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Saint Phoebe

Introduction

Now and then through the history of the church a great light appears, a prophet who calls an erring church back to its missional vocation. These reformers are lovers of God, mystics whose lives are utterly given to the divine vision. Yet as Jesus noted, a prophet is often without honor among her own people. In the case of Phoebe Palmer (1807–1874), honor was lost posthumously, for within a few decades after her death her name all but disappeared. Though Palmer's theology continued to be handed on with varying degrees of fidelity through camp meeting preachers and holiness leaders, the holiness movement splintered into numerous denominations eschewed by mainstream Methodism. As Albert Outler comments, holiness, the "keystone" of Wesleyan doctrine, became "a pebble in the shoe" of Methodists.[1] There is also the fact of Palmer's gender, which undoubtedly helped reduce her to a footnote in the official stories of Methodism. The deepest problem, though, is that Methodism lacked the necessary theological framework with which to honor and interpret its premier mystic, for Methodists have long been averse to mysticism.[2]

1. Outler, *Evangelism and Theology*, 118.

2. The reasons for Methodist ambivalence toward mysticism are complex, but much of the difficulty is rooted in resistance to "enthusiasm," a pejorative label used by critics against early Methodists (and other Christians of their era) to discredit their claims to revelatory religious experience. To be called an "enthusiast" was to be labeled a fanatic, one whose religious experiences were actually delusions. Accusations of enthusiasm had political connotations, as well, arising from anti-Puritan polemic. John Wesley was accused of enthusiasm because of his insistence upon the vital role of experience in Christianity. Taves, *Fits, Trances & Visions*, 15–18.

For all these reasons Palmer's sanctification theology was separated from its apophatic spiritual moorings, even as her memory was lost. Throughout most of the twentieth century her name was virtually unknown among Methodists. To this day the Mother of the holiness movement still awaits her place of recognition as a Christian mystic equal to Catherine of Siena, Teresa of Avila, or Thérèse of Lisieux.

The primary goal of this book is to locate Palmer's life and thought within the great Christian mystical traditions, reclaiming her importance within and beyond Methodism. Within this task rests a secondary goal, which is to offer a Wesleyan theological framework for understanding and valuing Christian mysticism, while connecting it with the larger mystical traditions in Catholic, Anglican and Orthodox communions.

While Palmer was a powerful revivalist in her own day, until her status as a mystic is fully recognized, she will not have "come into her own." Palmer, for example, could become the patron saint for contemporary Methodists who are drawn to the new monasticism,[3] and who long for the renewal of the church. Palmerian mystical spirituality is exactly what the mainline church needs today to overcome its torpor. Like Wesley, Luther or Zwingli, Palmer was a firebrand who evangelized a sleeping church. Like John of the Cross and other great apophatic mystics, Palmer's theology emerged from her own experiences of unknowing, darkness and loss.

In this chapter I present a brief overview of Palmer's life and theological contributions, to contextualize the more detailed examination of her mysticism and theology in subsequent chapters. Chapter two describes Christian mysticism, locating Palmer's spirituality within the long history of Christian mysticism. Chapter three focuses on Palmer's apophatic mysticism,[4] the aspect of her theology and spirituality that has been the least understood and most controversial. In chapter four a new reading of Palmer's theology is presented, honoring her mysticism and her authority to speak to a drifting church. Chapter five advances the proposal that Palmer is indeed a mystic for our own day, with several key elements of a Palmerian spirituality that are consistent with the ethos of the new monastic movement. While Palmer was a powerful revivalist in her own day, in many ways she could be the patron saint

3. More will be said about the new monasticism in chapter five, but for now see "Twelve Marks of the New Monasticism" at www.newmonasticism.org.

4. The definition of apophatic mysticism is given in chapter 2.

for contemporary Methodists who are drawn to the new monasticism, and who long for the renewal of the church. Saint Phoebe is precisely the one who can help Methodists envision new forms of Christian community, mission and witness in a postmodern world.

Biography

In order to address the issue of Palmer's mysticism[5] we must begin with her context in nineteenth century America and in the Methodist Church. For comprehensive biographies see Harold Raser's *The Life and Thought of Phoebe Palmer* or Charles White's *The Beauty of Holiness: Phoebe Palmer as Theologian, Feminist, Revivalist and Humanitarian*. For our purposes the following survey should suffice.[6]

The Mother of the holiness movement was a native of Manhattan, New York, the fourth of sixteen children born to devout Methodist parents Dorothea Wade and Henry Worrall. Ten of the sixteen children born to Dorothea and Henry would survive to adulthood. As a young teenager Henry Worrall had come under the influence of John Wesley, whose Methodist society meetings made a profound impact on the fourteen year old. Within a short time the Yorkshire native became a Methodist whose faith remained the center of his life for the rest of his life.[7] Along with his wife Dorothea, Henry took seriously his responsibilities as a Christian parent. Palmer attributes much of her spiritual vitality to her Christian parents.

Typical of well-to-do, pious households of the time, the Worrall family was managed with sober but loving discipline. Family devotions, each of which was an hour long, were held morning and evening with Father presiding over Bible reading and prayer. The Bible,

5. The term "mysticism" and the reason for the use of this word rather than "spiritual experience," "spirituality," etc. is treated in chapter 2. For now suffice to say the term as used in this study has to do with numinous experience, with direct, transformative contact between Phoebe Palmer and God. Mystical experience interpreted through the lens of Scripture and uniquely shaped by her Wesleyan Protestant tradition, forms the locus of Palmer's theology, as well as being the driving force behind her public ministry. To understand her theology aright, then, it is necessary to understand something of her mystical experience. It is particularly important to locate her mystical experience within the great stream of Christian mysticism as a whole.

6. Raser, *Phoebe Palmer*. Also see White, *Beauty of Holiness*. For Palmer's journal entries and personal correspondence, see Wheatley, *Life and Letters*.

7. Wheatley, *Life and Letters*, 14.

especially verses that had been memorized, was the favorite topic of conversation around the dinner table. Children were encouraged at an early age to surrender their lives to Christ and be saved.[8] Thus it was that from her earliest memory Palmer describes herself as having had an acutely sensitive religious conscience and never having willfully disobeyed her parents.[9] With a spirituality somewhat reminiscent of Thérèse of Lisieux, as a young girl Palmer longs for opportunities to offer to Jesus lavish, sacrificial gifts.[10] She wishes she could be "like the Jew bringing his costly offering" and feels frustrated that she cannot.[11] Ever feeling her spiritual deficiencies, Palmer describes herself at age twenty as lacking in faith, courage and resolve. In a journal entry dated November 24, 1827, Palmer confesses that she "shrinks from crosses," avoiding the simple religious duty that lies at hand even though in her heart she would like to be a martyr.[12] In time these longings would lead Palmer to the most significant turning point in her life: her experience of sanctification based on "naked faith in the naked word of God."[13] It was this experience that eventually launched Palmer into ministry and from which some of her key theological themes emerged.

Virtually nothing is recorded as to the kind of formal education Palmer had as a child, but it is clear that as an adult she was well-versed in the works that were standard for persons who were Methodist class leaders: the Bible, commentaries on the Bible by Adam Clarke and others, the works of John Wesley and other key Methodist writers.[14] As we shall see in chapters 2 and 3, the writings of John Fletcher and his wife Mary Bosanquet, as well as those of William Carvasso and Hester Anne

8. Raser, *Phoebe Palmer*, 22–26.

9. Wheatley, *Life and Letters*, 17.

10. St. Thérèse of Lisieux (1873–1897) is known for her childlike faith and simple but heartfelt life of devotion to Jesus. Like Phoebe Palmer, Thérèse experienced profound suffering in her life, which became the crucible in which her faith was formed. Also, like Phoebe, the Carmelite sister longed to be a spectacular martyr but had to be content with small daily acts of self-sacrifice in her community. See Egan, "Thérèse of Lisieux."

