"ANCHORED BEHIND THE VEIL":
MYSTICAL VISION AS A POSSIBLE SOURCE
OF AUTHORITY IN THE MINISTRY OF PHOEBE PALMER

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In 1837 Phoebe Palmer ended long years of spiritual struggle by seizing sanctification by means of what she would later call The Shorter Way. In that moment she began the change from being a typically pious Methodist woman of her time into one of the most effective and best known revival speakers of her generation. This paper will explore Phoebe Palmer's experience of sanctification and the dramatic effect it had on her life by asking what it was that allowed her to leave the safety of private life for public ministry. Brought up from an early age to understand a "woman's place" in her society, something freed Palmer from that place and motivated her to seek another. What was the source of her authority for this change and for her public ministry? In answering this question we will look first at who Phoebe Palmer was and what she expected from life. Second, we will take a close look at the dramatic experience of sanctification which changed her life. Lastly, as we explore the issue of authority, we will compare her experience to that of other women who had similar life-changing experiences, the mystics of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries.

A Sketch of Phoebe Palmer's Life

Phoebe Worrall Palmer was born into a pious household. Her father, Henry Worrall, had been converted to Methodism as a youth by John Wesley himself. Her mother, Dorothea Wade Worrall, clearly supported the family emphasis on devotion, as the early conversion of her nine children indicates. Phoebe's few recollections of her childhood indicate that she took this focus on religion very seriously.¹

In 1827 when Phoebe was just shy of her twentieth birthday, she married a young doctor, Walter Clarke Palmer. Four years her senior, Walter was also a serious student of religion. By all accounts Walter and Phoebe were well matched. Affectionate letters between the two that have survived from various periods in their forty-four year marriage support this claim. When her public ministry began to take her away from home for long periods of time, Walter supported Phoebe both financially and practically, remaining home with their three children. In later years he

Anchored Behind the Veil

left his flourishing medical practice to join Phoebe on the road, eventually buying a periodical, The Guide to Holiness, and working on it with her.²

Harold Raser, author of Phoebe Palmer: Her Life and Thought, points to three critical events in Palmer's life in the first ten years of her marriage, which have significant impact for her later career. The first event was the death of the first three of the Palmers' children. Alexander Palmer was born on their first anniversary, and died nine months later, on July 2, 1829. A second child, Samuel, died quite suddenly the next year, at only seven weeks of age. Their third, a daughter Eliza, born in 1833, died tragically in a nursery fire when she was three years old, in 1836.³ Phoebe was crushed by the deaths and came to see them as trials sent by God to teach her how to love God truly. She records in her journal after the second death:

Surely I needed it, or it would not have been given. God takes our treasure to heaven, that our hearts may be there also. . . . After my loved ones were snatched away, I saw that I had concentrated my time and attentions far too exclusively, to the neglect of the religious activities demanded . . . From henceforth, Jesus must and shall have the uppermost seat in my heart.⁴

Palmer was clearly trying to draw a lesson for her life from these tragedies. Her conclusion was that God was showing her that she had devoted too much time to her children and not enough to the service of the Lord. She committed herself to putting Jesus first in her heart, and all others, including her family, second.

The second event of significance to which Raser draws our attention is Palmer's religious struggle and experience of conversion. We know that revivalistic Methodism placed a great deal of emphasis on the individual sinner's conversion to Christ. One could affirm the validity of this experience by the accompanying emotional state: a "warming of the heart," or "witness of the Spirit" as it was commonly called. For those unfortunates who could not summon the appropriate feeling, one could interpret it as lack of acceptance by God. Phoebe Palmer was just such a person. Despite her pious upbringing she could not point to any significant warming of the heart and be assured that she was a child of God. "Not infrequently [I] felt like weeping because [I] could not weep."⁵ Palmer became preoccupied with this, especially so once she decided that she wanted to attain

²Raser, 71.
⁴Palmer, diary entry undated (1828?) in Wheatley, 26.
the perfection of “sanctification” or “holiness” that was being promoted in her day. In a struggle with herself and with God that reminds one of Jacob wrestling the angel at Peniel (Gen. 32:22-32), Phoebe seized God’s blessing without any accompanying feeling. This “Shorter Way,” as she would come to refer to it, became her trademark and her message. The discovery of it changed her life, just as the deaths of her children changed her life, and it impelled her out into the world as a witness to what she had experienced.

