

Slices of Wesleyan Theology In a Word

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Near the top of the world in northern Thailand, he sits on the porch of his slit-bamboo house. Sweat streams, dripping from his chin and ears. He peers down the Maekok River running in front of his house. Suddenly, Jasuh—powerful witch doctor of his Red Lahu hill tribe—sees walking toward him on the shiny surface of the water two men dressed in white.

With flowing white hair and beards, they stride straight to him, look into his eyes, and one of them announces, “The true and living God will send a messenger to tell you how to know him, the true and living God. Trust his message.” They quickly turn away and disappear.

A young evangelist on his way to a distant downstream village soon comes. He asks for the village headman or the witch doctor, to get permission to spend the night. Jasuh welcomes him. Following dinner with the witch doctor and his family, he draws from his shoulder bag a “Viewmaster” that missionary Sam Yangmi had given him.

He instructs Jasuh to aim it toward the light to view its pictures. The first picture is from the story of Moses. To the shaman’s surprise, it shows the two men he’d seen in his vision. Jasuh exclaims, “I’ve been waiting for you to come to tell me about the true and living God. The men in this picture came to me. They told me to receive your message. How can I know the true and living God?”

The evangelist marvels at such openness by a medicine man. He changes his plans and stays longer. Jasuh and his whole family trust Christ as their Deliverer from demon powers. The evangelist goes and gets Sam Yangmi to lead a service at the river’s edge in celebration of Christ’s superior power to evil’s power. They burn demon shelves, idols, and witchcraft paraphernalia.

Jasuh is the first Red Lahu baptized in northern Thailand. Persecution soon breaks out. Villagers blame their deserter witch doctor for every illness and difficulty. When he refuses to forsake Christ, they hire a hit man to kill him. He flees with his family to a far village where Christians teach him to read and write. The pastor must be away one Sunday, so he has Jasuh give his testimony. It has a powerful impact on everyone.

He and his family become full-grown Christians. In time, Pa Yang village needs a pastor. Sam goes to Jasuh, and hears the former witch doctor’s story. Years before, fleeing from a assassin, he’d told God that if he lived, he would serve him full-time. God had formed Jasuh into a Christian leader.

He becomes pastor at Pa Yang. Through a visiting Korean team’s intercession and witnessing, revival breaks out. Many turn from Satan to the Savior, including the village headman and his wife. All are baptized.

At the district pastors and wives retreat, Jasuh stands with a Bible in his hand and tears streaming. “Please teach me how to be a pastor,” he pleads. “I don’t have much education, and I don’t know the Bible well but I want to learn so I can help my people. Please teach me how to be a good pastor?”

Jasuh’s haunting question sows seeds that give being to Southeast Asia Nazarene Bible College. Jasuh has taken every course offered at Maetang extension center, graduating from the course of study for pastors. His daughter Jane has graduated from the degree course in Bangkok. She serves her people in the “Golden Triangle,” opium-growing capital of the world. At the district assembly Jasuh

Jana is ordained. The former witchdoctor has been transformed into Christ's agent of deliverance through Christ's supreme Power. Today he is leading and equipping others for fruitful ministry because of the theological education that he received at Southeast Asia NBC's Maetang Extension center.

A student at Tokyo's renowned Sophia University, he is an English major. The Catholic school offers religion classes, but he is not exposed to the gospel. Talking with international students and teachers, his English ability soars. Helen Wilson and Thelma Culver, Dean of Women and Academic Dean respectively of Northwest Nazarene College, are two foreigners who come.

Wilson asks him if he would like to study in America. "Yes," he says, "but I can't leave here now." She gives him her card, that he puts in a drawer and "out of mind" for 2 years. It is the late 1960s. A nationwide student revolt is underway. Protests and clashes with riot police shake university campuses.

The turmoil tires him. Feeling no hope for the future, he recalls Ms. Wilson's card, and finds it in the drawer. He wonders if she remembers him, as he writes her about his desire to study at NNC. Her reply comes quickly.

She expresses genuine interest in him. Inviting him to come, she promises: "I will consider you my *son*." He has never heard such words. He wonders why she offers to sponsor him legally, help him financially, and to assist him in other ways—like a son.

Upon arrival in at NNC, he finds Wilson, Culver, and others eager to be "family" to him. Wilson secures an international student scholarship, plus a Rotary Club grant for him. They all call him "Paul." Administrators, teachers, and students show him kindness and acceptance, "birthing" in him a yearning to know this way of love.

Going to church on Sundays, on Wednesday evenings, and to college chapel services, he tries to grasp the gospel, but grows dismayed. Something hinders him. Besieged by doubts, he thinks: I don't know if there *is* a God. If there is, I must find Him and follow Him. If there is no God, then I'll give up on it all.

One November Sunday in 1968 his struggle intensifies. He resolves to find God that night, or to give up trying. At the close of his message, the speaker invites people to commit their lives to God for service. Paul does not understand what "coming to the altar" means. Yet, not knowing how he got there, he finds himself there!