11. Wheatley, *Life and Letters*, 19.

12. Ibid., 24.

13. This is a phrase Phoebe came to use frequently to describe the importance of taking God at his word instead of requiring physical proofs in order to believe. Raser, *Phoebe Palmer*, 114.

14. Raser, *Phoebe Palmer*, 29.

Rogers were deeply influential on Palmer. (It could be argued from the number of times Palmer cites Fletcher and from some of her theology, that Fletcher's work was more influential upon her than Wesley's.) Each of these authors expresses elements of classical Christian mysticism as being formative in their own spirituality and theology.[15] Indeed, John Fletcher was known as "the Methodist Mystic."[16]

It is also probable that Palmer read at least some of the 50 volumes of Wesley's *Christian Library*, since Methodist class leaders were encouraged to read these works for their own spiritual formation. Here, too, the influence of at least eight mystical tracts and numerous other works by or about mystics were included in the library and may well have left their mark on the Mother of the holiness movement.[17]

At age 19 Phoebe Worrall married Dr. Walter C. Palmer, a homeopathic physician who received his training at Rutgers University. In a remarkable journal entry dated August 12, 1827, the young woman reflects upon her decision not to date four different suitors who pursued her prior to Walter, since she knew she would not want any of them as a husband. For Palmer it would have been a violation of integrity to give hope to any of the young men when she knew she would not marry them. In her words: "I have regarded it as cruel—in fact, wicked, on the part of a lady, to encourage a manifestation of affection, that she did not intend to reciprocate, and since my earliest approaches to womanhood, I have been very guarded on this point."[18]

The Palmers' marriage was happy and, for the time, remarkably egalitarian, with each of them regarding the other as a soulmate and partner in ministry. During the rise of "the cult of domesticity" following industrialization, it was unusual for a married woman with children to have a career, much less to have her husband's unswerving support as she followed that career. Yet this is precisely what Palmer did, believing that to disregard her call to ministry would be to disobey God and demonstrate a serious lack of trust in both God and her husband.[19] Indeed, when Palmer was contemplating marriage to Walter, she recorded in her

15. The definition of classical Christian mysticism is found in chapter 2.

16. Tuttle, *Mysticism in the Wesleyan Tradition*, 138.

17. Ibid., 133.

18. Wheatley, *Life and Letters*, 22.

19. From Palmer's *Memoirs*, abridged in Oden, *Phoebe Palmer*; Palmer, *Way of Holiness,* 61.

journal that he was exactly the kind of husband she could give herself to, for he was a "kindred spirit" and was designed to be a "helpmeet" for her.[20] Despite the evidence for a rather egalitarian praxis in the Palmer household, it should be noted that Palmer used patriarchal rhetoric when describing husbands as the heads of families, including her own husband. This was evident, for example, in Walter's leadership of family devotions.

Repeating the pattern set out in her family of origin, Walter (with Phoebe's assistance) led family devotions twice a day with prayers sung before and after each meal and much Scripture memorization by the children. Palmer's personal "daily rule" included rising at 4 AM for two hours of "reading the Scriptures and other devotional exercises: half an hour for closet duties at midday . . . if practicable I will get an hour to spend with God at the close of day."[21] She goes on to describe her systematic approach to Bible study, prayer for her Bible students and family, and other aspects of personal spiritual formation. Like Wesley before her, Palmer was a natural for a systematic, disciplined and rigorous devotional practice.

Although Walter and Phoebe had six children, only three survived to adulthood. Alexander, their firstborn, died at nine months and their second son Samuel, died at seven weeks. These losses were a "crushing trial" for Palmer, not only because of the normal grief process but be-

20. *Memoirs*, quoted in Oden, *Phoebe Palmer*, 65–69. Palmer's use of the word "helpmeet" for her husband is extraordinary, given the usual patriarchal nuances attached to this word. This is but one of many instances where her exegetical ability shines. Palmer is citing Genesis 2:18 in which God declares that Adam needs a "help meet," (KJV) or a suitable helper (NIV). The Hebrew word for helper in this passage is *ezer*, a word that is never used in the Hebrew Bible to describe a subordinate helper but rather is used primarily to describe God as humanity's helper. Yet the traditional understanding of the term "help meet" has been patriarchal, with the assumption that Adam was the main caretaker in Eden, and Eve his subordinate helper. Sometimes the term "helpmate" is substituted for "help meet" in these patriarchal interpretations. Palmer did not understand the phrase to refer to subordination or she would not have used it to describe Walter, for it is clear in her other references to Walter that she did not view him as a subordinate. Her contextual understanding of *ezer* reflects accurately the meaning of the Hebrew text of Genesis 2:18, even though there is no indication that Palmer could read Hebrew or Greek. Brown, Driver, and Briggs, *New Brown, Driver, Briggs, Gesenius Hebrew and English Lexicon*, 740. For further discussion on patriarchal interpretations of *ezer* and the shift from "help meet" to "helpmate" see Spencer, *Beyond the Curse*, 23–29.

21. Palmer, *Way of Holiness*, 80–81.

cause she saw the deaths as divine chastening for having loved her children too much.[22] Rather than embittering her toward God, the deaths of her first two children caused Palmer to re-think her priorities in life and to consecrate herself more fully to God. Palmer's interpretation of her children's deaths as direct acts of God is disturbing to readers today, but throughout most of Christian history Palmer's explanation would have seemed normal, even commendable. Yet there were other factors at work within Palmer's Wesleyan spiritual formation that led her to interpret her children's deaths as a spiritual discipline.

As Diane Leclerc demonstrates, John Wesley himself set the stage for Palmer's understanding of the idolatrous love of family as the besetting sin of women.[23] In letters of spiritual direction Wesley counseled numerous single women to remain single since marriage and motherhood often prove to be a snare to a woman's spiritual commitments. Marriage, according to Wesley, can easily become a threat to "singleness of heart."[24] Wesley tends to denigrate traditional female roles that are totally focused on home and family because these roles so easily lead to idolatry of the family. Leclerc cites Wesley's callous response to the deaths of his sister Martha's children as one of several examples of Wesley's ambivalence toward marriage and family.[25] Of even greater significance is Wesley's position that the idolatrous love of "creatures" (including spouse and children) is one form of original sin.[26] For Wesley the "root of sin" is more likely to be enmeshment than pride.[27] Wesley's position on these matters was handed on to Palmer through Hester Ann Rogers, among others.

Beyond Palmer's exposure to Wesley's perspective on family life, her own experiences led her to see the utter "absorption" of women in their husbands and children as a form of idolatry, indeed perhaps as *the* original sin (root of sin) for women. Again and again she prayed prayers of relinquishment of her husband and children, fearing that she loved

22. Wheatley, *Life and Letters*, 26.

23. Not only is Leclerc's work siginificant for a greater understanding of Palmer's theology, but it also helps to critique contemporary forms of idolatry of the family among evangelical Christians. See Leclerc, *Singleness of Heart*.

24. Ibid., 68–71, 79.

25. Ibid., 83.

26. Ibid., 89–92.

27. Ibid., 113–15.

them too much.[28] The death of her third child and eldest daughter, Eliza, in a tragic crib fire, became the ultimate springboard for Palmer's entrance into a lifetime of public ministry.[29] Leclerc notes the "mystical transfiguration" of Palmer's maternal grief into mature theological reflection: "Palmer's resolution of (vs. rejection of) her maternal grief, can be seen not as dispassionate, but rather as representing a rather mature understanding of questions of theodicy. And underlying her interpretation of such questions is her definition of sin as relational idolatry."[30] As we shall see in subsequent chapters, the darkness of Eliza's death was one of the key formative experiences in Palmer's mystical spirituality and theology.

In addition to the agonizing loss of three children, Palmer suffered from theological opposition (some of it in print), was seriously ill several times with painful ailments and in later life, with what appears to be Bright's Disease,[31] and she struggled mightily with "intense mental conflicts."[32] These conflicts were a mixture of her own temperament, which she saw as being overly analytical and overly scrupulous, and what she described as wrestling with demonic forces.