The third event of note in her first decade of marriage is the sharing of the Palmer house with Phoebe’s sister Sarah Worrall Lankford (later Palmer) and her husband. Sarah struggled with her faith in a similar manner to Phoebe, and the sisters must have been a great support to each other. It is interesting that Sarah records in her diary in 1835 an experience of claiming holiness very like Phoebe’s of two years later in 1837, but Palmer never publicly credited her sister for showing the way. 6

Sarah led two women’s prayer groups which she merged and invited to meet in the shared home. Palmer became an active member of the “Tuesday Meeting for the Promotion of Holiness” and only reluctantly took over its leadership in 1839 when the Lankfords moved and Sarah had to give up her role. By this time the group was attracting some attention among people seeking holiness. Men like Professor Thomas Cogswell Upham of Bowdoin College in Maine became interested and began to attend the meetings, spreading their influence far beyond New York City. Tuesday Meetings for the Promotion of Holiness spread across the country and lasted into the twentieth century. 7

By 1838 when she was 31, Phoebe was occasionally leading Walter’s Methodist class meeting when he was absent, a most unusual occurrence at the time, since these meetings were normally led by men. Palmer started to receive invitations to speak. By 1841 she had travelled as far as Philadelphia and was “perceived to be a zealous and articulate spokesman for a concept official Methodism was clearly interested in promoting [i.e., holiness].” 8

In the 1850s and 1860s her ministry came to full blossom. One of her first books, The Way of Holiness, was published in 1842 and gained a huge following. 9 Other books followed, as did tours to both Canada

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and to England. Phoebe and Walter, who had joined her by this time in a supporting role, also went to Canada many times between 1853, when they visited Napanee, and 1858 when they toured in the Maritimes. The Palmers are credited with being instrumental in starting the revival experienced in both Canada and the States in 1857-58, known variously as the Layman’s Revival, the Prayer Group Revival, or the *Annus Mirabilis*.  

Phoebe Palmer experienced huge successes in North America, where she adapted and pioneered such revival methods as the holiness altar invitation, previously only used for initial conversion; the believers’ meeting, for those seeking present holiness; and altar testimony, or the insistence on immediate and continual testimony by the one newly converted to holiness. In England ten thousand are said to have converted to holiness during the Palmers’ four year tour. Her presence and her books had enormous impact.

In 1874, after a life streaked by serious illness, but nonetheless enormously effective, Phoebe Palmer died at home.

**“The Shorter Way,” The Altar and the Veil**

I have referred above to Palmer’s dramatic experience of entering holiness by “the Shorter Way,” which she herself dated to 1837. It was this Way which released her from the terrible burden of not having had the feeling of acceptance by God, the warming of heart so important to Methodists at the time. It was also in the context of the Shorter Way that Palmer developed and started teaching her altar theology, bringing thousands to an experience of sanctification. Since the Shorter Way was an important factor in propelling Phoebe Palmer into public life I propose that we look briefly at it here.

At a gathering of faithful church-goers one day, a seeker addressed himself to Phoebe Palmer: “I have thought... whether there is not a shorter way of getting into this way of holiness than some of our brethren apprehend?” Phoebe’s answer was a resounding “Yes, brother, THERE IS A SHORTER WAY!” With that conviction in her heart she set herself to find it.  

Contemporary holiness theology has attempted to integrate the new Arminianizing influences of such Second Great Awakening preachers as Charles Grandison Finney and Asa Mahan with the traditional Wesleyan

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11Raser, 68.

theology of Christian Perfection. Where Wesley had pointed to Christian Perfection and had encouraged believers to strive after it all their life, Finney and his like were claiming perfection in their own time. Finney claimed that both sin and holiness “are voluntary acts of mind” and that the believer must simply choose with conviction and receive holiness. This emphasis on choice shifted the focus of holiness theology from God, who traditionally had been the gracious Giver, to the believer, who now actively chose to claim the gift of grace.

