REVISITING THE METHODIST LEGACY IN AMERICAN PENTECOSTALISM: NUANCES IN THE EARLY PENTECOSTAL UNDERSTANDING OF "SANCTIFICATION" (1896-1950)

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As regards salvation by justification we are Lutherans. In baptismal formula, we are Baptists. As regards sanctification, we are Methodists.¹

The 19th-century holiness movement was complex in that it was influenced by both Methodism and Higher Life theology. That Methodism was bound to influence the holiness movement should be no surprise since the 19th century was "The Methodist Age in America."² In turn, the entire holiness movement impacted the emerging Pentecostal movement. This has led historians to classify the Pentecostal movement into Wesleyan and non-Wesleyan groups. The major non-Wesleyan Pentecostal groups are the Assemblies of God, the Church of The Foursquare Gospel, the United Pentecostal Church, and the Pentecostal Assemblies of the Word. Most Wesleyan Pentecostals are affiliated with the Pentecostal Holiness Church, the Church of God in Christ, the United Holiness Church, and the Church of God (Cleveland, Tennessee).³

While clear Methodist influences are discernible in Pentecostal policy and theology,⁴ it is usually the doctrine of sanctification that is viewed as the major Methodist legacy in the Wesleyan branch of Pentecostalism. In 1910 Paul Fleisch, a German scholar, was among the first to make this connection. He was followed by Frederick Bruner, Walter Hollenweger, Vinson Synan,⁵

⁴For example, various Pentecostal churches use the title "bishop" for the conference leaders who are responsible for placing pastors in local churches. Also, Pentecostal churches share an Arminian anthropology and soteriology. Steven Land considers the common theological heritage to include testimony, salvation as spiritual journey, Christian affections, crisis-development transformation, and urgent mission. See Steven Land, "The Triune Center: Wesleyans and Pentecostals Together in Mission," Pneuma: The Journal of the Society for Pentecostal Studies (Fall 1999), 214.
Melvin Dieter,⁶ and Donald Dayton.⁷

In this paper, using the Church of God as an example, I will argue that while sanctification as an experience was sought by early Pentecostals, their understanding of the nature of sanctification was not fully Wesleyan. Wesley understood sanctification as a subsequent experience that entailed both eradication of the sinful nature and the infusion of perfect love. Early Church of God members took the second blessing to mean only the eradication of sinful nature, with “love” or “perfect love” usually missing as important elements in their interpretation of sanctification. For Wesley, if love is the quintessence of sanctification and even the entire Christian life, then the Methodist legacy in early Pentecostalism can be argued to be much less Wesleyan.

I

Sanctification is undoubtedly a complex doctrine in the Wesley corpus. It was the most controversial of all Wesley’s doctrines.⁸ Not only did Wesley use several expressions to refer to the second blessing (entire sanctification, Christian perfection),⁹ he also associated this experience with many other theological concepts (witness of the Spirit, a gradual process before and after entire sanctification, restoration of the image of God, assurance).¹⁰ Here I am concerned only with the motifs of subsequence, carnal nature, and perfect love and their importance (or lack of importance) in early Methodism and Pentecostalism.

Wesley admitted that sanctification started in regeneration: “From the moment we are justified, there may be a gradual sanctification, a growing in grace, a daily advance in the knowledge and love of God.”¹¹ He went on to expect “entire sanctification” to occur afterwards. Christian perfection “is not so early as justification; for justified persons are to ‘go unto perfection.’ (Heb. vi. 1). . . It is not so late as death; for St. Paul speaks of living men that were perfect (Philip. iii. 15).”¹² Negatively, Wesley anticipated the destruction of the sinful nature¹³ to take place when the believer is sanctified: “It shall please our Lord to speak to our hearts again, to speak a second time, ‘Be clean.’ And then only the leprosy is cleansed.’ Then only the evil root,
the carnal mind is destroyed, and inbred sin subsists no more.” 14 The demand for the eradication of the old man was also stated elsewhere: “And if sin cease before death, there must, in the nature of the thing, be an instantaneous change; there must be a last moment wherein it does exist, and a first moment wherein it does not.” 15

Positively, Wesley thought that much more took place in sanctification than the destruction of the Adamic nature. In this process of restoring the divine image in man which is sanctification, God also infuses perfect love into the consecrated believer. To the question, “What is implied in being a perfect Christian?” Wesley replied: “The loving God with all our heart, and mind, and soul. (Deut. vi.5).” 16 But what is Christian perfection? It is nothing else but, “The loving God with all our heart, mind, soul, and strength. This implies, that no wrong temper, none contrary to love, remains in the soul; and that all the thoughts, words, and actions are governed by pure love.” 17

