

A THEOLOGY OF



The word "LOVE" is written in a large, bold, serif font. The letters are dark gray and have a slightly aged appearance. The "L" has a long horizontal stroke extending to the left. The "O" is a standard circle. The "V" is a standard V-shape. The "E" has a vertical stem on the left and a horizontal crossbar.

A THEOLOGY OF
Love

THE DYNAMIC
OF WESLEYANISM
SECOND EDITION
MILDRED BANGS
WYNKOOP



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Preface

A “four-letter word,” LOVE, is the contemporary “in” word. It is a catchword, protected from the sacrilege of criticism by a mystical and emotional ambiguity which defies the intrusion of rational inquiry. It is a magic cliché pulling for the attention of all of us caught in a technological world which has all but shut itself off from compassion. In a programmed society manned by programmed automatons the idea of love is especially appealing because people cannot, at least until genetic engineering has done its work, be totally programmed. But love is linked with ideas that react back on its traditional meaning—ideas not essential to it but which are confused with it. Its sacrosanct ambiguity makes any critical exploration into its “complex” tantamount to a rejection of love itself and its critic an apparent “enemy of the people.”

There is a companion word which vies with *love* for attention, namely, *meaning*, and, strangely, the “meaning of meaning.” Meaning has escaped us and slipped away, leaving a distressing void. Perhaps, we think, love can bring back meaning. Without them, life has gone dull, and frustration has turned to virtual cynicism. So we grab for what passes for love and hope that meaning may be found hiding within it.

But *love* is a weasel word, and *meaning* is a will-o’-the-wisp. *Love* may mean anything—or nothing. It has lost its moorings and stands for “what I want”—a most deceptive concept and despotic tyrant. The Greek language has a number of words for social relationships, which English in its poverty translates into one word, (generally) *love*. And the kind of meaning which the human heart seeks is not found at the end of every one of “love’s” beckoning rainbows.

This book is about love. Being a religion book about love, the concept of love will include its religious meaning but not limit it to the religious. It will explore the many meanings which in English are

subsumed under that one word. The awareness of the contemporary cynicism regarding the religious dimension of love will be in constant attention. *Love* is a “hollow word,” drained of its promise of fulfillment by those who have betrayed it by unfulfilled promises. The Church has not demonstrated, says the world, the kind of love it professes. Perhaps so. But this is no new problem, unfortunately.

Eighteenth-century England was a vest-pocket edition of today’s cynical world. It helped to imprison love in “low” forms unredeemed by love’s “higher” relationships. It glorified a cruel, vulgar, sodden life-style reaching from the palace down to the lowest level of society. In it, human life had little value and no meaning. It is significant that in that age of unrestrained permissiveness—called love—John Wesley, the modern “Apostle of Love,” should have appeared. He proclaimed holiness, the highest possible spiritual value, in terms of love, in the face of love’s lowest possible connotation.

Wesley equated holiness with love. But the antidote of holy love, in counteracting its diseased namesake, displayed a morally healing power, which wooed us to the Source of Wesley’s concepts, the Bible. Is there a way of conceiving of love which will rescue it from its moral exile and make it a useful guide in recovering “holiness” from its ivory-tower irrelevance? Strangely, this is the thing that the New Testament writers did with the one word which has been made to bear the meaning of holiness. It is the word *agape*, which is not in the common category of social love at all but has been tailored to express a concept which includes the ultimate in meaning and which “sanctifies” all love without downgrading it or rejecting it. *Agape* has suffered almost irreparable damage by translating it “love,” without the catharsis of careful scholarship.

We are indebted to two modern expositions of love. Both are definitive in the field though standing at opposite poles from each other “presuppositionally.” Anders Nygren, in *Agape and Eros*, makes the clear and proper distinction between *agape* and human social love, which he equates with *eros* (not, incidentally, a biblical, and hence not quite a proper biblical antithesis). Nygren’s profound insight, however, makes it impossible to fail in serious scholarship to take the contrast between *agape* and *eros* into consideration. Whether or not “love” is used to refer to *agape*, the qualitative difference must always be made a point of clarity.

The more recent work, *The Spirit and Forms of Love*, by Daniel Day Williams, contributes what I believe to be a more biblical approach to agape. Nygren, in Williams' mind, has set *agape* and *eros* in irreconcilable opposition. Never the twain meet. From a very different metaphysical presupposition Williams finds it possible and more biblical to relate *agape* and *eros*, or to unite them, without losing the specific character of either. "Process Theology" makes a much-needed correction to the dualisms of a former day. It is my considered opinion that, though the metaphysical foundation of process thought is not the only solution to theological problems, its insights are inescapable in a biblical theology. The *dynamic* emphasis in relation to God, man, love, grace, nature, and salvation and interpersonal relations is crucial to the Christian faith.

