes salvation *sure* for them.

Pointing out that a “second grace,” a Spirit-induced experience, is the basis of their certainty of salvation or perfection does not imply that Wesley and his adherents have totally jettisoned the Word. They adduce some impressive (and misleading) statistics to the effect that Scripture passages that speak of entire sanctification (*entire* by their exegesis of the passages) outnumber proof passages for conversion by a ratio of five to one, or passages speaking of sanctification outnumber those that speak of Christ’s deity by ten to one.

For them, however, the Word is impersonal and objective. It is merely a first testimony. The real purpose of the Word is to draw from man’s spirit a sacred testimony that is subjective and immediate, the result of direct intervention by the Holy Spirit. It is the aspect of the Spirit’s intervention that makes this witness so “sure” for them. It is also this activity of the Spirit that; accounts for the unique value that is placed on the “testimonials” of those who are willing to get up and share publicly what they feel the Holy Spirit has done in them.

Heirs of the Lutheran Reformation with its emphasis on sola Scriptura will realize immediately, of course, that this assurance of perfection or salvation is not built on “thus it is written” but on “this is what I feel.” Mayer cannot refrain from the comment: “In the final analysis, Wesley rested his faith on his faith, a highly subjective procedure.”¹¹

Wesley’s Method

This fourfold blessing, a salvation that is universal, free, full, and sure, is what Wesley felt he had to share with his fellowmen. It was a blessing that came to men in connection with a distinct and clearly perceived spiritual experience. This spiritual experience could be, if not induced, at least aided and prepared for by following a “method.” Realizing this will both help us to understand the form that Wesley’s ministry took, and it will also explain some of the features of worship life that still characterize the holiness and pentecostal bodies.

Perhaps it is not to be wondered at that the staid and sedate Church of England did not take too kindly to a Wesleyan type of service in which the Holy Spirit threatened at any minute to interrupt their formal liturgical service. Though an ordained Anglican clergyman, Wesley was not particularly welcome in Anglican churches. To reach the masses, therefore, he had to resort to preaching in open fields, under groves of trees, in barns, in all manner of unchurchly settings. In these surroundings the lack of liturgical emphasis seemed to be little or no barrier at all.

Furthermore, many of the services, especially the evening meetings, turned out to be lengthy “watches” in which seekers after perfection earnestly prayed for and waited for the tangible and palpable intervention of the Holy Spirit.

Not all was impromptu, however. There was also careful organization. As early as 1739, the year after Wesley’s Aldersgate experience, he formed the United Society, a group of about ten men “having the form and seeking the power of godliness, united in order to pray together, to receive the work of exhortation, and to watch over one another in love, that they may help each other work out their salvation.”¹²

Patterned on the “choir” system that Wesley had observed when he spent six months at the Moravian settlement of Herrnhut, this system of organizing into small groups became the standard unit among Wesley’s

followers. Ten or twelve new converts (“a class”) were put under the supervision of a “class leader” who was closely to monitor the spiritual progress of each convert. At least once a week the leader was to sit down with each of his charges and to discuss his spiritual life, suggesting areas for improvement and receiving the convert’s “free will” offering for advancement of the “method.”

The individual classes were organized into “circuits” and placed under the supervision of lay preachers. Not content to entrust the perfecting of the saints entirely to lay preachers, Wesley soon organized a corps of “itinerant” clergymen who as “circuit riders” traveled regularly from station to station, supervising the whole.

In 1744 Wesley for the first time convened all the workers into a general assembly and in so doing established what became the regular feature of “annual conferences.” Thus, in about five years, Wesley developed virtually all the forms that were to become the distinctive features when Wesley’s movement within the church came to be a separate denomination.

American Methodism

We need not follow Methodism’s rise denominational status, except to note that Wesley was prominent in establishing the American branch of the movement after the Revolutionary War. He drafted the *Twenty-Five Articles of Religion* (based largely on the Anglican *Thirty-nine Articles* and the *Book of Common Prayer*) which together with his *Sermons and Notes on the New Testament* formed the doctrinal basis for the American branch.

