

"UNHOLY CONTENTIONS ABOUT HOLINESS":

THE CANADA HOLINESS ASSOCIATION AND

THE METHODIST CHURCH, 1875-1894

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"UNHOLY CONTENTIONS ABOUT HOLINESS":
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I. INTRODUCTION

It is noteworthy that the last three decades of the nineteenth century were a period of religious ferment within the churches in Canada, the United States and England. A very important manifestation of this religious unrest was evidenced in the dramatic upheavals surrounding a new surge of interest in entire sanctification and Christian perfectionism.¹ This Wesleyan legacy was primary in the development of a significant number of holiness associations which served to foster the growth of these sentiments. These non-denominational holiness associations initially continued to operate within the existing denominations but then gradually became alienated from them to such an extent that between 1893 and 1907 twenty-five separate holiness denominations were formed.² Often the break with the existing denominations involved formal church trials and expulsions of these "lovers of holiness".

Among the Canadian Methodists the formation of the Holiness Movement Church under the leadership of Rev. Ralph C. Horner in 1895 is one of the most prominent examples of this phenomenon in Canada. Horner's trial and deposition from the Methodist ministry in the Ottawa Valley in 1894 has already been analyzed by several scholars.³

But there are other significant Canadian manifestations of holiness or Christian perfectionism in the late nineteenth century which have to date received little serious attention. Recent research in this field is beginning to show the inaccuracy of the tacit assumption that the Hornerites were the paradigm of this phenomenon in Canada.⁴

This paper will attempt to provide a means to broadening our understanding of holiness associations in Canada through a discussion of the Canada Holiness Association and its efforts to promote the cause of Christian holiness in southern Ontario; this association through its leader, Rev. Nelson Burns, precipitated a crisis among the Ontario Methodists after 1879. Analysis of the life of Nelson Burns and of the heresy trials of Burns and his close associate, Rev. Albert Truax, as well as a brief discussion of the battle of words between the Methodists' Christian Guardian and the Expositor of Holiness, the journal of the Canada Holiness Association, will help reveal the central issues that were raised in the public debate.

Among the Presbyterians a "brush fire" of holiness sentiment in the Galt region in 1888 was extinguished by the formal suspension of seven members of Knox Church in Galt; these "contumacious" Presbyterians were directly influenced by the Canada Holiness Association. Although the Galt heresy case is of considerable interest here time will not permit more than a passing reference to it.

It is important, at the outset, to note that the official position of the Methodists was not against the doctrine of holiness. Brian Ross has pointed out that Horner was not expelled from the Church because of holiness heresy but rather for his resistance to the authority of the Church to place him into a preaching circuit instead of officially appointing him as one of their evangelists.⁵ Yet, it should also be noted that even though the Methodists, superficially at least, all agreed that Wesley taught holiness, there was (and still is!) considerable dispute over what he really meant by the term. Much of the disputation between the radical holiness proponents and the rest of the Church, as described in this paper, had its roots in this problem.

II. REV. NELSON BURNS

By his own admission Nelson Burns considered himself to have a sensitive nature.⁶ His autobiographical account of his life which was unfortunately never completed because of his untimely death in 1904 at age 70⁷ is replete with self-deprecatory sentiments. Yet, on the other hand, Burns had much of which to be proud, especially in his youth.

Burns was born of Methodist parents in the town of Niagara (Niagara-on-the-Lake) on March 22, 1834. His father was of Irish birth and his mother was United Empire Loyalist or as Burns would have it, of Pennsylvania Dutch descent.⁸ Niagara High School, University College and Genesee College (near Rochester) were the schools where Burns received his education. To say that he was an outstanding student is to understate the truth.

When Burns entered University College in 1854 he did so with a Natural Sciences scholarship.⁹ He continued to receive that scholarship for each of the four years prior to receiving his BA in 1857. During his third year he received a special prize in mathematics. In his final examination for his BA in Natural Sciences he ranked first in five out of ten subjects. That same year he received a silver medal in "Chemistry with Zoology and Botany".¹⁰ With his usual modesty he described his graduation as follows:

I enjoyed myself well as a student, and whilst not conspicuous for scholarship according to my own thoughts, seemed to stand well in the estimation of my teachers. This was evinced, greatly to my surprise, when at the close of my fourth year, I was selected

to carry the mace before the chancellor and sit at his right hand during the convocation, an honor accorded to the party who, in the estimation of the faculty, was considered the best student of the year.

In harmony with this I was called upon by Dr. McCaul, the president of the University, to reply to the toast to the honor men of the University, at the annual dinner. Hence it is evident that my career as a student, on the whole, was satisfactory.¹¹

In his Autobiography Burns stressed that he experienced considerable ambivalence while deciding on his ultimate career. After his university training he immediately became a teacher. As he described it, the biggest difficulty for him was the choice he had to make between teaching, law school or the Methodist ministry.

As a teacher Burns seems to have been a reasonably good success. After one and one-half years in Welland as headmaster of the high school he transferred to St. Thomas where he was the principal of the high school for three years. During his time at St. Thomas Burns continued to struggle with his ambivalence about his future; his sense of calling to the ministry was growing stronger.

As to teaching, I was convinced that it was not my life work. . . . All these forces acting on me, and the call being a clamorous one to select my life-work, . . . , I finally yielded the point and proclaimed my intention of entering the ministry. But even then I received small encouragement from either pastor or people; so that I had to forge my way to the front, unbacked by any, the sole, compelling force being my conscientious convictions, my full belief that God had called me to such a life, and a feeling of certainty that any other life attempted would be a miserable failure.¹²

Thus in 1862 Burns was appointed to the Smithville circuit in the London Conference of the Methodist Church. The next year he was received on trial and moved to Holland

Landing.¹³ Cookstown and Erin circuits then followed in the annual lists of appointments.

