

"The 'social gospel' of the Methodist tradition"

By [Steve Thorngate](#)

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National Public Radio just ran a pair of features on the flavors of Christianity represented by the presidential and vice presidential nominees. An editor's note affixed to both stories summarizes the theme: "Both major presidential candidates this year are Protestants... Beyond that, their faith profiles are very different."

Donald Trump is an admirer and former parishioner of Norman Vincent Peale's, the *Power of Positive Thinking* guy. [NPR reporter Tom Gjelten connects](#) Trump's history with Peale to his current preference for prosperity preachers. As for Hillary Clinton, [Gjelten aligns her with what he calls "the 'social gospel' of the Methodist tradition,"](#) which he defines basically as love of neighbor put into practice.

A classic problem of understanding American Protestantism is overstating the role of denominations. It would have been a rookie mistake to suggest that Peale somehow represents something essential about the Reformed Church in America, and Gjelten avoids this. But with Clinton he makes an odd mistake, implying that the social gospel movement is or was uniquely Methodist:

Clinton identified squarely with the "social gospel" of the Methodist tradition. It is an outlook encapsulated in the Methodist credo, widely attributed to the church founder, John Wesley: "Do all the good you can, by all the means you can, in all the ways you can, in all the places you can, at all the times you can, to all the people you can, as long as ever you can."

No, it's a historical movement, ecumenical in its scope and postmillennial in its theology. It emphasizes not just doing good but making the world permanently and measurably better. It is arguably still strong in the United Methodist Church, but also in other churches. Gjelten seems to have conflated *social gospel* with the Wesleyan term *social holiness*.

You know who was a Methodist: Norman Vincent Peale. Not that he represents Methodism any more than he represents the RCA, which he affiliated with when he took the job at Marble Church in New York. But it's worth noting what Peale does have in common with both the Methodism that shaped Clinton and, for that matter, with the social gospel movement: a deep optimism about people and what they can achieve. That's in stark contrast with other major strains of American Protestantism—contra NPR's framing here, you can get a lot more different than the difference between mainline Methodism and Norman Vincent Peale.

No doubt there remains a large gap between the optimism of *The Power of Positive Thinking* and that of social holiness. For starters, one is individualistic and the other communal. And while Wesleyans talk about both social and personal holiness, the latter's aims are of course strikingly different from Peale's emphasis on personal success. Trump likes Peale but pushes his insights in a yet more self-serving direction: his optimism is not about what individuals can do but about what *one* individual can do, Trump himself. So yes, this looks pretty different from Clinton's social-justice Methodism.

But I'm struck that each offers an essentially optimistic view of change and how it happens, the power of positive *doing*. Trump believes in himself and his ability to fix things. Clinton believes in the power of progress enacted slowly but surely by people working together. Her specifically religious motivation here is nothing new. (Not even within the realm of modern Democratic political rhetoric, which [took a faith-y turn](#) a decade ago, not [last week at the convention](#).) But it's the two candidates' optimism, not their ostensible Protestantism, that's as different as can be.