The practical implications of these two doctrinal statements was set forth in the *Book of Discipline* which with its prescriptive do’s and don’ts was a virtual rule-book setting forth what was required of the American Methodist. Again Mayer makes the telling observation: “These rules play such a prominent part in Methodist Church life that this church body may be called a church with a discipline rather than a doctrinal platform.”¹³

Be that as it may, the Methodist Church was admirably suited to frontier life. From the very beginning it had been geared toward working with small and scattered groups. Small “classes” of ten or a dozen souls, sustained by lay-preaching and periodic visits from the circuit rider, could be formed in countless places in the young States.

Furthermore, the warm and personal aspects of the Methodist faith tended to be an antidote to the rugged and often lonesome pioneerlife, and the fact that Methodism tended to be practical in its emphasis rather than doctrinal allowed it to adapt itself or “fit between” the various denominations among which it found itself. Also, from their background and training, Methodists were not inclined to churchly edifices or elaborate and formal liturgical settings. It will not be surprising therefore that in the early decades of our country Methodism soon became one of the strongest denominations and a powerful force for “perfecting” of the many who pursued Wesley’s “method” in their quest for holiness.

In this quest the humble, local prayer meeting was no doubt the basic form, but it soon came to be supplemented by the popular annual camp meeting. Though the idea of camp meetings seems to have been something of an innovation by the Presbyterians on the Kentucky frontier, camp meetings soon became an annual feature that brought together the entire community.

In his *Essay on Camp Meetings* (1849) James Porter describes them as a “golden link” binding distant Methodist “societies together in a holy brotherhood.” These “strictly religious” meetings, held “amid waving trees” and “purling streams” were “conducive to health,” furnishing a change of air, scenery, society, and style of living which was most ruinous of hypochondria, and invigorating to the whole man.”¹⁴

Statistics seem to offer some support to Porter’s glowing testimonial. From a membership of some 14,000 at the end of the Revolutionary War, the Methodist Episcopal Church had grown to over one million members in Porter’s day. Roughly one American in twenty was Methodist. No doubt the camp meeting was highly supportive of these gains.¹⁵

Beginnings of the Modern Holiness

Along with this rise in numbers, accompanied as it was by a growing number of seminary-trained clergy, affluent and society-minded members, elaborate church buildings, swank summer resorts replacing

rustic camp grounds, there arose also the gnawing suspicion that the church was losing sight of its real reason for existing, namely, effecting the perfection and sanctification of its growing membership.

As early as 1825 Timothy Merritt sounded a warning in his book *The Christian Manual, a Treatise on Christian Perfection*. Fourteen years later he began a regular publication of a journal, eventually entitled *Guide to Holiness*, that over the years exerted tremendous influence for holiness in Methodist circles by reproducing much of Wesley's writing, almost verbatim.

One who was caught up in these urgings to holiness was Sarah Lankford. In 1835 after receiving the "second blessing" she started prayer meetings in her New York home in the interest of helping others attain perfection. When she moved from New York, her sister, Mrs. Phoebe Palmer, continued the weekly prayer meetings as the Tuesday Meeting for the Promotion of Holiness. While the level of popularity enjoyed by these meetings perhaps never quite reached that of league bowling in Milwaukee, yet these Tuesday Meetings outlived Mrs. Palmer by thirty years and had a far-reaching effect on the course of the holiness movement.

First of all, Mrs. Palmer succeeded in effecting a change in the church's understanding of one of the key doctrines in Wesley's theology. Whereas Wesley had taught, or at least allowed the possibility, that sanctification was a *process* in the life of the converted Christian, Phoebe Palmer insisted that it was an instantaneous act produced by the Spirit at a definite point of time.

With this new emphasis she gained the ear of a number of movers and shakers within the Methodist Church who were convinced that the only way to salvage the church and its commission of perfecting the saints was by a return to the camp meetings that had been so effective a means of revival in the first half of the nineteenth century. Thus she influenced directly the relatively small group of leaders who issued the general invitation to all who were interested in "holding a camp meeting, the special object of which shall be the promotion of the work of entire sanctification."¹⁶

The proposed camp meeting was held at Vineland, New Jersey in July of 1867 and proved to be so successful that it led to the formation of the National Camp Meeting Association for the Promotion of Holiness. Under the name of The National Association for the Promotion of Holiness that body is still in existence today.