Harold Raser observes that three critical events in Palmer's life led her into a public preaching and teaching career that rivaled the most popular preachers of her day and equaled their impact. These events were the deaths of her three children, her prolonged spiritual struggle prior to her experience of sanctification, and her decision with Walter to share a home with Palmer's sister and brother-in-law, Sarah and Thomas Lankford.[33]

Both Palmer and her sister Sarah were members of Nathan Bangs' class meeting in the 1820's. Under Bangs' tutelage the sisters began to seek the second work of grace.[34] It was in the shared home of the Lankfords and Palmers that Palmer experienced a deeper work of the Holy Spirit which she understood to be entire sanctification, and there

28. Palmer, *Way of Holiness*, 61.

29. Palmer, *Incidental Illustrations of the Economy of Salvation*, 145–46; Palmer, *Way of Holiness*, 151–52.

30. Leclerc, *Singleness of Heart*, 115.

31. Raser, *Phoebe Palmer*, 59.

32. *Way of Holiness*, 64–66.

33. Raser, *Phoebe Palmer*, 33–34, 76.

34. Smith, "John Wesley's Religion in Thomas Jefferson's America," 39.

that she began her public ministry.[35] Following her experience of entire sanctification (which she refers to in her journal as the "day of days," July 27, 1837),[36] Palmer began to "testify" to others of her experience, urging them to trust God's word just as she had in order to enter into the way of holiness. As Raser notes, Palmer curiously says nothing about her sister Sarah having gone through a similar "unemotional" sanctification experience two years earlier, or Sarah being one who helped lead her into this deeper experience of God. Yet with the two living in the same household and sharing so much of their daily lives it is difficult to conceive of Sarah not playing a key role in Palmer's sanctification.[37] We can only speculate as to why this omission was made in Palmer's memoirs.

The first step into public ministry came with the institution of the Tuesday Meetings for the Promotion of Holiness in 1836, in partnership with her sister, Sarah Lankford. The Tuesday Meetings became a ministry of some fifty years' duration. These informal house meetings included a combination of personal testimonial, "talks" (which would have been called "sermons" if given by men), exposition of biblical texts, and prayer. Attendees were urged to take up the challenge to become "Bible Christians" and surrender themselves utterly to the "way of holiness," meaning to the Lordship of Christ, receiving the cleansing and empowering baptism of the Holy Spirit.[38]

The evolution of Methodist class meetings into the larger and more protracted Tuesday meeting was a natural and easy step for Palmer and

35. Wesleyan distinctives in the doctrine of sanctification and Palmer's development of those distinctives are treated in depth in chapter 4.

36. Wheatley, *Life and Letters*, 36.

37. Raser, *Phoebe Palmer*, 44–48.

38. The phrase "baptism of the Holy Spirit" did not have the Pentecostal associations given to it today. Pentecostal denominations such as the Assemblies of God use the phrase "baptism of the Holy Spirit" rather than "entire sanctification," whereas Wesleyan holiness denominations such as the Church of the Nazarene prefer the phrase "entire sanctification." Pentecostal denominations associate the baptism of the Holy Spirit with the alleged initial evidence of speaking in tongues. Non-Pentecostal denominations generally eschew speaking in tongues, and thus have distanced themselves from the phrase "baptism of the Holy Spirit." Phoebe used the "Pentecostal" phrase increasingly toward the end of her ministry, particularly when emphasizing the cleansing and empowering work of the Holy Spirit to prepare believers to do the work God calls them to do. Charles White argues persuasively for several reasons behind Palmer's shift to the use of Pentecostal language to describe entire sanctification. See White, "Phoebe Palmer and the Development of Pentecostal Pneumatology."

Sarah to take. Class meetings were instituted by John Wesley as a means of providing a small group structure in which Methodist Christians could practice charity and hold one another accountable for spiritual and ethical growth. Classes consisted of no more than 15 members who met weekly. Class meetings were powerful means of "spiritual direction in common" among the early Methodists and were one of the secrets to the explosive growth of Methodism in North America in the nineteenth century. Indeed class meetings were the backbone of American Methodism.[39]

Originally the Tuesday meetings were for women only. These meetings provided women a platform for public speaking and religious leadership that was usually closed to women in more formal church settings of the day.[40] Part of Palmer's "three step altar theology" is that one must publicly testify to having received the Holy Spirit in fullness. Thus women were encouraged to publicly exhort one another in the Tuesday meetings.[41]

Two major events took place in Palmer's life in 1839 that changed the course of Methodist history. Palmer became the first woman in New York City appointed to permanently lead a mixed class meeting.[42] This appointment gave official church sanction to a woman to teach and lead men as well as women. The second major event took place when Thomas Lankford's work as an architect led him and his wife Sarah to relocate 50 miles away, leaving Palmer as the sole leader of the Tuesday meetings. Under Palmer's able leadership the Tuesday meetings were opened to both men and women, where over the next few decades, hundreds experienced conversion and testified to sanctification. As many as 300 people came sometimes for the Tuesday meetings.

By 1840 Palmer was a frequent speaker at camp meetings. She quickly became prominent in her region, eventually traveling across the United States, into Canada and across the Atlantic for a four-year

39. For more on the history of class meetings, see Watson, *Early Methodist Class Meeting*.

40. Cunningham-Leclerc, "A Woman's Way of Holiness," 11–13.

41. Though Palmer is today seen by many as a proto-feminist, her apologetic for women in ministry was based on pneumatology more than feminist concerns. She was eager to see every child of God actively serving God to whatever capacity God called him or her.

42. Raser, *Phoebe Palmer*, 50, 99.

preaching tour in England. Walter, too, began to preach at some of these meetings, but Palmer was by far the more powerful of the two, attracting larger audiences, and following a heavier itinerary. While Phoebe traveled, Walter often stayed at home attending to his medical practice and parenting. For the first twenty years of her public ministry Palmer usually traveled alone, an exceptional feat in light of the time in which she lived. Walter supported his wife's ministry financially as well as emotionally, never seeming to bridle "at a role which cast him as something very close to Mister Phoebe Palmer."[43] It is noteworthy that neither of the Palmers would accept honoraria for their speaking ministry, supporting themselves instead from their own means.[44]

In addition to public speaking, Palmer wrote 18 books, many articles, and edited the widely-read periodical *Guide to Holiness* (1864–1874). Her most popular book, *The Way of Holiness*, became a bestseller, undergoing numerous printings and being translated into several foreign languages. It is her spiritual autobiography, written in third person and describing numerous mystical experiences.

Palmer's apologetic for women in ministry, *Promise of the Father*, is a superb and unprecedented exegesis of biblical texts used to support women in ministry. While Palmer never argued for the ordination of women in an official sense, this book persuasively demonstrates the necessity for every daughter of God to use the spiritual gifts God has given, including public speaking gifts, in order to serve God and bless the world. The book is a fine example of her clear, analytical thinking and straightforward writing at its best. More than her other work, this volume exhibits familiarity with and competence in the use of historical-critical exegesis, which was new and more than a little controversial in Palmer's day.[45]

43. Ibid., 106–7.

44. C. E. Jones, "Posthumous Pilgrimage of Phoebe Palmer," 210.

45. Paul Basset argues that "persons in the Palmerian stream" following after Phoebe, did not use a truly Wesleyan hermeneutic of Scripture and that they tended to identify with fundamentalist understandings of Scripture. According to Bassett, Palmer's approach to Scripture is rationalistic, with a commitment to a "radical doctrine of *sola scriptura*" (85). He contrasts Palmer, who believed the Bible in order to be a Christian, with Wesley, who believed the Bible because he was a Christian (85). While Bassett's statements about some who followed Palmer are undoubtedly true, Palmer's exegetical abilities in *Promise of the Father* belie the suggestion that Palmer always approached Scripture with a proto-fundamentalist, rationalistic hermeneutic. Bassett, "The Theological Identity of the North American Holiness movement."

