

PHOEBE PALMER: CHOSEN, TRIED, TRIUMPHANT
AN EXAMINATION OF HER CALLING
IN LIGHT OF CURRENT RESEARCH

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I

Phoebe Palmer, whom many refer to as the “Mother of the Holiness Movement,” has often been left unmentioned in many accounts of religion in America.¹ Happily, however, with the growing interest in women’s studies, new research is being conducted which seeks to understand Palmer and her role in the religious history of America during the antebellum period. There is much to be studied in relation to her life as she was a well-known revivalist,² theologian, author, and philanthropist.

Phoebe Palmer was a pivotal figure in the holiness movement.³ Her work as a revivalist began when she became the leader of “The Tuesday Meeting for the Promotion of Holiness” which met in the parlor of her home. Although these meetings were originally designed for women only, men soon came in droves as well. In addition to the Tuesday Meeting, Phoebe Palmer also began to lead camp meetings and revivals throughout America, Canada, and England. The influence of these services, moreover, crossed denominational lines. According to Thomas Oden, in developing her doctrine of holiness, Palmer “deeply affected four worldwide religious traditions: Wesleyan, Holiness, Pentecostal, and Charismatic.”⁴

¹Histories of religion in America which make no reference to Phoebe Palmer include Edwin S. Gaustad, *A Religious History of America*, H. Sheldon Smith, Robert T. Handy, and Lefferts Loetscher, *American Christianity*, J. Gordon Melton, *Encyclopedia of American Religion*, William McLoughlin, Jr., *Modern Revivalism*, and *Eerdman’s Handbook of Christianity in America*. Thomas C. Oden, ed., *Phoebe Palmer: Selected Writings* (New York: Paulist Press, 1988), 4.

Even Sydney E. Ahlstrom’s *A Religious History of the American People* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1972), though mentioning Palmer’s “extraordinary career as the greatest among countless other Methodist propagandists for the doctrine [holiness],” nevertheless, fails to mention her anywhere else in his large volume. For the reference above, see 478.

²Melvin Dieter claims that “It is a commonly accepted truism in American church history that from the time of the Great Awakening until the close of the nineteenth century revivalism was the dominant force in the shaping of American Protestantism.” Melvin Easterday Dieter, *The Holiness Revival of the Nineteenth Century* (Metuchen, NJ: The Scarecrow Press, Inc., 1980), 1.

³In this article, the holiness movement is viewed as “the movement at the center of an accelerating current of some of the steadily flowing streams of Christian tradition.” Dieter, 6.

⁴Oden, 5.

As an author, Palmer wrote very prolifically with items ranging from poetry to books, journal articles, pamphlets, diaries, and letters. In 1839, Palmer and her sister, Sarah Lankford, helped in the establishment of a journal dedicated to the spread of holiness. Later, in 1864, with the help of her husband, Walter Palmer, Phoebe took over the journal and became its general editor. By 1870, *Guide to Holiness* reached circulation of 37,000 subscribers, the largest in its history.⁵

Phoebe Palmer was a dedicated humanitarian. She helped found the Hedding Church, a city mission work, as well as worked in The New York Female Assistance Society for the Relief and Religious Instruction of the Sick Poor. She distributed religious tracts in the slums and visited prisoners on a regular basis. Her most well-known contribution entailed the establishing of the Five Points Mission, which housed twenty families and provided schooling and religious instruction. Her motive for humanitarian work remained the salvation of souls. She recognized, however, the necessity of meeting physical essentials as a vital corollary to providing for spiritual needs.

In recognizing the tremendous influence Phoebe Palmer exerted, it is intriguing to examine how this woman decided to surpass proper patterns of decorum and enter circles of authority widely understood as exclusively male domain. The question of this article is, "what ushered Palmer into such an influential role?" To answer this question, this essay first offers a brief biographical sketch. Then, examination of a previously unpublished account⁶ of a pivotal experience will be conducted to let Palmer shed light on this question herself. Last, some conclusions based on this investigation will be given.