Phoebe Palmer grew up during the period in which this new ability to choose holiness was becoming popular. We see strong evidence of this trend in her own thought, once it is formulated, and also her own unique contribution to this thinking, now called her Altar Theology.

In *The Way of Holiness* Phoebe shared the story of her struggle to perceive the Shorter Way. She went through five distinct stages in her thought, which we may call duty, consecration, holiness, acceptance, testimony. On first resolving to find the shorter way, Palmer committed herself to search only the scriptures for the way to holiness. The first thing that she found affirmed was that, “God requires that I should now be holy... duty is plain. God requires present holiness.” She understood that it was her duty to consecrate herself entirely to God in payment for her costly redemption. She thus resolved to give “all her redeemed powers to God.” This decision moved her into the second stage, that of consecration. She decided “not to cease importuning the throne of grace” until she had been given the assurance she sought, i.e., that her consecration had been accepted. While awaiting that witness Phoebe found that her previous agonies of doubt concerning her adoption by God were passed. She felt she was “growing in grace daily” and decided to wait on her knees for the assurance she sought.

Suddenly she entered the third stage, holiness. In *The Way of Holiness* she asserted that, “the Lord... led her astonished soul directly into the ‘way of holiness,’ where, with unutterable delight, she found the comprehensive desires of her soul blended and satisfied in the fulfillment of the command, ‘Be ye holy.’” She understood that she was commanded

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14 Oden names only three steps in her thinking: entire consecration, faith, and witness or confession, but these are the steps she invited others to follow. Her own thinking seems to have had two extra steps. Oden, 130.
to be holy *at that moment*. Again, “she resolve[d] to give herself entirely to God,” and, in her own words, “in experimental verity [does] lay hold upon the terms of the covenant.”

Even though she claimed the covenant for herself, she was still seeking the warming of the heart that she previously lacked. In the fourth stage the desired assurance was given that God had received her gift. It was here that she introduced her “method” of self-consecration, known widely now as her “altar phraseology.” Palmer realized that faith and feeling are distinct, and that to wait for feeling to confirm faith is to put the emphasis on the wrong aspect of salvation. Without waiting for feeling, she confirmed her faith by “*taking God at his word* relying unwaveringly upon his truth.” She committed herself and laid “body, soul and spirit ... upon [God’s] altar to be forever His.”

For Palmer, Jesus was the altar, and by both laying one’s all (powers, gifts, talents, etc.) upon the altar and by keeping it there the gift was made holy by the sanctifying blood of Jesus Christ.

The last stage was that of testimony, a traditional emphasis in Methodist theology. Once she had laid all upon the altar, Palmer felt the security of her position as a sanctified child of God as being similar to a ship safely anchored in harbour. Borrowing imagery from the Letter to the Hebrews, Palmer spoke of being “permitted through the blood of the everlasting covenant, to cast anchor within the veil.” This powerful image of safety, combining the “anchor” of hope and the “veil” of safe haven and holy space functioned for her as a guarantee of her adoption. It symbolized what she felt had happened, and gave her the courage and the authority to live out the ramifications of her sanctification. It is from the safe haven of the harbour behind the veil that she went out to testify to the world.

Palmer recorded that she had been afraid “for years” to testify publicly, knowing that this was normally expected of Methodists, but “she now formed the resolution, that if she should literally die in the struggle to overcome nature, she would be a martyr in the effort.” So she devoted all her energies and the rest of her life to one of the most effective public ministries of the mid-nineteenth century.

