

the fourth of the 'Four Alls'

All can know themselves saved to the uttermost

BY PAUL SMITH



*Former Chair of Headway,
Paul Smith, presents
Methodism's magnificent
vision of holiness.*

Turning to the fourth of the 'Four Alls of Methodism' we affirm that there is no limit to what the grace of God can do in a life yielded to him. We are focusing our attention on the life of holiness.

It is clear from both his correspondence and his preaching that this was a central emphasis of John Wesley's ministry. Writing to Robert Carr Brackenbury, on 15 September 1789, he affirmed that 'Full sanctification is the grand depositum which God had lodged with the people called Methodists; and for the sake of propagating this chiefly he appeared to have raised us up' (Letters of John Wesley Vol 8. p. 238). The same emphasis is to be found in so many of Charles' hymns:

*O for a heart to praise my God,
A heart from sin set free
Saviour from sin I wait to prove
That Jesus is thy healing Name
To lose when perfected in love
What 'er I have or can or am
I stay me on thy faithful word
The servant shall be as his Lord.*

To understand where this emphasis came from we need to turn back to the Rectory in Epworth. Both his father, Samuel, and his mother, Susanna, came from Puritan stock. They had a clear understanding of what God required, and believed that, as his children, we had a responsibility to do our best to achieve it. We need to believe the right things; the faith once for all delivered to the saints, contained in scripture and crystallized in the creeds of the Church; and we need to do the best we can to offer our lives to God in service and in gratitude for his goodness toward us. This

was the atmosphere of the home and a responsibility which Susanna took very seriously. All the children were nurtured with the aim of enabling them to achieve these twin goals. This determined the course of John Wesley's life as he pursued the life of discipleship.

Many have argued that it was this which led both John and Charles to offer for the Anglican priesthood and in turn to offer for service in the colonies, in their case America, but if they hoped that such service would bring any sense of achievement they were both disappointed. Returning to England in disgrace he wrote, whilst passing the Lizard Point on the tip of Cornwall, 'I went to convert the Indians but who will convert me?'

THE MOMENT OF REALISATION

The turning point came on 24 May 1738 when his heart was 'strangely warmed'. From that moment his whole ministry moved in a new direction. We often emphasise the change of heart which caused this revolution, but there was also a change of mind. Crucially the Aldersgate experience convinced him that becoming a 'real Christian' was not essentially about what we do; it is about what God does in us. This must also be true, he reasoned, with the life which follows conversion. It cannot be true that we are justified by faith and sanctified by works. God needs to do it all. We only need to yield to his great desire.

Further, whilst he acknowledged that sanctification can be a gradual process, the main thrust of his teaching was that, just as we are justified in a moment, so we can be sanctified in a moment.

No doubt there will be a process leading to that moment, and certainly there will be development from it; but the change, being saved to the uttermost, occurs in an instant. We can be entirely saved from sin in this life.

All this begs the question 'What is sin?' Wesley understood it to be the wilful transgression of the known will of God. We can act in ignorance either not knowing the will of God or inadvertently transgressing it, but Wesley would not have identified this as sin. Things like lapses of memory, for example, are not sin. The intention is not there, and clearly intention is very important in our consideration. Sometimes the intention can be right but the result wrong. As long as the intention is right, it is not sin, even though it may fall far short of perfection. Your child returns from school and proudly presents you with a painting he has done. You stick it on the fridge door whereupon he tells you that it is upside down. Good intentions but less than perfection.

Yet despite these considerations Wesley continued to insist on using the term 'Christian Perfection'. When challenged he retorted that this was the phrase that Jesus used (Matthew 5:48). To Wesley it was inconceivable that Jesus would make a demand which was unattainable. No, the very fact that he requires it means that it is attainable. We can know this 'Second Blessing' here and now.

THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE DOCTRINE

It was in the form that we have just outlined that this doctrine was exported to America with the Methodist missionaries, and the theological scrutiny it received there resulted in a number of significant developments. For one thing, largely as the result of the influence of Oberlin College and Charles Finney in particular, this second blessing was identified with the baptism in the Holy Spirit, but note: there is no emphasis here on the gifts of the Spirit, for that we have to wait until Asuza Street in 1904. Significantly, the second blessing was identified as the result of a new and deeper work of the Holy Spirit within the believer's life.

