

PROPOSAL

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“AGAPE AND RECONCILIATION”

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Theologians have promulgated the claim that *agape* is a necessary ingredient for genuine reconciliation. The meanings these theologians bestow upon *agape*, however, often presuppose conceptions contrary to Wesleyan theological distinctives. For instance, Anders Nygren and Gene Outka -- two highly influential *agape* scholars -- claim only to be analyzing love motifs in Christian history and *agape*'s ethical ramifications, respectively. Yet their *agape* proposals undermine Wesleyan distinctives, such (1) as the God-human synergy of salvation initiated through prevenient grace (Nygren equates *agape* with Luther's notion of an all-determining redeemer), (2) the intrinsic value of the divinely created order (Nygren argues that God's *agape* starts with the conviction that creatures lack worth), and (3) divine omniscience (Outka, following Karl Barth, contends that God does not take into account the characteristics, whether good or bad, of the subjects God loves; to be omniscient is to account for all things).

In this paper, I briefly address the conceptions of *agape* held by Nygren, Outka, and others to reveal what I consider their conceptual inadequacies and to demonstrate the need for a more adequate conceptual scheme. As a reconstructive counterproposal, I

offer my own conception of *agape* meant to correspond with various Wesleyan theological distinctives. I define love as acting intentionally, in sympathetic response to previous acts by God and others, to attain a high degree of well-being given the degrees of ill and well-being possible for a particular act. I define *agape* as a specific type of love that responds antagonistically to activity generating ill-being. Because *agape* opposes activity that generates ill-being, it is a necessary, but not sufficient, love-ingredient for reconciliation.

I close the paper by discussing the similarities and differences between divine expressions of *agape* and divinely-inspired creaturely *agape* expressions. I note that love is essential to deity, because love constitutes the divine essence. *That* God loves is necessary; God loves involuntarily, in this sense. However, *how* God loves is neither fully determined by the creatures nor by the divine essence; *how* God loves is contingent. I also note that, although creatures have often chosen to act in unloving ways, creatures are capable of imitating God in their loving. Creatures can do so, because God acts as (1) the moment-by-moment initiator of a loving relationship, (2) provider of the possibility of love, and (3) one who calls others to actualize that love possibility. In short, creatures can love because of God's prevenient grace. Because God, whose name and nature is love, provides the possibility and inspiration for expressions of *agape*, reconciliation is possible.