II

Phoebe Palmer was born in New York City on December 18, 1807 to Dorothea Wade and Henry Worrall. Her Methodist roots can be traced to England where her father had been converted under the guidance of John Wesley. At the age of 19, on September 28, 1827, Phoebe married Walter Palmer, a physician. They continued to reside in New York City. Writing her thoughts in her diary regarding the upcoming event, she records, "I have not approached this crisis, without careful circumspection and prayer. . . . In religious, moral, and intellectual endowments, he stands approved. The best of all is, that he is a servant of the Lord."⁷

The Palmers had six children. Unfortunately, however, three died prematurely. The first, Alexander, who was born one day prior to the Palmers' first wedding anniversary, Sept. 28, 1828, died after a few short months.⁸ The

⁵Oden, 6.

⁶This account is found in Oden's selections of Palmer's writings. To my knowledge, no critique of this piece has been offered to date.

⁷Richard Wheatley, *The Life and Letters of Mrs. Phoebe Palmer*, reprint for "The Higher Christian Life": Sources for the Study of the Holiness, Pentecostal, and Keswick Movements (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1984), 26.

⁸Oden, 10. There is some discrepancy between Oden's account and that of Harold Raser on the exact dating of this birth. See also, Harold E. Raser, *Phoebe Palmer: Her Life and Thought*, Studies in Women and Religion vol. 22 (Lewistown, NY: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1947).

second, Samuel, born in 1830, lived only seven weeks. In 1833, their first daughter, Sarah, was born. Shortly thereafter Phoebe gave birth to a second daughter, Eliza, in 1835.⁹ She, however, joined her two brothers in premature death due to a tragic event. The maid was refilling a lamp near the baby's cradle and the linens caught fire from the burning alcohol. Palmer heard the screams from another room and ran to the nursery to find her baby girl badly burned. Eliza died a few hours following the accident. Two other children survived, Phoebe and Walter Clark, Jr.¹⁰

In Phoebe's mind, the deaths of her children were not random occurrences, but were filled with purpose. She related these to her spiritual struggle, and saw them as acts from God designed to teach her how to release her grasp on "earthly treasures." She frequently reminded herself that "God takes our treasure to heaven, that our hearts may be there also."¹¹

Although Phoebe Palmer never had a definite conversion experience, on July 26, 1837, she had what Wesley termed a "second blessing." She subsequently referred to this event as her "day of days." The remainder of her life entailed a dedication to being a "Bible Christian" which would lead Phoebe to various arenas of work for the spread of the doctrine of holiness.

Sarah Lankford, Phoebe's sister, who claimed to have experienced entire sanctification prior to Phoebe, was holding a women's prayer meeting in the home that they shared at 54 Rivington Street. In December 1839, Professor Thomas Cogswell Upham, a philosopher of Bowdoin College attended the Tuesday meeting. Thereafter, men began participating in these gatherings. After her own sanctification experience, and Sarah's move away from New York City, Phoebe began to lead this assembly. In the years prior to 1840, Phoebe was active in various church-related activities. She taught the "Young Ladies' Bible Class" at the Allen Street Church. She also frequently led Walter's class meetings due to his busy medical practice. In 1839, Phoebe was appointed to preside over her own "mixed" class meeting. She was the first woman to be appointed to this type of leadership role in American Methodism.¹² While these responsibilities are notable, it was the Tuesday Meeting that catapulted Phoebe into expanding ministry. In 1843, her first widely-known book, *The Way of Holiness* was published. Others soon followed and her publications were carried to England and Europe so that soon she became an international figure.

⁹Raser, 40.

¹⁰Raser, 42.

¹¹Raser, 32.

¹²In December 1839, the Rev. J. L. Gilder appointed Phoebe Palmer to this position. Although this practice was not unusual in England, America had not witnessed the leadership of women in such situations. Wheatley writes, "The consequences amply justified its wisdom, and awakened the inquiry why such an element of power, as feminine leadership, had not been more widely adopted by American Methodists." Wheatley, 178.

From 1859–63, the Palmers led revival services in Britain. Upon their return to America, Phoebe worked as the editor of the journal, *Guide to Holiness*. Additionally, in the years 1866–1870, she made several journeys West and South visiting such states as Ohio, Kansas, Louisiana, and even California.

