The pre-Civil War story of the Wesleyan Methodist Connection [USA] has been frequently narrated. In 1843, thousands of disillusioned members of the Methodist Episcopal Church seceded to organize a new abolitionist sect. Unlike its parent denomination, the Wesleyan Methodist Connection was uncompromising in its opposition to African-American slavery, and was dedicated to the immediate extirpation of the "peculiar institution" by a strategy of overt political action. The antebellum Wesleyans were active also in temperance reform, the women's rights movement, and the democratization of ecclesiastical hierarchies--claiming that their commitment to such radical positions was required of them by their belief in Christian perfection. Wesleyans were convinced that God had a special purpose for them in advocating the cause of the "poor"--a term that for them meant not only those in economic poverty but also all who were oppressed in any way.

After the Civil War, the saga of Wesleyan Methodism (along with that of the entire "holiness movement") becomes more

1In the antebellum period, the doctrine of "Christian perfection" was routinely and alternatively referred to by the terms "holiness," "entire consecration," or "sanctification." In the postbellum period, these different terms carried more nuanced variations of meaning. For the development of this doctrine, see John L. Peters, Christian Perfection and American Methodism (New York: Abingdon, 1956).


3For the history of the postbellum holiness movement, see Melvin E. Dieter, The Holiness Revival of the Nineteenth Century (Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow Press, 1980) and Charles E. Jones, Perfectionist Persuasion: The Holiness Movement and American
complicated; consequently, there are at least two possible ways of rendering their story. One of these renderings underscores the well-rehearsed stereotype of the holiness movement; that is, that it did not continue its antebellum tradition of social activism but was instead preoccupied with the pursuit of personal moralism, ecstatic religious phenomena, and charitable good deeds. Indeed, the language of discourse of the postbellum holiness groups regarding social issues was often couched in images that were philanthropic and therapeutic, concerned with the effects rather than the causes of the problems of the poor.

Wesleyan Methodist leader Adam Crooks, writing in 1864, articulated this apparent perceptual change in social reform strategy: "in former times" (i.e. before emancipation), God had used the Wesleyans as "His vanguard in His great battle for the temporal deliverance of his oppressed poor." But since the Wesleyans' cause celebre was ostensibly accomplished with the demise of slavery, Crooks believed that God had "in reserve for [the postbellum Wesleyans] a future of still higher and more glorious significance; the calling of His people to a larger spiritual liberty." Crooks now wanted the Wesleyans to emphasize the experience of "entire consecration" accompanied by a "Baptism of power." Put succinctly, the Wesleyans' old mission had been to advocate in the broader society for the physical liberty of the oppressed poor; their new mission was to advocate within the professed church for the "spiritual liberty" of a deeper religious experience.

The other rendering of the Wesleyan Methodists' story, however, is less familiar—and here is where their history becomes more complex. Postbellum Wesleyans and other holiness groups cannot be so easily caricatured when one adds some important and often overlooked qualifiers to the above description.

In the first place, many Wesleyans, Free Methodists, "holiness" Methodist Episcopalians and their fellow colleagues in the nascent holiness movement continued to be very active in the social justice issues of the post-War period. A large number of

Methodism, 1867-1936 (Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow Press, 1974). I am using the term "holiness movement" to refer to the movement among Methodists and various bodies that seceded from Methodism to (re-)emphasize the Wesleyan doctrine of Christian perfection. This movement was preceded by the antebellum revival of perfectionist preaching among Methodists and various Presbyterian and Congregationalist evangelists.

Crooks was a prominent pastor and editor of the denominational paper.

Cited in Leslie D. Wilcox, Wesleyan Methodism in Ohio, 27.
antebellum perfectionist reformers consistently followed through on their earlier commitments after the War. Wesleyan Methodist founders Lucius Matlack and LaRoy Sunderland, for example, were leaders in desegregating churches and public schools in the 1870s. The holiness-advocating Methodist Episcopal bishop, Gilbert Haven, was a strong integrationist and advocate for the election of an African-American bishop. A recent book on the Radical Republican movement during Reconstruction narrates how Wesleyan Methodists and Free Methodists were in the forefront of the postbellum political campaigns for a fully integrated society and for African-American and female suffrage. Judicatories of both of these holiness denominations precisely instructed their members for whom to vote on these all-important issues. And when preachers were ostracized by the mainline Methodist churches to which they were appointed for making political speeches on behalf of specific Radical candidates and in favor of black/white "amalgamation" (integration), independent holiness churches welcomed them gladly.

