From the Archives: Frances Havergal’s Letter to Hannah Whitall Smith about her Sanctification Experience

One of the most used collections in the Archives and Special Collections of B.L. Fisher Library are the Papers of Hannah Whitall Smith (Feb. 7, 1832 – May 1, 1911). This Quaker woman and her husband, Robert Pearsall Smith, experienced sanctification and were influenced by the teachings of William E. Boardman. As a result, they became leaders in the early Holiness Movement in the United States. She and her husband carried the teachings to England, where they were instrumental in forming the Higher Life Movement. Hannah became a major speaker and writer on holiness with one of her books, *The Christian’s Secret to a Happy Life* becoming a holiness classic found all over the world.

But Hannah’s interests carried her into many different arenas and connected her with women active in social movements in the U.S. and the United Kingdom. She worked closely with Frances Willard of the Women’s Christian Temperance Union and corresponded with women like Susan B. Anthony, Clara Barton, Frances Power Cobbe, and Josephine Butler. Hannah also became a strong supporter of the women’s suffrage movement and spoke out for women’s rights. She valued her experience of sanctification, but also recognized the inherent dangers the experience carried. She collected materials in her “Fanaticism Files” on groups that expressed interest in and an experience of sanctification, but frequently left orthodoxy. Hannah wrote, “My first introduction to fanaticism, if I leave out all that I got from the Quakers to start with, which was a good deal, came through the Methodist doctrine of entire sanctification. That doctrine has been one of the greatest blessings of my life, but it has also introduced me into an emotional region where common sense has no chance, and where everything goes by feelings and voices and impressions.”2
It is this almost scientific-like interest in the experience of sanctification that led Robert Pearsall Smith to ask Frances Havergal about her own personal experience. Frances Ridley Havergal (Dec. 14, 1836-June 3, 1879) was born into the family of an Anglican clergyman and except for a short time studying and traveling in Germany and Switzerland; she remained at home, frequently in ill health. She did not marry or have children and she died at the young age of 42 years old. She wrote
religious poetry, hymns, tracts, and some literature for children, most of which was published after her death by her sisters. But as her letter reveals, she was influenced by the holiness teachings of Robert Pearsall Smith and Hannah Whitall Smith. Because of her early death, and the fact that much of her work was published after her death, her letter to Hannah might be the most complete and full accounting of her sanctification experience. While the name of Frances Havergal is not a household name today, her most famous hymn became a powerful anthem in both holiness and missionary circles, a hymn still widely sung and loved today:

Take my life and let it be consecrated, Lord, to Thee.
Take my moments and my days; let them flow in ceaseless praise.
Take my hands, and let them move at the impulse of thy love.
Take my feet, and let them be swift and beautiful for thee.

Take my voice, and let me sing always, only, for my King.
Take my lips, and let them be filled with messages from thee.
Take my silver and my gold; not a mite would I withhold.
Take my intellect, and use every power as thou shalt choose.

Take my will, and make it thine; it shall be no longer mine.
Take my heart, it is thine own; it shall be thy royal throne.
Take my love, my Lord, I pour at thy feet its treasure store.
Take myself, and I will be ever, only, all for thee.
The following is an image of the pages of Frances Havergal's moving account of her spiritual experience written to Hannah Whitall Smith in 1875. The image is followed by a transcription of the page to make it easier to read.
43. Brickwood Avenue, Lexington.
(From Frances Ridley Havergal, author of "This is the Vine I have taken.") Oct 12, 1875

Dear Mrs. Smith,

I trust this note finds you well and happy, for your dear husband's kind note to me, which it shall be through you, in case he is now well enough to be leant on with letters. It refers to me the first of all things to put more care on the Lord, and to shun all, one to leave one's friends or their matters in the hands of hardest of all to trust them about. His own affairs. And so while it is long since I had the least glimpse of care about anything to do with myself, I have, until quite lately, failed to learn the other two lessons, i.e., the public has made use of you (i.e. both of you, friends) in that part of this cause of which you are the champions; in that the failure I teach me the lesson of how I have been seeing and using over the prejudice & opposition & false witnesses, & how I have been mourning because so many who did have been helping me 'themselves' apparently the Lord's own work! And how I have wanted to explain & speak my mind!
43 Briarwood Avenue, Leamington
Oct. 18, 1875

