



SPIRIT OF LOVE

A Trinitarian Theology of Grace

AMOS YONG

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*To Alma, the love of my life
with gratitude for the 25 years we have shared together,
and with eager anticipation of all that will come next . . .*



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Preface

I must begin this book with a confession. Up until a few years ago, I never would have thought I would have written a book on theology and love. That is, not until I was invited, in 2007, to be an advisory board member of the core research group for a John Templeton Foundation funded project: “The Flame of Love: Scientific Research on the Experience and Expression of Godly Love in the Pentecostal Tradition.” For this interdisciplinary research project intended to bring social scientists and theologians together, I was supposed to provide theological perspective. The first core group meeting of advisors and others in the spring of 2008 launched us all into vigorous discussions about the possibility and feasibility of combining interdisciplinary and theological perspectives on researching love as well as about the nature of Pentecostalism.¹ More importantly, it opened up extended consideration of the nature of godly love, why love language was not prominently featured in the pentecostal tradition, and what that might mean for the fortunes of this research endeavor.²

I will return in the third chapter to further discuss the Godly Love project. At the moment, however, I recall being quite skeptical that the project itself was based on a mistaken categorical association. Pentecostals were known for talking about divine power—the power of the Holy Spirit, to be exact—not about love; at least that was my initial reaction to the whole idea. And if I was right, we were going to be looking in vain

for enough references to love in general (never mind “godly love”) within the pentecostal tradition, and our failure to uncover this would end up undermining the project. Or even if we were to find love in the pentecostal tradition, its secondary status would call into question our project assumptions, objectives, and even methods. Whatever it was we were supposed to be studying, at that time I thought the project itself was quite wrongheaded in its approach.

I have come quite a long way in the last three years. Much of it has had to do with the patience of the project directors and other core group members with me. Along the way, I have come to realize two things, which are at the heart of this book. First, while references to love are not as prominent in the pentecostal tradition as are references to power, they are there, both in the contemporary landscape and, more important, at junctures early in the history of modern Pentecostalism. Second, there are untapped resources in pentecostal spirituality and theology for understanding a theology of love that can contribute to the wider discussion about godly love, its effects, and its redemptive and transformative power. The combination of these two intuitions that formed early on through our vigorous debate has led me on the path toward researching for and thinking about this book. What has emerged is a pleasant, but I should also say not totally unexpected, surprise: that there is a link between divine power and godly love in the person and work of the Holy Spirit, who is at the core of pentecostal spirituality and piety. In short—and here is my thesis for this volume—pentecostal understandings of the Spirit of God can shed new light on God as love and loving, and on what it means for creation as a whole and for human beings in particular to receive the love of God who gives graciously. I am optimistic that such pentecostal perspectives can be helpful for those in other Christian traditions as well as ecumenical theological discussions more generally.

I need to register three important caveats before proceeding. First, this volume makes no pretensions to presenting any exhaustive theology of love. We will indeed be covering a good deal of historical, scientific, and theological ground, but our coverage will be selective in each case, designed to engage with and undergird the overarching thesis of this volume, that regarding what might be called a pneumatological theology of love. Of course, such an endeavor is itself fraught with ambiguities and complexities since now we are hoping to unravel not just one mystery but

two: that related to the Holy Spirit and that to divine love! But I make no apologies. The biblical witness unambiguously declares both that “God is spirit” (John 4:24) and “God is love” (1 John 4:8, 16). The Christian tradition has spent the last two millennia attempting to elucidate the obscurity surrounding each revelatory claim. This book is motivated by the intuition that our understanding of each one can illuminate the other.

Yet before proceeding to our second caveat, it is imperative that I say just a bit more about what I mean by “spirit” and by “love”—the two central notions of this book. Of course, it is impossible to define “spirit” exhaustively and I will not even try that here. Suffice to say that in this book, I assume that the biblical claim that “God is spirit” can be understood at least in part by what Christians refer to as the experience of the Holy Spirit. This is not to collapse God as spirit into God the Holy Spirit—I am surely aware that there has been a longstanding historical debate about the relationship between these two notions—but it is to say that the Christian encounter with the Holy Spirit provides at least one window into our understanding of the spiritual nature of God. More precisely, for my purposes, writing as I am from the perspective of pentecostal–charismatic experience, God as spirit is understood at least partly in terms of the Spirit poured out on all flesh on the Day of Pentecost (Acts 2). The rest of this volume will fill out this rudimentary claim.