Phoebe Palmer died on November 2, 1874. Rev. John Parker remarked in a tribute on November 15,

I doubt if her influence can be estimated in the present life. She has put in operation, agencies and means for usefulness, which must continue their activity, till the end of time. It may be justly doubted whether any minister or layman of our times, has been so influential for good. And I have no recollection of any record of usefulness by a female, in the entire history of the church, that will at all compare with hers. She was the woman of the Christianity of our times.¹³

III

A common question addressed by scholars in the search for understanding Palmer's call to ministry is "where did she derive the authority to do what she did?" In her early years she did not seek any type of public ministry, but seemed content to be the wife of a wealthy physician and act in ways accepted as appropriate for an upper-middle class woman. Yet, a definitive change occurred that seemed to propel her into a radically different sort of life. Frequent answers to explain this change include the death of her children and her experience of sanctification. These studies, however, did not have the benefit of a newly uncovered document.

Happily, however, Oden's collection of original writings provides a fresh opportunity to consider Phoebe's activities in light of recent evidence. In Oden's volume there is a piece Palmer wrote in 1874 very near to her death entitled "*Refining Processes: 'I have chosen thee.' 'Great Trials,' Great Triumphs.*" This account of her calling has not previously been made available in print. Moreover, in my research, I have not found any scholars who have addressed it. Although written in 1874, this account tells of an experience some 34 years previous, placing the actual event in 1840.¹⁴ To put this time period in perspective, this is the year that Palmer became the leader of the Tuesday Meetings for Holiness, and shortly thereafter her publication, *The Way of Holiness*, appeared.

The narrative reveals a spiritual struggle where Palmer experienced intense humiliation and awareness of sin. It seemed to her that "all sensible, joyous experiences were withheld. . . ."¹⁵ She was tempted to doubt the faithfulness of God, and even spoke of these days in terms of their being a "fight of faith." One morning, in the midst of tremendous travail, she opened her Bible

¹³Wheatley, 631.

¹⁴This date corresponds to the one Palmer mentions in the chronicle itself.

¹⁵Oden, 323.

and her eyes landed on the text of Haggai 2:23: "In that day, saith the Lord of hosts, will I take thee O Zerubbabel my servant saith the Lord, and will make thee as a signet; for I have chosen thee saith the Lord of hosts." Remembering that crucial moment Palmer relates,

the curtain of the future seemed uplifted. Yes! The Spirit took of things to come and revealed them to me. Perceptions of the great blessedness of the work to which the Lord might call me in identification with the great fundamental truth of Christianity "*Holiness to the Lord*," were granted, but with these glorious perceptions, a view was also given of the trials I should be called to endure, in connection with my open identification with Truth.¹⁶

The implications for Palmer were tremendous. It is not difficult to suppose that since she recognized this verse as having particular significance for her, she perceived herself as being chosen by God to fulfill a specific mission. As she moved into her work of spreading the doctrine of holiness, she would remember God had promised her efforts would be sealed with God's approval and authority.

That Palmer understood this verse in these terms is quite plausible. Following this experience she began to act in ways that were still viewed as inappropriate for women. Yet, she broke these social morés because of the authority she believed she possessed from God. She trusted this message meant she was called, like Zerubbabel, to undertake a specific task. As Zerubbabel was called to work toward the rebuilding of the temple, Phoebe was to work toward the spread of holiness. The authority she had to do this was that God had called her to this task and given her his "stamp" of authority. She did not need any human approval to do the things she was called to do. Her authority resided in God alone.

This document illuminating Phoebe's calling revolves around three themes: being chosen, experiencing trials, and realizing triumphs. The following is an exploration of these themes as Palmer understood them evidenced through her writings.

Chosen

The first theme of this newly published document, therefore, is entailed in the phrase, "I have chosen thee." Knowing what we do from her experience in 1840, many of Palmer's comments in her journals and letters take on new meaning. The idea of being called to a specific task permeates many of her writings. In a letter to Mrs. James in December of 1841, Palmer admits,

I have been attending meetings in Jersey City, of much the same character as those at Burlington; I cannot describe to you the weight of responsibility I at times, feel to be resting upon me, in view of these various calls, as they seem to be accumulating. By the manner in which I am sustained, I have no reason to think otherwise than that the invitations I receive, and the providential openings which seem to say, "Go forward," should be regarded as the voice of God.¹⁷

¹⁶Oden, 324.

¹⁷Oden, 153.