Throughout Wesley’s writings is spread the idea that love is the kernel of sanctification: “Scripture perfection, is pure love filling the heart, and governing all the words and actions. If your idea includes anything more or anything less, it is not scriptural; ... Pure love reigning alone in the heart and life —this is the whole of scriptural perfection.” 18 Perhaps Wesley’s most succinct statement of perfection is this one: “It is ‘perfect love’ (1 John iv.18). This is the essence of it.” 19

Wesley scholars have long appreciated the importance of love in the Wesleyan theological construction of Christian perfection: “In some ways the most important doctrine of all was Wesley’s doctrine of Christian perfection, and important because its emphasis was that the perfection of Christians was perfection in love. It is not the negative side of deliverance from wrong-doing that matters so much as the obligation of right-doing.” 20 Lindstrom in a seminal work also shared the same view: “Sanctity is regarded as an ethical transformation of the heart and life of man. Its essence is love.” 21

In Wesley’s theology love is more than the essence of sanctification. It is also the kernel, the quintessence of Methodism: “What is Methodism? What

15Wesley, Minutes of Several Conversations, 329.
16Wesley, A Plain Account, 387.
17Wesley, A Plain Account, 394.
18Wesley, A Plain Account, 401.
19Wesley, A Plain Account, 442.
21Lindstrom, 102.
Revisiting the Methodist Legacy in American Pentecostalism:...

199

does this new word mean? Is it not a new religion? ... Methodism... is 'no other than love, the love of God, and of all mankind.'”

II

The Church of God was founded in 1886 as a Baptist renewal group, the Christian Union, in the mountains of Tennessee by R.G. Spurling, Sr., a Missionary Baptist minister. In 1896 the Christian Union under the leadership of R.G. Spurling, Jr. joined the holiness movement when three preachers, “Billy” Martin, Joe Tipton, and “Milt” McNabb from the Fire-Baptized Holiness Association introduced the holiness message in Cherokee, North Carolina.23 At that time, the Spurling movement merged with another group of former Baptists led by William F. Bryant, a layman. Six years later, the Christian Union adopted the name “The Holiness Church at Camp Creek.” In 1903 Ambrose Jessup Tomlinson joined the Holiness Church and was subsequently made pastor, moderator, and overseer of the group until 1923.24 In 1907 this new holiness group formally adopted the name “Church of God” which remains. In 1908 the Church of God joined the Pentecostal movement after Tomlinson spoke in tongues through the preaching of G.B. Cashwell.25

Now we review the early Church of God understanding of sanctification through an examination of the sanctification experience of two pioneers and the interpretation of sanctification in official documents, books, and articles.

III

One early leader of the church who received the experience of sanctification in 1896 was W. F. Bryant, who later became an associate of R.G. Spurling, Jr. who was the leader of the Christian Union after the departure of his father in 1886. Bryant described his experience of the second blessing as follows:

In 1896 I began seeking God definitely for an experience that I had never attained to. The spirit within me would cry out, ‘Give the blessing like those other few have received.’ Oh, how I had to consecrate my life, dying out to my own selfish nature and forsaking wife and children, father and mother and all my earthly friends and giving up my Baptist church, in fact, making a clean breast of everything. But, thank God, when I got all on the altar, one Thursday morning, about 9:00 o'clock I was sanctified while sitting in my saddle on my horse.26

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22 Wesley, “At The Foundation of City-Road Chapel,” Works 7: 423.
24 Conn, Like A Mighty Army, 547. Tomlinson was at various times publisher (1910-1922), Bible School president (1918-1922); also read 553, 556-557.
25 Conn, Like A Mighty Army, 98-100.
Bryant went on to describe the various persecutions he suffered after this experience. Nonetheless, he failed to provide a Wesleyan interpretation of his new experience. It was unlikely that he perceived sanctification to have brought him an overwhelming sense of the love of God. The same comment could apply to Tomlinson's experience of sanctification: "It was a hard fight but I was determined for that 'old man.' He had already given much trouble, and I knew that he would continue to do so if he was not slain. . . . All of a sudden came from above like a thunderbolt from the skies, a sensational power that ended the conflict, and there lay the old man dead at my feet. . . . I was sanctified wholly." It is clear here that what was important for Tomlinson was only the freedom he gained from the eradication of the sinful nature. It is another way of saying that he expressed only a negative view of sanctification. Since The Last Great Conflict was originally written in 1913 (twenty years after Tomlinson's experience of sanctification), I think that the mature Tomlinson would have made the connection between sanctification and love, if love had become essential to his theology of sanctification. The fact that he did not clearly shows that his Wesleyan understanding of sanctification was originally deficient.