If it is impossible to delineate “spirit” concisely, it is just as difficult to do so for “love.” In order to provide some orientation for the discussion to come, however, let me suggest the following working definition: love is the affective disposition toward and intentional activity that benefits others.³ It is the last clause that allows for translation of the preceding into a theological key. The benefit of others understood theologically is suggestive of what the biblical witness calls health, wholeness, and salvation, and this is finally comprehensible in terms of what Jesus called the kingdom or reign of God. For our purposes, Jesus came to announce and inaugurate the reign of God in the power of the Spirit. Hence, our approach will be specifically pneumatological, with the goal of seeing if some aspects of this topic can be opened up through considerations specifically related to the Holy Spirit.

Caveat number two clarifies how this volume answers to some of my critics, in particular those who have been concerned in my work about what they feel to be a division between the economies of the Son and the

Spirit, an overly optimistic view of the Spirit's work in the world, and an eliding of the differences between the Spirit of creation and the Spirit of redemption. All of these are important matters in the classical theological tradition that get us into the thickets of the trinitarian mystery of salvation and of grace. While I have already provided some preliminary responses to these questions,⁴ the following pages unfold a more expansive answer, portrayed as a pneumatological soteriology of love and trinitarian theology of grace. Part of the challenge is that my work proceeds with one foot squarely in the evangelical tradition of theology, broadly defined, and with the other foot resolutely in the pentecostal movement, as complex and unwieldy as it is. For some, these two traditions overlap to a large extent, while for others, there are major differences that at present prohibit any substantive dialogue. Yet my theological career from the beginning has been to make a contribution from a pentecostal perspective to the wider theological conversation, both evangelical and ecumenical. Those to my right probably do not think this can be done (they think I should move further right), while those to my left probably wonder how I can maintain my evangelical sympathies. I have thought all along that it is precisely my pentecostal intuitions and sensibilities that might help us carve a *via media* between an inflexible conservatism and an unbridled progressivism in the contemporary theological landscape.

Such a conviction certainly drives what might be called the soteriology of love in this book. What follows is not only a pentecostal and pneumatological theology of love but also a pentecostal and pneumatological soteriology intended to provide a "big picture" about where pentecostal theology might be going. In brief, the Spirit of love is also the Spirit of the Father and the Son who is graciously given to the world so that she might sanctify and redeem the world for the glory of God.⁵ This is my pentecostal version of the pneumatological and trinitarian theology of grace beautifully envisioned by Catholic theologian David Coffey, especially in his early work which depicted the Spirit's gracious outpouring of the Son as bringing about not only the incarnation but also, through Jesus' Spirit of sonship, the gracing of many sons and daughters.⁶ It is also my pentecostal and pneumatological version of the trinitarian theology of grace brilliantly articulated by evangelical theologian Stephen Webb, for whom God is Giver, Given, and Gifting, and for whom the Gifting Spirit makes present and active the saving grace of God for the world.⁷ What is

minimally emphasized in both Coffey and Webb is that the gracious God and the Gifting Spirit of God is also the God who is love, who loves unconditionally, and whose Spirit of love never ceases to work for the salvation of the world.

In other words, this book in one sense brings together the various threads of speculative theology woven in my previous work but reenvision them around the themes of God as spirit and God as love. As before, I proceed convinced that the pentecostal “gift” to the church ecumenical is continuous with that of the broader Christian tradition, but with a difference, one revolving around our encounter with the Spirit of God in Christ. As opposed to so-called trinitarian theologies which seem inevitably to collapse into binitarian notions or even christocentric or christomonistic formulations (because of a marginalized, neglected, or even forgotten pneumatology), starting with the Spirit contributes to a more fully and robustly trinitarian theology which also adjusts our doctrines of creation and redemption in an eschatological direction. Further, the point is not about either a pessimistic (few shall be saved) or optimistic (oh, no, too many shall be saved) soteriology but one that captures the gospel—the good news—of the Father’s loving, unconditional, and gracious Gift of the Son through the Spirit for the salvation of a world otherwise awash in sin. In effect then, to think deeply from out of the pentecostal experience is to start with a charismatic God whose charisms (gracious gifts) are less supernatural capacities than they are the God of love himself, given in an unqualified way in the Son through the Spirit, and what difference such gifts might make for those of us who have been caught up in them. The following unfolds this trinitarian theology of grace, with a pentecostal accent. It presumes the work I have done before, but brings this forward in the hopes that such a pentecostal and pneumatological theology of love makes a resounding difference at the heart of the dogmatic and theological tradition, in particular its soteriology, trinitarian theology, and theology of grace.