Evidence exists which reveals Palmer's insecurity regarding her public role. A journal entry in December 1844 reveals this continuing struggle. She writes, "How my *nature* still shrinks from this publicity, but I never refuse, and grace *always sustains*. Though nature recoils, yet the divine principle within me always goes out in searching for the mind of the Spirit."¹⁸ In August 1848, she writes regarding the Vincentown camp meeting, "Nature shrank from going, but on lifting my heart to God for instruction, duty seemed plain."¹⁹ Although Palmer remained reluctant to assume her public role in camp meetings and revivals, she resolved to accommodate herself to this work because she sensed God calling her to this task. She was to spread the "great fundamental truth of Christianity." From this appointment she could not resign.

Great Trials

The second theme of the 1874 document is "great trials." Of these, two were particularly important to Phoebe Palmer. The first involved misunderstandings of her teachings that resulted from her public life. The second included the many periods of sickness that she endured.

Palmer saw disputes over her doctrinal thought as "great trials." A diary entry in 1847 reveals one such tribulation.

I have had some seasons of trial, deep trial, of late. The Lord has said to my heart, "Take your brethren, the prophets, as an example of suffering," etc.; and great has been the courage with which the Lord has inspired me, in view of those who have gone before. I can truly say with Paul, "I know what it is to be abased, and what it is to abound." My views (doctrinal) have been misrepresented by those who do not seem to love holiness, and are not disposed to be at pains to read what I have written.²⁰

Palmer was a theologian in the sense that she constructed theological views on certain subjects and sought to distribute these views through her writings and public discourses. Because she was active more as a revivalist than as a systematic theologian, she encountered opposition to some of her doctrinal opinions, especially regarding the issue of holiness. Although she was a Methodist, and therefore comfortable with Arminian thought, she nevertheless emphasized the role of the believer to such an extent that she was accused of promoting the antinomian view "that when one is justified, one is thereby sanctified, and hence there would be no need to make any further commitment beyond that of acceptance of God's act of pardon."²¹ Her theology of holiness according to Harold Raser developed along the lines of two convictions: the absolute necessity of holiness as a prerequisite to see God,

¹⁸Oden, 211.

¹⁹Wheatley, 278.

²⁰Oden, 216.

²¹Oden, 216.

and that holiness is a blessing and duty of the believer.²² As she continued to propagate her views of holiness, she had to respond on several occasions to people of the antinomian persuasion.

Moreover, around the middle of the century, Hiram Mattison charged Palmer with departing from Wesley and introducing “strange doctrines” into Methodism. He accused her of four mistakes. First, she confused entire consecration with entire sanctification. Second, she made believing that one is sanctified the same thing as being sanctified. Third, she urged the profession of holiness before one could be sure holiness had been obtained. Fourth, she dismissed the need for the subjective witness of the spirit. Of course, Palmer refuted these charges by appealing to Scripture and John Wesley.²³

Trials continued to weigh on Phoebe Palmer’s mind. After the war, she wrote a letter dated May 12, 1866, to her sister about her current theological opponents. She laments,

With Unitarianism and Universalism, and general obtuseness on the subject of everything that constitutes an orthodox Christianity, we are being called to contend. Even members of the M.E. Church think that revival services are too *exciting*, and that we are making quite too much ado in getting people forward to the altar, the thing being new to them. Some of them also quarrel with the subject of holiness.²⁴

The trials of illness also plagued Phoebe throughout her life. Writing in August of 1835, prior to her experience of sanctification in 1837, and the calling of August 1840, she shares,

I have been raised almost as from the dead, having recently passed through a very critical illness. . . . I have long felt that the Lord has a work for me to do, but I need an inspiration of power beyond what I now possess. While flickering between the two worlds, during my late extreme illness, I had views of responsibility, and feeling unlike any I have heard described.²⁵

During portions of 1841 and 1842, she experienced “much severe pain of body,” which she said made her “unfit for mental effort.” Palmer suffered another severe bout of illness during 1845 and 1846. This illness caused her to curtail much of her speaking. Raser reports that it was during this time period that she gave up most of her local parish work due to sickness.²⁶ Just eight years before she died she endured another year of serious sickness. By 1871 chronic health problems forced Palmer to slow her schedule once again. Even though during 1872 to 1873 she was active, she seemed to realize that the end of her life was imminent. Her journal reveals that she was contemplating death. “I have . . . entered upon what has been, with thousands, the last decade of life.”²⁷

²²Raser, 151.