John Wesley's understanding of love can be supported only by an underlying "metaphysic" which is dynamic in nature. His theological position was not, however, derived from a philosophical point of view. Rather, his religious and biblical insights lead to a metaphysic which, it is believed, commends itself to modern man's new understanding of nature and furnishes a ground for the Christian meaning of life, which all men seek, whether or not they know what it is they seek.

This study is undertaken with the above considerations in mind. The attempted "creative" approach is rooted deeply in more experience of contact with scholarly minds than can be itemized here. The immediate "inspiration" is John Wesley, and the consuming interest is in a biblical theology. Wesley always leads to the Bible. Wesley's 14-volume *Works* furnishes the sources of his ideas. The simplest documentation possible has been utilized. The biblical studies are *preliminary* to a proper scholarship rather than scholarship itself. The provincialisms of an older biblicism have obscured the most obvious meanings of the biblical passages. It is this obscurantism that we have tried to correct.

Of the many to whom credit is due I must gladly acknowledge the support and encouragement of my husband, who has often and consistently urged my continued work in the years of study and intellectual and spiritual anguish necessary to bring this work to birth. Without that backing no achievement could possibly have been forthcoming.

—M. B. W.

CONCERNING REFERENCES TO WESLEY'S WRITINGS

Because of the large number of quotations from John Wesley's own writings throughout this volume, a code system has been devised to identify each in lieu of otherwise voluminous footnoting. There are four major sources of these quotations, which are listed below along with the code designation:

The Works of the Rev. John Wesley (Kansas City: Nazarene Publishing House, n.d.; and Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1958, concurrent editions), 14 vols. Code: *Works*.

Wesley's Standard Sermons, edited by Edward H. Sugden (London: The Epworth Press, 1921), 2 vols. Code: *Sermons*.

The Letters of the Rev. John Wesley, edited by John Telford (London: The Epworth Press, 1931), 8 vols. Code: *Letters*.

Explanatory Notes upon the New Testament (New York: Eaton and Mains, n.d.). Code: *Notes*.



LOVE takes the Harshness out of Holiness.
Love takes the Incredibility out of Perfection.
Love takes the Antinomianism out of Faith.
Love takes the Moralism out of Obedience.
Love takes the Gnosticism out of Cleansing.
Love takes the Abstraction out of Truth.

Love puts the Personal into Truth.
Love puts the Ethical into Holiness.
Love puts Process into Life.
Love puts Urgency into Crisis.
Love puts Seriousness into Sin.
Love puts Fellowship into Perfection.

—M. B. W.

[Love] is the end of every commandment of God. It is the *Point* aimed at by the whole and every part of the Christian institution. The foundation is faith, purifying the heart; the end Love, preserving a good conscience. (*Works*, XI, 416)

+ + +

On January 1, 1733, I preached . . . on “the Circumcision of the Heart,” an account of which I gave in these words: “It is that habitual disposition of soul which, in sacred writings, is termed holiness, and which directly implies, the being cleansed from sin, . . . the being so ‘renewed in the image of our mind,’ as to be ‘perfect as our Father in heaven is perfect.’” [See *Works*, V, 203.]

In the same sermon I observed, “Love is the fulfilling of the law, the end of the commandment.” It is not only “the first and great commandment,” but all the commandments in one. . . . The royal law of heaven and earth is this, “Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and mind and strength.” . . .

I concluded in these words: “Here is the sum of the perfect law, the circumcision of the heart.” . . .

It may be observed, this sermon was composed the first of all my writings which have been published. This was the view of religion I had then, which even then I scrupled not to term *perfection*. This is the view I have of it now, without any material addition or diminution.” (*Works*, XI, 367-68)

+ + +

This Religion we long to see established in the world, a religion of love, and joy, and peace, having its seat in the inmost soul, but ever showing itself by its fruits, continually springing forth, not only in all innocence (for love worketh no ill to his neighbor), but likewise in every beneficence, spreading virtue and happiness all around it. (John Wesley, *An Earnest Appeal to Men of Reason and Religion*, London: Wesleyan Conference Office, n.d., 14th edition, 4)

CHAPTER I

The Clue

The question which occasions the writing of this book is, simply, Is there a principle of interpretation—a hermeneutic—which can explain Christian doctrine and Christian life in the same system without either one undercutting the integrity of the other? That is, Can theology and real human existence meet meaningfully? Of course, this is not a simple question. It breaks out into an explosion of questions even as one looks at it. And this is good.

