

Module 3

The Pilgrim Church

Saving the Lost

Introduction

The 1968 merger that created The Wesleyan Church brought together two denominations with divergent histories and structures. While the Wesleyan Methodists were early adopters of the holiness message, the Pilgrim Holiness Church was the product of the holiness revival and in many ways expressed the culmination of that new expression of Wesleyan theology.

In this module we will provide the historical background of Pilgrim Holiness Church and the unique blend of features created when they joined forces with the Wesleyan Methodist Church.

Background

If currents of revivalism and social reform during the first half of the 19th century led to the creation of the Wesleyan Methodist Connection. Other currents in the second half of that century contributed to the formation of the International Holiness and Prayer League, the forerunner of the Pilgrim Holiness Church. Two modes of engagement – one inward and spiritual, the other outward and public -- came together in this new denomination.

A holy life, freed of the sins that beset fallen humanity, was always a theme of Methodism. Years before their heart-warming experiences, the Wesley brothers had endeavored to be wholly devoted to God. They had gathered with other friends at Oxford University to form the Holy Club, where frequent sessions of Bible study and prayer were accompanied by feeding the poor and ministering to prisoners in the local jail. Wesley's mission trip to Georgia was a visible expression of their desire to serve God in meaningful ways.

Like many Christians, they assumed that acts of piety and mercy would bring God's favor and blessing. Only in crisis experiences after their return to England did John and Charles realize that works of righteousness are the product of faith rather than the way to attain God's favor. For the rest of his life, John made his primary focus the proclamation of justification by faith in the work of saving work of Christ on the cross. Such faith resulted in forgiveness of the guilt of sin and deliverance from "the wrath to come" for those who repent and believe.

But for Wesley, salvation was more than simply forgiveness of sins and a ticket out of hell. Salvation was also a regenerating work of the Holy Spirit that made one a new creature. A newly-born Christian must "go forward" in a sanctifying process that delivered a person from both the guilt and the power of sin. More than other Protestant reformers, Wesley was optimistic about the degree to which one might attain a life free from internal sinning. He challenged his followers to "go on to perfection," a level of spirituality where one loved God with all one's heart, soul and mind as well as loving one's neighbor.

Wesley was reticent to put a time stamp on this experience of entire sanctification. While he observed it usually occurred long after one was justified and shortly before the end of life, he believed it might happen sooner than that. He further realized that this experience of “heart holiness” was not always sustained. Many of his followers had only temporary episodes of entire sanctification. No matter how long it might be delayed or how briefly it might last, entire sanctification was a possible attainment for one wholly dedicated to God. Thus it was to be a pursuit throughout a believer’s life.

For a time, this doctrine of Christian “perfecting” faded in American Methodism. With the second great awakening under Finney and others, the focus was primarily on God’s justifying work – getting sinners saved. However, there were those who, in the fervor of this awakening, proposed that entire sanctification, the “second work of grace” should follow the pattern of the first. If an unregenerate sinner could experience forgiveness of sin by a simple act of repentance and faith, why could not a believer be entirely sanctified by a simple act of consecration and faith at a time of their own initiation? If only faith was required to become born again, why not experience the sanctifying power of the Spirit by a similar act of faith at any time.

Phoebe Palmer, a physician’s wife and loyal Methodist, began hosting Tuesday meetings in her home where women shared they had experienced an instantaneous cleansing of inward sin by a simple act of consecration. Using the analogy of Old Testament rituals, adherents of this theology claimed that the moment the lamb was placed upon the altar, it became holy – set apart for God. In a similar way in an act of self-surrender, the “altar sanctified the gift,” and one could become holy in a moment’s time. Palmer drew her focus on entire sanctification from the teachings of Wesley, but proposed that he looked too much to the gradual process of sanctification. She advocated a “shorter way” where one could reap the benefits of freedom from sin through an instantaneous crisis experience at a holiness revival service.

This teaching spread rapidly. Soon it was no longer just women gathered on Tuesday mornings, but great crowds at holiness rallies or holiness campmeetings. Other advocates of the “second blessing” found another biblical account that supported this new understanding. Were not Jesus’ disciples believers who had heeded his call to follow Him? And were they not ineffective and vacillating even at the point of his death and resurrection? Yet on the day of Pentecost, when the Spirit descended and gave them a second baptism, they were transformed into pure and powerful Christians – Christians that Paul would address as “saints” (holy ones).