IV

While sanctification as an experience was preached by Church of God ministers since the late 1890s, it was only in 1908 that their Minutes recorded their understanding of sanctification. At the General Assembly of 1908, R.G. Spurling, Jr., the founder of The Holiness Church, preached on sanctification. The moderator recorded as follows the nature of sanctification as interpreted by Spurling: "R.G. Spurling spoke on sanctification and the experience as we have today the removal of the carnal nature belonging only to the gospel age, or the time of the New Covenant." It is quite clear from this statement that Spurling, like Tomlinson, shared a negative view of sanctification.

The next statement on sanctification is found in a 1910 list of twenty-five "Teachings" meant to assist ministerial candidates in gaining a better understanding of the church. Teaching number five was the following: "Sanctification subsequent to justification: Rom. 5:2; 1 Cor. 1:30; 1 Thess. 4:3; Heb. 13:12." This statement is very succinct, but the verses cited are very important for none of them treats the theme of "love" so dear to Wesley. 1 John 4:8 and Deut. 6:5, the "love texts" so critical to Wesley, were omitted. Throughout the years many articles were written on sanctification. Such articles abound in the denominational paper, Church of God Evangel, fol-

28 Tomlinson, The Last Great Conflict, 203-204.
Revisiting the Methodist Legacy in American Pentecostalism:...

lowing the Finished Work controversy that erupted in 1910. This controversy was started by William Durham, a Wesleyan-Holiness Pentecostal preacher, who argued for a Reformed re-interpretation of sanctification, namely that it all takes place in regeneration. Most Wesleyan Pentecostals fought the Finished Work adherents because their position militated against the idea of "subsequence." Speaking of his denominational folks Tomlinson, general overseer, wrote in 1915:

Here is a company of sturdy soldiers, both men and women, that are so established in the doctrine of sanctification as a definite and distinct experience subsequent to regeneration that they, like their brothers and sisters of old, would burn at the stake, or be torn by the wild beasts rather than deny it. They would boldly stand on the very brink of hell, if they were forced to do so, and shout in the face of all demons of that dreadful place, "I am sanctified, I am sanctified by the blood of the Lord Jesus Christ."30

Clearly, Tomlinson endorsed the idea of subsequence. As we have seen before, he also believed that the sinful nature was destroyed in sanctification. In 1920 Tomlinson penned these words: "Sanctification as we know it is the destruction of the Old Man—the sin principle. 'Our old man is crucified...the body of sin [sic] destroyed' (Rom 6.6). This is Paul’s explanation. He shows the 'Old Man' no favors. He demands death, not suppression. The blood of Jesus Christ cleanses from all sin."31 The following year, Tomlinson wrote in another article on the same issue: "A man that is not clear on sanctification as a definite work of grace wrought on the heart subsequent to conversion is not a true representative of the Church of God. We are no Zinzendorfians; neither are we in any wise favorable to the repressive theory. We are opposed to painting over the 'old man' and leaving him in the heart. He must be completely eradicated, exterminated, crucified, killed, utterly rooted out."32

In 1919, M.S. Lemons, a member of the Editorial Board of the denominational paper (1910-1916),33 wrote in response to the question "What has been done for a man who is sanctified:" "Sanctification is a second experience subsequent to regeneration. It is taking away the sin of the world—the old Adamic nature—the old man—the man of sin—the carnal mind—the guilty conscience—the proneness to wander."34

In 1922 the Church of God published The Book of Doctrines in order to instruct new converts, members and confirm ministers in the faith. The chapter on sanctification stipulated the following: "Sanctification is a sec-

