THE BEAUTY OF HOLINESS:
THE CAREER AND INFLUENCE OF PHOEBE PALMER

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In January of 1857 the editors of a national magazine published a portrait of an attractive young woman. Being honest men, they were forced to admit that their engraving was "not a perfect picture of the original: that is, she is not now so youthful and her features are not so artistically formed." They hastened to add, however, that the woman was actually more intelligent than she appeared in the picture.¹

Phoebe Palmer probably was not offended at their comments. She was friendly with the editors who had published her portrait, and shared their Wesleyan heritage of plain-speaking. Anyway, physical beauty was unimportant to her: what mattered was the beauty of the soul. Mrs. Palmer believed that only one thing could make the soul beautiful: holiness. She spoke of the "beauty of ... holiness" which empowered one to live a well-balanced or "symmetrical" life.²

Mrs. Palmer's life demonstrated how holiness could give a life both symmetry and power. The symmetry of her life is shown by her wide range of interests. She was a theologian, revivalist, feminist, and humanitarian. The power of her life is revealed in the significant contributions she made to American life in these four areas.

Phoebe Palmer was born in New York City in 1807 and died there in 1874. Her father had been converted in England under John Wesley's preaching, and set up a staunch Methodist home when he emigrated to America. Phoebe embraced her parents' Methodist faith as a child, and remained true to it all her life. In 1827 she married Walter Clarke Palmer, a physician, and a lay leader in the Methodist Episcopal Church.³

The turning point in Mrs. Palmer's life came at nine o'clock on the evening of July 26, 1837, when she experienced "entire sanctification." Three of her children had died in infancy. As she grieved over her loss, Phoebe Palmer became convinced that God had taken her children because she had loved them too much and because she was spending too much time with them. She resolved to resign everything she held dear to God,

¹Guide to Holiness 31, (1858): 2. (Hereafter the Guide to Holiness will be referred to as GTH.)
³GTH 66 (1874): 42-43; Richard Wheatley, The Life and Letters of Mrs. Phoebe Palmer (New York: W. C. Palmer, Jr., 1876, pp. 13-17. Wheatley reproduces sections of Mrs. Palmer's diary and letters. When these are cited they will appear as Diary, (date), in Wheatley, (pages), or Phoebe Palmer to (recipient), (date), in Wheatley, (pages).
promising that she would never murmur at any step of obedience he required. She also resolved that the time she would have spent with her children would henceforth be dedicated to the Lord’s service. She thought of her commitment as the “living sacrifice” God required, and became convinced that God had accepted her offering. She then realized that what had happened to her was the entire sanctification which her Methodist heritage had taught her to expect. 4

The remaining thirty-seven years of her life would see the implications of that evening worked out as she devoted herself entirely to God. She began her career as a theologian by penning religious verse, then branched out to write articles and books. She got her start as a revivalist by filling in for her husband at a class-meeting, and eventually crossed the continent and the Atlantic to preach the good news. She started speaking at women’s prayer meetings and went on to produce a full-scale defense of the ministry of women. From distributing tracts in poor neighborhoods, she moved on to the establishment of one of the nation’s first settlement houses. During this time she also managed to bear and raise three other children all of whom went into professional Christian service.

Although Phoebe Palmer did not think of herself as a theologian, the seventeen books she published and the Guide to Holiness, which she edited from 1864 to 1874, set forth her theological ideas. Some male Methodist leaders refused to take her seriously as a theologian, but to the bishops, professors, and editors who came to weekly meetings in her home, to the thirty-seven thousand who subscribed to her magazine, and to the hundreds of thousands who read her books, she was an important teacher of theological truth. 5

As a theologian Phoebe Palmer simplified and popularized John Wesley’s doctrine of entire sanctification, modifying it in six different ways. First, she followed John Fletcher in his identification of entire sanctification with the baptism of the Holy Spirit. Second, she developed Adam Clarke’s suggestion and linked holiness with power. Third, like Clarke, she stressed the instantaneous elements of sanctification to the exclusion of the gradual. Fourth, again following Clarke, she taught that entire sanctification is not really the goal of the Christian life, but rather its beginning. Fifth, through her “altar theology” she reduced the attainment of sanctification to a simple three-stage process of entire consecration, faith,

5GTH 29 (1856): 155; GTH 57 (1870): 186; GTH 82 (1882): 164.
and testimony. Sixth, she held that one needed no evidence other than the biblical text to be assured of entire sanctification. In her day Methodists, Baptists, Presbyterians, Congregationalists, and Anglicans accepted her ideas, and later her thought gave theological direction to the Holiness movement. Her emphasis on Pentecost and Spirit baptism helped to pave the way for the emergence of the Pentecostal and Charismatic movements.  

