After languishing in obscurity for many years, the work of Phoebe Palmer (1807-1874) has been rediscovered by church historians and scholars. Although virtually unknown today, Palmer was a widely-recognized religious figure in her day—a woman whose concern for the holy life enabled her to transcend the limitations of both gender and denominational affiliation. 

As a premier proponent of “the holiness way,” Palmer functioned as teacher, writer, social activist, theologian and evangelist for the cause of Christ. She desired nothing less than full consecration to God, and her passionate devotion compelled her into the pulpit and onto the printed page. Consumed by the divine fire of God’s call, Phoebe became a dominant force in the nineteenth-century Holiness Movement, “a woman to whom thousands of people looked for leadership, and by whom thousands were instructed, in a time when women were not generally accorded positions of leadership or authority in American culture.” The brief biography that follows is intended as an introduction to this amazing woman. It is also offered as encouragement for all who, like Phoebe Palmer, desire nothing less than to be used fully of God.

Phoebe Palmer was born Phoebe Worrall on December 18, 1807 in New York. Her father had been converted under the preaching of John Wesley, and Phoebe grew up steeped in the history and teaching of prominent Methodists. At age 19, she married physician Walter Palmer, a fellow Methodist who shared her commitment to the Christian faith. The Palmers began their married life well placed, but the early years of their marriage were also marked by tragedy. Their three year old daughter died in a horrible crib fire caused by a careless nurse. During these years, Dr. and Mrs. Palmer attended the Allen Street Church, a prominent Methodist congregation in New York City. Here the young couple were active in church leadership, and the direction of their ministry was strongly influenced by a year-long period of revival that settled on the Allen Street congregation in 1831. It was in this atmosphere of heightened spiritual awareness that Phoebe and her sister Sarah Langford opened their home to a women’s Bible study committed to the pursuit of the “pure heart.” This simple gathering, known as the Tuesday Meeting for the Promulgation of Holiness, would eventually become the model for over two hundred such “Tuesday Meetings” around the world. Phoebe Palmer gradually assumed leadership of the Tuesday Meeting, and her reputation for teaching and exposition of Scripture spread.

From their early work with the Allen Street revival to their emerging work in camp meeting evangelism, the Palmers’ ministry grew steadily throughout the 1830s. As a result, Phoebe found it increasingly difficult to justify limiting her teaching and preaching to women only. In 1839, she became the first female Methodist “class leader” in New York. This year also brought the first of many camp meetings and evangelistic services which Walter and Phoebe conducted in the United States and Abroad. By 1840, she was persuaded to allow men into the Tuesday Meeting. Here she taught on “entire sanctification” to a crowd of prominent men and women from a variety of denominational backgrounds. Working within the Wesleyan Holiness tradition, Palmer combined her knowledge of Scripture and Wesleyan doctrine with a pragmatic concern for the consecrated Christian life. Out of this, her distinctive altar theology emerged as a significant theological modification of Wesley’s doctrine of Christian Perfection (sanctification.)

As word of the Palmers’ ministry spread, there were an increasing number of invitations to speak for gatherings of people interested in “going on to perfection.” In response,
Phoebe Palmer wrote one of her most important works, The Way of Holiness with Notes by the Way; Being a Narrative of Religious Experience Resulting from a Determination to be a Bible Christian. Here Palmer wrote:

I know that the Holy Spirit, the Comforter, has come! And has taken up his abiding residence in my heart—inciting me ceaselessly to every good word and work, and giving me a longing desire for the spiritual benefit of those around me—enabling me also to call upon God with a confidence hitherto unknown or unfelt, being assured that it is the principle of holy life within me, [giving expression to] my petitions and enabling me to exercise faith for the fulfillment of the promises. Glory be to the Triune God for such a salvation! (Holiness, 89)

The same devotion which fueled her work as a teacher, writer, and preacher, also gave Phoebe Palmer a heart for evangelism. I have already noted the Palmer's involvement in large-scale evangelistic efforts such as camp meetings. Phoebe's particular evangelistic efforts also included her numerous publications, extensive correspondence, tract distribution, and her work in the Tuesday Meeting. Palmer also used her influence in support of larger evangelistic efforts both at home and abroad. For example, her involvement in urban missions included one of the earliest prison ministries in the United States. Phoebe was prominent in the leadership of the New York Female Assistance Society for the Relief and Religious Instruction of the Sick Poor, and active in the establishment of the "Five Points Mission." Five Points settlement house for impoverished women and children, the first of its kind in America, remains a significant milestone in the field of urban ministry. Similarly, Phoebe Palmer later gave her New York City home on East 15th Street to the Salvation Army as a home for unwed mothers. This concern for evangelism is also seen in her support of missions abroad, and "She is acknowledged as one of the founding mothers of world missions in the American Methodist tradition."

