

“Why Do We Sing What We Sing: The Holiness Tradition”

Salvation Fire

John 3:1-17

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Imagine a great river system — always moving, changing, and bringing life. This is the river of God into which many streams flow, feeding and being fed by the river, causing God’s work in the world to be diverse and full. There is no facet of human life that remains unchanged by the life-giving river of God. When the people of God immerse themselves in its flow, they become the reflection of God throughout the world. As a result, lives are restored, systems are redeemed, and all creation is made new. Many streams comprise the river of God, all contributing movement, breadth, and depth to the larger river — the Church. Each stream brings uniqueness and diversity to the river system, representing a variety of traditions and stories coming together in unity to make up the whole.

That is a beautiful depiction by one church historian of how, after the Reformation, the Protestant church in all its varied forms spread throughout the world. Among the interwoven network of streams that form God’s river system is the holiness tradition, the flow of which began with the Wesley brothers and became a movement of people in love with Jesus and full of the passion of God’s Holy Spirit.

Some of you, especially former Methodists, will recall that it all began in a dorm room at Oxford University when Charles Wesley began a “holy club” with some of his fellow students. Meetings were led by his brother John and followed a consistent routine. They would rise early, study the Greek New Testament, and pray. Because of their “method” of daily piety other students poked fun at them by calling them “Methodists.” After Oxford, the Wesleys became itinerant preachers, moving about the city and countryside preaching to large groups of people, offering extemporaneous prayers and singing hymns that Charles would write. When they sang it wasn’t in the plainsong of the Anglicans, but in full voice and with gusto — what has forever become known as “hearty hymn-singing.”

The standard at that time had been singing the words of the hymn without tunes or, if music was desired, each locale would choose familiar secular tunes to accompany the hymn. John Wesley, wanting to standardize hymns, published a hymnal in which he put hymns to “all the tunes in common among us and exactly as I desire our congregations to sing them.” Knowing full well, as he said, “Churches are not fond of changing versions of hymns and hymn tunes because that only creates great confusion. Give us the best music we have, but make it friendly to the people.” (Well, that sounds familiar — as I said, history really does repeat itself.)

John and Charles Wesley sought to renew the Church of England by having Christians take seriously the call to live holy lives, bearing the fruit of their sanctification by the Holy Spirit. There’s no stronger expression of this emphasis on holiness than Charles Wesley’s hymn “Love Divine, All Loves Excelling”:

*Finish, then, thy new creation;
pure and spotless let us be.*

*Let us see thy great salvation
perfectly restored in thee;
changed from glory into glory,
till in heaven we take our place,
till we cast our crowns before thee,
lost in wonder, love, and praise.*

We are so familiar with the words of this beloved hymn that we might easily take for granted its extraordinary claims that we prayerfully seek to affirm and receive anew each time we sing it — God’s desire and our desire for us to be the “humble dwelling” in which the Spirit makes a home that “pure and spotless we may be.” We sing trusting God will finish thy new creation, reminding us sanctification is a lifelong process which began the moment we were “born again” at our baptism into our new life in Christ. As Jesus told Nicodemus, the “Spirit blows wherever it wishes” making us as if we were newborn, dead to sin and alive to God. Our outward holiness, all our acts of piety and devotion, are to be expressions of our inner transformation. Which, for those in the holiness tradition, led to strict codes of behavior and standards of dress. Worship services became holiness meetings designed to bring about that conversion of heart necessary for rebirth through “fire and brimstone” preaching, extemporaneous prayer, and robust singing culminating in an altar call — an invitation for sinners to come to Christ and be reborn. Walking forward to the altar was the outward sign of their hearts’ conversion.

In this country, the holiness tradition spread by way of tent revivals or camp meetings that would last for days. The most notable was the Cane Ridge Revival in Kentucky in 1801. It was estimated 25,000 people attended. Presbyterian, Baptist, and Methodist ministers led the holiness meetings. Someone who was there later wrote,

“The noise was like the roar of Niagara. The vast sea of human beings seemed to be agitated as if by a storm. . . . Some of the people were singing, others praying, some crying for mercy in the most piteous accents, while others were shouting vociferously. While witnessing these scenes, a peculiarly strange sensation, such as I had never felt before, came over me. My heart beat tumultuously, my knees trembled, my lip quivered, and I felt as though I must fall to the ground. A strange supernatural power seemed to pervade the entire mass of mind there collected.

“At one time I saw at least 500, swept down in a moment as if a battery of a thousand guns had been opened upon them, and then immediately followed shrieks and shouts that rent the very heavens. I fled for the woods and wished I had stayed at home.”

From that moment on, the organized revival became the major mode of evangelism for denominations such as the Methodists and Baptists, who had been newly converted by the teachings of John Wesley.

Centuries later, that moment in history marking a new stream is also a cautionary tale for us. Sadly, in the Church of England Methodists were labeled “enthusiasts,” which was not a compliment. An enthusiast was thought to have a dangerously emotional, nonintellectual understanding of the faith. Today, many people would attach that same derogatory label to modern day Pentecostalism or even certain styles of so-called Contemporary Praise Services.

Faith is to be both a matter of intellectual pursuit and personal religious experience. One should not be sacrificed for the other. Yet, we also know evangelistic passion has, at times, become a matter of manipulation rather than inspiration. It's one of the cautions we learn early in preaching and worship planning. Emotional stories and emotive music stir the soul, but their intent should not be to manipulate a momentary emotional response, but rather they should create space for the inner work of the Holy Spirit. So, too, as with all spiritual experience, we ask "what is the fruit of that emotional response?" A person who is truly converted has heard and understood the truth of the Word of God because the Holy Spirit has moved in that person's mind and heart. Over time, that person's life will reflect the change that has taken place.

Every time we worship should be a conversionary experience transforming us until we are, as we sing:

*Perfectly restored in thee;
changed from glory into glory,
till in heaven we take our place,
till we cast our crowns before thee,
lost in wonder, love, and praise.*