

“CAPABLE OF GOD”:
WESLEY’S THINKING AS A RESOURCE FOR AN EVEN MORE HOLISTIC THEOLOGY
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In grateful response to “Wesleyan Theology: A Holistic Theology”

It is a joy and privilege to offer a response to Professor Julca’s fine paper, delivered to us here in a powerful and passionate presentation. There is much with which to agree here, and with great gusto. I would like to highlight some of the ideas and phrases that particularly jumped out at me, in order to offer my appreciation, and occasionally to offer additional remarks or commentary, before turning essentially to offer my one criticism of some possible substance.

First, I appreciate Professor Julca’s suggestion that “theology is reflection for growth on the path of Christian life.” This is an important practical, and eminently Wesleyan, reminder for us all. Indeed, perhaps we could put a finer point on it by insisting with Wesley that the nature of that path is invariably “pure love of God and neighbor,” i.e., the dual commands of love from the Torah, cited in turn by Jesus as the two great commands. Augustine long ago insisted that all truly Christian interpretation of Scripture, and all truly Christian theological reflection, will by nature and by definition serve to contribute to the upbuilding of such love. We cannot be reminded too often of this simple truth.

“Pure love of God and neighbor,” as Wesley often put it, is by nature wholistic. Such love is ever expanding, ever reaching out in wider concentric circles of compassion. Further, this love is rooted first in God’s love, in the confession and conviction that God *is love* (1 Jn. 4:8, 16). If God is love, and if God is simple, then God’s love is a whole – and not doled out here and there, in bits and pieces, to some and not to others. This leads inevitably to a recurring theme in Professor Julca’s essay:

“A theology of mission, understood holistically, has as its starting point the fact that God’s purpose is to reconcile all of creation through Jesus Christ.”

“. . . God’s purpose is to create a new humanity, through Jesus Christ and the power of the Spirit, a community that incarnates the values of the Kingdom and testifies to this world in the present.”

“. . . [God’s] purpose is to reconcile, through Jesus Christ in the power of the Spirit, all of creation.”

I applaud not only the strong doctrine of reconciliation found in such passages, echoing the cosmic and universalist directions of many of Paul’s writings. I also appreciate the decidedly Trinitarian description that Julca is offering us of the divine economy in creation. He uses Trinitarian language not simply as window dressing, but very intentionally mirrors New Testament language – particularly, again, that of Paul – in bearing witness to the nature of God’s saving activity through the incarnate Son Jesus Christ in, or by, the dynamic power of God’s own Holy Spirit. Thank you for this intentionally and carefully Trinitarian testimony!

I was struck, too, by Professor Julca’s mentioning that “the declaration ‘*Jesus is Lord*’ (Phil. 2:11) was the core confession of the Christian community during the first centuries” (– and let us, by the way, keep the Trinitarian pattern in mind, such that the full phrase in Philippians is that we might confess that “Jesus Christ is Lord to the glory of God the Father” –), “which is especially significant in the context of the Roman Empire when the term was applied in reference to the absolute authority of the emperor, the address of a god.” This is a powerful and potent reminder of the irreducibly and inescapably political character of the early church’s confession regarding Jesus. This confession was (and is) the rallying cry and charter of an alternative polis, a people set apart, defined not by border or language or ethnicity or color but by common confession of Jesus’ lordship. In this time when another nation seems intent on creating a new empire, it is incumbent upon us all to hear again the truly political implications of the reality of the universal church as the people of God transcending all such artificially drawn distinctions.

In the light of the strong wholism that Professor Julca champions throughout his essay – a wholistic soteriology rooted in the outpoured, outpouring love of “the Three-One God” (to use a favorite phrase of Wesley) – I offer this one criticism, or suggestion for further reflection:

Under the heading of “The Nature of Humankind: *Imago Dei*,” Professor Julca writes, “Theologically we assume that man and woman were created in the image of God, which distinguishes them from inferior orders in life and, as such, [they] have the capacities of reflection, free will, . . . creativity, and an understanding of the holistic beings that we are.” I find two potential problems in such language. First, I suspect that the use of an adjective such as “inferior” does not serve well our hopes to think about salvation in the wholistic sorts of ways

that Professor Julca is espousing. The language of “Inferior / Superior,” it seems to me, reinscribes a hierarchical understanding of creation that becomes ecologically dangerous and easily leads to our greater alienation from the other-than-human realm. I do not mean to deny the real differences that exist between the human species and other animal species; I do mean to underscore the theological fact that we are all creatures of dust. Genesis 1 does indeed bear witness to the responsibilities that God has entrusted to humanity as male and female to bear or reflect God’s image in creation; those responsibilities, however, are not best served by the language of hierarchy or superiority.

