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Kevin Twain Lowery

*Olivet Nazarene University*, [klowery@olivet.edu](mailto:klowery@olivet.edu)

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# A FORK IN THE WESLEYAN ROAD: PHOEBE PALMER AND THE APPROPRIATION OF CHRISTIAN PERFECTION<sup>1</sup>

by

Kevin T. Lowery

Phoebe Palmer has long been a source of inspiration as well as a center of controversy within the Wesleyan/Holiness Movement. In 1838 she began to speak at camp meetings for the purpose of promoting “holiness,” not only the doctrine, but the experience which she had personally encountered a year earlier. At the end of the following year she initiated a weekly meeting on Tuesdays in her home with the same goal. In spite of chronic health problems, she continued the camp meeting visits until her death some thirty-five years later. En route, she spent four years promoting holiness in the British Isles through revival services. Of her numerous publications, her books *The Way of Holiness, Faith and Its Effects*, and *Promise of the Father* (which argues for the legitimacy of women in ministry) are perhaps the most notable.<sup>2</sup>

For the greatest part of the twentieth century, historiographies of American Evangelicalism did not pay much attention to Palmer. Harold E. Raser attributes this to the fact that she influenced a great many schis-

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<sup>1</sup>I am grateful to George Marsden for his helpful critique of an early draft of this article.

<sup>2</sup>A good biography of Phoebe Palmer can be found, among other places, in Charles Edward White, *The Beauty of Holiness: Phoebe Palmer as Theologian, Revivalist, Feminist, and Humanitarian* (Grand Rapids: Francis Asbury Press, 1986).

matics, even though she was not one herself.<sup>3</sup> In any event, historians are beginning to rediscover the various aspects of her overall impact on Evangelicalism. Meanwhile, some Wesleyan theologians have lately questioned the consistency of her teachings and practices with those of John Wesley, the founder of Methodism and the Holiness Movement's ultimate font.

Raser concludes that "in filling [the traditional expositions of holiness] with very specific meaning, Palmer created something new."<sup>4</sup> John Leland Peters believes that between Wesley and the subsequent Holiness Movement (in which Palmer played a key role early in its history) there are three main differences in the type of perfectionism that each claimed. First, the Holiness Movement's methodology has traditionally been more strict and rigid than that of Wesley. The Holiness Movement proposed specific steps that would produce perfection, but Wesley's approach was more open-ended. Second, whereas Wesley only utilized the testimony of individuals in specific cases where it might prove especially helpful, Palmer and her followers considered testimony a duty and a necessary means of retaining the "blessing." Third, the moment in which perfection is attained is, in Wesley's mind, both preceded and followed by a gradual process. In contrast, the Holiness Movement has often isolated the event from the process. It is suggested that purity (which is achieved by an instantaneous volitional act) can be separated from maturity (which is achieved by a gradual, more intellectual process).<sup>5</sup>

In order to critically appraise Palmer's departure from Wesley, the sources of the differences must be identified. Most Wesleyan scholars agree that the crux of the matter is the way that perfection is redefined by Palmer. The question now becomes whether the shift is strictly one of method (which several scholars have proposed) or stems from a deeper theological shift. I believe that a methodological shift led to a theological one. My thesis is two-fold. First, I believe that, while Palmer attempted to merely appropriate Wesley's doctrine through a new methodology, a closer examination of her writings will reveal a theological shift which was necessary to justify the new methodology. Hence, she essentially

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<sup>3</sup>Harold Raser, *Phoebe Palmer: Her Life and Thought* (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen, 1987), 2.

<sup>4</sup>Raser, 155.

<sup>5</sup>John Peters, *Christian Perfection and American Methodism* (New York: Abingdon Press, 1956), 114.

altered Wesley's doctrine. Second, Palmer made these changes in an effort to promote holiness as an ecumenical concern, and she did succeed in reaching a diversified audience. Nevertheless, the shared experience of "entire sanctification" (i.e., "holiness," "perfection," "second blessing") was not enough to unite these various groups. Instead, each one appropriated perfection according to its own theological schema. Even the Holiness Movement itself could not be united through the shared experience of entire sanctification, but became even more fragmented than it was at the start.

Melvin Dieter suggests that Palmer's changes are somewhat justified because they reflect the culture of nineteenth-century America. White goes a step further by claiming that Palmer merely carried out Wesley's doctrines to their natural conclusion.<sup>6</sup> This stronger assertion is one which I believe does not hold up to close scrutiny, but a full rebuttal of this thesis would go beyond the scope of this paper. Instead, it will be sufficient to (1) detail the shift which occurs from Wesley to Palmer, (2) suggest some possible sources beyond Wesley which might account for the shift, and (3) use the shift as a means to connect Palmer with the divergent groups which appropriated the experience of holiness for their own purposes.

### 1. Divergence from Wesley

**A Common Core.** At first glance, it does not seem that Palmer was teaching a doctrine of entire sanctification (i.e., Christian perfection) different from that of Wesley, for she generally agrees with his theological construal. With Wesley, she asserts that Christian perfection is not a state of absolute perfection, neither is it angelic perfection or Adamic perfection (i.e., the created human state before the fall). Instead, Christian perfection is a relative state of perfection.<sup>7</sup> It might be best characterized as a moral perfection within the limits of human reason. From this perspective, she can assert that "in the present state of existence . . . perfection can only exist in the gospel sense."<sup>8</sup>

<sup>6</sup>Charles White, "Phoebe Palmer and the Development of Pentecostal Pneumatology," *Wesleyan Theological Journal*, 23 (1988), 204.

<sup>7</sup>Palmer, *Faith and Its Effects: Fragments from My Portfolio* (1867?; reprinted in *The Devotional Writings of Phoebe Palmer*, New York: Garland, 1985), 51-53.

<sup>8</sup>Palmer, *The Way of Holiness* (1867, reprinted in *Devotional Writings*), 58.

Also, Palmer remains consistent with Wesley by claiming that in sanctification the image of God is “re-ensamped upon the soul.”<sup>9</sup> For Wesley, the image of God (which was lost in the fall) includes body, soul, and spirit. The redemption of the body will not be consummated until the final resurrection. In the meantime, believers can experience a full spiritual restoration within the confines of diminished bodily powers. Hence, Wesley declares, “It is a ‘renewal of believers in the spirit of their minds, after the likeness of Him that created them.’”<sup>10</sup>

**Outlining the Differences.** Palmer truly believes that she has captured the content of Wesley’s doctrine of Christian perfection and that her version will produce the same results as Wesley’s account. Consequently, the difference between her and Wesley is best described as a variation of a doctrine, rather than as a different doctrine altogether. It is with Palmer’s successors that the shift from Wesley was great enough to produce entirely different doctrines (e.g., Keswick’s denial of salvation from all sin, Pentecostalism’s emphasis on the spiritual gifts, etc.). Thus, the issue with Palmer is her alteration of Wesley’s doctrine of Christian perfection. White outlines six aspects of this change. Palmer:

1. Equates entire sanctification with the baptism of the Holy Spirit;
2. Relates holiness to power;
3. Stresses the instantaneous to the neglect of the gradual;
4. Sees entire sanctification not as the goal of the Christian life, but as its beginning;
5. Reduces sanctification to consecration, faith, and testimony by using “altar theology”;
6. Claims that the only evidence needed for the assurance of sanctification is the biblical text itself.<sup>11</sup>

The first alteration can be traced back to John Fletcher, Wesley’s heir apparent who unexpectedly preceded Wesley in death. The next four relate to the theology of Adam Clarke, one of Wesley’s young ministers who went on to write one of the most celebrated Bible commentaries of his time. The final alteration seems to be a precursor to the literalist

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<sup>9</sup>Ibid., 61.

<sup>10</sup>John Wesley, “A Plain Account of Christian Perfection,” in *The Works of John Wesley* (1872; reprint, Kansas City: Beacon Hill Press, 1978), 11: 378.

<sup>11</sup>White, “Pentecostal Pneumatology,” 198-199.

hermeneutic that emerged with fundamentalism at the end of the century.<sup>12</sup> Along the same lines as George Marsden, I surmise that some form of Thomas Reid's "Common Sense Realism" was at work here.<sup>13</sup> I will use these six differences as the foundation for developing my thesis, focusing on them in greater detail. However, I believe that these six points can be better understood if they are addressed in a slightly different order. Palmer's divergence from Wesley begins with her adaptation of a Pentecostal model of sanctification, in which entire sanctification is equated with the baptism of the Holy Spirit (#1). Arguably, this might be regarded as the introduction of new doctrine, although Fletcher and Palmer did not think so. This theological alteration essentially supports Palmer's methodological innovations, those which spring from her quest to shorten the process of attaining the experience of entire sanctification. She depicts the experience as an event rather than as the culmination of a process (#3). Since she understands the event to be initiated by complete consecration, she employs the model of a sacrifice being laid upon an altar (#5).

Nevertheless, Palmer still expects this experience to free the believer from all sin. For Wesley, this freedom is achieved through a long, arduous process of conquering sinful desires and thoughts. Palmer's short-cut to this methodology is to insist that the long process can be replaced by an instantaneous bestowal of divine power which will produce the same effect (#2). Unfortunately, she fails to appreciate the depths of Wesley's grappling with sinfulness, and this aspect of his doctrine of Christian perfection seems to be the pivotal point between emphasizing sanctification as a gradual process or as an instantaneous event.

Palmer's writings also reveal her constant thirst for assurance. Even though she feels that ecstasy is a natural concomitant to entire sanctification, she knows that such cannot be the motivation for the event, neither can it be the assurance. Therefore, she attempts to base her assurance in the veracity of Scripture (#6). However, she diminishes the role that reason plays in the process, just as she does when she replaces Wesley's

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<sup>12</sup>If this is true, then it is doubtful that the biblical literalism which is so characteristic of fundamentalism is wholly attributable to the development of modern higher criticism.

