Dignity, Justice, and Flourishing Within the Human Family: Methodist Theology and the Enrichment of Public Discourse and Life

Kenneth M. Loyer, Ph.D.

Pastor, Otterbein UMC of Spry, York, PA and Adjunct Professor of Theology and United Methodist Studies, United Theological Seminary, Dayton, OH

Introduction

One way of approaching the relationship between Wesleyan communities and the world beyond Christianity, the theme for the 2013 Oxford Institute, is to explore common ground between Methodist theology and wider public discourse and life. The themes of dignity, justice, and flourishing, which are increasingly common in the latter, find theological parallels in the former. While these are by no means the only similarities or areas of mutual concern, the fact that they figure prominently in both cases makes them an apposite subject of inquiry. Even with all that Methodists and Wesleyans stand to gain from sources outside their own theological heritage, an analysis of dignity, justice, and flourishing suggests the potential for Methodist theology to advance the understanding and practice of these principles not only within the church but also in the broader society. Theological reflection in Methodist and Wesleyan traditions shows noteworthy potential toward those ends because of its holistic character and soteriological orientation as expressed in the *via salutis*. A critical extension of Wesley's theological intuitions and insights can therefore serve to enrich public discourse and life, particularly regarding the themes of dignity, justice, and flourishing within the human family.

At the 2013 Oxford Institute, the Theology and Ethics working group will consider the question: How can Christians maintain authentic Christian beliefs and practices at the same time as they relate constructively to non-Christian persons and communities? An answer emerging

from the present study highlights the importance of identifying shared concerns and seeking the fulfillment of these three ideals in particular through a deeper theological grounding than is normally associated with them, the benefits of which have key implications not just for advancing Christian, and especially Methodist, theology but also for the work of societal renewal more broadly.

The themes of dignity, justice, and flourishing are not by any means new. They have helped to shape intellectual and societal life for centuries and in numerous ways, despite considerable debate from various points of view over the definition of each. In recent years, each one has enjoyed a certain emergence or perhaps resurgence as indicated by various publications aimed at scholarly audiences, the wider public, or both. In what follows, rather than attempting a sweeping survey of the roles that these concepts have played in academic and popular thought, this paper will highlight one prominent example showing the contemporary relevance in each case. That initial move will lead, in turn, to an exploration of convergence with theological teachings and possible extension from Methodist sources.

Dignity

The recent interest in dignity in the world beyond Christianity is reflected in the book *Human Dignity* by George Kateb, the William Nelson Cromwell Professor of Politics, Emeritus, at Princeton University.[1] Kateb offers an intentionally and self-described secular perspective,[2] grounding dignity in our existence as human beings. It is, according to Kateb, an existential

[1] George Kateb, *Human Dignity* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2011).
[2] "Let us keep open the secular possibility of exploration, because if theology goes down, then in disappointment we might be moved to think that since there is no irrefutable theological system, there can be no idea of human dignity. We must be willing to think about human dignity with the assumption that it was not bestowed on us or imputed to us by some higher non-human entity, whether divine, demonic, or angelic" (ibid., xi).

value that pertains to the identity of a person as a human being and the status of humanity as the highest being in creation. Over against critics of the idea of dignity, Kateb maintains that neither human rights nor morality can alone suffice. The concept of human dignity must be defended and utilized in order to account for the equal status of all persons.[3] Moreover, the dignity of the human species rests on its uniqueness among all other species.[4] The exceptionally fitting task of humanity can be seen in what Kateb calls a stewardship of nature, which is a labor that only humanity can perform and, as "atonement" for the harm that human beings have done to nature, must perform.[5] Attentive to the problems associated with human life, including the "immeasurable wrong" that human beings in various ways commit, Kateb points out the need to avoid excessive pride about our humanity and to limit claims about human dignity as appropriate.[6] Nevertheless, he insists that human beings have inherent dignity and that the idea of this dignity should not be disowned, no matter what else one might say about humankind, because it is a central feature of human existence.

Although Kateb takes great care to avoid theological language in his account, human dignity bears an undeniable similarity with the doctrine of creation. That congruence provides the tools necessary to recast the concept of dignity with greater theological depth and clearer public import.

