

Foreword

ELAINE HEATH'S WORK BREAKS EXTRAORDINARY NEW GROUND IN the interpretation of the theology of Phoebe Palmer. My own reading of Palmer until I read Professor Heath's work was that Palmer was an interesting but minor, derivative nineteenth-century theologian who at best had offered a crude oversimplification of the theology of John Wesley and early Methodism. What she has done is show that Palmer re-discovered independently some of the deepest insights of ascetic theology from within the bosom of Methodist theology. This totally alters our reading of Palmer, giving her a truly original place within the development of Methodist theology in the nineteenth century. Moreover, Palmer's oversimplification of Wesley and early Methodist theology (the stress on radical personal commitment, on laying all on the altar) turns out to be a very significant dimension of holiness that Wesley, in the interests of pressing the divine side of entire sanctification, may well have overlooked or downplayed. The first of these discoveries would be an amazing breakthrough; taken with the latter we have an astonishing contribution to historical theology.

More broadly, Professor Heath alters the landscape of scholarship on the Holiness movement as well as more general nineteenth century Methodist theology, and ascetic theology. In the former cases the lesson is obvious: we need to look again at the relation between mysticism, Holiness, and Methodism. In the last case, we now have to reckon with the Methodist and Holiness contribution to ascetic theology and expand it beyond the confines of Eastern Orthodoxy, Roman Catholicism, and the Quakers. There are also bound to be repercussions for the interpretation of Pentecostalism.

The reason for Professor Heath's success in this work is quite simple. Where conventional historians work with standard historical categories, Professor Heath brings to the texts a deep immersion in mystical theology that gives her the powers of perception and the conceptual resources that are vital to seeing Palmer in all her sensitiv-

ity and complexity. She also brings feminist perspectives to the task. The upshot is that she outstrips conventional historical work in her historical reconstruction of the theology of Palmer. This is one reason why conventional historians will not know what to do with this work; it shows up the poverty of the standard resources brought to the historical task. Yet in time, her reading will become commonplace, and we will wonder why we were so blind to the obvious truth that she has so skillfully unearthed. This is wonderfully accessible, ground-breaking scholarship on the great mystic of Methodism, Phoebe Palmer.

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