

RESPONSE TO SVETLANA KHOBNYA AND LUIS FELIPE NUNES BORDUAM  
Deanna Hayden, USA/Canada Region

In August 2022, *The Christian Century* published an opinion article by William Willimon about the division in the United Methodist Church.<sup>1</sup> The article raises objection to this division, and claims at the end, “Schism is always counter to the togetherness produced by Christ.” While Willimon speaks about the United Methodist Church from a North American perspective, the issue of a spirit of divisiveness is not unique to that denomination or to the church in North America.

In her paper, Svetlana Khobnya describes an alienated world of hostility and antagonism, in need of the Spirit’s power of togetherness. Luis Felipe Nunes Borduam’s paper explores a spirit in conflict as people misinterpret what it means to live in the power of the Spirit. A divisive spirit is not a new problem. The answer to this problem is not new, either. The solution is the Spirit of unity in love (Phil. 2:1-2). Khobnya expresses the work of the Spirit as empowering people for loving interrelatedness and names the work of unity as the ultimate purpose of the Spirit. Borduam closes his paper with the apostle Paul’s assertion: the power of love is the greatest gift of the Spirit to be desired.

If this solution of unity in love is known, and the Holy Spirit is able to empower us to live in such love, why is there still division and unloving behavior in the church? The short response is “sin.” But perhaps there has also been a lack of clarity surrounding what love really is, and what it means to live in love. Therefore, this paper utilizes the conclusions of Khobnya and Borduam that the Holy Spirit gifts us with love as a way to bring unity, and will focus on what it means to live in the power of the Spirit in love.

First Corinthians 12 describes a unified Spirit creating a unified faith community filled with a variety of gifts. First Corinthians 13 names the greatest of these gifts as love. Additionally, Galatians offers love as the first fruit of the Spirit, perhaps to reinforce its primacy: “the fruit of the Spirit is love...”<sup>2</sup> The power of the Spirit is certainly found in love. But what does it really mean to love?

John Wesley associates the laying down of one’s life with the concept of love, in conjunction with Jesus’ words to his disciples in John 15:13. For Wesley, this is determinative as to whether a believer truly exemplifies God’s love. For example, in a letter he writes, “And if you love God, you will love your brother also; you will be ready to lay down your life for his sake.”<sup>3</sup> Wesley uses the concept of the laying down of one’s life at least 17 times in his works. Of these, 12 of them contain a direct reference to this being the true expression of love. Other ways Wesley

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<sup>1</sup> William H. Willimon, “The United Methodist divorce is a mistake,” *The Christian Century* 139:18 (2022), [cited 18 August 2022]. Online: [https://www.christiancentury.org/article/opinion/united-methodist-divorce-mistake?fbclid=IwAR1sdzZkzIDjvQY\\_RXFAWhOhCOTtBDUo8im9Ob36hljhNZDeHRBzdTgoSdI](https://www.christiancentury.org/article/opinion/united-methodist-divorce-mistake?fbclid=IwAR1sdzZkzIDjvQY_RXFAWhOhCOTtBDUo8im9Ob36hljhNZDeHRBzdTgoSdI)

<sup>2</sup> Galatians 5:22

<sup>3</sup> John Wesley, “A Word to a Protestant,” in *The Works of John Wesley* (3rd ed.; Kansas City: Beacon Hill Press, 1986) 11:191.

expounds on what it means to love are through concepts of self-emptying<sup>4</sup> and self-denial.<sup>5</sup> If laying down one's life is the distinguishing evidence of love, self-denial is a day-to-day, even moment-to-moment, version of that evidence.

These ideas are consistent with scripture. In Philippians 2:1-8 we read of the unity of the Spirit in love being marked by self-denying humility<sup>6</sup> and the self-emptying love of Christ.<sup>7</sup> In the gospels we read of Jesus distinguishing the spirit of temptation to avoid suffering—as he calls Peter a stumbling block to him<sup>8</sup>—from the guidance of the Holy Spirit. In both Matthew and Mark, he connects this with calling his disciples to deny themselves.<sup>9</sup> This calling to self-denial is found in all the synoptic gospels,<sup>10</sup> marking it as a primary virtue in those desiring a Christlike spirit. Considering the connection between love and self-denial both in scripture and in Wesley's writings, self-denial is arguably the distinguishing mark of love, especially in the Wesleyan tradition.

Wesley regularly describes self-denial in terms of a discipline such as fasting.<sup>11</sup> It can certainly be practiced as an active discipline in any number of ways, such as silence, detachment from technology, or living simply. But wholistically, it is more than a discipline. Self-denial is a posture of one's spirit nurtured and grown in the power of the Holy Spirit. Robert Mulholland uses the idea of taking up one's cross (a phrase Jesus pairs with self-denial in each of the cited synoptics) to describe this posture. In his description, our cross is not a difficult person or situation with which we must deal, but instead he states, "Our cross is the point of our unlikeness to the image of Christ."<sup>12</sup> Our cross is the place in ourselves at which we experience dispositions that are less than loving. This is the place we must deny ourselves in the power of the Spirit. We must be receptive to the Holy Spirit's voice of conviction and be willing to receive correction.

