

JOSEPH DONGELL

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*ONLY HOLY LOVE*



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# **SEEDBED SHORTS**

*Kingdom Treasure for Your Reading Pleasure*

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# Only Holy Love

I was born and raised deep within the first wave I want to identify, Wesleyan Holiness Movement in North America. My childhood memories are filled with camp meetings and revival meetings, along with the colorful men and women who led them. I easily remember the aroma of the oat straw layered around camp meeting altars to cushion the knees of those seeking God in fervent prayer. These are priceless memories.

We knew who we were. We believed ourselves to be the true followers of John Wesley. We knew that God was calling every Christian to experience his or her own personal Pentecost, the baptism of the Holy Spirit after the pattern of Acts 2, in a “Second Definite Work of Grace,” entered into by the total surrender of one’s heart to God. We knew that through this specific act of complete self-giving, one would be infused with the Holy Spirit, and that at that very moment two supreme graces would be ours, two blessings towering above all other gifts God could impart: namely, purity of heart and power for service. Put simply: purity and power.

I am not interested today in exploring why this wave, the American Holiness Movement, seems to have ebbed so dramatically (especially over the last two generations) after so promising a beginning. I have come to believe that its fundamental problem was not sociological, as some suggest, but theological and biblical. My informed suspicion is that by naming power and purity as its supreme priorities, it was actually aiming a bit too low, and missing out what our highest aspiration ought to be. But more on that later.

## **The Second Wave**

A second major wave (in my experience) emanating from John Wesley is quite different from the first. It is the tidal wave of scholarly researchers poring over every nook and cranny of the writings of John and his brother Charles, and straining to identify every imaginable stream of influence flowing into and out of them. This second wave appears still to be rising, as evidenced by the mighty surge of books, articles and journals, specialized libraries and collections, doctoral programs and their dissertations, conferences and scholarly societies devoted to examining all things touching the Wesley brothers.

While I am not the one to map out all of the currents in this tidal wave of research, I do want to identify two outcomes that have impressed me, again as one raised in the American Wesleyan Holiness movement. The first outcome is negative, in that a central piece of the traditional Holiness message has been called into question: namely, the practice of promoting the experience of the disciples at Pentecost, as reported in

Acts 2, as the clear and simple pattern for all believers to follow in seeking “the second, definite work of grace.”

To put it another way, it turns out that it might not be valid, from the standpoint of biblical exegesis, to claim that the outpourings of the Spirit at Jerusalem (in Acts 2), later in Caesarea (Acts 10) and then at Ephesus (Acts 19) are straightforward instances of what we have called “The Second Definite Work of Grace.” It is problematic to equate the status of those who were just about to be filled with the Spirit on these occasions (in Acts) with the status of justified-and-baptized Christians today. [We haven’t the time to explore that here.] But no clear consensus has gathered around any compelling replacement paradigm, and many Wesleyan scholars appear to have moved (unfortunately, I say) toward an exclusively progressive and incremental view of sanctification.

A second outcome, as I see it, of the scholarly rediscovery of Wesley is the search (whether right- or wrong-headed) for the core of Wesley’s theology, for the essence of Wesley’s spiritual genius. Is there some tight cluster of elements that capture the inner mechanism of his thought to form a set of “Wesleyan Distinctives?”

Having earned an MDiv at Asbury Seminary several decades ago, and having served on the faculty there now for 25 years, I have logged many hours in discussion/argument about what it means to be Wesleyan, and about what sorts of commitments would be required for one to join a confessional faculty like ours. So, what commitments of Wesley have most impressed my colleagues and me as those we should be embracing? Here’s my list of 12 such commitments:

1) Wesley was a man of one book, homo unius libri, or a Bible bigot as he called himself. Here is the touchstone of all truth by which all practice and belief is to be judged.