Once this relationship between the second blessing and the work of the Holy Spirit was established it gained traction through the ministries of people like Phoebe Palmer, Sarah Lankford and Robert Pearsall Smith, together with his wife Hannah Whitall Smith. Robert Pearsall Smith published a book entitled 'Holiness through Faith' in 1870. It proved to be one of the foundation works of the growing holiness movement.

It is rather difficult for us to imagine, but the Second Evangelical Awakening gave rise to a growing number of people longing for holiness. It was a mass movement much like the charismatic movement in a more recent generation. There was a deep desire for entire sanctification. In response, a number of conventions were held in Oxford and Brighton, one of which was attended by Rev T D Harford-Battersby, a canon of the Church of England. He hungered for a deeper spirituality and following the Brighton convention of 1875 he consecrated himself afresh to God which led him to 'a peace in trusting Christ for present and future sanctification which exceeded our utmost hopes'. He and his friend Robert Wilson both wanted to be involved in the promotion of holiness and together they determined that a new convention with that aim ought to be held. Harford-Battersby suggested that this be held in Keswick, his own parish, and a large marquee be pitched on the vicarage lawn to accommodate the crowds. Thus the Keswick convention was born. The promotion of holiness was its stated aim and in

those early days, as the record of speaker's messages records, the thrilling result. It is clear that the Keswick convention has developed since that time, but that's another story.

HOLINESS TODAY

We may find this brief resume of holiness history and teaching both interesting and confusing, so we need to finish on a positive note. God is seeking people who not only know what Christ has done for them, but experience what the Holy Spirit can do within them. This is the great need of the church. We don't need better organisation or more training classes. We need more people who have been made like Jesus through the work of the Spirit within. In a chaotic world where ordinary people long for something which really can

make a difference we need folk whose lives have been transformed and who are living examples of the peace which Christ can bring. Well might we sing 'Let the beauty of Jesus be seen in me' and make it our prayer that this will be our daily experience.

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PRAYER FOCUS

ALL CAN KNOW THEMSELVES SAVED TO THE UTTERMOST

Pray for the Holy Spirit to bring transformation of heart soul and mind in the lives of all throughout the Connexion and beyond; a desire within individuals for a deeper spirituality and a closer relationship with God that all may know themselves saved to the uttermost. (Psalm 63:1-5; Jeremiah 29:13)

FOCUS ON THE CHURCH

The Methodist Church: The president and vice president of Conference, Rev Richard Andrew and Mr Matthew Forsyth as they take up office; for a return to an emphasis of spreading Scriptural Holiness across the land; at the start of a new connexional year, for all presbyters, deacons, local preachers, and worship leaders to receive fresh inspiration of the Holy Spirit; Probationers taking up their first appointments; those who have come to serve in Britain from the world church that they will adapt to a different culture and new ways of doing things. (Deuteronomy 5:32-33; 1 Peter 5:1-4).

Cliff College: Rev Dr Andrew Stobart as he takes up office as principal; uptake of students for the new academic year; continuity for both staff and students in a new 'phase' of the college; suitable placements for students to reach out to communities; for adequate funding and resources. (Romans 10:13-15; Hebrews 13:20-21).

FOCUS ON NATIONAL ISSUES

Education: Minister for Education; schools across the country – good curriculum content; the Cass Report to be upheld and enshrined in law; universities – all students, especially those attending for the first time; Christian unions reaching out with the gospel of Christ, for their protection; for an openness among the student population to the gospel and eagerness to find out more; courage for all Christian teachers and lecturers to stand up for Christian values. (Jeremiah 29:11; Colossians 2:8).

Anti-social Behaviour: Creative solutions to the underlying issues which are causing a rise in crime and lawlessness in parts of the country; the tackling of gang culture, knife crime and the use of drugs and alcohol; for youth workers reaching out to those stuck in the cycle of violence, drug and alcohol abuse, particularly Christian youth workers; for perpetrators to find new direction, focus, and positivity in Christ, transforming their lives; support for victims. (Psalm 34:13-18; 2 Thessalonians 1:6-7).

FOCUS ON WORLD ISSUES:

Russia/Ukraine: Pray for President Volodymyr Zelensky in the volatile situation he faces; for Ukraine to receive the necessary resources they need; the pushing back of Russian aggression; for a fair solution for peace to be found acceptable to Ukraine; Christians on both sides of the war and for their protection, especially for Russian Christians in a repressive regime; the Russian Orthodox Church to be true to biblical truth. (Psalm 55:22-23; Romans 1:18).