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23 “The altar ... is Christ.” *Way*, 62.
24 *Hb* 6:19, where God’s promise to save the children of Abraham is understood as the immutable hope which is an “anchor of the soul, both sure and steadfast, and which entereth into that within the veil” [King James Version]. For her use of the terms anchor and veil see Palmer, *Way*, 97, 270.
It is exactly here that I would like to raise a question concerning Phoebe Palmer. There is no doubt that Palmer was a remarkable woman. One look at her career confirms us in that opinion. Yet, there is an intriguing side to her. She had a safe and happy childhood and entered a loving relationship with a supportive spouse. In the early years, there is no hint of ambition on her part for a public career, especially one in so prominent and masculine a field as revival ministry. A dramatic change overcame Phoebe Palmer, turning her from the roles she had been prepared for, those of supportive wife, loving mother and faithful church-goer, to new roles hitherto unconsidered by her: class leader, teacher, preacher, author, revivalist.

It seems fair to ask how such a dramatic change could take place. Phoebe Palmer did not simply decide to break gender barriers and assume a public ministry. Her letters and diary extracts affirm her own misgivings about the path on which she was being led. It was not a path she consciously chose to follow. What was it that allowed her to do what she did? What was the source of her authority for the actions she took?

I am going to propose that the seeds for the answer to this question lie in what we have already learned about Phoebe Palmer, but that in order for us to discover those seeds and what they signify we will need to explore the experiences of some other women first. There is a group of women in church history who dealt with many of the same issues of authority and voice as Phoebe Palmer did. These were the medieval women mystics. It is a great leap of both time and imagination to move from nineteenth century America to thirteenth and fourteenth century Europe, but the striking similarities in the experiences of these women to Palmer's own experience cannot be overlooked as we seek to uncover the source for her authority in her public ministry.

In Medieval Europe women were not generally regarded as spiritual authorities. Although it was widely accepted that women were "emotional" and religious creatures, it was the men who defined doctrine, guided souls in spiritual direction, and offered the mass. Clerical authority was the authority of office. A man had "voice" because he was trained and ordained into an office by the church to speak about and for the institution he served.

Despite these facts, women found ways to express their own voice. Women like Hadewijch of Brabant, Marie of Oignies, Margery Kempe and Julian of Norwich, among others, wrote or dictated books of their own mystical experiences of God. Carolyn Walker Bynum, in her study on women mystics of the thirteenth century, claims that it was the overwhelming experience of mystical union with God that served as the source of these women's authority to speak. The experience of God became the authority—and it was an authority accepted by the women's confessors and scribes as well as by the lay people who came to them for spiritual counsel. Bynum elaborates on this claim:
Anchored Behind the Veil

The mysticism of thirteenth-century women is therefore an alternative to the authority of office. It is an alternative that is fostered by the presence of institutions within which a female religious culture can develop. It is fostered also by a theology that emphasizes God as accessible in intimate union and comprehensible in human images, yet just, [and] powerful. . . . Moreover, the mystical alternative flourished as a complement to, not a contradiction of, the clerical role.26

Women, who could not hold clerical office, fostered mystical vision in institutions, like convents, where women's culture could develop; and these women use images of God that emphasized God's accessibility. This source of authority did not compete with or seek to deny the authority of office, rather, it existed along side it.

Can we find anything parallel to mystical vision in the life of Phoebe Palmer that we might identify in a similar way as the source of her authority? Certainly, we find a female-positive institution in the Tuesday Prayer Meeting for the Promotion of Holiness and a parallel to the theology of union is discovered in Arminianism and holiness. Can we find anything in Phoebe's experience as we know it to support the suggestion that she might have had an experience something like the mystical vision of the women of the Middle Ages?

We must first of all acknowledge that in asking a question such as this we are far beyond anything with which Palmer or her contemporaries would have felt comfortable. To the Methodist, mysticism smacked of Quietism: passivity, annihilation of the will and self-abandonment. A contemporary of Palmer's did express a concern that "she might have imbibed something of that mysticism which affects Madame Guyon" but sets aside that fear saying Palmer was too practical a Christian for that.27