Palmer also penned hundreds of letters of spiritual direction. By the time of her death Palmer was credited with having brought "some 25,000 people to saving faith in Christ."[46] In addition to this astonishing contribution to the church, Palmer's impact upon numerous key Protestant leaders of her day led to the formation of several Holiness denominations including the Pilgrim Holiness Church, the Salvation Army and the Church of the Nazarene. Her teaching and writing influenced such notables as John Dempster, founder of Boston and Garret seminaries, the presidents of several universities including Asa Mahan (the first President of Oberlin College), Frances Willard (founder of the Women's Christian Temperance Union), and many Methodist bishops. Among her closest friends were Bishop and Mrs. Leonidas L. Hamline, who testified to having experienced "full salvation" under Palmer's ministry.[47] When Congregational philosopher Thomas Cogswell Upham experienced entire sanctification under Palmer's guidance at the Tuesday meeting (1839), it was the beginning of an increasingly interdenominational ministry for the Mother of the holiness movement.[48]

Palmer was also active in many social justice ministries including being an abolitionist and helping to found Five Points Mission, the first Protestant inner city mission in America. Prison ministry, alcoholic rehabilitation efforts and the care of orphans were among her other hands-on ministries. It was their commitment to serving the poor that led Phoebe and Walter to move their church membership from their comfortable middle-class Allen Street Church to a new church start in an impoverished neighborhood near Five Points Mission.[49]

In light of her staggering achievements it is stunning that within a few decades of her death Phoebe Palmer was virtually unknown, although her theological impact continued to grow. In the 1950's Timothy L. Smith and a few other scholars "rediscovered" Palmer, but not until the 1980's when Charles White and Harold Raser wrote biographies of Palmer did she begin to attract much-deserved scholarly attention. As Oden has noted in the preface to his anthology of Palmer's work (1988), she continues to be omitted from most standard American

46. Tucker and Liefeld, *Daughters of the Church*, 263.
47. Oden, *Selected Writings*, 11.
48. Raser, *Phoebe Palmer*, 53–54.
49. Oden, *Selected Writings*, 12–13.

Church history texts and she was never listed along with Finney, et al, as one of the great revivalist preachers of her day. Along with White and Raser, Thomas Oden has helped reintroduce Palmer to the Church. According to Oden, Palmer is the "missing link" between Methodist and Pentecostal spirituality.[50] Moreover, she is in Oden's eyes one of the greatest women theologians of all time.[51] Yet even Oden has not identified the importance of Palmer as a Christian mystic beyond her own Methodist tradition.

To this remarkable woman's theological distinctives let us now turn our attention. It will readily become apparent why Palmer made such an impact in her day, and why her spirituality is so important today.

As we shall see in Chapter 3, Palmer's creative adaptation of Wesley's theology of sanctification arose directly from her own *via negativa* spiritual experience. After her death Palmer's so-called "altar theology" and its author came to be rigidly interpreted in ways the Mother of the holiness movement may never have intended. It is possible, and indeed it is this author's conviction, that Phoebe Palmer's altar theology deserves a new reading, intentionally ecumenical and unashamedly directed toward rediscovering the mystical spirituality that caused the diminutive young Methodist to become one of the greatest women theologians of all time. For I believe that as we revisit the context of Palmer's experience of God, informed by wider understandings of Christian mystical experience, we can rediscover the deeper meanings of her altar theology, meanings that have been obscured by the "reification of sanctification" that took place among her theological progeny.[52]

Theological Distinctives: Altar Theology and Entire Sanctification

To understand Palmer's altar theology and her creative adaptation of John Wesley's theology of entire sanctification it is necessary briefly to revisit Wesley's experience and doctrine of "perfecting grace," or entire sanctification.

50. Ibid., 16–17.
51. Ibid., 14–15.
52. See Truesdale, "Reification of Sanctification."

When John Wesley's "heart was strangely warmed," the pivotal numinous experience of May 24, 1738, it changed the entire course of his ministry. Wesley describes the event as follows:

> In the evening I went very unwillingly to a society in Aldersgate Street, where one was reading Luther's preface to the Epistle to the Romans. About a quarter before nine, while he was describing the change which God works in the heart through faith in Christ, I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone, for salvation: and an assurance was given me, that He had taken away my sins, even mine, and saved me from the law of sin and death.[53]

The experience of having his "heart strangely warmed" with assurance about his salvation, and the subsequent power Wesley experienced to resist temptation and to do the ministry to which God had called him, were key experiences Wesley had that contributed to his theology of sanctification. As was the case with Martin Luther, whose preface to the Epistle to the Romans was the vehicle of Wesley's profound experience, Wesley's faith moved from an intellectual assent and an anxious, works-centered faith to an emotionally experienced faith, one which was marked with new power, new vision and new love, one which had grace as its central theme.

From early childhood Wesley was committed to the Christian faith and was a pious man of strong principle. He had considerable leadership ability. Prior to his Aldersgate experience Wesley had already been involved in spiritual leadership at Oxford, with the formation of the Holy Club. As an ordained Anglican minister John Wesley and his brother Charles had already made a missions trip to Georgia. Thus the Aldersgate experience could not exactly be described as one of conversion to the Christian faith. It was, rather, a deeper work of God, a turning point for the founder of the people called Methodists.

As a result of his own experience and from his study of certain Eastern (and mostly pre-Augustinian) patristic writers, as well as the writings of William Law, Jeremy Taylor and Thomas à Kempis, Wesley came to understand the experience of entire sanctification to be both an event and a process subsequent to conversion, one which would

53. Wesley, *John Wesley's Journal*, 51.

culminate in the believer's being "perfected" in divine love and likeness.[54] Wesley did not present a norm for the amount of time or experience that must lapse before a converted person is ready to experience entire sanctification. Instead, Wesley urged new converts to quickly open themselves completely to the "perfecting grace" of sanctification.[55]

Wesley wrote and preached copiously on sanctification as the grace of God which leads to holiness, or teleological completion of love toward God and neighbor. Using the Greek New Testament for his text, Wesley focused on the Greek word *teleiotes* (Col 3:14; Heb 6:1) in which perfection is understood to mean maturation or completion.[56]

For Wesley the sanctified Christian life is to be one of increasing holiness, a life of increasing love of God and neighbor. Sin no longer has inevitable power in the sanctified believer. While temptation is not eradicated, the believer is empowered by the indwelling Holy Spirit to effectively resist temptation. In addition to evident outward fruits of holiness in one's life there should be an "inward witness" or emotional assurance that one is being transformed by God's holy love and that one is indeed "going on to perfection." (Wesley's stress on experiencing an inward witness or assurance comes directly from his own experience at Aldersgate.) To summarize then, in the words of Michael Christensen, for Wesley entire sanctification or Christian perfection is understood:

> . . . as an experience of grace, subsequent to salvation, with the effect that the Holy Spirit takes full possession of the soul, sanctifies the heart, and empowers the will so that one can love God and others blamelessly in this life. One is justified and then sanctified—understood as imparted, not just imputed on the basis of what Christ accomplished on the cross. The power of sin in the believer's life is either eradicated or rendered inoperative as one participates in the higher life of the divine.[57]

Wesley's clearest and most definitive teaching on "the second blessing" of entire sanctification is found in his treatise: *A Plain Account of*

54. See Christensen, "Theosis and Sanctification," 71–93.

55. White, "Phoebe Palmer and the Development of Pentecostal Pneumatology," 202.

56. Oden, *John Wesley's Scriptural Christianity*, 320.

57. Christensen, "Theosis and Sanctification," 71. For a more detailed but concise exposition of Wesley's sanctification theology, using many primary sources, see Oden, *John Wesley's Scriptural Christianity*, 311–43.

