

# ARTICLES

## HOLINESS AND SOCIAL CONCERN : HURDLES TO BE CLEARED

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It is a privilege and pleasure to share in a *Festschrift*, published in honor of W. Curry Mavis by Asbury Theological Seminary, an institution with which he has been vitally associated for nearly three decades. My associations with Dr. Mavis reach back beyond his career as a Seminary teacher, and have continued actively through the years. He has sought with success to relate the insights of the field with which I have also been associated to the needs of the Christian ministry. In this pursuit, he has been a faithful steward of our common heritage. It has been a joy to work with him in workshops for ministers, as well as to join hands with him in other professional capacities. W. Curry Mavis is one whom we delight to honor, professionally as well as personally.

The turning of attention within the holiness movement to a greater emphasis upon social concern follows a similar trend that has prevailed for some time among evangelicals as a whole. Carl F. H. Henry spearheaded this trend in 1974 with the publication of his book, *The Uneasy Conscience of Modern Fundamentalism*. Henry rebuked conservatives for not having spoken out against such social evils as war, racism, and economic injustice. Billy Graham wrote in the 1960 *Christian Century* series, "How My Mind Has Changed,"

My belief in the social implications of the gospel has deepened and broadened . . . the evangelist must not hedge on social issues . . . . Social sins, after all, are merely a large-scale projection of individual sins and need to be repented of by the offending segment of society.<sup>1</sup>  
The president of the National Association of Evangelicals wrote in 1967,

Evangelicalism must not be content to stop with an insistence on personal holiness, but we must go on to demonstrate Christian concern for our neighbor.<sup>2</sup>

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In 1968, Millard Erickson, writing in *The New Evangelical Theology*, concludes that “new evangelicals believe that the Bible teaches that there are social implications of the gospel, and social responsibilities of the Christian Church.”<sup>3</sup> Last year Donald Bloesch wrote that “the new evangelicalism is also distinguished by its recognition of the realities of regeneration and sanctification . . . . Their intention is to uphold both personal morality and social holiness (John Wesley).”<sup>4</sup>

Evangelicals have been credited with appropriating a good deal of the old liberal social action vocabulary.<sup>5</sup> Even more interesting, a writer in *Christian Century*, after noting National Council of Churches emphasis turning from activism to divine grace, and reading NAE comment upon social righteousness, concluded that the two bodies are passing each other going in opposite directions.<sup>6</sup>

David Moberg writes in his 1972 book, *The Great Reversal*,

There was a time when evangelicals had a balanced position that gave proper attention to both evangelism and social concern, but a great reversal early in this century led to a lopsided emphasis upon evangelism and omission of most aspects of social involvement.<sup>7</sup>

Moberg deprecates the separation of evangelism and social concern as a false dichotomy and pleads for a biblical balance. He concludes that evangelicals are beginning to move toward the forefront of social welfare and social reform with a truly biblical perspective that views social action in a balanced relationship to evangelistic witnessing.<sup>8</sup>

The holiness movement earlier turned its attention to ethics in 1962 with the publication of a paper by Harold Kuhn.<sup>9</sup> However, his essay deals primarily with individual ethics, and closes with the declaration that God is available to build “a type of strong saint who can weather the growing ferocity of the moral storm of even this day.” He does call for those who advocate the life of Christian sanctity to “come up with some constructive strategy for meeting” the questions of race, economic life, and the sexual revolution “at the high level of keen ethical sensitiveness and courageous moral responsibility.”

Why has there been such a lag in the turning of attention from an almost exclusive devotion to personal salvation and holy living to social issues? Paul Carter blames fundamentalism for causing the pendulum to swing toward individualism.<sup>10</sup> But long before fundamentalism was born, the holiness movement had already made the personal attainment of Christian perfection the common goal of its constituents. Timothy Smith believes that this emphasis upon perfection was a mighty social force “when joined with compassion for poor and needy sinners and a

rebirth of millennial expectation.”<sup>11</sup> Whatever the social by-products of the holiness movement may have been, the formal doctrinal statements of the General Holiness Assembly of 1885<sup>12</sup> and the second General Assembly held sixteen years later<sup>13</sup> refer only to the personal aspects of holiness experience and life. The 350 pages of stenographically recorded testimonies and sermons from the Second Assembly are similarly person-centered.