In particular, Judeo-Christian teaching on the *imago Dei* reveals the basis for such an understanding. As we read in Genesis 1,

> Then God said, "Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the

[3] Ibid., pp. 1-113.
[4] Ibid., pp. 113-173.
[5] Ibid., x, and 205-211. It is striking, especially given his unabashed interest in a secular defense of human dignity, that Kateb uses this distinctively theological term to describe the possibility of humanity to serve nature.
[6] Ibid., xiii and pp. 174-217.

> birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thins that creeps upon the earth." So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.[7]

For God to create us in this way makes human beings, as Wesley says, "capable of God."[8] That is, God's free and gracious gift to all people, as persons created in God's image, means that we are capable of knowing, loving, and obeying God. This gift of our creaturely reality, patterned after the very image of God, makes all human beings persons of sacred dignity. It is a gift prior to and independent of anything we do, though along with it comes a responsibility for us to live up to the calling that God has given us as human beings.

Yet the problem of sin, our tragic, willing rebellion against God, defaces this image in which God has made us. As a result, what is desperately needed is the renewal of God's image, which is one of Wesley's favorite descriptions of salvation.[9] Mercifully, God has made abundant provisions for the renewal of the divine image in us through Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit.

Such renewal is essential because of two issues rightly identified by Kateb, the wrongdoing in which we are all complicit and from which we must turn away, and the common good that we should pursue instead. In one way or another, we all have missed the mark in our personal and social lives. One manifestation of such wrongdoing is our mistreatment of the world around us. For those ways in which we have failed in our God-given task of caring for the world, including for one another, we must repent. Kateb's appeal to the human stewardship of nature echoes the biblical call for human beings to care for the earth that God has made and constitutes a penetrating challenge from outside the world of Christianity that, if heeded, could

---

[7] Genesis 1:26-27.
[8] Wesley, "The General Deliverance," Sermon 60 (1781), I.5, III.6, 12, in *The Works of John Wesley*, edited by Albert C. Outler, et al. (Nashville, Tenn.: 1984—), 2:441, 448, 450.
[9] Cf. "The One Thing Needful."

help us to become more faithful Christians. In the wake of any sin, repentance is absolutely necessary as a matter of both turning away from what would denigrate our dignity or that of others, and turning toward what respects our created dignity as human beings and reflects that dignity in how we live.

Working toward the common good requires us to honor the dignity of other human beings and treat the rest of the created order, and ourselves, appropriately. Theologically speaking, the doctrine of the image of God teaches that what God asks of us as creatures made in the divine image is to exercise dominion over the world in a way that reflects God's own dominion, shown most clearly in loving, self-giving service through the person of Jesus Christ. God has designated humankind as God's own vice-regents and has given us the honor of having dominion over other creatures so that we might be "the more strongly obliged" to bring honor to our Maker.[10] Humanity's calling toward the world is to act—in a necessarily public way—on behalf of God for the good of the created order, to care for one another and the rest of creation as representatives of the God "whose mercy is over all his works" (Psalm 145:9), or in other words, to imitate God as the very children of God that the Father's great love, freely lavished on us, has made us to be (1 John 3:1). Understood in that sense, dignity assumes a force and magnitude befitting of its reality as both a gift and a responsibility for us all under God.

Justice

Another key principle that has received widespread attention in both academic and popular discourse is justice. Notably, Michael J. Sandel, the Anne T. and Robert M. Bass

[10] Wesley, *Explanatory Notes Upon the Old Testament*, on Gen 1:26. http://wesley.nnu.edu/john-wesley/john-wesleys-notes-on-the-bible/notes-on-the-first-book-of-moses-called-genesis/#Chapter%2BI. Accessed August 1, 2013.

Professor of Government at Harvard University, has drawn from his experience teaching political philosophy, including a popular course called "Justice," in writing *Justice: What's the Right Thing to Do?*[11] In this best-selling book, Sandel employs three influential theories of justice in order to approach some of the most difficult moral issues of the day, such as government bailouts, immigration, abortion, stem cell research, and the role of markets, as well as the personal ethical questions that we confront in our everyday lives. One approach, utilitarianism, says that justice means maximizing utility or welfare to produce the greatest happiness for the greatest number. A second approach sees justice as a matter of respecting freedom of choice, "either the actual choices people make in a free market (the libertarian view) or the hypothetical choices people *would* make in an original position of equality (the liberal egalitarian view)."[12] According to a third approach, justice involves the cultivation of virtue and thinking together about the common good.[13]

