

A Special Note from Bill Cleveland, Sojourners Group Leader

Hello Sojourners!

This week Pastor Andy's sermon addressed the perceived divide within the UMC between "evangelicals" and "progressives." His theme was "It's both/and!" not either/or, which is a very Wesleyan approach to our faith. The scripture lesson from John chapter 14 lifts up Jesus teaching His disciples that God's plan for salvation of humankind synchronizes love for God (and neighbor) with faith in Jesus. The New Testament reminds us that a born again follower of Jesus Christ exhibits fruit of the indwelling Spirit, which includes acts of charity toward those in need. Jesus came to seek and save the lost, not to enhance the position of holy people. The following article addresses the issue of Social Holiness, and distinguishes it from Social Justice, wherein the motivation for social action must spring from a transformed heart, and not just a "woke" outlook toward your fellow human beings. The author, a seminary graduate, frames the discussion such that personal and social holiness are inseparable. Feel free to comment.

- Bill

SOCIAL JUSTICE IS NOT SOCIAL HOLINESS

By Evan W. Rohr-Dodge

I attended a very liberal seminary. I don't mean that pejoratively, nor do I believe it to be an unfair characterization. Many, if not most of the school faculty identify themselves and the school as progressive — which seems to be the preferred nomenclature of the theological left. I loved my time there. I grew in my own faith; I was nurtured and loved; I discovered and relished the rich intellectual tradition of Mainline Protestantism; heck, I even met my wife there! Given my proclivity for theological orthodoxy, I could relate all the ways I disagree with some of the theological and social positions of the school. But, I don't want to do that. No doubt any of us who have attended a seminary, theological school, or divinity school could relate all the ways in which we might disagree with aspects of the institution. I am truly indebted to the school. I have maintained numerous relationships there, and I currently serve on the Executive Board of the Alumni Association. I offer that preamble because I want to be clear that my criticism here is respectful and not offered from spite or ill-will. But I do want to discuss what I perceive as a categorical misappropriation of terms I repeatedly encountered at seminary, a conflation of concepts that, if disentangled and properly understood, might fundamentally alter the way particular warring factions in The United Methodist Church are currently talking to each other. I am speaking of **social justice** and **social holiness**.

Now, my alma mater wholeheartedly embraces social justice as a foundational pillar of its institutional identity. Social justice is written into syllabi, into curricula, into lectures, into student organization bylaws, etc. That's great. I don't have too much of a problem with that. But, time and again during my studies there, professors and students would make the link between social justice and United Methodism, often referring to it, either explicitly or implicitly, as THE defining task, THE primary thing that United Methodists should be all about. And as I have talked to people from a variety of United Methodist-related institutions, including General & Conference Boards, Boards of Ordained Ministry, District Committees on Ministry, etc, this emphasis on social justice — sometimes at the exclusion of anything else — is seemingly ubiquitous across the denomination.

I posit that social **holiness**, NOT social **justice**, is the foundational pillar of United Methodism. There are deep differences between the two. Social justice is the belief that everyone deserves an equal footing; all deserve access to the same sort of political, social, and economic rights and privileges. Depending on where you fall on the theological or political spectrum, social justice is a loaded term.

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Some see it as code for socialism, while others interpret it as the driving message of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount. I believe both of those perspectives simplistically caricature social justice. Social justice is a good thing. Social holiness, on the other hand, is categorically different.

"Personal and social holiness" is a catchphrase of United Methodism. Even though [Wesley never used that exact phrase](#), holiness is integral to the Wesleyan tradition. In "Upon Our Lord's Sermon on the Mount," Discourse IV, Wesley poignantly opens with this: "The beauty of holiness, of that inward man of the heart which is renewed after the image of God...this inward religion bears the shape of God so visibly impressed upon it..."¹ Fundamental to social holiness, then, is the restoration of the image of God, the "new creation," in which the old has gone, and the new has come. To bifurcate "personal and social holiness" is to separate something that, according to Wesley, is inseparable. Works of piety and works of mercy cannot be understood apart from each other. He goes on, in his fourth discourse on The Sermon on the Mount, to condemn a religion that would tend toward the solitude, "without living and conversing with other men."² For Wesley, social holiness is all about people "going on to perfection" in community; hence, the early band meetings (Kevin Watson deals with this fabulously in his [book](#)).

Social holiness is fundamentally different from social justice because inherent in social holiness is the salvation of the individual as the recipient of prevenient, justifying, and sanctifying grace, in whom the Imago Dei has been restored, enabling the move toward entire sanctification in community. Without this understanding of God's gracious activity, social holiness lapses into a sort of vapid social justice, where concern for societal structure and rights is preeminent, where the individual, not God, is the primary actor.

What would happen if our educational institutions, denominational entities, churches, and our clergy and laity emphasized social holiness in all its Wesleyan nuance? What if we moved the conversation over human sexuality (the issue that seems to be prompting talk of schism in The United Methodist Church), and all that goes with it in our current denominational context — marriage, clergy covenant, ethical responsibility — and understood it not in terms of social **justice**, but social **holiness**? How might this change how we listen to and understand each other, especially people with whom we find fundamental disagreement? What if discussions on issues of human sexuality were not couched in the Enlightenment-driven language of rights, but instead were talked about in terms of grace and sanctification, about God's desire for the restoration of the divine image in all creation? Do you believe this would change the conversation? Have you already started having this conversation through the framework of social holiness? If we began to engage this methodology in our communities, I believe that would be deeply faithful to the witness and ethos of historic Wesleyanism, that great tradition of which we United Methodists are part.