<sup>13</sup>George Marsden suggests Reid's "Common Sense Realism" as an intellectual source which bolsters fundamentalist literalism. See Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture: The Shaping of Twentieth-Century Evangelicalism, 1870-1925* (Oxford: Oxford University, 1980), 14-21, et. al.

more cognitive approach to conquering sin with non-contemplative mystical experiences.

Finally, Palmer's modified version of perfection is an experience that she feels can and should be experienced early in the Christian life (#4). According to her, all believers can be sanctified holy, regardless of their theological commitments. This allows her to promote her doctrine as an ecumenical endeavor. The task at hand is to explore each of the aspects of this divergence according to the outline I have just described. This investigation will reveal the other sources Palmer attempts to synthesize with Wesley. It will also uncover some of her underlying assumptions which are difficult, if not impossible, to reconcile with Wesley's thought. It should then become apparent how Palmer's and Wesley's accounts are only partially compatible.

**The Pentecostal Model.**<sup>14</sup> Perhaps the most obvious difference between Palmer and Wesley is her use of Pentecost as the model for sanctification. She says that the experiences encountered in the upper room at Pentecost "furnished a model for all future generations of disciples."<sup>15</sup> Making this move has some inherent difficulties. To start, it takes the general state of perfection and relates it to a specific event. Granted, Wesley asserts that perfection culminates at a point in time, but the time and the conditions under which it occurs cannot always be specified, let alone predicted. Accordingly, Palmer focuses on Pentecost, which is clearly a more tangible event. Also, the pentecostal model not only redefines perfection as a singular event (as opposed to the culmination of a process), it also moves away from theology toward experience. The significance here is the fact that one is usually used to define the other. While Wesley wants experience to confirm and nuance his theology, Palmer uses experience to derive hers. As such, the pentecostal model changes the theological content of perfection, adding some concepts and overlooking others. These changes will unfold before us as we proceed.

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<sup>14</sup>For the sake of clarity and consistency, I will use the non-capitalized "pentecostal" to denote something which takes the day of Pentecost (as described in Acts 2) as its model, pattern, or example. In contrast, the capitalized "Pentecostal" will refer specifically to the movement (and adherents of the movement) which occurred at the turn of the twentieth century, giving rise to such groups as the Assemblies of God. Obviously, the use of the term in titles or any reference to the day of Pentecost will require capitalization for grammatical reasons.

<sup>15</sup>Palmer, *Pioneer Experiences* (1868; reprint, New York: Garland, 1984), xii.

**Streamlining the Process of Attainment.** What Palmer really wanted to do is develop a method that can bring believers into the experience of holiness. Hence, she indicates this as her specific qualm with Wesley's treatment of the subject:

Though I have ever been a firm believer in the doctrine of Christian holiness, embracing the entire sanctification of body, soul, and spirit, as taught by the apostolic Wesleys, and their contemporaries; yet the terms made use of, in speaking of this attainment, were objectionable to my mind, in a manner which I cannot now take time to explain. Though from early life I had felt that I needed just the blessing comprehended, yet the terms made use of I seldom used. Now there seemed such a glorious propriety in the words "holiness" and "sanctification" that I thought nothing less than infinite Wisdom could have devised words so infinitely proper.<sup>16</sup>

She concludes that there must be a "shorter way" to attain holiness.<sup>17</sup> In fact, she produces a method that is not only shorter, but almost immediate, and she contends that this shorter way is divinely sanctioned. For example, on a particular occasion, a woman who had been converted just three days prior said to her, "I feel as if I could not rest short of anything which it is my privilege to enjoy . . . I must be holy!" Palmer "assured her in reply that the very desire for this blessing was a sure intimation of not only the willingness, but the intention of God to give it, and that it was only for her to persevere in looking for it, in order to speedily obtain it."<sup>18</sup>

Thomas Oden indicates that Palmer reduces the attainment of sanctification to three steps: entire consecration (i.e., being completely surrendered to God, especially to God's will), faith, and witness/confession.<sup>19</sup> In reality, Palmer only proposes consecration and faith as the necessary steps to *attaining* the experience. Testimony is necessary for *retaining* it.<sup>20</sup> Either way, the recipe is simple and easily controlled through human effort. Kate P. Crawford Galea has suggested that there is a connection

<sup>16</sup>Ibid., 73-74.

<sup>17</sup>Palmer, *Way of Holiness*, 17.

<sup>18</sup>Ibid., 101-102.

<sup>19</sup>Palmer, *Phoebe Palmer: Selected Writings*, ed. Oden (New York: Paulist, 1988), 130, n 145.

<sup>20</sup>Palmer, *Promise of the Father* (1859; reprint, New York: Garland, 1985), 245.



between Palmer's ill health and some of her writings, especially *The Way to Holiness* and *Four Years in the Old World*.<sup>21</sup> It is possible that the looming threat of death motivated Palmer to construct a "shorter way" to holiness as a means of gaining the assurance for which she craved, but such a thesis is speculative.

According to Palmer's plan, the pursuit of holiness boils down to a crucial decision: "I will now be holy, and lay all upon the altar."<sup>22</sup> This decision must be made, and it must be made decisively. Indeed, Palmer judged that too many people do not experience holiness "for want of bringing the matter to a point, and then deciding with energy and perseverance, 'I must and will have it now.'"<sup>23</sup> This sense of urgency also accounts for her preference for the terms "holiness" and "sanctification." The former is both the aspiration and the duty of each and every Christian, and the latter is the means (i.e., consecration) of pursuing and attaining this aspiration. Whereas Wesley exhorts the believer to continually expect to reach perfection, Palmer asserts that one cannot even expect it until the decision is made to perform continuous and unreserved consecration. It is foolish to think that God will accept anyone otherwise.<sup>24</sup>

Her model for consecration is that of a sacrifice being made on an altar. Romans 12:1-2 exhorts us to present ourselves as "living sacrifices, holy and acceptable to God." However, Palmer believes that the act of consecration, in and of itself, will not make anyone holy. Holiness is achieved because "the altar sanctifieth the gift."<sup>25</sup> In essence, the gift is sanctified by virtue of the altar, i.e., there is something particular about the altar that renders it able to bestow holiness.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>21</sup>Kate P. Crawford Galea, "Anchored Behind the Veil: Mystical Vision as a Possible Source of Authority in the Ministry of Phoebe Palmer," *Methodist History*, 31:4 (July 1993), 246.

<sup>22</sup>Palmer, *Faith and Its Effects*, 316.

<sup>23</sup>Palmer, *Way of Holiness*, 234.

<sup>24</sup>Palmer, *Faith and Its Effects*, 351-352.

<sup>25</sup>Palmer, *Way of Holiness*, 101.

<sup>26</sup>*Ibid.*, 63. Notice that holiness is not ascribed, it is bestowed. This follows Wesley's rejection of the Calvinist doctrine of imputed righteousness, which proposes that the believer is declared righteous, but remains sinful. Luther also held this view, declaring the believer to be *simul justus et peccator* (i.e., simultaneously justified and sinner). The believer is declared righteous by virtue of Christ's righteousness. God does not see the believer's sin, only the righteousness of Christ which covers it.

What is it about the altar that enables it to effect holiness in the lives of the consecrated? In one sense, the altar represents the atonement. More specifically, it represents the blood of Christ. “The soul, through faith, being laid upon the altar that sanctifieth the gift, experiences constantly, the all-cleansing efficacy of the blood of Jesus.”<sup>27</sup> Nevertheless, the altar represents more than Christ’s blood, it represents Christ himself. In other words, the act of consecration is essentially the offering up of oneself to Christ, “and if we render up mind, memory, and will, every moment, to Christ, are we not to believe he sanctifies all these powers?”<sup>28</sup> It follows that if consecration is where sanctification occurs, then consecration must remain intact if sanctification is to be maintained.<sup>29</sup> Sanctified believers cannot cease to set themselves apart to God, else sanctification will be lost.<sup>30</sup> Referring to Romans 12:1-2, she maintains, “In order to be washed, cleansed, and renewed after the image of God, the sacrifice must be ceaselessly presented. This is implied in the expression ‘a living sacrifice.’”<sup>31</sup> Here and in similar places, Palmer is following Adam Clarke’s metaphor of a “continual sacrifice.”<sup>32</sup>

Surprisingly, Wesley speaks of consecration as an evidence of perfection, namely, “total resignation to the will of God, without any mixture of self-will.”<sup>33</sup> The difference is subtle but vitally important. Wesley’s

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In contrast, the Wesleyan understanding of righteousness is that the divine nature is imparted to the believer in the person of the Holy Spirit. In his hymn “O For a Heart to Praise My God,” Charles Wesley writes, “Thy nature, gracious Lord, impart; Come quickly from above; Write Thy new name upon my heart; Thy new, best name of Love.” Following in this tradition, Palmer believes that the consecrated Christian is made righteous, i.e., a substantive change is effected in the hearts of the sanctified.

<sup>27</sup>Palmer, *The Life and Letters of Mrs. Phoebe Palmer*, ed. Rev. Richard Wheatley (New York: Palmer & Hughes, 1884), 527.

<sup>28</sup>Palmer, *Faith and Its Effects*, 266.

<sup>29</sup>Once again, this follows the Arminian understanding that salvation (and the effects of salvific events) may be forfeited. Earlier in life, Wesley believed Christian perfection to be an irreversible state, for it would seem that if a person’s sinful inclinations were eliminated, then willful sin would be a virtual impossibility. Over time, he saw that the experience of many, whom he truly believed had attained the state, contradicted this premise. Consequently, he concluded that perfection is by no means a sinless state, and he expounds this belief in “Plain Account.”

<sup>30</sup>Palmer, *Way of Holiness*, 77.

<sup>31</sup>Palmer, *Life and Letters*, 529.

<sup>32</sup>Palmer, *Way of Holiness*, 86.