Phoebe Palmer's career as a revivalist began when she attended a women's prayer meeting her sister, Sarah, was holding in the home that their families shared. Soon the meeting was open to men, and Phoebe eventually took over leadership of the gathering. She called it "The Tuesday Meeting for the Promotion of Holiness." To her parlors came such church leaders as Leonidas Hamline, Edmund Janes, and William Taylor, who became Methodist bishops: John Dempster, the "Father of Methodist theological education"; John Inskip, leader of the National Camp Meeting Association for the Promotion of Holiness; Nathan Bangs, publishing agent for the Methodist Church; and Thomas Upham, internationally-known philosopher. These leaders were joined by thousands of others, clergy and laity, women and men, who wished to know more about holiness. Many professed entire sanctification, and some established similar "Tuesday Meetings" in places as far away as England, India, and New Zealand.  

Besides leading the Tuesday Meeting, Phoebe Palmer also spoke at more than three hundred camp-meetings and revival services. J. Edwin Orr, noted historian of awakenings, attributes the beginning of the 1858 awakening to Mrs. Palmer's ministry. He says that reports of her success in Canada in 1857 stimulated the American prayer revival of the following spring. An estimated one million converts joined American churches as a result of that awakening. When British Christians read reports of the outpouring of the Spirit in the United States and Canada, they copied the Americans' methods and witnessed similar results. An estimated one and one-half million converts were added to the churches of the United Kingdom.  

Walter and Phoebe Palmer followed the revival to England. They spent almost four years in itinerant evangelism and led more than 17,000

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to "pardon or purity." Walter gave up his medical practice to make this journey. He did not resume it when they returned to the States, but joined Phoebe in her extensive travels.

Besides leading thousands to Christ, Mrs. Palmer made another contribution to revivalism. She civilized and systematized the methods of frontier Methodist revivalism. Because revival was an attack against Satan, she said it required the most serious planning and preparation. The first step in her plan was to preach the possibility and duty of entire sanctification to those already converted. Next, the sanctified must be reminded of their duty to seek the lost and organized into "Christian Vigilance Bands" which will visit the unsaved. Then the church should begin to hold evangelistic meetings to which the Christians can bring people. Secretaries must carefully record the names of those who respond to the invitation. These seekers will be visited by the members of the bands, and those who are converted will be encouraged to join in the battle for the Lord. Thus the revival will continue to spread in ever-widening circles. Finally, Phoebe Palmer said the church must publish the results so that God was given the glory for what he had done.

Phoebe Palmer's emphasis on lay ministry was new to revivalism. Finney had spoken of the role of the laity in revivals, but Mrs. Palmer was the first to organize their labors effectively. While Finney urged church members to visit the unsaved, he placed this injunction eleventh on the list of things they should do, mentioning it after the duty of paying the minister well and keeping the church clean. Phoebe Palmer did not just mention house-to-house visitation as one of a number of tasks to help the minister. Rather, she gave it priority in her message, and also organized the church members into bands to see that it was done. Her emphasis on the role of the laity helped to transform revivalism from the clergy-centered campaigns waged by Finney to the city-wide crusades led by Moody.

Besides her contribution to the revival of lay ministry, Phoebe Palmer's career as a revivalist had two other important effects. One was positive and the other was negative. The positive effect was that her emphasis on holiness helped to remind Christians of their high calling when revivalism had flooded the church with people who were only "half-converted." Revival preaching had tended to lower the standards of Christian discipleship: Finney once even likened conversion to casting one's vote for God. Phoebe Palmer's preaching made it plain that God was not

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9This figure is based on the numbers reported in Phoebe Palmer, Four Years in the Old World: Comprising the Travels, Incidents, and Evangelistic Labors of Dr. and Mrs. Palmer in England, Ireland, Scotland, and Wales, 3rd ed. (New York: Foster & Palmer, Jr., 1866).
12For a more detailed discussion of these points, see chapter seven of The Beauty of Holiness.
satisfied with a casual commitment, but required an entire consecration from each believer. The negative effect of her preaching was that while her teaching about sanctification brought the doctrine to the attention of many people, the way in which she taught it tended to devalue the doctrine for some people, leading them to believe they were sanctified when they were not. In her zeal for people to be entirely sanctified, she could use tactics which encouraged people to think that sanctification could result from quick decisions made in the emotionally-charged atmosphere of an altar call. She urged all who responded to her appeals to consider themselves sanctified, unless they made a conscious choice to back-slide. Such a plea obviously opened the door to self-deception.\footnote{For a more detailed discussion of these points, see chapter seven of \textit{The Beauty of Holiness}.}

Phoebe Palmer promoted the cause of women's rights in two ways: by example and by argument. In an age when many thought it improper for a woman to speak in public, she addressed thousands in camp-meetings and revivals. In a day when most considered it unfitting for a woman to teach men, male pastors and professors came every Tuesday to sit at her feet. In a time when men debated a woman's ability to reason, she edited a national magazine and wrote seventeen books.