While Sandel invites people of all political persuasions on a journey of reasoned debate and moral reflection, he reveals near the end of the book his own predilection for a version of the third theory of justice as expressed in what he calls "a politics of the common good."[14] In this discussion, he addresses the place of religion in politics. His concern is not Christianity *per se*, but rather to identify an appropriate role for moral and religious convictions of any sort to play in public discourse. In the process, he outlines what a new politics of the common good might look like, with attention to such themes as sacrifice, service, solidarity, civic virtue, and a politics of moral engagement.[15]

---

[11] Michael J. Sandel, *Justice: What's the Right Thing to Do?* (New York, N.Y.: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2009).
[12] Ibid., p. 260.
[13] Ibid.
[14] Ibid., p. 261.
[15] Ibid., pp. 263-269.

There are obvious connections between contemporary discussions about justice and the common good as represented by Sandel's work, on the one hand, and Christian theology, and particularly Methodist doctrine, on the other. For example, both are concerned with the conditions necessary for rightly ordered lives and the social impact of such lives. These parallels allow us to account for justice in a way that shows both deeper theological substance and greater public significance and urgency.

The deeper theological substance derives from the foundation of virtue and justice in God. In his sermon "An Israelite Indeed,"[16] Wesley critiques the proposal of Francis Hutcheson in *An Inquiry into the Original of Our Ideas of Beauty and Virtue* (1725) that the essence of virtue is benevolence or love of our fellow creatures, a claim that is representative of Hutcheson's autonomous ethical theory divorced from any theological ground. Against Hutcheson, Wesley insists on the love of God as "the true foundation both of the love of our neighbour and all other virtues," in accordance with Christ's own designation of this commandment as the "first and greatest" (Matt 22:38).[17] He further asserts that truth and love are to be understood as integrally united, and in a direct correlation with holiness:

> This then is real, genuine, solid virtue. Not truth alone, nor conformity to truth. This is a property of real virtue, not the essence of it. Not love alone, though this comes nearer the mark; for 'love' in one sense 'is the fulfilling of the law' [Rom 13:10]. No: truth and love united together are the essence of virtue or holiness.[18]

Benevolence, as Wesley goes on to say, is surely part of the good life, but must be fixed on "its right foundation, namely, the love of God, springing from faith, from a full conviction that God

[16] Wesley, "An Israelite Indeed," Sermon 90 (1755), in *Works*, 3:278-289.
[17] Ibid., §2, in *Works*, 3:280.
[18] Ibid., II.11, in *Works*, 3:289.

hath given his only Son to die for my sins."[19] Here Wesley states plainly the connection between truth and love that is vital to genuine virtue and holiness, including the commitment to justice in personal and public life.

Even with all that Sandel and others appropriately emphasize about the importance of justice, because of its foundation in God the very notion of justice reaches an order of public magnitude that is even greater still. The God of all creation, the God of Israel and the God and Father of Jesus Christ, takes justice very seriously. This is a God of justice, whose throne is founded on righteousness and justice (Psalm 89:14), and who is therefore not content to watch injustice thrive and spread. Out of love for the world, God acts. God heard the cries of the Israelites enslaved in Egypt and acted, through Moses, Aaron, and others, to set them free. God sent the prophets to speak to the people and bring them back from their waywardness, by showing them what the Lord requires, as in Micah's famous pronouncement: "to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God" (Micah 6:8).

Most significantly of all, the one true God came into the world in the person of Jesus Christ, whose mission, clearly expressing the justice of God, was a recapitulation of the words of the prophet Isaiah: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor" (Luke 4:18-19; cf. Isaiah 61:1-2). In his life, teachings, healings, and especially his suffering, death, and resurrection, Jesus restored our broken relationship with God. As St. Paul explains, "God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us" (Rom 5:8). So we are now justified by God's grace "as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put

[19] Ibid.

forward as a sacrifice of atonement by his blood, effective through faith. He did this to show his righteousness"—and δικαιοσύνης can be translated "justice"—"because in his divine forbearance he had passed over the sins previously committed; it was to prove at the present time that he himself is righteous and that he justifies the one who has faith in Jesus"; or as one translation reads, God "did it to demonstrate his justice (δικαιοσύνης αὐτοῦ) at the present time, so as to be just (εἰς τὸ εἶναι αὐτὸν δίκαιον) and the one who justifies (δικαιοῦντα) those who have faith in Jesus" (Rom 3:24-26). Acting justly, and indeed mercifully, God gave for us in sacrificial love so as to be just and to justify us. Wesley stated the matter succinctly: justification is God's work "*for us*" through Jesus Christ, setting right what we had done wrong toward God, ourselves, and this world.[20]

