



Phoebe Palmer and the Holy Life

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INTRODUCTION

In 1859, Phoebe Palmer sailed to England with her husband, Walter, and her sixteen-year-old son, also named Walter. By this time in her career, Palmer was a well-known revivalist and author. Her services were in such demand that she ended up traveling throughout the British Isles for the next four years, leading revivals and preaching about the importance of Christian Holiness. In Newcastle, she brought “thirteen hundred to pardon or purity” and indirectly influenced Catherine Booth to devote her life to public ministry.¹ On the Isle of Wight, she had the chance to drop a copy of her newest book with Queen Victoria’s private secretary.² With a few exceptions, wherever the Palmers went they found success. A pattern repeated itself throughout their tour of the British Isles: hundreds of people claiming conversion and additional people claiming sanctification at her revivals.

The Palmers returned to New York in 1863 after their extensive and exhausting trip. Within a mere two hours of arriving home, a group from their home

¹ Charles Edward White, *The Beauty of Holiness: Phoebe Palmer as Theologian, Revivalist, Feminist, and Humanitarian* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 1986), 71–72.

² White, *The Beauty of Holiness*, 76.

The Holiness movement in nineteenth-century America had, and continues to have, a strong influence on religion in this country. Distinctive for this time was that its key leader was a woman, Phoebe Palmer, whose preaching and writing about Holiness were deeply influential in her day, and even up to the present day.

congregation of Allen Street Church arrived asking them to lead a revival at their church, to which the Palmers agreed—starting a new pattern of itinerant preaching that would continue for the next eleven years, until Phoebe Palmer’s death in 1874. This anecdote demonstrates Palmer’s unfailing dedication to evangelism and is a glimpse into how she earned the title “mother of the Holiness movement.”

Phoebe Palmer was an important American Methodist leader in the nineteenth century. She was a well-known preacher, writer, social reformer, and advocate for an increase in women’s participation in public ministry. Although she had great influence during her lifetime, she received little historical attention until the 1980s, when Charles White wrote his in-depth biography of her. In recent years, there has been an increase in interest in Palmer, and it appears she will finally be appreciated as the influential Christian figure she truly was.

The purpose of this article is to examine Palmer’s life, her theology, and her various ministries with the intention of highlighting aspects that can be helpful for modern Christians. Through these next pages, we will get to know a woman who devoted her life to God and let that unfailing devotion guide her to unexpected places.

THE HOLINESS MOVEMENT

Before diving into Palmer’s life and ministry, a brief examination of the Holiness movement is needed. The desire and drive to be holy is as old as Christianity itself. However, the Holiness movement, which does indeed fit into this larger story of Christian holiness, is a distinct movement that arose in the United States in the nineteenth century. This movement was most prominent among Methodists, but clear evidence of it can be seen elsewhere, including, most notably, in the theology of Charles Finney.³ Besides the most obvious influence of Wesleyan theology on the Holiness movement, influences from monasticism, pietism, and the Society of Friends are evident as well.⁴ Palmer preached in a variety of Protestant churches and revivals, showing that Holiness was accepted by a number of Protestant denominations at the time.

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³ John Corrigan and Winthrop Hudson, *Religion in America: An Historical Account of the Development of American Religious Life*, 8th ed. (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson, 2010), 294.

⁴ William Kostlevy, *Historical Dictionary of the Holiness Movement* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow, 2009), xxxiv.

A key feature of the Holiness movement was a commitment to “Christian perfection.” Palmer believed that perfect holiness was not only desirable but expected by God from all believers. She wrote in her most popular book, *The Way of Holiness*: “Whatever my former deficiencies may have been, God requires that I should now be *holy*. Whether *convicted*, or otherwise, *duty is plain*. God requires *present holiness*.”⁵

After Palmer passed away, the influence of Holiness was largely pushed out of Methodism, leading to the establishment of different Holiness denominations. Today there are denominations still associated with the Holiness movement, including the Church of the Nazarene, established in Los Angeles in 1895; Church of God (Anderson, IN); and the Wesleyan Church. Also notable is the Salvation Army, which grew out of the Holiness commitment to urban missions. Despite the relatively few Holiness denominations in existence today, one can see the influence of the movement in a variety of Christian communities, most significantly in Pentecostal churches.