One of these books was a tome of four hundred closely-reasoned pages. The thesis for the book appeared in her journal for 1856: "The spirit of prophecy [has] fallen on women."\footnote{Diary, December 1856, Wheatley, pp. 496-7.} Three years later in \textit{Promise of the Father: or, A Neglected Specialty of the Last Days}, she developed this thesis. With the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, she argued, came a new obligation for women to speak for the Lord in public. While she pointedly refused to discuss whether or not women should be ordained, she asserted that just as the Spirit-filled prophets of the Old Testament had a duty to proclaim God's word, so today's Spirit-filled Christians, women and men, have a responsibility to talk to others about the Lord. Women in New Testament times exercised this right and duty, but since those days the church has sinned by silencing their voices.

Ranging from Justin Martyr to Queen Victoria, Mrs. Palmer defended her thesis by appealing to Hebrew and Greek etymology, the Old and New Testaments, the Church Fathers, the example of female leaders in early Methodism, and the evident blessing of God upon women's ministries in her own day. She exegeted each of the biblical passages treating the role of women in the church, contending that the prohibitions against female ministry were either misunderstood or culture-bound. In her eyes the villain in the story was the "Man of Sin," the Roman Catholic Church, which ended the freedom of the primitive church with its human regulations.

The book has recently come back into print, and is important today both as an early statement in the struggle for women's rights, and as a wide-ranging treatment of the biblical and historical evidence for the active role of women in Christian ministry.  

So concerned was Phoebe Palmer for the salvation of souls that her efforts were not limited to speaking to those who attended her meetings. Soon after her sanctification, she began to distribute religious tracts in an effort to reach those who would never hear the gospel in a church. Mrs. Palmer was zealous to visit every home in her assigned district of the city. She reported how one afternoon she went from "cellar to garret" in several homes and gave tracts to fifty families. During these visits Mrs. Palmer would not only give out tracts, she would also try to speak to people about their spiritual states. Some rebuffed her attempts, but others listened. After talking with people about their souls, Phoebe's next step was to invite them to church. To make sure they got there, she would often return to their homes and collect them just before meeting time. Then they would all go to church together.

From her description of her district with people living in cellars, garrets, and alleys, it is evident that her assigned area was not one of New York's more fashionable neighborhoods. Thus it must have been quite a sight to see Mrs. Palmer arrive at the church with her new friends in tow. Sometimes Phoebe provided proper clothing for her guests. She once visited a family lodged in a basement. The father was sleeping off the effects of the previous night's binge, and the eleven year-old son sat listless in the corner. The mother was God-fearing, but had been unable to interest her child in Sunday School. Seeing that the boy needed clothes, Phoebe promised to get him a coat if he would go to church. The boy brightened at the prospect, and before Mrs. Palmer left, "he seemed quite elated with the idea of attending Sabbath-school." So eager was she to get people to church that at least once she paid a person to accompany her to the Lord's house. One twenty-year-old widow wanted to go with Phoebe, but was reluctant to go to church because time in church was time away from her work. The young widow was attempting to support her three babies and an invalid mother on her earnings as a cobbler. Because she was paid by the piece, each moment that she could work meant more food for her family. Phoebe calculated how much money the woman could earn in the time it would take her to go to church, and then paid the widow that amount to go to church with her.

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17Diary, 1846, Wheatley, p. 208.
18Phoebe Palmer to Bishop and Mrs. Hamline, 4 March 1847, Wheatley, pp. 208-9.
19Diary, 17 September [1844], Wheatley, p. 212.
20Diary, 4 March 1844, Wheatley, pp. 211-2.
Visiting the poor to meet their spiritual need for salvation helped to make Phoebe Palmer aware of their other needs as well. Her diary mentions taking food to a destitute family; Walter Palmer often gave his medical care free of charge to his poor patients, and sometimes left them money for food and medicine. Once the Palmers even adopted a boy who needed their aid.\footnote{Diary, 1846, Wheatley, p. 208; George Hughes, \textit{The Beloved Physician, Walter C. Palmer M.D., and His Sun-lit Journey to the Celestial City} (New York: Palmer & Hughes, 1884), pp. 61-63. Phoebe Palmer to Bishop and Mrs. Hamline, 28 April 1855, 8 May 1855, and 5 August 1856, Wheatley, pp. 213-4.}