Christian Perfection. John Fletcher, considered by some to be the greatest early Methodist theologian, developed Wesley's doctrine of Christian perfection in a treatise of his own entitled: *Check to Antinomianism, or A Vindication of the Rev. Mr. Wesley's Minutes*.[58] The book is a series of five letters written to defend Wesley's Arminian position regarding predestination, grace and free will.[59] Both Wesley and Fletcher's primary theological concern in the Calvinist controversy was, according to Thomas A. Langford, that "the Calvinist position would result in antinomianism and hence undercut the drive for Christian holiness."[60]

In *Check to Antinomianism*, Fletcher does more than systematize and expound Wesley's teaching on Christian perfection. He goes on to make new contributions, which would later be adapted into Palmer's sanctification theology. These new ideas include Pentecostal language in regard to sanctification, linking the Baptism of the Holy Spirit to entire sanctification; a shifted stress toward the instantaneous event of sanctification over the process of sanctification; and an understanding of human history as having taken place in three dispensations: the dispensation of the Father (Old Testament era), the Son (New Testament era), and the Holy Spirit (the Church since Pentecost).[61] Of these three innovations the first two would figure most prominently in the thought of Palmer.

An excerpted version of *First Check to Antinomianism* was later published with a letter (written in 1796) by Thomas Rutherford and entitled *Christian Perfection*. In the shorter work Fletcher defines entire sanctification or Christian perfection with customary poetic elegance:

> In other words, Christian perfection is a spiritual constellation made up of these gracious stars,—perfect repentance, perfect faith, perfect humility, perfect meekness, perfect self-denial, perfect resignation, perfect hope, perfect charity for our visible

58. Fletcher had been designated by Wesley to be Wesley's successor, but Fletcher preceded Wesley in death. Fletcher, *Check to Antinomianism*. The extracted treatise is published as: *Christian Perfection: Being an Extract from the Rev. John Fletcher's Treatise on That Subject*.

59. The controversy between Calvinists and Arminians was the most heated debate marking the Second Great Awakening, the series of revivals that spanned the latter years of the eighteenth century and touched Christians from virtually all denominations in the U.S. with a renewed call to salvation and holiness of life.

60. Langford, *Practical Divinity*, 51.

61. Ibid., 53.

> enemies, as well as for our earthly relations; and, above all, perfect love for our invisible God, through the explicit knowledge of our Mediator Jesus Christ. And as this last star is always accompanied by all the others, as Jupiter is by his satellites, we frequently use, as St. John, the phrase "perfect love," instead of the word "perfection"; understanding by it the pure love of God, shed abroad in the heart of established believers by the Holy Ghost, which is abundantly given them under the fullness of the Christian dispensation.[62]

By the time Palmer was born, just sixteen years after Wesley's death, revival fire burned hot across New York and the rest of New England. The Second Great Awakening reached from the classrooms of Yale to primitive frontier settlements to genteel parlors of upper class New Yorkers, drawing thousands to a deeper commitment of life and self to Christ.

Revival preachers such as Charles Grandison Finney (1792–1875) used hard-hitting, emotional messages to persuade assembled listeners to repent of all sin and experience full salvation. Unlike the preachers of the First Great Awakening, who were nearly all Calvinistic, these preachers were primarily Arminian.[63] The Gospel was to be preached to all people because the possibility of repentance existed for all. Penitents came forward to the "mourners' bench," a long bench near the pulpit where sins were confessed and forgiveness received.[64] Protracted camp meetings were the new method for revival preachers wanting to reach increasingly large audiences. While some camp meetings such as Cane Ridge, Kentucky, became known for strange physical manifestations (barking, lying prostrate, shaking, and other experiences), in general the revivals led many people to a deeper life of piety. Penitents were instructed to express their newfound faith in a life of holiness, including attention to social justice issues such as abolition, temperance and

62. Fletcher, *Christian Perfection*, 9–10.

63. Some of the Second Great Awakening preachers were Arminian despite their Calvinist background, Charles Finney (a Presbyterian) being a prime example.

64. Fitzmier points out Finney's previous career as a lawyer and its influence on his innovations in ministry, such as use of the mourner's bench which is much like the witness stand in a court of law. Finney also frequently appealed to juridical imagery to communicate the Gospel. See Fitzmier, "Second Great Awakening." Legal language and the use of Finney's mourner's bench, etc. become important in the development of Palmer's preaching career, which in every way was equal to that of Finney.

the needs of impoverished immigrants. Thus the call to salvation had widespread social ramifications, leading to the establishment of many social justice ministries.

It was into this climate of revival that Palmer was born. From her earliest memories Palmer describes herself as being a spiritually sensitive child, eager to please God and parents.[65] Ironically, the absence of any period in her life in which she disavowed the faith of her parents, created the angst which eventually led to Palmer's sanctification experience. Her memoirs record:

> So early in life was the love of God shed abroad in her heart, that occasionally it was a subject of perplexity with her, that she could not so distinctly trace the hour of her conversion, as many others. But there was a time in her young child-days, making a turning point in her experience that did not admit of questioning. Seeing a number of persons at the altar of prayer as seekers of salvation, some of whom seemed to be the subjects of exciting influences, such as she had not felt, she went forward and knelt among them. She hoped that by some mysterious power she might also receive like influence, and be led to cry out in the agony of deep conviction. No such feelings were given, but, on the contrary, a realization of trust and hope in God, that she should not be cast off, but that Jesus loved and would save her. The tempter said, "The reason you feel thus, is because you are not convicted. So you may just as well give up the whole matter." "That I will never do. No! Never!" said the young seeker. "I will continue to seek as long as I live, though it may be till I am threescore, or a hundred years old. I will continue to seek, and if I find mercy at last, I will thank the Lord that I ever lived, and praise Him forever!" That moment Jesus revealed Himself as never before to His little one, and she went on her way rejoicing."[66]

Palmer's early childhood conversion experience at the "altar" (the mourner's bench) was to repeat itself, in a sense, in her young adulthood when she would struggle with guilt and shame over her lack of emotion as she sought the "second blessing" of entire sanctification. Under the tutelage of Wesley, revival preachers insisted that the "inner witness" or "assurance" is always present when one is sanctified. There was also an often unspoken assumption that repentance is accompa-

65. Wheatley, *Life and Letters*, 17.

66. Ibid., 18–19.

nied by tears and much sorrow. While others wept and groaned at the mourner's bench Palmer knelt, dry-eyed and sober, longing for even a trickle of tears. While others rejoiced with exceeding great joy at the manifest presence of God, Palmer watched and yearned, believing the message but feeling little.

> I have just been spending three or four days at Sing-Sing camp meeting. The Lord manifested himself most graciously to His people. My own soul was refreshed. The Lord has given me a longing desire for purity. I am sure I would not knowingly keep back anything from God. But alas! There must be some hindrance, or I should consciously enjoy the witness that Jesus reigns the Supreme Object of my affections.[67]

In this and other journal entries written prior to her momentous "Day of Days," Palmer lamented the absence of emotion as she sought the deeper experience of God proclaimed by revival preachers. She never questioned the reality of the emotional experience others have, but rather saw her own lack of feeling as a personal deficiency.

On July 27, 1837, the devout seeker finally had a breakthrough. Writing in *Faith and Its Effects,*[68] *The Way of Holiness* and her memoirs, Palmer describes the experience as the pivotal turning point of her journey, the experience "which she regarded as the most eventful of all her religious career."[69] The climax of the "day of days" came after a protracted dialogue between Palmer and the voice of God, which she perceived to be speaking to her directly, through Scripture. The most detailed version of the struggle leading up to Palmer's experience of full surrender involves eight points of temptation.[70] These were understood by Palmer to be direct attacks from Satan to try to prevent her from receiving God's fullest blessing. This series of eight temptations is of great significance in understanding the mysticism of Palmer's sanctification experience and subsequently, her sanctification theology. In some ways the eight temptations and her response to them are typical and representative of her mysticism overall. Since that is the case, the nature of the temptations and Palmer's response to them is treated in subsequent

67. Ibid., 28–29.
68. Palmer, *Faith and Its Effects*; Palmer, *Way of Holiness*.
69. Wheatley, *Life and Letters*, 36.
70. Oden, *Selected Writings*, 115.

chapters focusing on mysticism. For now it is sufficient to know that the temptations had to do with what I propose was Palmer's own form of *via negativa* spirituality, or her "not knowing" and her lack of emotions despite her deep faith.