<sup>33</sup>Wesley, 422.

account of consecration is one that is absent of self-will. This is why he saw consecration as the culmination of a long, difficult, and gradual process of crucifying sinful and selfish desires and thoughts. Palmer would obviously want to claim that consecration effectively spawns this result, but this claim does not eliminate the possibility that a consecrated believer can be fully committed to God's will for reasons that are tainted with selfishness, a possibility which Palmer recognizes. This is even more the case when sanctification is sought as an ecstatic experience. Since Palmer definitely promoted sanctification as such, some of her sharpest critics contend that the need for continual consecration in her schema is actually the believer's psychological need to maintain the ecstatic experience.

She also speaks of consecration as a struggle. In her own experience (speaking of herself in the third person), she attested that "if she should literally die in the struggle to overcome nature, she would be a martyr in the effort, rather than that Satan should triumph."<sup>34</sup> She so heartily believed that complete consecration requires a struggle that she frequently admonished others to "wrestle" all night in prayer until they would "receive the blessing."<sup>35</sup> This being the case, it is not clear if the pursuers are to wrestle with themselves or if they are to wrestle with God, which is another way that she sometimes describes the struggle. Is the believer struggling to overcome self or struggling to receive a divine impartation of faith so that the blessing might be secured? For example, a man "who had been the happy possessor of the blessing of holiness, but did not long retain it" asked everyone to pray for him, that he might experience it once again.<sup>36</sup> She gives us little help in understanding why this particular man is in need of special prayer if, in fact, consecration is a decision, i.e., an act of the will. Perhaps she might say that the believer must be divinely aided in the process, but then faith must occur twice, first in seeking this divine assistance, and second in the expectation of the blessing. Perhaps sanctification is not as simple as Palmer would like it to be.

For Wesley, "wrestling in prayer" is not concerned with seeking divine power. Its purpose is inner renewal in the image of God, i.e., the defeat of sin in the believer's affections and thoughts.<sup>37</sup> It would thus

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<sup>34</sup>Palmer, *Way of Holiness*, 117.

<sup>35</sup>Ibid., 102-104, et. al.

<sup>36</sup>Ibid., 204-205.

<sup>37</sup>Wesley, 403.

seem that Palmer's type of struggle is much closer to the Keswick and Pentecostal pursuit of divine power. In any case, Palmer exhorts the believer to "press on to perfection," for she sees "entire consecration" as an ever-present duty for the believer.<sup>38</sup> Since consecration must be complete, and since it is presently required, she concludes that it cannot be put off, but "there would have to be a now, at last."<sup>39</sup> The mere intention to be holy does not comply with the command. Obedience must be complete (i.e., entire consecration) before holiness can become a reality.<sup>40</sup> Ironically, the converse is also true for her, because the experience of holiness is what provides the believer with "that stability of soul which renders us less liable to vacillate in our Christian course."<sup>41</sup> In other words, holiness enables the believer to consistently obey God's will. Between holiness and obedience, we have to wonder which is the cause and which is the effect.

This compulsion to vigorously pursue sanctification is not wholly compatible with Wesley's inclinations. He asks the question, "In what manner should we preach sanctification?" and replies, "Scarce at all to those who are not pressing forward: To those who are, always by way of promise; always drawing, rather than driving."<sup>42</sup> It seems that Wesley's hesitancy to press those who are otherwise indifferent or half-hearted was motivated by the desire to avoid ecstatic experiences which do not genuinely arise from the death of self-will. Palmer has no such apprehension, allowing ecstatic experiences to be superimposed on Wesley's doctrine. In time, Wesley's theological norms would be superseded by experiential ones.

**Apprehending One's Own Sinfulness.** Phoebe Palmer describes her childhood as one engulfed with strict and rigid moral standards.

My parents, prior to my being entrusted to them, were rather devotedly pious. I was therefore early instructed in experimental religion. Of the necessity of its affecting my life, and even in minute things inducing a change of conduct, I was in the morning of my existence aware. I shall never forget the intense

<sup>38</sup>Palmer, *Way of Holiness*, 20-21.

<sup>39</sup>Palmer diary, 25 January 1841, *Life and Letters*, 186.

<sup>40</sup>Palmer, *Way of Holiness*, 69.

<sup>41</sup>Palmer, *Faith and Its Effects*, 89.

<sup>42</sup>Wesley, 387.

anguish I suffered in consequence of telling an untruth, when but about three and a half years old.

This extreme sensitiveness, as to moral and religious obligation, grew up with me; so much so, that I was sometimes smiled at for my well-intentioned scrupulousness, and at other times almost censured for carrying it to a troublesome excess. I then regarded refuge in God as the safe sanctuary for the recital of the little grievances incident to childhood.<sup>43</sup>

This strict moral code was not limited to the condemnation of wrongdoing. It also included the Christian duties enjoined by the Scriptures. For instance, in regard to keeping the “sabbath,” she admits that “I can scarcely remember the time when I was not influenced by the opinion, that if I thought or conversed on topics of mere worldly interest, I need not expect prosperity in the prosecution of the matter in contemplation.”<sup>44</sup> Consequently, she developed a strong sense of right and wrong, even to the point that she was able to make distinctions between carnal desire and natural human desire. This led to her claim that sanctification is the death of sin, but not the death of self.<sup>45</sup> Even so, this does not seem sufficient to have produced a sense of sin as strong as Wesley’s, for she says that she had always been a docile person. In fact, she could not recall a time in her life when she was not compliant. As a result, she never developed a deep sense of her own sinfulness and was uncertain of her conversion, since it was not a dramatic event.<sup>46</sup>

This gave her great difficulty in understanding conviction as a feeling of remorse effected by a guilty conscience. “Conviction is not condemnation. . . . Willful transgression necessarily brings condemnation, but a kind father may convict a dutiful child of unintentional error and not condemn him.”<sup>47</sup> It almost appears that this is a self-description. She clearly held refined notions of right and wrong, of carnal and human desire, and of duty. However, her docile spirit helped her to avoid many willful transgressions and the guilt which accompanies them. Her main concern, therefore, was to be instructed so as to perform her duties more

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<sup>43</sup>Palmer, *Faith and Its Effects*, 62-63.

<sup>44</sup>Palmer, *Way of Holiness*, 197.

<sup>45</sup>Palmer to Professor and Mrs. Upham, New York, 30 April 1851, *Life and Letters*, 520.

<sup>46</sup>Palmer diary, 12 August 1827, *Life and Letters*, 22-23.

<sup>47</sup>Palmer, *Way of Holiness*, 187-188.

perfectly. In this manner, it is sufficient to regard conviction as the knowledge of right duty. Even when duty is not perceived through conviction, the duty remains (e.g., the duty to pursue holiness).<sup>48</sup> In her mind, “knowledge is conviction.”<sup>49</sup> Such an emphasis, while perfectly valid, had only a marginal role at best in Wesley’s schema, since his basic definition of perfection is the deliverance from all sin.

In conformity, therefore, both to the doctrine of St. John, and the whole tenor of the New Testament, we fix this conclusion: A Christian is so far perfect, as not to commit sin. This is the glorious privilege of every Christian, yea, though he be but a babe in Christ. But it is only of grown Christians it can be affirmed, they are in such a sense perfect, as, Secondly, to be free from evil or sinful thoughts.<sup>50</sup>

It is not enough for a person to be sincere. Those who would be perfect must be “cleansed from pride, anger, lust, and self-will.”<sup>51</sup> The first step which must take place is conviction, i.e., the Holy Spirit must reveal to believers the depths of their own depravity. “And now first they do see the ground of their heart; which God before would not disclose unto them, lest the soul should fail before him, and the spirit which he had made.” Once these carnal traits are revealed, the believer will experience “the inexpressible hunger [for] a full renewal in [God’s] image.”<sup>52</sup> After the obstacles of carnal dispositions are removed, the soul is free to love God and others unconditionally and unreservedly. “Yea, we do believe that [God] will in this world so ‘cleanse the thoughts of our hearts, by the inspiration of his Holy Spirit, that we shall perfectly love him, and worthily magnify his holy name.’”<sup>53</sup>

According to Peter Gardella, this type of remorseful conviction is unnecessary in Palmer’s approach to sanctification. For her, “the quest for perfection demanded no heightened consciousness of sin.”<sup>54</sup> It is not that she completely neglects this aspect of Wesley’s doctrine, she just does not

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<sup>48</sup>Ibid., 19.

<sup>49</sup>Ibid., 18-19.

<sup>50</sup>Wesley, 376-377.

<sup>51</sup>Ibid., 418.

<sup>52</sup>Ibid., 381.

<sup>53</sup>Ibid., 445-446.

<sup>54</sup>Peter Gardella, *Innocent Ecstasy: How Christianity Gave America an Ethic of Sexual Pleasure* (New York: Oxford, 1985), 88.

give it center stage as he does. The element which she does emphasize more than Wesley is power. In fact, she claims that “faith always brings power.”<sup>55</sup> Again, this puts her closer to the Keswick and Pentecostal camps. As a result, Palmer’s understanding of being saved from all sin is theologically shallow in comparison to Wesley. The transformation of character never progresses beyond a mystical event. However, she does offer a corrective for this apparent lack in her paradigm. She holds up “symmetrical holiness” as an ideal for the sanctified believer. It is defined as the “perfect consistency and agreement between the various elements of the character possessing it.”<sup>56</sup> In the end, she furnishes a theory of virtue that must be reinforced with another one on top of it.