For us to play our proper role in the great drama of our salvation means that God's justice demands something of us. God has given so much—the very Son of God in flesh and blood, teaching, healing, suffering, dying, and rising again for us and our salvation—to repair our relationship with God! Because of God's mercy toward us, we too should learn to be merciful, especially toward those who suffer. The Scriptures state repeatedly the high ethical demands placed on all who believe in Christ, including the command to give up themselves for his sake and pattern their lives after his life. As St. Paul writes, "For the love of Christ urges us on, because we are convinced that one has died for all; therefore all have died. And he died for all, so that those who live might live no longer for themselves, but for him who died and was raised for them" (2 Cor 5:14-15). Elsewhere the call is intensified: "be imitators of God, as beloved children, and live in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God" (Gal 5:1). Of course, Jesus himself spoke freely of the cost of discipleship, as

[20] Justification "implies what God *does for us* through his Son" ("Justification by Faith," Sermon 5 [1746], II.1, in *Works*, 1:187).

in his demanding words, “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will save it” (Luke 9:23-24). The point is simple to grasp but difficult to embody: followers of Christ should be willing to give of themselves for others, in the name of Jesus Christ. If more Christians lived out that commitment on a daily basis, the world would be a more just place.

For these and other reasons, a religiously informed public philosophy has the potential to energize and advance contemporary discussions about justice and the common good. Moral and religious arguments can do so because they stress that justice is more than just a noble ideal; it is an obligation and essential principle toward which to strive. Moreover, these arguments reinforce the point that the common good is a natural consequence of just relationships and a justly ordered world. The love of Christ decisively shows that God’s commitment to justice takes the form of self-giving mercy. If God was willing to do so much for the justice of God and the common good, then with God’s help we can—and must—give of ourselves in pursuit of just relationships, a just world, and the good of others.

Flourishing

Along with dignity and justice, flourishing is a third topic that has generated considerable interest and discussion in recent public life. The two previous examples emerged from the domains of philosophy and politics, and either field could suitably proffer a representative study on flourishing. To broaden the selection of sources, however, we turn to another field, albeit a related one, psychology. In *Flourish: A Visionary New Understanding of Happiness and Well-Being*, Martin E.P. Seligman, the Zellerbach Family Professor of Psychology at the University of

Pennsylvania, indicates that flourishing is very much also of interest to psychologists just as it is to the wider public.[21] Seligman is a leader in the field of positive psychology, a branch of psychology that focuses on positive human functioning and seeks to achieve "a scientific understanding and effective interventions to build thriving individuals, families, and communities."[22] Positive psychology is primarily concerned with using psychological theory and techniques to understand and achieve emotionally fulfilling aspects of human behavior.

Flourish presents Seligman's new concept of what well-being is, a construct measured by positive emotion (which he calls "the pleasant life"[23]), engagement (depth of encounter through life experience, such as the feeling of losing self-consciousness or complete absorption in a task[24]), meaning ("belonging to and serving something that you believe is bigger than the self"[25]), relationships (the salubrious effects of friendship and constructive social interaction[26]), and achievement ("accomplishment for the sake of accomplishment, in its extended form" of potential positive social consequences).[27] Seligman then spends the second half of the book outlining a series of ways for individual and communal flourishing with attention to character, intelligence, psychological fitness, growth, optimism, and the effect of politics and economics on well-being.[28] His conclusions are, not surprisingly for a positive psychologist, remarkably optimistic about the potential for human flourishing, and his work represents the notably

---

[21] Martin E.P. Seligman, *Flourish: A Visionary New Understanding of Happiness and Well-Being* (New York, N.Y.: Atria Paperback, 2011).
[22] Martin E.P. Seligman and Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, "Positive Psychology: An Introduction," *American Psychologist* 55/1 (2000): 5–14.
[23] *Flourish*, p. 16.
[24] Ibid.
[25] Ibid., p. 17.
[26] Ibid., 20.
[27] Ibid., p. 19.
[28] Ibid., chapters 6-10.

widespread interest among trained professionals and lay people alike about what makes life worth living.

