

For Response
Sept 2006

HOLINESS, WOMEN, AND THEIR MUSIC

Holiness has taken many forms and understandings in Jewish and Christian thought, behavior, and theology. To some holiness is a way of living, open to God's guidance and example. Others see holiness as a code of behavior, a list of dos and don'ts. To others holiness is a characteristic of God and just as God is holy, so we as worshippers of God are to be holy. Holiness is also understood to be the sense of awe one has for a God that is separate from us but in whose image we are made. Biblically, holiness is about all of the above, but the emphasis in both testaments is on holiness that is expressed as justice, righteousness, and a right relationship with God, persons, and all of God's creation.

John Wesley had at the core of his theology holiness, or as he often called it, the doctrine of perfect love. Others have called this sanctification (to be made holy), Christian perfection, second blessing, or full salvation. For Wesley perfect love was both inwardly and outwardly expressed. It was a total commitment to God with life centered in God and continually seeking God's presence and grace. It was also expressed in loving the neighbor, the stranger, and in doing good works based on justice for all God's children. To Wesley, sanctification or perfect love was an ongoing process, one in which you are involved throughout your lifetime. Leonard Sweet has defined this Methodist type of holiness as a "lived holiness, a synergy of faith and works, moving the world from injustice to justice, from cruelty to compassion, from evil to good, from lies to truth...[This holiness] is an affair of public policy." Wesley's holiness did not imply that one was without fault or temptation, but that life was lived in love and filled with the Spirit of God.

In the 1830s in New England, Charles Finney, a Presbyterian clergyman, held a series of open revivals emphasizing that each person could choose salvation and Christian perfection. His message of free choice, the importance of testimony, and availability of holiness for anyone (men, women, slaves) changed the religious and social landscape of the time. He allowed women to pray in public; he encouraged the anti-slavery movement; and he assisted in founding Oberlin College which admitted both women and blacks.

Methodist preachers and lay people, as well as those from other denominations, became very active in what became known as the holiness movement. Phoebe Palmer was a Methodist laywoman living in New York City. She saw sanctification as a matter of commitment and laying claim to God's promises. She felt that all that was needed was to lay one's self on the altar (give one's self to Christ) and become instantly sanctified through the baptism of the Holy Spirit. She advocated public testimony to what God had done. She also urged a total commitment to God's will and work. Mrs. Palmer claimed full salvation in 1837 and by 1840 she was holding meetings each week in her home for the promotion of holiness. At the meetings, first attended by women and then later by men and clergy, there was testimony, prayer, and encouragement. Mrs. Palmer wrote and spoke about holiness and traveled all over the country advocating the commitment of women and men to God's will in their lives, giving special attention to the spiritual well-being of women..

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I rise to walk in heaven's own light,
above the world and sin,

with heart made pure and garments white,
and Christ enthroned within.

Leila Morris (1862-1929) had a holiness experience in 1892 at Mountain Lake Park in New Jersey. She wrote many hymns (both words and music) as well as serving as Sunday school teacher, choir member, and a leader in the missionary society in her local Methodist Episcopal Church. The first stanza of "I Long to Be Holy" speaks of the yearning for holiness:

I long to be holy, all spotless within,
free from the defilement of every known sin;
the past with its follies all under the blood,
soul, body and spirit, all yielded to God.

In "We are Full Salvation Soldiers," Mrs. Morris expresses in a militant manner the spreading of holiness through out the land.

We are full salvation soldiers
marching at our King's command,
in obedience to his orders,
going up and down the land;
lifting high the cross of Jesus
with his banner wide unfurled,
preaching full and free salvation
to a lost and sinful world.

Another of her hymns, "Nearer, Still Nearer" speaks of a relationship with Jesus and the haven that Jesus provides.

Nearer, still nearer, close to thy heart,
draw me, my Savior, so precious thou art;
fold me, O fold me close to thy breast,
shelter me safe in that "Haven of Rest."

Eliza E. Hewitt (1851-1920) was a teacher in Philadelphia and an active Presbyterian laywoman. In her hymn "Count On Me," she combines an understanding of holiness with a call to missionary service.

The Lord has need of workers, to till His field today,
so kindly He has led me to walk in wisdom's way;
I pray for grace to help me with all my heart to say,
O blessed Savior, count on me.

I count on Thee, dear Master for cleansing in Thy blood,
for constant streams of blessing, a never failing flood;
to ever new fruition I see Thy mercies bud,
O blessed Savior, count on me.

I'll bear another's burden along a lonely way,
or teach that burden-bearer with confidence to pray;

in service ever loyal at home or far away,
O blessed Savior, count on me.

Fanny Crosby (1820-1915) was the writer of 8500 hymns. She was a member of the Methodist Episcopal Church, blind from infancy, and an active mission worker. She was a friend of Phoebe Palmer's and spent many summers in holiness camp meetings, but she never claimed sanctification. Her hymns were sung at revivals, camp meetings, and Sunday services. We still sing her songs of commitment, assurance and faith, eternal life, and prayer. "I Am Thine, O Lord" is in the section of the 1989 United Methodist Hymnal entitled "Personal Holiness." It speaks of hearing the Lord's call, of knowing the love of Jesus, and of a desire for total commitment to service.

I am thine, O Lord, I have heard thy voice,
and it told thy love to me;
but I long to rise in the arms of faith
and be closer drawn to thee.

Consecrate me now to thy service, Lord,
by the power of grace divine;
let my soul look up with a steadfast hope,
and my will be lost in thine.

These women and many others attempted to live a life that was holy; a life that gave them "freedom as whole persons in Jesus Christ." We too can be holy. We too can be whole persons, for each of us is "striving on toward perfection" in our understanding of the faith, in our inward journey toward unity with God, and in our outward journey of doing justice and serving our neighbor.

Joyce D. Sohl