In the twenty years after Vineland (1867-87), the National Association held "sixty-seven national camp meetings and eleven Tabernacle meetings ... distributed through sixteen states of the Union extending to both shores of the Continent and to the far off East."¹⁷ The National holiness movement was as successful in reviving the camp meeting as it was in reviving the doctrine of sanctification.

Opposition to Holiness

Understandably, the success of such a national camp association within the official Methodist church caused both fear and suspicion in the parent body. Those feelings were heightened when the national association extended itself into regional, state, and local associations patterned after the national body and designed to provide worship services, conventions, revivals and camp meetings for those with a holiness bent that was not entirely shared by the official Methodist Church.

Among charges and counter-charges there soon appeared the additional phenomenon of "come-outism," i.e., people who for conscience reason found it necessary to "come out" and disengage from the Methodist Church. "Come-outers" were most common in the Midwest and South, and it is there that, the bitterest battles between the "holiness" and "anti-holiness" factions were fought.

The show-down took place in the 1894 convention of the General Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South. Perhaps the issue was for all practical purposes decided already by Bishop Haygood's letter that went out in preparation for the convention. In a virtual declaration of open warfare against "holiness" he stated:

There has sprung among us a party with holiness as a watchword; they have holiness associations, holiness meetings, holiness preachers, holiness evangelists, and holiness property. Religious experience is represented as if it consists on only two steps, the first step out of condemnation into peace and the next step into Christian perfection. The effect is to disparage the new birth, and all stages of spiritual growth from the blade to the full corn in the ear.... We

do not question the sincerity and the zeal of these brethren; we desire the church to profit by their earnest preaching and godly example; but we deplore their teaching and methods in so far as they claim a monopoly of the experience, practice, and advocacy of holiness, and separate themselves from the body of ministers and disciples.¹⁸

When the convention accepted the anti-holiness position advocated by their bishops, the ranks of the “come-outers” were swelled by the “put-outers” who on theological grounds found themselves separated from their church.

One might have thought that these disenfranchised holiness people would have had a relatively easy time of banding together to a new and sizeable denomination. After all, the organization for it not only on the local and regional, but even on the national level was all there for it in the structure of the National Holiness Association.

But that new, united holiness denomination did not come into being. Rather, by following the strong personality of various “come-outers” and “put-outers” the holiness movement fragmented into over a score of small groups. Syan says, “A measure of the intensity of the conflict over sanctification is the fact that twenty-three denominations began in the relatively short period of seven years between 1893 and 1900.”¹⁹

Divisions Within Holiness

Because of mortality and mergers few of these early groups have remained recognizable entities to the present, but some of them effected significant changes in the holiness movement during their careers. Take the case of the Fire-Baptized Holiness Church founded in the 1890s by Benjamin Irwin of Lincoln, Nebraska. Irwin was a converted Baptist who received the “second grace” of sanctification through holiness preaching and then threw himself into a study of Wesleyan and other Methodist literature. From these studies he concluded that additional stages of grace beyond the second grace of sanctification were possible. Specifically, he believed that the “full dispensation of the Spirit” was a baptism “with the Holy Ghost and fire.”

Irwin sought and eventually received such an experience of “fire-baptism” for himself, he then preached it and advocated it to others with such success that “those receiving the ‘fire’ would often shout, scream, speak in tongues, fall into trances, and even get the jerks.”²⁰ Traditional holiness advocates who had always equated the “baptism of the Spirit” with the “second grace” of sanctification were appalled and they now denounced Irwin’s teaching as a “third blessing heresy.”

Because of his excesses and immorality, Irwin lost the leadership of his church, but his influence lived on in the life and work of Charles Parham and William Seymour.

Parham, a “come-outer” from the Methodist Church, felt uncomfortable with the emotionalism to which he had been subjected when he attended Irwin’s worship services, but he accepted Irwin’s theology of a “third experience” consisting in a “baptism of the Holy Ghost and fire.” It was this “third experience” that he felt would be needed for men to “meet the challenge of the new century.” Consequently he set up a school in Topeka, Kansas to train preachers to help others achieve the “third experience.”

