

Social Holiness

by Captain Amy Reardon

In 1930 philosopher Bertrand Russell, critic of religion and especially Christianity, wrote an essay called *Has Religion Made Useful Contributions to Civilization?* This essay is now a chapter in the collection of his work titled *Why I Am Not a Christian*. Among his many intriguing arguments is this one: “The natural impulse of the vigorous person of decent character is to attempt to do good, but if he is deprived of all political power and of all opportunity to influence events, he will be deflected from his natural course and will decide that the important thing is good.” Early Christians had no political power, so they turned their energies inward. It became their focus to live holy lives, with, “a conception of personal holiness as something quite independent of beneficent action... Social virtue came therefore to be excluded from Christian ethics.”

Those of us who embrace the doctrine of holiness might argue that what Russell described was not holiness, but piety. True, inner virtue is part of holiness, but it is not the whole picture. At least, not as the 19th century pioneers of the Holiness movement would have defined it.

In the Spring 2004 issue of Christian History & Biography magazine, William Kostlevy wrote:

“For some critics, the term ‘holiness movement’ has conjured images of navel-gazing holy rollers too interested in getting a spiritual thrill or (at most) saving souls to care about alleviating social distress. This caricature is simply not accurate. The movement’s most enduring legacy is a nationwide network of missions to the socially and economically disadvantaged – primarily in inner-city neighborhoods.”

(Though this particular issue of the magazine is dedicated to the great holiness preacher/teacher/writer/activist Phoebe Palmer, the editors simply couldn’t stop themselves from sprinkling it with stories about the Booths -whose doctrine was heavily influenced by Palmer - and The Salvation Army.)

Real holiness *insists* upon what Russell called “social virtue”. If one follows holiness doctrine through, one will draw this conclusion. For if it makes sense that Christ can cleanse a believer from all sin not just in the next life, but in *this* life, then it makes sense that Christ wishes to make his Kingdom come – on earth (in this life), as it is in heaven. Just as he wants to purge each heart of its evil, he wants to purge society of collective evil and injustice. The Christian who truly believes in holiness believes in bringing about social justice and works toward that end. As Kostlevy wrote, “Holiness leaders... taught that sanctification does not stop in the individual heart, but must overflow into ‘social holiness’.”

The Hebrew word for holiness (qodesh) actually means separateness – that is to say, separated from this world and consecrated to God. We often use the word “righteousness” hand-in-hand with the word holiness, or even as a synonym for it.

Interestingly, the Hebrew word that English Bibles translates as “righteousness” – *tsedeq* – is inextricably linked with the concept of justice. We have come to think of righteousness as virtuous personal conduct, but it is so much more. Those who are righteous, as it is biblically defined, are those who seek justice. They are the people who demonstrate social holiness.

But what about Russell’s criticism? Did he concoct such a view out of thin air? Though he was an atheist, it must be noted that Russell’s writings were even-handed. His observation that Christians were impotent within society must have been the result of intentional observation. To some extent, he must have been looking in the wrong places. Christian missions were in full swing and impacting their environs within Russell’s lifetime. Already The Salvation Army had lifted its first generation of degenerates from the streets and turned many into decent citizens. But perhaps there weren’t enough Christians on the streets. Perhaps their light was still only a flickering candle in a vast darkness.

With the passing of time, that flickering candle was in danger of being extinguished. For most of the second half of the twentieth century evangelical churches taught parishioners to concentrate on their “personal relationship with Jesus Christ”. That relationship was, and is, crucial. But it was stressed so strongly that Christians began to forget their place as God’s agents in this world. In this century, I believe we are adding a larger vision to our previous scope. We are recognizing that God expects our relationship with him to be radiated outward. He expects Christians to change this planet. It’s really a return to what the late 19th century holiness leaders already taught and practiced. It is the synchronization of holiness with righteousness.

I admit to being a little intimidated at the thought of actually changing society. But there is something thrilling about it, too. Imagine not only seeing souls saved. Imagine not just paying the electric bill of a family that has come upon hard times. Imagine a complete redemption – changing our world. Christ is capable of it, and with his empowerment, we can live righteous lives that actually assist in bringing about justice.