

JOHN ALLAN WOOD

The Holy Life

Nineteenth-century J. A. Wood of North Attleboro, Massachusetts, was as ardent a Wesleyan as eighteenth-century Jonathan Edwards of Northampton was a convinced Calvinist; and yet their experience of the immediacy and power of God in their lives was almost identical.

The teaching and testimony of Pastor Wood has been retained for us in his writings, principally the volume entitled *Purity and Maturity*, and also, *Perfect Love*. Converted at the age of ten, he was a devout lad with desire to know the things of God, and with delight in prayer and obedience to the Almighty.

During the first five or six years of his Christian life he was often perplexed and distressed with doubts as to the reality of his conversion, because it did not seem to him as dramatic and deeply emotional as was true of some. He would later say, however: "After many and severe trials on this point, the Lord enabled me to settle the matter; and thousand thanks to His blessed name, many years have passed since I have doubted for a moment the verity of my early conversion."

While preparing for the ministry he found that he himself, his old Adamic nature, was his greatest hindrance to growth in Christian experience. Of those years he wrote:

"During this period I was often convicted of remaining corruption of heart and of my need of purity. I desired to be a

decided Christian and a useful member of the church; but was often conscious of deep-rooted inward evils and tendencies in my heart unfriendly to godliness. My bosom-foes troubled me more than all my foes from without. They struggled for the ascendancy. They marred my peace. They obscured my spiritual vision. They were the instruments of severe temptation. They interrupted my communion with God. They crippled my efforts to do good. They invariably sided with Satan. They occupied a place in my heart which I knew should be possessed by the Holy Spirit. They were the greatest obstacles to my growth in grace, and rendered my service to God but partial.

"I was often more strongly convicted of my need of inward purity than I ever had been of my need of pardon. God showed me the importance and the necessity of holiness as clear as a sunbeam. I seldom studied the Bible without conviction of my fault in not coming up to the Scripture standard of salvation."

Although convinced of his need of complete dedication to the Savior and the fullness of the Spirit in his life, he held "no clear or definite ideas in regard to the blessing of perfect love, but thought of it, and taught it, as only a deeper work of grace, or a little more religion." He declared: "I became somewhat prejudiced against the Bible terms 'sanctification,' 'holiness,' and 'perfection,' and disliked very much to hear persons use them in speaking of their experience; and opposed the profession of holiness as a blessing distinct from regeneration. I became prejudiced against the special advocates of holiness; and at camp meetings and in other places discouraged and opposed direct efforts for its promotion."

Wood was ordained to the gospel ministry, and became a devoted pastor and an acceptable preacher. Hungry of heart for purity and power in his life, however, he came into contact with some "whose experience in piety possessed a *richness, depth, and power*" which he did not have and consequently he

says he "was preaching to some who enjoyed more religion than their pastor."

To continue his testimony:

"Through the entire summer of 1858 I was seeking holiness, but kept the matter to myself. During this time none of the professors of holiness said anything to me on the subject, but, as I have learned since, were praying for me night and day. God only knew the severe struggles I had that long summer, during many hours of which I lay on my face in my study, begging Jesus to cleanse my poor, unsanctified heart; and yet was unwilling to make a public avowal of my feelings, or to ask the prayers of God's people for my sanctification.

"The Binghamton district camp-meeting commenced that year the 1st day of September, and about eighty of the members of my charge attended it with me. . . .

"On the last day of the meeting, a few minutes before preaching, a faithful member of the church came to me weeping, and said, 'Brother Wood, there is no use in trying to dodge this question. You know your duty. If you will lead the way, and define your position as a seeker of entire sanctification, you will find that many of the members of your charge have a mind to do the same.' The Lord had so humbled my heart that I was willing to do anything to obtain relief. After a few moments' reflection I replied, 'Immediately after preaching I will appoint a meeting in our tent on the subject of holiness, and will ask the prayers of the church for my own soul.'

