

## Book Notes

### **A Century of Holiness Theology: The Doctrine of Entire Sanctification in the Church of the Nazarene 1905 to 2004**

**Mark R. Quanstrom**

2004. 232 pp., paper, \$29.99

Kansas City, Missouri: Beacon Hill Press

On one level, Quanstrom's book on holiness theology reads like a detective novel. He begins with the crime scene ("by the end of the [twentieth] century entire sanctification would not be taught so much as an instantaneous change. . .but rather more as an unremarkable event in the process of growth, if at all"), and he then works his way back, recounting much history, to offer an explanation as to how this event occurred.

Originally the doctrine of entire sanctification in the Church of the Nazarene was taught as a second, distinct work of grace, subsequent to regeneration, that was received instantaneously by faith. In this conception, contrary to contemporary objections, revisionings and misunderstandings, the Nazarenes actually followed fairly closely the doctrine of John Wesley himself. Declension, however, set in rather quickly as holiness folk began not only to distinguish between sin properly (a willful violation of a known law of God) and improperly (any violation willful or not) speaking—in a way that even Wesley had done—but they went beyond the Father of Methodism by offering what was touted as a "more realistic" understanding of the nature and extent of sin. Here the possibility of heart cleansing was modified "in light of the subsequent 'failures,' of the sanctified."

An accomplice in the death of the historic teaching on Christian perfection was the gradualist reading of Wesley's doctrine of salvation that arose, oddly enough, in his name during the twentieth century. Salvation at its highest reaches was understood to be an incremental process, fostered through the means of grace, that ever advanced by degrees. In this newfangled view (tied in with the theological fad of reading Wesley through an Eastern Orthodox paradigm) purity was equated with maturity in a way that many holiness leaders of the nineteenth century specifically cautioned against. As Quanstrom points out, J.A. Wood, author of the holiness classic, *Perfect Love*, believed

“one could never mature into purity.” Such wisdom, however, has apparently been lost.

Another culprit in this cast of characters included, interestingly enough, some of the nineteenth-century holiness leaders themselves especially as they tied entire sanctification to Pentecost. Quanstrom views this development as an “American addition to Wesley’s doctrine coming primarily from outside the Wesleyan tradition via Charles G. Finney and New School Presbyterianism.” Whether one agrees with his analysis or not, the consequence of this move was to foster increasing confusion in terms of the scriptural (and Wesley’s own) teaching on the new birth and entire sanctification. That is, Pentecost does not represent the perfection of the church but its beginning. And if the disciples of Christ were entirely sanctified at Pentecost, then this can only mean that they were real, true, proper Scriptural Christians, regenerated and initially sanctified by the Spirit, prior to Pentecost—a view that Wesley specifically rejected. Give such confusion, when many holiness folk in the late twentieth century thought they were explicating John Wesley’s teaching on entire sanctification, they were actually describing his views on the new birth! And if the grace of regeneration is not properly understood, how will one ever understand entire sanctification?

As he recounts the story of holiness theology late into the twentieth century, Quanstrom painfully but accurately observes: “there was no substantial agreement in the [Nazarene] denomination over what it meant to be “entirely sanctified.” And if the recent conference on “Revisioning Holiness” sponsored by the Nazarenes is any clue, then we can only conclude that the present state of the doctrine among some holiness folk is indeed in considerable flux. Quanstrom’s perceptive, courageous and well written book helps us to understand just why this is so.

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## **John Wesley’s Moral Theology: The Quest for God and Goodness**

**D. Stephen Long**

*2005. 257 pp., paper, \$34.00*

*Nashville: Abingdon Press*

Bringing together a strong background in both theology and philosophy, Stephen Long, associate professor of systematic theology at Garrett Theological Seminary, has produced a book in Wesley studies that will likely be discussed for years to come. His basic thesis, weaved throughout the work with numerous subtle and fresh expressions, is that a significant shift had occurred during the Age of Reason (the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries) in which God and the good were separated. At first the cultural elites of this

period, philosophers and educators among them, were content with having “the good” become a more general category than the term “God” with the result that the latter was virtually subsumed under the former. That is, leading moral philosophers of the eighteenth century, Locke and Kant among them, attempted to ground morality on “self-evident axioms akin to geometry.” In time this patchwork arrangement was discarded by others, and the full humanistic thrust of these subsequent thinkers became evident, as even the language of “the good” dropped out to be replaced by “the rights” that (self-referential) people enjoy. In short, an autonomous individual having rights is a far different starting point than a community responding to the evocative power of God ever calling them through the means of grace.

Long expresses this shift in yet another way by distinguishing moral theology, which resonates with a medieval, sacramental and participatory approach to reality, from ethics, which is predicated on the divorce between God and the good. Interestingly enough, the cash value of this distinction in the twentieth century issued in numerous attempts by Methodist theologians and ethicists to substantiate the ongoing relevance of theology by a vigorous (and often self-righteous) appeal to a “grand social reality.” Seminaries and colleges, for instance, quickly re-titled their course offerings in order to demonstrate the new perspective until the oddly-drawn course that was more about the twentieth century than the eighteenth finally emerged, namely, John Wesley’s *Theology for Today*. Indeed, some contemporary Methodist theologians actually went on record by declaring that they had virtually no interest in John Wesley’s theology until they perceived how they could relate his theological reflections to the social vision and analyses of Marxism. The problem with this move, then as now, was that it subsumed the story of the church, and the gospel (and that of Methodism as well) under some other discourse where a “politics of division” continually held sway.