Secondly, since holiness churches were comprised of the economically poor more often than the increasingly-bourgeois mainline Methodist churches, the holiness folks more easily embraced the causes and struggles of their lower class constituency. Holiness ministries such as the Salvation Army, the Church of the Nazarene, various Rescue Missions, and the Crittenton homes for "fallen women" were engaged daily with the plight of the poor on a very direct and personal level (incidentally at the same time that most mainline churches were espousing patronizing or even regressive attitudes toward the poor). The charitable activities of these groups are well known—soup kitchens, emergency shelters, disaster relief, and so forth—activities which primarily dealt with the results of poverty rather than its roots. Unrecognized by most historians, though, is that some of the other programs of these holiness ministries also provided systemic solutions to longstanding social problems which went beyond the mere treatment of the symptoms of poverty. These programs included free health care for the indigent, employment bureaus, empowerment opportunities in leadership for women and African-Americans, and political

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8 Howard, 31, 63, 67, 82, 135, 163, 193, 204.
advocacy on behalf of world peace and temperance.\(^9\)

For the holiness movement, then, its praxis was often more liberative than its rhetoric. The holiness churches' analysis of social problems was based on a strategy of charity, but--because of their intimate identification with the poor--their practice of social action became (almost unconsciously) a strategy of justice.

II

Most historians have not recognized this duality in the nineteenth century Methodist message of Christian perfection. Consequently, scholars have interpreted the holiness movement (and its antebellum perfectionist predecessors) in a variety of one-sided and, therefore, contradictory ways.

The standard older view is represented by sociologist Milton Yinger, who declares that holiness churches are the primary example of "avoidance behavior," in which they "not only disagree with the values of the prevailing culture, but withdraw, isolate, and otherwise disassociate themselves" from the dominant society.\(^{10}\) Other interpreters similarly conclude that the major characteristic of the holiness movement was its "strict moral code" which emphasized "individualistic" and "private" reform at the expense of "social" strategies.\(^{11}\) A more recent example of this position is offered by Marxist social historian Christopher Clark, who states that the perfectionistic revivalists taught that "cures for economic ills lay in the hands of individuals,"


and not in "political reform."  

In contrast, revisionist historians of social activism in the Methodist tradition have emphasized the highly politicized activities of perfectionist reformers. These historians point out that the reformers hoped their politicking would lead toward nothing less than a radical egalitarian transformation of the economy and social order of the nation.  

Timothy L. Smith writes—in direct contradiction to Milton Yinger—that postbellum holiness preachers believed the "kingdom of Christ...must rule the temporal world, not shun it." In terms of social strategy, Smith finds that "in the postwar period...evangelical ideology...merged without a break into what came to be called the social gospel." Norris Magnuson argues a step further by asserting that the members of the Salvation Army and other "gospel welfare" workers had a more "profound social consciousness" than many of the often-touted social gospellers.  

A deep historiographical disagreement is apparent here. Most scholars align themselves with one or the other of these viewpoints and disregard the significance of the opposing opinion. Perhaps it is more constructive to plumb the depths of this contradiction, since both interpretations contain important contributions to the subject at hand. Such an exploration will reinforce the thesis that there were fundamental tensions in the antebellum history of perfectionistic social reform which resulted in an ambivalent legacy for the late nineteenth and twentieth century Methodist/holiness tradition regarding its approach to strategies addressed to the needs of the poor. The presence of this ambivalence both challenges and confirms long-held stereotypes, and is derived, it seems to me, from two sources—one theological and the other sociological.  

III  

First we will consider the theological ambiguity inherent within  


14Smith, 234-35.  

15Magnuson, xi.-xvi.
nineteenth century holiness social reform—what James Moorhead has called the "divided conscience" of antebellum Protestantism. Although Moorhead limited his study to the "new measures" revivalism of the arminianized Presbyterian reformer Charles G. Finney, his analysis can be applied to Methodist/holiness social activism as well, especially since Finney’s "Oberlin perfectionism" greatly influenced mid-nineteenth century brands of holiness reform. In fact, there was so much sympathy in the antebellum period between these theological positions that the "new measures" reformers were regularly charged with denying "every doctrine which distinguishes the Presbyterian church from the Methodist." 

