



"You will know them by their fruits." Mt. 7:16

HEZEKIAH CALVIN WOOSTER

Hezekiah Calvin Wooster was one of the most powerful influences for second-blessing holiness in early American Methodism. Although the impact of his Holy Ghost-anointed ministry was brief, it was freighted with holy power. Its shock-wave ushered those around him into both saving and sanctifying grace, and its ripple effect continues yet today, nearly two hundred years after his death. Indeed, with the publication of this sketch the moving influence of Calvin Wooster's holy life and zeal may continue to be felt until Jesus comes.

THE SIGNIFICANCE AND DATES OF HIS EARTHLY SOJOURN

Calvin Wooster lived less than 29 years, and he died nearly two hundred years ago (this sketch being created in September of 1997). It was not, however, the length of his earthly existence, but its purity, its power, and its purpose in Christ that gave it impact and significance, and that makes his life worthy of note.

After his death, the following was found among his belongings, written on a scrap of paper:--
"Hezekiah Calvin Wooster was born May 20, 1771. Convicted of sin October 9, 1791. Born again December 1, 1791. Sanctified February 6, 1792." To this we would here add: Died on the 6th of November, 1798.

A CLEAR WITNESS FOR BOTH WORKS OF GRACE

Religion with him 'was in demonstration of the Spirit and of power.' No vagueness attended the facts of his Christian experience, nor the presentation of experimental truth in his ministrations. That he enjoyed "perfect love," was demonstrated, not only from the fact of his having recorded the time when he received this great blessing, but also and more especially from the whole tenor of his life, his constant self-denial, his watchings and fastings, and from the "fruit of the Spirit, love, faith, meekness, patience, gentleness, long-suffering, and charity," which shone out conspicuously in all his deportment, in the temper of his mind, and the words of his lips.

The clarity of Calvin Wooster's testimony to the experience "Perfect Love" reached Nathan Bangs, who later ministered where Wooster had ministered. Bangs wrote: "He was indefatigable in his labors, full of faith and of the Holy Ghost; and preached with the demonstration of the Spirit and of power. He professed and enjoyed the blessing of sanctification, and was, therefore, a man of dignity, faith and prayer." The fact that Wooster's testimony and ministry ushered others into second-blessing holiness was also noted by Bangs: "I never found so many persons, in proportion to their number, who professed and exemplified the perfect love of God, as he had left on this circuit."

THE COMMENCEMENT OF HIS MINISTRY

I find little about his first two to three years of ministry. He commenced his ministry at about the age of 22 in 1793 on the Granville Circuit, in Massachusetts. This circuit was within the limits of the Albany District, then superintended by the devoted Thomas Ware, and thus he may have joined the Albany Conference of that year. The two following years he spent in arduous labors on circuits in New Jersey and New York.

WOOSTER'S ARDUOUS TREK TO CANADA WITH SAMUEL COATE

In 1796, ready to suffer the loss of all things, Wooster volunteered, with Samuel Coate, to join the few Methodist pioneers beyond the Canadian border. His history during that expedition would form a romantic and almost incredible narrative. After enduring almost incredible hardships on their way, for they lodged no less than twenty-one nights in the wilderness under the trees of the forest, they arrived in safety just in time to attend a quarterly meeting on the Bay of Quinte circuit. (a bay and peninsula west of Kingston on Lake Ontario)

NOT WILD FIRE, BUT HOLY FIRE, STRUCK THE MEETING!

After the preaching on Saturday, while the presiding elder, Darius Dunham, retired with the official brethren to hold the quarterly meeting conference, brother Wooster remained in the meeting to pray with some who were under awakenings, and others who were groaning for full redemption in the blood of Christ. While uniting with his brethren in this exercise, the power of the Most high seemed to overshadow the congregation, and many were filled with joy unspeakable, and were praising the Lord aloud for what he had done for their souls, while others "with speechless awe, and silent love," were prostrate on the floor. When the presiding elder came into the house, he beheld these things with a mixture of wonder and indignation, believing that "wild-fire" was burning among the people.

THE DOUBTING DUNHAM IS SWEEPED INTO THE SECOND-BLESSING!