**Instantaneous or Gradual?** When it comes to the issue of perfection being an event or a process, Palmer’s use of Wesley is highly selective. She is quick to point out Wesley’s admonition to preach perfection and to agonize for it.<sup>57</sup> She also quotes Wesley at length when he urges those who seek perfection to “expect it now.”<sup>58</sup> This gives her boldness in validating the experiences of those who quickly move from conversion to sanctification. Accordingly, she said, “we see, in fact, there is no difference, that some of the most unquestionable witnesses of sanctifying grace, were sanctified within a few days after they were justified. . . . What marvel, since one day with God is as a thousand years!”<sup>59</sup>

It is quite convenient that she ignores Wesley’s understanding that the moment in which perfection is attained “is constantly both preceded and followed by a gradual work.”<sup>60</sup> He had questioned, “Q. When does inward sanctification begin? A. In the moment a man is justified. (Yet sin remains in him, yea, the seed of all sin, till he is sanctified throughout.) From that time a believer gradually dies to sin, and grows in grace.”<sup>61</sup> Even though death to sin may occur gradually, it must still reach a terminus. The process must be culminated for Christian perfection to be attained.<sup>62</sup> Wesley clearly explains that the process of crucifying sinful

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<sup>55</sup>Palmer, *Way of Holiness*, 153.

<sup>56</sup>Palmer, *Faith and Its Effects*, 77.

<sup>57</sup>Palmer, *Way of Holiness*, 247.

<sup>58</sup>Palmer, *Faith and Its Effects*, 285-6.

<sup>59</sup>Palmer, *Life and Letters*, 530.

<sup>60</sup>Wesley, 442.

<sup>61</sup>*Ibid.*, 387.

<sup>62</sup>*Ibid.*, 402.

desires is rarely, if ever, accomplished in a short amount of time. In regard to those who have attained perfection, he avers that “we are not now speaking of babes in Christ, but adult Christians.”<sup>63</sup> He also refers to the entirely sanctified as those who are “grown up into perfect men.”<sup>64</sup> In other words, “perfect” Christians are neither those who indefinitely progress but never attain, nor are they immature believers.

Wesley sees two dangers. The first is that immature believers will pursue some type of experience that is not grounded in a deep realization of and complete victory over one’s own carnal desires. The other danger is that we might begin to insist that people must be believers for a certain length of time before they can attain the state of holiness. “God’s usual method is one thing, but his sovereign pleasure is another. He has wise reasons both for hastening and retarding his work.”<sup>65</sup> Wesley is unwilling to preclude any possible timetable, for he recognizes God’s ability to control the process.

Palmer seizes the opportunity to make the most of this small concession. She reinterprets Wesley’s assertion that God can “do the work of many years in a moment” as evidence that new converts can very quickly attain perfection.<sup>66</sup> Notwithstanding, it should be noted that Wesley does believe the gradual death to sin to be the usual method. “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.”<sup>67</sup> Wesley concedes that the process of death to sin can occur at an accelerated rate, but he does not allow the process to be shortened in its steps. Hence, there is no “shorter way” for Wesley. The sanctification of the newly justified is considered by him to be “an exempt case.”<sup>68</sup> Palmer asserts the exact opposite. This is why she opposes his terms for attaining the experience.

Yet Wesley does not stop here. While he truly believed that “without holiness no one shall see the Lord,” he also believed that many Christians will not be entirely sanctified until death. In fact, he asserts that God perfects most at death or a little before.<sup>69</sup> The fact that many do not attain

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<sup>63</sup>Ibid., 374.

<sup>64</sup>Ibid., 382.

<sup>65</sup>Ibid., 407.

<sup>66</sup>Palmer, *Faith and Its Fragments*, 54.

<sup>67</sup>Wesley, 446.

<sup>68</sup>Ibid., 423.

<sup>69</sup>Ibid., 423.



perfection in this life should not cause us to doubt their eternal destiny. Wesley says that not all of those who are sealed by the Spirit for the day of redemption have attained perfection.<sup>70</sup> In effect, he does not use perfection as a means of reaffirming his salvation.

**Objectifying the Subjective.** Palmer lived by what she called “experimental religion.” She was raised according to the philosophy that personal experience is to be used to shape one’s theology. Obviously, she recognized the fact that personal testimony is derived from such “experimental knowledge.”<sup>71</sup> However, she took the matter one step further by asserting that the “footmarks” of Christ are to be “experimentally tested.”<sup>72</sup> She was careful not to imply that the Christian life should be lived by trial and error, but her method certainly gives experiential knowledge equal footing with other types of knowledge, and it allows experience to shape the interpretation of Scripture. This leads Gardella to concur with Charles Edwin Jones: “Wesley’s methods produced ‘a generation of seekers after Christian perfection; Mrs. Palmer’s, a century of holiness professors.’ Identifying the attainment of perfection with a single ecstatic experience was what brought about this change.”<sup>73</sup>

Palmer was apparently seeking some type of affirmation that she had genuinely experienced holiness in her heart and life. For one thing, she had experienced a recurring pattern of faith, doubt, and pleading in her quest for sanctification. Even after receiving the “blessing,” she experienced frequent doubts, both of her own experience and her ability to help others attain the experience. She had an ongoing desire to gain assurance and she looked to “clearer perceptions” and ecstatic experiences to fill the void.<sup>74</sup> She wanted a “direct assurance” to function as the “witness of holiness.”<sup>75</sup> In her struggles, she “wrestled importunately with God” to be delivered from “temptations” of doubt. She was wanting to know “the precise ground upon which [she] obtained, and might retain, this blessing.”<sup>76</sup>

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<sup>70</sup>Ibid., 380, n2.

<sup>71</sup>Palmer, *Way of Holiness*, 18.

<sup>72</sup>Palmer, *Pioneer Experiences*, vii.

<sup>73</sup>Jones, *Perfectionist Persuasion: The Holiness Movement and American Methodism, 1867-1936* (Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow Press, 1974), 2, in Gardella, 89.

<sup>74</sup>Palmer, *Way of Holiness*, 117-288.

<sup>75</sup>Ibid., 227.

<sup>76</sup>Palmer, *Faith and Its Effects*, 85.

As Palmer looked to ecstatic experience for assurance, a progression took place. First, she testified that through “some great and indefinable exercise” the Lord led her into holiness “with unutterable delight,” where the “comprehensive desires” of the soul were “blended and satisfied in the fulfillment of the command, ‘Be ye holy.’”<sup>77</sup> Her ecstatic experiences were so glorious that she wondered whether the ecstasy of departed saints differs from that of the fully sanctified only in degree, and not in nature.<sup>78</sup> She embraced these ecstatic experiences as normative and thus began to doubt that one can “really and fully believe” and not possess “joy, peace, or even satisfaction.”<sup>79</sup> Indeed, when someone made the comment to her, “I wish I could always be as happy as you are,” Palmer replied that she “did not dare to be otherwise than happy” since we are commanded in Scripture to give thanks in everything.<sup>80</sup> Moreover, she discovered that there is apparently no limit to the levels of ecstasy which can be reached. At least one time, she prayed for and received an “expansion of soul” (i.e., heightened emotional capacity).<sup>81</sup>

Her struggle became one of being certain that her faith was not based on feelings. She realized that if people consecrate themselves to God guided only by their feelings, they can eventually be led astray.<sup>82</sup> People might consecrate themselves out of the selfish motive of experiencing ecstasy, or they might allow a lack of emotion to limit the level of consecration they would make. The results would be disastrous. Nevertheless, she still expected sanctification to produce these ecstatic experiences. She attempted to validate them by asserting that feelings are produced by faith, and yet, all she did was to move the problem to a new location since faith too cannot be based on feelings.<sup>83</sup> Rather than attempt to avoid the illegitimate by eliminating ecstatic experiences altogether, she concluded that the quality of the faith which produces these experiences can be tested. True faith “will produce a fixedness of purpose, and an established state of experience, beyond expression glorious.”<sup>84</sup> She

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<sup>77</sup>Palmer, *Way of Holiness*, 28.

<sup>78</sup>*Ibid.*, 160.

<sup>79</sup>Palmer, *Faith and Its Effects*, 150.

<sup>80</sup>Palmer, *Way of Holiness*, 93-94.

<sup>81</sup>*Ibid.*, 84-85.

<sup>82</sup>Palmer, *Faith and Its Effects*, 107.

<sup>83</sup>Palmer, *Way of Holiness*, 37-38.

<sup>84</sup>Palmer, *Faith and Its Effects*, 351.

also looked for assurance in prayer, asserting that the “witness of purity of intention” is attainable and is to be sought through prayer.<sup>85</sup> Additionally, she granted feelings an epistemic status, suggesting that feelings produce a useful type of knowledge.<sup>86</sup> She concluded, “Ecstatic experiences and wondrous visions are good, but a sympathy with Jesus, in the great work that brought him from heaven to earth, is better.”<sup>87</sup> Having now put her ecstatic experiences into proper perspective, she could fully embrace her claim to have been “powerfully and experimentally assured.”<sup>88</sup>

Next, Palmer turned to the Scriptures for assurance. On one hand, Scripture can distinguish the false from the true. Consequently, the spirits must be tested by Scripture so as to avoid error and delusion.<sup>89</sup> How shall Scripture itself be tested? “God’s word is its own evidence.”<sup>90</sup> This gave her confidence regarding the validity of her ecstatic experiences. “Shall I venture upon the declarations without previously realizing a change sufficient to warrant such conclusions? Venture now, merely because they stand thus recorded in the written word!”<sup>91</sup> Paul Bassett aptly describes this hermeneutic as a “radical doctrine of *sola scriptura*.”<sup>92</sup> However it is classified, it appears to have sufficiently dispelled her doubts. She reported:

O yes! the blessed word even now most assuringly whispers the certainty to my heart—the sure word of prophecy—the voice of revelation tells me that these blessed assurances are not the mere imaginations of an over-excited mind. Blessed beyond all that the mind can conceive is the state of that soul, who, through the blood of the everlasting covenant, hath entered within the veil.<sup>93</sup>

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<sup>85</sup>Palmer, *Way of Holiness*, 21.

<sup>86</sup>*Ibid.*, 217-9.

<sup>87</sup>Palmer, *Life and Letters*, 529.