PALMER’S HEARTBREAK

There is little in Palmer’s early life to indicate she would become a widely known religious figure. Her success is even more surprising when considering the social and religious limitations for women of the time. With few exceptions, women were largely barred from ordained ministry and were often criticized for public speaking, especially if men were present. Regardless of these challenges, Palmer went on to be a successful preacher, author, and theologian. She shaped a religious movement and advanced women’s rights.

Phoebe Worrall was born in 1807 to Dorothea Wade and Henry Worrall in New York City. She was the fourth of sixteen children.⁶ Her parents were devout Methodists. Interestingly, her father had experienced a religious conversion while listening to John Wesley preach in England before moving to the United States. Religion and church life were significant parts of Palmer’s young life. It seems she was a pious and scrupulous child, and during her teenage years, she was concerned for her salvation because she had not had a dramatic conversion experience.⁷

Phoebe met Walter Clarke Palmer in 1826. He was a young physician and a Methodist. He had considered the ministry but instead felt a divine call to medicine.⁸ By all accounts, the Palmers had a strong and happy marriage. It was unusually egalitarian for the time. They worked together as partners in ministry, and Walter supported Phoebe in her career as a preacher and writer.

⁵ Phoebe Palmer, *The Way of Holiness* (New York: Lane & Scott, 1849), 7. (Italics in the original.)

⁶ Elaine A. Heath, *Naked Faith: The Mystical Theology of Phoebe Palmer* (Cambridge, UK: James Clark & Co., 2010), 3. About half of her siblings died before reaching adulthood, though the exact number varies from source to source.

⁷ White, *The Beauty of Holiness*, 1–3.

⁸ White, *The Beauty of Holiness*, 4.

Sadly, the Palmers suffered significant tragedy in their early marriage. These heartbreaking events would influence Phoebe's call and theology. Their first child, named Alexander, died at the age of eleven months. Their second child, a boy named Samuel, died at a mere seven weeks. Palmer was utterly devastated by the loss of her children. She concluded that God had taken her sons because she had made an idol of them and put them before God. She was determined not to make that mistake again.⁹ This belief appears to emerge from a need to make sense of her profound grief.

In 1833, Palmer gave birth to her first surviving child, a daughter named Sarah. Two years later she had another daughter, named Eliza. During this time both Eliza and Phoebe were critically ill, and Phoebe would continue to suffer from debilitating illness throughout her life. Soon after recovering from this illness, Eliza died in a fire accidentally set by a household maid. In Phoebe's intense grief, she had a mystical experience. She felt God telling her to stop blaming herself and others for the death. The trial came from God, and she was assured that good would come of her suffering.¹⁰ The Palmers would go on to have two more surviving children: Phoebe Knapp, who is famous for writing over five hundred hymn tunes, and Walter Jr., who followed his parents into the publishing business.

PALMER'S SANCTIFICATION AND THEOLOGY

Palmer's sanctification was one of the most significant events in her life. In fact, she would celebrate the anniversary of it every year. Her sanctification was highly influenced by her sister Sarah Lankford, who had experienced it two years prior. On the day of Palmer's sanctification, Sarah had set aside the entire day, July 26, 1837, to fast and pray for Palmer's soul. Palmer had been seeking this deeper spiritual experience, and during her time of prayer, she realized she needed to give up everything she had to God. For her, that meant putting her husband and surviving children on the "altar." Palmer believed that her love for them was a hindrance to her love for God. Then she trusted in that sanctification even though she did not have an overly emotional response. It was after this that she wrote, "I felt . . . that the seal of consecration had been set, and that God had proclaimed me by the testimony of his Spirit, entirely his."¹¹

In addition to Palmer's own experiences of loss and personal sanctification, her theology is heavily influenced by John Wesley and John Fletcher. In fact, her critics have often accused her of preaching nothing but a corrupted interpretation of Wesley. However, there is originality in both her "altar theology" and her "shorter way."

After Palmer's long struggle to achieve sanctification, she developed her "shorter way" for others who were seeking it. It involves three steps: entire consecration, faith, and testimony. The first step in achieving entire sanctification is that

⁹ White, *The Beauty of Holiness*, 5–6.

¹⁰ White, *The Beauty of Holiness*, 7–8.

