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THE LIFE AND MINISTRY OF PHOEBE PALMER

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It is safe to say that the majority of us today know what is meant by the term “lay it all upon the altar.” However, in the pre-civil war days, in the midst of the Second Great Awakening, these words were quite innovative. Although a bit overshadowed by other “great lights” of revival, Phoebe Palmer is a significant contributor. Her personal struggle to gain the assurance of the Wesleyan perfection of her parents was key in placing her as someone significant on the timeline of Pentecostal history. Her “altar theology” opened the door for an audience that was more broad in its ecumenical understanding, thus expanding Pentecostal-Holiness influence.

Phoebe Palmer was born as Phoebe Worrall in New York, in 1807. Her parents were devout Methodists belonging to the Methodist Episcopal Church in New York City. In fact, her British-born father was a convert of Wesley himself. The top priority for the Worrall family was that their children would take hold of the Wesleyan doctrine of Christian perfection. In 1827, Phoebe married Walter Clark Palmer who was also a member of the Methodist Episcopal Church. His family had done much to promote the church within the community and also held class meetings in their home. Both were from devout families in which Wesleyan theology was vital.¹

Early in their marriage, the Palmer's were met with tragedy. Their first child died at nine months of age, their second at seven weeks. “Phoebe was convinced God was punishing her for not totally devoting herself to him: "Surely I needed it, or it would not have been given," she

¹ Barbara A Howie, “Then Peter and the Other Apostles answered and said, We ought to obey God rather than men.” Religious Studies 128, West Virginia University, <http://are.as.wvu.edu/phebe.htm> (accessed January 29, 2016).

wrote. "Though painfully learned, yet I trust the lesson has been fully apprehended."² She was also in deep distress because her Christian experience had never entailed a moment where there was a deep emotional experience in which she felt that she had given herself completely over to God. This had become known in Wesleyan circles as evidence of "one's salvation and was considered the absolute prerequisite of Christian perfection, or "entire sanctification."³ Phoebe, however, felt as though she had sought after the Lord sincerely, but this emotional-evidence caused her to struggle with the assurance that she was entirely sanctified.

The change seemed to occur when Phoebe's sister came to stay with the Palmers. Sarah obviously had the same upbringing as Phoebe, except that she could point to a dramatic conversion experience that was emotional in response. What Sarah helped Phoebe to grasp was an understanding of "reckoning oneself as dead to sin and becoming akin to God."⁴ Phoebe took hold of this thought and applied herself to believe its truth, no matter what her emotions told her. She had never been an outwardly emotional person, but had believed sincerely. "She surmised that the "act of believing" itself was grounds for assurance."⁵ Not long after, her fourth child, a daughter, died in a house fire. Although immensely tragic, Phoebe no longer sees this as God's judgment, instead she writes these words:

"After the angel spirit winged its way to paradise, I retire alone, not willing that only one should behold my sorrow. While pacing the room, crying to God, amid the tumult of grief, my mind was arrested by a gentle whisper saying, 'Your heavenly Father loves you. He would not permit such a great trial, without

² Christianity Today, "Phoebe Palmer, Mother of the Holiness Movement," Christian History, <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ch/131christians/moversandshakers/palmer.html?start=1> (accessed January 29, 2016).

³ Christianity today, "Phoebe Palmer, Mother of the Holiness Movement."

⁴ Barbara A. Howie, "Then Peter and the Other Apostles answered and said, We ought to obey God rather than men."

⁵ Ibid

intending that some great good proportionate in magnitude and weight should result. He means to teach you some great lesson that might not otherwise be learned. He doth not willingly grieve or afflict the children of men. If not willingly, then he has some specific design in this, the greatest of all trials you have been called to endure.”⁶

Phoebe “resolved to resign everything she held dear to God, promising that she would never murmur at any step of obedience he required. She also resolved that the time she would have spent with her children would henceforth be dedicated to the Lord's service. She thought of her commitment as the "living sacrifice" God required, and became convinced that God had accepted her offering. She then realized that what had happened to her was the entire sanctification which her Methodist heritage had taught her to expect.”⁷