It may be well to begin by exploring some of Palmer's experiences to test the validity of our working hypothesis; namely, that Palmer may share a kind of experience with medieval women mystics. To what degree may Phoebe Palmer be said to have been a visionary? Palmer's book The Way of Holiness is full of classic mystical light imagery: "her very existence seemed lost and swallowed up in God; she plunged, as it were, into an immeasurable ocean of love, light, and power, and realized that she was encompassed with the 'favor of the Almighty as with a shield.' "28 She was attentive to her dreams, recording many of them in her "Notes By the Way." In one she spoke with an angel; in others with Satan, who conversed with her frequently.29 A third, from her youth in 1822, is the most clearly a mystical vision:

28Palmer, Way, 42.
29Palmer, Way, 109, 128.
The canopy of a beautiful midnight sky was spread out above her; the firmament was cloudless, and the full moon was silently walking the heavens. . . . Her eye was intently fixed, and her mind all absorbed by the attraction of a bright star. Presently, it began to enlarge its circle, wider and yet wider, when . . . the form of the infant Saviour was presented, and these words were proclaimed, "For unto us a child is born. . . ." In the mean time . . . the circle rapidly widened, until the whole heavens had become encircled in one glow of glory. 30

Phoebe Palmer would not have had a language of visions, as the medieval women did, in which to express her experiences. The language available to her was that of dreams, but it is clear from the above that what she experienced was powerful and very real to her. It was as real as the experience of the English mystic Margery Kempe, who, in a vision, "swaddled [the infant Jesus], weeping bitter tears of compassion, mindful of the painful death that he would suffer." 31 The intensity of feeling is clearly the same, although the words that convey the feeling, being culturally conditioned, are not the same.

The question is not really, "Was Phoebe Palmer an unwitting Methodist mystic?" That violates her integrity as a person of her time. The question is more properly "Did Phoebe Palmer have an experience or experiences that functioned for her in the same way that the mystical vision functioned for the medieval women who found their voice as a result?" In other words, can we trace Palmer's sudden and unexpected change of self to an experience as profound and as intimate as mystical union?

The Characteristics of Visionary Literature

Mysticism, which was grossly misunderstood in the nineteenth century, has received a great deal of attention in our own time. A number of prominent authors have proposed identifiable characteristics of the authentic mystical experience. I would like to suggest that we explore quickly some of the features outlined by Elizabeth A. Petroff in her study *Medieval Women's Visionary Literature*. The women Petroff studied not only had visions, but were compelled or commanded to write them down so that they might be shared. These women became acknowledged spiritual authorities in their time and, like Phoebe Palmer, they had also struggled to find their voices in a man's world. 32

Petroff examined numerous testimonies of visions to determine what role the visions had played in the lives of the women who received and recorded them. Using Petroff's findings, we can explore the role of Palmer's

experiences of God speaking to her and the roles those experiences played for her.

First, Petroff claims that the women's visions gave them "a voice and a belief in [themselves]." The experience of having met Christ, or of having been united to God in some way provided women with the authority they needed to speak or to write. These women claimed mystical authority, the authority of their vision and of God who gave it to them for their message.

Phoebe Palmer had a life-changing experience of suddenly discovering the Shorter Way and of feeling the assurance of God's sanction. She had always been a "useful" Christian, leading classes and conducting the prayer meeting, but her breakthrough turned her into an energetic and public witness to God's gift. Her "voice" came from her experience. Being "anchored behind the veil" she had the strength to go out into the world to proclaim God's good news.

The second role that visions played was to impel women to discover their hidden voice. Each had to discover for herself how to write. Writing was a man's activity, and the women had to find ways acceptable both to themselves and to those in authority over them to record their vision. Petroff talks about two aspects of the motivation to write: to tell one's story and to teach about God.

In 1837, when Palmer found the Shorter Way, there were no prominent women revivalists. Women had been preaching in the United States since the seventeenth century, but they still faced opposition in the Methodist Episcopal Church in the nineteenth century and it was by no means common for a woman to be invited to speak before a large mixed gathering. Palmer had to find her own way to present her message. There is no doubt that she felt called to testify, although she never claimed to preach. She simply and clearly told of what the Lord had done for her, and did not consider what she did to be preaching. She referred to it as "bearing witness," "exhorting," or "prophesying." She also found her voice in her books, which were widely read in many languages.