An incident while serving the Erin circuit in 1865 gives an insight into the young minister's idealism. Burn's was invited to address a tea-meeting in the area. He decided to make the speech entirely entertainment and leave out any references to religion. He did so well that a visiting minister from a neighboring circuit invited him to speak at a similar gathering on his circuit. Burns described the meeting as follows:

A number of previous speakers had got on a similar vein, and fun and frolic were rampant. Meanwhile the character of the meeting descended to pretty low depths. At first I thought I would excuse myself from taking part. . . ; but upon second thoughts I made a desperate resolve: I concluded I would let myself down to the level of the meeting and then bring up its tone to a more dignified position. The work of letting myself down I found comparatively easy, but when I attempted to bring the meeting up I proved a failure; Still, I note the fact that the effort I did put forth was successful, and it seems to lend countenance to the thought that if at any time I had thrown off the trammels of conscientious conviction, I might have pursued the role of popularity in the pulpit with a measure of success.¹⁴

After his ordination at the Conference in Montreal in 1866 Burns' career as a minister, at least in terms of preaching circuit appointments, was of dubious distinction. He was appointed to the Galt circuit but after preaching there several times withdrew with the consent of the local board. Burns stated that he did not meet their expectations as to popularity!¹⁵ He was offered another circuit but declined because of a sore throat; the throat affliction was in his words "virulent".

The conviction I obtained was that the whole incident had a relation to the fact that I had failed to carry out, as the leading thought of my ministry: preaching, testifying and conversing on the subject of holiness; in fact, making it the chief end and object of my life.¹⁶

Burns' return to the emphasis on holiness had been a gradual one. A holiness "experience" which he had had as a result of reading Phoebe Palmer's, Faith and Its Effects,¹⁷ when he was only fourteen, was still important to him in spite of the fact that he claimed he had subsequently lost the experience. During the first five years of his ministerial probation, he had become more and more occupied with the need to evangelize and bring other persons to the experience of holiness. After his ordination, the holiness emphasis virtually supplanted all other emphases in his ministry.

After declining another circuit Burns returned to teaching, first at Port Dover and in 1868 as the high school principal in Milton.

In 1876, at his request, the London Conference appointed Burns to the Camlachie circuit; he served there as minister for three years.¹⁸ During this time, and earlier, while still a school teacher in Milton, Burns carried on an active work in holding revival/holiness meetings in the surrounding churches. He soon developed quite a reputation as a holiness preacher. Opposition to this sort of activity from within the circuit increased until Burns resigned his post under pressure in 1878. At the Annual Conference that same year Burns was granted

supernumary status in the church. From that time on, he was never again on the list of active ministry of the Methodist Church.

Upon his departure from the circuit ministry Burns again returned to teaching. He set up a boys' boarding school in Georgetown but it did not do well. For two years the venture was plagued by such financial insecurity that it was on the brink of disaster. Burns was ready to close it down but he received a definite word from God as follows:

Stay in Georgetown, pay cash for everything, and the first day you fail to have the money to run the institution on a cash basis you may close it.¹⁹

Since the time of his conversion as a youth, Burns had been systematically attempting to discover how a Christian can know the will of God and live by it, daily. Each crisis in his life was handled in such a way as to achieve a sense of his responding to the direct guidance of God in his personal choices. The Georgetown incident was, by Burns' own admission, the final crisis which was to determine the ultimate validity of his newly developed doctrine of "Divine Guidance" as the means of direction in a believer's life.

For three days he struggled with the problem.

The call was upon me to accept this communication as the veritable word of God to me, and by this act to decide the whole question. Moreover, it implied that in accepting it I must also take the attitude to God of giving up myself absolutely to his personal control for the rest of my life, be the consequences what they may. The wording of the covenant with God which I seemed to be called on to make was, as far as

I can recollect, as follows: I covenant to accept God as my only guide absolute to the close of life, with the understanding that this covenant must be binding upon me to the judgment day, no matter what may be the apparent result during life; should my obedience lead to any or all forms of erratic conduct, or even make shipwreck of my moral or religious character, still I must carry out all Divine instructions, and let others judge from my history of the value of a life of obedience after this sort.²⁰

Although literally on the brink of financial collapse every day, the school did survive on a cash only basis for about nine months. Burns finally decided to close it at Easter time; he attributed the failure to his wife. Apparently she was unable to handle to extreme insecurity of such a style of life and this so seriously jeopardized her health that she was on the verge of complete mental and physical collapse. Burns decided that this was the word of God for him to close the school. His faith in the principle of Divine Guidance was, however, unshakeable. Clearly God had something else in mind for him.

One important event should be noted at this point in the study; it was the publication of a book which Burns authored, Divine Guidance or The Holy Quest. It was published in Brantford in 1889 by Rev. T.S. Linscott, a Methodist minister, a strong supporter of holiness and the Canada Holiness Association and owner of the publishing firm, the Book and Bible House.²¹

Since the book was in large measure one of the causes for Burns' eventual expulsion from the Methodist ministry, a brief summary of its major ideas seems appropriate here.

The first seven chapters are basically an attempt to prove that the idea of divine guidance in a scriptural way does exist. Examples from the Old Testament and the New Testament are used to illustrate the patterns of communication between human beings and God. According to Burns, John the Baptist declared the main reason for Christ's coming was to "make it possible for the Holy Spirit to come and abide in the world in some fuller sense than ever before."²²

How did Burns define "Divine Guidance"?

