

The reception of and reaction to the Holiness Movement within Primitive Methodism in the 19th century

Extracted from a longer lecture given at the Nazarene College Didsbury in December 2019

“The blessed gift of venerating love ... given to many humble craftsmen since the world began ... a lingering afterglow from the time of Wesley ... in carrying a divine message to the poor” (George Eliot in Adam Bede, 1859)

We celebrated the 200th anniversary of George Eliot's (aka Mary Ann Evans) birth in November last year. She was a keen and critical observer in the mid years of the 19th century of the effects of the Evangelical Revivals, of the Wesleys and then the 2nd Evangelical Revival of the early 19th century as its legacy, not least in what she saw as the watering down and institutionalisation of the initial fire of revival in clerical structures and attitudes. Weber in a different context had described such developments as the “bureaucratisation of charisma”, which effected first the Wesleyan Methodists and then the Primitives and other branches who tried to keep warm the dying embers of revivalism. This paper will seek to examine the place of holiness teaching and practice within British Methodisms of the 19th century as they sought to keep alive or revive the doctrines of Christian Perfection or Scriptural Holiness espoused by the Wesleys and John Fletcher in the earlier century. We shall describe the work of proponents and opponents of the holiness tradition and pose some questions as to why such tensions were exhibited.

Because of my particular role as Research Director of the Englesea Brook Chapel and Museum of Primitive Methodism, I've chosen to give rather more weight to that strand within Methodism than that traditionally reserved for the Wesleyan branch. I also highlight the transatlantic nature of the developments in the 19th century and the North American influence on the religious trends of these nations, for good or ill, the legacies of which are continuing to be felt, not least on the renaissance of Wesleyan holiness teaching and practice in the 20th and 21st centuries, in different forms. It is therefore a particular delight to share in this conference and to be able to re-assess this topic in an interdisciplinary and interdenominational context.

But an important caveat at this point. We can learn as much from contemporary literature and other forms of culture of religious attitudes as we can from the writings of Methodists themselves. In that same novel George Eliot writes:

“Methodism may mean nothing more than low pitched gables up dingy streets, sleek grocers, sponging preachers and hypocritical jargon – elements which

are regarded as an exhaustive analysis of Methodism in many fashionable quarters". (quoted Hempton:1)

Holiness in Primitive Methodism

The Methodists who were converted in the waves of revivalism in the first two decades of the century adopted the name of Primitive, claiming Wesleyan origins for the term used by the founder in Chester just before he died. Camp Meeting Methodists might have gone the way of the later Tent Methodists established 200 years ago (see John Lander's article on this). But it was the camp meetings which survived as the engine of revival and provided the model for the holiness gatherings later in the century. With this exception however. The early PM camp meetings were outside while the later holiness conventions in Britain retreated in the main to large public spaces under cover and indoors. (Bebbington, 1989:165)

Owen Chadwick's magisterial if not faintly patronising judgement on the reception of Wesley's doctrine of entire sanctification was that "some PM preachers pressed not only instantaneous conversion but instantaneous holiness upon their simple people". (Chadwick: 1:389). Early preachers like John Petty and Johnny (Praying) Oxtoby testified to entire sanctification as part of their spiritual development. Entire sanctification was both progressive and instantaneous in their preaching and practice. The memory of the fiery revivalist preaching of William Bramwell in Yorkshire and Nottinghamshire who preached, with his female assistant Ann Cutler, "a present and full salvation" and taught "through the exercise of faith in bringing what some call burning love ... a warm glowing feeling in the heart". Some of his converts left the less-than-warmed Wesleyan Connexion and joined the PMs in the early days. A full, free and present salvation became a catch phrase for later Primitive Methodism (Hatcher: 273)

But Hugh Bourne, its co-founder, whilst welcoming the results of such exuberant preaching, expressed caution in using the doctrine in sermons, stressing rather the ongoing quest for holiness (PMM 1837:199). There was a decline in the sanctification-orientated revivalist spirit of Primitive Methodism of the 1820s, as it too became more connexional and less mission-focussed, in what Lysons characterises as moving from revivalism to recreation (Lysons: 81-82)

There was a different emphasis after 1850, possibly in reflections on the work of William Arthur who was a great influence in reviving interest in holiness. Leading the field in this was Abraham Worsnop whose *Entire Sanctification Distinct from Justification and Attainable before Death* went into a third edition by 1872, drawing heavily on Wesley and Clarke. He wrote this work as a companion to his *Scripture*

Questions for Bible Classes, an indication of how and where holiness teaching was most likely to be transmitted. The reviewer of this work wrote in the PMM 1859:

“On the subject of entire sanctification there is, as may be expected, from the diversity in human minds, the influence of education, the power of prejudice, etc, etc, a considerable diversity of sentiment among those who believe in the doctrine, a doctrine which can never be overthrown while the truth of God remains. It is a TRUTH “If we walk with the Lord. And, we ask, Is it not equally true that we may be filled with all the fulness of God?”