The holiness movement was now in full bloom. The theology in its most basic form declared that you could not only be saved (forgiven) from sin by a simple act of faith; you could also experience a baptism of the Holy Spirit that would cleanse you of inward sin and empower you to live in a state of holiness. This state could persist indefinitely if you continued to walk in faith.

This holiness doctrine became institutionalized in denominational creeds and in the creation of camp meetings, specifically designed to draw believing Christians to the second work of grace. The Wesleyan Methodists were one of the first denominations to add an article of faith on the doctrine, specifically defining this holiness emphasis. This article can still be found in our

Discipline. Isolated camp meetings clustered together to form the National Camp Meeting Association for the Promotion of Holiness, the forerunner of what would become the Christian Holiness Association.

This new perspective on the Christian life – and sanctification in particular – was not always well received by other Protestant traditions. The idea of “sinless perfection” was anathema to Lutheran and Reformed theologians, who argued that only death could cure individuals from their fallen state. They believed that we inevitably sin in “word, thought and deed” every day of our life whether we are believers or not.

Even many Methodist-oriented pastors were averse to promoting this new understanding of sanctification. When holiness “converts” returned to their local congregations and found resistance to their witness of the baptism by the Holy Ghost, many left these churches. They founded or formed new clusters of “holiness” unions, bands, associations and churches. In some cases, they were forcibly evicted from their home churches or denominations by those leaders who considered this teaching to be heretical.

These “come-outers” and “crush-outers” soon comprised a sufficient pool of adherents to form the constituents of a new denomination – the Pilgrim Holiness Church. The roots of this denomination are often traced back to a meeting of Martin Wells Knapp and Seth Cook Rees in Cincinnati, Ohio in 1898, although that moment was only one of many groups that were forming at the time. These two proponents of holiness created the International Holiness Union and Prayer League, not yet a denomination in the proper sense, but the seedbed for accumulating many other small sectarian groups together until a more formalized organization organized in 1922.

The other movement contributing to the rise of the Pilgrim Holiness Church was the mass migration of rural America to the cities. Industrialization in America had begun early in the 18th century, but it was the “war machine” of the Civil War that spawned the transformation of factory towns into great centers of commerce and industry. At the close of the war, many freed slaves headed north to escape and to find economic security. Young men and women raised in farms across America took to the city to find meaningful employment.

Urban America was no friend to evangelical spirituality. Liberated from parental constraints and habitual church attendance, many newcomers abandoned the spirituality of their early years and became “back-sliders” on the slippery slopes of sin in the cities. Aware of the moral decline confronting urban America, many of the holiness advocates centered their ministry in what Rees described as the “cesspools” of iniquity.

At this time, Martin Wells Knapp moved to Cincinnati, a growing commercial center on the Ohio River. Seth Cook Rees made Chicago the locus of his ministry. Here they established rescue missions, homes for unwed mothers and soup kitchens to feed the poor. Knapp went so far as to start a Bible school on one of the hills overlooking the city of Cincinnati – a school that continues the tradition of training pastors and Christian workers to this day.

While holiness sermons were their primary focus in preaching, reaching the down and out was the active ministry during the week. The “lost” were not limited to urban centers. These early Pilgrims had a global perspective as well. Many of the early graduates of God’s Bible School headed to foreign countries to spread the gospel. Appeals for funding for missions in the cities and missionaries around the world were common in this denomination.

The Pilgrim Holiness Church offered a remarkable combination of divergent perspectives. On the one hand they were almost radical in their belief and proclamation of holiness doctrine. Attenders were challenged to seek a second blessing that would deliver them from the daily presence of sin. Holy living was often codified in behavioral patterns—abstinence from harmful practices like consuming alcoholic beverages or smoking as well as avoidance alluring activities like dancing, attending movies, watching TV.

In their approach to worldliness, their mantra was “Wherefore come ye out from among them, and be ye separate” (II Cor. 6:17). At the same time, more than many other denominations, they heeded the Master’s instructions to “Go ye into the highways and byways and compel them to come in, that my house may be full.” (Luke 14:23). The Pilgrim Holiness Church would bring these to diverse yet complementary features to the merger that would create The Wesleyan Church.