At a new years eve service on December 31, 1900 one of Parham’s students, Agnes Ozman, asked him to lay hands on her head and pray for the baptism of the Holy Spirit with the evidence of speaking in tongues. That evening after midnight, on the first day of the 20th century, she began speaking in the Chinese language, while a halo seemed to surround her head and face. Reportedly for three days thereafter she was unable to converse in English. When a writing pad was brought to her, she wrote in Chinese.²¹ Through the publicity the incident received in the public press, Parham’s “third experience” was beginning to overshadow the “second grace” of sanctification.

Parham closed his Topeka school and went on a campaign to spread the new “Full Gospel” with its emphasis on the third blessing of healing and the gift of tongues as evidence of the Spirit’s indwelling. Unquestionably the most significant convert of this tour was William Seymour a Negro pastor who, after instruction in Parham’s pentecostal gospel, eventually made his way to Los Angeles. Here in April of 1906 he was instrumental in touching off the well-known Azusa Street revival that lasted for three years and with its mass hysteria drew the attention of the whole nation. The Azusa street revival is generally considered the

birthday of the modern pentecostal movement. This new Pentecostalism grew directly from the seedbed of “holiness” and confronted holiness adherents with the need to make a decision.

Holiness or Pentecostalism?

Many in the holiness camp accepted the pentecostal concept gladly and sought the tongues experience as a “third blessing,” merely adding it to their understanding of Wesley’s “second grace of sanctification.”

Others, like A.B. Simpson, head of the Christian and Missionary Alliance, remained ambivalent. While rejecting the pentecostal claim that everyone *had* to speak in tongues in order to be sure of the Holy Spirit’s indwelling, Simpson nevertheless allowed tongues as “one of the evidences” of the Spirit’s baptism. This bit of compromise, caught under the catchphrase of “Seek not — Forbid not,” came to be known as the “Alliance position.”

Consistent followers of Wesleyan theology, on the other hand, found it necessary to oppose the new pentecostal teaching in the interest of retaining their distinctive doctrine that the “second grace” constitutes “entire sanctification.” In general, these opposing groups and denominations are the forebearers of the holiness denominations that remain to the present, such as the Church of the Nazarene, the Wesleyan Methodist Church, the Salvation Army, etc.

That they were indeed being true to their traditions in opposing Pentecostalism and that determined resistance was necessary became the more evident to conservative holiness groups when they detected a new heresy developing among the Pentecostals, namely, the “finished work” teaching of W.H. Durham and others.

As long as Pentecostalism remained rooted in the holiness tradition, there was never any question about sanctification as the “second grace,” but when the movement began to draw also from other denominations, particularly the Baptists, then it was confronted with preaching and teaching such as that of Durham who denied that scripture taught any such thing as a *second* grace of sanctification. To him the *first* grace of conversion covered it all and was a “finished work,” its completed nature being attested to by the visible indwelling of the Spirit. To the holiness adherents this was, of course, the rankest of heresy, for it denied the very reason for their existence.

As a result the older denominations, more settled in the traditions of Wesley’s holiness, tended to resist Pentecostalism. A good illustration of this is the case of the Church of the Nazarene, by far the largest of the present holiness denominations. It was founded as early as 1895 by Phineas Bresee in the city of Los Angeles. Its original name was the Pentecostal Church of the Nazarene, and it was in fact the mother church of the Azusa Street movement. Throughout the three years of the revival (1906-09), however, it staunchly opposed the Pentecostal teaching that came from that quarter. In the “finished work” controversy that followed, the disagreement became so sharp that in 1919 they dropped “Pentecostal” from their name and reduced it to the present Church of the Nazarene. In general then, the older holiness churches tended to keep their teaching of sanctification as a second grace, but as Synan indicates:

So pervasive, was the new (finished work) view that most of the Pentecostal denominations that began after 1911 incorporated it in their statements of faith.²²

Rampant Growth

That there was internecine warfare between the holiness movement and its Pentecostal branch does not mean that these bodies did not grow. Quite the opposite! E.S. Gaustad in his *Historical Atlas of Religion in America* gives some astounding statistics. Comparing five mainline Protestant denominations with five holiness-pentecostal groups, he notes that while the Protestant groups showed a 20% growth for the 1910-20 decade, the representative holiness bodies registered a 240% increase. The gap widens in the next decade. From 1920 to 1930 the five holiness groups grew by 300% while the five mainline bodies tapered off to a 10% growth! After 1930 the holiness growth rate declined markedly, but by that time significant numbers were already won to these bodies, and they have continued as sizeable denominations.