¹¹ White, *The Beauty of Holiness*, 19.

a believer needs to put everything on the “altar,” which is Christ himself. You cannot hold anything back—believers need to be a living sacrifice. If something is held back, then the sanctification cannot occur. The second step is faith in the sanctification regardless of outward signs or emotions. To doubt God and his promise is a sin itself. The final step then is one of testimony. A believer cannot keep this blessing private; the gift of sanctification is meant to be shared with the world.¹² If the believer does not testify to this gift, it will be lost. This last step in the process, that of testimony, is critical to understanding Palmer’s life following her sanctification. Palmer devoted herself to ministry despite challenges and societal expectations, because of her belief in this last point.¹³

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PALMER’S MINISTRIES

Palmer engaged in a variety of ministries throughout her lifetime. What follows are brief summaries of her Christian leadership, her writings, her work as a revival preacher, her participation in social reform efforts, and her contributions to the advancement of women’s role in ministry.

Leadership

Palmer exercised strong leadership in her Tuesday Meetings for the Promotion of Holiness. These weekly gatherings would continue for over fifty years. Originally, the group was founded by Palmer’s sister, Sarah Lankford, in 1836. It is unclear how much Palmer was involved at first, especially since she had not yet experienced sanctification. The meetings were only for women, which would have been customary at the time,¹⁴ and followed a consistent schedule beginning at 2:30 p.m. First the women would read from the Bible, then they would sing and pray. They would also give testimonies of their conversions or other experiences with God. Following her sanctification, Palmer took over as leader of the group. Soon men

¹²Heath, *Naked Faith*, 22–26.

¹³A number of books dive deeper into Palmer’s theology, including Charles White’s biography, *The Beauty of Holiness*; Elaine Heath’s examination of Palmer as a mystic, *Naked Faith*; and Justin Davis’s new book, *Schleiermacher and Palmer: The Father and Mother of the Modern Protestant Mindset* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2019), which examines Palmer as the mother of the modern Protestant mindset. While all three give a slightly different interpretation of her thought and theology, they are good resources for additional study on this topic.

¹⁴White, *The Beauty of Holiness*, 10.

began to attend the meetings, including well-known male pastors from a variety of denominations, including Methodists, Baptists, Congregationalists, Quakers, and Episcopalians. Despite the attendance of prominent male clergy, Palmer was the clear leader. The meetings became so popular, averaging about two hundred people every Tuesday, that space became an issue. This prompted the Palmers to add an addition onto their home to accommodate the crowd.¹⁵

Writings

Palmer had long been a writer; however, after her sanctification she began to write about Holiness in earnest. Her friend and founder of the publication *Guide to Christian Perfection*, Timothy Merritt, encouraged her to write for his periodical. In 1839, she published a series of letters to a friend, in which she gave an account of her sanctification. In 1841, she published her first book, entitled *Mary; or, the Young Christian*, but it included little of her own theology. In 1842, she began a serialized work in the *New York Christian Advocate and Journal* entitled *The Way of Holiness*.¹⁶ This would become Palmer's most popular work. It went through fifty printings by 1867.¹⁷ It is estimated that around 100,000 copies were sold worldwide during her life.¹⁸

Palmer's early writings were published anonymously. She had hesitations about publishing works openly as a woman, and she questioned whether women should be public figures in general. Her decision to take credit for her writings came from an unusual place. First, it must be noted that Palmer had a decidedly low opinion of the theater. In fact, she had such a low opinion of it that when Abraham Lincoln was assassinated, she blamed the *theater*—not John Wilkes Booth.¹⁹ So when she walked by the Bowery Theater in New York and saw that a number of actresses had their names advertised, she proclaimed: "Here are the servants of Satan who are not afraid or ashamed to let their names appear. And should the servants of the heavenly king be less bold?"²⁰ Thus Palmer entered public life as a Christian author.

Palmer continued to write and produce many books throughout her life, though her best-known are *The Way of Holiness*; *Entire Devotion to God*, published in 1845; *Faith and Its Effects: or, Fragments from My Portfolio*, in 1848; and *The Promise of the Father* (which will be discussed in further detail below), in 1859. In addition to her published works, Palmer wrote thousands of personal letters to people all around the world: Letters would arrive from people who had read her books, asking her advice. Palmer would respond to them, with the correspondence sometimes lasting months or even years.²¹

¹⁵ Justin Davis, *Schleiermacher and Palmer*, 89–90.

¹⁶ White, *The Beauty of Holiness*, 28.

¹⁷ Susan Hill Lindley, *You Have Stept Out of Your Place: A History of Women and Religion in America* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1996), 119.

¹⁸ White, *The Beauty of Holiness*, 29.