Besides these personal ministries, Phoebe Palmer organized others to aid the poor. Her most famous contribution was the inauguration of the Five Points Mission in New York's worst slum. Charles Dickens had visited the Five Points during his trip to America, but he went only under the protection of two burly policemen.\footnote{Charles Dickens, \textit{The Writings of Charles Dickens}, ed. by Edwin Percy Whipple, et al., vol. 11, \textit{Martin Chuzzlewit and American Notes} (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1894), pp. 437-9.} Phoebe Palmer, however, went alone where Dickens had feared to tread. She knew the needs of the inhabitants of New York's worst slum, and wanted Christians to do something about them. After several years of agitation, she persuaded the other board members of the Ladies' Home Missionary Society of the Methodist Episcopal Church to demolish the "Old Brewery" which dominated the Five Points, and to establish a home, school, work-room, and chapel in its place.\footnote{Phoebe Palmer to Joseph Hartwell, 17 February 1853, in Wheatley, pp. 224-5. See also \textit{Ladies of the Mission, The Old Brewery, and the New Mission House at Five Points} (New York: Stringer and Townsend, 1854).} This mission house at Five Points was one of Protestantism's first efforts to meet the needs of the poor in urban America's rapidly expanding slums. Its ministry set the pattern for the social action of the churches for the rest of the nineteenth century.

Phoebe Palmer's humanitarianism began as evangelistic fervor, but soon came to include a concern for the whole person as she saw the soul-destroying effects of urban poverty. Her work helps to demonstrate the overwhelmingly evangelistic motivation of those who worked with the poor in the middle years of the nineteenth century. Phoebe Palmer's ministry and the ministry of the institution she helped to found also show the progression found in most other mid-nineteenth-century religious efforts to help the poor. Beginning with almost a purely evangelistic motive, various organizations came increasingly to concentrate on humanitarian aid. This progression shows that it is wrong to give the impression that mid-century philanthropists thought the poor needed tracts more than they needed food. The study of Mrs. Palmer's involvement with the poor also supplies further evidence of the connection between revivalistic, evangelical religion and social concern. In addition, it provides a counter-example...
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to the contention that the beginnings of organized religious action against poverty in America should be traced solely to the early Unitarians or to the late-nineteenth-century preachers of the social gospel. Finally, her humanitarian efforts also show the transition that occurred in the nineteenth century from visiting the poor to living among them. Her pioneering work helped to break the ground for the establishment of rescue missions and settlement houses. 24

Phoebe Palmer’s contribution to American religious history is immense. Her contributions to theology, revivalism, feminism, and humanitarianism mark her as one of the most influential American women in her century. Her achievement gives rise to two questions:

1. If her contributions were really so great, why is she not better known?
2. Where did she get the energy to do all she did?

While no one can know the answers to these questions for sure, I would like to speculate about the first and let Phoebe answer the second.

I believe that Mrs. Palmer’s contribution to American religion has been ignored because she was female, pious, and Methodist. Because she was female, perhaps the male-dominated scholarly community has undervalued her contributions. Because she was pious, her cloying style might have put off more secular readers. Because she was Methodist, Reformed scholars might not have been as interested in her as in others of their own tradition. Perhaps they also found her doctrine of entire sanctification absolutely incredible. Happily, today’s renewed interest in the contributions of women, and the continued vitality of the Holiness, Pentecostal, and Charismatic movements have stimulated the study of Phoebe Palmer.

Finally, where did Mrs. Palmer get the energy to do all she did? Obviously having servants helped to free her from the normal routine of caring for a family. Perhaps, however, the answer lies deeper.

Phoebe Palmer knew the Scriptural promise that her labor in the Lord was not in vain (1 Corinthians 15:58). Because she was convinced she was entirely sanctified, she believed everything she did was a “labor in the Lord.” Thus she was encouraged to attempt great things for God, knowing that in an ultimate sense, she could never fail. God had promised to crown whatever she undertook with success. Hence whatever the apparent result, whether she accomplished what she wanted or fell short, she could be sure that her labor was not wasted, but that it fulfilled God’s plan. Armed with such confidence, she did not grow weary in well doing. 25

It seems that entire sanctification played the same role in Phoebe Palmer’s thought that justification by faith played in Luther’s theology.

24See chapter 9 of The Beauty of Holiness for further discussion of these points.
25WOH, pp. 24-56.
In *The Freedom of a Christian* Luther argued that because we are justified by faith, we must not spend any energy trying to justify ourselves. Freed from the impossible task of self-justification, we can give all the energy that used to go into scrupulous obedience, detailed confession, and supererogatory works to the service of the neighbor. In the same way, Phoebe Palmer's doctrine of sanctification by faith freed enormous energies for the service of others. Since her “all was on the altar” she knew God accepted and empowered her. Thus all the energy that formerly went into anxious brooding about her spiritual state was now discharged in working for the betterment of others.

Phoebe Palmer, however, would have answered the question in another way. She asserted: “Holiness is power.” She believed that just as the Holy Spirit had empowered the disciples after Pentecost, so every Christian who received the Spirit in entire sanctification would be similarly empowered. Her life, she felt, was ample demonstration of this truth.

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27 *GTH* 33 (1858): 11.