

ARTICLES

The Wesleyan Message Today

Harvey J. S. Blaney*

The spontaneous lay holiness revival of the nineteenth century was the immediate ancestor of the modern holiness movement. Creeds and dogmas were few. Personal experience was the goal, the Bible was the guide, evangelism was the method. The theological emphasis was essentially Wesleyan-Arminian, although the doctrine of sanctification had a variety of interpretations. The momentum of the revival was the call of faith and the illumination of the Word of God by the Spirit. It was marked by dynamic evangelism and enthusiastic theology. Periodicals were founded which publicized camp meetings and evangelistic campaigns and made available vivid testimonies of earnest seekers who had become happy finders.

Books were published to give the central emphasis more permanent form and to serve as protection against distortions. Such volumes as *Perfect Love* by J. A. Wood, *Principles of the Interior or Hidden Life* by T. C. Upham, *Christian Purity* by R. S. Foster, *Holiness and Power* by A. M. Hills, and *Love Enthroned* by Daniel Steele, are recognized as holiness classics. Supported by such writers, including John Wesley, Dr. H. O. Wiley has given the doctrine formal expression in his *Christian Theology*:

Entire sanctification is that act of God, subsequent to regeneration, by which believers are made free from original sin, or depravity, and brought into a state of entire devotement to God, and the holy obedience of love made perfect. It is

* Professor of Religion and Chairman of the Graduate Division of Theology in Eastern Nazarene College, Wollaston, Massachusetts. Dr. Blaney was Visiting Professor of Doctrine and Philosophy of Religion at Asbury Theological Seminary during the Winter and Spring Quarters of the academic year of 1967-1968.

wrought by the baptism with the Holy Spirit, and comprehends in one experience the cleansing of the heart from sin and the abiding, indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit, empowering the believer for life and service (Vol. II, pp. 466-467).

The modern Wesleyan movement remains committed to this doctrinal statement. It borders on the miraculous that this twofold message has been sustained in active context for so long a time. The danger of drifting and failing by default is always present, but the supporters of this movement and their educational institutions show few signs of forsaking their heritage or denying their doctrine.

The earlier movement was in part a reaction against Modernism, and, at the same time, a mediating position between the extremes of Calvinistic predestination as preached by Jonathan Edwards and New England Unitarianism. Today Wesleyanism faces on the one hand a vacuum created by peripheral liberal theologies which have flared briefly and then subsided. On the other hand there is the resurgence of evangelicalism, with its strong emphasis upon the work of the Holy Spirit in the life of both the individual and the church. Wesleyans must become involved more actively in the challenge which each of these movements presents. They must help to fill the vacuum with a viable doctrine which speaks to the needs of our day. And, as an integral part of the evangelical movement, they have their own distinctive emphasis to make concerning the nature of sin and the destruction of the carnal nature by the baptism of the Holy Spirit.

Wesleyanism is just beginning to break away from a convergent type of thinking which tends to "package and label" doctrine and the results it is expected to produce. The conviction is growing that the time has arrived when the doctrine of entire sanctification needs to be re-thought and re-expressed in order for the Wesleyan movement to perpetuate itself effectively. There is danger that the present momentous era, with its knowledge explosion in every area of research and activity, will pass without receiving up-to-date contributions to its thought in terms of the distinctives of Wesleyan theology.

The doctrine of entire sanctification is well established upon the teachings of Scripture and personal Christian experience. Its roots are now deep in history. But its flowering in each generation will only come by diligent effort. Theology must be cultivated to be kept alive. The implications of modern psychological and sociological studies for the understanding of man, the carnal nature, and the life of holiness are staggering. The scientific revolution and space age technology have developed new frames of reference and relationships which challenge the

older holiness idiom and the honored analogies for the understanding of Christian truth. Perhaps of equal significance is the valid claim that the explosion in biblical knowledge is as great as the scientific knowledge explosion. The challenge and the possibilities should be obvious. The answer is not to shout louder, but to work harder. To borrow an analogy from music: While the score of a composition remains constant, every performance before a new audience demands the most adequate instruments, freshly tuned, and a distinctively rendered performance. Recordings cannot for very long take the place of a master conductor with a live orchestra.

Relevant Wesleyanism calls for an open and trustful atmosphere and for men—ministers and teachers—who will grapple with the personal and social problems of our day in the light of the biblical promise of redemption from sin and the promise of the Kingdom of God on earth. It calls for more and better biblical holiness preachers and writers—for more holiness literature and the formulation of fresh theological concepts in the thought forms of the rising generation—for improvement in the content of books and periodical literature which will speak to the problems of laymen in this highly technical and industrial age. This is in the spirit of Jesus, of the Wesleys, and of our more recent holiness forebears. The tendency of religious movements is to reach the zenith of their perfection, remain balanced on the pinnacle for a period, and then decline. But Wesleyanism can be sustained and revived and carried to new levels of excellence by the charting of new ways in a new generation, by meaningfully communicating the gospel of full salvation to people who “know not Joseph,” and by envisioning a new people of God who will arise as a remnant to inherit the promises made to previous generations.