The first step toward entire sanctification came when Palmer resolved to be a "Bible Christian"[71] no matter what the cost would be. With a prayer of surrender like those of many saints before her, Palmer committed everything she was and had to the will of God. For her this meant a covenant to be a "Bible Christian":

> I never made much progress in the career of faith, until I most solemnly resolved, in the strength of the Lord Jehovah, that I would do every duty, though I might die in the effort. From that hour my course was onward and upward. I also covenanted with God that I would be a Bible Christian, and most carefully seek to know the mind of the spirit, as recorded in the written word, though it might lead to an experience unlike all the world beside. I had often prayed for holiness of heart, before, but do not remember now that holiness, as a blessing in *name*, was on my mind; my highest and all-engrossing desire was to be a Bible Christian.[72]

As Palmer worked through the eight temptations, answering each one with Scripture, she realized that she could trust the promises in the Bible whether she emotionally felt anything or not. As she wrestled with the desire for an emotional manifestation that would prove she had been sanctified, Palmer sensed the Holy Spirit challenge her to believe the written word of God as quickly as she would believe an audible voice from heaven, telling her she was sanctified.[73] The written word of God promised: "I will receive you," therefore, Palmer reasoned, it was her duty and gift to believe this promise and begin to live as if it were true instead of waiting for some outward sign.[74] She agreed with God that she would "lay hold of the Word" in this promise and trust that she had been fully received and fully sanctified. Even if she never felt any

71. Palmer uses the phrase "Bible Christian" to refer to a Christian who has embraced the "way of holiness" as commanded by God in Scripture. See Palmer, *The Way of Holiness*, 43.

72. Wheatley, *Life and Letters*, 36.

73. Ibid., 40.

74. Ibid., 41.

religious emotion for the rest of her life, she wrote, she resolved to walk by faith and "hold on in the death struggle."[75]

In Palmer's book *Faith and Its Effects* her account of the "day of days" focuses primarily on her struggle to relinquish her husband, Walter, as the object of her supreme affections. (This struggle is one of the eight temptations described in her memoirs.) She had already interpreted her two infant sons' deaths as the judgment of God because of what she felt was her idolatrous love for them. Now she began to feel that her deep love for Walter and the oneness that existed between them could be a hindrance to her loving God first and best.[76] The story of Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac was the biblical metaphor that guided Palmer's prayer as she finally gave Walter to God in surrender:

> I could just as readily have said, "Take *life*" as I could have said, "Take friends"; for that which was just as dear, if not dearer, than life, had been required. And when I said, "Take him who is the supreme object of my earthly affections," I, from that moment felt that I was fully set apart for God, and began to say, "Every tie that has bound me to earth is severed." I could now as easily have doubted of my existence as to have doubted that God was the supreme object of my affections.[77]

Thus the day of days was not one in which Palmer finally had the emotional spiritual experience she longed for, but rather one in which she settled the question of the role of emotion and other signs in regard to trusting God for sanctification. It was a day of purification and release, in a sense, from the need for emotional religious experience. It was also a day of transaction between Palmer and God, in which she believed she had finally, irrevocably placed everything in her life on the altar so that no thing could ever again come before God in her life.

As she subsequently began to articulate her experience of "naked trust in the naked word of God" regarding sanctification, Palmer developed a new "shorter way" for others to use in seeking sanctification.

75. Ibid.

76. We cannot help but observe that Palmer was capable of deep and passionate feeling, as expressed toward her husband and children. Perhaps the presence of strong feeling for her family presented too painful a contrast with her seeming absence of emotionalism toward God, contributing to her conviction that her love for her children and Walter were at times idolatrous.

77. Quoted in Oden, *Selected Writings*, 115.

She also articulated what came to be known as her distinctive "altar theology" or "altar covenant," which was foundational to the shorter way. It was not Palmer's desire to create a new theology of sanctification, but rather to help other strugglers trust God's word and begin to act upon it despite their own fluctuating emotions. Palmer believed that she was teaching the same principles that Wesley had taught in regard to sanctification.

The shorter way involves three steps, each of which has its own assumptions about Scripture, faith and the nature of salvation. These steps are entire consecration, faith, and testimony. The warp and woof of the whole process is Palmer's understanding of what holiness is, how it is gained and how it can be lost. For her, holiness is the experience of being entirely devoted to God, of being a living sacrifice on the altar of Christ, of being continuously "washed, cleansed, and renewed after the image of God" as one is ceaselessly presented to God.[78] Using the ancient hermeneutical method of "pearl-stringing" Palmer cites numerous texts from both Old Testament and New Testament in which God's people are commanded to be holy or be sanctified.[79] Of these texts, Hebrews 12:14 is most prominent: "Follow peace with all men, and holiness, without which no man will see the Lord."

At times Palmer goes so far as to give the impression that a professing Christian still may not be ready for heaven and may actually be in danger of hell if he or she has not entered the way of holiness, since "without holiness, no man will see the Lord."[80] The only way to stay holy is to keep everything "on the altar." For in Palmer's altar theology it is the altar that sanctifies the gift. And, true to her Wesleyan, Arminian theological heritage, she believes that the Christian never loses his or her free will, with which continuous decisions are made about keeping on or removing from the altar, that which has previously been consecrated.

As we shall see, the "shorter way" of sanctification is both an event and a process. Though many of her theological progeny have focused on the instantaneous side of the shorter way (having a personal "day of

78. Excerpted in Oden, *Selected Writings*, 189. The text is originally from Palmer, *Entire Devotion to God*, section II.

79. Ibid.

80. White, *Beauty of Holiness*, 133–34. Phoebe quotes Heb 12:14, among other texts.

days," so to speak, to which one could point as the day of one's sanctification), it is already clear from the brief citations of her own descriptions of the shorter way that a daily process of surrender is involved, one which requires all three "steps" on an ongoing basis.[81] Palmer issues repeated admonitions against losing one's holiness, and the need to walk faithfully day by day in order to retain a state of sanctification. Despite Palmer's teaching on the ongoing process of being made holy, this side of her teaching was subsequently minimized, while the three-step, shorter way was emphasized as an instantaneous event by those who followed her. The neglect of focus on the process of the shorter way receives more detailed treatment in chapter four, for it is one of the symptoms of Palmer's theology not having been understood sufficiently in light of her mystical experience.

Palmer's "altar theology," the corollary of her shorter way of sanctification, centers on two concepts: first that the altar sanctifies the gift, and second that Christ himself is the altar. As always, these convictions are based upon Scripture. Palmer's understanding that the altar sanctifies the gift is based upon Matthew 23:19, in which Jesus answers his critics with a quote from Exodus 29:37. The gift is not intrinsically holy, rather the altar of sacrifice is what makes the gift holy.

> It is only by an entire and continual reliance on Christ, that a state of entire sanctification can be retained. The sacrifices under the old dispensation were sanctified by the altar upon which they were laid. Had the offerer resumed the sacrifice, to the degree he resumed it, to that degree it would have ceased to be sanctified; for it was the *altar* that sanctified the gift.[82]

Palmer goes on to argue that Christ is not only the sacrifice for sin, but he is also the altar:

> The altar, thus provided by the conjoint testimony of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, is Christ. His sacrificial death and sufferings are the sinner's plea; the immutable promises of the Lord Jehovah the ground of claim.[83]

81. For more on the reification of the instantaneous side of the shorter way, see Truesdale, "Reification of Sanctification."

82. Excerpted in Oden, *Selected Writings*, 200. Originally found in *Entire Devotion to God*, section XVI.

83. *Way of Holiness*, 43. This is but one of numerous instances in which this claim is made.

