

“The Extreme Center”

A Wesleyan Way of Salvation

An excerpt from [Pastor Jon's blog](#)
[Light of the Canyon UMC](#)

There has been a lot of talk lately about the theological divisions within the American church. It seems that the popular conception of “Christian” is of a right wing zealot with all of the compassion of Attila the Hun! These zealots focus almost exclusively on personal holiness; on living without sin. Sometimes, unfortunately, they act as if grace does not exist. A problem with zealots is that they have no reluctance judging others. In their minds, the problems of America are the result of the sin of "those people," as if standing in judgment of others wasn't a sin.

Then, on other side of the spectrum from the zealots are “Christians” that interpret the gospel almost exclusively through the lens of social justice. To them, it is not enough to preach and practice compassion for all of God's children, they must remake the social order to reflect someone's (their) view of what is just. The problem here is that it is never clear who decides what is just, or what is loving. The good news of Jesus Christ, in this view, becomes relegated to being little more than a call for political action committees.

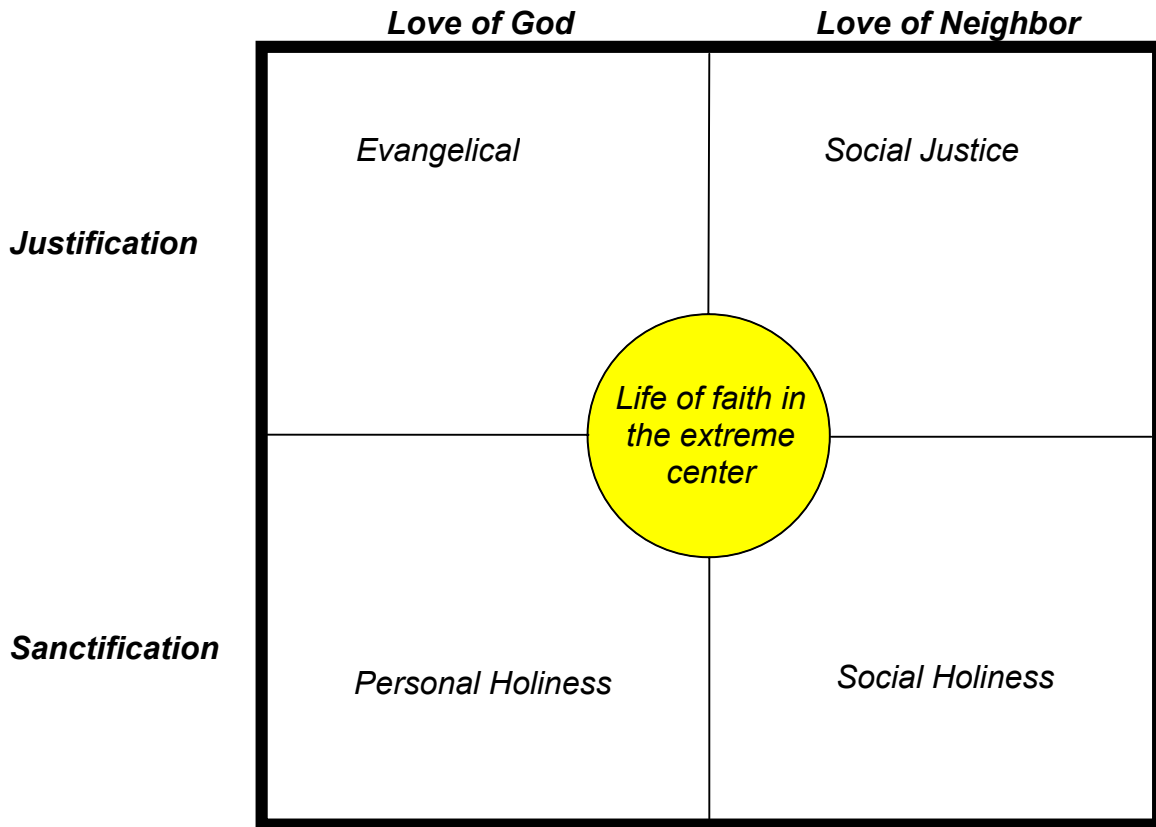
And on both sides of the spectrum, we experience intolerance and fear. That's not good.

Within the context of Protestant Christianity, in terms of the experience of the church, it seems that there are very few options. One can attend either a mainline church (that reflects tendencies either on the left or the right). The worship and communal experience in many of these churches is often times steeped in tradition. The experience relates to the cerebral response to God. On the other side of this are the mega-churches. They have much more freedom and creativity in worship and in the life of the congregation. These churches tend to lean to the right theologically, although that is not true in all cases.

So, where does this leave the person that seeks to live a life of faith, explore the questions of faith, relishes the mystery of faith, but seeks a deeper more visceral expression of their faith experience? I am happy that there is a growing movement that seeks "a third way" to living out the gospel. At Light of the Canyon United Methodist Church, we call this living in the “*extreme center*”.

I did not make up the term “*extreme center*”. I first heard it from United Methodist bishop Scott Jones. Preacher and author Brian McClaren has also used this term in describing his approach to faith. At Light of the Canyon United Methodist Church, *we reject the idea that theology and Christian practice are on a continuum from left to right*; that we have to place ourselves somewhere on that line. Instead, we live in the extreme center, a place that embraces aspects of the left and right, as well as creatively approaching the living out of our faith.

The extreme center that we claim rejects the continuum model because it limits Christian faith to doctrinal positions. Instead, we believe that the focus of our life should be on growing in Christ, on sanctification, on “going onto perfection”. Instead of a single continuum, this is more aptly described by a square with four quadrants.



The two quadrants labeled *Evangelical* and *Personal Holiness* represent what is traditionally considered the practice of **Evangelical Christianity**. The focus here is on the *transformation of the individual*.

The other quadrants labeled *Social Holiness* and *Social Justice* represent what is traditionally considered **Social Justice Christianity**. The focus here is on the *transformation of the social order*.

The circle in the middle of the square around the place where the four sections intersect, is the *extreme center*.

Life in the *extreme center* is not a faith that limits God to one box. It is a faith that sees God in all different aspects of faith. In fact, the extreme center views any faith that does not embrace all four aspects of faith as incomplete. *The extreme center is an approach to faith that is more concerned with how we live rather than how we think.*

In the Methodist tradition, we have already developed the tools to practice this kind of faith. The means of grace that John Wesley taught (see the sermons section on the LOTC web site for more details on the means of grace) and the quadrilateral (scripture, tradition, reason and experience) represent perfect tools for living life in the extreme center. It is another way to practice our faith. It is a way for people that have been frustrated by either the staleness of the “old” way of doing church or by the dogma of the “new” way. This is a different way of being the church. This is living in the extreme center. God bless.

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