


## Mail Message



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**From:** <ENCTom@aol.com>  
**To:** Sharon Pearson, Anderson.GWIA."phillipt@enc.edu"  
**Date:** Thursday - August 17, 2000 10:03 AM  
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Sharon,

I was pleased to hear of the theme for the 2001 meeting of the Wesleyan Theological Society. I would very much like to present a paper as proposed below.

Thanks,  
Tom Phillips

PAPER PROPOSAL FOR THE 2001 MEETING OF THE  
WESLEYAN THEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

"Love as Self-Assertion: An Important Corrective to Wesleyan/Holiness Theology"

In Wesleyan/Holiness circles, we have a long and noble tradition of standing with the poor, the neglected, and the disenfranchised. Among many Wesleyan/Holiness theologians, the notion of perfect love and Christian holiness must, almost by definition, include an advocacy for the powerless. For many holiness theologians, myself included, the social and ethical imperative of Christian holiness demands that persons and communities speak for the weakest and most vulnerable in society. This noble tradition has, of course, been expressed both in the ministry of John and Charles Wesley and in the ministry of many strands of the American holiness movement. I do not wish to undermine this tradition, but I do want to suggest that this tradition typically employs the rhetoric of the powerful. That is, one can only speak for the marginalized, the neglected, and the powerless if one is not included among the marginalized, the neglected, and the powerless.

This tradition contains the ironic potential for two problems. First, we must consider the very real potential that one's commitment to action can become demeaning and condescending to the very persons whom one seeks to help. This potential for objectifying persons and treating them as mere "victims" to be helped in a one-way relationship is real and should not be ignored. In this paper, however, my primary focus lies in the second area.

Second, this tradition contains the danger of refusing to allow the powerless to speak for themselves. As theologians, I would suggest that we must begin to conceive of perfect love and Christian holiness in ways that allow the powerless, the marginalized, and the disenfranchised to speak for themselves. Because many Wesleyan/Holiness theologians begin their soteriology with a construct which defines sin as selfishness, they often then proceed to speak of Christian holiness and perfect love in terms of "selflessness." This understanding, I will argue, is utterly destructive to the disadvantaged.

If Christian holiness and perfect love are defined as selflessness, then, almost definition, self-assertion is contrary to love--and perhaps even blatant sin. For the privileged and powerful, this theological construct is not particularly damaging since they do not sense any urgency for change in their status, but for the powerless, the ones who desperately need to see change in the existing order, this faulty theological construct renders any quest for equity "selfish" and thus "sinful."

In a sad and pathetic perversion of justice, the powerless cannot assert themselves without being labeled "selfish." The powerless become even more powerless. They must wait upon the powerful to act "selflessly" in their behalf. The powerless become mere objects upon whom the powerful selflessly pour "compassion."

For the powerless, I want to propose an alternative understanding of love--love as self-assertion. The Biblical basis for this understanding is found in Paul's discussion of his rights as an apostle. Paul argues, in a most self-assertive fashion, that he has every right to be treated as an apostle and that he will not allow his converts to deny him his "rights." Here, where Paul stands in the position of the abused, he asserts himself and his rights. Paul's arguments (particularly in Galatians and 2 Corinthians) cannot, by any stretch of the imagination, be called "selfless." Paul, I will argue, represents a theology of love that fits the situation of the powerless--love as self-assertion.

For Paul, a failure to assert one's own rights is a violation of love, because to allow another to abuse and violate his rights was an act of unlove toward the abuser. Paul's love for his congregation would not allow him to take part in his own victimization, because Paul's victimization hurt not only him, but also hurt his victimizer--and Paul loved his congregations too much to allow them to victim him. Paul understood that love required him to be self-assertive.

If you have any further questions about this proposal, feel free to contact me.

Tom Phillips  
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