Palmer's understanding of Christ as the altar is based upon a particular interpretation of Heb 13:10 in which believers are assured: "We have an altar from which those who officiate in the tent have no right to eat." Following Adam Clarke, Palmer understands the altar in this passage and the rest of Hebrews to be Christ. In Hebrews Christ is all three: the sacrifice, the priest and the altar. This interpretation is consistent not only with Clarke, but also with much of Church tradition since antiquity.[84]

Understanding, then, the foundation of her altar theology, let us consider the three parts of the shorter way of sanctification. The first step of the shorter way is the step of entire consecration, in which the individual takes inventory of every part of his or her life, willfully and with irrevocable commitment placing everything on the "altar" which is Christ himself. Nothing is held back. Romans 12:1–2, in which Paul exhorts believers to present themselves as living sacrifices is the scriptural command for this step. As part of this step the believer also implores God to reveal if there is anything that has not been surrendered. If anything is held back, whether it is a relationship, possessions, or even the sin of doubt, one cannot expect to receive the full blessing of sanctification.[85]

For Palmer, this inventory and prayer has the nature of a legal document such as a last will and testament. In her book *Entire Devotion to God* Palmer includes a sample covenant prayer that can be personalized.[86] More will be said about this covenant prayer in subsequent chapters on mysticism.

The second step of the shorter way is the exercise of faith: willfully trusting the promise of God in Scripture concerning sanctification, regardless of outward signs, emotions, or religious manifestations.[87]

84. Raser, *Phoebe Palmer*, 160. Observe that contemporary NT scholars including Attridge and Lane are in agreement with Palmer's exegesis of the altar in Hebrews. See Attridge, *Epistle to the Hebrews*, 391. Also see Lane, *Hebrews 9–13*, vol. 48, 538–39. "Altar" in Heb 13:10 is a metonymy for sacrifice, according to Lane, with Christ being the perfect and final sacrifice.

85. White, *Beauty of Holiness*, 136–37.

86. Ibid., 247.

87. It is important to note, however, that Palmer expected a holy lifestyle ultimately to manifest itself in those who claim to be sanctified. She minces no words in warning that Christians whose lives do not reflect the indwelling Christ will be held directly accountable by God. Palmer blames hypocritical Christians for giving faith a bad name

This step requires "naked faith in the naked word of God." Since God promises to receive all who fully consecrate themselves to him (2 Cor 6:16—7:1), the believer has no reason to fear being rejected by God. Even if the one seeking holiness is not sure about having confessed all sin and consecrated everything to God, there is no reason to doubt because Phil 3:15 promises that if the Christian thinks incorrectly about something but is still open to God, God will surely reveal and correct the incorrect thinking.[88]

To doubt that one is sanctified after having fully consecrated oneself is to doubt God's word, which is sinful according to Palmer.[89] This doubt can prevent sanctification from taking place. As Charles White notes, this step becomes ambiguous and problematic for some because "There is a subtle shift in the object of faith, so that one confuses trusting the veracity of God with believing something about oneself."[90] Here again, it is possible that the seeming ambiguity is only present or a problem when Palmer's shorter way is reified into a rigid, three-step event that takes place once and is primarily a legal transaction. As will become clear in subsequent chapters, what Palmer is really describing with the limited conceptual framework available to her, is what the contemplative Catholic tradition identifies as a threefold process of negation, purgation, and illumination. The seeming ambiguity of Palmer's shorter way is in fact a distinctly Wesleyan form of *via negativa* spirituality.

The third and final step of the shorter way is that of testimony. Indeed if this step is omitted, argues Palmer, sanctification cannot be retained. John Fletcher, one of Palmer's heroes of faith, reports that he lost the blessing of holiness five times because of failing to testify about it. Palmer begins the section of *Full Salvation* entitled "Publish It, Tell It" with Fletcher's experience, then goes on to describe the power of the Holy Spirit that came upon a camp meeting when a certain minister

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and causing some to "perish in unbelief" because the only Christianity they experienced was the false faith of hypocrites. *Full Salvation*, 76. Palmer also explains that perfection is not in wisdom or knowledge, but in love—to love God with all of one's heart. In this she reflects Wesley's understanding of perfection as the teleological fullness of love of God and neighbor.

88. Ibid., 137–38.

89. White, *Beauty of Holiness*, 139.

90. Ibid., 139.

there finally began to testify to having been sanctified.[91] Several others present who had "lost the blessing" regained it as this man testified to the baptism of the Holy Spirit.[92] Citing Rom 10:9–10, Palmer urges those who have believed in their hearts to also "testify with their mouths" to the truth of what God has done. Palmer follows Wesley in this step, for he also urged Christians to tell others what God has done for them.[93]

Testimony is necessary because the goal of sanctification is complete love of God and neighbor, and central to the expression of that love is the sharing of what God has done. The good news of the Gospel is to be given away, not selfishly kept as a private blessing. No experience of God is meant simply as a private gift. Everything is to have a larger impact upon the world. "God's gifts must be *diffused* or lost," declares Palmer. "And no one enjoying the grace but will testify to the truth of this. A light put under a bushel goes out, and then it neither enlightens ourselves nor others."[94] Testimony, like the other two steps of the shorter way, is an ongoing requirement, a spiritual discipline for the rest of one's life.

Charles White proposes that Palmer "simplified and popularized John Wesley's doctrine of entire sanctification, modifying it in six different ways."[95] These changes led not only to the eventual formation of at least a dozen Holiness denominations or movements, but also to the beginning of what became classical Pentecostal pneumatology, although the non-Pentecostal denominations such as the Church of the Nazarene that point to Palmer for their theological origins have for the most part distanced themselves from the Pentecostal denominations, primarily over the issue of *glossalalia*.[96]

91. Palmer, *Full Salvation*, 60.

92. Ibid., 61–62.

93. White, *Beauty of Holiness*, 139.

94. Palmer, *Full Salvation*, 71.

95. White, "Phoebe Palmer and the Development of Pentecostal Pneumatology," 198.

96. White, *Beauty of Holiness*, 158. Donald Dayton has also published several works treating the relationship of Palmer's theology to the rise of Pentecostalism, including his dissertation which was published as *Theological Roots of Pentecostalism*. Regarding *glossalalia,* Pentecostal denominations regard speaking in tongues as the initial evidence of the baptism of the Holy Spirit, a position eschewed by non-Pentecostal holiness denominations. Interestingly, it is because of the later linkage of the phrase "baptism in the Holy Spirit" with Pentecostalism that non-Pentecostal holiness groups

The six ways in which Palmer adapted Wesley's theology to her setting in nineteenth century American culture are as follows:[97]

Following John Fletcher, Palmer identifies sanctification with the baptism of the Holy Spirit and increasingly in her later years uses the language of "baptism of the Holy Spirit" to describe sanctification. Next, she develops Adam Clarke's focus linking holiness with power. Third, she appears to stress the instantaneous over the gradual aspects of sanctification, again following Clarke. The fourth shift is in the location of sanctification in the believer's journey. Wesley emphasized "going on to perfection," with complete sanctification being the end goal. Palmer presented the shorter way of sanctification as the beginning of the way of holiness, not the goal at the end of the journey. Fifth, Palmer simplified and made more clear to her contemporaries the process of sanctification. With Palmer there were just three, easy to understand steps: entire consecration, faith and testimony. Finally, and perhaps most controversially in her theology, Palmer stresses that one needs no other initial evidence for having been sanctified other than the words of the Bible. Assurance need not be based on having one's heart "strangely warmed" or any other external, subjective manifestation.

It is my conviction that at least some of these six changes were not the intention of the Mother of the holiness movement, nor were they changes made by her. Instead, these so-called deviations from Wesley were theological trends set in motion by Palmer's interpreters, popular writers and preachers in the Methodist tradition. As Raser comments, holiness movement theology came to be shaped more by popular Methodist religious writers who came after Palmer and her contemporaries than by established theologians.[98]

Charles E. White argues that Palmer's altar theology, rather than deviating from or perverting Wesley's understanding of sanctification, is better understood as the logical conclusion of Wesley's doctrine of

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generally prefer the terms "entire sanctification" or "being filled with the Holy Spirit" to the seemingly Pentecostal phrase "baptism in the Holy Spirit." A similar phenomenon is seen among mainstream evangelical Christians who resist using the phrase "born again" because of fundamentalist associations with the term.