After gazing for a while with silent astonishment, he knelt down and began to pray to God to stop the "raging of the wild-fire," as he called it. In the meantime, Calvin Wooster, whose soul was burning with the "fire of the holy Spirit," knelt by the side of brother Dunham, and while the latter was earnestly engaged in prayer for God to put out the wild-fire, Wooster softly whispered out a prayer in the following words, "Lord, bless brother Dunham! Lord, bless brother Dunham!"

Thus they continued for some minutes – when, at length, the prayer of brother Wooster prevailed, and Dunham fell prostrate on the floor – and ere he arose received a baptism of that very fire which he had so feelingly deprecated as the effect of a wild imagination. There was now harmony in their prayers, feelings, and views; and this was the commencement of a revival of religion which soon spread through the entire province for as brother Dunham was the presiding elder, he was instrumental in spreading the sacred flame throughout the district, to the joy and salvation of hundreds of immortal souls. Thus, upper Canada experienced a gracious revival in 1797, chiefly through the instrumentality of Calvin Wooster, whose fervency of spirit led him forth in the work of reformation in a most remarkable manner, and with singular success.

OTHER PREACHERS CAUGHT FIRE FROM HIS FLAME

Nor was he alone in this work. The other preachers caught the flame of divine love, and were came forward under its sacred impulses in their Master's work. Many instances of the manifestations of divine power and grace might be narrated, which go to illustrate the authority by which these men of God spoke in his name, consider the following:

At a quarterly meeting in the Bay of Quinte district, as the preacher commenced his sermon, a thoughtless man in the front gallery, commenced, in a playful mood, to swear profanely, and otherwise to disturb the congregation. The preacher paid no attention to him until he was in the midst of his sermon, when, feeling strong in faith and the power of His might, suddenly stopping, he fixed his piercing eye upon the profane man, then stamping with his foot, and pointing his finger at him with great energy, he cried out, "My God! Smite him!" He instantly fell, as if shot through the heart with a bullet. At this moment such a divine outpouring came down upon the congregation, that sinners were crying to God for mercy in every direction, while the saints of God burst forth in loud praises to his name.

SECOND-BLESSING HOLINESS REVIVAL SPREADS INTO THE UNITED STATES

Similar instances of God's gracious presence were not uncommon in those days in that country, as they have been related on the most unquestionable authority. Indeed, this great work may be said to have been, in some sense, the beginning of that great revival of religion which soon after spread through various parts of the United States. While Wooster was spreading the flame on Oswegatchie circuit, and afterward on that of the Bay of Quinte, Dunham, being presiding elder, extended it from circuit to circuit through the district, and great multitudes were awakened and converted. It spread not only through Upper Canada, but ran in its course into the United States. Many preachers caught the sacred inspiration. Indeed, it became a proverbial saying among the people along the way from Canada to the seat of the New York Conference, that the northern preachers brought the Canada fire with them. This Canada fire was none other than the flame of sanctifying grace, which then spread like a conflagration over the Canada circuits."

The doctrine more especially urged upon believers was that of sanctification, or holiness of heart and life, -- a complete surrender of the soul and body, all their powers and affections, to the service of God -- and this was pressed upon them as their present privilege; depending for its accomplishment now on the faithfulness of God, who had promised to do it. When this baptism of Fire which fired and filled the hearts of God's ministers at that time, and which enabled them so to speak that the people felt that their words were with "demonstration and power," and they could not well resist the influence of those "thoughts which breathed," and those "words which burned."

WOOSTER'S THREE-YEAR SPIRITUAL SHOCK-WAVE IN CANADA

Hezekiah Calvin Wooster traveled about three years in Canada, preaching almost daily, and with a power seldom equaled in the history of the Christian ministry. There was, indeed, an energy in his words quite irresistible. The dwellers in the wilderness, long destitute of the means of religion, heard with amazement his simple but overwhelming eloquence, and often fell, in their forest congregations, like dead men, under his ministrations ... He was a man of Abrahamic faith, and his prayers seemed directly to enter heaven and prevail with God. He maintained an unceasing spirit of prayer. Often at midnight would he rise to pray, while the inmates of the house where he made his temporary abode were awed by the solemn voice of his supplications ascending amid the silence. Such was the unction of his spirit, and the power of his appeals to the wicked, that few of them could stand before him; they would either rush out of the assembly or fall to the floor. Such was the holy fervor of his soul, his deep devotion to God, his burning love for the souls of his fellow-men, that he was the happy instrument of kindling up such a fire in the hearts of the people, wherever he went, particularly in Upper Canada, that all the waters of strife and opposition have not been able to quench it ... The grace of God wrought mightily in him.