2) Wesley valued reason, tradition, and experience as the necessary lenses through which to interpret Scripture well;

3) Wesley was Arminian, convinced that God has sovereignly created and preserved human beings with a measure of (truly) free will, and has designed the entire process of salvation to require the real cooperation of the human will;

4) Wesley viewed the process of salvation optimistically, as the unfolding of grace in successive stages in this life, beginning with prevenient grace long before one's salvation, and extending ultimately to glorification in the next life;

5) Wesley viewed the human being as being perfectible, at least in a limited way, so that we can live holy lives free from willful disobedience to God, free from sin "properly so-called," being restorable in large measure to the image of God;

6) Wesley was convinced that all progress in the Christian life would come through the practice of the means of grace (particularly the Lord's Supper), specified patterns of behavior given to us by God in the first place, as the ordained avenues through which divine grace flows to us;

7) Wesley was convinced that all progress in the Christian life must likewise come in the company of other believers, pressing on together for God's very best in groups of accountability and intimacy;

8) Wesley was convinced that God desires every human being to be saved, and that God is constantly working (especially through the many avenues of Prevenient Grace) to draw

all persons toward salvation. Our highest and most creative energies must be devoted to being involved in God's mission of calling all humanity toward God's highest;

9) Wesley insisted that the poor and marginalized be attended to in a variety of ways, and that his followers press on with vigor to relieve their suffering in both body and soul;

10) Wesley was convinced that God desires to assure believers of their salvation through the Witness of the Spirit, relieving them of their fear of judgment and death;

11) Wesley knew that the transforming grace of God must change more than our intellect, but must also renew our wills and convert even the deep currents of our affections (our dispositions, instincts, and inclinations). And speaking of the affections, it surely matters that we actually feel the presence of God, and actually feel the joy of belonging to God's redeemed flock. Robust and rigorous singing appropriately characterizes our worship;

12) Wesley urged that true Christians of all stripes foster the common bond they share in Christ, and that while differences among believers may require certain administrative distinctions, we must always cultivate a catholic spirit, always being ready to declare, "If your heart is with me, give me your hand."

So if anyone had said to me, "Yes, these are the very convictions by which I live," I would likely have replied, "Surely you are a Wesleyan of the highest order."

Now as one trained primarily in biblical studies and not primarily in Wesley studies, I stand indebted to this second great wave of marvelous Wesley scholars who, especially

over the last 50 years, have exposed the various contours of Wesley's thought. I value and admire them as valuable guides in the matter of interpreting Wesley within his day and for our day. That is why I feel a bit vulnerable now, in venturing to talk about my own recent (re-)reading of Wesley. I could lose my nerve here, but I'm going to charge ahead!

## **The Third Wave**

About 4 years ago, owing to a series of factors I won't go into here, I decided to read through the entire 14-volume Jackson set of Wesley's works I had just received from the library of an elderly uncle. Until then I had read Wesley directly only sporadically, relying for most of what I knew about him and his thought on the writings of others. In other words, even though I felt I knew the substance of Wesley's thought fairly well, mine was a largely a secondary knowledge.

But as I made my way through the 14 volumes, through the journals, all 150 sermons, treatises of various sorts, and letters, a strange thing began to happen to me. I found myself utterly surprised, even stunned, by what I read. Of course I found ample support for the 12 elements I've already listed above. They do indeed represent much of Wesley's thought, at least as I had perceived it over the years. But what I had not anticipated was another element, something spectacularly prominent, like a church steeple reaching into the clouds and rising far above all of these other elements I've just named. I'm talking about love. That's right. Love. (Ugh!)

I had, of course, known that some Wesley scholars, like Mildred Bangs Wynkoop, David Cubie, and (more recently)

Thomas Oord, had already picked up on this theme. I was appreciative of their work, but for a variety of reasons I had not really been captured by it. I had too many suspicions about love. It seemed too shallow a matter, not sturdy enough, and already hijacked by several theological projects (over the last century and a half) that appeared to me to be heading away from vibrant orthodox Christianity. Of course I also knew that the expression “Perfect Love” was occasionally mentioned in the Wesleyan Holiness Movement as something (somehow) equivalent to Entire Sanctification, or to the Baptism of the Holy Spirit. But once mentioned in passing, talk of love seemed to play a minor role (at best) in most Holiness exposition, being quickly overwhelmed by the Movement’s intense focus on cleansing and empowerment.