Some have argued the language of self-emptying from Philippians 2 must be used carefully (or not used at all) with oppressed people groups, specifically women, as it can be used to reinforce subordinate roles and even abuse.<sup>13</sup> The language of self-denial can be misused in similar ways, and thus a careful understanding of the "self" being denied must be clarified. Mulholland's description of the cross being taken up refers to characteristics and dispositions in the self which

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<sup>4</sup> See Wesley's Journal: 19 May 1738 (1:98) and "A Collection of Forms of Prayer for Every Day of the Week: Friday Morning" (11:229) in *The Works of John Wesley* (3<sup>rd</sup> ed.; Kansas City: Beacon Hill Press, 1986).

<sup>5</sup> John Wesley, "The More Excellent Way," in *The Works of John Wesley* (3<sup>rd</sup> ed.; Kansas City: Beacon Hill Press, 1986) 7:28; and John Wesley, "Scriptural Christianity," in *The Works of John Wesley* (3<sup>rd</sup> ed.; Kansas City: Beacon Hill Press, 1986) 5:109.

<sup>6</sup> Philippians 2:3

<sup>7</sup> Philippians 2:7

<sup>8</sup> Matthew 16:23

<sup>9</sup> See Matthew 16:24 and Mark 8:34

<sup>10</sup> Matthew 16:24, Mark 8:34, and Luke 9:23

<sup>11</sup> Robert Joseph Webster, Jr., "The Value of Self-Denial: John Wesley's Multidimensional View of Fasting," *Toronto Journal of Theology* 19/1 (2003), 25-40.

<sup>12</sup> M. Robert Mulholland, Jr., *Invitation to a Journey: A Roadmap for Spiritual Formation* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 38.

<sup>13</sup> Mark A. Maddix and Adrienne Maddix Meier, "Listening to Voice: Revisioning Feminist Pedagogy for Christian Education and Formation," *Didache* 11:1 (2011), 6-7.

are not Christlike. It is not a broad exhortation to deny every characteristic, need, or inclination of the individual. Therefore, the self being denied is any part of the self which does not reflect the spirit of Christ.

For any person, love marked by self-denial can only be lived with the empowerment of the Holy Spirit. Samuel Chadwick expresses this in his reflections on the self-emptying love of Christ displayed in Philippians 2: “Our Lord emptied Himself, but the Father gave to His self-emptied Son the fullness of His Spirit. . . .Through all the earthly life and ministry of our Lord He was indebted to the Presence and Power of the Holy Ghost.”<sup>14</sup> Indeed, some scholars insist Christ was only emptied as he was filled with the Spirit. Gerald Hawthorne states, “Christ’s . . . kenosis came about not by subtraction but by addition, . . .his *kenōsis* (an emptying) was in reality a *plerōsis* (a filling).”<sup>15</sup> Paul prays for the church in Ephesus to be strengthened in their inner being with power through the Spirit, that they would be grounded in love and know God’s love more deeply.<sup>16</sup> Self-denial requires the filling of the Spirit in one’s inner being, both to discern what are an individual’s temptations and to overcome them. Because each person’s temptations are unique to their individual character, self-denial looks different from person to person.

In the same way the posture of self-denial takes different forms in different people, it can take varied forms in varied contexts and cultures. Khobnya’s paper identifies a spirit of antagonism and hostility which must be overcome by togetherness in the power of the Spirit. A posture of love marked by self-denial in such a context would bring openness to the needs and expressions of others. Self-denial makes room to receive the filling of the Spirit and offer expression through the Spirit’s fruit and through the love described in 1 Corinthians 13. Borduam’s paper identifies misinterpretations of the Spirit’s power which come to be used in self-serving ways. A posture of love marked by self-denial in such a context would offer correction to the temptation toward seeking experientialism and prosperity.

When various cultures come together, self-denying love can be expressed by balancing power dynamics. Those in positions or cultures of more power practice self-denial by speaking less and listening more. Perhaps a posture of self-denial would be well-practiced by denying the temptation to correct others, seeking instead curiosity and wonder toward the other which comes with the gentleness of the Spirit. Likewise, those in positions or cultures with less power can be encouraged to communicate their experiences, thoughts, and opinions.

We would do well to pause enough to ask ourselves (and ask the Spirit): What does a posture of love marked by self-denial look like in our context? What fruit of the Spirit is lacking in us, and how is the Holy Spirit calling us to be filled? How are we being called to deny ourselves in the power of the Spirit, and to lift up others? It will be in denying ourselves that we will find love, unity, and togetherness in the power of the Spirit.

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<sup>14</sup> Samuel Chadwick, *The Way to Pentecost* (Berne, IN: Light and Hope Publications, 1937), 59.

<sup>15</sup> Gerald F. Hawthorne, *The Presence and The Power: The Significance of the Holy Spirit in the Life and Ministry of Jesus* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2003), 207.

<sup>16</sup> Ephesians 3:16-19