He goes on to make the case for this being an authentically Wesleyan approach drawing on the “records of Divine truth”. In the review in the PMM, the book is commended as a useful manual which deserves the writer’s best wishes, “to promote what is essential to the true dignity of the Church, the purity of her members”. (PMM 1859:623-624).

The 1860s sees a flurry of interest in holiness writing reported in the PMMs. An interesting article in 1866 by one of its ministers, Mark Graves. He was an agricultural labourer and local preacher in the 1861 census who became itinerant in 1862. In his article he pulls no punches in putting before his readers what he considers “the greatest need of the Church .. is complete consecration. It is for want of complete consecration that her efforts are so puny and that she makes so little advancement”. The church, he argues, needs a larger baptism of the spirit. Unless they are born again, they invoke the names of Wesley and Fletcher and William Clowes in vain, pointing to the emphasis on wealth and missions and revivals as costly diversions if not founded on complete consecration.

“If the church were fully consecrated, what a work would she accomplish for souls and for God! What millions would be saved! On our hearts, our talents, our property, our words and actions must be written ‘Holiness unto the Lord’”. Entire sanctification is entire holiness. His heroes of the faith, Bramwell, Clowes, Oxtoby and Smith were all men distinguished for holiness.

Descending into a holy rant worthy only of a Primitive Methodist, he concludes:

In an age of public houses increasing, sabbath desecration and light trashy and infidel literature flooding the land and poisoning the minds of thousands ... O then to counteract these evils, defeat the devil, and bring the world to Christ, let there be entire consecration. [Then] the entire church would be ready for prayer, benevolence and labour .. and the world would unite in one glorious anthem “Hallelujah! The Lord God omnipotent reigneth!” (PMM 1866:154ff)

I would like to have said that as a result many were convinced by his arguments, It is difficult to know. But this sounds to be the voice of one crying in the wilderness as the records show that in the same year he ended his itinerancy of five years in four different stations in Yorkshire and Lincolnshire and returned to being a lay member in his home town of Selby as a linen grocer and auctioneer.

Yet interest remained in the PMM in the form of a series of articles on holiness by another minister, Alfred Clayton, serving in Loughborough, who concludes that “holiness is a complete blessing. It is entire. It is the destruction of all sin, outward and inward. He argues for the doctrine as complete and instantaneous and at any time rather than progressive. His brand of PM theology offers a “present, free and full salvation”. (PMM 1868: 75-77), His obituary records that he held “a lofty idea of the Christian life” which does rather imply that his contemporaries did not share his zeal for holiness!

Further articles appear with increasing regularity in the 1870s, on Personal Holiness (PMM 1873) and Personal Consecration (PMM 1874), the latter by the Connexional Editor who lashes out at fellow Christians: there was an

“Alarming conformity of professed Christians to the luxurious refinements of modern society which implies a retrogression from that heightened spirituality which was conspicuous in many of our Christian predecessors. In the spread of Popery and its baby-offspring Anglican ritualism, in the advance of infidelity which is patronized and inculcated largely by the educated and is percolating through the various strata of society and already is intensively spread in the great centres of industry and population among the working classes, they discover ominous indications of a threatened retribution for spiritual declension ... the result of a lifeless Christianity and intellectual contempt for an irrational formalism ... it behoves us to make our religion a living reality.” The answer is for believers “to be realized in the higher life of Christ”. At the beginning of a New Year he urges all PMs to make this a year for “personal consecration”.

Lest we fall into the trap of assuming a wave of holiness teaching swept the church, there is by way of balance an article in the same volume by Rev David Steele warning readers of the dangers of a fanaticism exhibited by those who “run mad on the subject of holiness”. Such fanatical pretenders to Christian Perfection as Wesley himself encountered in Maxfield and others are still to be found:

“In view of the possibility of such an unlovely character coming into existence under the preaching of entire sanctification, would it not be wise to abstain

from inculcating this high doctrine lying as it does on the borders of an infatuation so dangerous?" (PMM 1874:513-517)

This may well have been a result of the impending publication of Asa Mahan's *Christian Perfection* with an introduction by Rev George Warner who is perhaps the greatest holiness influence in Primitive Methodism in the late 19th century.

George Warner was converted in 1848 at a Wesleyan Chapel near Worcester. When he moved back home, he joined the Primitive Methodists at Napton. He was soon on the plan and called to ministry by the Banbury circuit in 1851.

A hint of George's style comes through the description of his work at Malmesbury in Kendall; '...as late as 1854, Malmesbury at last yielded to the vigorous assaults of George Warner, and in 1858 was made a circuit.'

Warner was the first entirely connexionally supported evangelist, a benefactor named T. Jones having given £100 to inaugurate his career as a holiness evangelist. George had a vision to unite the call to salvation with the challenge of holiness. Speaking of the relationship of faith to full salvation George said, '***It is like a man under a shower-bath. He pulls the chain and down comes the water***'.