The study of this matter started with the plethora of intellectual questions and problems raised by the apparent ambiguity between theory and life in my own mind and in the minds of others. The painfully slow process of honestly tracking down every problem to its source has been exciting and rewarding.

Many problems are self-created; that is, questions are posed which arise either from a faulty concept of the nature of reality or by attempting to impose a rigid concept of reality upon the very dynamic thing human personality really is. Categorizing such questions is not as difficult as correcting their matrix of thought because the unsuspected roots of the questions are often carefully protected by emotional and irrational fears.

A never-to-be-forgotten philosophy course in the university introduced me to the “never-never land” of hidden and undreamed-of, but discoverable, basic presuppositions which account for the way we think and the conclusions we are willing to entertain as truth. The greater surprise to me was the assertion that not everyone built his thinking on the same “self-evident” truths. I was the last one to suspect the presence of such important biases, and certainly the most naive about what they might be, once I began to search for them. It was a profitable, if shocking, enterprise. A search for and the discovery of the controlling theory of criticism of any area of human thought and

difference of opinion and position opens the way to a deeper understanding than I ever dreamed was possible. It became to me one of the keys to the unlocking of problems heretofore resisting every attempt at solution.

This book is the result of trying to determine why our theological and religious problems are problems. There are ways of thinking which underlie many questions which are impossible to answer the way they are asked because they are born in categorical errors and/or uncriticized presuppositions antithetical to rationality and the Christian faith. These need exposure if not correction.

It is this author's considered opinion that John Wesley has contributed a sound and usable approach to theology which is worthy of consideration in the solutions of the problems relating to the theology/life syndrome. His "hermeneutic" was "love to God and man." This theme runs throughout his works. At least, when each doctrine of the Christian faith is identified and defined by him, the basic meaning invariably comes out "love." Wesley's thought is like a great rotunda with archway entrances all around it. No matter which one is entered, it always leads to the central Hall of Love, where, looking upward toward the dome one gazes into the endless, inviting sky. There is no ceiling to love. The return flow of love back through each doctrine in preaching and life serves to link every doctrine together into one dynamic architectonic and to show the theological stature and integrity of John Wesley.

This "Rotunda Theology," circular in form rather than the "Stair-step" approach, creates a problem for the theological analysis of Wesley. Theology should have a systematic form. Each element should be clearly distinguished from every other element or doctrine. Each should follow logically from the one before it and lead comfortably into the one ahead. But in Wesley such neatness is impossible to capture because it is not there. Wesley's doctrines cannot be so sharply separated from each other and from the whole thing that love is. They are not "abstract." This "problem" will become obvious in this study, where an inevitable duplication of theme and quotation will often become apparent. In almost every Wesley passage long enough to complete the point being made (and it is unfair to do less) almost every major doctrine is implicated. The theological terms are interlinked so tightly that to touch any one is to touch them all. Almost any significant passage could illustrate almost any central doctrine.

Let it not be imagined, however, that Wesley's emphasis on love cancels out definition. No Christian doctrine is neutralized by love, nor its sharp line of identity feathered off by it. Any concept of love which tended to erode away rational integrity had short shrift in Wesley's hand. Christian doctrines *did* "come alive" in human experience, but that is a far cry from the dissolution of doctrine in a mystical fog.

Nor did love, for Wesley, cancel out controversy, or drain off creative tensions in human social relations, whether religious, home, church, or any other. Love was not a soft, permissive cover-up of human personality, as explosive as it might be. Love, or holiness as he interpreted it, was not the end of wholesome, even intense, human reactions but rather the disciplining of them. Christian love creates an atmosphere in which all the creative conflicts may not only exist but also be matured and fully utilized without tearing apart the fabric of Christian unity.

Wesley's "love" would belong to the same kind of thing that God's love is, because that is where Wesley got the idea. It creates freedom and achievement. It "takes on" anything that would destroy it. It has poise in, and thrives on, the wholesome give-and-take of persons in relationship. The theological solution which our study seeks, therefore, will not be the solution which is designed to end all thinking and difference of opinion and debate but to encourage a lively "dialogue" which will serve to strengthen us where we may be weak and to lead the way out of some of the confusions that inhibit effective Christian service.

John Wesley, specifically, has been chosen as the "catalyst" for a study of the foundations of Christian doctrine for the following reasons. First, Wesley's concept of love is a more complete catalyst than any other that I know of; that is, when both theology and life are considered together, love, as Wesley conceived it, solves more theological and religious problems than other concepts seem able to do. The second reason follows the first in that love as the central truth makes better sense out of the gospel than do some other aspects of theology. Love *is* the gospel message. Christian love, revealed by God in Christ, is the correction of man's limited, selfish, selective, perverted love. It stands against any human concept of love projected into a theory of God's nature and His way with man.