But in reading through Wesley for myself, it seemed to me that love rushed through all 14 volumes like a tsunami (this is the third wave I want to talk about). My handwritten index tracking substantive references to love in each volume had taken the appearance of a dense forest. It seemed that Wesley was standing on his head and shouting to draw attention to love. I want to take the time to read for us just a few of the many dozens of passages from Wesley’s own hand praising love as the comprehensive Christian commandment, as the highest possible Christian aspiration, and as the burning center of Wesley’s whole mission:

[In the following excerpts I have taken the liberty of condensing, at times, Wesley’s wording, and occasionally supplying an antecedent identified only in the large context. I

believe I have not distorted his thought in doing so. All references are drawn from the standard “Jackson” set of Wesley’s works.]

1) From his sermon, “The Circumcision of the Heart” V: 207 [Love] is the essence, the spirit, the life of all virtue. It is not only the first and great command, but it is all the commandments in one. In [love] is [found] perfection and glory and happiness. 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 with all thy mind, and with all thy strength.’

2) From his sermon XCII “On Zeal” VII: 60-2, 67

In a Christian believer, love sits upon the throne which is erected in the inmost soul; namely, love of God and man, which fills the whole heart and reigns without a rival. ...This is that religion which our Lord has established upon earth. . . . This is the entire, connected system of Christianity: And thus the several parts of it rise one above the other, from that lowest point, the assembling of ourselves together, to the highest, -- love enthroned in the heart.

[Love], then, is the great object of Christian zeal.

[So] be most zealous of all for love, the queen of all graces, the highest

perfection in heaven or earth, the very image of the invisible God.

3) From his sermon (CXXXII) on the occasion of “... Laying the Foundation of the New Chapel” VII: 462

What is Methodism? [It is] the old religion, ... “nothing other than love, the love of God and of all mankind; the loving of God with all our heart, and soul, and strength, as he first loved us, -- This love is the great medicine of life; the never failing remedy for all the evils of a disordered world; for all the miseries and vices of men. . .

4) From his sermon (XXXVI) “The Law Established Through Faith” V: 462

Love is the end, the sole end, of every dispensation of God, from the beginning of the world to the consummation of all things.

5) From his sermon (LXXXIII) “On Patience” VI: 488

From the moment we are justified, till we give up our spirits to God, Love is the sum of Christian sanctification; it is the one kind of holiness [there is, the degrees of which are simply differences] in the degree of love.

6) From his treatise “The Character of a Methodist” VIII: 341

Who is a Methodist? A Methodist is one who has “the love of God shed abroad in his heart by the Holy Ghost given unto him;” one who “loves the Lord his God with all his heart, and with all his soul, and with all his mind, and with all his strength.”

7) From his treatise “Principals of a Methodist Farther Explained” VIII: 474.

Religion itself we define [as] “... loving God with all our heart and our neighbor as ourselves; and in that love abstaining from all evil, and doing all possible good to all men.” “Religion we conceive to be no[thing] other than love; the love of God and of all mankind; the loving God ‘with all our heart, and soul, and strength, and the loving of every soul which God hath made, every man on earth as our own soul. Wherever [there is love], there [is] the whole image of God.

8) In a “[Letter] to Mr. John Smith” XII: 78-79

The purpose of the commandment, of every command, of the whole Christian dispensation, is love. Let this love be attained, by whatever means, and I am content; I desire no more.

9) In a “[Letter] to a Young Disciple” XII: 445

But you have all things in one, the whole of religion contracted to a point, in that word, “Walk in love, as Christ also loved us and gave himself for us.” All is contained in humble, gentle, patient love. In effect, therefore you need nothing but this.