As with dignity and justice, flourishing itself can be envisaged anew, with all its potential impact for individuals, communities, and society as a whole. If, as Seligman suggests, well-being is based on such measurable factors as engagement, relationships, and meaning, then there is definite common ground between this view of well-being and what Christians know to be the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit, healing relationships, bringing new life and purpose, giving us strength for the journey, and promoting through holiness of heart and life the knowledge and love of God and love for our neighbor. That work, historically a hallmark of how Methodists have approached the Gospel, provides a formative vantage point from which to consider flourishing. As Wesley explains,

> I believe the infinite and eternal Spirit of God, equal with the Father and the Son, to be not only perfectly holy in himself, but the immediate cause of all holiness in us: enlightening our understandings, rectifying our wills and affections, renewing our natures, uniting our persons to Christ, assuring us of the adoption of sons, leading us in our actions, purifying and sanctifying our souls and bodies to a full and eternal enjoyment of God.[29]

Sanctification entails, as Wesley says elsewhere, God's work "*in us*" by the Holy Spirit.[30] The presence and power of the Holy Spirit in the hearts and lives of Christians yields a specific kind of flourishing, namely, ever-greater holiness and happiness in God.

In the face of criticism, Wesley tirelessly maintained that entire sanctification or Christian perfection was not only a realistic possibility under grace but also a gift for which every Christian should earnestly pray and seek to receive from God in faith. He addressed

---

[29] Wesley, *Letter to a Roman Catholic*, in *The Works of John Wesley*, edited by Thomas Jackson (London: Wesleyan Conference Office, 1872; reprint, Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1958-1959), 10:82.
[30] Sanctification implies "what God *works in us* by his Spirit" ("Justification by Faith," II.1, in *Works*, 1:187).

various misunderstandings of and objections to this teaching, most notably in the tract *A Plain Account of Christian Perfection as Believed and Taught by the Reverend Mr. John Wesley, From the Year 1725, to the Year 1777*.[31] In short, Wesley considered the doctrine of Christian perfection so central to Methodist teaching that he referred to it as the grand *depositum* of Methodism to the world.[32] Ironically, the doctrine once thought uniquely crucial to Methodist identity has to a great extent fallen into obscurity among Wesley's heirs.[33] Yet the theological core of that teaching has been affirmed, at least on paper, in the doctrinal sources of Wesleyan and Methodist church traditions. For example, the article "Of Sanctification" from the Methodist Protestant *Discipline* states:

> Sanctification is that renewal of our fallen nature by the Holy Ghost, received through faith in Jesus Christ, whose blood of atonement cleanseth from all sin; whereby we are not only delivered from the guilt of sin, but are washed from its pollution, saved from its power, and are enabled, through grace, to love God with all our hearts and to walk in his holy commandments blameless.[34]

In *The Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church*, Article XI of the Confession of Faith of the Evangelical United Brethren Church describes both sanctification and Christian perfection:

> We believe sanctification is the work of God's grace through the Word and the Spirit, by which those who have been born again are cleansed from sin in their thoughts, words and acts, and are enabled to live

---

[31] *A Plain Account of Christian Perfection as Believed and Taught by the Reverend Mr. John Wesley, From the Year 1725, to the Year 1777* (Bristol, 1777; reprint edition, London: Epworth Press, 1952).

[32] "This doctrine is the grand depositum which God has lodged with the people called Methodists; and for the sake of propagating this chiefly He appeared to have raised us up" (To Robert Carr Brackenbury, September 15, 1790, in *The Letters of the Rev. John Wesley, M. A.*, edited by John Telford [London: Epworth Press, 1931], 8:238).

[33] Robert E. Chiles traces this shift in the American context in *Theological Transition in American Methodism, 1790-1935* (Nashville, Tenn.: Abingdon Press, 1965).

[34] *The Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church—2012* (Nashville, Tenn.: The United Methodist Publishing House, 2012), par. 104, p. 70. This article was placed in the *Discipline* by the Uniting Conference of 1939 (which united The Methodist Protestant Church, The Methodist Episcopal Church, and The Methodist Episcopal Church, South, under the name The Methodist Church), but it was not one of the Articles of Religion voted on by the three churches.