¹⁹ Davis, *Schleiermacher and Palmer*, 107.

²⁰ White, *The Beauty of Holiness*, 28–29.

²¹ White, *The Beauty of Holiness*, 32.

Revivalist

Without a doubt, Palmer was one of the great revivalists of the nineteenth century. She was not the only female revivalist of the era, but she was one of the better known (if not the best known) and very effective. For the first twenty years or so of her revivalist ministry, she generally attended revivals alone while Walter stayed home to work and take care of their children. However, Walter also had a gift for ministry, and eventually he was able to retire from the medical profession to dedicate his life full-time to the former.

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The Palmers put significant planning into their revivals. They considered a revival an attack against Satan, so they believed “it requires as least as much planning and preparation as a battle between nations.”²² While they needed to adapt certain aspects depending on the situation, they followed a general revival outline. First, the Palmers would decide where to go. They only went where they were officially invited—they would never hold a revival where they did not have the full support of the minister. The second condition was that the people of the congregation be willing to make sacrifices for the revival; in other words, the people needed to devote their time and energy to the revival work while the Palmers were in town. The Palmers argued that they did not bring the revival; they were co-laborers with the people. After arriving in the location of the revival, they would preach about entire sanctification. Reports of Phoebe’s preaching style indicate she was calm, deliberate, and logical in her approach.²³ “Usually the Palmers stayed in one town for several weeks, with nightly services, but sometimes there were as many as five in one day, including prayer meetings at 5 and 6 a.m.”²⁴ The people who attended their revivals tended to be workers, artisans, and members of the lower to middle classes.²⁵

After a revival began to bear fruit, the Palmers would form “Christian Vigilance Bands.” These groups agreed to make business or domestic vocations “subservient to Christ”; devote at least one half hour a day to evangelism; work to encourage other Christians to engage in evangelism; meet weekly, pray for each other, and report progress; and, finally, meet monthly with the other bands and the minister.²⁶ Through these groups, the Palmers ensured that the seeds of the revivals would be tended long after they left.

²² White, *The Beauty of Holiness*, 171.

²³ White, *The Beauty of Holiness*, 171–73.

²⁴ Margaret McFadden, “The Ironies of Pentecost: Phoebe Palmer, World Evangelism, and Female Networks,” *Methodist History* 31, no. 2 (January 1993): 70

²⁵ McFadden, “The Ironies of Pentecost,” 69.

²⁶ White, *The Beauty of Holiness*, 175.

Social Reformer

Like many other women of the nineteenth century, Palmer was a believer in social reform movements and foreign and domestic missions. After her sanctification, she recognized Jesus's concern for the poor in the Bible and felt the call to do likewise. Included in that was being a good steward of both time and money. The Palmers were wealthy, and Phoebe believed she was to use those resources for God.²⁷ The Palmers gave generously to a variety of causes, and they never charged for their participation in any revival.

During her life, Palmer was involved in a number of different relief missions, including the Committee for Promoting National Education, which sent young women to the frontier to be teachers (she was invited to join by Catharine Beecher); the New York Female Assistance Society for the Relief and Religious Instruction of the Poor; the American Female Guardian Society, which had a mission of eliminating prostitution; the Five Points Mission, an urban mission in New York City; and foreign missions both in China and in Palestine.²⁸ This list of involvement is impressive, though not atypical for an affluent Christian woman of this era.

In addition to these missions, Palmer was a strong believer in temperance and abolition. She died less than a year after the Woman's Christian Temperance Union was founded, though she is often cited as an influence on cofounder Frances Willard. Throughout Palmer's career, she repeatedly spoke out against the consumption of alcohol, insisted people take temperance pledges, and refused to hold a revival where she suspected there was alcohol being sold or stored.²⁹ She also publicly opposed slavery, and when the Civil War arose, she viewed it as divine punishment on the South.³⁰

Feminist?

Palmer has often been labeled a feminist, though the title may not be entirely accurate, especially in a modern sense of the word. Without question, though, she pushed boundaries and advanced women's participation in public ministry.

In 1859, Palmer published a book entitled *The Promise of the Father*, in which she vigorously defended a woman's right to engage in ministry. It was by no means the first defense of this kind. Margaret Fell's pamphlet *Women's Speaking Justified* defended a woman's right to preach already in 1666. Sarah Grimké's *Letters on the Equality of the Sexes*, published in 1837, also provided a thoughtful defense of women's role in Christianity. Six years prior to Palmer publishing *The Promise of the Father*, Antionette Brown Blackwell became the first ordained Congregational pastor, and Olympia Brown became the first ordained female

²⁷ White, *The Beauty of Holiness*, 209–211.