Why was there such a dramatic growth in holiness interest in the first three decades of this century? In many ways the situation in our country after the turn of the century was similar to conditions in Wesley’s England. Recall that we noted as contributing factors rampant deism and rationalism, the average worshipper’s

feeling of isolation and separation from the formal Anglican church service and its sophisticated clergy, coupled with a general disenchantment with life on the part of large, underprivileged masses milling about in the cities. Almost all of these features have counterparts in America at the turn of the century. Holiness growth, like Wesleyanism, capitalized on them.

We note first of all that the holiness growth was mainly in the urban areas, to which rural people thronged in great masses after 1900. Economic conditions for them were often little better in the city than they had been in the country, and many found themselves disappointed and homesick.

Adding to their feeling of disorientation was the fact that many felt they had lost their religious base, for they found it hard to adjust to the large, imposing city churches, often shepherded by “slick” city pastors to whom they could not relate.

Not only life-style but theology separated them. In the great fundamentalist controversy, the large, affluent urban churches seemed often to be the haven of liberalism teaching or at least tolerating, the rationalism of liberal European theology, Darwinism and evolution, deism in the form of lodge membership, and assorted other ills.

As an alternative to this, the holiness churches offered a return to the fundamentals. Thousands of displaced and lonesome urban people saw in the warm and subjective holiness service a return to the “old-time religion” of their youth, rooted as that had been in the camp meeting and the revival service.²³ As a result, many of the holiness bodies prospered and grew to the denominational status in which we find them today.

Present-day Denominations

Not all of the holiness denominations are large, of course. As already indicated previously, Piepkorn in his *Profiles in Belief* (published 1979) lists 55 holiness bodies. They range in size from the tiny Church of Daniel’s Band consisting of two congregations in the vicinity of Midland Michigan, and having a membership of about 100 to the sizable Church of the Nazarene with over 4,000 congregations and a membership almost the same as that of the WELS.

Using Piepkorn’s statistics it is possible to compute that the 55 denominations total just a bit over 13,000 congregations with about 830,000 members. That works out to a trifle less than 65 members per congregation. Even if we take into consideration that in holiness circles “members” usually does not mean all the baptized souls but rather those who have experienced the second grace of sanctification after conversion, that still leaves us with relatively small congregations as the normal pattern.

It may be of interest to take a look at just a few of the larger denominations if we apply the very arbitrary standard of choosing only those denominations with at least 1,000 congregations and 10,000 members, our list of 55 congregations is reduced to four. That rather drastic procedure may seem a bit more pardonable if we realize that these four denominations have a combined membership of some 650,000, or roughly 78% of the listed holiness constituency.

Before looking at the four individually, a few generalizations may be in order. First of all, note the early, i.e., decidedly pre-1911, origin of these bodies. They thus exhibit firm grounding in the Wesleyan tradition of entire sanctification as a second grace, as opposed to the post-1911 pentecostal inclination to emphasize healing and tongues speaking as a “third blessing” or even as a replacement for the traditional “second blessing.”

Furthermore, note that they tend to be strong in the heartland of our country — notably in Indiana and vicinity, and in the Midwest generally. Finally, note their mission zeal, supported as that is by the “sanctified giving” which regularly puts them among the leading contributors in the U.S.

Free Methodist Church of North America

In the mid 1800s there was a growing concern on the part of many that in the Methodist Church holiness “had become a counsel of perfection for the few and an object of ridicule to many.” So vocal was the concern of Benjamin Roberts that in 1858 he found himself “put out” of the Methodist Episcopal Church for his efforts. His response was to found the Free Methodist Church. In the eyes of its founder the church was to be *free* from episcopal domination and ecclesiastical machinery, *free* from sin through an emphasis on entire sanctification, *free* from the evils of commercial financial practices in the church, including pew rental and pew sales, and *free*

from musical over-emphasis, particularly from trained choirs and organ virtuosos. The first three “freedoms” have been maintained to the present. In 1943 the church granted its congregations an option regarding the use of choir and instrumental music, and in 1955 the restrictions were dropped entirely.

