

FEBRUARY 14-25: GOD IS HOLY

INTRODUCTION BY DR. MERLE STREGE

Historically considered, Church of God preaching on the doctrinal practice of holiness drank deeply from the well of the American holiness movement. Many first generation of Church of God preachers and teachers learned about the doctrine of holiness – alternatively, entire sanctification or Christian perfection – as participants various holiness associations. Before forsaking denominational affiliation, D. S. Warner belonged to no fewer than three such groups. “Mother” Sarah Smith and A. J. Kilpatrick were members of a holiness meeting at Jerry City, Ohio. Along with many others, they envisioned the Christian life to be free of sin. In the words of the gospel song, “Wholehearted Service,” they meant “. . . to live holy and blameless, a Christian indeed will I be.”

Founded by Methodists, holiness movement leaders looked to the teaching of John Wesley. In his 1766 book, *A Plain Account of Christian Perfection*, Wesley repudiated the notion of sinless perfection. Instead, the grace of God operating in the soul as both power and pardon could advance the Christian to being “perfected in love.” This stage of the Christian life, declared Wesley, was the highest Christians could reach until they were carried into Abraham’s bosom; nothing in religion exceeds the love described in I Corinthians 13. John’s younger brother Charles set this idea to music when he wrote that God “. . . breaks the power of canceled sin; He sets the prisoner free.” Once sin’s power has been canceled, the Christian is freed from self-love and is free to love others. Wesley’s vision of holiness/sanctification/Christian perfection was the second component of his theology of salvation. First, God justifies the believer; that is what God does for us. Second is the believer’s sanctification – which Wesley also termed the new birth; that is what God does in us. Thus to be saved is both to be rescued (justified) and also sanctified (made whole).

In the nineteenth century American holiness preachers interpreted Wesley’s doctrine of Christian perfection to emphasize avoidance of “worldliness.” This tendency also showed itself among Church of God preachers. A “holy and blameless” life was often described in negative terms. Thus true Christians didn’t frequent forms of entertainment like dances, theaters, or ballgames. They didn’t wear neckties or hats with feathers, and pleats were not found in their dresses. Nor did Christians use tobacco in any form, or drink alcoholic beverages, coffee or tea. Accordingly, one Church of God saint testified that she was “saved and sanctified from all forms of hot drinks.”

In his important but now overlooked 1954 book, *When Souls Awaken*, Charles E. Brown, Editor of the *Gospel Trumpet*, challenged the negative definition of holiness. He thought it was insufficient to describe the life of holiness with a list of “don’ts.” Brown did not reject the notion of a disciplined Christian life, but he understood purity of heart and life as means to holiness rather than its badge. For Brown, holiness finally concerned positive Christian action in the world. By this move he recovered the Wesleyan emphasis on holiness as love. Of course, Christian love is to be in relationship with one’s neighbor as well as with God. Rather than emphasize those things Christians don’t do, let us then so live that our relationships express the love which Paul says is shed in our hearts by the Holy Spirit.

CONTRIBUTORS FOR THIS THEME

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