It was at this point that Phoebe and her sister, Sarah Lankford, began to hold prayer meetings that were known as “Tuesday Meetings.” These meetings were actually held from 1835-1874 for the promotion of holiness and became a “center of revival within Methodism.”⁸ Although the Tuesday Meetings started as a women’s group, by 1839, the gathering had opened itself up to men. It had also begun to cross denominational barriers in part due to the decline of the traditional Wesleyan class meetings, but largely because Palmer’s teachings could be applied to all who looked to the Scriptures for guidance. Palmer also sought to evangelize New York through prison ministry, serving the poor, and speaking at camp meetings and other revival

⁶ Barbara A. Howie, “Then Peter and the Other Apostles answered and said, We ought to obey God rather than men.”

⁷ Charles Edward White, (1987) "The beauty of holiness: the career of Phoebe Palmer," *Fides Et Historia* 19, no. 1: 22-34, *ATLA Religion Database with ATLASerials*, EBSCOhost (accessed January 29, 2016).

⁸ Jennifer A. Miskov, (2011) "Missing links: Phoebe Palmer, Carrie Judd Montgomery, and holiness roots within Pentecostalism," *Pentecostudies* 10, no. 1: 8-28, *ATLA Religion Database with ATLASerials*, EBSCOhost (accessed January 30, 2016).

outlets. "In 1864, the Palmers bought a publishing house, as well as the popular holiness magazine entitled, *The Guide to Holiness*, which she edited until her death."⁹

Although most agree that the subtle changes Phoebe applied were unintentional, Mrs. Palmer was in fact offering a different slant on traditional Wesleyan theology. Kevin T. Lowery writes, "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. 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. Also, Palmer remains consistent with Wesley by claiming that in sanctification the image of God is "re-enstamped upon the soul. 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."¹⁰

Where we see more of an intentional change was in her methodology. Wesley believed in a more gradual movement toward Christian perfectionism; Palmer spoke of a crisis-moment

⁹ Jennifer A. Miskov, (2011) "Missing links: Phoebe Palmer, Carrie Judd Montgomery, and holiness roots within Pentecostalism."

¹⁰ Kevin T. Lowery, (2001) "A fork in the Wesleyan road: Phoebe Palmer and the appropriation of Christian perfection," *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 36, no. 2: 187-222, *ATLA Religion Database with ATLASerials*, EBSCOhost (accessed January 30, 2016).

decision. Wesley believed that “holiness was the culmination of mature graces.”¹¹ Palmer, and the Holiness Movement 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.)¹² What Phoebe Palmer offered her disciples was something more formulaic that helped one obtain entire sanctification. This was known as the “Altar Covenant.” It included scripture, songs, a specific setting, and testimonies.¹³

Charles Edwin Jones writes, “The genius of Mrs. Palmer's message and methodology was that it spoke to the dilemma faced by many in the second and third generations (Wesleyans) who believed themselves incapable of realizing, in the same manner as their parents, the witness of the Holy Spirit that they had been made perfect in love.”¹⁴ The phrase “the altar sanctifies the gift” meant that what God was looking for was a heart completely devoted to Him – this was the gift. The altar was Christ Himself who alone had the power to sanctify the gift. Men and women would physically come to an altar that had been set up directly in front of the pulpit so that the message was centralized and public. They would lay their deep heart issues upon the altar which symbolized Christ and through prayer, confess their belief that the blood of Jesus was enough to cleanse them from all unrighteousness.

“Nowhere in the Holiness mind is Mrs. Palmer's impact more apparent than in its visualization of salvation. The centrality of the altar as physical object and as spiritual symbol could hardly have been lost on the vast majority of American Methodist hearers. Stress on the

¹¹ Kevin T. Lowery, (2001) "A fork in the Wesleyan road: Phoebe Palmer and the appropriation of Christian perfection."

¹² Ibid

¹³ Charles Edwin Jones, (1996) "The Inverted Shadow of Phoebe Palmer," *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 31, no. 2: 120-131, *ATLA Religion Database with ATLASerials*, EBSCOhost (accessed January 30, 2016).