Although the Palmers were models of Christian and marital devotion, Phoebe's prominent role as preacher inevitably left them open to criticism. As was often the case, she responded in writing. One result was her 1859 book, The Promise of the Father; or, A Neglected Specialty of the Last Days, which defended women in public ministry. This lengthy work, which offers an exegetical-historical case for women in ministry, was written during the revival period of 1857-1859. This was a period of tremendous spiritual renewal in the American Church, and the Palmers were in great demand. As news of the North American revival spread abroad, Walter and Phoebe were invited to preach in the British Isles. Here they found themselves in the company of such notable "Transatlantic Revivalists" as D.L. Moody and Charles Finney. The Palmers' return to the United States in 1863, and are the subject of her 1864 work, Four Years in the Old World.

Phoebe and Walter Palmer returned to New York, and in 1864 became editors of the popular periodical, Guide to Holiness. Phoebe remained in this position until her death in 1874. By the time of her passing, the Tuesday Meetings had become an international movement which would soon number over 200 meetings around the world. The holiness doctrine she developed had changed the American theological landscape, and would play a formative role in the Wesleyan, Holiness, and Pentecostal traditions. Her belief in the transforming power of God's grace had drawn the rich and powerful to her, just as it drew her to the poor and powerless. Thousands came to hear her preach the Word of God, and more still were influenced by her writing on the fully consecrated life. Service to Christ would take her across the United States from New York to California, north to Canada and across the Atlantic Ocean to the British Isles. Through all this, an ordinary woman who desired "only to be fully conformed to the will of God," became one of the most important American theological thinkers of the nineteenth century.

References:

2. Raser, 2.
3. From the first camp meeting in Williamsburg, New York in 1839, to Ohio State Camp Meeting in 1874, the Palmers would eventually minister to over 300 separate revival meetings in the United States, Canada and Great Britain. The Palmers would lead over a hundred such gatherings in the course of their ministry.
4. Lindley, 118.
5. Initially published anonymously in 1843, this book eventually sold over 50,000 copies. This work remains an excellent insight into the Christian life.
7. This later became the Salvation Army's first general hospital in the United States, and forerunner of the Booth Medical Center; Tripp, in Booth, 3n.
8. Oden, 7.
9. Phoebe Palmer offers a much shorter version of The Promise of the Father in her "Tongue of Fire on the Daughters of the Lord" (1859), in Oden, 31-56.
11. As a result of the Palmers' work in England, Catherine Booth, whose husband later founded the Salvation Army, published her important pamphlet, Female Ministry, in 1859. The work was written in response to a published attack upon Phoebe Palmer and all female preachers. Booth, who had heard Mrs. Palmer preach in Newcastle-upon-Tyne, responded to local clergymen who viewed women in preaching ministry as unscriptural; see Tripp, in Booth, 3.
BIBLIOGRAPHY AND SUGGESTED READING


—— Four Years in the Old World: Comprising the Travels, Incidents, and Evangelistic Labors of Dr. And Mrs. Palmer in England, Ireland, Scotland, and Wales. 3rd ed. New York: Foster and Palmer, Jr., 1886


WHY I’M AN EGALITARIAN

A PERSONAL REFLECTION

Fred Gingrich

Chances are that being a male, over 35 years old, ministering in a conservative evangelical denomination, and the product of a “dad-works, mom-at-home” traditional family, I would not be an egalitarian. Chances are that I would be a “New Man,” probably of the Promise Keepers variety, whose maleness has recently been reclaimed and revitalized. I would, as chances go, probably be a man who on the one hand is sympathetic to the feminist cause, listening to and understanding the plight of women throughout the centuries, while on the other hand being a man who has decided to follow “God’s plan” and has taken on the leadership of my family in a gentle but firm way.

But I am not, thank God, a victim of chance. Over my lifetime, throughout the many formative experiences, educational meanderings and ministry adventures, I have been led, I believe, and of course have chosen, to adopt a personal and ministry stance that affirms the equality of women and men, girls and boys, both in God’s eyes and in ours. The influences on the development of this stance are varied and complex, and I readily admit that as a counselor my penchant for self-reflection may be too self-absorbing for some of you to handle. But I trust that through having a glimpse into my story you might be able to reflect more clearly on your own and help others who may be struggling with this issue to move toward greater clarity of their own.

Many evangelicals would believe that this issue, like any issue that affects the life of the church, needs to be settled by turning to the Word of God for instruction. How could I disagree? Increasingly over my lifetime, Scripture has become the standard against which all doctrine and practice within the church must be tested. But one doesn’t have to be a thinking evangelical long to realize that Scripture isn’t always as clear as we would like. “Seeing through the glass darkly” clouds our understanding and causes serious divisions among us. The critical factor is how we approach Scripture. Who we are, what we have experienced in life, the friends and family we interact with, all coalesce in a complex web of perception with which we approach Scripture. Whether we like it or not we are never unbiased. Pure objectivity is never possible in any experience in life,