> in accordance with God's will, and to strive for holiness without which no one will see the Lord.
>
> Entire sanctification is a state of perfect love, righteousness and true holiness which every regenerate believer may obtain by being delivered from the power of sin, by loving God with all the heart, soul, mind and strength, and by loving one's neighbor as one's self. Through faith in Jesus Christ this gracious gift may be received in this life both gradually and instantaneously, and should be sought earnestly by every child of God.
>
> We believe this experience does not deliver us from the infirmities, ignorance, and mistakes common to man, nor from the possibilities of further sin. The Christian must continue to guard against spiritual pride and seek to gain victory over every temptation to sin. He must respond wholly to the will of God so that sin will lose its power over him; and the world, the flesh, and the devil are put under his feet. Thus he rules over these enemies with watchfulness through the power of the Holy Spirit.[35]

Because this way of life, made possible by God's grace, involves deliverance from the power of sin and evil and, positively, love of God and neighbor, it is flourishing of an exceptional sort. Rooted in God's magnanimous, sacrificial love, this flourishing is life-giving in two remarkable senses: it is life-giving both for those who walk this way of salvation and for those within the sphere of influence of such persons. A journey into the heart of God, sanctification has profound implications socially as well as individually; through their compassionate and selfless acts, those on this journey enrich the lives of others by extending to them active benevolence born out of gratitude to the one Christians know as the ultimate source of happiness and well-being, the triune God.[36] The human understanding and experience of flourishing can therefore be enhanced in relationship to God, as that relationship highlights not only the extent of flourishing that is possible but also the societal benefits of happiness in God.

---

[35] *Book of Discipline*, par. 104, p. 73.

[36] In Wesley's words, just as "there is one God, so there is one religion and one happiness" ("The Unity of the Divine Being," Sermon 120 [1789], §22, in *Works*, 4:70). That one religion and one happiness is, "in two words, gratitude and benevolence; gratitude to our Creator and supreme Benefactor, and benevolence to our fellow creatures" (Ibid., §16, in *Works*, 4:66-67).

Lives shaped by the way of salvation can promote dignity, justice, and flourishing in extraordinary ways. Such formation leads us to recognize the fundamental gift of our own dignity as well as that of others. It immerses us in the justice of God revealed supremely in Christ's self-sacrifice to set the world aright and calls us to imitate Christ in giving of ourselves for the good of others, not simply as a fitting goal for those so inclined but as an imperative for us all. Finally, our sharing in God's life through the *via salutis* ushers us into a life of flourishing in the love of God and neighbor and invites us to experience and then reflect that life and love in ever-deepening dimensions.

For Christians from all ecclesial traditions, dignity equates to a gift, justice to an imperative, and flourishing to an invitation, with each freely extended to all people, whether Christian or not. Given the holistic scope of the approach to the Gospel taken by the Wesley brothers and early Methodists, Christians from Wesleyan and Methodist churches should highlight these interests and pursue them with particular vigor and zeal. A vibrant, flourishing life occurs when we live in justly ordered relationships with God and with others by recognizing and celebrating our own God-given dignity and that of others. Dignity, justice, and flourishing so conceived reveal the essence of human worth and potential over against the dominant cultural measures of value and meaning such as self-gratification, status, wealth, influence, and possessions. Toward that end, faithful Christians, including Christians from the Methodist and Wesleyan family, can make profound, indispensible contributions to democratic, pluralistic societies.

Trinitarian Depth

In addition to the theological parallels and potential noted already, the concepts of dignity, justice, and flourishing, when considered collectively, reflect a certain trinitarian depth suggestive of their origin in God. This claim constitutes a clearly theological argument at this stage, so it is not something that everyone in the public square will understand or accept. Yet its importance for Christians and for the life of the church does not depend upon universal understanding or acceptance.

The doctrine of the Trinity, as the distinctively Christian teaching about God, states that God's actions toward the world are common and undivided among the three persons of the one God. Even with this affirmation of the unity of action, and indeed substance, among the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, sometimes one person of the Trinity figures with particular prominence in any given action of God in and for the world. The doctrine of appropriations sheds light on the connection between dignity, justice, and flourishing on the one hand and the doctrine of the Trinity on the other.

Dignity derives from our existence as human beings. It pertains to the identity of a person as a human being, and thus to the gift of human life in creation. The doctrine of God the Father has special significance for the Christian understanding of creation. The dignity of human beings comes as a gift from God, the source of all life, who has created all human beings, without exception, in the very image of God. While God has given human beings dominion over the world, that dominion entails a call to care for the earth in a way that represents the Father's care for the entire created order (Gen 1:26-27, Matt 6:26).