97. White, "Phoebe Palmer and the Development of Pentecostal Pneumatology," 198–99.

98. Truesdale, "Reification of Sanctification," 102.

entire sanctification.[99] If, as White suggests, Palmer's theology is not a grand departure from Wesley's after all, at least not as she presented it, and if the epistemological role of mystical experience in the development of Palmer's theology has been swallowed in the "interests of instantaneousness"[100] by subsequent interpreters, it is safe to say that some of Palmer's most important theological contributions have yet to be identified. Not only does the retrieval of Methodism's own mystic bring new light to the study of Methodist theology, spirituality and history, but it opens fruitful dialogue between Methodism, Orthodoxy and Catholicism in the field of ascetical theology.

Before moving on to ecumenical considerations through a closer study of mystical experience and the role it played in Phoebe Palmer's theology, a summary of the crux of the problem is helpful. For those within holiness traditions, the most pressing existential problem has to do with the reification of Palmer's experience of entire sanctification.

Reification and A New Trajectory

Drawing from the insights of Alfred North Whitehead's "fallacy of misplaced concreteness," Al Truesdale explains that reification is the fallacy of attributing "objective substantiality to an idea or abstraction. It is the practical equivalent of hypostatize."[101] Just as in philosophy a reification fails to base thought upon concrete experience, in theology a reification of experience fails to account for the existential realities of the persons involved. In the reification of experience, in other words, one person's experience (that of Wesley or Palmer, in this case) becomes normative as *the* holy experience that is to be expected by others regardless of their personalities, life settings, spiritual traditions and so on.

According to Truesdale, Palmer's altar theology and shorter way were actually her way of breaking through what had become the reification of Wesley's experience of sanctification.[102] "Although the reification of experience had numerous contributing elements," states Truesdale,

99. White, "Phoebe Palmer and the Development of Pentecostal Pneumatology," 204.

100. Truesdale, "Reification of Sanctification," 102.

101. Ibid., 96 n. 2.

102. Ibid., 97.

"its center had principally to do with temporality, and secondarily with dispositional and behavioral considerations."[103]

While Wesley probably did not expect every individual to have precisely the same emotional experience he had, he did teach that sanctification as a distinct second work of grace was normative, and that some kind of affective, inner "assurance" was normative. Yet the revivalist preachers who elicited such frustration from young Palmer, who could not seem to feel what she was supposed to feel, without realizing it had reified Wesley's experience. Their message left Palmer and others with the impression that not only should a believer undergo a distinct second work of grace subsequent to justification, he or she should expect the same kind of emotional experience that Wesley had and should expect a similar time frame in which to experience sanctification. The one seeking sanctification should be prepared to wait and pray and seek God until the "inner witness" finally comes.

Unable to experience the "norm" of having her heart strangely warmed and other expected manifestations, Palmer struggled mightily to believe she could be sanctified. Her "day of days" was in fact, to use Truesdale's framework, her day of deliverance from the reification of Wesley's experience of sanctification.

Yet ironically the same phenomenon happened with certain influential figures who followed, interpreted and popularized Palmer's teaching after her death. Rather than treating her experience (including the absence of emotion and the somewhat legalistic, contractual nature of her covenant prayer) as the unique way in which Palmer found sanctification, with the principles of her shorter way interpreted accordingly, holiness writers and speakers tended to present Palmer's experience as the literal, normative way to enter into sanctification. "Naked faith in the naked word of God" became a statement for a simple, uncritical hermeneutic of Scripture instead of a description of the profound angst of "the cloud of unknowing" that Palmer experienced. The daily process of surrender and oneness with Christ of which Palmer wrote, was swallowed by instantaneousness in the interpretation of Palmer's three steps and altar theology. The shorter way became a method for certainty among its adherents, but in the process of reification something essential was lost: the role of individual personality, life history, religious

103. Ibid., 97 n. 3.

tradition and numinous experience in the believer's existential experience of sanctification. Because of the reification of Palmer's experience, her actual lived experience of God was misunderstood and in some ways, forgotten.

Truesdale discusses five major exemplars of reification in the nineteenth century holiness movement, including Henry Clay Morrison (1857–1942, founder of Asbury Theological Seminary), prominent evangelist Beverly Carradine (1848–1919), Martin Wells Knapp (1835–1901, co-founder of the Pilgrim Holiness Church), founder of the Pentecostal Publishing Company, L.L. Pickett (1859–1920), and William Baxter Godbey (1833–1920), well-known evangelist and author of more than 200 books. Truesdale argues that even though these men followed a different trajectory than the original teachings of the Mother of the holiness movement, their trajectory became the norm for the holiness movement. More moderate, tempered and informed voices such as that of Randolph S. Foster[104] failed to win the day.

Although at the time of her death Palmer was probably the most influential Methodist woman of her century, the author of eighteen books and numerous articles, and had enjoyed a preaching career equal to that of Charles Finney, within a few decades her name virtually disappeared from Methodist memory. While her teaching continued to spread and be interpreted in new ways, Palmer's name, life and experience became detached from her mystical theology. A variety of circumstances led to her becoming anonymous, including her own habit of not signing articles she wrote (a common practice in her day), her books gradually going out of print and the *Guide to Holiness*, the widely-circulated paper she had edited for more than a decade, ceasing publication.[105]

Charles E. Jones suggests that "the rapid disappearance of her name from common discourse served rather to strengthen her hold on the movement she had helped shape."[106] Palmer had reinvented a

104. Foster (1820–1903) seemed to understand the impact of personality and experience upon the subjective experience of sanctification, justification and other aspects of the spiritual life. Foster was professor of systematic theology and served as president of Garrett Biblical Institute, president of Drew Theological Seminary and was a bishop of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South. Truesdale, "Reification of Sanctification," 99.

105. C. E. Jones, "Posthumous Pilgrimage of Phoebe Palmer," 203–4.

106. Ibid., 204.

"laicized form of Methodist ministry" and in the process had offered a "formula" for assurance of sanctification," notes Jones, betraying his own Wesleyan interpretation of her work as formulaic and simplistic, the kind of interpretation that has essentially kept Palmer as a footnote in Methodist history.[107]

While she did not set out to change the structure of ministry in the Methodist church, Palmer's revival preaching, Tuesday meetings, popular theology and altar services became a new paradigm for ministry, normative for the holiness denominations that would be founded by those following her teaching.[108]

The new holiness churches, impacted by the model of camp meeting ministry, were theologically shaped by the paradigm for sanctification which had been given through Palmer. Preaching and hymnody urged congregants to be sanctified, and the steps that were to be followed were the three steps of Palmer's shorter way. Even the architecture began to reflect Palmer's shorter way and altar theology, with the mourner's bench becoming the altar rail where kneelers prayed, placing their "all on the altar."[109]

In summary, the posthumous anonymity of Palmer as well as the anti-mystical theological bias of her interpreters effectively removed the mystical foundation of Palmer's theology. Her apophatic mysticism was neither acknowledged nor seen as a major hermeneutical key in understanding her altar theology. In assigning Palmer to the margins of official Methodist history and denying the mysticism that gave birth to her powerful ministry and theology, Methodist theologians and historians have missed one of the greatest gifts the Methodist tradition has to offer the church universal. To put it another way, dismissing Palmer from the "important" and "real" history and theology of Methodism, is something like dismissing Catherine of Siena or Hildegard von Bingen from the "real" story of Catholicism. It is time for Phoebe Palmer to be restored to her rightful place as one of the great saints and mystics in the history of the church.

107. Ibid.
108. Ibid., 210.
109. Ibid., 206.