Christian experience encompasses far more than the two crises of justification and sanctification, two vital contacts with God, the effects of which one strives to maintain. Christian experience is a personal relationship with God which has a beginning but need have no ending. It is a continuum, a walk with God through the Spirit, a going-on to perfection, a walk in the light which has been punctuated by the two great crises in the settling of the sin problem. The crises are the avenues of entrance, the taking of the vows, the ratifying of the covenant, the wedding, if you will, which re-establishes one’s lost relationship with God on a permanent basis. The sanctified life is the daily perpetuation of the crisis of sanctification.

Experience expressed in these terms can be understood through a deeper knowledge of the developing person and his environment, as well as of the working of the Holy Spirit. Consecration and sanctification, as

they constitute the second crisis experience, are related to the carnal man, but in a deep sense of the realities of the Christian life they must also be related to the sanctified man. The "unknown bundle" of initial commitment will gradually unfold; with the attending temptations and desires of an easier way, the consecration of new chapters in one's life—whether of failure or of fortune—and the answering ministration of the Holy Spirit, may be as meaningful to the maturing Christian as his crisis experience of sanctification. Consecration of the unknown future must be actualized by consecration of the ever-present now, and repeated anointings of the Spirit must make real the promise of His abiding presence. Sanctification is entire when it encompasses the whole man throughout the total extent of his life as a Christian.

One's Christian experience is also involved in his social relationships. It was relatively simple to be a Christian a generation or so ago when much of life could be lived in comparative seclusion from the world at large. Today Christians are necessarily involved in the culture of their society. Withdrawal ignores inherent problems and is seldom possible. The prayer of Jesus that His followers be not taken from the world but be kept from its evil has awesome meaning in our day. How does a man live as a Christian in an organization or profession when he cannot determine its ethical code? How does he demonstrate his Christian commitment as a member of a labor union, as a politician, in an office or factory, or on a university campus? What does it mean today to keep the Sabbath holy? What is the Christian answer to war? How does one love his neighbor—all of his neighbors—as himself? These questions make up life situations which demand understanding as well as answers.

During the past century the liberal twins of Source and Form Criticism have decimated the authority of the Bible and thrown doubt upon the historical portions of both the Old and New Testaments, casting the biblical material into evolutionary molds. Wesleyans have "cursed the darkness" which resulted, but it is time now to light some fresh candles of biblical truth, not in fear or defensiveness, but in faith and confidence. Others cannot light them for us. But much can be learned methodologically from all branches of modern biblical scholarship for "rightly handling the word of truth" (II Tim. 2:15, RSV). Biblical studies such as literary and historical research, textual and linguistic criticism and archaeological investigations can serve to make the scriptures take on new life and meaning. Liberal scholarship, as well as evangelicalism, challenges Wesleyans to be more diligent in their "homework" and to give more positive support for the doctrines they hold as authoritative.

The earlier holiness movement flourished on biblical proof texts, which are now known to be best used in combination, as sermon starters,

or for illustration and identification of a truth; seldom do they suffice of themselves for all that has been read into them in popular use. They are like nuggets which have risen to the surface, having great beauty and value, yet suggestive of what lies beneath the surface. The profoundest truths must be mined from the depths. "Be ye holy, for I am holy" (Lev. 11:44; I Pet. 1:15), like a vein of sacred ore, underlies all scriptural truth in exhaustless supply, waiting to be worked upon and cast into relevant commentary. The Bible, the Old Testament as well as the New, is replete with the holiness of God, the sinfulness of man, and the redeeming grace of a divine Savior. These fundamental truths are found there in symbol and story, in sermon and song, proclaimed by poet and prophet, priest and preacher. The truth is there, sufficient for life and doctrine, waiting fresh development into a vital theology for this age and culture, and as practical applications of the Gospel of Christ.

This paper in no wise advocates a change in the accepted Wesleyan doctrinal position. It does suggest both the demand for and the availability of a more adequate understanding and presentation of what an experience of entire sanctification means, resulting hopefully in a new evangelism. The persuasion of preaching will be fortified with the persuasion of biblical truth. The preacher and the theologian will be combined. There will be a diminishing tendency to seek for a standardized type of experience. The Holy Spirit will be given freedom to surprise and challenge God's people to new achievements—to do in them and among them the unexpected, the new, the exceedingly abundant, the miraculous. Then will any presumptuous faith be humbled before the mysteries of the Kingdom of God. Then will those who are honored to be called holiness people bow before their Christ like full heads of ripened grain; they will rejoice that a new harvest has sprung from the permanent soil.