<sup>88</sup>Palmer, *Way of Holiness*, 45.

<sup>89</sup>Palmer to Professor and Mrs. Upham, New York, 30 April 1851, *Life and Letters*, 521.

<sup>90</sup>Palmer, *Life and Letters*, 539.

<sup>91</sup>Palmer, *Way of Holiness*, 37.

<sup>92</sup>Paul Bassett, “The Theological Identity of the North American Holiness Movement,” in *The Variety of American Evangelicalism*, edited by Donald W. Dayton and Robert K. Johnston (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1991), 85.

<sup>93</sup>Palmer, *Way of Holiness*, 228-229.

Even though Wesley is known for his doctrine of the witness of the Holy Spirit, he does not share Palmer's insatiable desire for certainty. In fact, he acknowledges that a certain degree of uncertainty is inherent in the process of perfection. As a person attains perfection, although there must be an instant when sin dies, the precise moment can be difficult to perceive.<sup>94</sup> Hence, the witness of sanctification "is not always clear at first. . . . Yea, and sometimes it is withdrawn." Indeed, he believed that as long as the believer has no doubt, the witness of the Spirit is unnecessary.<sup>95</sup>

Wesley did believe that the sanctified can be certain of their state, evidenced when four criteria are met. First, a "deeper and clearer conviction" of carnality must be gained. Second, sin must be gradually mortified until its death is experienced. Third, the subject is renewed in the image of God so as to be filled with the love of God. Fourth, the Spirit bears witness with the sanctified person's spirit. Neglecting any of these four criteria can lead to delusional experiences. To the person who experiences all of these, Wesley says, "I judge it impossible that this man should be deceived herein."<sup>96</sup>

This still leaves the question for Wesley as to whether or not we can ascertain when someone else attains perfection. Again, those who seek confirming experiences like Palmer will find his answer less satisfying, but it is more realistic. He concludes: "We cannot infallibly know one that is thus saved (no, nor even one that is justified) unless it should please God to endow us with the miraculous discernment of spirits."<sup>97</sup> Ultimately, the best that can be done is to judge the behavior and credibility of the person providing the testimony.

According to Palmer, testimony itself is crucial for holiness. Externally, it is necessary to promote the doctrine, for many are often encouraged to pursue it after hearing the testimonies of those who have already attained it. As a result, testimony is more central to spreading the doctrine than even theology itself. Internally, testimony is necessary for retaining sanctification. Palmer believed that she lost her assurance of the experience by not testifying to it. Fortunately for her, she was also able to regain it through testimony.<sup>98</sup>

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<sup>94</sup>Wesley, 442.

<sup>95</sup>Ibid., 420.

<sup>96</sup>Ibid., 401-402.

<sup>97</sup>Ibid., 399.

<sup>98</sup>Palmer, *Promise of the Father*, 393-396.

**Role of Reason Diminished.** Charles White attempts to relate Palmer's hermeneutical method to the Wesleyan quadrilateral of scripture, reason, tradition, and experience.<sup>99</sup> From the differences that have already been outlined, this does not appear to be a very accurate comparison. First, Palmer gives experience a greater role than Wesley does. He allows experience to affirm and nuance his understanding of Scripture, but she allows experience to shape and determine hers. Next, Wesley has a higher sense of tradition than Palmer. Even her use of Wesley is selective. Also, Wesley's use of reason is more dialogical and balanced, while Palmer's seems limited to simple apprehension. Finally, Palmer does share Wesley's regard for Scripture as the ultimate source of truth. She believes our prayers and expectations cannot contradict God's word, else they will be delusional.<sup>100</sup> Notwithstanding, her approach to scripture is mystical in comparison to Wesley. She believes that scripture cannot be discerned through external means. Each person must approach the text without the aid of external sources, and interpret it from her own perspective, even if this understanding should come through some mystical medium.

What a strange, God-dishonoring position it is, to acknowledge the Bible as the word of God, and yet suffer ourselves to be governed by our own feelings—the views, experience, and traditions of others, in reference to it, while we are every moment liable to be called into the other world, to answer for ourselves, and be judged by our individual conformity to its precepts!

But are we to reject all manifestations from God, or answers to prayer, that may be given in dreams or visions of the night? The spirit of the word settles this matter. From the earliest, down to the latest period, God has spoken to his people in this manner. As well might we deny any other part of divine revelation, as to deny this.<sup>101</sup>

In another instance, Palmer prays for guidance from the Lord while randomly opening her Bible: “. . . scarcely could I have had a stronger realization that this was indeed the voice of God to me, had it been spo-

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<sup>99</sup>Charles White, “What the Holy Spirit Can and Cannot Do: The Ambiguities of Phoebe Palmer's Theology of Experience,” *Wesleyan Theological Journal*, 20:1 (Spring 1985), 108-21.

<sup>100</sup>Palmer, *Way of Holiness*, 206-8.

<sup>101</sup>*Ibid.*, 209-10.

ken from heaven to the outward ear, as well as to the inmost soul.”<sup>102</sup> Wesley is not nearly as inclined to follow such premonitions, if at all. Clearly, Palmer uses higher reasoning much less than Wesley. Her neglect of reason may be in part due to her view that the Methodists were called of God to be a movement of simple, plain people. In one place, she asserts that they were “raised through their instrumentality.”<sup>103</sup> In another place, she claims that their simplicity and uniqueness account for their success.

I verily believe that when God thrust the Wesleys out to raise a holy people, and we became a distinct organization, with men of such simple, childlike, enlightened, and yet noble piety, under God, at the head of our ecclesiastical affairs, that he really intended that we should retain more of those distinctive features by which our economy is characterized, as dissimilar in doctrine and usage from other evangelical bodies.<sup>104</sup>

Matters must be kept simple. Indeed, Palmer felt that the reason more people do not attain perfection is not because of its intricacies, but for a lack of simplicity. “We do not need great powers of mind to reach it, but deep humility of spirit to come down to it.”<sup>105</sup>

Wesley had witnessed the dangers that can be produced by such talk. He thus seems more concerned that people be sober in their thinking (i.e., free from false imaginations) rather than simple-minded. Note this:

. . . and a considerable number of persons believed that God had saved them from all sin. Easily foreseeing that Satan would be endeavoring to sow tares among the wheat, I took much pains to apprise them of the danger, particularly with regard to pride and enthusiasm. And while I stayed in town, I had reason to hope they continued both humble and sober-minded. But almost as soon as I was gone enthusiasm broke in. Two or three began to take their own imaginations for impressions from God, and thence to suppose that they should never die; and these, laboring to bring others into the same opinion, occasioned much noise and confusion. Soon after, the same persons, with a few more, ran into other extravagances; fancying they could not be tempted; that they should feel no

<sup>102</sup>Ibid., 199-200.

<sup>103</sup>Ibid., 234.

<sup>104</sup>Ibid., 216.

<sup>105</sup>Palmer, “Faith and Its Effects,” 54-55.

more pain; and that they had the gift of prophecy, and of discerning of spirits.<sup>106</sup>

Wesley had good reasons for saying that we must continually guard against “enthusiasm.”

Give no place to a heated imagination. Do not hastily ascribe things to God. Do not easily suppose dreams, voices, impressions, visions, or revelations to be from God. They may be from him. They may be from nature. They may be from the devil. . . . Try all things by the written word. . . . And so you are [in danger of enthusiasm] if you despise or lightly esteem reason, knowledge, or human learning; every one of which is an excellent gift of God, and may serve the noblest purposes.<sup>107</sup>

How does Wesley account for the ecstatic experiences of those who are enthusiasts, especially when they do exhibit some type of evidence that might support a claim that they are perfected in love?

“But he is deceived.” What then? It is a harmless mistake, while he feels nothing but love in his heart. It is a mistake which generally argues great grace, an high degree of both holiness and happiness. This should be a matter of real joy to all that are simple of heart; not the mistake itself, but the height of grace which for a time occasions it. I rejoice that this soul is always happy in Christ, always full of prayer and thanksgiving. I rejoice that he feels no unholy temper, but the pure love of God continually. And I will rejoice, if sin is suspended till it is totally destroyed.<sup>108</sup>

Hence, it is possible for some to ecstatically experience the love of God without being perfected. In such cases, “sin is only suspended in them;” it is not destroyed.<sup>109</sup> To his credit, Wesley is able to account for these types of experiences without discrediting them altogether. He only maintains that those who have such experiences should not claim too much for themselves. One can only speculate as to whether he would support Palmer’s methods, or as to what he would think of the variety of experiences that people have attempted to legitimize by linking his name to them.

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<sup>106</sup>Wesley, 406.

<sup>107</sup>Ibid., 429.

<sup>108</sup>Ibid., 405.

<sup>109</sup>Ibid., 442.

## 2. Possible Sources of the Divergence

The best way to determine which figures influenced Phoebe Palmer is through her own words. First, in one of her letters she asserts, “Not Wesley, not Fletcher, not Finney, not Mahan, not Upham, but the Bible . . . is the standard, the groundwork, the platform, the creed.”<sup>110</sup> It is obvious that she recognized these men either as the standard figures of her day or as her personal favorites. A more striking endorsement appears in *The Way of Holiness*. “The fact of having received, from God, through such men as Wesley, Fletcher, Nelson, Bramwell, and a host of other heaven-owned luminaries, this glorious doctrine [of holiness], as revealed in the blessed word, throws a weight of responsibility, most tremendous in magnitude, upon our ministry and people.”<sup>111</sup> Taking a brief look at several of these figures may shed further light on Palmer’s departure from Wesley.