According to Moorhead, Finney’s theology (and, consequently, his social action) was basically conservative and "pessimistic about human nature." Although he rejected the concept of inbred depravity, Finney nevertheless believed that persons had a native propensity to commit sinful deeds. Individuals have the free will not to sin, but inevitably will do so. Due to this

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16 The revivalism of Charles Finney and his colleagues was characterized by the so-called "new measures"—protracted meetings, women praying in mixed assemblies, physically demonstrative behavior, and perfectionist theology, among others. These measures were "new" only among Congregationalists and Presbyterians; they had long been standard among the Methodists of the early republic.


18 See, for example, An Account of the Trial of Luther Myrick, Before the Oneida Presbytery (Syracuse: J.P. Patterson, 1834), 69.

19 Leonard I. Sweet, "The View of Man Inherent in New Measures Revivalism," Church History 45 (June 1976): 206-21. Finney’s relatively conservative theological position on human nature was a holdover from his Calvinist/Puritan heritage—although even this idea was greatly modified by his stress on individual free will. Among Congregationalists and Presbyterians, the modification of Calvinist hamartiological doctrine from a view of natural depravity (inbred sinfulness) toward an emphasis on sinful deeds due to one’s free will is generally attributed to Nathaniel W. Taylor, and is referred to as the "New Haven theology," the "New England theology," or the "New Divinity." See Frank Hugh Foster, A Genetic History of the New England Theology (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1967); and Earl A. Pope, New England Calvinism and the Disruption of the Presbyterian Church (New York: Garland Publishing, 1987).
persistence of sin, some coercive restraints and checks (such as governmental institutions and regulatory legislation) are needed in human society. Only a volitional conversion experience can overcome the habitual inclination to disobey God.

Since the greatest task at hand is to assist people toward an experiential free will conversion, then social and political activism should always be an "appendage" to evangelistic efforts. Such activism is necessary, Finney felt, but he doubted its ultimate efficacy if it were not accompanied by a religious revival.

At the same time, and in tension with the "pessimistic" doctrine of the inevitability of sin, the "new measures" theology emphasized natural human ability--thus making it somewhat progressive and optimistic. Following conversion, Finney believed that it is possible to be sanctified from all sin.\(^20\) Since society is simply a composite of the individuals who make up that society, then a sinless society is theoretically attainable when all persons are converted and sanctified. Indeed, it is incumbent upon Christians to strive toward the "perfect state of society" which will precede the millennium.\(^21\) This postmillennial concept of Finney's (and of the Methodist social reformers) encouraged Christians to work for human rights and social transformation in preparation for the establishment of the reign of God.

Finney's doctrinal synthesis of the inevitability of sin and the human ability to overcome sin corresponded well with the combination of ideas (the propensity to sin and human ability) already present within the theological tradition of John Wesley.\(^22\) In describing the theological tension produced by this doctrinal synthesis within the Wesleyan tradition, one commentator wrote that Methodism held "the middle ground between

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\(^20\)At first, Finney seemed to accept the Wesleyan concept of conversion followed by sanctification. Later on, he came to believe that entire sanctification should occur at the same time as one's conversion.


\(^22\)Actually, Finney stressed "free will" so much that his theology inclined significantly more in the Pelagian direction than Wesley's did, but this distinction did not concern most nineteenth century Methodists. See note 25 below.
Calvinism and Universalism. This was indeed true of nineteenth century Methodism--and that "middle ground" was an unstable place on which to remain standing. Antebellum perfectionist reformers understood this difficulty--and were fearful of losing their precarious balance--since only "a slender railing" kept them from falling into the abyss of "despotism" (i.e. the propensity to sin emphasized to the point of hierarchical control) on the one side or "disorganization" (i.e. human ability emphasized to the point of antinomian infidelity) on the other. After the Civil War, the tension of this middling position became even more difficult to hold.

