



LUTHERAN

looks at...

THE ASSEMBLIES OF GOD

Michael T. Feuerstahler

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Art Director: Karen Knutson
Designer: Pamela Dunn

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INTRODUCTION

I am a Lutheran. As a confessional Lutheran, I believe that the Bible is the verbally inspired, inerrant Word of God. God's saving revelation to us is bound together by its two chief teachings of law and gospel. The law crushes us with its demand for the holiness we are incapable of achieving. The gospel comforts us with the assurance of God's unconditional forgiveness of our sins through the Savior's substitutionary life and death. Law and gospel are the meat and potatoes of a Lutheran's spiritual diet. They dominate Lutheran teaching and worship.

Our Lutheran heritage stands on a three-point foundation: *Scripture alone*—The Bible, not human teachings or traditions, is the only sure guide for faith and life. *Grace alone*—God's undeserved love is the only reason he sent a Savior into a world lost in sin and personally gives us his forgiveness. *Faith alone*—God declares sinners innocent of wrongdoing by imputing Christ's righteousness to them. Spirit-worked faith alone is the hand by which we take hold of God's promise.

In this book, we will look at the Assemblies of God through distinctively Lutheran eyes. We will consider its beliefs and how its practices conform to those beliefs. We will look at what it emphasizes and, just as important, what it does not emphasize. Does it emphasize objective truth or subjective experience? Does it shine the spotlight on Christ's work *for* us or Christ's work through the Spirit *in* us? What is the mission of the church, and what are its means to carry out that mission? We will consider these issues and more as a Lutheran looks at the Assemblies of God.



1 ROOTS IN MODERN *Pentecostalism*

The rise of modern Pentecostalism is one of the greatest religious phenomena of the past century. The Assemblies of God is the largest and fastest growing Pentecostal denomination in the world. Our look at the Assemblies of God begins with a brief history of its roots.

John Wesley (1701–1791)

Modern Pentecostalism originated in 18th-century England with John Wesley. Wesley grew up in a Christian home where his parents, especially his mother, stressed the importance of Christian living. She taught her children that Christians must adhere to a prescribed method of conduct.

We Lutherans, following Saint Paul, realize that we have an old Adam, which leads us down the path of sin. With the apostle Paul we lament, “What I do is not the good I want to do; no, the evil I do not want to do—this I keep on doing” (Romans 7:19). The battle with the sinful nature is never ending. Consequently, we repeatedly ask and answer with Paul, “Who will rescue me from this body of death? Thanks be to God—through Jesus Christ our Lord!” (Romans 7:24,25).

John Wesley failed to appreciate the constant internal struggle against the sinful nature in which Christians are engaged throughout their lives. Raised in an atmosphere of strict compliance with God’s law, Wesley became convinced that if he lived by certain rules, he could arrive at perfection. At Oxford University, he and his brother Charles were members of the Holy Club, a group of students who met to further their sanctification. Fellow students gave them

the name Methodists because of their methodical approach to Christianity.

But John Wesley found no peace for his soul. He became a missionary to the American Indians, which proved unfruitful. On his return trip to England, Wesley encountered two Moravian missionaries who told him that “saving faith brought with it both dominion over sin and true peace of mind—both holiness and happiness.”¹

Wesley began to passionately seek this double gift. On May 24, 1738, at a religious society meeting on Aldersgate Street in London, Wesley finally felt that he trusted in Christ and that his sins were forgiven. He entered the meeting with a “strange indifference, dullness, and coldness” after experiencing months of “unusually frequent lapses into sin,” but there Wesley felt his “heart strangely warmed.”² He felt that he could live free of voluntary sin and achieve a life of holiness.

Entire sanctification

John Wesley did not believe in the scriptural doctrine of total depravity. He denied people’s natural spiritual condition, highlighted in such passages as Ephesians 2:1: “As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins.” He taught that fallen mankind is free to accept Christ or to reject Christ. While the moral endowment of perfect holiness was lost in the fall, he felt that people still have the natural endowment of reason and free will. Wesley asserted that by the use of reason and free will, a person can regain his former perfect holiness. Wesley did not equate *perfection* with *sinlessness* in an absolute sense. Instead, he adopted a narrow definition of sin: “a willful transgression of a known law.” He maintained that sins done in ignorance or weakness weren’t really sins because they do not involve guilt. The effect of this was the denial of the internal struggle Paul describes in Romans chapter 7 and the adoption of the idea that a Christian could attain a kind of perfection, which he called entire sanctification.