In light of these developments, Long calls for a return to a “metaphysics of participation,” reflected in Wesley’s theology, in which happiness and holiness can once again become the goal of humanity, in which the moral life depends on “friendship with God” through the inculcation of the theological virtues, and in which the beatitude that arises from the vision of God enjoyed by the ecclesial community is selflessly shared with others. However, if the story of the church is indeed a more general narrative than that of “the good” as Long suggests (“the church is that social reality than which nothing more universal or more public can be conceived”), then such a view must be held with great care and in deep humility lest those “outside” the church be treated as the “other” and, in the worst instances, as “enemies.” In other words, though Long has made the case for a theologically informed ethic, what he calls moral theology, he nevertheless has not laid out a detailed, positive program as to how this can occur and what consequences it will hold for

those beyond the church. To be sure, the pages of church history (just ask the Jewish community) are filled with the results of those who intended to do the will of God (*Deus vult!*) and serve the church, but in doing so left a record of persecution and remarkably un-Christ-like behavior. Simply put, Long needs to articulate a number of checks and balances (perhaps in a future book) that will accompany his worthy theological vision.

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### **Methodist Theology Today**

**Clive Marsh, Brian Beck, Angela Shier-Jones, and Helen Wareing, eds.**

2004. 256 pp., paper, \$21.95

New York London: Continuum

This recent edited work which purports to be about Methodist theology today for the most part simply embraces the British Methodist scene which has not been noted for its theologians. Indeed a hesitancy, perhaps even an awkwardness, quickly emerges among the contributors with respect to serious theological inquiry lest all of this be considered, as they put it, “too high-lutin.” And in terms of the basic question, “What is so special about Methodism?” the editors glibly reply, “nothing.”

The nothingness, the unsettling emptiness, of this oddly executed book is evident in its frank recognition that the use of Wesley texts was “diluted during the twentieth century” as theological fads, many of them coming from the political left, ruled the day. In making a distinction between the interpretation of the *written Word* (the Bible) and the *living Word* (the contemporary judgment of the leaders of the British Methodist Conference), one contributor thereby feels empowered to effectively set aside the authority of Scripture (actually the authority of God, according to N.T. Wright) for the sake of new, and in her judgment, better understandings—especially in terms of the highly controversial matter of human sexuality. Indeed, the theological drift that has characterized British Methodism for much of the twentieth century (and now into the twenty-first) is so painfully evident here especially as it affirmed: “There is no single common or dominant theological understanding of the nature of scriptural authority at work in British Methodism.”

What fills the void here, what is actually authoritative or normative throughout, is the judgment of the leaders of British Methodism itself, a judgment that gives every indication that it has been culturally accommodated in significant ways. Since Scripture is “not the only place of revelation” and since revelation itself is deemed to be ongoing (“God continues to reveal”), the essays naturally invite the kind of systemic critique that emerges from a

significant reading of the writings of Karl Barth and Reinhold Niebuhr, who both cautioned against the heady narcotic of mistaking fleeting cultural forms, all-too-human products, for revelation, the very Word of God. As one contributor put it in a shaft of refreshing honesty: “Methodism’s openness to current trends of thought. . . may be interpreted as showing a tendency to ‘be confirmed to this world.’” Most readers will agree.

Having lost the generous balance between personal and social ethics so typical of the work of John Wesley, current British Methodist leaders, as amply demonstrated in this volume, have decided to become “less centered on evangelism, and the pilgrimage of individual Christians,” with the result that Methodist membership (Is anyone surprised by this?) continues to decline in Britain. And though this British “Great Reversal,” similar to its North American counterpart, is chalked up to ongoing tensions between the evangelical and catholic elements in the movement, the situation is actually far more complicated than this observation allows. By way of analogy, when the voting was taking place in 1969 on the possible reunion of British Methodism with Anglicanism, it was a successful coalition of Anglo-Catholics and Evangelicals within the Church of England which actually defeated this measure. Neither group wanted to be a part of the doctrinal lassitude and the theological skittishness that British Methodism would likely bring to the enterprise. Indeed, the minority of evangelicals within British Methodism today (a persecuted lot to be sure) have far more in common with the Anglo-Catholics of the Church of England than they do with many of the Methodists of their own communions.

But what is particularly sad, even poignant, about the British Methodist situation is that while on the one hand its leaders do indeed acknowledge that “the Methodist Church may cease to exist as a separate Church entity during the twenty-first century (though not because the Anglican church wants to unite with it!), on the other hand, these very same leaders refuse to take what steps would actually begin to address this downward spiral. Indeed, they doggedly insist on staying the course in British Methodism and on affirming “its own *peculiar* identity and understanding of ministry.” But this is far too much peculiarity in the face of a hurting world that needs to hear the gospel, genuine good news.

What is so special about the book, *Methodist Theology Today*? Nothing.