For instance, it was hard to maintain the "middle ground" when the "pessimistic" side of the theological tension was overemphasized. Some holiness folk accentuated both Finney's caution regarding the efficacy of political advocacy and his elevation of the importance of personal volitional religious experiences. This trend away from politics and toward particularly-defined experiences was heightened by the Methodists' appropriation of Finney's (rather un-Wesleyan) stress on free will. By promoting individual free will, one's pure motives for social reform activity became more important than one's actual reform activity; more emphasis was placed on the intentional experience of holiness and less on the ethical results of holiness. For some "holiness" Methodists and others in the holiness movement, then, their priority shifted from sanctification as the means of social transformation to sanctification as the goal of personal transformation.

Phoebe Palmer, the well known Methodist holiness leader, is a prime example of this shift. In her ministry, Palmer practiced an openness to all persons and even promoted the preaching (though not the ordination) of women. Nonetheless, she believed...
that encouraging the experience of entire sanctification was the only legitimate purpose of the church. Any endeavor which smacked of political controversy (thereby diverting attention from the preaching of holiness) was to be quickly stifled. 27

The "middle ground" was also hard to maintain on the optimistic (human ability) side of the Finneyite/Methodist theological tension. Even before the Civil War, a slippage off of the "middle" was evident in the tendency of various perfectionists to fall into all kinds of anarchistic and antinomian extremes. If Christians truly had the ability to be free of sin, the antinomian perfectionists asked, then why should there be a need for any mediating human authorities, such as the clergy, the bible, ecclesiastical and political institutions (including the U.S. government), or restrictions on the free expression of sexuality? They believed that persons should exercise their own freedom concerning moral judgement. 28 Many "proto-holiness" antebellum abolitionists left Methodism and other orthodox Christian sects for these antinomian perfectionist deviations—universalism, utopian communitarianism, spiritualism, and various "religions of reason." 29 Such "freethinking" also had an impact on the postbellum holiness churches. Second generation progeny of the holiness movement were particularly susceptible. For instance, despite a thoroughgoing Wesleyan Methodist upbringing and education, John Wesley Powell left the tradition of his youth to become a leading religious freethinker (and famous explorer and scientist) of the late nineteenth century. 30


Along with the theological tension described above was an equally significant sociological tension contributing to the ambivalent legacy of perfectionistic social strategy. This second tension resulted from the fluctuating social location of the holiness subculture within the broader transformation of nineteenth century North American society.

Antebellum perfectionists were primarily agrarian in their background and orientation. Even into the twentieth century this rural bias held true among holiness advocates. Although holiness churches eventually existed in urban areas, these churches were composed of persons recently migrated from rural areas, who still maintained their agrarian attitudes and close contacts with the country. Thus the holiness folk were some of "those who stayed behind" in their rural culture during the era when the majority of North Americans were becoming urban oriented.

Nineteenth century U.S. society, especially in the North, was changing from a basically agrarian-focused, decentralized, localized culture to an urban-focused, centralized, cosmopolitan culture. Historian Hal Barron describes this as a change in which "center stage, so to speak, moves from the country to the city." This transformation, however--especially in the rural areas--was not uniform or unremitting. There was not a simple rural-to-urban shift in which the agrarian way of life was overcome by the forces of bourgeois modernization and ceased to exist as a separate culture. Rather, rural North Americans accepted some aspects of the emerging commercialized culture and rejected others.

The holiness churches reflected this ambivalence toward

31See Cross, 78-109, 354-55. Bernard Weisberger states that those most open to antebellum evangelical revivalism were the "rural class halfway between rawness and cosmopolitanism." They Gathered at the River: The Story of the Great Revivalists and Their Impact upon Religion in America (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1958), 12, 18.

32Jones, 121.


modernization. While the holiness movement retained a primarily rural ethos, it was not unaffected by the industrializing commercialization that characterized the "Gilded Age." Many holiness persons eventually came to appreciate certain values of the urbanizing culture, particularly the supposed advantages of capitalistic expansion. But even those holiness folk who embraced some cosmopolitan values were nonetheless very wary of them. Consequently, holiness ministries often developed social strategies which both accepted and circumscribed the emerging cosmopolitan culture. Some of the holiness reformers, for example, developed a relatively systemic analysis of social problems but then preferred to tackle the solutions to these problems on a local basis. Others, such as the members of the Salvation Army, practiced strategies of justice for the urban poor while refusing to be engaged in potentially compromising political alliances with others who were committed to the same cause. For instance, at the same time that the Army was providing direct and politically-charged support for striking laborers, it had an official policy of avoiding any political controversy. Again, tensions are hard to hold in balance. And the tension of the rural-oriented holiness folk to simultaneously affirm and reject the dominant commercializing culture was particularly untenable given the impulse toward greater urban-oriented industrialization that followed the Civil War.