It is precisely this unlimited, impartial, indestructible love that needed to be "revealed" because the best in human love has been limited. The very nature of sin is love's perversion, which makes the self

the object of its own dedication. Could the dogma of particular election as understood by some theological traditions be the projection of faulty human love into the very nature of God? The gospel was not born in human philosophy but in God's heart revealed in Christ. This Wesley declared.

A third reason is the emphasis on the profoundly moral and personal and spiritual relationship between God and man which the concept of love supports. This is in contrast to any merely legal, mechanical, automatic, or mathematical "thing-manipulation" which so easily becomes a substitute for the personal and spiritual realities of the gospel.

A fourth reason is Wesley's wholesome freedom from provincialism in theology. Not all of his followers have been so discreet. A narrow exclusivism in the Church is Gnostic in spirit and derives from very ancient roots. Theological and religious provincialism must always be suspect. James Stewart said in an article in the *Scottish Journal of Theology*, "The trouble with heresy [re the Colossian problem], as Paul saw it, was its dreadful provincialism" ("A First Century Heresy," November 1970). Love as it is revealed in Christ stands at the opposite pole from the age-old sin—*The Sin*—the self against God and anyone who might threaten the autonomy of the self or invade its "rights." Wesley was not provincial in his concept of the gospel or his understanding of it. Love, to him, was the divine solution to the problem of divisiveness.

Wesley was a "man of one Book," as he characterizes himself, and he rested his faith on it. What could not be clearly spelled out in the Word of God was not binding on him. As this is so, Wesleyanism is, or should be, a biblical theology. In keeping with this ideal there will be found in this study several rather lengthy biblical studies. The choice of which of the several doctrines surveyed in this book was to be studied biblically was made on the basis of the nature of the control question. Wherever the greatest problems are raised in the tension between doctrine and life, the deepest probe was made.

In these cases all even remotely relevant references to the specific words under examination are recorded in order to avoid the suspicion that any arbitrary selection of passages was made in order to make a point. Conclusions must be made in the light of the whole picture. Biblical theology is rooted in the Bible as a whole, not in selected portions of it. These studies are not heavy, scholarly studies but obvious contextual observations often missed in casual proof-text compilations.

Without this foundation biblical theology cannot even begin. True and careful scholarship, it is believed, will not prove to be antithetical to what is concluded in these studies.

John Wesley was a theologian, as we hope to show. He worked out from a “system” which in his mind was not materially different from traditional Christian doctrine. He added a spiritual dimension which put theology into a new framework—personal relationship and experience. This “addition” threw the balance of doctrines into a different configuration but did not actually alter the system. His entire ministry was an explication of the altered configuration. Love, the essence of the new perspective, served as a unifying factor in theology and a humanizing application to life. The structure of theology was, under Wesley’s hand, made to fit human possibilities. This does not destroy theology but it does ask penetrating questions of it.

At the heart of Wesley’s contribution was the reinstatement of sanctification into theology as a viable element, clearly distinguished from justification but integral to it. Luther corrected the Catholic confusion of the two as it put sanctification prior to justification (which was then to be achieved by works), by declaring that justification was by faith, not works. But Luther lost the meaning of sanctification in this correction by confusing *it* with works. The faith by which justification became a reality was limited by his concern to keep faith from any suspicion of human merit.

Wesley saw that justification and sanctification were two aspects of one truth, not separated by time or experience but in relationships. Everything he saw sanctification to be by way of dynamic vitality was rooted in the work of Christ (the atonement) which justified—reconciled—all men potentially to God. The appropriation of God’s grace of forgiveness by each individual—by faith—was the beginning of sanctification. He presupposed justification in every subsequent “stage in the way.”

Justification, then, is preventient grace guarded from universalism, not by God’s selective decree (which was to Wesley a travesty of God’s universal love), but “by faith,” which grace makes *possible* to all men, but *not inevitable*.

It would be a mistake to suppose that Wesley considered justification and sanctification as merely mathematical values distinct only in quantitative measure—first one is justified and later he may add sanctification. By declaring that sanctification, as well as justification, is by faith, a concept of faith is proposed that goes beyond Luther. One

does not believe *for justification* and then, later, believe *for sanctification*, but he begins to trust *in Christ* (a personal relationship), by which he appropriates God's grace and begins the life of holiness. His new relationship to God rests in justification and issues in the newness of life which faith initiates. In this new life there are crucial crisis points integral to moral experience. Only a clear and full and adequate concept of justification can support a biblical concept of sanctification. This book begins at this point and proceeds on the basis of this assertion.