Justice involves an appropriate ordering of relationships, including fair treatment and due consequences for our actions. Here the theological correspondence is the doctrine of God the Son, the person of Jesus Christ. As Paul declares, "in Christ God was reconciling the world to

himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us" (2 Cor 5:19). Through Christ we are set right, graciously restored to a proper relationship with God and with our fellow human beings, and made heirs and sharers together in God's promise in Christ Jesus (Eph 3:6).

Flourishing, as that state of life marked by fulfillment and satisfaction, is reminiscent of the Christian teaching about sanctification, in which the Holy Spirit figures prominently. God has poured out the Holy Spirit without measure (John 3:34). The Spirit of God gives life and peace: "if Christ is in you, though the body is dead because of sin, the Spirit is life because of righteousness. If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies also through his Spirit that dwells in you" (Rom 8:10-11). While God's work, first of all, creating us in the very image of God gives us and all people inherent dignity, and God's work for us in Christ brings us back to right relationship with God, God's work in us through the Holy Spirit changes us from within. It does so by conforming us to Christ and to the abundant life that he came to give, which is a flourishing in the very fullness of love, joy, peace, and all the fruit of the Spirit (Gal 5:22-23).

The trinitarian depth of dignity, justice, and flourishing points to what, from a theological perspective, is the grounding of these concepts in the Christian doctrine of God. Historically, God's actions toward the world are said to proceed from the Father through the Son in the Spirit. The relationship among dignity, justice, and flourishing can be understood in a somewhat analogous way, as issuing from what is foundational, in this case the dignity of the human person, which is nothing anyone could earn but is simply given to us in our created status. The dignity of the human race creates the necessary conditions for justice in our personal and social lives, from which flourishing for us and others logically follows. Theologically speaking, and

now moving in reverse, human flourishing in sanctification derives from the just ordering of our relationships both with God and with others as modeled and achieved for us through the justifying work of Jesus Christ; and that justice of God, in turn, assumes the prior dignity of the human race as having been created in the image of God, an image marred by sin to be sure, but never obliterated and yet wonderfully healed and restored in Jesus Christ, who is himself the image of the invisible God (Col 1:15). Dignity, justice, and flourishing may not be, *prima facie*, distinctively theological terms, but they refer to ideas with clear theological parallels and therefore to deeply theological realities. The fact that they do so helps to substantiate their objective, universal source, standard, and goal, namely God.

Ultimately, of course, dignity, justice, and flourishing are not abstract, theoretical, disembodied concepts, but rather virtues to be lived out and shown to the world. The church should lead the way, in word and deed, in service to the wider world—to all our neighbors, who are our sisters and brothers in the human family. The church should do so precisely by promoting true dignity, justice, and flourishing as found in the love that gives life, that is, in God's love so richly displayed in the reconciling, heart-renewing, world-transforming life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

Conclusion: Methodism and the Enrichment of Public Discourse and Life

How then can Methodism serve to enrich public discourse and life, particularly regarding the understanding and practice of dignity, justice, and flourishing within the human family? The broader question is this: How should we, as Christians in the Methodist and Wesleyan global family, seek to interact with the world around us, in both the language that we use and the lives that we live? For decades, reflective of a crucial shift from Methodist to mainline, The United

Methodist Church (of which I am a lifelong member) has stressed the importance of translating theological claims and commitments into generic, sometimes even atheological, language more readily intelligible to other churches and the wider world. That approach encourages thought and action aimed at social and political relevance, but the problem is that the theological content tends to get lost in translation, along with any particular ecclesial identity and mission.[37]

A better strategy, I believe, is for Christians in Methodist and Wesleyan traditions to seek, in humility and yet deep faith and conviction, a more distinctively Wesleyan witness in engaging the world. In that work, finding common ground with other groups in the wider public discourse remains critical. However, the purpose of Methodism as boldly described at the first

---

[37] In *The Recovery of a Contagious Methodist Movement* (Nashville, Tenn.: Abingdon Press, 2011), George Hunter argues that the shift from Methodist to mainline was no accident. He writes:

> At one point in history, following the 1968 merger of The Methodist Church and The Evangelical United Brethren Church that became The United Methodist Church, Methodism was substantially, and quietly, steered toward a generic mainline destination. What I am about to report was never prominent in the public discussions before, or after, the merger. In those years, I was on the staff at the Board of Evangelism, and then on the Perkins faculty, and then on the staff of the Board of Discipleship. In those years, some senior denominational executives were informing staff people that what the merger was really about was becoming a "New Church." These leaders were good people who meant well; like leader-groups in most generations, they convinced themselves that they knew best. So becoming a New Church would involve one major shift: our church would become much less Methodist and much more mainline - like the Presbyterians, Lutherans, Episcopalians, and so on.
>
> We had already drifted in that direction; now we were being navigated in that direction. Ironically, much of Methodism's theological academy was becoming *more* Methodist; scholars like Albert Outler, William R. Cannon, and Frank Baker produced the greatest generation of Wesleyan scholarship. But a constellation of denominational executives agreed that they knew better than the early Methodists and their own scholars. The accelerated shift from a Methodist to a mainline identity did not just happen. We were pushed.
>
> Indeed, in those years, the 1970s and 1980s, we managed to become more mainline than our partners. Today, Lutherans are more consciously and recognizably Lutheran, Presbyterians-Presbyterian, and Episcopalians-Anglican, than United Methodists are consciously and recognizably Methodist. We gave up much more than our partners did in the hope that they would welcome us into the mainline club of denominations. (9-10)

Therefore, according to Hunter, the move from Methodist to mainline in The United Methodist Church, far more than simply a natural shift, was a strategic effort carried out by church executives. Whatever the intentions driving this change, the results have proven, by almost any measure, woefully unfruitful at best and downright disastrous at worst. Affirming the insights of Scott Kisker in *Mainline or Methodist? Rediscovering Our Evangelistic Mission* (Nashville, Tenn.: Discipleship Resources, 2008), Hunter maintains that the shift to mainline "sucked much of the identity, vitality, and reproductive power out of our once-great movement" (10). Methodists at least of the UMC variety now have an identity crisis, particularly in America, where the UMC as a whole has yet to experience growth since it came into existence, but has seen only decline in numbers and influence instead.

Methodist Conference in London in 1744—"To reform the nation, and in particular the Church, to spread scriptural holiness over the land"[38]—calls for more than what a strategy of translating theological language into more widely recognized terminology can itself accomplish. What that audacious vision for the purpose of Methodism calls for is something that is harder and far more demanding than simply translation, yet in the end also vastly more fulfilling and fruitful: actual demonstration, pointing the world to the depth and beauty of life with God. This is our challenge and task, and it is a God-sized one, only attainable in and through the Holy Spirit.

So without retreating from the world into the safety and isolation of our own ecclesial enclaves (a caution properly issued by advocates of the translation method), Christians in Methodist and Wesleyan traditions should speak and practice, both in the church and especially in the world, our own distinctive language—that of the way of salvation, toward the goal of both personal and communal sanctification—thus giving witness to its truth and offering freely to others this gift endowed by God to our theological heritage. While we must learn a genuinely public vocabulary for public life, and the ability to be bilingual in that sense is critical, that is not our native language. Our native language is the way of salvation; the biblical grammar of creation, fall, God's prevenient and all-atoning love in Jesus Christ, repentance, justification, sanctification, and Christian perfection not only ensures our continuity with historic Methodism but also, and thereby, makes possible a faithful, vibrant Methodist witness to the Gospel today.

Of course, people outside the church may not easily understand that language or accept it as valid. It might even sound to them as utter foolishness (cf. 1 Cor 1:18-25). Yet many such people probably can, without much difficulty, appreciate the beauty of this way of life as it is actually lived out, a life of self-giving love that honors the dignity of all people, pursues justice

[38] "The 'Large' *Minutes*," §4, in *Works*, 10:845.

in public as well as personal life, and shows that, contrary to popular opinion, flourishing consists of more than mere wealth, social standing, or self-indulgence. We can love others, and love ourselves rightly, because we have first been loved by God. The way of salvation, which is our grace-enabled participation in the life of God, confounds yet even more wondrously perfects human aspirations for lives marked by dignity, justice, and flourishing. For that language, graciously beckoning to be both spoken and lived, promises the greatest possible common good through Christ's saving mediation for and presence in the world: true dignity, justice, and flourishing not only within the human family as such, but in fact in the kingdom of God.