Dear Mrs. Smith

I just want to send a line of thanks for your dear husband’s kind note to me, but it shall be through you, in case he is not well enough to be tended with letters. It seems to me the first and easiest lesson to cast one’s own care on the Lord, but a harder one to leave one’s friends and their matters in His hands, and hardest of all to trust Him about His own affairs! And so, while it is long since I had the least ripple of care about anything to do with myself, I have until quite lately, failed to learn the other two lessons, and the Master has made use of you (i.e. both of you, I mean) and that part of His cause of which you are the champions, to show me the failure and teach me the lessons! Oh, how I have been vexing and chafing over the prejudice and opposition and false witness and how I have been mourning because so many who should have been helping were hindering (apparently) the Lord’s own work! And how I have wanted to explode and speak my mind!
Well, it is all over now. The kindly silence of Mrs. E. D. W. has shown me a more excellent way, and I think, there have been few foolish and painful.

It was right to leave your affairs and His affairs as entirely belonging to Him in every way. Oh, how thankful for this peace of silence and grief, so to you, for I believe the absence of it is gradually a saving, consolatory, witnessing for the truth of God to no distance of yourselves could possibly do. Just as if He would not vindicate His own witnesses! And just as if the Enemy could prevail against the truth! Satan so glad! He has taught me at last. To trust Him during all this trial, sir. I did not know there was such a gap in my armor.

One word must have at once resulted from Mrs. E. D. W.’s silence. I suppose thousands more prayers went up for him then, if he had been kept in health, when I heard of it. I really felt inclined to congratulate him! For I knew how the hearts of God’s people would be turned to pray for him. And I knew a little too, of how tenderly precious the patient.
Well it is all over now- the saintly silence of R.P.S. and H.W.S. has shown me a more excellent way, and at last I have seen how foolish and sinful it was to leave your affairs and His affairs as entirely and restfully to Him as my own. Oh, I am so thankful for this grace of silence given to you, for I believe the eloquence of its is gradually and surely resounding and witnessing for the truth of God as no defense of yourselves could possibly do. Just as if He would not vindicate His own witnesses! And just as if the Enemy could prevail against His truth! I am so glad He has taught me at last to trust Him entirely in all this matter- I did not know there was such a gap in my armour.

One good must have at once resulted from Mr. Smith's illness- I suppose thousands more prayers went up for him than if he had been kept in health- when I heard of it I really felt inclined to congratulate him! For I knew how the hearts of God's people would be stirred up to pray for him. And I knew a little too, of how tenderly gracious the Master
...
Himself would be to him, and what praise he would be sure to have to give for this unexpected “calling apart.” For myself, I don’t know how to thank God enough for my own illness, it is a retrospect of unmingled praise. I cannot imagine why He is so very good to me, having no mysteries in His dealings with me, but letting me see a marvelous array of wonderfully wise reasons why He did just as He did with me, and why it was just at that time. From the very day I trusted myself wholly to Him, He has always let me see thus clearly in everything. I hardly know how to express, but I think you will understand me if I say that through continually testing my trust in a singular variety of ways, He never yet (these two years) seems to have tried it so that I shall be conscious of any strain upon it; I entrusted it to Him, and He so keeps it, that in every test however severe it has been as if He almost changed the faith into my sight while the testing lasted. I want to tell every one who shrinks from illness and pain that
they really need "fear no evil." I am pretty well now, but not at all strong. I feel well somehow, think it. If I live, I shall be - I was by no means strong before my illness, but I am considerably below my former level, a very little either too big or something. 

I have been delighting in thinking that we can exact the miracle of the lesser disguises as to our work. That, in these, they can receive a few words from many thousands, multiply our hours, may, one minute's work of the wise, to the value of months or years of effort of labour. And even supposing one could not do anything at all again on earth, one might well acquiesce in a lifetime of passive, filling in the grand service of eternity, for the master's rest above.

