
*From Aldersgate to Azusa Street* is an ambitious volume that seeks to do three things: outline the similarities between the Wesleyan, Holiness, and Pentecostal traditions, arguing that there is sufficient commonality that they can be seen to represent a distinct theological family; trace the decline of the vision that unites these traditions, to the extent that there has been a departure from the original vision; and point to the ongoing relevance of this vision for the revitalization of the contemporary church.

One of the major strengths of the book is its scope. The book is far more engaging and substantial than a biographical dictionary of key figures in the Wesleyan, Holiness, and Pentecostal traditions. And yet, there are chapters that focus on thirty different figures in these traditions. Many of the essays do an excellent job of introducing the person that is the focus of the chapter and situating them within their cultural and ecclesial setting. For instance, John H. Wigger focuses on the ways that Asbury was an effective communicator and leader in his eighteenth-century American context. Douglas M. Strong considers the enigmatic Lorenzo Dow within his intellectual and social environment, viewing him as an “eccentric democratizer” and a “cosmopolitan evangelist.” Estreilda Alexander discusses Amanda Berry Smith’s emphasis on sanctification within the context of her experience of racism and sexism, noting that Smith “operated at the intersection of two spiritual realities: independent black Methodism and the white Holiness movement”, which also had dynamic personal and social dimensions (165). Harold E. Raser’s essay, “Phineas Franklin Bresee: Recovering the Original Spirit of Methodism” emphasizes both the significance of holiness in Bresee’s ministry, as well as his dissatisfaction with the affluence of nineteenth century American Methodism. Strong compares two competing visions for late nineteenth and early twentieth century American Methodism in his essay on Borden Parker Bowne and Henry Clay Morrison, outlining their divergent understandings of Methodism as well as the ways each person represented broader theological, social, and cultural rifts in the movement. Finally, Diane K. Leclerc’s essay on Mildred Bangs Wynkoop describes Wynkoop’s effort to revitalize the doctrine of Christian perfection within the Church of the Nazarene, arguing that her theology “gave the movement new language, new metaphors, [and] new theological paradigms for a new day” (323).

As one would expect in a volume of this scope, some of the chapters are primarily summaries or reviews of existing scholarship. In some places, the volume lacks a bit of balance with insufficient attention given to figures of deep importance to their tradition. Dennis C. Dickerson’s essay on “Richard Allen and the Making of Early American Methodism” is one such example. While Dickerson is exactly the right person to write this essay, it is one of the shortest pieces in the book (6 pages), which is surprisingly brief for such a key figure for African-American Methodism and American Methodism more broadly. It is perhaps unfair to criticize omissions, which are inevitable in a project like this one. Nevertheless, the volume would have been stronger if it had included an essay on northern Methodist abolitionists, particularly Orange Scott (who eventually left the Methodist Episcopal Church because of its compromise on slavery and racism). The biographical approach also occasionally leads
to downplaying important aspects of the history of the Wesleyan, Holiness, and Pentecostal traditions. For example, the origin and significance of the camp meeting is not featured prominently, even though the institution played a key role in the renewed emphasis on entire sanctification in nineteenth century American Methodism and in the growth of the holiness movement. Finally, the book does not succeed as clearly in its attempt to suggest the contributions that the Wesleyan, Holiness, and Pentecostal traditions can make to the contemporary church as it does in demonstrating that there is a common vision among these traditions, and pointing to the decline of the originating visions of these traditions where it is relevant. In particular, the pastoral responses at the end of each of the five chronological parts felt tacked on and sometimes lacked the focus and clarity of the other essays.

Nevertheless, the volume provides a long overdue description of common theological emphases and experiences in the Wesleyan, Holiness, and Pentecostal traditions. The biographical approach brings into focus a broader movement of Christians who expected and anticipated a transformational encounter with God's grace that, impacted their personal lives in profound ways and changed how they thought about and interacted with their broader cultural context. Several decades ago in Discovering an Evangelical Heritage, Donald W. Dayton argued that the Wesleyan and Holiness traditions were concerned about gender equality, racial reconciliation, and lifting up the oppressed before liberal Protestantism turned its attention in that direction. In his subsequent work, Theological Roots of Pentecostalism, Dayton traced the development of the theology of entire sanctification from Wesley through American Methodism and into the holiness movement, arguing that Pentecostalism is rooted in the Wesleyan tradition. From Aldersgate to Azusa Street develops both of these themes in crucial ways, showing an unmistakable family resemblance among the Methodist, Holiness, and Pentecostal traditions. The book narrates the stories of women and men who, because of their common concern for personal and corporate holiness worked to correct issues of systemic injustice and accepted leaders who often challenged prevailing assumptions about race and gender. Methodist historians, in particular, have not given sufficient attention to their spiritual offspring in the Holiness and Pentecostal traditions. This book addresses that deficiency and ought to spark renewed scholarly interest in this neglected trajectory. For these reasons, From Aldersgate to Azusa Street is a gift to the academy, and a useful resource to help members of these traditions recognize just how much they have in common.

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