

Divine Love: The Power of Christian Hope

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“The Lord delights in those . . . who put their hope in his unfailing love”
(Ps. 147:11).

The thesis of this paper is that without an emphasis upon the power of divine love, there can be no satisfactory vision of Christian hope. In fact, a vision of hope, if it is to be genuinely hopeful, must be a vision permeated, undergirded, and instigated by love. We contend that God expresses and inspires the power of love sufficient for an adequate vision of hope, while creaturely love responses to divine love perform a necessary role in hope's ultimate triumph.

The most important empirical clue to the hope of love's power is found in Jesus Christ. When we ask, “What is love?” our most profound answers arise from the revelation of God found in Jesus the Nazarene. The author of First John witnesses to the life of Jesus as the revelation of divine love: “God is love. God's love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him.” Furthermore, “we know that the Son of God has come and has given us understanding so that we may know the true God” (4:8, 9, & 5:20).

Jesus not only reveals the loving character of God in his words and actions, but Christians find hope in God's prevenient provision of love to creatures. Or, as the Apostle Paul puts it, “we are not reluctant to be hopeful, because the Holy Spirit has poured divine love into our hearts” (Rm 5:4, 5). The Jesus of John's Gospel claims that those who respond appropriately to God will express love in such a way as to be demarcated as devotees of the Master: “By this will all know that you are my disciples, if you love one another” (13:35).

The power of love as the ground of hope is seen in the death and resurrection of Jesus. The cross of Christ profoundly reveals that God sympathizes as one who suffers in love. The power of divine love was evident when God raised Jesus from the dead. The power of love to transform the dead body of Jesus into a risen Lord provides hope for us both in this life and beyond our bodily death. For, as the writer to the Church in Ephesus puts it, “God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us . . . made us alive together with Christ . . . and raised us up with him” (2:4-6).

Not all theological visions of hope currently envisaged harmonize with the central love themes of the broad biblical witness. In fact, theologies of hope that find their ultimate justification in divine sovereignty at the expense of divine love oppose what we consider the heart of the Wesleyan-Holiness tradition's theology. Concepts of divine sovereignty that *guarantee* God's coercive triumph over evil often undermine central convictions pertaining to creaturely freedom and the centrality of divine love. One task for theologians in the Church

of the Nazarene is to present a biblically-rooted vision of an almighty, loving God who acts in ways that do not jeopardize creaturely freedom.

When tragedy strikes there are several responses among people of faith. The two most common are either to respond by emphasizing divine sovereignty or respond by emphasizing divine love. Those who emphasize sovereignty typically presuppose an intricate cosmic plan. They understand every event and action as having an intended purpose in God's present or future kingdom. Every experience that a Christian has occurs for a divinely determined reason, and God's premeditated goal is to teach a valuable lesson by causing or allowing tragedy. The person who emphasizes divine sovereignty ultimately "rests" in the knowledge that God orchestrates all history so that divine purposes are always served. No matter how tragic an event, the sovereign God has willed its occurrence.

While many emphasize divine sovereignty as the basis for hope in the midst of tragedy, we do not feel that this vision of sovereignty is rationally or existentially consistent with the core of Wesleyan-Holiness theology. One weakness of this approach is that it depicts God as one who seems to care little about the destructive forces in our lives — so long as God's ultimate goal is reached. It is also difficult to reconcile this view with what we witness in the life of Jesus Christ. If God knows our names, cries when we cry, rejoices when we rejoice, dreams the dreams in our hearts, and counts the hairs on our head, where is that intimate love when tragedy strikes?

By contrast, some who reflect upon the tragedy of life choose to emphasize God's love. These individuals perceive painful events as indications of humanity's sinfulness. Evil events are not the expressions of God's will. This loving God, however, works faithfully in the midst of such events to bring about the promise of new life. Divine love can squeeze some good out of the evil that God did not originally desire. The person who emphasizes divine love "rests" not in God's absolute control but in God's unfailing steadfast love *through* all events.

Some might criticize our view that divine love is the impetus of hope — instead of divine all-controlling power — as a view that limits God's power. It seems to us, however, that this view offers a vision of a God who is ultimately more powerful. A God who does not fashion a Kingdom through unilateral control but whose presence transforms creation through love seems, to us, to be a God who wields power in a more awesome and effective way. In short, we suggest that Christian hope be not based upon God's pre-determination or absolute control; it should be based upon God's limitless love.

These two emphases typically produce two different responses in Christians. Those who emphasize the sovereignty of God often express a need to figure out the divine "why" of an event. These Christians struggle to imagine how every event fits into a divinely woven pattern, a pattern that must make sense down to each divinely decided needle stroke. These Christians seem to be comforted in their belief that every event is God-directed and divinely ordered. From the divine perspective, they surmise, life is free of risk and chaos.

Those who embrace the centrality of divine love and the convictions of creaturely freedom, however, believe that some risk and chaos is inevitable. All events and actions are not divinely pre-ordained; some events express creaturely decisions. Those who emphasize

divine love and eschew all-controlling sovereignty deny that God chooses each step of life for us. Instead, they can affirm that God's relentless love invades our lives — conveniently in each moment — and divine love creates the potential for God's desires to be born anew within and among us.

As we conclude, we offer an illustration of the hope that Christians might find in the impetus of divine love. When we look in the eyes of a woman who is a religion major in one of our colleges or seminaries, we might see a vision of hope centered in a loving God. This hope might be based upon a God who loves the student lavishly, who works in her life, and who will not let her go.

But the vision of hope we see in her eyes is also often a vision borne in the midst of intense struggle. It is a vision profoundly shaped by the awareness that some arms in the church are not open to provide her a place to respond to God's call upon her life. Because of this resistance, she must not believe that God sovereignly controls all of life's events. She must not believe that God calls her into ministry only to be discouraged, rejected, sent away, and faced with a difficult choice between remaining in the denomination that birthed her or fulfilling her call elsewhere.

We choose not to view the history of the Church's rejection of women ministers as expressing God's sovereign plan. Instead, we interpret this rejection as a form of rebellion against God. We believe that female religion majors must embrace a vision of hope that allows them to hear the Church's often negative reaction to their call, without also supposing that this reaction expresses God's will. The vision of hope we entertain provides a way to see how God can use the Church's rebellion to work new creation in our lives, without also believing that this rebellion is divinely foreordained. We fear, however, that if the resistance to women in leadership becomes too great, the vision of hope God inspires in many women will lead them to find places of ministry outside our denomination.

In sum, the hope we envisage is based upon God's love and faithfulness. This hope incites us to jump into life — with all its potential for pain, rebellion, and chaos — assured by God's limitless love. We trust in a God who transforms not by determining our every step but by pouring out love in abundance. Our hope is that God will inspire love in us so that, in response to God, we might make this world a place in which love reigns supreme. We entertain this hopeful vision, because we believe that the God whose love is perfect and steadfast and whose power is not all-controlling intimately interacts with creatures by calling them to love in response.