10) In “A Letter to Mr. Alexander Hume” XII: 458

[My preachers] will teach you that religion is [comprised of] holy tempers and holy lives; and that the sum of all [this] is love.

11) In “A letter to Miss Betsy Ritchie” XIII: 55

[W]e know there is nothing deeper, there is nothing better, in heaven or earth, than love! There cannot be, unless there

is something higher than the God of love! Here is the height, here is the depth, of the Christian experience! “God is love; and he that dwelleth in love dwelleth in God, and God in him.”

12) In “Explanatory Notes on the NT,” commenting on I John 4:8 “God is love”:

This little sentence brought St. John more sweetness, even in the time he was writing it, than the whole world can bring. [Love] is [God’s] darling, his reigning attribute [shedding] an amiable glory on all his other perfections.

13) In “Explanatory Notes on the NT” commenting on I John 4:19 “We love him, because he first loved us:”

This is the sum of all religion, the genuine model of Christianity. None can say more: why should any one say less, or less intelligibly? And climactically (in my view),

14) From “A Plain Account of Christian Perfection,” Section 25, in answer to Question 33 [the last third of the answer]: [One cause of] a thousand mistakes is [this:]... not considering deeply enough that love is the highest gift of God; humble, gentle, patient love; that all visions, revelations, [or] manifestations whatever, are little things compared to love; and that all [other] gifts . . . are either the same with or infinitely inferior to it. [Y]ou should be thoroughly [aware] of this – the heaven of heavens is love. There is nothing higher in religion; there is, in effect, nothing else; if you look for anything but more love, you are looking wide of the mark, you are getting

out of the royal way. And when you are asking others, “Have you received this or that blessing?” if you mean anything but more love, you mean wrong; you are leading them out of the way, and putting them [on] a false scent. Settle it then in your heart, that from the moment God has saved you from all sin, you are to aim at nothing more but more of that love describe in the thirteenth [chapter] of [First] Corinthians. You can go no higher than this, till you are carried into Abraham’s bosom.

I could not dismiss these kinds of declarations as just so much sermonic exaggeration, or spiritual hyperbole. Claims like these are too frequent, too precise, and too programmatic to be set aside so easily. I found these claims sprinkled I across every genre of Wesley’s writings, and across the whole span of his long and fruitful ministry, so far as I could tell. Now I’m wondering if in describing ourselves as Wesleyan, we ought perhaps start with love as the hierarchically supreme matter!

But Wesley is saying something more than that love is “important,” a claim with which all Christians could agree without dispute. Rather, Wesley has has a specific understanding of how love works across the whole Christian life, and how love is the operational center of all things. So I want to put before you just 5 proposals (out of many more we could examine) that sketch out some of the contours of how Wesley understood love, an understanding that he derived (validly and insightfully, I am now convinced) from Scripture. (All of these are contestable, and several of them I myself wouldn’t have advanced just 5 or 6 years ago.)

First, the love advocated by Jesus and his apostles cannot be defined by general human intuition, or by cultural sensibilities, or by finding some supposed ethical overlap between all the world's religions. When Jesus declared that the two greatest commandments were: a) "You shall love the Lord your God," and b) "You shall love your neighbor as yourself," he was not creating a new moral principle *de novo* on the spot, but quoting directly from the Pentateuch (from Deuteronomy 6:5 and Leviticus 19:18). Surely he presumed that the immediate contexts of these verses (along with the whole Old Testament context), must shape our thinking as we try to live out these twin commandments now forwarded to us. According to Jesus' own outlook, then, God's self-revelation to Israel must form the first crucible for our interpretive work as we craft a theology, yes, even of Christian love.