It is some intimation to our consciousness by the Holy Spirit whereby we know that we are taking that course in all things, from moment to moment, which is the best possible under the circumstances and is therefore pleasing to God, and satisfactory to ourselves. Less than this could not be Divine guidance, and more than this can hardly be desired.²³

The remainder of the book deals with a variety of aspects of the doctrine of "Divine Guidance". What is the "manner" of "Divine Guidance"? It could be dreams, visions, voices, impressions, reasoning processes, intuitions, providences, human helps or Scripture passages. What is the "scope" of the doctrine? Burns here makes a somewhat unclear distinction between the gift (baptism) of the Holy Spirit and walking in the Spirit.²⁴ Apparently baptism must precede and lead into walking in the Spirit; there must be consciousness of being directly led by the Spirit in order to experience "Divine Guidance".

Burns also addresses the critics of "Divine Guidance"

directly.²⁵ Some object to the doctrine because it seems to teach individual "infallibility". Burns sees the concept as a regulatory device for the true believer even though there are problems when persons who only think they are under "Divine Guidance" misuse their assumed infallibility.

Another complaint is that the doctrine depreciates the Bible and allows for antinomianism. Burns argues that the true believer does not need rules since the believer is always in tune with the Divine guide who operates on a "living law". The Bible, according to Burns, is really only a testimony of God but the Spirit is the individual's guide. This does not destroy Biblical authority but rather regulates it.

The book, as a whole, is clear, well organized and interesting. Burns does not do as well while defending the doctrine from criticism as he does while expounding on the doctrine itself. It appears from the later writings of persons like Albert Truax that the book virtually became a doctrinal textbook for the Association.

III. THE CANADA HOLINESS ASSOCIATION

The Canada Holiness Association (hereafter C.H.A.) was formed in October of 1879. A Methodist minister stationed in the village of Brussels (London Conference), Rev. James Harris, placed a notice in the Christian Guardian announcing a holiness convention in his church. Approximately a dozen ministers and lay-men attended.²⁶ Nelson Burns was asked to preach the first sermon. It set the tone for the rest of the convention as Burns emphasized the importance of seeking and accepting holiness. Burns later recounted some of the significant events at the meeting:

Towards the close of the convention Mr. Harris proposed the organization of an association. The response to his proposal was very decidedly in the affirmative, seeing we were all acted upon by a high-tide convention, and the possibilities concerning propagating the subject of holiness after this definite form seemed very bright and encouraging.²⁷

Burns was elected president (he remained in this post until his death in 1904). It appears that most of the leaders in the C.H.A. were Methodists even though the Association was officially independent and interdenominational. Geographically, the C.H.A. apparently operated primarily in central Ontario, including the Niagara Peninsula and the area between London and Toronto.

The C.H.A. from its founding was self-consciously an association of persons who were interested in promoting the cause of Christian holiness among Canadian Protestants. Until 1894 there does not appear to be any attempt on the part of the C.H.A. leadership to start a separate

denomination. For example, ^{when} The Expositor of Holiness was begun in 1882, the back cover featured the following in each succeeding issue:

OUR PLATFORM

Catholic in Spirit--Loyal to Bible Truth--Avoiding Controversy which Engenders Strife--Whilst Thoroughly Wesleyan in Doctrine, yet not Sectarian--Hence suitable to the Lovers of Holiness in every Denomination.²⁸

The C.H.A.'s public activity was primarily twofold: its publication of the Expositor of Holiness, and annual conventions and camp-meetings. The Annual conventions were four days of meetings held at different locations in the C.H.A.'s "territory" each year.²⁹ The majority of the time was spent in hearing devotional and instructional addresses by invited speakers or leading C.H.A. members. The business of the C.H.A. was usually transacted in one session during the course of the meetings.

The camp-meetings were also held annually in summer and were occasions where holiness experiences could be celebrated and shared among persons who were usually quite widely scattered.³⁰

The role of the camp-meetings and the annual conventions in helping promote group solidarity and genuine interaction between persons of similar beliefs should not be underestimated. It was at these gatherings that "batteries were recharged" in preparation for the return to the "lukewarm" churches of which all were members.

As a monthly magazine The Expositor of Holiness (hereafter Expositor) played an extremely important role in

the promotion of holiness sentiments especially for the C.H.A.'s adherents. Burns became the editor at its founding in 1882. He regularly published articles on a variety of points of view on a given issue in the interests of finding the "truth". One would expect that his academic background was an influence on this effort to appear objective. Articles or letters which were decidedly critical of Burns or the C.H.A. were usually annotated by him.

The Expositor as the main mouthpiece of the C.H.A. was frequently used as a means to convey official positions on issues. For instance, it is interesting to note that the C.H.A. leadership consciously stressed its avoidance of creedalism. Albert Truax addressed the creed issue directly in 1889:

As to a formal creed, we have none. As an association, our business has been not to make creeds but to live up to the creeds which we already have. Our creed then is the creed of all orthodox denominations. There is one article, . . . to which all these denominations subscribe; . . . they believe in doing right, in living holy lives.³¹

In 1892, Burns published a special issue of the Expositor in which he attempted to summarize the development of the C.H.A.'s theological stance. The issue was entitled "How To Keep Converted"³² and it received considerable negative as well as positive response. Burns summarized the distinctive position of the C.H.A. as follows:

1. This movement, as its main object, professes to teach and illustrate how to keep converted.
2. It is not a holiness movement after the pattern of the modern holiness movement; the severance between those two movements is now completed.
3. It in no way discounts conversion. We claim to have found nothing higher or grander than this

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experience. Our only distinctive teaching is concerning the method of continuing in that gracious state. . . . We believe that Jesus taught that when the Holy Ghost came on the day of Pentecost, He, although a Spirit, was to take the place of a personal Christ to every believer We, as members of this Association, profess to have put this teaching of Jesus Christ into practice, We do know and do the perfect will of God, that is, we have learned how to keep converted. 33

The most interesting part of Burns' statement is the allusion to the modern holiness movement and the apparent break between it and the C.H.A.