**John Fletcher.** Fletcher was the systematic theologian for early Methodism. He identified Christian perfection with the baptism of the Holy Spirit and sparked a debate that continues to this day.<sup>112</sup> Wesleyan scholars still argue whether Wesley’s endorsement of Fletcher was general (i.e., he did not agree with certain elements) or total (i.e., he fully agreed with him). More specifically, did Wesley later come to accept the baptism of the Holy Spirit as the vehicle for perfection? Regardless of Wesley’s feelings, Palmer certainly makes use of Fletcher’s pentecostal model. The fact that her feminist writings are based upon Acts 2 may have something to do with her adaptation of the this model.<sup>113</sup> Also, she may have borrowed from Fletcher’s understanding of how sanctification is experienced. He establishes the virtues of meekness, humility, and true resignation to God as the prerequisites to entire sanctification.<sup>114</sup> In 1863, during her trip to the British Isles, Palmer visited the home and graves of the Fletchers. On the same trip, she also visited the only surviving daughter of William Bramwell.<sup>115</sup>

<sup>110</sup>Palmer, *Life and Letters*, 251.

<sup>111</sup>Palmer, *Way of Holiness*, 215.

<sup>112</sup>John Fletcher, *An Equal Check to Pharisaism and Antinomianism, Second Part* (reprint, Salem, OH: Schmul, 1974), 627-657.

<sup>113</sup>White, “Pentecostal Pneumatology,” 200.

<sup>114</sup>Fletcher, 630. A fuller exposition of Fletcher’s understanding of perfection is found in the same volume on pages 491-669.

<sup>115</sup>Palmer to Bishop and Mrs. Hamline, Leeds, 7 January 1863, *Life and Letters*, 388-389.



**William Bramwell.** Bramwell was a popular and colorful early Methodist circuit rider. It is reported that his zeal and work ethic made him one of Wesley's favorites. However, he tended to be a bit clairvoyant and this stirred up some controversy. In fact, he once destroyed his own diary by burning it, fearing that the stories contained therein would result in him being castigated for fanaticism.<sup>116</sup> Fletcher himself led Bramwell into the experience of the baptism of the Holy Spirit after he had lost it "four or five times before." Each time, he had lost the experience by not testifying to it.<sup>117</sup> Palmer would teach the same concept years later.

Bramwell's mysticism can be illustrated by a revelatory dream that he had, in which he discovered the intent of some rogues to kill him along the highway. He altered his route to avoid the impending danger.<sup>118</sup> Bramwell also gave credence to a "remarkable dream" experienced by his intimate friend John Nelson (another name on Palmer's list).<sup>119</sup> Bramwell once prayed for and effected the healing of a man who subsequently reported, "Thus Mr. Bramwell might be said to be possessed of a key that opened heaven and drew the blessing down."<sup>120</sup> Some of these tendencies were later adopted by Palmer.

**Adam Clarke.** Adam Clarke's commentary on Romans 12:1-2 provides a thorough development and the necessary support for the "altar" model which Palmer would eventually adopt into her own theological framework.<sup>121</sup> Like Palmer, he concludes that true happiness is tied to complete consecration. "Our souls can never be truly happy till our wills be entirely subjected to, and become one with, the will of God."<sup>122</sup> Clarke disdains the use of the term "Christian perfection," since it requires so many qualifications and nuances to be useful.<sup>123</sup> Finally, in deriding the

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<sup>116</sup>Bramwell, *Memoir of the Life and Ministry of Mr. William Bramwell, Lately an Itinerant Methodist Preacher*, ed. James Sigston (New York: Lane & Scott, 1849), 3-4.

<sup>117</sup>*Ibid.*, 38-41.

<sup>118</sup>*Ibid.*, 50-51.

<sup>119</sup>*Ibid.*, 68.

<sup>120</sup>*Ibid.*, 163.

<sup>121</sup>Adam Clarke, *Clarke's Commentary* (reprint, Nashville: Abingdon Press, n.d.).

<sup>122</sup>Clarke, *Christian Theology* (1835; reprint, Salem, OH: Schmull, 1967), 203.

<sup>123</sup>*Ibid.*, 184-185.

Calvinist doctrine that deliverance from sin is not possible until death, he seems to distance himself from Wesley's claim that many do not attain perfection until some point shortly before death.<sup>124</sup> He says enough to provide Palmer with some ammunition.

**Charles Grandison Finney.** The evangelistic services held by Finney are largely credited with initiating the Second Great Awakening that took place in America in the early nineteenth century. He and the educator Asa Mahan founded Oberlin College in Ohio as an evangelical institution. They were eventually exposed to the Wesleyan doctrine of Christian perfection and set out to study the matter. As a result of their personal evaluation, they developed their own version of entire sanctification, known more informally as "Oberlin Perfectionism." Galea sees these two men as the root of Palmer's deviance from Wesley.<sup>125</sup> Although we have already exposed several other sources of divergence, they certainly do contribute to the cause in a significant way.

Finney concluded that sanctification is not any constitutional change of the soul or body, neither is it an intellectual state. Instead, it is "a phenomenon of the will, or a voluntary state of mind."<sup>126</sup> From this definition he extrapolates the definition of "entire sanctification," determining it to be "entire and continual obedience to the law of God."<sup>127</sup> The primary difference here between Finney and Wesley is not found in their respective definitions of sin. Rather it lies in their understanding of the nexus of moral action. To be specific, they have opposing views as to the relationship between the will and feelings. For Finney, sanctification is not a matter of the affections or emotions. These are the result of a "state of heart." He proposes that "the only way to secure them [i.e., the feelings] is to set the will right, and the emotions will be a natural result." Consequently, "sanctification consists in entire consecration."<sup>128</sup> In other words, the feelings are a product of the will. Whenever the will makes proper choices, the feelings will also be proper.

Wesley's portrayal is diametrically opposed to Finney's account. In consonance with many thinkers of his day, Wesley believed that the will is

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<sup>124</sup>Ibid., 185-186, 205-209.

<sup>125</sup>Galea, 239-240.

<sup>126</sup>Charles Finney, *Finney's Systematic Theology* (1846; reprint, Minneapolis: Bethany House, 1976), 340-342.

<sup>127</sup>Ibid., 342.

<sup>128</sup>Ibid., 374.

largely controlled by the “tempers,” “passions,” and “desires.” The way to get the will to function properly is to guide it with proper drives and inclinations. This accounts for the fact that, when Wesley speaks of being freed from all willful sin, he reduces the issue to freedom from sinful tempers, passions, etc. He heartily believes that, when a Christian is able to conquer such evil “tempers” and “dispositions,” the love of God will fill the heart, enabling the will to function in accordance with God’s will. Hence, entire consecration that is free of self-will is seen more as an evidence of perfection and less as a prerequisite. Consequently, Wesley knows that there is a danger when people bypass the gradual death of sinful inclinations, expecting ecstatic experiences to generate emotions sufficient to produce similar results. The danger is that such ecstatic experiences will overshadow the individual’s true spiritual condition.

It appears that Palmer attempts to synthesize Wesley and Finney regarding perfection. On one hand, she seems to agree with Finney that the will must come first and then the feelings will follow. Earlier, I mentioned some of her internal struggles in that regard. Essentially, she accepts the notion that having the mind of Christ “induce[s] [us] to feel and to act” like Christ, i.e., Christ-like thinking produces Christ-like feelings and Christ-like actions.<sup>129</sup> This is produced through the exercise of the will. “If you have power to reason above an idiot, or the beasts that perish, God has given that power.”<sup>130</sup> However, this is the logical conclusion that she wishes to avoid. She was perplexed when she contemplated the possibility that her account of sanctification is a matter of the will and can therefore be controlled by the subject. According to her, the Spirit reassured her that such is not the case, that consecration is not strictly an exercise of the will but “is a matter of thanksgiving to God.”<sup>131</sup> On the surface, this seems acceptable, for it is possible for consecration to be motivated by love. There does not seem to be any way to reconcile this suggestion with her claims that the believer must: (1) decide to be holy and (2) vigorously pursue consecration, even through a struggle. Furthermore, she contends elsewhere that consecration is not a matter of the feelings. She has apparently contradicted herself. Her attempt to reconcile Finney and Wesley in this regard seems to have failed.

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<sup>129</sup>Palmer, *Faith and Its Effects*, 57.

<sup>130</sup>Palmer, *Way of Holiness*, 50.

<sup>131</sup>*Ibid.*, 41-42.

When all is considered, her position seems to be closer to Finney than to Wesley. Finney, too, suggests that it is the believer's duty to be filled with the Spirit. "If you do not have the Spirit of God in you, you will dishonor God, disgrace the church, and die and go to hell."<sup>132</sup> Palmer could not have said it better herself. Finney sees sanctification as the general duty of each Christian. It does not arise from a particular theological system, but is an experience that all Christians can enjoy, regardless of their individual doctrines. For this reason, the experience of one person cannot be forced on another as a norm.<sup>133</sup> Moreover, "a man may believe in what is really a state of entire sanctification, and aim at attaining it, although he may not call it by that name. This I believe to be the real fact with Christians." Wesley also allowed for this possibility, and Palmer followed suit by attempting to raise the experience to a new level of ecumenism (see below).

**Asa Mahan.** Palmer lauded Mahan as "an ointment poured forth, to the lovers of heart-purity, in both hemispheres."<sup>134</sup> In regard to the baptism of the Holy Spirit, Mahan teaches that the believer must seek it "in a state of supreme dedication to Christ, and of absolute subjection to His will."<sup>135</sup> Once again, the key is obedience to God's will. In fact, the Holy Spirit perfects the newly converted believer in obedience (i.e., teaches the convert how to be obedient) as preparation for the baptism of the Holy Spirit.<sup>136</sup> Like Finney, Mahan has no difficulties in describing consecration as a function of the will. Indeed, he points out that when Finney became aware "that by being 'baptized with the Holy Ghost' we can 'be filled with all the fullness of God,' he of course sought that baptism with all his heart and with all his soul, and very soon obtained what he sought."<sup>137</sup> This is what Palmer tries to embrace in practice and reject in theory.

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<sup>132</sup>Finney, *Lectures on Revivals of Religion* (1835; reprint with introduction and notes by William G. McLoughlin, Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1960), 108-109.