You asked me a year ago to tell you whether I had been for any length of time consecrated before realizing union with Jesus in words to that effect. I could not answer because I was uncertain. I
they really need “fear no evil.”

I am pretty well now, but not at all strong, and I do not somehow think it likely I ever shall be. I was by no means strong before my illness, but I am considerably below my former level, a very little eater talking or walking knocks me up for days. I have been delighting in thinking that He can re-enact the miracle of the loaves and fishes as to our work- that His blessings can make a few words feed many thousands and multiple one hour’s way, one minute’s work, if He will to the value of weeks or years of effort of labor. And even supposing one could not do anything at all again on earth, one might well acquiesce in a lifetime of passive molding and meetening for the proud service of eternity- for the Master’s use above.

You asked me more than a year ago to tell you “whether I had been for any length of time consecrated before realizing union with Jesus” or words to that effect. I could not answer then because I was taken ill. I
...throughout. For some 2 or 3 years, I had been more conscious to follow fully, and practically give more of the love and power and strength to Christ, but conviction as a definite transaction had never been brought before me. I did not know the real meaning of my own words, "full and glad assurance" of what "deliverance from sin" meant, I had no notion. I had been a long, long time learning to realize justification, and latterly had gone on from that to entering into the company of those awaking doctrine of God's sovereign grace in election and grace of perseverance. I found this platform worked for time happily and fully among others. I received that the would break our wish, having been very conscious of propersine teacher. The more that it would...
think not. For some 2 or 3 years I had been more desirous to “follow fully” and had practically given more and more of love and time and strength to Christ, but consecration as a “definite transaction” had never been brought before me. I did not know the real meaning of my own words “full and glad surrender” and of what “deliverance from sin” might mean. I had no notion. I had been a long, long time learning to realize justification and latterly had gone on from that to entering into the comforting and praise awakening doctrines of God’s sovereign grace in election and “final perseverance” and from this platform I worked far more happily and successfully among others. I wondered what He would teach me next, having been very conscious of progressive teaching.

Then came what Mr. Smith told me he calls “conviction for holiness” some weeks neither dissatisfaction or craving for I hardly knew what, then three days of seeing what I wanted and tremendous turmoil of soul about it. Then-just
one sentence in a letter from H.
"Therefore, for conscious the there
is instant, conscious v instant, ye
sinner.- you unconscious in the
cloak of Christ, goes on cleaning
and during, meaning of returning to me. It
really works at all! I saw everything
at once, just as you see a whole
landscape in one flash, where before
you saw nothing! Everything which
I have read or seen since turned there
at once - conversion, definite, total
reunion. Then v there! Trust, equal,
definite v entire, second a matter
of course! the definite purpose to vi
no more because the precious blood
could v would go on cleaning, the
instant, vision, as clear as daylight,
that, every scrap of care was to be
fall on them, v every shred of
unbelief renounced for ever. That
He meant all He said, that no
commands were impossible, no
promises unattainable - all this
seemed simultaneous! And no human
reading had anything whatever to
do with it; it was all new to me.
one sentence in a letter from Mr. Wrenford3 - “For conscious sin there is instant confession and instant forgiveness— for unconscious sin the blood of Christ cleanseth, i.e. goes on cleansing”! That was the message of deliverance to me! I really received as if I saw everything at once, just as you see a whole landscape in one flash where before you saw nothing! Everything which I have read or seen since seemed there at once— consecration, definite, total, rapturous— then and there! Trust equally definite and entire, seemed a matter of course! The definite purpose to “sin no more” because the precious blood could and would go on cleansing, the instant vision, as clear as daylight, that every scrap of care was to be cast on Him, and every shred of unbelief renounced for ever— that He meant all He said, that no commands were impossible, no promises unattainable— all this seemed simultaneous! And no human teaching had anything whatever to do with it— it was all new to me,
so what could it have been but the
Spirit himself teaching me! It was
just till weeks after that. I first
read anything on the subject and
then I found it all in print. I am
so exceedingly thankful that He taught
me thus—thus. I have not the regret
of having heard before accepting. I
having hesitated to receive the full
salvation, I delayed my surrender.