"Glory be to God! The Rubicon was passed. The moment of decision was the moment of triumph. In an instant I felt a giving away in my heart so sensible and powerful that it appeared physical rather than spiritual; a moment after I felt an indescribable sweetness permeating my entire being. It was a sweetness as real and as sensible to my soul as ever the sweetest honey to my taste. I immediately walked up into the stand.

Just as the preacher gave out his text,—Eccl. 12:13, 'Let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter,' etc.,—the baptism of fire and power came upon me.

"For me to describe what I then realized is utterly impossible. It was such as I need not attempt to describe to those who have felt and tasted it, and such as I can not describe to the comprehension of those whose hearts have never realized it. I was conscious that Jesus had me in his arms, and that the Heaven of heavens was streaming through and through my soul in such beams of light and overwhelming love and glory, as can never be uttered. *The half can never be told!*

"It was like marching through the gates of the city to the bosom of Jesus, and taking a full draught from the river of life."

The man of God then knew for himself the melting, the cleansing, and the filling of the Holy spirit with His sin-consuming power. Like so many others, it was Pastor Wood's experience that the blessing of God did not come into his life until the last barrier or hindrance was broken down. After thus coming to know the immediacy of God in his life he could say:

"A willingness to humble myself, and take a decided stand for holiness, and face opposition to it in the church, and take the odium of being an advocate of holiness in Binghamton, where the doctrine had been trailing in the dust for years, constituted the turning-point with me. After I reached that point of complete submission, I had no consciousness of making any special effort in believing; my whole being seemed simply, and without effort, to be borne away to Jesus."

The deep dealing of God with His servant was not confined to that single experience; rather, he could say: "From that hour the deep and solid communion with God, and the rich baptisms of love and power have been 'unspeakable and full of glory' . . . at times I have had an overwhelming sense of the

Divine presence, and a sacred unction has pervaded my whole being. Especially this has been my experience while called to defend this glorious salvation. . . . There was a divine fragrance and sweetness imparted to my soul when the Savior cleansed and filled it with pure love, that has ever remained with me, and I trust it ever will. . . . To know that God is mine; to feel that He dwells in my heart, rules my will, my affections, my desires; to know that He loves me ten thousand times better than I love him—oh, what solid bliss is this!”

And what were the lasting effects of this crisis experience in the life of God’s servant? Let him speak for himself:

“Some of the precious results of the cleansing power of Jesus in my soul have been:—

“1. A sacred nearness to God my Savior. The distance between God and my soul has appeared annihilated, and the glory and presence of divinity have often appeared like a flood of sunlight, surrounding, penetrating, and pervading my whole being. . . .

“2. A sense of indescribable sweetness in Christ. The fact that he is ‘the rose of Sharon’; ‘the lily of the valley’; ‘the brightness of his [the Father’s] glory’, and ‘altogether lovely’, has at times so penetrated my soul as to thrill and fill it with ecstatic rapture. How lovely has the dear Savior appeared to my soul, and how strong the attraction my heart has felt toward him! How I love him!

“3. A deep, realizing sense of spiritual things. Bible truth has appeared transformed into solid realities. The doctrines of the gospel have become to me tangible facts, and my soul has triumphed in them as eternal *verities*.

“4. A surprising richness and fullness of meaning in the Scriptures, which I had not before realized. Many portions of the Word, which I had hitherto but little understood, now appeared full of meaning, and exceedingly precious. . . .

"5. A triumph over temptation more complete and habitual. When Satan comes he finds the sympathies and affinities of my soul strongly against him; hence he receives no favorable response. . . .

"6. A great increase in spiritual power. This I have realized in my closest devotions, in my pastoral duties, and especially in the ministrations of the blessed truth. Blessed by the Lord, I have learned by experience that men may receive the Holy Ghost in *measure* limited only by their *capacity to receive*, and feeble *ability to endure*. . . .

"This increase of power has delivered me from slavish fear of man, or of future evil. It has given me such love to the Savior and to his glorious gospel as to make all my duties sweet and delightful. . . .

"7. A clear and distinct witness of purity through the blood of Jesus. . . .