<sup>133</sup>Finney, *Systematic Theology*, 355.

<sup>134</sup>Palmer to Mrs. (Sarah) Lankford, Jackson, MI, 15 August 1866, *Life and Letters*, 426.

<sup>135</sup>Asa Mahan, *Out of Darkness into Light* (1877; reprint, New York: Garland, 1985), 173-174.

<sup>136</sup>*Ibid.*, 174.

<sup>137</sup>*Ibid.*, 180.

### 3. A Fragmented Ecumenical Movement

**Holiness as an Ecumenical Enterprise.** Phoebe Palmer was not interested in sharing her experience in just a little corner of the world. She saw holiness as the true essence of Christianity, something to be experienced by all believers, regardless of their denominational affiliations or theological commitments. “We say irrespective of denomination, because the time is past for the doctrine of Holiness to be characterized as the doctrine of a sect.”<sup>138</sup> For this to occur, the experience must be seen as theologically neutral, at least in certain respects. Palmer saw her Tuesday meetings as success stories in this ecumenical enterprise, asserting that they demonstrated “how completely the Spirit of God annihilates the spirit of sectarianism.”<sup>139</sup> One other particular event stood out in her mind as a confirmation of her ecumenical project. On a certain occasion she discovered a woman outside the Methodist tradition who, after Palmer explained that holiness is “loving God with the whole heart,” realized that she already had it. Palmer thus acknowledged her as “a witness of perfect love.”<sup>140</sup>

**Her General Impact.** Overall, Palmer’s was very favorably regarded within evangelicalism. Peters indicates that her particular emphases and methods were frequently imitated and exaggerated.<sup>141</sup> If imitation is truly the sincerest form of flattery, we can conclude that she was highly esteemed. Thomas Oden summarizes her impact as follows: “If Phoebe Palmer is not the most influential woman theologian of Protestantism of her time, it becomes extremely difficult to make a serious case for an alternative.”<sup>142</sup> In addition to her efforts to legitimize women’s roles in ministry, possibly her greatest area of influence is in her insistence on complete consecration. Timothy Smith says that nineteenth-century perfectionism is identified by its stress on unconditional surrender to God’s will.<sup>143</sup> I think that Palmer had much to do with that.

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<sup>138</sup>Palmer, *Pioneer Experiences*, vi.

<sup>139</sup>Palmer, *Promise of the Father*, 226.

<sup>140</sup>Ibid., 180.

<sup>141</sup>Peters, 112.

<sup>142</sup>Palmer, *Selected Writings*, 14.

<sup>143</sup>Timothy Smith, *Revivalism and Social Reform: American Protestantism on the Eve of the Civil War* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980), 142.

Even with all of her success, her ministry was not without controversy. Her views and methods were almost constantly under fire. Even though she spoke out against the secession of the Protestant Methodists, Wesleyan Methodists, and Free Methodists, the Methodist Episcopal Church seemed the most critical of her. The Methodist General Conference of 1852 warned against “new theories, new expressions, and new measures” of sanctification. Members were exhorted to adhere to Wesley and Fletcher.<sup>144</sup> Ivan Howard relates that “Randolph Foster, prominent Methodist [of the nineteenth century], criticized Mrs. Palmer’s position as tending toward delusion and toward ‘spurious though sincere professions.’”<sup>145</sup>

Even some of Palmer’s friends opposed various facets of her teachings. Nathan Bangs reacted against her contention that sanctification can be claimed without any extra-scriptural evidence, calling it “not sound. . . unscriptural, and anti-Wesleyan.”<sup>146</sup> As a matter of fact, Bangs had an ongoing dispute with her teaching about the immediate witness to entire sanctification.<sup>147</sup> Even her friends Bishop Hamline and John Inskip gave her opposition on at least one occasion. It is obvious that her teachings stirred up much controversy, especially after the camp meeting movement gave her a broader audience. According to J. Wesley Corbin, such controversy is characteristic of a distinct shift that took place in the Holiness Movement in 1867, the year that Inskip organized camp meetings as a national platform for promoting Palmer’s version of holiness.<sup>148</sup>

**Palmer and the Perfectionist Traditions.** In her attempt to create an ecumenical movement, Phoebe Palmer did in fact impact several traditions, yet each of these appropriated Christian perfection for its own purposes. I am not suggesting that these movements can be wholly traced back to Palmer, only that she had some impact on each, even if only in an indirect way.

Obviously, she impacted her own Methodist tradition. She was a personal friend of Methodists like Nathan Bangs, Professor Upham, Bishop

<sup>144</sup>White, *Beauty of Holiness*, 156.

<sup>145</sup>Ivan Howard, “Wesley Versus Phoebe Palmer: An extended Controversy,” *Wesleyan Theological Journal*, 6:1 (Spring 1971), 31-40.

<sup>146</sup>Peters, 113.

<sup>147</sup>White, *Beauty of Holiness*, 245.

<sup>148</sup>J. Wesley Corbin, “Christian Perfection and the Evangelical Association Through 1875,” *Methodist History*, 7:2 (Jan. 1969), 29.

Hamline, Bishop Janes, etc., and she influenced countless others. Smith argues that “there was not a ‘holiness controversy’ in the Methodist Episcopal Church, North, during the Civil War years. . . . The extensive controversy over the ‘second blessing’ appeared only during the years after 1872.”<sup>149</sup> He goes on to say that the teaching and preaching of entire sanctification, until that time, was more prevalent among Methodists than one might otherwise suppose. Hopefully, Smith is not ignoring the antebellum controversy that arose in Methodism over the stress that should be placed on Christian perfection. Instead, Smith may be referring to the fact that doctrinal wrangling about entire sanctification did not occur until after the advent of the camp meeting movement. Obviously, Palmer was at the center of this impetus.

Palmer’s impact on the Holiness and Camp Meeting Movements was tremendous, to say the least. Jones maintains that her model for gaining the assurance of entire sanctification was followed by the first two generations of the National Holiness Movement.<sup>150</sup> Smith refers to her as the “titular head of the holiness revival.”<sup>151</sup> It is a well-known fact that the Inskips were among her closest disciples, and it would be difficult to estimate the impact that she had on the Camp Meeting Movement, considering the fact that she personally appeared in these camps for thirty-five years. White can thus claim that the National Camp Meeting Association for the Promotion of Holiness “institutionalized Mrs. Palmer’s view of sanctification.”<sup>152</sup>

In spite of her opposition to their break with Methodism, Palmer still was very influential among the fledgling holiness denominations. Initially, some of these groups were founded for purposes other than the promotion of holiness. For example, the Wesleyan Methodist Connection was formed as an abolitionist group. However, after the Civil War the issue was resolved and the group’s purpose became disputed. Luther Lee, one of the denomination’s founders, tells the story:

The war and its results, with the change of the Methodist Episcopal Church from a pro-slavery to an antislavery position,

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<sup>149</sup>Smith, introduction to *Beauty of Holiness*, by White, xiii.

<sup>150</sup>Jones, “The Inverted Shadow of Phoebe Palmer,” *Wesleyan Theological Journal*, 30:2 (Fall 1996), 126.

<sup>151</sup>Smith, 211.

<sup>152</sup>White, *Beauty of Holiness*, 157.

removed the principle reason for the Wesleyan Methodist organization. The Wesleyans lost their influence and progressive power, as other denominations became more and more antislavery, and from the commencement of the war they began to decline.<sup>153</sup>

In the postbellum period, the Wesleyan Methodists eventually came to redefine their mission as “the spreading of scriptural holiness throughout every land,” one which they have maintained until this day. Palmer’s innovations in sanctification gave the Holiness groups a doctrine that was somewhat different from that of the mainline Methodists, and this helped to justify their existence apart from their parent Methodist Church. Palmer’s movement continued to propagate even more denominations and sects, each one sharing the common purpose of spreading the doctrine of holiness.

**Keswick/Higher Life Movement.** Even though the Keswick doctrine of sanctification is different from the Wesleyan version, Palmer’s divergence from Wesley makes her account resemble the Keswick model in several ways. For example, D. L. Moody also relies on the promises of Scripture to gain assurance of the baptism of the Holy Spirit, a practice which is strikingly similar to Palmer’s. He taught that people must simply believe these scriptural promises.<sup>154</sup> He continues, “Many people want some evidence outside of God’s word. That habit always brings a doubt. . . . We must not question what God has said.”<sup>155</sup>

Donald W. Dayton asserts that from Oberlin perfectionism to pentecostal perfection (i.e., Palmer, et. al.) there was a shift in emphasis from “ability” to “power.”<sup>156</sup> Moody certainly relates sanctification to power. In one sense, the Holy Spirit is the Christian’s source of power.<sup>157</sup> In another sense, “[Christ] is our Sanctification; we draw all our power for holy life from Him.”<sup>158</sup> However, the power gained in sanctification is not only for

<sup>153</sup>Luther Lee, *Autobiography of the Rev. Luther Lee* (1882; reprint, New York: Garland, 1984), 299.

<sup>154</sup>Moody, *The Way to God* (reprint; Springdale, PA: Whitaker House, 1983), 111-114.

<sup>155</sup>*Ibid.*, 116.

<sup>156</sup>Donald Dayton, *Theological Roots of Pentecostalism* (Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow Press, 1987), 77.

<sup>157</sup>Moody, *Secret Power, or the Secret of Success in Christian Life and Work* (1881; reprint with a preface by Donald W. Dayton, New York: Garland, 1985), 9.

<sup>158</sup>D. L. Moody, *Way to God*, 136.



victorious living; it is for witnessing. Since the Holy Spirit bears witness to Christ, the Spirit provides the power to witness.<sup>159</sup> This is again similar to the way Palmer relates sanctification, power, and testimony.