A sharp sense of his own sinfulness stabs him. Amid unspeakable light, Hitoshi "sees" evil in his own heart. He feels he deserves hell, yet he senses mercy, forgiveness and grace flowing to him. He will never forget the twin revelations of his sinfulness and of God's mercy.

He knows he is a "new creation" in Christ. Bart McKay and Phyllis Hartley, who had served in Japan, give him a Japanese Bible and books. He searches Scripture and devours devotional literature. He grows by leaps and bounds in grace, faith, and in his intimate walk with Christ.

Pastor Jim Bond's preaching help Paul to lay a firm foundation on which he begins to construct his Christian belief system. A magnificent mentoring relationship develops between pastor and Hitoshi.

You know him—NTS graduate, Boston University Th.D., and APNTS professor—Christ's "new-creation," made possible by means of His people "living out" their biblical "theology of agape."

At the Johannesburg Education Conference, Dr. William Greathouse, in his keynote address, confided that he has come to believe that the dynamic of Wesleyan holiness is that it is "a theology of love."

I will draw upon the book by Wynkoop titled with those words, written to answer the questions: "Is there a principle of interpretation. . . which can explain Christian doctrine and Christian life in the same system without either one undercutting the integrity of the other?" "Can theology and

real human existence meet meaningfully?”¹

John Wesley contributed an approach to theology that does this, adding a spiritual dimension that puts theology into a framework of personal relationship and experience.

Wesley did not consider justification and sanctification to be totally separated by time and experience. Rather, he saw them as two aspects of one truth. One does not believe for justification, and later believe for sanctification; rather he trusts in Christ by means of a personal relationship, and on the basis of that relationship of trust, he appropriates God’s grace and begins a life of holiness.

Wesley saw in Scripture that a clear and adequate concept of justification alone is able to support a biblical concept of sanctification.

I will attempt to do three quick “slices” of Wesley’s theology. Like slicing into an orange with a knife, if we cut into Wesley’s theology at any point, we are likely to find the same ripe “fruit” of Wesley’s having done his theology in a context of practical, passionate ministry.

Glimpse with me three slices of Wesley’s theology:

1. The **essence** and **dynamic** of Wesley’s theology
2. The **relevant practicality** of Wesley’s theology
3. The key **contribution** of Wesley’s theology.

1. *Wesley’s theology’s essence and dynamic is agape.*

Rather than Wesley representing a theology of *holiness*, it is more faithful to his major emphasis to call it a “theology of *love*.” The following by Wesley shows that *love* is central to his theology:

If you look for anything more than 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. . . . 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* described in the thirteenth of the Corinthians. You can go no higher than this, till you are carried into Abraham’s bosom.²

When we say that *love* is the “*dynamic* of Wesleyanism,” we imply that holiness is “*dynamic*,” and that its character is *love*. Wesley did not merely *relate* the terms “*holiness*” and “*love*”—he *equated* them. They were, for Wesley, says Wynkoop, “one blazing unity of truth.”

Cyril Squire compiled a list of Wesley’s accomplishments that hint at his great heart of love of God and neighbor that motivated him:

- He rode over 250,000 miles on horseback.
- He preached over 45,000 sermons.
- He founded a school for boys and wrote textbooks.
- He compiled a Christian library.
- He published 233 original works on a variety of subjects.

¹Mildred Bangs Wynkoop, *A Theology of Love: The Dynamic of Wesleyanism* (Kansas City, Missouri: Beacon Hill Press, 1972).

²John Wesley, “A Plain Account of Christian Perfection,” *The Works of John Wesley*, 3rd ed. 14 vols., edited by Thomas Jackson (London: Wesleyan Methodist Book Room, 1872; reprint ed., Kansas City, MO.: Beacon Hill Press of Kansas City, 1979), 11:430.

- He wrote a medical book.
- He set up spinning and knitting shops for the poor
- He, according to some historians, helped save England, morally and spiritually, from the disaster that threatened Europe.

2. *Wesley's theology's relevant practicality relates to the prominence he gives to personal relationships.*

Wesley wrote: “‘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.’”³

For Wesley, love is a quality of a person, never a “thing.” It has to do with persons in relationship. He declared: “Religion is nothing more or less, than pure love to God and man.” Wesley wrote 14 volumes of his main works, plus many other books, articles, and hymns. Yet all are a commentary, elaboration, and exegesis of love—the multi-faceted *agape* kind.

In the *New Living Translation* we read about Enoch: “He enjoyed a close *relationship* with God throughout his life” (Gen 5:24 NLT). About Noah we read: “He consistently followed God’s will and enjoyed a close *relationship* with him” (Gen 6:9 NLT).

If *we* are committed to Wesleyan theology, we must know it to be a theology of *love*. We learner-theologian-teacher-preacher-practitioners know that four main Greek words are often translated “love,” but that one, *agape*, is different from the others. It refers to the quality of a *person* and a *principle* by which he orders his life. It is not an emotion but a deliberate policy by which *relationships* are set right and kept right.

Wynkoop writes that “*Agape* cannot so much be *defined* as it can be *demonstrated*.” It motivates outreach. It loses itself in others. Holiness is wholeness; *agape* is sharing that wholeness.⁴ This is part of what Wesley meant by “social holiness.”

