

Faith Pulpit

What Happened to Keswick?

Years ago a few Fundamentalists had occasion to identify with the Keswick movement, also known as the “deeper life,” or “victorious life.” Others have slurred the movement in somewhat the same way that New Evangelicals have slurred the Scofield Reference Bible. The point is worth some notice.

While the movement traces back to the perfectionist movements that in the 1860s produced Holiness, it went in a somewhat different direction. Credit seems to go to William Boardman, who in the 1860s was preaching a higher life, and to Pearsall Smith and his wife Hannah Whitehall Smith. Smith held meetings in England in the early 1870s, making considerable impact. Then in the summer of 1875, Smith badly smudged his reputation and left the ministry. Thereupon Canon T. D. Harfoed-Battersby, vicar of St. John’s church in Keswick, up in the Lake District, not far from the Scottish border, announced a week of meetings in Keswick near his church. The meetings were to be a time for spiritual refreshing and earnest seeking after God, and they began a series which has continued to the present.

Various conferences in North America have taken both the Keswick name and the emphases, notably in New Jersey, Canada, and Florida. An early exponent of the movement was the Sunday School Times, under Charles G. Trumbull. Two schools that once articulated the view were Columbia Bible College and Prairie Bible Institute, and there is reason to believe that for years Moody Bible Institute was warm to the Keswick message. An important book from the early days was Hannah Whitehall Smith’s *The Christian’s Secret of a Happy Life*. These all shared the view that, while sinless perfection is in no way attainable in this life, the believer does not have to live in defeat and guilt. That message remained intact until about 1960, when the Keswick movement seemed to tail off.

Of the complaints lodged against the movement, perhaps the most insistent was that, despite all denials, they really believed in sinless perfection, a second work of grace. There is no use denying it,

opponents claim; if you say A, then of course you have to mean B. Probably Warfield's book *Perfectionism* left little more to be said, or written. Other complaints were that the movement involved pietism (putting experience above Scripture), spiritual pride, misuse of Scripture, and perhaps an undue concern for self and for an experience-centered life. The movement had its problems, but I do not believe that the above list ranked very high among those problems. As to perfection, the leaders were too well educated to fall in that direction. Barnhouse spoke at Keswick in the 1930s and Wilbur Smith in the 1950s, not to mention W. Graham Scroggie, the gray eminence after the War. There seemed to be a deep gulf fixed between them and the Holiness movement (offhand pulpit remark: "I'd rather be a holy man than a holiness man").

What then, at its best, did the movement stand for? For daily fellowship with Christ and being taken up with Him, for human depravity and the dangers in the old nature, for the walk in the Spirit, for the demands of the cross in total sacrifice, for daily quiet time in Bible reading and prayer, for immediate confession of known sin, and for leaving guilt at the foot of the cross. Much of the preaching had to do with death to self, renouncing the world, separating to Christ, confessing Him faithfully, promoting foreign missions, and living by faith. (I list these on the basis of considerable experience and a recent rereading of Keswick literature.)

It seems that the movement did have its problems. Perhaps separation was a key issue. For all the emphasis on separating from the world, they did not have much to say about real apostasies. Few if any of them ever went into Modernism; but they did not seem to warn people very much against it, or against the ecumenical movement. So many denominations were represented that they did not say much, if anything, against sacramental grace. When Billy Graham linked with the New York Modernists in his 1957 meetings, the Deeper Life men had little or nothing to say against it. In 1961, as Graham was making common cause with the Modernists, with the WCC, and even with Rome, Alan Redpath, then at Moody Church in Chicago, seemed to be swept along in the current. He was widely quoted to have invited the Modernists, with their fine ethics, and the Fundamentalists, with their sound doctrine, to get together in winning souls to Christ.

Now the whole movement seems to have slid off into New Evangelicalism.

A second problem was the lack of interest in the literal interpretation of prophecy. That negligence probably reflects the amillennialism of so many preachers in the UK. I find little mention of the blessed hope in my reading of the literature.

A third problem was pietism, although I believe that there was a lot less of it early on than they were accused of. They loved the Word too much to bypass it just because someone prayed and got different leading. That view seemed to hold for about the first 80 years. If anything, the pietism came up after 1956, when preachers were trying to justify Graham; but that coincided with the decline of the movement. The slide to New Evangelicalism at last justified the charge of pietism.

A fourth complaint was the temptation to pride. If pride goes with depravity, and no one dares claim innocence, I have two observations. I can think of few movements which so encouraged their people to be on guard against the flesh and against the pride of life. Furthermore, on reading scores of sermons preached half a century ago, I was struck by the reticence of the preachers to talk about themselves. Their names are now unfamiliar, at least in this country, and it is difficult to learn much of a given man's ministry of experiences. You might realize only later that he was a veteran missionary to China. They preferred to talk about Christ.

Some have complained about the misuse of Scripture, e.g., rendering Romans 8:1 as "There is therefore now no encumbrance, no disability, to them which are in Christ Jesus . . ." It is difficult to find in the Greek sources any idea that *katakrima* was so used in civil law. Well, the movement did not stand or fall on that verse. And a reading of the literature should reveal in those men a tender love for the Word and faithfulness in expounding it.

What became of the original conference? Reportedly it still meets, and for three weeks in 2001. What may be left of its old power, I do not know. A author in the 1952 convention expressed his concern that the townspeople were unimpressed and unmoved at what they saw of the conference in their midst. I have received the same impression—two blocks of stalls selling books, music, and souvenirs does not look spiritually encouraging. I hope that the actual conference is not so materialistic as my host in town seemed to think.

It was good while it lasted. I learn that even R. T. Ketcham was for years a author at Keswick of New Jersey. But now the message seems *passe'*, especially in the entertainment churches. But there are still saints who hunger for the preaching of the cross, for a real experience with Christ, for death to self, for the walk in the Spirit, and for joy in Him. These themes do not seem to be often heard from Fundamentalist pulpits, and hardly in entertainment churches.

With few exceptions, both Fundamentalists and Keswick men held aloof from each other; yet each needed the other's message. How many Fundamentalist churches hear anything about crucifying the flesh, walking in the Spirit, or adoring Christ? How many of Keswick's heirs showed any concern for the absolutes in doctrine, or for separating from apostates? A friend of mine, now with the Lord, identified with the Keswick movement and was widely used on Deeper Life platforms—and then left his library to an agency with whom he would have nothing to do in his early ministry.

A. W. Tozer said one night, "Few men run well to the end of their course." That may well be written as the epitaph of the Keswick movement; but I still do not like to hear gratuitous slurs against it.

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