Burns summarized the process of the break with the rest of the holiness movement (the holiness "creed" movement) in the December 1891 issue of the Expositor under the title "Is It A New Departure?". His discourse, although somewhat lengthy, clearly shows the reasons for the division and as such merits repetition here. The tone of his account is much softer than one would expect but it is still accompanied by a good measure of strident rhetoric.

. . . in the second year of the Association's life, we (Burns) attended one of the great holiness camp-meetings, under the auspices of the National Holiness Camp-Meeting Association, and led by the late Rev. J. S. Inskip. We were received kindly, nay, cordially, were even asked to preach

The following summer, in preparing for our first camp-meeting, we did our utmost to secure some of the leaders of that movement to come and help us expecting . . . they would, virtually take charge and direct the whole meeting.

Also we assumed an exchange with most of the holiness periodicals then published, and freely utilized their contents without the slightest suspicion that our writings would ever be put under a ban by them.

Thus it will be seen that we acted in all good faith in our attitude towards (them)

But . . . as all our labors were placed under the direct control and supervision of the Holy Spirit, we followed where He, and not they might lead.

. . . And as time went on we were called on to

investigate, one after another, the questions left in a loose, unsatisfactory condition by all holiness writers, such as dress, mistakes, physical manifestations, righteous living, inbred sin and faith cures. But as we proceeded with our investigations we found that said periodicals objected, and finally . . . they all, without exception, repudiated our work as heretical in the extreme, and, indeed, were not very choice in the terms used to characterize it.

But when this attitude was definitely assumed by them we realized . . . a call . . . upon us not only to re-examine the foundations of our own faith, but to more closely scrutinize theirs. This examination we carried on openly, not only in our writings, but also in our public gatherings.

. . . The result has been startling, indeed, for without exception, they all fail before the test of having lived holy lives, no matter how carefully and faithfully they may have carried out their formulated doctrines and rules and regulations for holy living.

. . . Their whole creed, from foundation to cornerstone, is simply and only an elaborate effort to climb into a righteous life by legalistic effort.³⁴

Since Burns disagreed with much that the holiness "creed" movement espoused, his views on "physical manifestations", when compared with the intense emotionalism of someone like Ralph Horner, are almost predictable.³⁵ Burns took the position that shouting, hysterical laughing or ecstatic prostrations are phenomena which are common to all religious groups where emotional excitement is high. Therefore, these were definitely not signs of superior piety nor were they to be encouraged as effective contributions to religious services.³⁶ Burns' strong opposition to emotionalism earned him wide criticism from the advocates of holiness in North America since these persons usually tended to emphasize emotion in their experience.

Not only was the C.H.A. rejecting its natural ties with those with whom it had the most in common theologically, but the debate within the Methodist denomination was also warming up.

There were two major periods in which the holiness question was addressed most vociferously in the Christian Guardian. The first coincides with the rise of the C.H.A. in the early 1880's until 1886. The second period coincides with the Burns and Truax heresy trials in the first half of the 1890's.

A brief look at Albert Truax's defense of Nelson Burns who was under attack from the Guardian will give some insight into the debate during its most acrimonious period, in 1891.

In the July 22, 1891 Guardian Dewart, the editor, noted that the teaching of Burns particularly as contained in Divine Guidance was "dangerous and misleading". Albert Truax responded forcefully in the August 1891 issue of the Expositor.

Now Mr. Dewart should have the very best reasons for making the statements he does, and the strongest proof of the truth of his charges, but for some unaccountable reason he gives his readers neither one nor the other.³⁷

Truax went on to analyze Dewart's criticisms point by point. They were, in fact, the ones that Burns had anticipated in his book--disparaging Scripture and infallibility. Truax reiterated a defense that was very similar to that of Burns.

However, on August 19 Dewart published an editorial which referred to parts of Truax's letter in defense of Burns. Truax replied to the editorial in the September issue of the Expositor. He faulted Dewart's interpretation of Burn's book.

The Doctor seems to think words have a rigid, fixed and invariable meaning, and, therefore, need no explanation or interpretation. Strange, indeed, for a nineteenth century editor.³⁸

Truax complained that Dewart either only thought he knew what the Association was teaching or he was deliberately misrepresenting it. In both instances, however, Truax maintained that the "defender of the truth" (as Dewart apparently thought he (Dewart) was) was unable to defend the truth when he did not or could not know it.

Of course, when a member of the Association claims to know and teach the truth, he is at once dubbed oracle and infallible. But when Dr. Dewart knows, defends and teaches truth, he is--well, what in the name of common-sense is he anyway?³⁹

It is obvious that the C.H.A. leadership began to feel its progressive alienation from fellow Methodists as the controversy deepened. Two things which occurred in the early months of 1893 help to measure the intensity of the feelings.

First of all, the Expositor, which had until that point been printed at the "Office of the Christian Guardian, Temperance Street, Toronto" (since 1882), was now printed by "W.S. Johnston and Co., The Art Printers, Toronto."⁴⁰ No reasons were given for the change.

Secondly, an important clause was removed from the official "Our Platform" which was always on the back cover of the Expositor. By April of 1893 "Avoiding Needless Controversy which Engenders Strife" was missing. Also "Loyal to Bible Truth" now simply read "Loyal to Truth".⁴¹

But the final struggle was still to come.

IV. "HERESY . . . THIS STIGMA, THIS ODIUM"

Following the 1889 publication of Divine Guidance, Methodist objections to Burns' doctrinal views began to gain strength. Although several informal attempts were made earlier, it was only in 1893 that specific charges were laid against Nelson Burns at the annual Guelph Conference; Burns was at that point in England on a two-month visit to promote the cause of holiness.⁴² Consideration of the case was postponed until 1894 in order that he might be present. Nevertheless Burns made no effort to defend himself even in 1894 except to write a letter entitled "My Apology" to the Conference leadership. (A copy of the letter has not been preserved.)

