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Holiness Without the Legalism

Ten denominations cooperate to revive their historic emphasis.

David Neff interviews Kevin Mannoia/ March 27, 2006

A new theological manifesto marks an effort by historic Holiness churches to rearticulate their key doctrine for today. At the end of February, the [Wesleyan Holiness Study Project](#) (WHSP) released a document that had been in the works for three years.

According to Kevin Mannoia, graduate and faculty chaplain at Azusa Pacific University, this document also marks the first time these historic Holiness denominations have cooperated in this way. Each of the ten denominations provided funding and sent three representatives to participate in the three-year project. These included both Pentecostal and non-Pentecostal branches of the movement, as well as black and white denominations. The participating denominations are the Salvation Army, Church of the Nazarene, Free Methodist Church, Brethren in Christ, International Church of the Foursquare Gospel, International Pentecostal Holiness, Church of God (Anderson, Indiana), Church of God in Christ, Shield of Faith, and the Christian & Missionary Alliance.

From the 1840s to the end of the 19th century, key leaders believed that the culturally dominant form of Methodism had slipped from its original commitments and formed splinter groups to revive the concern for holiness taught by Methodist founder John Wesley. These groups served the poor and culturally marginalized, and taught them principles of holy living. Some split with the Methodist Episcopal Church over the issue of slavery. At the beginning of the 20th century, the Pentecostal movement sprang from the soil of these Holiness groups.

CT editor David Neff interviewed Kevin Mannoia, who served as chair of the WHSP steering committee, about the significance of the project. The Holiness Manifesto can be read at holinessandunity.org

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The Holiness Manifesto says that "holy people are not legalistic or judgmental. They do not pursue an exclusive private state of being better than others. Holiness is not flawlessness but the fulfillment of God's intention for us." Can you unpack that for us?

That is our effort to acknowledge the "valley moments" in our own histories. We recognize, for example, that in the mid-20th century a lot of what we did was based out of a legalism that was behaviorally oriented and in many cases became judgmental.

And we're trying to say that we all recognize that pitfall. We reject that, and we want to capture the spirit of this message afresh.

The document says that holiness is not "an exclusive private state of being" and frames holiness as neighbor love. It uses "covenant" language. There's a more communal understanding of holiness in this statement, that holiness is not just about us as individuals but about individuals belonging to a covenant people.

We're trying to say that we have also fallen prey to the idea of a privatized faith, that you are holy internally and that it has no external responsibility to community and to culture. We recognize that we cannot be holy in our hearts without an overflow of action and engagement with other people and with culture. The important thing here is that holiness begins with God. It does not begin with the church, it does not begin with a person, it does not begin with the Bible. It begins with God.

One characteristic of God is holiness, and at the root of that is his love for humanity. Out of that abundant love then, his otherness, which is essentially his holiness, finds expression in reaching and engaging with humanity for redemptive and reconciling purposes.

So if we pursue becoming Christ-like, which is the essence of holiness, then we will not only be transformed into his holy character, but that love will flow through us and compel us to engage and to transform culture. You can't have individual holiness without social holiness. It's impossible.

How did the Wesleyan Holiness Study Project begin?

The genesis was about four years ago at a breakfast conversation with Fuller Seminary librarian Dave Bundy and historian Don Dayton. We were talking about the way in which the whole Holiness message had so shaped the history of the church, and yet it seemed as though it had gotten submerged in the last 50 years. That message had been recast as the "don'ts" of behavior. Wouldn't it be nice, we thought, if we could rearticulate the holiness message. The first option was to hold an academic conference. But I wasn't interested in having an academic symposium, because those can very easily be relegated to the shelves of irrelevancy and never seen again.

So I contacted some of the core denominations that have Holiness as their heritage—particularly in those that I'm familiar with, the Free Methodists, the Nazarenes, the Wesleyans, and then the Church of God (Anderson).

You've been a Free Methodist bishop?

Right. I knew that this message was in our past, but we really haven't been able to see its impact on the history of the church.

More importantly, it was important to say two things. Number one, the Holiness message has *convening* substance for creating unity in the church, because increasingly people are interested in what holiness is—from the Roman Catholics to the Vineyards, the Calvary Chapels, and so forth. Our denominations are sitting on this heritage, and we need to share it with the broader church.

Second, it has the ability to focus the future mission of the church. I began to contact some of these church leaders, including the board of bishops of the Free Methodist Church, the Nazarene generals, and the Salvation Army national commander. And in every case, I found a fairly significant level of interest in at least having a conversation.

So I said to them, if you will send me three of your best minds and some money, we can put together a three-year project to meet once a year for two days and begin this conversation. It was tilted to the academic side, but we always kept it zeroed in on practical application in the local

church context and leadership development, because that's where the future of the church comes from.

Many denominations formed in reaction to what they saw as the Methodist establishment veering away from holiness. Why was it later obscured?

One of the factors that has caused it to be submerged is that holiness largely is a theological emphasis that comes out of poor churches dealing with the disenfranchised in the late 19th century. These are not the wealthiest denominations, and they are not the ones that exert the greatest amount of influence.

B. T. Roberts formed the Free Methodists precisely to bring the gospel to the poor.

Exactly. And obviously, the Salvation Army did the same thing on the southwest side of London. And relatively speaking, they're not the most influential denominations.

Secondly, they did not have a well articulated, nor a printed means to convey the Holiness message. By its very nature, Holiness comes out of a Wesleyan construct that is largely built upon descriptive or experiential theology as opposed to propositional truths.

John Wesley spoke about "experimental religion."