²⁸ White, *The Beauty of Holiness*, 60–65.

²⁹ Davis, *Schleiermacher and Palmer*, 105.

³⁰ White, *The Beauty of Holiness*, 228.

Unitarian pastor in 1863.³¹ Nonetheless, Palmer's book provided a thoughtful and important voice amid the growing demand for an increase in female participation in public ministry.

Palmer opens *The Promise of the Father* with a gentle reassurance to her reader: "Do not be startled, dear reader. We do not intend to discuss the question of 'Women's rights' or of 'Women's Preaching,' technically so called."³² Palmer states that women are often better off in their own sphere of influence (the domestic sphere), though there are times when women do need to be brought out into the public sphere. While the reader may question whether Palmer's reassurances are sincere, since the rest of the book goes on to defend women in ministry, it is also true that she does not openly advocate for female ordination or for women's rights in a political sense, such as universal suffrage. The book is primarily concerned with elevating the position of women in society, defending women's right to preach, and contending with Paul's command for women to be silent in church in 1 Corinthians 14:34.³³

Palmer was committed to the idea that all sanctified believers, regardless of gender, *needed* to testify to their faith and evangelize others. On the other hand, as a Christian committed to the Bible, Palmer had to take the biblical passages that seemed to restrict female preaching seriously. The result is a book that utilizes history, reason, and thoughtful biblical interpretation over the course of more than four hundred pages to argue her points.³⁴

LESSONS FOR TODAY

What can Palmer teach us about holiness today? In many ways she was a woman of her own time, and she may seem an unusual choice as an example for modern holiness. She was more conservative and zealous than many of us regarding a variety of social behaviors, and she could also be inflexible and intolerant of those who did not share her beliefs and opinions. On the other hand, she took her role as a Christian seriously and worked tirelessly to positively affect the world around her. Three key areas of her life and belief are most pertinent for believers today: her unflinching trust in God, her ability to hold to her convictions despite societal pressure, and her endless enthusiasm for both evangelism and social reform.

As we have seen, Palmer faced significant tragedy in her life. However, not only was she able to overcome her grief, but she developed an even closer relationship with God through it. She put everything she loved onto the "altar" and trusted God. This unflinching trust led Palmer to a life and career she would have never imagined prior to her sanctification. She boldly did what she believed

³¹ Lindley, *You Have Stept Out of Your Place*, 123, 125.

³² Palmer, *The Promise of the Father* (W.C. Palmer, 1859), 1.

³³ Davis, *Schleiermacher and Palmer*, 125.

³⁴ Davis, *Schleiermacher and Palmer*, 125–27.

God was calling her to do, and surely her success was part of what encouraged her to continue.

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Closely related to Palmer’s trust in God was her ability to hold strong to her convictions even when they ran counter to popular opinion. It was not typical for women of her era to lead, preach, and write so extensively. She did receive criticism and condemnation from various sources, yet she genuinely believed it was her duty to testify publicly. She trusted in her call from God and acted boldly. Her book *The Promise of the Father* demonstrates that she did grapple seriously with her role as a female Christian leader. For Palmer, testifying to the love of Jesus Christ was not something left only to men. Every believer needed to participate in evangelism, and she lived into that belief.

Finally, Palmer’s commitment to spreading the gospel and improving the world around her through engagement in social reform movements can be a model to us in the church today. Despite having young children and suffering from serious illness, Palmer traveled around the US, Canada, and later Great Britain preaching at hundreds of revivals over the course of decades. She was never ordained or on the payroll of any church (though she did earn income from the sales of her books). She believed it was her duty as a lay believer to engage in ministry, so that is simply what she did. While not everyone can or even should do exactly what Palmer did, every Christian has significant gifts that need to be encouraged and shared. In addition, every Christian is called to participate in the joy and duty of spreading the gospel. Everyone should work to leave the world a better place than when they arrived in it. These are not goals left only to the clergy, but to all Christian believers.

In the final analysis, this is key to understanding Palmer’s lasting impact on Christian history: She trusted, she acted decisively, and she worked tirelessly. She felt a divine call to do what she could for the betterment of both society on a large scale and individual people and their salvation. It is a message that still rings true in the church today. ☩

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