¹⁴ Ibid

altar of the heart sprang quite naturally from the material culture of the revivalistic spirituality in which they, like she, had been nurtured. The practice of kneeling for prayer and for communion, an inheritance from Anglicanism, was an integral part of Methodist worship. Relation of religious experiences was expected in every class meeting and every prayer meeting, and use of biblical metaphors, such as the “Altar of Sacrifice” and the “Mercy Seat” were the stock in trade of common religious discourse. Phoebe Palmer required no illustrator. Presentation of Mrs. Palmer's theology of self-sacrifice in such a context was destined to make the altar—represented by the altar rail rather than the communion table—the focal point of Holiness worship.... The altar rail was to be for the church at prayer the place where the physical and spiritual merged.”¹⁵

She certainly was not without her critics. The obvious is the fact that women theologians are most often suspect within ministerial associations. She agreed in theory that women were not usually called to preach, but she also believed that there were times in which God Himself appointed women to accomplish a task for His purpose and glory. Barbara A Howie states, “Women found roles within the context of revivalism because of its focus on individual religious experience rather than traditional ecclesiastical structures. Phoebe defined the woman's right to preach by citing the Biblical injunction of Acts 5:29 to obey God rather than man. This became the basis for Wesleyan/Holiness women to challenge the authority of those who attempted to prevent them from preaching. She also stated, “It is always right to obey the Holy Spirit's command, and if that is laid upon a woman to preach the Gospel, then it is right for her to do so; it is a duty she cannot neglect without falling into condemnation.”¹⁶

¹⁵ Charles Edwin Jones, (1996) “The Inverted Shadow of Phoebe Palmer,” *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 31, no. 2: 120-131, *ATLA Religion Database with ATLASerials*, EBSCOhost (accessed January 30, 2016).

¹⁶ Barbara A Howie, “Then Peter and the Other Apostles answered and said, We ought to obey God rather than men.”

She was also criticized by theologians, of whom she called hair-splitters, because they believed she was taking Methodism in a very un-Wesleyan direction. Most scholars agree that in her case, she believed herself to be taking Wesley's teachings out to their logical conclusion. She did not depart from her Methodist roots, she merely had a slight theological shift in her understanding. It would be her predecessors that would actually take her teaching and depart from Wesleyan thought in more diverse ways. But most theologians can agree that there are six areas of theological thought that Mrs. Palmer does alter in her interpretation of Wesley's teaching. She:

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 itself¹⁷

John Fletcher, a disciple of Wesley, was the first to actually equate entire sanctification with the baptism of the Holy Spirit given at Pentecost. Phoebe began to write on the subject in numerous books and would often urge her audience at camp meetings to receive the "Pentecostal Baptism."¹⁸ Her language began to change from the more traditional perfectionism ideas to an embodiment of Acts 2 and the "Day of Pentecost." Phoebe, with the help of her husband Walter,

¹⁷ Kevin T. Lowery, (2001) "A fork in the Wesleyan road: Phoebe Palmer and the appropriation of Christian perfection."

¹⁸ Charles Edward White (1988) "Phoebe Palmer and the development of Pentecostal pneumatology," *Wesleyan Theological Journal* 23, no. 1-2: 198-212, *ATLA Religion Database with ATLASerials*, EBSCOhost (accessed January 30, 2016).

wrote out an order of service based on Acts chapter 2 during their four-year revival tour in England. It is here that she begins to report the results of her evangelical endeavors in Pentecostal terms such as – “this many” gave their hearts to Christ and “this many” were filled with the Holy Ghost. This language would remain upon returning to America.¹⁹

Cultural factors as well contributed to the acceptance of Phoebe’s Pentecostal language across denominational lines. “...the culture of the late 1850s was not as optimistic as the culture of the late 1830s had been. Immigration, urbanization, and industrialization made American society more complex, and the powers of evil, especially that of slavery, seemed more deeply entrenched than ever.”²⁰ Whereas “Perfectionistic language” was future-oriented and taught that man’s perfected state would usher in a utopian age, “Pentecostal language” reminded the people of a time when God broke into humanity’s plight and empowered them to live righteously in the midst of a cruel world where they were to be salt and light that would effect change. “Such restorationist language was more suited to a time when people felt powerless in the face of complex social problems and institutionalized evil.”²¹