Now my final caveat builds on the preceding more explicitly theological concerns toward a full, more personal confession and self-disclosure: researching for and reflecting on this book have brought me, in retrospect, full circle. Although I have published a number of books on pentecostal thought in the last decade, I have intentionally operated with a fairly “objective” stance as a theologian writing primarily for the wider academy.⁸ Against the emerging popularity of confessionally rooted theological

work in our late- or postmodern context, I have tried to strike a balance between assuming my ecclesial location within the pentecostal movement on the one hand, yet writing for both the church ecumenical/catholic and the theological and religious studies academy on the other hand. In order to address these latter audiences, I have had to maintain a levelheaded posture, one more fitting for the “proper” discursive approaches prevalent in these modernistic enterprises. In other words, I have had to soften, control, or altogether mute the more “enthusiastic” sensibilities that otherwise characterize my pentecostal commitments.

In this book, however, I am going to lay bare my pentecostal soul. In effect, it can be read as my personal *apologia pro vita sua*, at least insofar as such has unfolded across the last fifteen years of my work as a pentecostal theologian. This does not mean that I am going to simply take leave from academic integrity, formal argument, or scholarly documentation. It does mean that I proceed less as one detached from the ideas presented and more as one committed to, confessional of, even passionate about, what is at stake. Put another way, I grant here that I am working not only as a pentecostal theologian but as a pentecostal evangelist, and even a pentecostal missionary. As a pentecostal “missionary kid”—my parents came to the United States from Malaysia when I was ten years old to serve as pastors and missionaries to Chinese-speaking immigrants from Hong Kong to northern California—I have long realized that this is an inherent part of my spiritual DNA, and that it is time for me to explicitly claim and speak out of that identity. In some respects, readers can revisit my corpus of work produced to date in light of this book as an outworking of this missionary self-understanding and calling, even if I have been assiduous about avoiding such an explicitly missiological self-understanding.⁹

In this book I feel moved in my spirit to embrace that evangelistic and missionary posture. As we shall see, there are many other scholarly tomes and theologies of love on offer, and I would never claim that my book is an improvement on what has gone on before. Love is too complex, too beautiful, and too mysterious a reality for any one book to fully capture. But I do think that what I have to say makes some fairly important connections and leads us to helpful reconsiderations of love. And in the end, it is not just about understanding love better, but about knowing how to receive more of it and how to spread it around in redemptive ways. As Marx castigated the philosophical tradition for merely trying to understand the world rather

than to mobilize its transformation, I here urge that any proper understanding of divine love will result in embodying the mandate to change the world. We cannot be touched by the love of God, even in our intellect, without loving our neighbors. That is why the God who is love not only sent his only begotten Son into the world but also poured out his Spirit into human hearts so that she can help us make the world into a better place. It is this saving story and truth that the following pages are meant to explicate.

This missionary and evangelistic manifesto will unfold in three parts. Part I begins with the mysterious revelation of God as love, charting pneumatological trajectories toward a theology of love from the theological tradition, in dialogue with the contemporary sciences, and via a mapping of pentecostal spirituality. Part II goes deeper into the grammar of pentecostal experience of God revealed as spirit, especially as the Spirit who baptizes in holy love, by tracing out the performative dimensions of this baptism of love, exploring its pneumatological explications, and revisiting the pentecostal canon-within-the-canon of Luke-Acts. Part III deploys the pentecostal and pneumatological hermeneutic developed in part II toward a constructive charismatic theology of love for the twenty-first century that registers also Pauline and Johannine perspectives. The last chapter presents a manifesto on a pentecostal and pneumatological theology of love in nine theses: I proclaim that the God who is love is also the God who gives love and loves unconditionally, in Christ and through the Spirit, for the sake of the world, and thereby empowers us to go and do likewise. This is perhaps a simple reaffirmation of the gospel, but it is no less profound for that. I hope the following pages unfold both the simplicity and the profundity of the mystery of such a gracious God who is both love and spirit.