On the one hand, some holiness advocates emphasized the complete rejection of modern urban culture. They became apprehensive about the direction in which the nation was heading--preferring the familiar values derived "from the fields and shops" of their rural environment to "the soulless artificialities of the city." The Wesleyan Methodists, for example, criticized the effects of commercialization by lamenting "the increasing desecration of the Holy Sabbath, especially along canals, railroads and thoroughfares throughout this nation--thus turning these improvements into curses." Not coincidentally, these transportation improvements were also blamed for diverting trade to other places, thus contributing to the late nineteenth century


37Minutes of the Rochester Conference of the Wesleyan Methodist Connection, cited in Stanley W. Wright, et.al., One Hundred Years of Service for Christ in the Wesleyan Methodist Church, 1844-1944 (n.p.: n.d.), 17.
stagnation of the rural economy. Holiness folk, along with their rural (and urban working class) neighbors, were left out of the economic expansion of the Gilded Age. As a result, personal moral prescriptions against jewelry, fancy dress, robed choirs, instrumental music, and so forth symbolized a protest against the bourgeois lifestyle of the predominant commercialized culture, which was economically exploiting the poor.

The holiness churches were also pessimistic about the future of U.S. political culture. During the antebellum era, perfectionist reformers had seen tangible results to their politicking, but with the increasing complexity of postbellum society, political victory was much more difficult to achieve, as demonstrated by the lackluster response to the agrarian Populist movement. The rise of premillennial eschatological theories within the holiness movement only reinforced the prevailing rural negativism regarding the possibility of broad societal change. It was better, the holiness churches believed, to provide individual charity to those in need.

As the rural economy declined, there was also tremendous personal anxiety. Holiness theology began to emphasize the "power" that one receives in the religious experience of entire sanctification. This holiness message offered the prospect of personal empowerment for individuals who felt powerless in their society.

Promises of personal "power" and personal acts of charity were individualistic strategies, to be sure. Nevertheless, the holiness churches were involved with the immediate needs of struggling people during a time when the hoped-for social transformation proclaimed by those who called most loudly for systemic political change seemed very remote. And at times, the holiness churches' close identification with the poor (combined with their striving for perfection) caused them, almost unintentionally, to transform their own social strategies into

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38 See, for example, Levi Parsons, History of Rochester Presbytery From the Earliest Settlement of the Country (Rochester: Democrat-Chronicle Press, 1889), 156, who describes the weak condition of perfectionist "new measures" churches in the postbellum period due to economic decline.


strategies of justice.  

The rejection of the dominant culture by a large portion of the holiness movement created certain problems. First, in their disillusionment with the political process, the postbellum holiness movement tended to drop out of political activity altogether—an unfortunate reduction that went far beyond Finney’s original caution concerning political activism. Secondly, it was easy for holiness churches to drift off into a legalistic moralism in which moral prescriptions lost their original force as a rebellion against commercialization, hierarchy, and impersonal bourgeois oppression. In this way, the holiness folk retained "the form" of personal morality but "denied the power thereof."

On the other hand, some of the heirs of antebellum perfectionism were more accepting of the increasingly cosmopolitan society. They understood the interlocking and interconnected nature of social relations in the urbanizing culture. As early as 1847, perfectionist abolitionists had moved beyond the individualistic presumptions of Finney’s free will theology and began to view society in solidaristic rather than atomistic terms. Abolitionist perfectionists had learned that there were "other forms of oppression that cluster around [slavery] and support it." Wesleyan Methodists referred to this interrelatedness of oppressions as the "sisterhood of evil." Understanding the unified character of sin led some perfectionist abolitionists to comprehend the need for more unified, structural solutions. Rather than personalized strategies for reform, they thought that there should be an "all-comprehensive, generalized idea of opposition to ALL oppression." Some began to speak openly of the need for "social regeneration" as well as individual regeneration.  