There are 1,058 Free Methodist congregations in the U.S. with a membership of 67,043. This, however, is only a little over half of its world membership. Almost 40% of the world-membership lives overseas. Because of extraordinary mission contribution, Free Methodist missions can be maintained in India, Africa, the Dominican Republic, Taiwan, Hong Kong, the Philippines, Brazil, Paraguay, and Mexico. The international headquarters are located in Winona Lake, Indiana.²⁴

The Wesleyan Church

The Wesleyan Church is the result of the 1968 merger of the Wesleyan Methodist Church of America and the Pilgrim Holiness Church. Both of these parent bodies are themselves the result of many and complicated mergers, but their roots go back into the 1800s.

The Wesleyan Methodist Church was originally founded in 1843. Around Orange Scott, a “come-outer” from the Methodist Episcopal Church, there gathered like-minded people bent on opposing laxity in sanctification, slavery, lodges, alcohol, etc.

The Pilgrim Holiness Church was organized in 1697 by Martin Knapp and Seth Rees with much the same sanctification interests as those shown by the Scott group.

The two churches very nearly merged in 1959 when the merger resolution failed by one vote. Since 1968 the joint group totaling 2600 churches and 80,000 members, is headquartered in Marion, Indiana. There are Wesleyan missions in Latin America, the West Indies, Asia, Africa, Australia, New Guinea, and the Philippines.²⁵

The Church of God (Anderson, Indiana)

To venture into the history of the Church of God is to invite mistaken identity. There were countless groups, usually unbeknown to one another, who called themselves “The Church of God” under the logic that this was the only name ever given to the church in Scripture. When the confusion became too great, these groups often changed their name or added a descriptive element. Hence there remain today The Church of God (Holiness), The Church of God (Apostolic), and The Church of God (Sanctified). There is a Church of God in Oklahoma which, because of its pioneering efforts at integration, gained from outsiders the designation The Church of God (Holstein). Understandably the members prefer a geographical designation and call themselves The Church of God (Guthrie, Oklahoma).

A geographical designation also marks the only Church of God that fits into our category of having 1000 congregations 10,000 members. That is the denomination headquartered in Anderson, Indiana.

The Church of God (Anderson) owes its founding to David Warner. He believed that the church had been restored to its Apostolic state in three stages: When the Pietists restored the doctrine of justification; When Wesley restored the doctrine of sanctification, and when the Plymouth Brethren started the movement to reestablish the unity of the church.²⁶ In 1881 Warner and his followers renounced all creeds and party names and pledged themselves to principles following the apostolic church of the living God.

While the Church of God (Anderson) in principle does not accept creeds, it obviously is thoroughly committed to the Wesleyan doctrine of entire sanctification. Thus it fits squarely into the holiness group. It has a membership of 166,259 in 2,251 congregations. Tithing is common among them and from their midwest base they support missions in Africa, India, Australia, Japan, the SouthSea islands, Europe, and Latin America.¹

The Church of the Nazarene

The 1895 founding of this denomination by Phineas Bresee has already been alluded to. The many mergers and mission connections that have resulted in making this the largest of the holiness denominations with 441,093 members in 4,733 congregations is a matter far too large to enter in on at this point. Suffice it to say that, though its headquarters are not in Indiana but rather in Kansas City, Missouri, the Church of the Nazarene is decidedly a midwestern institution. Its strength is in the smaller rural communities lying generally

on an oblique northeast to southwest band running roughly from Pennsylvania to Kansas. While its base is the midwest, its outreach is certainly not confined to that area. Tithing from its more than 400,000 members allows it to work in literally too many areas to name — over forty countries!

Weakness of Holiness Theology

There is a commendable mission zeal in the holiness bodies, but the doctrine they bring, while essentially “fundamental,” retains the distinctive Wesleyan-Arminian theology of perfectionism. *The Agreed Statement of Beliefs*, which is all that the Church of the Nazarene requires for membership may be taken as representative of all the holiness groups. Its eight points read:

We believe—

1. In one God — the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.
2. That the Old and New Testament Scriptures, given by plenary inspiration, contain all truth necessary to faith and Christian living.
3. That man is born with a fallen nature, and is therefore, inclined to evil, and that continually.
4. That the finally impenitent are hopelessly and eternally lost.
5. That the atonement through Jesus Christ is for the whole human race; and that whoever repents and believes on the Lord Jesus Christ is justified and regenerated and saved from the dominion of sin.
6. That sinners are to be sanctified wholly, subsequent to regeneration through faith in the Lord Jesus Christ.
7. That the Holy Spirit bears witness to the new birth, and also to the entire sanctification of believers.
8. That our Lord will return, the dead will be raised,, and the final judgment will take place.²⁸

While much of this confession could be understood properly and accepted as Scriptural, points 6 and 7 reflect the holiness bodies’ distinctive teaching of perfectionism. In fact, this doctrine is their real reason for existing as a separate denomination.