Second, it is not unusual at all, when we assume the position of “superior” over the other-than-human realm, that we will next offer an apologetic to support our assumptions of superiority; that is, we will isolate those qualities we believe to set us apart from the vast world of God’s other-than-human creatures and equate these qualities with “the image of God.” Indeed, Professor Julca appears to do this with his list of candidate qualities such as “reflection, free will, creativity” and so on. I am not opposed to celebrating these gifts shared by most human beings, but I am also unconvinced that these capacities are explicitly what Genesis 1 intends when it identifies the human, as male and female, to be God’s image. I am convinced that the language here is not about some uniquely human capacity, or set of capacities, that we assume to be, essentially, “the image of God in man.” Rather, in Genesis it is *adam* (humanity as male and female) who is created “in the image of God” (rather than “the image of God in man”), i.e., to function as God’s “image” or, if you prefer, God’s “reflection” within creation. Granted, in order for us so to function in God’s creation – and now, further, to function as agents in God’s *reconciliation* (or even re-creation) of God’s world – those capacities of reflection, freedom, creativity and self-awareness are truly important. But those capacities in and of themselves do not fit us to function as God’s image. Professor Julca, indeed, draws near to this very idea when he writes that “God ingrained [I confess to be uncomfortable with that verb] his likeness into humankind so that it might reflect his character.”

Of late I have become convinced that in such discussions a return to Wesley (and indeed to a host of theologians in the two millennia of Christian tradition) will be helpful. He and many others wrote of a “natural image” and a “moral image” of God. While I used to shy away from the language of “natural image,” I now would argue that the phrase functions to point toward such human capacities as language, abstract thought, creativity, awareness of the future (and of

our own deaths), agency and creativity – all of which capacities, we might say, make it possible for us *to love*, but cannot make force us into loving. Becoming creatures of love – for neighbor, for stranger, for enemy, for God, for God’s creation – is what is involved in growing into the “moral image” of God. It is the same distinction many early Christian and Jewish exegetes drew between the language of “image” and “likeness” in Genesis 1: “image” is a given; “likeness” is a project and a calling, having to do with growing toward Godlikeness. It is only as we responsibly direct the energies and abilities we associate with the natural image toward love for God and all neighbors (including non-human neighbors) that we are growing increasingly in the moral image of God.

In any event, I believe in this regard we are not yet sufficiently wholistic or Wesleyan. Read again Wesley’s remarkable sermon on Romans 8, “The General Deliverance,” which is attentive to creation’s groans but in fact begins not with creation but with God’s character: Wesley begins by citing one of his favorite Scripture texts, Psalm 145:9 – “The LORD is good to all, and God’s compassion is over all that God has made.” God is love, and God’s love is whole, and thus God’s love is graciously lavished toward each and every creature, whether human or not. If God’s compassion touches each and every creature, and if human beings are called to represent or image God in the realm of creation (which calling Wesley actually identified with the “political image”), then humans obviously are called upon by the Creator to represent God’s loving compassion to all creatures and all creation. Again, I question whether such love is best served by the language of superiority / inferiority.

Indeed, as he nears the conclusion of this remarkable sermon, Wesley asks the question, “What is it, then, that distinguishes human beings from other creatures?” It seems, then, that Wesley is about to draw this line of distinction in terms of qualities or capacities that might then be identified as “the image of God.” But in fact he refuses to do so; in the midst of an Enlightenment era enamored of human reason, Wesley asks, “Is it reason” that so distinguishes us? “Away with such an ambiguous term,” he essentially replies. Substitute it with a more accessible word as “understanding,” Wesley preaches, and is there any doubt that animals all share a degree in that? Do we really think other animals entirely lack understanding? (Wesley apparently did not entirely applaud Descartes’ relegation of the non-human creatures to being no more than physiological machines of instinct and reflex.)

What then? What makes human beings distinct, unique? Wesley's answer is in fact distinctly *theological*: we are "capable of God" – "capable," he writes later in the same sermon, "of loving, obeying and enjoying God." We are created for God and toward God – not as superior or against or apart from the rest of God's creatures, but as God's image or representative among and beside and on the side of those creatures. Wesley offers us in this sermon a truly wholistic soteriology. We are yet to live up to it.