But even more critically, in several key NT passages it is clear that neither Jesus nor the apostolic writers trusted the supposed power of words (like *avgapa,w* or *file,w*) to carry the full freight of what they meant by love. For example, in both John 13 and John 15 Jesus did not simply say, "Love one another," (again, as if the use of the verb *avgapa,w* would make all things clear), but rather said "Love one another as I have loved you." In other words, Jesus put forward his whole life as the defining pattern for the love he commands. No language has a word that captures all of that! Similarly in Ephesians Paul did not simply say, "Walk in love," (as if that were enough guidance to give), but "Walk in love as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us." So as the apostolic witnesses insist here and elsewhere, the Christian understanding of love must

be closely tethered not just to the Bible in a general and platitudinous way, but particularly to the story of God in Christ specifically as narrated within the Bible, with special focus on the cross and the network of truth woven into it.

Second, we must stop equating Christian love with good actions, even if those good actions are done in the name of Jesus. Many of us have been told that, since “love is a verb,” love itself is an action. By this logic, we have too easily concluded that love comes into existence in the exact moment we act to help someone. If we have helped, then (by definition) we have loved.

But love is something prior to, and beneath the action it sponsors. Love is a matter of the heart, a disposition that is deeper and longer lasting than the specific actions we undertake. For example, even in God’s case, we read in Romans 5 that God demonstrated his love for us by sending his own Son.” In other words, love was something already residing in God, something already part God’s character long before God proved (demonstrated) this love in the act of giving his Son. Love precedes action, and therefore is something distinct from and prior to any actions that might arise from it.

This is not just a technical point, for it opens up an inverse truth we will find hard to accept. If love and helpful actions are distinct from each other, then it may be possible (sadly) for us to be doing helpful deeds without really being persons of love underneath it all, without having experienced the deep transformation of the heart in love. In other words, good deeds may unfortunately arise from motives other than love. I know for a fact that nurses, for example, can provide

life-saving treatment to patients without having or desiring any particular relationship with them. As the apostle Paul explained in I Cor. 13:1-3, and as John Wesley himself carefully noted (with awe) when commenting on this passage, one may be a Christian, and may be functioning effectively in ministry, and may even act so benevolently as to give away all of one's possessions for others. . . and still not "have love," that is, not be a person fundamentally characterized by love. In other words, I may exhaust myself in compassion ministries, and yet at the same time be hyper-competitive, or consumed with self-image, or abrasive, or unforgiving, or impure. This is why a focus on action, a focus simply on motivating inert people to become active doers may be a far shallower project than we imagine, and may be largely accomplishable in the power of the flesh through various forms of merely human persuasion. A more radical change of the heart in its deeper chambers is the divine miracle we need to be seeking.

Third, love's origin is God himself, or as it is expressed in I John 4:7, "Love is of God." Imagine a rare kind of gem that is dug from only one mine in the world. Wherever we see it, no matter who is wearing it or what cut and setting it has, we know where it has come from. And so it is with love. Wherever we see it truly expressed, we know that God, in his grace, is somehow the supplier. Though human beings of course participate in shaping the expressions of love (just as with the cut and setting of a gem), all real love is still "from God," and as such, has not (strictly speaking) been created, *ex nihilo*, by any human individual. Fundamentally, whatever love we express to God and to others is always and only the

love we have already received from God. Love, therefore, just as Wesley himself saw and insisted, is a gift from God, and is not the raw creation of our wills. We cannot love our enemies simply by deciding to do so; we cannot become people of love (through and through) simply by determining to be such.

Fourth, if love is a gift from God, then we must seek to receive love from God, the very love we are commanded then to express both to God and to others. What do we have that we have not first received (cf. I Cor. 4:7b)? The mere fact that one is a Christian, even a spiritually gifted and effective person, is not yet proof that one has undergone the deeper reception of God's love. Love is something we must, apparently, seek (just as Paul urges in I Cor. 14:1), and must seek with the expectation that God will (in his own time and way) actually satisfy this quest. This seems exactly the point of Paul's prayer for his readers (who quite clearly were already Christians, see 1:3-14) in Ephesians 3, one of the most eloquent prayers in all of Scripture, which reaches its supreme petition in 3:19, "and to know the love of Christ which surpasses knowledge, and [so] be filled with all the fullness of God." Here is the highest prayer, the supreme agenda for the Christian life, which (when granted) so satisfies our inner thirsts (through this infusion of divine love for us/me) that we are finally freed to turn outward in self-giving. We must pray this prayer together, actively waiting within the means of grace for God to answer it.