In 1904, John Paul, in an article considering hindrances to the progress of the holiness movement, cited “lack of touch with humanity and its practical needs.”<sup>14</sup> It is said of Joseph H. Smith, whose holiness theology may be considered as representative of his time, that

He did not anticipate the Christianizing of society or an earthly Utopia through the teaching of the gospel, but rather the intensifying of the spirit of antichrist until the second advent of Christ who would forcibly put down all forms of spiritual, moral and social evil . . . .<sup>15</sup>

This focus upon the personal was not only written into the principles and preaching of the holiness movement, but inheres in the term “holiness,” as it does also in “victorious life.” Both terms refer to the conquest of sin. Henry Bett’s comment is pertinent:

It is unfortunate that holiness was thought of so largely, and especially by the opponents and critics of Wesley’s doctrine, in terms of sinlessness, for the quality of holiness is not negative but positive.<sup>16</sup>

Wesley preserved a positive emphasis upon love in both individual and social expressions by defining Christian perfection as “loving God with all our heart, and our neighbor as ourselves.”<sup>17</sup>

If the holiness movement is to transcend a traditional privatism and is to incorporate social concern in a broader way than before, there are several basic questions to be faced, representing diverse viewpoints that now exist or that may emerge within its constituency. Four of these questions, all of which are essentially theological in nature, will be considered.

The first question: **How shall we give expression to social concern?** Two broad directions appear: social welfare and social action. There is general agreement that the church should continue to provide welfare to the needy, but some disagreement as to whether this should be a means to evangelism or an end in itself. Moberg believes that welfare in the hands of the church is witness, and can communicate the love of God. However, he finds that most church-related agencies have discontinued welfare as “evangelistic bait” in gospel missions, migrant worker programs and minority ethnic groups.<sup>18</sup>

There is sharper disagreement in the area of social action, which aims to correct the social structures and processes of society that create the problems.

Helping the victims of social problems and corporate evil is not the same as eliminating the sources of their misery . . . . Reforms in society are essential in order to correct dehumanizing inequities, eliminate injustice, and eradicate all violations of basic human rights.<sup>19</sup>

Moberg contends that it is not even possible to be neutral on social issues, since “neutrality supports the side of whoever wins in the struggle for power.”<sup>20</sup> Rather, he maintains, complete commitment to Jesus Christ carries revolutionary implications affecting one’s political and social involvements. Klaas Runia deplors the neglect of the political sphere by evangelicals. “It is getting time that we develop a Christian political ethos . . . must we support the state in every war, or are there limits of support?”<sup>21</sup>

Evangelical leaders are divided on the nature of socio-political duty, as was evident at the World Congress on Evangelism. Some evangelicals see the new society tied to the Lord’s return. Maxey Jarman commented at the Congress:

A careful study of history must convince us not only of the danger of political power with all of its corruption, but also the futility of trying to change human nature through legislation or political influence.<sup>22</sup>

Carl Henry concluded that there are “significant divisions within the evangelical community touching Christian responsibility at some of the major frontiers of contemporary concern.”<sup>23</sup> Those divisions, insofar as they prevail in the holiness movement, may be expected to impede the implementation of social concern.

A second question: **How far can we go with Christian love?** Wesley’s definition was simple: “Scripture perfection is pure love filling the heart, and governing all the words and actions. If your idea includes anything more or anything else, it is not scriptural.”<sup>24</sup> But Wesley complicated that simple definition by his qualifications, so that efforts to apply it have produced diversity, even among holiness people.

For example, although some evangelical bodies are traditional peace churches, other groups are antipacifist, and express “veiled advocacy of preventive war.”<sup>25</sup> Moberg cites studies that indicate theological conservatives to be more hawkish in their attitudes toward war, more approving of harsh punishment, and more opposed to restrictions

on the sale of guns<sup>26</sup> than liberals. Wesley made short shrift of the war question:

Who can reconcile war, I will not say to religion, but to any degree of reason or common sense? . . . What an amazing way of deciding controversies!<sup>27</sup>

While some views diverge on the specific application of Christian love, others seem to call in question the adequacy of love to deal with the harsh realities of power in the world. Kuhn refers to the social ethics of Reinhold Niebuhr and calls upon the holiness movement for “some hard-headed thinking” that will recognize “the ambiguous quality of human relationships.” What adjustments must the Christian make, Kuhn asks, as he tries to take a vital part in the life of the world? And how does the wholly sanctified Christian practice both perfect love and justice?<sup>28</sup> In thus calling the attention of the holiness movement to “the problematic character of much of our finite life,” Kuhn is underscoring this second question, How far can we go with love?