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Most important, though, I must thank my wife, Alma: this book will appear in the spring of 2012, right before we celebrate our twenty-fifth wedding anniversary. Alma, you have not only patiently shared your husband with a computer for most of your married life, but you have been unflinching in your support in so many ways big and small. You have endured the challenges that life has brought our way because you have believed in the God who loves us and who works all things together for our good. Nothing I do would be possible without your love, expressed daily in smiles, hugs, and deeds that energize me and help me to envision and dream of reaching higher and farther than I would have dared to on my own. The following pages do not even begin to do justice to the love you have shown, to me and to our children. For a man who otherwise has many words for his books, you leave me speechless, except to say: thank you Lord for this undeserved blessing who is my wife, and, Alma, I love you.

PART I



GOD IS LOVE

The Theology and Science of Love

CHAPTER 1



The Spirit of Charity

Toward a Theology of Love

One should not be surprised to hear that a great deal on love and theology of love has been published over the centuries and Werner Jeanrond's 2010 volume, for example, not only is the most recent installment of a long line of illustrious books on the topic but also provides an excellent overview of the state-of-the-question on these matters.¹ In addition to the more theological oriented approaches of Jeanrond and his predecessors are a wide variety of historical studies as well as philosophical analyses.² This is not to mention the emerging and even exploding field of scientific research on love, some of which we will discuss in the next chapter. All this to say that of books on love there is no end, and that the mysteries of love have perennially called forth authors who have attempted to communicate, if always in partially successful ways, about love's power, reality, and elusiveness.

This opening chapter will certainly not pretend to provide any overview of previous efforts. In fact, I will reproduce some rather one-sided perspectives, and concentrate on three main sets of ideas about love: Augustine's, Aquinas', and Tillich's. This rather narrow explication, however, is designed to fulfill very specific purposes related to the constructive arguments in the next two parts of this book. In particular, each of these theologians of love can be said also to have been a pneumatologist of love; that is, in each case, theology of love has been intimately connected with theology of the Spirit

(pneumatology). As we survey the terrain charted by their reflections, various facets of the interrelationship between love and the Holy Spirit will come into focus, and critical engagement with their ideas will help to lay much needed groundwork for our quest for a (pneumatological) theology of love.

Augustine: The Spirit and Divine Love

We begin our discussion of St. Augustine's (354–430) theology of love where Augustine himself began, at least in his earliest extant writings, on "the happy life" (*De beata vita*).³ These ruminations launched Augustine's philosophical and theological quest, one that would persist through much of his later writing.⁴ Framed as a dialogue involving his friends and his mother, early on it is Monica who observes that happiness involves not just getting what one wants, but wanting and getting good things (*HL* 10). But good material things can be lost or they fade away, and those who have such goods often are unhappy because they fear losing what they have (*HL* 11). Hence the ultimate good that brings happiness must be everlasting. Put positively, then, happiness derives from desiring and having God, and doing God's will; put negatively, happiness includes being free of unclean spirits, and this involves living chastely (*HL* 12, 17–19). Thus the happy person desires not the material things of the world that will eventually perish but the spiritual wisdom that will last forever.⁵ Those desirous of the former are the foolish, and they will be perpetually fearful, disappointed, and unhappy, while those who pursue the latter will come to see that what they are after is nothing less than the wisdom of God. This is the wisdom of the Father, incarnate in the Son, who is truth (*HL* 34). With this, we are led to the happy life of contemplation on the trinitarian God. Monica therefore exclaims at the end: "Cherish us as we pray, O Trinity[.] This is without doubt the happy life, and that life is perfect toward which we can, we must presume, be quickly brought through solid faith, lively hope, and burning love" (*HL* 35). Inevitably, the quest for happiness leads to God, to God's love, and to loving God.