²³Charles Edward White, *The Beauty of Holiness: Phoebe Palmer As Theologian, Revivalist, Feminist and Humanitarian* (Grand Rapids: Francis Asbury Press, 1986), 143.

²⁴Wheatley, 417 and Oden, 294.

²⁵Wheatley, 27.

²⁶Raser, 89.

²⁷Raser, 72.

In May of 1872, after visiting the cemetery, she wrote, "It is awaiting the time when this now active frame, shall cease its pulsations, and the spirit ascend to the God who gave it."²⁸ As she experienced these adverse times and seasons of sickness, I imagine Palmer kept recalling her 1840 call which promised her "great trials."

Great Triumphs

The third theme in Palmer's 1840 calling account is "great triumphs." She knew that even though her trials would be tremendous, triumph would ultimately reign. In reflecting on her calling in light of the path her life had taken, she said,

While He revealed to me that I should have great trials, He also assured me that I should have great triumphs. So great and continuous have been the triumphs of truth in connection with the precious theme of Holiness, that my life has been one great Psalm of "Glory to God in the highest."²⁹

Her journal entry on January 25, 1841 claimed that "the Lord indulged me by permitting me to see my labors crowned with almost immediate success."³⁰ Moreover, writing to Bishop and Mrs. Hamline on July 30, 1846, she exclaimed, "The cause prospers with us. Our itinerant fellowship meeting, which was established purposely for the promotion of holiness, in our various churches, is commanding increasing interest."³¹ Even a cursory reading of Phoebe Palmer's writings reveals that moments of great joy and triumph abound.

The fact that Palmer waited until near her death to write the account of her calling is intriguing. For many years she kept this experience to herself. She may have wanted to test the accuracy of the calling after having lived most of her life. We can imagine that she continually weighed the experiences of her life against the calling, seeking to determine how God was bringing about God's purposes through her. She may have thought that if she shared this experience with others, they would have doubted its authenticity. Whatever her reasons for her slow recording of this event, we can suppose that had her life not conformed to the way in which she understood this calling, she would not have recorded it after reflecting on her life. Thus, it is reasonable to think she believed her life did, in fact, correspond to the message given her in 1840.

Interestingly, there is a possible foreshadowing of the recording of the calling event in her late journal entry of December 10, 1873. In light of the 1840 experience, it is quite insightful. She wrote,

Of these wonderful solemnities and responsibilities, I have not a slight experimental apprehension. That God has called me to stand before the people, and proclaim His truth,

²⁸Raser, 72.

²⁹Oden, 324.

³⁰Wheatley, 186.

³¹Wheatley, 199.

has long been beyond question. So fully has God made my commission known to my own soul, and so truly has He set His seal upon it, before the upper and lower world, in the conversion of thousands of precious souls, and the sanctification of a multitude of believers, that even Satan does not seem to question that my call is divine.³²

Although scholars have heretofore claimed that Palmer's call to ministry resided in the death of her children or her moment of entire sanctification, I contend that this new evidence refutes such a position. Truly, the two momentous events of deaths and grace helped shape Palmer's life and her understanding of her role in it. It was her 1840 experience, however, which served as the overriding impetus to catapult her into public ministry. Even in her account, Palmer mentions "Since that hour I have experimentally apprehended the solemn significance of my holy calling as never before."³³ Clearly, Palmer believed she was meant to fulfill a God-given task. That is the reason she led the life she did.

IV

Phoebe Palmer is an important figure in the story of the holiness movement, the history of revivalism in America, 19th century religious thought, and the role of women in religion in America. Though neglected in the past, her contributions are now being examined and included in the story of American religion.

That Phoebe Palmer felt keenly a sense of calling is supported by her writings. This calling entailed three aspects that she used to reflect upon her life. First, she indeed was called by God to perform a specific task—to spread the truth of holiness. Second, as a result of her activity, Palmer would experience "great trials." Last, even though trials would be plentiful, "great triumphs" would prevail.

This sense of calling and the actual narrative that Palmer recorded help us answer the question of what motivated her to undertake such a difficult assignment. Although the deaths of her children and the sanctification moment both played crucial roles in Palmer's formation, it was her 1840 experience that provided the needed impetus to usher her into the public roles of revivalist, theologian, author, and philanthropist.

³²Oden, 312.

³³Oden, 324.