On a ferry in the Philippines are three Americans—Flora Wilson and her daughters, Elizabeth and Brenda. They strike up a conversation with *Julietta* who is surprised to hear them speaking Ilongo.

Their kindness to her stirs a hunger in her to know *Christ*. She calls that conveniently-graced day “the beginning of my conversion.” One month later, she boards a ferry and hears Flora Wilson call her name! Hunger is written on her face.

During the long voyage to Manila, Flora “gossips the good news” about a personal saving *relationship* with Christ. She tells Julie a new church is being planted in her town, giving her its location.

Upon returning to Bacolod, Julie goes to the Nazarene storefront on Wednesday evening to meet young pastor Jerry Tingson and the other joyous Nazarenes. She says she has met missionary Flora Wilson. They welcome her to the “family,” taking her to their hearts, and making her promise to return on Sunday.

That Lord’s Day is another turning point for Julie. They make her feel that *she* is the most important person present. Pastor Tingson preaches a clear salvation message. The entire service

³Ibid., 367.

⁴Wynkoop, *Theology of Love*, 34-35.

centers on Christ. When the pastor extends an invitation, she goes forward, along with others. Jesus becomes her personal Savior, and her heart feels as though it will burst with joy!

God calls her to His service. When she talks with the Wilsons about her call, they urge her to come to Iloilo City to study at VNBC, where they teach.

Her thirst for knowledge is insatiable. In the Doctrine of Holiness class that Stanley Wilson teaches, he invites students to consecrate their lives to Christ. Julie kneels and presents herself completely to the Lord as a living sacrifice. The Holy Spirit purifies her heart by faith.

Dr. and Mrs. Kenneth Rice come to VNBC to conduct a Sunday school workshop. The Lord leads them to get to know Julie and to offer to help her to go to America for advanced studies.

In 1979, she arrives in Kansas City to begin at NTS. She stays in the home of the Rices, and works in the Sunday School Ministries Department at Nazarene Headquarters. She works with women's ministries, singles' ministries, and senior adult ministries.

What explains (accounts for) this radical reorientation of her life? It is the grace of God, yes; but in large part, it is flesh-and-blood "dealers in hope," living out their holiness lifestyle and "theology of *agape*" in *relationship* with her, that brings God's grace to Dr. Julie Macainan Detalo.

3. Wesley's theological contributions include personal involvement in grace (as opposed to pre-determinism or a fatalistic predestination).

Carl Bangs, on the directness of the Wesleys' (John and Charles) faith, says that it "lies in the way in which the Bible functions for them, informing their perceptions, thoughts, and actions. It lives through them. Exegesis and life are one and the same."⁵

When T.W. Willingham was a student at Olivet Nazarene College, some fellow students began to tell each other what they wanted to do when they graduated from college.

"I'm going to become District Superintendent of this district," boasted one student.

"I'm going to become President of this college," boasted another.

"I'm going to become Director and Preacher for the Nazarene denominational radio broadcast," boasted a third student.

"T.W., what are you going to become?" they asked. "I don't know," he said. "I haven't thought about what position I will have. I want to serve the Lord; *HE* will choose what he wants me to do and be."

After they graduated, they went away—one to become District Superintendent, one to become college President, and the third to become director/preacher for the Nazarene radio ministry. T.W. Willingham went forth to serve the Lord because he loved Him.

Within a short time, however, here is what happened:

- The student who had wanted to become district superintendent had left the ministry.
- The one who planned to become President had left following Christ altogether.
- The student that had wanted to be the Nazarene radio preacher and director had turned his back on the Lord!

⁵Carl Bangs, *Our Roots of Belief: Biblical Faith and Faithful Theology* (Kansas City: Beacon Hill Press, 1981), 40-41.

- T.W. Willingham, however, was serving the Lord with all his heart as a loving, fruitful pastor and a faithful evangelist.

In time, he was elected District Superintendent. And he kept serving Christ. During a crisis at the college, he was made President of Olivet Nazarene College. And he just kept serving the Lord. One day, when denominational leaders were looking for a godly man to direct the radio ministry and to be the preacher for the radio broadcasts, they chose T.W. Willingham. And he just kept serving his *LORD!* I grew up hearing Willingham. He was a faithful “existential” biblical theologian, his feet firmly fixed on the ground of ministry engagement.

Theology infused with the personal experience of God’s grace is genuine Wesleyanism. Wynkoop summarizes: “Wesley’s ultimate herme-neutic is *love*. Every strand of his thought, the warm heart of every doctrine, the passion of every sermon, the test of every claim to Christian grace, was *love*. So central is love that to be ‘Wesleyan’ is to be committed to a *theology of love*.”⁶

LET YOUR LOVE FLOW THROUGH ME

*Let Your love flow through me,
Let Your love flow through me,
Make me a blessing, Lord,
Wherever I may be;
Keep me pure, keep me clean
So that You might be seen,
Let Your love flow through me,
Through me.*

Words and Music

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⁶Wynkoop, *A Theology of Love*, 101.