"8. A disposition to tell the blessed story of Christ, and his 'great salvation.' O for a thousand seraph tongues to publish the glad tidings to perishing men!

"In this narrative of my religious experience I have endeavored to give a simple statement of facts, regardless of what mistaken good men or wicked men may think or say. I would as soon deny God as to flee before the offense of the cross, or quail under the reproach of Christ. Like Peter and John, I 'can not but speak the things which I have seen and heard.'"

To God's servant the crisis of the deeper life resulted in perfect love that continued to flood his soul.

The questions that occur to us as we read his testimony were asked of Pastor Wood in his day. "Perfect love" he defined as "*pure love filling the heart*. That is all! . . . Our perfection is in *Christ*, as the perfection of the branch is in the vine. Grace is derived from Christ only by a union with him, as the branch to the vine. . . ."

Some inquired: "Does Christian perfection exclude growth in grace?" To this he replied, "By no means. The pure in heart grow *faster* than any others. . . . There is no standing still in a *religious life* nor in a *sinful life*. We must either *progress* or *regress*. . . . Again, our capacities and powers are improvable and expansive, and we must proportionately grow in holiness. . . ."

The further question was then asked: "How can holiness be perfect and yet progressive?" His answer was: "Perfection in *quality* does not exclude increase in *quantity*. Beyond entire sanctification there is no increase in *purity*, as that which is pure cannot be more pure; but there may be unlimited increase in *expansion* and *quantity*."

Christian holiness as understood by Pastor Wood does not exclude the possibility of temptation and a liability to sin. "Holiness secures the safest possible conditions on earth. . . . Grace never induces presumption."

Nor does Christian perfection produce perfect knowledge and infallibility of judgment. Certainly the apostle Peter was filled with the Spirit of God, and it is equally certain that he made errors in judgment. The fullness of the Spirit does not of necessity deliver from the infirmities of human nature, such as "slowness of understanding, errors of judgment, mistakes in practice, erratic imaginations, a treacherous memory, etc."

One more question: "What is the grand secret of holy living?" To this God's servant replied: "It is to *obtain* and *retain* the *perpetual presence, fullness* and *illumination* of the Holy Ghost. 'He shall abide with you for ever.'

"1. He will *subdue* your lusts and propensities. 'Walk in the Spirit, and ye shall not fulfill the lusts of the flesh.'

"2. He will impart *liberty*. 'Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty.'

"3. He *reveals* the things of Christ. 'He shall receive of mine and show it unto you.' 'He shall testify of me.'

"4. He presents the *truth* of God and the things of God to the mind. 'The sword of the Spirit is the Word of God.' 'Even so the things of God knoweth no man, but the Spirit of God.' 'But God hath revealed them unto us by his Spirit.'

"5. He imparts *light* and *wisdom*. 'He will guide you into all truth.'

"6. He *sustains* in the hour of *affliction*. 'I will not leave you comfortless.' 'I will send the comforter.'

"7. He imparts the *virtues* of a *holy character*. 'The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, long-suffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, temperance.'

"8. He gives the *witness* of adoption and salvation. 'The Spirit beareth witness with our spirit, that we are the children of God.'

"9. He imparts the *divine image*—the *heavenly signet*—to the soul. 'Ye are sealed with the Holy Spirit of promise.'

"10. He is the *source* and *author* of all love to God. 'The love of God is shed abroad in our hearts by the Holy Ghost which is given unto us.'

"11. He is the source of *strength* and *success*. 'Not by might, nor by power, but by my Spirit, saith the Lord of hosts.'

"12. His presence and work make the soul a temple, sacred to the service of God. 'Know ye not that ye are the temple of God, and that the Spirit of God dwelleth in you? If any man defile the temple of God, him shall God destroy; for the temple of God is holy, which temple ye are.'

"Not by might nor by power [i.e., by human energy and effort], but by my Spirit" was the secret of this exchanged life. What once had been painful trying had become perfect trusting. Weakness had been turned into strength, sighing into song, and total failure into triumph—all because he learned to be filled with the Holy Spirit, and to walk in the Spirit.