Like the medieval women, Palmer chose to tell about God by telling her own story. The Way of Holiness is simply a retelling of her own journey. The first 72 pages (25%) narrate the experience, and the remaining 216 pages (75%) are diary entries from the period renamed "Notes By the Way."

Petroff outlines seven characteristic stages through which the mystics passed in their spiritual growth. Without going into great detail we can

33 Petroff, 6.
34 Palmer, Letter dated June 27, 1848 in Wheatley, 79.
find traces of some of these stages in Palmer's experience. Her rationalizing of the loss of her children, the long years of spiritual struggle, even her continuing dialogue with Satan are characteristic of the purgative stage. Her concern for others, her response to the brother seeking a Shorter Way, and her many letters show her to be deeply concerned with the spiritual welfare of others, a characteristic of the psychic stage. The devotional and participatory stages both involved meditations on Jesus, his life and death and vicarious participation in these through visions. Emotionally charged devotion to Christ and his passion characterized medieval mystical piety. A nineteenth century parallel may well be found in Palmer's graphic use of “blood” imagery, mostly taken from the Book of Revelation. She spoke frequently of being “washed in the blood of the Lamb” or sealed in Jesus' blood. 36 She had a strong attachment to Jesus, calling him “Infinite Love,” “The Divine Cleanser,” “My adorable Jesus,” and “Precious Jesus.” 37 The unitive stage is best characterized by compassionate charity, the writing or sharing of the vision, and erotic imagery involving Jesus. Palmer did not use this last, erotic imagery, but she wrote her story many times and literally made herself ill travelling and working to share it with others.

The last characteristic of mystical visionaries outlined by Petroff concerns their bodies. 38 She points out the high incidence of illness among the women she studied. She thinks that illness performed several functions including being a test, a call to a difficult life, a mystical sort of death, and an embodiment of conflict over writing.

It seems significant, then, to discover that Phoebe Palmer was troubled by ill health for much of her life. She was so sick that she was believed to be dying on several occasions. 39 It was during one of these serious illnesses that she wrote The Way to Holiness, believing that this was her only chance to testify as she felt driven to do. On her return from the exhausting four year tour of England she became ill, and again wrote a book while convalescing, Four Years In the Old World. Clearly, there is some connection between her illnesses and her writing.

Conclusion

We have been exploring the question of the source of Phoebe Palmer's authority for her ministry. In a quite astonishing case of historical

36 i.e. Palmer, Way, 270; Palmer quoted in Wheatley, 537.
38 Petroff also discusses the power of virginity, and the spiritual authority it gave to the women, but since some of the women she studies were married and bore children we will not consider virginity to be an essential characteristic. See Petroff, 32.
39 Palmer, August 1835, “While flickering between the two worlds, during my late extreme illness . . .” recorded in Wheatley, 27; also Palmer, Way, 259; and Raser, 59 for a statement of her general ill health.
parallelism, we find that Palmer’s experience of sanctification, of being accepted by God as holy, mirrors many aspects of some medieval women mystics’ visions of God, including the ground of their authority, the impetus to share their experience, the characteristic stages of their thought, and the physical effects it had on their bodies. We should question what to make of this.

The Medieval women mystics clearly gained their voice through their visions, an experience we see repeated in Phoebe Palmer’s experience of sanctification and of being anchored behind the veil. Without being conscious of any personal desire to preach or teach, Palmer felt compelled by God and by duty to testify publicly. And she found her voice. What is most important is the fact that she found a source of authority other than her own or that of ordination by which to enter the public arena. Once in the public eye she contributed to the rising tide of evidence in favour of women’s official leadership in the churches. Both Frances Willard, the temperance leader, and Catherine Booth, co-founder of the Salvation Army, named Phoebe Palmer as a role model in their own public ministries.40 Anchored behind the veil, Palmer felt secure in her authority to speak and to write about what she had experienced. It is poignant to find later women claiming her as their authority.