IN 1798, SICK-UNTO-DEATH, YET STILL SPIRITUALLY POWERFUL, WOOSTER LEFT THE CANADIAN FIELD TO GO HOME AND DIE

In Upper Canada Wooster's name became "like ointment poured forth," but the rigors of the climate, and the excess of his labors, injured his health, and in 1798 he was seized with pulmonary consumption. Yet he did not immediately give up his ministrations, and his marvelous power over his hearers continued even when he could no longer speak loud enough to be heard except by those who stood immediately around him. It is authentically recorded; that when so far reduced as to be unable to speak above a whisper, his broken utterance, conveyed by another to the assembly, would thrill them like a trumpet, and fall with such power on the attention of the hearers that stout-hearted men were smitten down to the floor; and his very aspect is said to have so shone with "the divine glory that it struck conviction into the hearts of many who beheld it." At last, hopeless of any further health, he returned to his parental home, to die amid his kindred.

WOOSTER LED LORENZO DOW INTO THE SECOND BLESSING

A single glimpse of Calvin Wooster on his route homeward is found in the journal of Lorenzo Dow. That eccentric man had been laboring sturdily on extensive circuits in New England. Through all his wandering course he carried with him a profound religious solicitude, and his spirit hungered and thirsted after God. He writes in his own unpolished but explicit style and with deep suggestiveness, that when he was on the Orange Circuit he “felt something within that wanted to be done away. I spoke to one and another concerning the pain which I felt in my happiest moments, but no guilt. Some said one thing and some another; yet none spoke to my case, but seemed to be like physicians that did not understand the nature of my disorder.

“Thus the burden continued, and sometimes seemed greater than the burden of guilt for justification, until I fell in with Thomas Dewey, on Cambridge Circuit. He told me about Calvin Wooster in Upper Canada – that he enjoyed the blessing of sanctification. I felt a great desire arise in my heart to see the man, if it might be consistent with the divine will; and not long after I heard he was passing through the circuit and going home to die. I immediately rode five miles to the house, but found he was gone another five miles farther. I went into the room where he was asleep; he appeared to me more like one from the eternal world than like one of my fellow-mortals.

“I told him when he awoke who I was and what I had come for. Said he, ‘God has convicted you for the blessing of sanctification, and that blessing is to be obtained by the simple act of faith in the same manner as the blessing of justification.’

“I persuaded him to tarry in the neighborhood a few days; and two evenings later, after I had done preaching, he spoke, or rather whispered out an exhortation, as his voice was so broken in consequence of praying in the air in Upper Canada, where from twenty to thirty were frequently blessed at a meeting. He told me that if he could get sinners under conviction, crying for mercy, they would kneel down, a dozen of them, and not rise till they found peace; ‘for,’ said he, ‘we did believe God would bless them, and it was according to our faith.’

“At this time he was in a consumption, and a few weeks after expired. While whispering out the above exhortation, the power which attended it reached the hearts of the people, and some who were standing and sitting fell like men shot on the field of battle; and I felt it like a tremor running through my soul and every vein, so that it took away my limb power and I fell to the floor, and by faith saw a greater blessing than I had hitherto experienced; or, in other words, felt a divine conviction of the need of a deeper work of grace in my soul – feeling some of the remains of the evil nature, the effect of Adam's fall, still remaining, and my privilege to have it eradicated or done away.

“My soul was in all agony -- I could but groan out my desires to God. Wooster came to me and said, ‘Believe the blessing is now.’ No sooner had the words dropped from his lips than I strove to believe the blessing mine now with all the powers of my soul; then the burden dropped from my mind, and a solid joy and a gentle running peace filled my soul. From that time to this I have not had the ecstasy of joy or a downcast spirit as formerly, but more of an inward, simple, sweet running peace from day to day, so that prosperity or adversity doth not produce the ups and downs as formerly; but my soul is more like the ocean, while its surface is uneven by reason of the boisterous wind, the bottom is still calm; so that a man may be in the midst of outward difficulties, and yet the center of the soul may be calmly stayed on God.”