Wesley also believed that entire sanctification is a “second grace,” separate from and subsequent to the first grace of justification or conversion. It is this “second grace” that made salvation sure for him.³ Wesley moved the spotlight from the objective truth of Jesus’ atoning death on the cross to the individual’s subjective personal experience. Instead of finding spiritual security in the words and promises of God, Wesley focused on his own works and his emotions. In Wesley’s theological thinking, “This is what I feel” trumped “This is what is written.” A study of Wesley’s doctrine of entire sanctification leads one to conclude that Wesley rested his faith on his faith, a procedure that is highly subjective.⁴

Revivalism in America

Methodism spread throughout England and also took root in America. The doctrine of entire sanctification came with it. This teaching’s effect on Methodist preaching became apparent in the first recorded Methodist sermon delivered in the United States by Thomas Webb in 1766:

The words of the text were written by the Apostles after the act of justification had passed on them. But you see, my friends, this was not enough for them. They must receive the Holy Ghost after this. So must you. You must be sanctified. But you are not. You are only Christians in part. You have not received the Holy Ghost. I know it. I can feel your spirits hanging about me like so much dead flesh.⁵

The early Methodist preachers did not use law and gospel to convict people of sin, lead them to repentance, and assure them of forgiveness through Jesus. Instead, they focused on a postconversion experience by which they would become Christians “in full.” Consequently, Methodist preaching became revivalistic.

This type of ministry was not new to America, however. During the Great Awakening, fueled by Methodist preachers, and in subsequent years when revivals were held throughout the country, fiery preachers would captivate the attention of

large audiences and purposely seek acute emotional responses from the crowd. Revivalism's particular contribution to American religion was the individualization and emotionalization of the Christian faith.⁶ Revival preachers did not shine the spotlight on the objective truth of Christ's redemptive work but on the subjective, visible responses of their audiences.

Charles Finney (1792–1876)

Charles Finney served as the bridge between Wesleyanism and modern Pentecostalism. Finney is credited with moving revivalism into the churches. In 1821, he experienced a dramatic conversion. Shortly thereafter he received a "baptism in the Holy Spirit" accompanied by "unutterable gushings" of praise. Finney's spellbinding sermons were heavily seasoned with Wesley's teaching of entire sanctification. One of Finney's theological innovations was his tendency to identify the "baptism of the Holy Spirit" as the means of entering into entire sanctification. He felt that one had to have that experience to be an effective preacher. He lamented about a previous mentor:

If he had ever been converted to Christ, he had failed to receive that divine anointing of the Holy Ghost that would make him a power in the pulpit and in society, for the conversion of souls. He had fallen short of receiving the baptism of the Holy Ghost, which is indispensable to ministerial success. . . . I have often been surprised and pained that to this day so little stress is laid upon this qualification for preaching Christ to a sinful world.⁷

Finney's revival methods would have made him a very entertaining and popular televangelist if he were living today. Not surprisingly, he rejected the scriptural teaching of justification in which God declares the sinner not guilty. He shined the spotlight on sanctification as the basis for a person's standing before God. He sought to bring his audience (frequently focusing on a particular individual in the audience) to an emotional state of spiritual crisis and excitement. Intense

expressions of emotion characterized his revivals. Frederick Dale Bruner, a leading analyst of the Pentecostal Movement, summarizes Finney's contribution to modern Pentecostalism: "In Finney were combined both the theology (essentially Methodism) and the methodology (essentially revivalism) which were later to find a permanent home in the movement called Pentecostal."⁸

Holiness Movement

The Methodist church was built on John Wesley's teaching of entire sanctification. As the church grew in America during the first half of the 19th century, many Methodists became disenchanted by their fellow church members, many of whom appeared to be worldly and unsanctified. Concerned Methodists shared a renewed interest in Wesley's teaching of entire sanctification. These Methodists formed holiness associations *within* the Methodist church. By the end of the 19th century, almost half of all Methodists were part of the Holiness Movement.

Diverse opinions surfaced within the Holiness Movement. Some discounted the need for a "second blessing" and viewed sanctification as a gradual process. Others vigorously advocated the need for a postconversion experience. By the end of the 19th century, a rift developed within the Methodist church over holiness teaching. Many within the church took a stand against the Holiness Movement. This forced many Methodists to break with their church and establish new denominations. "Twenty-three holiness groups were founded during the final decade of the 19th century."⁹ The stage was set for the explosion of the Pentecostal Movement in the 20th century.

Bruner unites the roots of modern Pentecostalism in his summary of the background and beginnings of the Pentecostal Movement: "The modern family-book of Pentecostalism has then the following main chapters: Wesley, Revivalism, Finney, The Holiness Movement. In each chapter personal experience

is given special stress. With Wesley and the later Holiness bodies in particular, the personal experience most stressed happened after a person was justified and converted. In the Pentecostal Movement this experience came to be called the 'baptism in the Holy Spirit.'"¹⁰