Fifth, the love poured out by God through the Spirit is a mighty force set loose in the deepest chambers of the heart and community, manifesting a host of powerful internal and

external effects. Among its many internal effects, Wesley frequently spoke of this infused love as expelling sin from the heart. Wesley's logic is easy to follow. For if love fills the heart (and by its nature fulfills the whole law of God), then the heart so filled with love has "no room left in it" (metaphorically speaking) for evil intensions and designs. In other words, Wesley viewed sanctification as resulting from being infused (from above) by divine love. If I have been filled (by God) with love for you, I cannot at the same time, lie to you, steal from you, damage your reputation, or violate you sexually. In other words, the infusion of God's love within us (in a way we clearly feel and sense) produces holiness as its natural outcome. Therefore a deficit of holiness, under analysis, turns out to be traceable to a prior deficit in our (sensible) reception of God's outpoured love (cf. Rom. 5:5, another favorite verse of Wesley).

Then among the external effects of infusion with God's love will be mission and service of every sort. For to be filled with love from God is to be energized by the same passion that has been energizing God's whole redemptive mission. Remember, it was because God loved the world that he willingly sacrificed his own Son (John 3:16). Love is that unstoppable energy powering every heroic undertaking, and I'm not speaking romantically here, but biblically. The apostle Paul several times refers to the labor of love, ostensibly because the one filled with love is compelled from within to expend every ounce of energy to surmount every obstacle for the sake of the beloved. This means that any person or church that is luke-warm in zeal to reach the lost or address human

suffering is best described (not as sleepy or lazy or unfocused or disorganized, nor even as disobedient (though it is that)) as insufficiently filled with God's own love for humanity.

Such a deficit cannot be really be erased just by explaining a theology of love to them, or by commanding them even more sternly to get busy in self-giving ministry. Again, a deficit in our loving can only be relieved by the deeper supply of love from God (the source of all love), by our being infused with the direct awareness of being beloved by God, by the actual experience of God's very love for us. Such a direct knowledge of the Lover of all souls compels us (from within) to draw the whole world into our embrace, and by doing so, to draw them to Him. In other words, if God's love drove him on a mission, then only his own love (resident within us) can drive us to join him on that same mission.

Much of the logic of the dynamic of love can be discerned in II Cor. 1:3-4, a passage that always sounds on first reading as dizzingly circular, and unnecessarily redundant. And when we read it now, I'm sure it will seem completely unrelated to love: "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and of all comfort, who comforts us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God."

You can see the three levels of comfort at work: God comforts Paul, and Paul in turn comforts others. Now here is the key: Paul does not comfort others simply by choosing to comfort them, as if to create comfort out of thin air to give to others. No, he first must receive that comfort from God

in a way that directly addresses him, in a way that meets his own need for comfort. Then he is able somehow to forward this comfort he has received to others as something already received and fully digested in his own soul. It's as if comfort is a commodity that has its source ultimately in God.

Now there is an unusually close connection between comfort and love (both in the mind of the Apostle Paul and Wesley as well) in a way I cannot lay out here. And I have become convinced that the dynamic of comfort (as we see it operating here in II Cor.) is the same as the dynamic by which love operates. I think we can substitute "love" for "comfort" without doing violence to the underlying idea: "Blessed be the God of all love, who has loved us. . . so that we may be able to love others. . . with the love with which we ourselves are loved by God." With this we have reached the fundamental bedrock for understanding how love from its source (God) to us and through us to others.

Now I usually don't advocate trying to do our theology via bumper stickers. Key nuances cannot be included in any three-word blast aimed at those following us. But I was struck, while strolling through the IGA parking lot in Wilmore recently, by a sticker on the right rear bumper of a Volvo: "Love God, Love Others." I began reflecting on it. Surely the driver, appealing to the Words of Jesus, believes he/she has said it all. How could we summarize religion (even the Christian religion) more simply than this?

