



A HERITAGE IS FOR OWNING

by Wesley Tracy

Ever notice the varied ways we use the term *own*? Money-grubbers want to "own" the world's supply of bank notes, unenlightened marriage partners may want to "own" their mate (or someone else's). The life ambition of one young man I know is to "own" a red Corvette. Others dream of a sweetheart of their very *own* as James Mangan dreamed of "My *own* Rosaleen . . . my life of life, my saint of saints . . . my flower of flowers."¹

We use "own" in yet another way. To *own* something is to embrace, claim, and cherish it. In this issue we hope to help you own your holiness heritage. We hope you taste again the flavor of those "sweet years, the dear and wished-for years . . . the sweet sad years, the melancholy years"² that legacy that enriches the holiness movement.

Think about: Wesley teaching coal miners to read the Bible and preaching in Newgate Prison, Adam Clarke writing the last sentences of his commentary on his knees, the Methodists pushing through Parliament the Child Labor laws, Asbury in camp meeting, Phineas Bresee crying out for "a place in the heart of the city, which could be made a center of holy fire, and where the gospel could be preached to the poor," Seth Rees taking yet another offering for a rescue home.

Does your heart say, "These are my people"? Will you own this heritage? Not so you can worship history, but learn from it? If you own your heritage we may hear God's future thunder in your past.³

You may feel that your forebears prayed too loud, preached too long, made too many mistakes, lived on the wrong side of the tracks, and were overzealous. Yet, in looking back, we discover that "in this moment there is life and food for future years."⁴ And he or she who is ashamed to call them brethren probably doesn't deserve them.

Three things have surfaced in my own ruminations of my holiness heritage. First is what Wesley called the "grand depositum" of Methodism—entire sanctification. I am coming to appreciate this as the most radically optimistic hope in the world. In the doctrine of entire sanctification we have the radical statement that the springs of the human heart from which flow love and motive can be pure and Christlike—in this life. This experience is wrought as the Holy Spirit cleanses the believing heart by grace through faith.

Those in Wesley's time, drunk on the doctrine of intensive total depravity, could not hear him. It is about the same today. The behaviorists tell us that the psyche is so complex that we will never know the source of any act or motive, or that we can be reduced to predictable "conscious automata."

Even the most optimistic humanist, who sins by denying the

existence of sin, dares not proclaim anything close to the purity preached in entire sanctification. Our Wesleyan-Holiness Movement heritage proclaims a redemption by grace that boggles the mind of those who hear about it—and, come to think of it, those who experience it too, for they never cease to marvel that "such love" could so redeem a "sinner such as I."

The second thing my heritage has been lecturing me about is its thoroughgoing practice of Christian nurture. Wesley tossed some tough words at "vagabond preachers" who preached and then hit the road, leaving the new converts to perish. Wesley majored in Christian nurture. Each Methodist was a member of a society, and a "class" of 12 persons who looked after each other spiritually under the direction of a class leader. In addition many Methodists were also members of a "band," a small group of some five persons committed to God and each other. Also, materials were provided for family worship that was to be held twice daily. And then there were the schools—in a day when schools were scarce the Wesleyans provided schools of every sort. To be true to our heritage, we must be willing to do whatever it takes to get the task of Christian nurture done.

The third lesson that my heritage is making me write on the board 50 times lest I forget it is that at the heart of my holiness heritage there is a conscious option for the poor. I see Wesley gathering ragamuffins off the street in order to feed and teach them. I see the teachers at Kingswood teaching illiterate miners to write their names and then, later, John 3:16. I see Susanna Wesley turning the parsonage into a school for 200 children. I see Adam and Mary Clarke turning their home into a hospital for cholera-stricken children. I see holiness people establishing the Stranger's Friend Society for the destitute. And I say, "These are my people." John Wesley looks down from the picture on my wall. He seems to be asking if I really need monogrammed shirts and Florsheims for every day.

Owning one's heritage isn't always easy, but it may give you the golden gift Mangan received from Rosaleen:

*Your holy . . . hands
Shall girdle me with steel . . .
[And] give me life and soul anew.⁵*

NOTES

1. James Clarence Mangan (1803-49), "Dark Rosaleen."
2. Elizabeth Barrett Browning, "Sonnets from the Portuguese," I.
3. *Ibid.*, XXVII, a paraphrase of Browning.
4. William Wordsworth (1770-1850), "Tintern Abbey."
5. Mangan, "Dark Rosaleen."