30Minutes of the Eleventh Annual Assembly (Cleveland: Church of God Publishing House, 1915), 4.
33Conn, Like A Mighty Army, 565.
34M.S. Lemons, Questions Answered on Regeneration, Sanctification, etc. (Cleveland: Church of God Publishing House, 1919), 9.
ond experience, subsequent to Justification. First the sins of the sinner are
pardoned—and then his soul is purified. This is the logical sequence. . . . It
requires a complete consecration, a setting apart, in order to attain the expe-
rience of sanctification. . . . Sanctification consists in taking out of the man,
the very nature of sin. It takes out the ‘prone to wander’ nature, the ‘Old
Man,’ the carnal mind.”35 Accordingly, Church of God leaders demonstrated
a great deal of uniformity in their eradicationist view of sanctification by the
1920s. This position must have been widespread in the church by the 1930s
for John Jernigan, also a member of the Editorial Board (1939-1941), pub-
lished a collection of sermons in which he articulated a quasi-Wesleyan view
of sanctification: “Sanctification is the eradication of sin within man. It
means that sin has been plucked up by the roots. That man is cleansed from
every inward stain.”36 Again Jernigan must have represented the mainstream
view for four years later he was elected general overseer (1944-1948).37
In 1948 the church produced a Declaration of Faith which stipulated that “sanc-
tification” was “subsequent to the new birth, through faith in the blood of
Christ; through the Word, and by the Holy Ghost.”38 This terse statement
spelled out all that the church had to say on sanctification.

V

After the above descriptive section, we now identify some historical fac-
tors that can explain the lack of a full Wesleyan understanding of sanctifica-
tion in the Church of God. First to be mentioned are the theological limita-
tions of the outside preachers who first brought the message to the Church
of God. The doctrine of holiness was introduced to the church by radical
holiness preachers from the Fire-Baptized Holiness Association (FBHA)
who were not exposed to a fully orbed Methodist theology. In fact the 1900
Constitution of the FBHA omitted “love” and “perfect love” in its treatment
of sanctification.

We believe also that Jesus Christ shed His blood for the complete cleansing of the
justified believer from all indwelling sin, and from its pollution subsequent to regen-
eration. . . . We believe also that entire sanctification destroys and eradicates inbred
sin (Rom. 6:6, Heb. 13:12, 1 John 1:7-9, 1 Thes. 5:23, John 17: 17, Acts 26: 18)....
We believe that sanctification is an instantaneous, definite, second work of grace,
obtainable by faith on the part of the fully consecrated believer.39

This fulfills the saying that, “the disciple can’t be greater than the mas-

36John Jernigan, Doctrinal Sermons (Cleveland: Church of God Publishing House, 1940),
96.
37Conn, Like A Mighty Army, 547, 567.
38Minutes of the Forty-second General Assembly (Cleveland: Church of God Publishing
House, 1948), 188.
39Constitution and General Rules of the Fire-Baptized Holiness Association of America
(1900). This is a rare document available from http://www.pctii.org/arc/adobe/
Fbhaa%201900.pdf; Internet; accessed September 26, 2002.
ter.” Conn, the official historian of the Church of God, pinpoints the theological framework of Tipton, McNabb, and Martin, the preachers who brought the holiness message to the church. “They did not preach the theology of sanctification as much as they exhorted from the Scriptures and related the wonderful experience that they had received... The three evangelists presented holiness through the expression of good, which is better.”

Other Church of God scholars also assent to the lack of a thorough understanding in the early history of Church. Hollis Gause saw the preaching of the three evangelists who introduced holiness message to the church as not “the Wesleyan message of sanctification.”

It was identified with the Wesleyan doctrine because of the background of these men, but the Wesleyan doctrine of sanctification does not deal with the overcoming of evil by an overwhelming good. It deals rather with the expulsion of the carnal nature, or the “old man” by an atonement act of divine grace, hence the removal of this carnal nature and a subsequent pursuit of holiness, freed from its hindrances in those who love wholeheartedly. This is the position of Wesleyanism.

This view fails to find strong enunciation in the early stages of the preaching of the church. Frankly in my research on the subject, I have found only one person in the early days of our church who enunciates a clear Wesleyan doctrine of sanctification. This is in the writings of J.B. Ellis.

James Bowers, another Church of God scholar, has a point when he makes these relevant comments:

Although emphasized from the earliest days, sanctification was not clearly understood in the Church of God. Pentecostals inherited a watered-down version of John Wesley’s teaching, focusing on instantaneous sanctification, and absolute sinlessness. . . . Wesley himself had understood sanctification to be both an instantaneous and gradual work which was primarily manifested in perfect love. Failure to comprehend the fuller Wesleyan view resulted in inadequacies, legalistic, and trivialized conceptions of sanctification which helped undermine its importance in the life of the church.

Second, the restorationist impulse of the church led it to ignore the contributions of historical theology to focus on their own understanding of the New Testament. In his early years, R.G. Spurling, Jr., fought against Landmarkism and promoted an anticreedal stance. Lacking a detailed Discipline it is not surprising that the church was not precise in its doctrines.