Four charges were laid against Burns:

1. He holds and teaches that the Holy Scriptures are non-essential; he impugns and discredits the Word of God, and affirms that it is not the only rule, and the sufficient rule, both of faith and practice.

2. He holds and teaches a view of Jesus Christ, which makes his divinity practically non-essential, and while declining to declare his accord with the view of the Divinity of Christ held by the Methodist Church, he has assailed that view.

3. He holds and teaches as the essential of the Gospel, the fanatical doctrine that a Christian may and should know the Will of God in all things affecting him, exclusively by direct revelation and guidance of the Spirit, as well as Christ or the Apostles know it, and repudiates all other guides.

4. He ignores the leading doctrines of Methodism, treating them as non-essential, and declaring in substance that his theory of guidance is the whole Gospel. He asserts the insufficiency of Wesley's teaching and example, because it did not include his fanatical doctrine; he also declares that Methodism has no satisfactory answer to the crucial problem of how to live right. He asperses the sincerity and integrity of Methodists and Methodism, repudiates rules and regulations for religious exercise, and

his teachings have produced dissatisfaction and discussion prejudicial to the Methodist Church in several places.⁴³

The charges were sustained and the conference of 1894 adopted a motion stating that Burns be deposed from the Methodist ministry. The conference also attempted to show its leniency by allowing Burns time until the end of the conference sessions to retract his views (to the satisfaction of the Conference). By this time, however, Burns was apparently not inclined to make even a token effort at healing the breach.⁴⁴

The fact that Burns did not attend his own trial effectively prevented the Methodist Church from really taking a serious look at Burns' concept of Divine guidance. It fell to Burn's close associate, Rev. Albert Truax, to be the one who more exhaustively tested the C.H.A.'s doctrines in the Methodist church courts.⁴⁵

Truax, a minister in the Niagara Conference, had been ordained in 1887 following the customary four year probation. He had spent the year 1885-86 in Montreal as a student at the Wesleyan Theological College.⁴⁶ After his ordination he regularly received an annual circuit appointment under the Niagara Conference until 1893. He had joined the C.H.A. by 1883 and by 1892 he appeared as its Vice-President.⁴⁷ By that time he was already an important and regular contributor to the Expositor.

In May of 1893 a letter which raised doubts on the "religious character and doctrinal teachings" of

"Brother" A. Truax of Courtland Mission was read at the Tilsonburg Conference of the Norwich District. A committee was named to investigate.⁴⁸

The committee met and formulated eight separate charges against Truax. Each charge, which was a general statement on a given issue, was supported with a number of specifications of when and where the offense had taken place.

The trial was held in St. Catharines on June 5, 1893 during the Niagara Methodist Annual Conference. The Toronto Globe reported extensively on the trial in its June 6th issue. The Report began by discussing the scope of the C.H.A.'s influence. The reporter stated that since the C.H.A. had

. . . not only been able to elude the efforts of the orthodox to crush it but that it has spread to an alarming extent establishes the cleverness of its apostles and the danger which threatens the church. Throughout the greater portion of western Ontario it has its adherents and its teachers. There are many Methodist churches especially in the rural sections of the district indicated who have found their influence impaired and their energies fettered by the existence of an element within their fold strongly sympathizing with the "new light".⁴⁹

The article went on to discuss the "theory of divine guidance" according to Burns and Truax and then reprinted the eight charges and specifications in full. (Considerations of length will permit only the notation of the charges.)

1. In his public teaching he has assailed the doctrine of the divinity of Christ.
2. He has disparaged the authority of the holy Scriptures.
3. He claims to know the will of God by direct

revelation of the spirit as well as Christ or the apostles.

4. He attacked the doctrine of eternal punishment.

5. In his preaching he has omitted to present the leading doctrines of the Methodist Church.

6. He has in nearly every sermon denounced all creeds.

7. He has made light of the duty of prayer, and his teaching and example have led others to do the same.

8. His influence has been very prejudicial to the church and its customary means of grace.⁵⁰

Truax, of course, pleaded not guilty to the charges.

After a lengthy examination and consultation the findings were presented. Truax was found guilty of all charges but the fourth (regarding the non-existence of eternal punishment).

The eighth charge^{is} particularly interesting because it included a list of nine specifications regarding Truax's prejudicial influence on the church. The Globe reported the specifications and the committee's findings as follows:

(1) His teaching tends to unsettle the faith of believers--found guilty. (2) Two prayer meetings have died out because prayer was discouraged by the pastor--reason assigned not sustained. (3) He has ridiculed in church and in public places, as shops, the experience given in class meetings, thereby discouraging many from attending them--sustained as regards church. (4) He has burlesqued and heaped scorn on evangelistic revival services--not sustained. (5) He has publicly attacked the language and sentiments of hymns in our hymn book--found guilty. (6) He has recommended the people to read anything they liked--the burden of proof was that he would not disapprove if guided by the Spirit. (7) He has declared that Sunday is no better than any other day, and that the people could read newspapers on Sunday if they like; it was nobody's business--found guilty. (8) He has publicly attacked in his pulpit the editor of the Christian Guardian (sic) and charged the editor with having libelled him, so that he (Truax) could secure pecuniary damages--the committee found that this specification was unimportant. (9) He has circulated tracts that are exceedingly mischievous in the tendencies of their teaching--found guilty.⁵¹

Truax was suspended for a year; the judgment noted that he would be expelled if he did not renounce his heretical views within that year. Within a week an appeal was launched by Truax through Rev. T.S. Linscott who was counsel for the defendant. The grounds of the appeal were that the "prosecution was irregular and illegal, manifestly unjust and rendered it impossible. . .to have a fair and unprejudiced trial."⁵² A hearing before the Court of Appeal of the Methodist Church was granted and the date set for late October 1893.

