

Keswick and Holiness: Then and Now

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Looking back on the history of the Keswick movement, and ahead to our future hope, Mark Ellis reflects on the yearning to live lives of attractive holiness and Christlikeness here and now.

Thomas Dundas Harford-Battersby was troubled. Deeply anxious. And had been for years. Not just because, 150 years ago, people had elaborate names. But because he knew he was failing.

Harford-Battersby had been a vicar for 25 years. Now in his early-50s, he still struggled with sin and felt keenly God's call to, 'Be holy as I am holy'. The mismatch between his own life and Christ's call, cut him to the heart. He passionately wanted to be godly and obey God's word, but couldn't seem to make progress. As a result, he struggled with low moods – possibly depression – as he searched for an answer to 'practical holiness' in his own life, and in the life of his people.

To his great relief, he'd heard from some American preachers who proclaimed a 'higher-life view' of sanctification. And it struck a chord. They claimed you could die to the influence and down-drag of sin. And that by decisive act(s)



of wholehearted surrender to God, the Holy Spirit would enable you to withstand the attraction of sin.

Which is what he brought back to his vicarage lawn in Keswick. He put up a tent and printed invitations. Everyone would be welcome, from any church background. And there would be no cost to attend. Earnest believers were to come as they are, united under the banner, 'All one in Christ Jesus' (Galatians 3:28). Because Harford-Battersby wanted everyone to have the opportunity to become more like Jesus.

That desire has, for 150 years, been the heartbeat of the Keswick Convention.

And although the theology today has returned to a more 'classic view' of holiness, that passion has never dimmed. We also still have a tent, though it holds 3000. But everything is still free to attend. We still unite everyone under the banner of being, 'All one in Christ Jesus'.

What has changed is that we've returned to a biblical view of holiness.

In the early days, the 'higher-life view' was attractive. Everyone who loves Jesus knows the painful reality of ongoing sin; that they do not do what they truly want to do; that they fall short of God's glory.

What many preachers were offering 150 years ago was a decisive experience that could jump-start your sanctification. If you, 'Let go and let God', then in total surrender to him you would be lifted to a higher level of Christian

living. You would no longer feel the influence and drag and inclination to sin.

This teaching was never the official line at Keswick, nor did it originate with Keswick. Not everyone agreed, nor was it the only approach taught. But popularly, it was sometimes called the 'Keswick view'.

Everything changed in the 1960s. And the catalyst for that change was a young John Stott.

Stott had been invited to preach on Romans 6. Those who held the 'higher-life view' thought it taught that union to Christ through the cross could lead believers to new levels of victory over sin. And that this was for life now, not merely in the new creation. That the 'old self' being crucified means we don't need to be responsive to sin. We can stop feeling its allure.

Though even this is a sweeping oversimplification of decades of theology and teaching that varied in application.

Stott blew the doors off with a much more careful exegesis. Because if both we and Christ have died to sin (v. 10), it can't mean that! Not least because if we no longer feel the influence of sin, why would Paul go on to say in v. 12 to, 'not let sin reign... [or] obey it's evil desires.' And that can't apply also to Christ.

Stott had also seen too many tender-hearted Christians who felt they had surrendered their lives to Christ the previous year ... only to find sadly it hadn't really worked. Because they still sinned.

The biblical truth is that every Christian will continue to struggle with sin, all through their life. That one day, in God's glorious presence, that fight will be over. But becoming like God's Son is gradual. Through the power of the Holy Spirit and by God's grace, it is possible to die to sin every day. But ultimate victory is not ours, yet. Yes, the penalty of sin has been paid and the power of sin has been broken, but for this life, the presence of sin continues.

The gospel is true and God is good! It is possible to please our Father by living all of life in his presence in union with Christ. And so, day by day, to push back this fallen wilderness world, even by an inch. Because holiness is an inside-out thing. But it's not just a private thing. It overflows practically as we yearn to bring everything in under the Lordship of Christ.

All this anticipates what will be beautifully true in the new creation, when Christ returns. Which is why we passionately yearn to live lives of attractive holiness and Christlikeness now. For his glory. And our joy.

To this day, the Keswick Convention's priorities remain: Hearing God's Word, Becoming Like God's Son, Serving God's Mission.

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PRAYER FOCUS

Personal response to holiness: For ourselves, searching and spending time with God and offering ourselves as living a sacrifice to God, seeking to grow in holiness; opening ourselves up completely to God, recognising afresh our own sinfulness through the sacrificial love of Christ on the cross. (1Peter 1:14-16; Isaiah 35:8)

The Work of Keswick Convention: Giving thanks for the vision pioneered so long ago and its ongoing work in today's society; the priority of hearing God's word, becoming like God's Son and serving God's Mission; for God's power to break through into individual lives, bringing transformation and hope to the lives of many. (1 Chronicles 16:23-25; Matthew 28:19-20).

FOCUS ON THE CHURCH: Revival: for the wind of the Holy Spirit to sweep through the church bringing transformation and vibrancy to local churches throughout the land; for the acceptance of, and a longing to experience God's power operating in all aspects of church life, drawing many new believers into God's kingdom. (Acts 3:19-20; Psalm 85:4-7).

FOCUS ON NATIONAL ISSUES: Education: The upholding of the Cass Report and for it to become enshrined in law; protection for our children and young people against harmful ideologies; wholesome curriculum content in all schools; the Education

Secretary Bridget Phillipson; people and organisations who present biblical teaching in schools; colleges and universities struggling with finances. (Mark 9:42; Colossians 2:8).

Christians in the Workplace: Particularly those working in politics, the media and education; for strength and resilience and protection against discrimination; for their integrity to shine out; for the right words to challenge harmful practices and policies. (Isaiah 43:1-3a; Luke 21:14-15).

FOCUS ON WORLD ISSUES Planet in Crisis: Changing weather patterns across the globe; areas affected by extremes of weather – soaring temperatures & flooding; resources to combat the underlying causes; new strains of crops to stand extremes of weather; farmers coping with these extremes of weather. Cry to the Lord for mercy. (2 Chronicles 7:13-14; Revelation 4:11).

Persecuted Christians: Oppressive regimes; justice and fair treatment for detainees and their families; protection for churches; for persecutors to see the love of Christ in the persecuted; organisations working to bring to public notice the plight of the persecuted across the globe – e.g. Barnabas Aid, Open Doors and Release International, amongst others. (James 1:12; Philippians 1:27-30).