Exactly. And John Wesley wrote a *Journal*; he didn't write *Institutes*. It isn't quite as propositional. Honestly, in the history in this country, the publishing houses have largely been driven by a more Reformed theological construct. So the publishing houses and other major influences affected many of the pastors and leaders within Holiness movements. And so their own DNA began to get occluded by this.

This is not to say that one is good and the other is bad. It is to say that the distinctive of the Holiness message was lost in this larger sea of a more generic evangelicalism that tilted in a Reformed direction.

A third factor that caused it to be covered up was the propensity for these churches to get sidetracked into legalism. In each case, you can trace their histories and find that especially in the mid-20th century they struggled with legalism, wherein holiness was described in behavioral terms rather than heart transformation.

What were the key "don'ts" that accompanied that?

Well, you know the phrase, "Don't drink, don't smoke, don't chew, and don't go with girls that do." How long was your dress? Could you wear sleeveless dresses? Could you wear jewelry? Could you wear make-up? All of the things that tended to become the appearance of holiness but that, over the course of generations, lost the heart.

In any movement where the founders have a passionate heart that alters their behavior from the inside out, subsequent generations try to mimic the behavior without the heart transformation, and that moves to the following generations where we not only mimic the behavior, but we impose the behavior on others without understanding the heart transformation. It's so easy to write down the rules in the Book of Discipline and say, this is what you have to look like, and then we lose the power.

Most of these denominations came to realize that fallacy, and in the last 15 to 20 years particularly, they have begun to wake up to the fact that they have a unique DNA, a unique heritage, and that it starts from the inside out. It's a message of love, it's a message of transformation, it's an open-handed, grace-filled proximity to a God who is holy and who transforms us into being holy.

You invited representatives from 10 different denominations. How often do official representatives of those groups get together for a common purpose?

It hasn't happened before.

This is a historic first?

It is. This excites me as I look back in church history. The Holiness movement gave rise to these churches and then came the Azusa Street Revival. But these commonly founded groups wound up in a three-way split. We had the Pentecostals and then the Silents, the ones who weren't loud or noisy. And then you had a split between the blacks and the whites. And I don't know of any time since then that those three categories of people have come together in a common project—especially around this message—until this moment. And so, we've got the Pentecostal stream (the Foursquare and the Shield of Faith and International Pentecostal Holiness), and we've got the Silents (the Nazarenes, the Wesleyans, Free Methodists, Brethren in Christ). We've got the black church (the Shield of Faith and the Church of God in Christ) and the whites. And so it's very exciting. Even if it may only be a small start, it signals that God wants us together around something that transcends our divisions and that his holiness is a unifying, convening place.

Furthermore, the Catholic church has expressed interest in this. I invited the bishops to send a representative, which they did, as an observer. The United Methodist Church has expressed a lot of interest in it. I invited them to send an observer, and they did. Also, some of the Calvary churches around here showed interest.

A lot of people are asking, "What is this holiness?" And these groups sit on a goldmine of heritage and history and now need to offer it generously to the broader church for the future.

How can the holiness message change the church?

As I work with pastors and church leaders, I see a frustration with the flat-lined church in North America. It seems to have set church leaders on a search for a silver bullet to mitigate that decline. Often, they look to methods. They've looked at cell-based ministry, the Sunday school movement—all great things, but they're methods. And lately I have been preaching really hard that the message, not the method, is our mission. We've distracted ourselves by looking at the latest and best, and often allowed the message to go wanting. Let's let go of the methods, and let's zero in once again on the message that God entrusted to us. Let's preach it, let's live it, let's model it, and then let the creative ingenuity of individual leaders in their context figure out how to bring it to bear into their community in unique ways.

I also hope that this will be a starting point for pastors in these ten denominations and others, who say, "That resonates with my soul, that builds a fire in my belly, that's what it's about. Let's get on with business."

If you're going to see change in the church, it probably is going to happen at the congregational level, isn't it? How do you get from a manifesto to congregational change?

Nobody is being paid to do this; it is entirely voluntary. In order to get this out, it's going to have to start with local churches. But denominational leaders recognize that they no longer have access to the accelerator, but they do have access to the brake pedal. Their pastors may not look to them for pace setting, but denominational leaders have the ability either to slow them down or to empower and encourage them. That's the role these denominations can play: to encourage them, to resource them, and to validate this interest that many pastors and church leaders have in rekindling their understanding of this message.

There are three things going on: One is that these denominational leaders are already using it. For example, it's being translated into Spanish now by one denomination, and it's going to be sent to all of their superintendents and pastors. The Nazarenes are using it in selected districts for pastoral training purposes. It's so new that it hasn't gotten traction beyond that at this point.

Second, we've had some initial conversations with a few denominational heads about getting together at the end of the summer and deciding how we can take this further through regional gatherings of district leaders and pastors, as we've already done here in the Southwest in Southern California. We may replicate that kind of gathering in other parts of the country.

Third, I've agreed to work together with Tom Black and George Barna to do regular programming through CCN [Church Communication Network] as a resource to church leaders around the issues of holiness.

What's the most important thing you want readers to take away from this conversation?

There are two things: Number one, if somebody were to ask what holiness is, the best response is to say it's Christ-likeness.

Number two, the intent of this project is to offer the broader church something that we feel deeply about, that we have lived with for 150 years in our respective denominations. Personally, I think God is increasingly calling the broader church to cross all lines of demarcation and division. And I would love to see this Holiness message blur those lines, so that we come together around this thing that is truly from the heart of God.

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