R. A. Torrey outlines seven steps that must be taken in order to receive the baptism of the Holy Spirit. The first three relate to conversion, as Palmer would understand it, but the last four are very close to her model of sanctification. First, the believer must unconditionally surrender to God's will. Next, there must be a "thirst" for the Holy Spirit. After that, the believer needs to ask in prayer. Finally, the trustworthy promises of God's word are claimed in faith.<sup>160</sup> Like Palmer, Torrey judges that there is no need to delay; the baptism of the Holy Spirit can be experienced immediately.<sup>161</sup> Once the believer exercises faith in the "naked word of God," the presence of the Holy Spirit will be manifested in power for service.<sup>162</sup>

**Pentecostalism.** In some ways, Palmer appears to be a precursor to the Pentecostal Movement which would emerge in the twentieth century. Mark Noll avers that many of the emphases which culminated in Pentecostalism did in fact emerge from the Holiness Movement.<sup>163</sup> If this is true, then the imprint of Phoebe Palmer should be there as well. Oden agrees with this and asserts that Palmer is the link between Methodism and Pentecostalism.<sup>164</sup> White also concurs, "As a theologian she provided the link between John Wesley and the Pentecostals by modifying his theology of Christian perfection."<sup>165</sup>

Obviously, Palmer's use of a pentecostal model of sanctification puts her in the same general class as the Pentecostals. In fact, she even goes to the extent of likening holiness revivals to the day of Pentecost. Since holiness is spread through the personal testimony of those who have already experienced it, one could almost say that receiving the experience of holi-

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<sup>159</sup>Moody, *Secret Power*, 55-56.

<sup>160</sup>R. A. Torrey, *The Holy Spirit: Who He Is and What He Does, and How to Know Him in All the Fullness of His Gracious and Glorious Ministry* (1877; reprint, Fleming, NY: H. Revell Company, 1927), 154-192.

<sup>161</sup>*Ibid.*, 192-194.

<sup>162</sup>*Ibid.*, 195-197.

<sup>163</sup>Mark Noll, *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 116.

<sup>164</sup>Palmer, *Selected Writings*, 16-19.

<sup>165</sup>White, "Pentecostal Pneumatology," 198.

ness is like receiving a tongue of fire, just as the apostles did at Pentecost.<sup>166</sup> Conversely, the Pentecostals use a general model that greatly resembles the one promoted by Palmer. They exhort all believers to: “(1) be converted, (2) obey God fully, and (3) believe,” in order to be baptized by the Holy Spirit.<sup>167</sup>

Palmer also had a mystical side that relates her to the Pentecostals somewhat. For instance, she gave a fair amount of credence to dreams.<sup>168</sup> She also considered herself to have special gifts of discernment, at least on occasion. She believed that the Spirit would help her understand the Scriptures and that “every portion” of them contains some type of “special lesson of grace.”<sup>169</sup> She also claimed to have received an “increase of light” which gave her greater confidence in discerning the works of the devil.<sup>170</sup> When her six-year-old daughter was converted, she claimed that the little girl “began praising the Lord with expressions altogether beyond her former capacity. I could not but regard the singularly mature expressions, so beyond her former self, as a development of renewed mental powers.”<sup>171</sup> Also, after having an ecstatic experience, she had a dream in which she claimed that she was assaulted by Satan and delivered by an angel.<sup>172</sup>

Contrast these assertions with the following quote from John Wesley: “I say yet again, beware of enthusiasm. Such is, the imagining you have the gift of prophesying, or of discerning spirits, which I do not believe one of you has; no, nor ever had yet.”<sup>173</sup> Now consider them alongside Aimée Semple McPherson, one of the leading figures in the beginnings of Pentecostalism. McPherson’s mother was in the Salvation Army and her grandmother “had talked much of the mighty power of God manifested in the early Methodist Church, and here in the Army [her mother] found it again, and it was nothing uncommon to see men and women slain as in the church of John Wesley’s day.”<sup>174</sup> It is true that Wes-

<sup>166</sup>Palmer, *Promise of the Father*, 208-209.

<sup>167</sup>White, *Beauty of Holiness*, 158.

<sup>168</sup>Palmer, *Way of Holiness*, 108-110, 163-164, 193-195, 210-215, et. al.

<sup>169</sup>*Ibid.*, 124.

<sup>170</sup>*Ibid.*, 57.

<sup>171</sup>*Ibid.*, 283.

<sup>172</sup>Palmer, *Faith and Its Effects*, 78-82.

<sup>173</sup>Wesley, 430.

<sup>174</sup>McPherson, *This Is That* (Los Angeles: Bridal Call Publishing House, 1921), 13-14.

ley many times witnessed people falling down, convulsing, groaning, etc. However, these experiences were almost always instances in which someone fell under great conviction, i.e., pangs of guilt. They were not ecstatic experiences, nor were they referred to as being “slain in the Spirit.” It is true that Wesley and his followers enjoyed great waves of emotion from time to time, but such occurrences were not the expected norm. Neither are there many instances, if any, where Wesley advocates someone experiencing ecstasy to the point of losing self-control.

In contrast, Palmer gives an account in which a man was praying for sanctification. He prayed,

“Let it [i.e., the blessing] come in any way, only let it come!” It came, and with such mighty power that the day of Pentecost could scarcely have witnessed, in individual experience, a scene more astounding, uncontrollable, or unaccountable, on the principles of mere human reason, than was presented in his extraordinary exercises. The “sound from heaven, as of a rushing mighty wind” could scarcely have been more overwhelming in its influences on that day when anciently given, than on this occasion.

For about four hours he was no more under his own control, or that of his friends around him, than the apostles were when first baptized with the Holy Ghost. Many others were baptized as suddenly at the same time. He still continues a flaming witness of the power of saving grace.<sup>175</sup>

It is little wonder that Gardella considers McPherson as one of Phoebe Palmer’s “heirs.”<sup>176</sup> He highlights the fact that both women teach the duty of being constantly happy.<sup>177</sup> However, their similarities extend beyond the emotional. McPherson also stressed the duty to immediately seek the baptism of the Holy Spirit.

Have you come to the end of yourself, empty, cleansed, humble, low under the precious blood of Jesus? Are you waiting with prayer and supplication as did the Bible saints of old? If so, the Lord will meet you quickly. God’s time is now. It is not His will that you should wait until some vague tomorrow for

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<sup>175</sup>Palmer, *Way of Holiness*, 183-184.

<sup>176</sup>Gardella, 94.

<sup>177</sup>*Ibid.*, 92.

His Spirit. In the day you seek Him with your whole heart He will be found of you.<sup>178</sup>

The duty to seek the experience immediately is facilitated by the fact that the preparation only takes a moment. “Inside of fifteen minutes from the time that they came to the altar seeking salvation I have seen such penitents fall prostrate under the power of the Spirit, receive the Holy Ghost, and burst forth speaking in other tongues as the Spirit gave utterance.”<sup>179</sup> McPherson contends that what the Lord essentially desires is that we return to our first love, i.e., a “whole-hearted sacrifice” and the “sacrifice of praise.”<sup>180</sup> This sounds a lot like Palmer’s insistence on complete consecration and testimony.

**The True Essence of Christianity.** As it turns out, the doctrine with which Palmer intended to unite people also ended up dividing people, for although the experience can be shared by all, it is not regarded as an option. Those who neglect it reject God’s plan of salvation. “The Bible presents but one way to heaven, and that, the Way of Holiness.”<sup>181</sup> Not only must all believers aspire toward the “prize of holiness,” but they must also possess it as a “rightful heritage.”<sup>182</sup> Furthermore, holiness can only be attained through one means; “all the disciples of our Lord . . . must receive the baptism of fire.”<sup>183</sup>

For Palmer, holiness is the norm of the Christian life, even to the extent that “a personal experience of holiness” should be “an essential prerequisite for the ministry.”<sup>184</sup> However, the believer need not fret over attaining this experience, since the Holy Spirit will guide each one into it personally. Palmer felt that her own “heavenward progress seemed marked as by the finger of God.”<sup>185</sup> She took no credit for attaining the “blessing,” for “it was all the work of the Spirit.”<sup>186</sup>

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<sup>178</sup>McPherson, 519.

<sup>179</sup>Ibid., 527.

<sup>180</sup>Ibid., 667.

<sup>181</sup>Palmer, *Way of Holiness*, 7.

<sup>182</sup>Ibid., 111.

<sup>183</sup>Palmer, *Life and Letters*, 525.

<sup>184</sup>Palmer diary, May 1844, *Life and Letters*, 244.

<sup>185</sup>Palmer, *Way of Holiness*, 26.

<sup>186</sup>Ibid., 47.

**The Appropriation of Christian Perfection.** Palmer intended to start an ecumenical movement, but it could not be sustained. Instead, each group appropriated the experience within its own theological framework. However, Palmer still made a noticeable impact on each of the groups discussed in this paper. The Methodists ended up looking back either to Fletcher or Wesley to revive their promotion and experience of the doctrine. The Higher Life (Keswick) Movement interpreted the experience as a means of empowering the believer for service and victorious living, even if this does not entail freedom from sin. Pentecostalism also emphasized the element of power in the experience and sought to evidence it in supernatural gifts, especially the gift of tongues. The Holiness Movement essentially combined Palmer's experiential model with Wesley's and Fletcher's concepts of carnal nature.

The final result was not unity, but the fragmentation of Wesleyanism. Gardella notes that following Phoebe Palmer "came a period in which the Wesleyan movement dissolved into isolated churches and secular channels.... Meanwhile, the logic of sanctification carried others into the gifts of tongues and healing. A splintering of new denominations ensued (e.g., Assemblies of God, Church of God in Christ, Church of the Nazarene, et. al.)"<sup>187</sup> It is not apparent whether the fragmented groups carried what Palmer started to its logical conclusions or to its various extremes, but it is clear that the place of Phoebe Palmer in evangelical history is greater than many realize.

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<sup>187</sup>Gardella, 94.