He sent the power with the
first word of definite deliverance
which had reached my ear at once.
So don't you think I have every cause
to praise! Others tell me of having
read books or been to Conferences,
I'
known all about it, ever so long;
it then being taught to receive the
teaching line by line, gradually,
getting hold of it a little bit at a
time; but to me it was as if He
spread out more treasure into my life
at once than I have had time even
to count yet! It is a thing

Page Seven of the Havergal Letter (Papers of Hannah Whitall Smith)
so what could it have been but the Spirit Himself teaching me!

It was not till weeks after that I first read anything on the subject, and then I found it all in print! I am so exceedingly thankful that He taught me this— that I have not the regret of having heard before accepting— of having hesitated to receive the full salvation and delayed my surrender and trust. He sent the power with the first word of definite deliverance, which had reached my ear or eye— so don’t you think I have extra cause for praise! Others tell me of having read books and been to Conferences, and “known all about it ever so long” and then being taught to receive the teaching line by line, gradually getting hold of it a little bit at a time; but to me it was as if He poured out more treasure into my lap at once than I have had time even to count yet! It is a strange contrast to all His previous teaching of me, which was peculiarly gradual. I
cannot tell when to state any conversion.
There were various times when I felt that He had been working in my heart, but I have been to no meeting, nor even in contact with any teacher, except hearing Mr. Smith at Newbury on Sunday, June 14th, 1874. I wonder whether this has not been a coincidence? But that, in what I say or write, I may express myself more freely than I should probably do if I had been hearing a great many addresses in it, it is too difficult to avoid unconsciousness in even copying reproducing the words of those speeches and one had been declining. In my time now the idea that I should have been hearing at Brighton or Oxford if I had been able to go. Nevertheless, if she did open the way for me to go, I should most thankfully embrace the opportunity of further help through human channels. I should not have inferred such a lesson on you, but that you express a wish to renew. Yours in heartfelt love.

Page Eight of the Havergal Letter (Papers of Hannah Whitall Smith)
cannot tell when to date my conversion!

It is rather curious how all along He has been keeping me isolated. I have hardly read anything about it. I have been to no meeting, nor come in contact with any teacher, except meeting Mr. Smith at Leamington and hearing that one address of yours at Mildmay (July/74). I wonder whether this is that I may not echo phraseology? But that in what I say or write, I may express myself more freshly than I should probably do if I had been hearing a great many addresses— it would be so difficult to avoid unconsciously or even consciously reproducing the words and form of ideas which one had been drinking in. For I know He is teaching me the same things which I should have been learning at Brighton and Oxford if I had been able to go. Nevertheless, if He did open the way for me to go, I should not thankfully embrace the opportunity of further help through human channels. I should not have inflicted such a screed on you, but that you expressed a wish to know.

Yours in heartfelt love,

Frances R. Havergal

The archives of the B.L. Fisher library are open to researchers and works to promote research in the history of Methodism and the Wesleyan-Holiness movement. Images, such as these, provide one vital way to bring history to life. Preservation of such material is often time consuming and costly, but are essential to helping fulfill Asbury Theological Seminary’s mission. If you are interested in donating items of historic significance to the archives of the B.L. Fisher Library, or in donating funds to help purchase or process significant collections, please contact the archivist at archives@asburyseminary.edu.
End Notes

1 All images used courtesy of the Archives of the B.L. Fisher Library of Asbury Theological Seminary who own all copyrights to these digital images. Please contact them directly if interested in obtaining permission to reuse these images.

2 Hannah Whitall Smith, from her introduction to the Overcomers and Anna Spafford (chapter six) in Religious Fanaticism: Extracts from the Papers of Hannah Whitall Smith, edited with an introduction by Ray Strachey, published by Faber & Gwyer Limited (1928), page 203.

3 Mr Wrenford refers to Rev. John Tinson Wrenford (1825-1904), a prolific Anglican writer and clergyman, who formed a close bond with Frances Havergal. She sent him the first copy of her hymn “Take my life and let it be consecrated, Lord, to Thee” in manuscript form as soon as it was written. He then helped publicize this hymn through his ministry.