Such was the influence of Wooster on Lorenzo Dow – such the power of Wooster’s anointed eloquence whispered from lips blanched with mortal disease. He passed on to his home and lay down to die; but before his spirit left the body it seemed already in heaven.

After thus quoting from Lorenzo Dow, Stevens added: “I make no apology for this citation. It is a gem

from a rude casket, but worthy to be strung among the many unpolished yet precious jewels which glitter on the thread of our history.

WOOSTER'S TRIUMPHANT, EVEN GLORIOUS, PASSING

He passed on to his home and lay down to die; but before his spirit left the body, it seemed already in heaven. It could not be expected otherwise than that such a man should be prepared to meet his "last enemy" with firmness, and to "rejoice in hope of the glory of God," when drawing near to the termination of his earthly career. Accordingly, when so exhausted as to be scarcely able to speak, on being asked by his father if his confidence was still strong in the Lord, he answered with holy triumph, "Yes, strong! Strong!" And a short time before his eyes were closed in death, he said, "The nearer I draw to eternity, the brighter heaven shines upon me." He thus "fell asleep in Jesus" on the 6th of November, 1798, in the 28th year of his age and the fifth year of his ministry. Though his race was short, it was brilliant – its brilliancy arising not so much from the splendor of his talents as from the purity of his motives, the fidelity of his private and public life, and the holy and burning zeal with which he pursued his vocation until sickness and death put a stop to his activity. And when he sunk under the cloud of death, he left such a trail of light behind him, as shall, it is humbly hoped, never be extinguished. Such honor God puts upon those who honor him.

THE MEMORY OF THE JUST "WOOSTER" WAS BLESSED

With such men; of course, the whole region of their travels was soon astir. Bangs says that a great revival ensued, which extended far into the states. Hundreds were awakened and converted, and no little opposition followed. But opposition could not stand long before Wooster. His strange power was a terror to evil doers. The Church antiquarian to whom we are indebted for so many interesting facts of our early Canadian history says: "He was a rare example of the holiness he preached. Of his piety and devotion the old people were never weary of speaking in terms of the most glowing admiration. His very breath was prayer. An old lady who entertained him, informed me that on his arrival he would ask the privilege of going up to the loft of their one-storied log building, which was the only place of retirement they had, and to which he had to mount up by means of a ladder. There he would remain in prayer till the settlers assembled for preaching, when he would descend like Moses from the mount with a face radiant with holy comfort. And truly his preaching was 'with the Holy Ghost sent down from heaven.' It was not boisterous, but solemn, spiritual, powerful. He was the instrument of a revival characterized by depth and comprehensiveness, a revival of the work of sanctification. Under his word the people fell like men slain in battle. This was even the case when he became so exhausted that he could preach no longer, or his voice was drowned in the cries of the people. He would stand with angelic countenance and upturned eye, bringing his hands together, and saying in a loud whisper, 'Smite them, my Lord! My Lord, smite them!' And 'smite them' he did; for 'the slain of the Lord were many.' "

AN ORDINARY MAN WITH EXTRAORDINARY FERVOR

"Behold how great a matter a little fire kindleth." Though Hezekiah Calvin Wooster could not be regarded as a man of more than ordinary talents as a preacher, yet, such was the holy fervor of his soul, his deep devotion to God, his burning love for the souls of his fellow-men, that he was the happy instrument of kindling up such a fire in the hearts of the people, wherever he went, particularly in Upper Canada, that all the waters of strife and opposition have not been able to quench it. This testimony I consider due to such departed worth. The grace of God wrought mightily in him, and great was his glorying in the cross of Christ – nor did he glory in aught else – for he was as much distinguished for his humility, his deadness to self, and to self-applause, as he was for the fervor of his spirit, the strength of his faith, and the boldness and pointedness of his appeals to the consciences of the people.

Source: "Hezekiah Calvin Wooster" compiled and written by Duane V. Maxey, using to a great extent material from Nathan Bangs' History of the M. E. Church, Vol. II

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