In the meantime Truax began airing his feelings in the Expositor:

Heresy! what a dread thing it has been in the past-- how it has been used as a lash, a thumbscrew, a torturing instrument, to force men into conformity with the mighty. . .majority. How men otherwise strong have quailed before this threatened charge, this stigma, this odium. And what a veritable bogie it is, what a mere scarecrow, when one dares to look it squarely in the face. . . . So far from believing that either suspension or expulsion can impair my usefulness or hinder my work, it will simply open a wider door to a more extensive field.⁵³

The appeal was heard in Toronto on October 26 with Rev. Albert Carman, the Methodist Church's General Superintendent presiding over the full court. The case was presented and after a short deliberation the court sustained the appeal. Although this meant that Truax would receive another trial, the court rebuked Linscott for the tone of his appeal--it was too disrespectful of the Conference and District authorities. A new trial date with the Niagara Conference was then set for Novemeber 27, 1893.

Prior to the second trial Truax wrote a letter to the Committee of Trial in which he acknowledged receipt of a package containing a summons, the charges and other documents related to the case. After stating that he had only read one page of the contents, Truax indicated that he would not appear at the trial nor would he ask anyone to represent him. Also he noted that he had earlier already accepted preaching engagements for the days of the trial. But more importantly,

. . .judging from my former trial you would not only require my presence in the evening which would prevent my preaching, but you would keep me up all night as well which would not be good for my health.⁵⁴

Toward the end of the five-page letter Truax raised what he considered was the crux of the matter.

The church must meet me on the straight issue or not at all. I frankly admit teaching Christian righteousness, that is, that men can be holy as Jesus, and know the will of God concerning themselves as well as He. I will answer no charges on side issues. If the Church will enact a farce it must do so without my assistance.⁵⁵

The trial was held in spite of Truax's absence.

Articles by Truax in the March, April and July 1893 issues of the Expositor were important pieces of evidence for the prosecution. This time there were also eight well-supported charges. They were virtually the same as those of the first trial except for the eighth charge. It concerned Truax's involvement in the illegal sale and disposal of the church building and property of the Zion Church in Courtland Mission.

The findings of the Committee were presented on November 29. The charges and each of the specifications for the first seven charges were, without exception,

sustained. With reference to the eighth charge the Committee found that Truax had erred and violated church law in the sale of the Zion Church but that it was unable to find sufficient evidence to convict him of "falsehood". The Committee voted unanimously to suspend Truax until the next Ministerial Session of the Niagara Conference.⁵⁶ At that session he was officially expelled.

V. CONCLUSION

It is clear that the Burns and Truax heresy trials were taken very seriously by the Methodist Church. It was under considerable pressure because of the relatively large amount of publicity that each side in the controversy had managed to generate. The vested interests of either faction had run deeply within the Church. The problems created by the C.H.A. were serious and demanded decisive action. It was the Guardian's editor, Dewart, who perhaps summarized the main issue most succinctly:

All such trials are unpleasant and undesirable. The question is not, however, whether a man should have liberty to believe and teach what he chooses. This all admit. It is whether a man shall teach with the authority and endorsement of the Church, doctrines which the authorities of the Church hold to be unscriptural and unsound.⁵⁷

Harold W. Pointen has noted that the break with the Holiness associations was not a break with the emphasis on holiness in the Methodist Church. It was, rather, more a result of the "unholy contentions about holiness".⁵⁸ Since the Church was determined to fulfill its role as guardian of true doctrine, its response to the C.H.A. was predictable. It had to remove the Burnsian heresy from its ranks, like a doctor excising a tumour.

The life of Nelson Burns provides us with an interesting case study of a dominant personality. Burns' self-expressed tendency toward sensitivity in his youth was later apparently replaced with an uncompromising idealism, even dogmatism, which was responsible for much of the opposition that the C.H.A. encountered. Undoubtedly

Burns was intelligent, perhaps brilliant, as evidenced particularly in his university studies and even his later writings.

At the beginning of his long term as editor of the Expositor he may have felt considerable willingness to dialogue with those who had countering points of view. But toward the end of our period of study, just prior to Burns' expulsion from the ministry, the willingness to debate was increasingly submerged under the weight of strident rhetoric which unabashedly declared the veracity of the doctrine of "Divine Guidance".

The inexorable process of alienation from both the Methodist Church and even other holiness movements presents a fascinating glimpse into the rise of a dissident movement. Certainly for the C.H.A. this process was not without its internal controversies. Even a solid C.H.A. supporter like T.S. Linscott was apparently not prepared to acquiesce totally to Burns' leadership. A letter from Linscott which strongly disagreed with Burns' antinomianism in an article on "Jesus and the Law" was published in the last extant issue of the Expositor (February 1894).⁵⁹

There is no doubt that the principle of "Divine Guidance" was the cornerstone of the C.H.A. doctrinal position. In fact, this doctrine with its logical outcroppings provided the primary impetus for the expulsion of both Burns and Truax from the ministry in the Methodist Church. According to Albert Truax at the time of his trial,

both he and the Niagara Conference were well aware ". . . that the charge in the indictment was the one concerning Divine Guidance (Charge III). All others were the mere results of this cardinal error, ^{the} fruits of this bad tree." ⁶⁰ The Church obviously knew that the disagreement was an important one. In its defense of orthodoxy it gave a decidedly negative response to the C.H.A.'s understanding of holiness.