What are the inherent dangers in the doctrine of entire sanctification? On perhaps the most elementary level it should be noted that the adherent of perfectionism walks the thin edge between pride and despair.

When things are going well, when he observes no coarse outbreaks of sin in his life, then he is encouraged into thinking that he has indeed “arrived,” that by harnessing the powers within himself and following the “method” he has become able to do what God requires. In this state he is deaf to the Law and its real demands, and therefore oblivious to his daily need for repentance and forgiveness. In his self-righteousness the perfectionist feels no need for God’s grace. When however the Law breaks through, as indeed it must and will, when he is overtaken by grievous sin, when he has to say with Paul, “The evil that I would not ... that I do,” then the only conclusion the consistent perfectionist can come to is that he is “living below his potential.” So he redoubles his efforts. He goes to his denomination’s manual of discipline with its rigorous injunctions against tobacco and alcohol, etc., and by a more diligent observance of the “method” he hopes to attain an acceptable level of performance. In his legalism the perfectionist finds no room for God’s grace.

Thus in good days and in bad, the perfectionist cuts himself off from God’s grace. But he offends not only against *sola gratia*. He sins also against *sola Scriptura*, for he does not give Scripture its proper place. Scripture is for him only a “first Witness.” Its real purpose for him lies in its being the means through which the Holy Spirit comes directly and immediately in an emotional and subjective experience through which he feels himself to be the object of God’s acceptance and approval. In doing so, he trusts not and his clear words and promise but rather his own heart, and feelings.

This depreciation of God’s Word brings a related danger. Where experience and feeling have come to be the center of the Christian life, there it is easy to disparage creeds and confessions, to play down the need for purity of doctrine, and to see a common quest for holiness as the rationale for all manner of unionistic and interdenominational activity.

The only antidote to the teaching of perfectionism and its appeal to human pride is, of course, to take Scripture seriously when it tells us that we were born sinners and that we will remain sinners until the day we die. Sinners, to be sure, but by faith in Christ, justified and forgiven sinners. “*Simul justus et peccator*,” as Luther says.

God grant that we always remember both parts of Luther’s dictum: our sinfulness as well as our justification. Only then will we be willing to throw ourselves on our Savior’s mercy and cry out, “God, be merciful to me, a sinner.” And only then will we have the courage to believe him when he says, “Son, be of good cheer. Thy sins be forgiven thee.”

Endnotes:

1. Piepkorn, *Profiles in Belief*, Vol., Table of Contents.
2. Jones, *Guide to Study of Holiness*, Scarecrow Press, 1974.
3. Synan., *Holiness-Pentcostal Movement*, p.15.
4. Ibid., p.16.
5. Mayer; *Religious Bodies*, p. 296.
6. Synan, p.13.
7. Mayer, p. 299f.
8. quoted by Mayer, p. 301.
9. Mayer, p. 303.
10. Ibid., p. 30.
11. Ibid., p. 304
12. Book of Discipline, quoted by Mayer, p.297.
13. Mayer, p. 298.
14. Jones, *Perfectionistic Persuasion*, p. 16.
15. Ibid., p. 2.
16. Synan, p. 36.
17. Ibid., p. 42.
18. Ibid., p. 50,51.
19. Synan, p. 54.
20. Ibid., p. 62
21. Ibid., p. 101
22. Ibid., p. 49.
23. B. Taylor, “Forty, Years Ago,” cited by Jones, p. 143.
24. Piepkorn, pp.15-17.
25. Ibid., pp. 11-14.
26. Mayer, p. 334.
27. Piepkorn, pp. 20-22
28. Ibid., p. 29

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