41 Liberation theologian Richard Shaull has noted a similar tendency among late twentieth century indigenous Latin American Pentecostals to combine a liberative praxis with a highly personalized emphasis on ecstatic religious experience. This experiential component is very important to poor persons who need comfort and encouragement in their daily struggles, while not taking away from their simultaneous struggle for political, economic, and social justice. Shaull notes that many Latin Americans find this experiential (Pentecostal) form of liberation theology to be more satisfying and successful than the more cerebral emphasis characteristic of the base Christian communities. Author’s interview with Richard Shaull, Washington, DC, 7 June 1992.

42 Liberty Party, Proceedings of the National Liberty Convention. Held at Buffalo, N.Y., June 14th and 15th, 1848... (Utica, NY: S.W. Green, 1848), 30; Resolution of the Rochester
noted, this systemic approach to social problems was evident among Wesleyan Methodists, Free Methodists, "holiness" Methodist Episcopalists, and others in their advocacy of African-American political and social equality, women's rights agitation, and temperance.

The pitfall of this easy acceptance of political activism among mid-nineteenth century perfectionists was that some abandoned their religious convictions altogether. They became caught up with the power, the excitement, and the pragmatic compromises of partisan politics and left their religious motivations behind.43

Some members of holiness churches embraced the emerging commercialization and consolidation of the broader culture to an even greater extent.44 Local accounts of holiness churches document many persons who fully adopted the capitalistic model of economic expansion--and succeeded very well in this endeavor.45 Eventually more and more holiness churches, which had previously been associated with the concerns and needs of the rural (and rural-oriented urban working class) poor, travelled the familiar road to middle class respectability--the same road that had been trod earlier by mainline Methodist Episcopalists. These churches found themselves in the duplicitous position of retaining the moral codes formulated to protest oppressive middle class values at the same time that they were affirming middle class aspirations.

The preaching of the doctrine of Christian perfection has had an explosive potential for the radical social transformation of the

Annual Conference of the Wesleyan Methodist Connection in 1847, meeting at Eagle Harbor, Orleans County, NY, cited in Wright, 18; William Goodell, Address of the Macedon Convention By William Goodell... (Albany: S.W. Green, Patriot Office, 1847), 6, 10; Christian Investigator 5 (November 1847): 458; ibid. 6 (April 1848): 496. The Liberty Party was an explicitly perfectionist political organization. See Strong, "The Application of Perfectionism to Politics."


45See, for example, Wright, 42.
"poor"—that is, all who are marginalized or disenfranchised by economic or political oppression. This potential is occasionally actualized, as was evidenced by perfectionist abolitionists, postbellum advocates of a radical Reconstruction, the feminist theorizing of Free Methodist founder B.T. Roberts, the interracial character of early Pentecostalism, and the liberationist themes of some contemporary Latin American Pentecostal and holiness churches.46

However, the liberative potential of the holiness message is often co-opted by concerns for institutional maintenance, upwardly mobile social status, or individual moralism. As we have seen, this withdrawal from political advocacy was not so much a "reversal" of the earlier practice within the Methodist tradition47 as it was a narrowing of the perfectionist theology and ethos. Progressive involvement in the political process and individualistic withdrawal from the political process are both a part of the ambivalent legacy of the perfectionist tradition.

The potential for radical social change within this perfectionist tension has been actualized, it seems to me, when two factors have been in place: a systemic social analysis; and, an unambiguous identification with the poor. First, without a systemic analysis of the structures of society, social activism will die a slow death. In the second generation which follows the initial enthusiasm of a movement, persons begin to accept the values of the oppressors, and moral protests against oppression can become legalistic codes of behavior.

Secondly, holiness churches were only liberative as long as they maintained their daily interaction with the poor. Neither the moralisms of upwardly mobile holiness "evangelicals" nor the lofty pronouncements of bourgeois "armchair liberals" (accompanied by their own systemic analyses of the problems!) will substitute for a sustained comprehension of the plight of the poor—a comprehension which only comes from knowing them, loving them, and identifying with them.

46 Just recently, I saw this same liberative praxis in operation in yet another context. An Appalachian holiness preacher who is also a socialistic, union-organizing mine worker claims to receive his motivation for social justice activism—in similar language to his (unacknowledged) perfectionist forebears—from his belief in entire sanctification.