As we confront the issues of social concern, a third question is likely to arise: **How shall we reconcile perfect love with the idea of participation in today’s corporate sin?** Wesley conceived of sin in terms of personal choice:

Nothing is sin, strictly speaking, but a voluntary transgression of a known law of God. Therefore, every voluntary breach of the law of love is sin; and nothing else if we speak properly.<sup>29</sup>

He seems not to have grasped or accepted the idea that every Christian participates in the collective sins of his time. J. Brazier Green notes that the social conscience which emerged after Wesley’s time may be attributed to the moral sensitiveness that Wesley so largely stimulated, but he adds:

It is extraordinary that Wesley, so insistent upon the social character of religion . . . should have failed to recognize the ramifications of sin in the life and thought of collective society . . . . Yet there is no evidence that he recognized that the most holy and blameless character shares the life of the state, and with it, the moral responsibility of its collective evils.<sup>30</sup>

Moberg emphasizes the involvement of Christians in corporate sin:

Awareness of collective sin has grown considerably in recent decades. It has become clear that individual persons who are honest, kind, even God-fearing, may be implicated deeply in evil through their basic employment or their cooptation as citizens into national events over which they have but little direct control.<sup>31</sup>

The concept has also appeared in holiness literature:

It is shocking to realize that, as a citizen of this land, I am responsible for the enslavement of Eastern Europe's millions; I must bear a share of the responsibility for the debacle in China; I must accept responsibility for interracial violence . . . .<sup>32</sup>

Assimilation of the idea of corporate sin into holiness thought may require some realignment of present concepts.

The final question is suggested by Cattell's study comparing the similarities and differences that exist between the holiness and the Victorious Life movements.<sup>33</sup> **Can the holiness movement accept the modifications that may be needed to join these two groups in common cause against evil at the social level?**

With Keswick there appears to be a growing social concern. In 1969, the Archbishop of York challenged the annual convention in a keynote address to pray "for the unity of the church and for the renewal of Christian faith and morals in our country." Referring to the tragedies of war, race hatred, and "the pit of drugs and drink," he added, "And oh, how many Christians are blind on this precise issue, and they have no social sense. God forgive us."<sup>34</sup>

Two of the issues cited by Cattell that tend to separate the two groups are their respective definitions of sin and the place of crisis experience.

Although Wesley emphasized the voluntary character of sin, he recognized two possibilities in defining the term: "Are they not sinners? Explain the term one way, and I say, yes; another, and I say, no."<sup>35</sup> Cattell comments,

Wesley restricted (sin) to voluntary evil, whereas Keswick includes all want of conformity to the will of God. We shall probably have to admit that Scripture can be found for both usages and that Wesley's position is more an expedient than a scriptural necessity.<sup>36</sup>

Cattell concedes that when scripture language is adhered to, they seem to be saying the same thing, and argues persuasively for a closer relationship between the two groups.

Experience, both past and contemporary, bespeaks caution in adopting any stereotype for identifying the diverse operations of the Holy Spirit. Charles Wesley had a frankly gradualist view of sanctification, and John himself was ambivalent for a period of years concerning the instantaneous requirement. He eventually accepted it, although he acknowledged that "the point is not determined, at least not in express terms, in any part of the oracles of God."<sup>37</sup>

There have long been earnest seekers after Christian perfection in Roman Catholic, Keswick and many other groups. The Franciscan priest, Fr. Piette, states in his monumental biography of John Wesley,

Methodist writers have drawn parallels between their own organization and that anxious search for spiritual perfection found in the religious orders of the Catholic church.<sup>38</sup>

He goes on to point out that John Wesley has been compared to St. Benedict, St. Dominic, St. Francis, Ignatius of Loyola and other Catholic saints. Sangster has correctly discerned that "the cardinal features of sanctity are alike whenever we meet it, and the major elements of method are alike as well. Similarity to Jesus binds all the saints together."<sup>39</sup>

Thirty-five years ago, Henry Bett pointed out the need for a dynamic conception of Wesleyan holiness, and others have repeated the observation.<sup>40</sup> Wesley himself realized the tendency for the doctrine to become static, and dealt with the problem in the 1770 conference:

Does not talking without proper caution, if a justified or sanctified state, tend to mislead men; almost naturally leading them to trust in what was done in one moment? Whereas we are every moment pleasing or displeasing to God . . . .<sup>41</sup>

This "every moment" concept appears in Wesley's writing as early as 1747<sup>42</sup> and often thereafter. The expression was elaborated by Sangster,<sup>43</sup> and is finding increasing acceptance in holiness ranks. Elsewhere I have written,

The moment-to-moment concept is an enlarged view of holy living that both embodies and transcends instantaneous and gradual. Its focus is upon the ever-present now, rather than upon historical event or eschatological goal.<sup>44</sup>

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