I now shift to the more mature Augustine, picking up on his discussion on happiness in *De Trinitate* and his homilies on 1 John, both of which were finalized in all probability in the mid-410s.⁶ Book 13 of *De Trinitate* expands upon the major themes of *De beata vita*, in particular the connection between happiness, the good, the incarnation, and the wisdom of

God.⁷ Earlier in *De Trinitate*, Augustine had returned to unfold the interwoven character of the knowledge, goodness, and love of God. If in *De beata vita* the question was how human beings would recognize happiness if that involved desiring after eternal things and divine realities (which are not usually on our list of wants), then in *De Trinitate* the question is how human beings could recognize the divine Trinity sufficiently in order to desire or pursue after God. The epistemological problem is how we could wish to know the unknowable, or seek after the good that is transcendent, or desire after the love of God. How can we know that the God we think we love is no more than our projection? It is this challenge that leads Augustine at the turning point of the volume to reflect on the biblical witness “in a more inward manner” (T 8.1), since it is in and within ourselves that we can learn about these matters.

Thus we can only recognize the goodness and love God if we previously have experienced some form of goodness and love. And Augustine believes that in general we are capable of recognizing these in others since we all have some sense of what it means to be treated justly and to feel loved (T 8.9). In that case, “Let no one say ‘I don’t know what to love.’ Let him love his brother, and love that love. . . . This is the love which unites all the good angels and all the servants of God in a bond of holiness, conjoins us and them together, and subjoins us to itself. . . . And if a man is full of love, what is he full of but God?” (T 8.12). In short, the human experience of love provides the analogical bridge for us to recognize God as love, to receive God’s love, and to love God in response.

It is also here, in this part of *De Trinitate*, that Augustine draws on Scripture, in particular the first Epistle of John, to elucidate his point. Citing variously from the fourth chapter (especially verses 7-21) leads to the following line of reasoning: that we know not only what it means to love our neighbor but that we have an obligation to love our neighbor since we ourselves wish to be so loved; that to genuinely love our neighbor is to love our neighbor with the love of God since “God is love” (1 John 4:8, 16); and that thus to love our neighbor is also to love God. Perhaps at about the same time as he was completing *De Trinitate*, Augustine was preaching and teaching through 1 John.⁸ This sustained exegetical engagement with the first Johannine Epistle produced the following exegetical insights:

- that those who keep God's commandments to love are perfected in God's love (*TH* 1.9; 1 John 2:5);
- that "Two loves there are: of the world and of God: if the love of the world dwells in us, the love of God can find no entrance. The love of the world must depart, the love of God come in to dwell" (*TH* 2.8; 1 John 2:15);⁹
- that "there is nothing to distinguish the sons of God from the sons of the devil, save charity" (*TH* 5.7; 1 John 3:10);
- that "the Holy Spirit's work in man is to cause love and charity to be in him" (*TH* 6.9), and if we love our brothers and sisters then we do so only because the Spirit of God dwells in us: "There can be no love without the Spirit of God" (*TH* 6.10; 1 John 3:24);
- that if God is both spirit (John 4:24) and love (1 John 4:8, 16), then "in love is the Holy Spirit . . . whom evil men cannot receive" (*TH* 7.6), which is consistent with the claim in *De beata vita* that happiness can only emerge after being rid of unclean spirits (cf. 1 John 4:1-6);
- that he can therefore admonish those who are born of and know God (1 John 4:7): "Love, and do what you will. . . . Let love's root be within you, from that root nothing but good can spring" (*TH* 7.8);
- that we can know God's love is perfected in us and both that we abide in God and that God's Spirit abides in us if we love one another (*TH* 8.12; 1 John 4:13);
- that, further, if "God is love" and we can only love in and through God's love, then so also is it true to say: "love is God" (*TH* 7.5-7, 8.14) and that those who love their neighbors do so with divine love and love God as well;¹⁰ and
- that if the fear of the Lord prepares the way for charity, "when charity has taken up its dwelling, the fear that prepared the place for it is expelled. . . . The greater the charity, the lesser the fear; the lesser the charity, the greater the fear" (*TH* 9.4; 1 John 4:17-18).

In brief, these homiletical considerations deepened Augustine's existential and theological insights into human fears and happiness. They also strengthened both the connections between happiness and love on the one hand and between love and its negative relationship to unclean spirits and its positive relationship to the Holy Spirit on the other hand.