Perhaps another comment that could be made in conclusion relates to the problem of effectiveness. Earlier in his career as a minister Burns addressed this problem from one perspective by suggesting that popularity in the pulpit necessarily involved unacceptable compromise of certain basic principles. Nelson Burns was one who did not easily make concessions in his beliefs. There is little doubt that his concern was not for effectiveness but rather faithfulness.

When he died in 1904, Burns was not a popular person. The bottom corner of the last page of the June 16, 1904 edition of the Globe included a column entitled "Died"; it had six entries. One of them read:

Burns- On Tuesday morning, June the 14th, at his late residence, 26 Homewood avenue (sic), Rev. Nelson Burns, B.A., aged 70 years.
Funeral private. ⁶¹

But the biography of Nelson Burns had one final postscript which provided further negative evidence for his critics. The controversy centred on Burns' claim of his own right to choose to end his life quickly and painlessly rather than to endure a lingering, painful death--in other words, euthanasia. (Although Burns died

from an attack of angina pectoris, he did have a severe form of sciatica throughout much of his later life.)

Albert Truax revealed this incident in an appendix to Burns' Autobiography. He noted that Burns had not decided to shorten his life in spite of considerable pain.

He simply claimed the right to shorten it, and his claim was admitted by God. As to putting it into effect, he would not do this until God told him to do so. He gave God liberty to tell him, but no such word was given; and as a matter of fact Mr. Burns finally chose to let nature have free course.⁶²

In his death, even as in his life, Nelson Burns and his followers were still surrounded by contentious issues!

FOOTNOTES

¹S.D. Clark, Church and Sect in Canada (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1971 (1948)), P. 368-424. Clark's account of the impact of several holiness movements in Ontario and Quebec is interesting and well documented although at points inaccurate. For example: On page 369 he states that Horner was closely associated with the Canada Holiness Association. I have been unable to find any evidence to support this view. Also Sydney Ahlstrom's comprehensive study of religion in the United States documents similar contemporary happenings in that country.

²Gordon F. Atter, The Third Force (Caledonia, Ontario: Acts Books, 1970 (1962)), p. 19.

³See Brian R. Ross, "Ralph Cecil Horner: A Methodist Deposed, 1887-1895" Journal of the Canadian Church Historical Society, Vol. XIX, Nos. 1-2, (March-June, 1977), P. 92-103.

Also Harold W. Pointen, "The Holiness Movement Church in Canada", unpublished BD Thesis, Emmanuel College, Victoria University, March, 1950.

⁴Conversation with Gerald Hobbs of Vancouver School of Theology. Hobbs has recently embarked on a major study of holiness movements in Canada.

⁵Ross, P. 103.

⁶Autobiography of the Late Rev. Nelson Burns, B.A., published under the auspices of the Christian Association, Toronto, nd., P.7&8. Note that Albert Truax appears to be the one who prepared the book for publication.

⁷"Died", Globe, Thursday, June 16, 1904, P. 14.

⁸Autobiography, P. 5&6.

⁹University of Toronto, Class and Prize Lists, 1853-57.

¹⁰Ibid.

¹¹Autobiography, P. 11.

¹²Ibid., P. 12.

¹³Ibid., P. 35.

¹⁴Ibid.

¹⁵Ibid., P. 36.

¹⁶Ibid.

¹⁷Ibid., P. 8.

¹⁸George H. Cornish, Cycloædia of Methodism in Canada, Vol. I. (Toronto: Methodist Book and Publishing House, 1881), P. 643.

¹⁹Autobiography, P. 60.

²⁰Ibid., P.61&62.

²¹Linscott, Born in England, was engaged by the Bible Defence Association to defend the Bible against the attacks of British secularists; he came to North America and was ordained by the Methodist Episcopal Church in 1875. He retired in 1879 while in Brantford where he also took charge of the publishing firm Bradley, Garretson and Co. Linscott is also the author of several books. See: Morgan, Canadian Men and Women of the Time, 1912 Edition.

²²Nelson Burns, Divine Guidance Or The Holy Quest (Brantford, Ontario: The Book and Bible House, 1889), P. 37.

²³Ibid., P. 63.

²⁴Ibid., P. 97.

²⁵Ibid., P. 231-257 (Chapters XXV and XXVI).

²⁶Autobiography, P. 66&67 and the Expositor of Holiness, Vol. XI, No. 5, November 1892, P. 130-132. These both give the best available accounts of the founding of the C.H.A.

²⁷Autobiography, P. 67.

²⁸Expositor of Holiness, Vol. I, No. 1, July 1882.

²⁹See Appendix 1 for a list of conventions from 1879 through 1893 as compiled by this writer from information in the Expositor of Holiness, the Christian Guardian and Burns' Autobiography.

Harold W. Pointen states that the C.H.A. held conventions in Smith Falls (1892), Newington (1894) and Queen's Line (1894), and that Ralph Horner took a prominent part in the Smith Falls Convention. My research to date would contradict rather than confirm this. The geographical area is not the one in which the C.H.A. was normally working nor does the Expositor of Holiness ever mention Horner's name. The Rev. J. McD. Kerr from Toronto, a Smith Falls participant, started a separate holiness periodical The Holiness Berean in 1890 but has no organic link with the C.H.A. (See Burns announcement of the new magazine in the Expositor of Holiness, January 1890, P. 190.) The conventions in the above named

locations were likely held under the auspices of some other holiness association(s); the Maritimes did have a separate association at one point.

³⁰See Appendix 1 for a list of the C.H.A. camp-meetings. Note that the first one was held in 1883.

³¹Expositor, Vol. VIII, No. 5, November 1889, P. 118.

³²Ibid., Vol. XI, No. 5, November 1892.

³³Ibid., P. 131.