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Gause, “Development,” 13-14. Ellis articulated his understanding of sanctification in this article: “O preacher, don’t stop with a little setting apart-holiness; but preach the type of holiness that gets on the inside of a person and takes out all sin and the work of the flesh and puts joy and glory in the soul until God is loved with all the heart, all the soul, all the mind and all the strength.” See J.B. Ellis, “Paul and His Gospel,” *Church of God Evangel* (January 20, 1923), 2.

This lack of doctrinal sophistication may also explain why the Church of God did not make sanctification a necessary doctrine in their merger talks with the Mountain Assembly in 1912. Similarly, the lack of doctrinal grounding could be a factor in the defection of many Church of God ministers during the Finished Work controversy in the 1910s.

Third, “the pentecostalization” of the church beginning in 1908 reduced sanctification to “a means to an end,” in that it was important only as preparatory to the third blessing, the baptism of the Holy Spirit.

Finally, power politics heavily contributed to further diminish the already simplified (pre-1940) understanding of sanctification. In the 1940s prominent ministers of the church who did not agree with the Wesleyan understanding of sanctification were put on ad hoc committee to clarify the doctrine of sanctification. The reason for the creation of this committee was that many pastors were not preaching sanctification as a second blessing. So, the church felt compelled to address the issue. It was this ad hoc committee that drafted the famous 1948 Declaration of Faith. The language of the Declaration was partially Wesleyan since sanctification was seen as “subsequent” to the new birth. However, the story is much more complex according David Roebuck, a leading Church of God historian: “The Declaration of Faith has been used to support both sides of the issue, however. For example, some who do not support the Wesleyan Holiness position interpret the word ‘subsequent’ in paragraph six as logical rather than temporal. Sanctification follows the new birth in God’s plan of salvation; yet, in actual human time sanctification and the new birth occur simultaneously.”

Roebuck continues in the same vein:

One major result has been that there is less of an emphasis on the doctrine of sanctification. This was the opinion of Cecil B. Knight in his Master of Arts thesis in 1968. Knight who later served as General Overseer and who currently serves as President of the Church of God School of Theology, wrote that the Declaration of Faith was an effort to appease both sides. Since that time the Church has never held a unified position. Each Minister has held to his particular position. The result has been a total lack of teaching or preaching on the subject. . . The general disposition has been that the subject is rarely preached or taught lest it arouse old animosities and create new schisms in the organization.

All the above factors coalesced to dilute further the veneer of

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46 David Roebuck, “Sanctification and the Church of God,” Reflections upon Church of God Heritage (Fall 1992), 3.
Wesleyanism that the church had acquired in late 19th century. As the Church of God became less and less Wesleyan, there was no way that its concept of sanctification could have become more Methodistic.

VI

Methodist ideas impacted the theology of the early Pentecostal movement. However, it does not follow that all early Pentecostals had a clear grasp of the Wesleyan understanding of sanctification. From a reading of primary materials, it is quite clear that Church of God pioneers agreed with Wesley on sanctification insofar as this experience was subsequent to the new birth and that it entailed the eradication of the sinful nature. Surprisingly, Wesley’s concern for the infusion of “perfect love” in the second blessing is virtually missing throughout the theological history of the Church of God in its first fifty years as a holiness church. This leads us to conclude that the Methodist legacy in Pentecostalism was very nuanced and not necessarily as strong as it could be imagined. Of course, the situation in the Church of God did not speak for all the other holiness Pentecostal churches. A preliminary review of the Discipline (1902) of the Pentecostal Holiness Church seems to suggest that this particular group retained a more Wesleyan view of sanctification. Another historical conclusion which may be posited is that the holiness people who were more familiar with Methodism joined the non-Pentecostal holiness groups like the Church of the Nazarene and that it was the more radical and the less informed who finally joined the Pentecostal movement after its emergence in 1901. Overall the Methodist legacy in Pentecostalism, though very nuanced, must be appreciated for what it is.

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48 Article ten of the Discipline speaks of the consecrated believer as follows: “He is able to exercise sanctifying faith in Jesus (Acts 16:18 who baptizes him (Matt. 3:11) with the Holy Ghost and fire which baptism destroys inbred sin and brings purity... This is the second blessing or second work of grace. This is perfect freedom from sin—all sin—both inward and outward. There is now nothing in the heart but love and Jesus is crowned within.” The Discipline of the Holiness Church (Goldsboro: Nash Brothers, 1902); available from http://pctii.org/arc/1902.html; Internet; accessed, September 26, 2002.