In his introduction to Mahan's *Christian Perfection* he wrote that he had read it every year since he first acquired a copy 20 years earlier (1855). He commended it as the most comprehensive work setting forth "the scriptural character of this great grace". He points out that many had been brought into the enjoyment of full salvation in the earlier part of the Methodist Revival. So what was needed was "Holiness! ... Holiness repaired! Holiness offered! Holiness attainable! Holiness a present duty – a present privilege - a present enjoyment. He urged the progress and completeness of its wondrous theme. (Mahan: v – vii) . That the book appeared on the PM Book Store list in conjunction with the National Publishing Association for the Promotion of Holiness along with books by Pearsall Smith and Boardman indicates that PMs were being willingly and officially introduced to holiness teaching in the 1870s.

His contemporary Thomas Waugh was typical in denouncing questionable amusements such as gambling and dancing. A spirit-filled church, as he put it, is 'world-emptied'. The principle of avoiding popular forms of entertainment was widespread in evangelicalism as a whole, but holiness zealots could apply it particularly sternly. George Warner, the leading holiness preacher among the Primitive Methodists, always regarded simple musical services as dangerous in the same way as Wesleyans regarded Moody and Sankey gatherings.

Perhaps the most challenging of the campaigns against worldliness was the one against smoking. *The King's Highway* carried in 1882 an article from an American counterpart urging the abandonment of tobacco and Warner frequently denounced its use. The tobacco habit and appetite were alike inconsistent with holiness, he insisted; he himself had renounced the habit and God had destroyed the appetite. In several of Warner's missions smokers abandoned their pipes, one local preacher giving it up during the singing of 'My all is on the altar'.

Sir Henry Thompson performed surgery on George and remarked on the state of his knees. George told him that night after night on his knees in prayer and reading the scriptures had produced a particularly painful problem.

After he superannuated in 1891, George continued to work as a special agent at Nottingham, Bristol, Barnoldswick and Settle, where he died.

A biography was subsequently published, written by J. Stephenson entitled *The Man of Faith and Fire or the Life and Work of the Rev. G Warner*. It paid a tribute to the one who had stemmed the decline in the holiness tradition which was in the 1860s in an advanced state of decay., with PM ministers preaching against the Methodist doctrine of entire sanctification.

Rev I E Page writes in his obituary; 'He was a typical Primitive Methodist, a fervid, happy saint with glory in his soul. He had a passion for saving men, and for leading believers into Christ's full salvation, and God used him to save many – 'Gypsy' Smith (in 1876) among others.'

Conclusion

Holiness by Faith in Jesus,
Not by effort of thine own;
Sin`s dominion crushed and broken
By the power of grace alone.
God`s own Holiness within thee,
His own beauty on thy brow;
This shall be thy Pilgrim brightness,
This thy blessed portion Now.

This hymn of Francis Ridley Havergal at the conclusion of the Christian (Holiness) Convention held in Bradford in 1889 brought together Christians of different traditions seeking "a deepening of spiritual life .. which distinctly vindicates the oneness of the Church of Christ, and the blessed unity of the Spirit of God, through whom believers become united, as branches of the same vine". And yet none of the

speakers came from the Methodist branches who, seemingly, were unable themselves to join together in this new spirit of ecumenism. Another 40 years were to elapse before such Methodist unity could be displayed in a new united church. Holiness was not the glue to bring the divided parts of Methodism together just yet.

In retrospect, it seems that though the PMs were more likely to be holiness people and the Wesleyans more ambivalent to this aspect of their Wesleyan legacy, it was the Wesleyans who stole the Emperor's clothes at the end of the 19th century. As Hempton reminds us: "sanctification was no respecter of gender or race" (Hempton:139-140). In the British context he might have added and class. Bebbington however argues that the holiness emphasis was more likely to be received by the lower classes (though the Keswick movement does rather undermine this) and that "scriptural holiness became the concern of a limited and relatively proletarian sector within 20th century Methodism." More research needs to be done perhaps on the background of those recruited to Cliff College.

The decline of the class meeting in Methodism is indicative that the fire had gone out of the revivalist elements of both Wesleyans and Primitive Methodism, though there were attempts to recover the tradition and practice. But the espousal of holiness teaching alongside the renewal of home missions, in gospel cars touring the villages spreading the Joyful News as well as the Central Hall building programme of the last two decades of the Victorian era, meant that all was not lost to those who more vigorously expressed this in their preaching and practice, notably the Salvation Army. Methodism was poorly represented in the elite of the holiness movement which was hijacked by the Anglicans, as Methodism aligned itself more with the Free Church movement and put more emotional energy into self-preservation than a commitment to ecumenism, (except in missions as evidenced by the Edinburgh conference of 1910), throwing itself behind the crusade to reform the nation led by Hugh Price Hughes in the moral purity aspect borne out of holiness teaching. Perhaps this was a reaction to those Methodists who had "drunk of the Oberlin well and found the parlor perfectionism of fellow Methodists such as Phoebe Palmer sentimental and lacking in ethical vigor" (Kostlevy:27) Did, as Thompson posits, the moral fervour of Nonconformity underpinned by this holiness emphasis "smack too much of self-righteousness and hypocrisy" as Eliot too had observed with the eye of the novelist? (Thompson:15) Or was it the basis for a renewal of both evangelicalism and pentecostalism in the 20th century, polarised around those for and against the Social Gospel which gained momentum in the first two decades.

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