³⁴Ibid., Vol. X, No. 6, December 1891, P. 142&143. See also Burns' further discussion of the problems with Wesley Park (in Niagara Falls, Ontario) and the dispute between "Palmerism" and "Burnsism" as he records it in his Autobiography, P. 109-117. Even James Harris, the virtual founder of the C.H.A., separated himself from Burnsism to such an extent that in 1894 he was the one who seconded the resolution which expelled Burns from the Methodist ministry. (Autobiography, P. 118.) No doubt there were other defections from the ranks as well.

³⁵Ralph C. Horner's Reminiscences is filled with account after account of emotional experiences connected with entire sanctification.

³⁶Autobiography, P. 114.

³⁷Expositor, Vol. X, No. 2, August 1891, P. 34.

³⁸Ibid., Vol. X, No. 3, September 1891, P. 66&67.

³⁹Ibid., P. 67.

⁴⁰Ibid., Vol. XI, No. 10, April 1893, see front cover.

⁴¹Ibid., back cover.

⁴²Expositor, March 1893 (P. 247), April 1893 (P. 276), May 1893 (P. 285-288). William Pointen states erroneously that illness prevented Burns from appearing before the conference ministerial session. Burns did have a protracted health problem (la grippe) in December 1891 through February 1892. (See Expositor, January 1892, P. 182-185.)

⁴³Christian Guardian, June 16, 1894, P. 361. No transcript of the trial proceedings has as yet been found.

⁴⁴Ibid., According to Burns, Rev. James Harris was the one who seconded the motion for Burns' expulsion from the ministry. (See footnote #34). The Guardian does not name Harris but rather a Rev. Dr. Willoughby as seconder.

⁴⁵In the Expositor of January 1894 Burns remarks that Truax on trial was in a double sense representative of the C.H.A. He was an official officer in the C.H.A. (vice-president) and he held beliefs which were similar, indeed identical, to those of the C.H.A. (more precisely Burns). In fact, chronologically, Truax's trial was completed before Burns' trial.

⁴⁶George H. Cornish, Cyclopedia of Methodism in Canada, Vol. II (Toronto: Methodist Book and Publishing House, 1903), P. 289-290.

⁴⁷Expositor, Vol. X, No. 10, April 1892, P. 264.

⁴⁸Niagara Conference, Norwich District Minutes, 1884-1895, P. 207.

⁴⁹Globe, "The Truax Heresy Case", Tuesday, June 6, 1893.

⁵⁰Ibid.

⁵¹Ibid.

⁵²"Appeal by Rev. A. Truax to Rev. D.G. Sutherland, Ex. President of the Niagars Annual Conference of the Methodist Church, Hamilton and also to Rev. James S. Ross, New President. Re: Norwich District Meeting vs. Rev. A. Truax." Papers in the Albert Carman papers, Box 5, File 21C, United Church Archives, Toronto.

⁵³Expositor, Vol. XI, No. 12, June 1893, P. 320, "The Truax 'Heresy'" by Albert Truax.

⁵⁴Document in United Church Archives, Toronto as Methodist Church--Court of Appeal, Box III, File #53.

⁵⁵Ibid.

⁵⁶Ibid., File # 52, "Findings and Decisions of the Committee of Trial re Rev A. Truax."

⁵⁷Guardian, June 6, 1894, "Editorial Jottings" by E.H. Dewart, P. 360.

⁵⁸Harold W. Pointen, P. 74. Pointen is quoting an anonymous writer.

⁵⁹Expositor, Vol. XII, No. 8, February 1894, P. 222.

⁶⁰Ibid., Vol. XII, No. 1, July 1893, P. 9, "The Truax Case Again" by Albert Truax.

⁶¹Globe, June 16, 1894, P. 14.

⁶²Autobiography, P. 133. Article entitled "Mr. Burns' Last Experience" by Albert Truax.

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APPENDIX 1

C.H.A. CONVENTIONS & CAMP-MEETINGS

- 1879 1. Convention in Brussels, Ontario (October)
- 1880 2. Convention in Georgetown. (Nelson Burns invites)
- 1881 3. Convention in London. (Sec/Tr Colling invites)
- 1882 4. Convention in Toronto. (Bloor St. Meth. Ch.)
- 1883 5. Convention in Dundas. (Oct. 23-26)
1. Camp-mtg in Grimsby Park.
- 1884 6. Convention in Beamsville. (Nov. 12-14)
2. Camp-mtg in Grimsby Park (Aug. 5-12)
- 1885 7. Convention in Galt. (Nov. 10-13)
3. Camp-mtg in Wesley Park (Aug. 8-17)
- 1886 8. Convention in Tilsonburg. (Oct. 5-8)
4. Camp-mtg?
- 1887 9. Convention in Brantford. (Feb. 20-23, 1888)
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- 1888 10. Convention in Toronto. (Feb. 12-15, 1889) Temperance Hall
5. Camp-mtg in Wesley Park (July 17-27)
- 1889 11. Convention in Hamilton. (Apr. 22-25, 1890) Zion Tabernacle
6. Camp-mtg in Wesley Park (Aug. 23-Sept. 1)
- 1890 12. Convention in Guelph (or Galt?) (Feb. 17-20, 1891)
7. Camp-mtg in Niagara-on-the-Lake (Aug. 29-Sept. 5)
- 1891 13. Convention in Toronto. (Mar. 29-31, 1892) YMCA bldg.
8. Camp-mtg in Niagara-on-the-Lake (Aug. 18-27)
- 1892 14. Convention in Brantford. (Jan. 23-26, 1893) WCTU Hall
9. Camp-mtg in Burlington (July 27-Aug. 1)
- 1893 15. Convention in Toronto. (Feb. 27-Mar. 1, 1894)
10. Camp-mtg in Wesley Park (with changed name?)