But strolling on in a reflective mode, I concluded that the bumper sticker gets only half the message right. It identifies the output called for by Jesus, (love to God and others), but

does not address the issue of the input necessary to fund this output! As it stands, the bumper sticker has reduce the gospel to moralism, leaving us with the impression that the gospel addresses us primarily as imperative: “love, act, sacrifice, do!”

But in the larger logic of the gospel, profusion (output) can only be funded by infusion. “Love out” can only be funded by “love in.” Enlightened good will and steely self-discipline cannot create and sustain a profusion of love to neighbor (to enemy, to estranged family, to political rivals, to ideological opponents, to (my) abusers, and the like). Sartre was not wrong in declaring (essentially) that every “other” is potentially my executioner. Only by reducing “love” to “niceness,” and/or insisting that “others” are basically “good” can we generate “love” (in this reduced sense) from our own (human) resources.

So I’m suggesting (tongue in cheek!) a bumper sticker campaign of our own, not one of ripping off stickers like the one I saw on the Volvo in the IGA parking lot, but one of adding a sticker to the left bumper: “First, Infusion of God’s Love,” and adding a “then” in the center of the bumper. Then we would be setting the whole gospel into view: “First, Infusion of God’s Love” . . . “Then” . . . “Love God, Love Others.” Infusion (of love) must precede the Profusion (of love).

This, I am now convinced, is the deepest insight that the Wesley brothers mined from the Bible, and insight that is not only biblically grounded but philosophically and psychologically profound. Wesley, as I have now read him, claims that this is the very heart of religion (in general), and the very

soul of Christianity (in particular). “We love him because he first loved us.” (I John 3:19)

One of the universally acknowledged engines of the Wesleyan revival was Charles Wesley, whose ready pen put into (singable) verse the message of the brothers. By some accounts, Charles’ finest text was his treatment of the story of “wrestling Jacob” as narrated in Genesis 32. It would be easy to be attracted to Charles’ poetic skill alone, or to focus on the allegorical technique by which he upgrades the OT text to serve his larger purposes. But what must not be overlooked (at any cost) is the actual payload Charles labors to deliver throughout: that the supreme encounter with God consists of seeking (and coming to know) God’s fundamental identity: God’s “name.” The wrestler discovers as the fruit of his persistent struggle is that God’s name/nature is “love.”

1 Come, O Thou Traveler unknown, Whom still I hold but  
cannot see; My company before is gone,  
And I am left alone with Thee; With Thee all night I mean to  
stay, And wrestle till the break of day.

2 I need not tell Thee who I am,  
My sin and misery declare;  
Thyself hast called me by my name, Look on Thy hands, and  
read it there; But who, I ask Thee, who art Thou? Tell me Thy  
name, and tell me now.

3 In vain Thou strugglest to get free; I never will unloose my  
hold;

Art Thou the Man that died for me? The secret of Thy love unfold; Wrestling, I will not let Thee go, Till I Thy name, Thy nature know.

4 Yield to me now, for I am weak,  
But confident in self-despair;  
Speak to my heart, in blessings speak, Be conquered by my instant prayer; Speak, or Thou never hence shalt move, And tell me if Thy name be Love.

5 'Tis Love! 'tis Love! Thou diedst for me, I hear Thy whisper in my heart;  
The morning breaks, the shadows flee: Pure, universal Love Thou art;  
To me, to all Thy mercies move;  
Thy nature and Thy name is Love.

6 Lame as I am, I take the prey;  
Hell, earth and sin, with ease o'ercome. I leap for joy, pursue my way,  
And, as a bounding hart, I run, Through all eternity to prove Thy nature and Thy name is Love.

I am not yet ready to declare just how we should reshape our experience, theology and praxis so that love takes its appropriately lofty place. But so far as I can make sense of things, somehow we've got to get there!



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Resourcing individuals, communities,  
and movements to love the whole world  
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