As to equating holiness to divine power, a few others, including John Fletcher, had made a somewhat ambiguous link, but Phoebe “made it the central theme of her teaching.”²² She deemed that “holiness was power” and that heart holiness and the dunamis power of the Holy Spirit were inseparable. She touted that the reason the church was ill effective in her day was because of a lack of being entirely sanctified. Morale was low in a cultural sense and

¹⁹ Charles Edward White (1988) "Phoebe Palmer and the development of Pentecostal pneumatology,"

²⁰ Ibid

²¹ Ibid

²² Ibid

evangelicals were losing influence. “Perhaps this sense of powerlessness made people especially hungry for Mrs. Palmer's explanation of how to get power. Thus she was eager to preach about power because she had found it, while her listeners were eager to hear about power because they had lost it.”²³

Whether one argues that Phoebe Palmer tweaked Wesleyan theology or changed it altogether can be largely due to one's own understanding of the nuances of “Perfectionistic language.” But one can argue, if studied out, an agreement can be made that what started as a personal struggle became the bridge that allowed for Wesley's theology to saturate the immerging Pentecostal environment. Her fear of not being able to receive this state of complete surrender is what made it so sweet when it actually came and she knew that others needed the same experience.

Some will say that there is evidence that Phoebe herself was never fully assured of her entire sanctification. But in a letter to an anonymous female, Phoebe writes these words, “You desire to be delivered from these (fears of assurance), so that you may bear a "stronger testimony." I think I sometimes give in a *stronger testimony* when tempted to doubt, than when all is quiet. If Satan could induce me to yield so far as to weaken my testimony, it would, on my part, be a partial closing in with his designs, and doubtless if he should succeed once, it would only embolden for an attack on every such occasion. So I make it a point, when most powerfully tempted, to speak most *confidently*. You may wonder, but I have proved the benefit of this course. At the Tuesday meeting two or three weeks since, I practiced on this principle precisely. The *accuser* for several days had been withstanding me at every point. He would fain have accused me in every word, thought, or action. Added to this, sensible assurances of the love of

²³ Charles Edward White (1988) "Phoebe Palmer and the development of Pentecostal pneumatology."

my Saviour were in a great measure withheld; and thus, with an indescribable sense of unworthiness, but with a consciousness of resting on *Christ*, I gave in a "*stronger testimony*" than usual. The feeling that possessed my soul was, that of defying Satan in the name of *Christ*; the enemy every moment saying that my state of grace did not warrant the testimony I had given. After I had finished, I felt such a conscious victory over the powers of darkness that my soul was filled with triumph. I afterward enjoyed blessed satisfaction in telling them, that the strong testimony I had given in was not founded on any state of *feeling* I at the time enjoyed, but because I *knew* I was by faith resting on the strong basis of the immutable word to sustain me in all I had said, and even in using much stronger language if it were possible."²⁴

It is credited that an estimated 25,000 Americans were converted under Phoebe Palmer's ministry. The rugged individualism of the American frontier demanded a Gospel message that met the need. The propagation of Wesleyan thought to the next generation can be traced to one woman's fear that her generation might not be able to obtain the blessing. I close with this famous quote from Phoebe herself, "Earnest prayers, long fasting, and burning tears may seem befitting, but cannot move the heart of infinite love to a greater willingness to save. God's time is now. The question is not, What have I been? or What do I expect to be? But, Am I now trusting in Jesus to save to the uttermost? If so, I am now saved from all sin."²⁵

²⁴ Phoebe Palmer, "Faith and its Effects," Letters 49-55, *Commonplace Holiness – Holiness Woven into Everyday Lives*, <http://www.craigladams.com/Palmer/Faith/page67/> (accessed January 30, 2016).

²⁵ Christianity today, "Phoebe Palmer, Mother of the Holiness Movement."

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