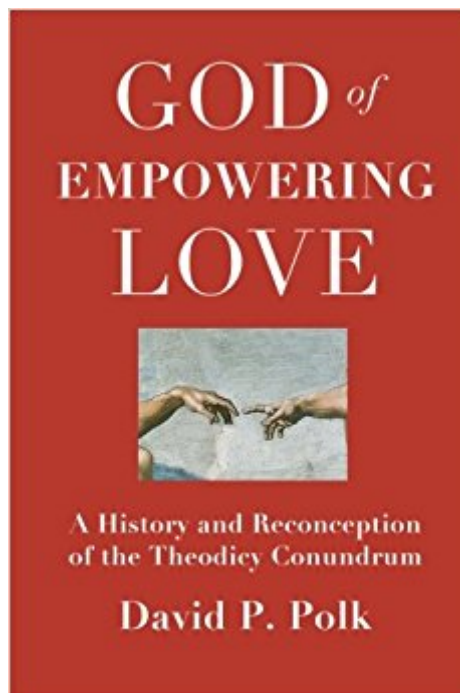




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God Of Empowering Love: A History And Reconciliation Of The Theodicy Conundrum



Synopsis

The path that through the centuries led Christian theology away from the dynamic and interactive God of the biblical writings to the immutable deity of classical theologians also involved a de-emphasis upon divine love in favor of divine power. David Polk traces this path with great care in remarkably accessible language, showing how at numerous points the ideas of creative thinkers, pointing to a better way, were largely ignored. With equal care and lucidity, Polk traces the eventual turn, still in progress, toward a new understanding that recovers what was lost and provides the groundwork for a creative resolution to age-old theological conundrums appropriate to our contemporary situation. Concluding with a resolution of the love-power question through a concept of empowering love, the book makes an important contribution to contemporary theological reflection. I can heartily recommend it not only as a textbook for college and seminary students but also as material for advanced-level adult study groups in local churches. It is not an easy task to speak to such a wide spectrum of persons, and we should be grateful to Polk for having done so.

~Russell Pregeant, Professor of Religion and Philosophy and Chaplain, Emeritus, Curry College

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Customer Reviews

Dr. David P. Polk is retired from a life of academia, publishing, and pastoral ministry but is still active as a constructive theologian deeply influenced by the orientation known as process-relational thought, rooted in the philosophy of Alfred North Whitehead.

This book has long needed to be written. Polk takes on the paradoxical theodicy question of - how

can God be both all powerful and all-loving in the face of evil? In a wonderfully detailed, logically argued and reader-friendly style, Polk traces the "living, loving empowering God of the biblical witness" to the Greek influenced theism that dominated Christian history - God as absolute Lord of all, eternal, immutable, passionless, into which love had to be "shoe-horned" as a mere attribute of this almighty God - a wrong turn from which the church has suffered for centuries. Following the theological twists and turns of this paradox down the centuries, Polk notes early twentieth century challenges to divine immutability in favour of a loving suffering God and contemporary moves to a redefinition of power, but argues that the dilemma cannot be resolved from the side of power but by starting with God as fully and unconditionally love and then asking, "What does power mean when applied to a loving, relational God?" In the tradition of Process Theology, Polk concludes, "We are created in the image of God who is empowering Love". This highly recommended gem of a book is a must for anyone, scholar or layperson, who has ever wrestled with this question in the light of their experiences. Dr. Val Webb, Australian theologian and author

In this book, David Polk masterfully combines academic rigor with lively readability to produce the most thoroughgoing and compelling study of God, power, and love in our time. Each chapter unfolds as a linear progression of thought – a sort of evolution of human thinking – from the philosophers of Greece to the great twentieth-century theologians responding to the Holocaust to postmodern thought and process philosophy. The tug-of-war between worldviews driven (even unconsciously) by a God defined as power or a God defined as love keeps the reader turning the page as history, theology, philosophy, and culture coalesce toward the urgency of that most profound of biblical truths, “God is love.” Polk unfurls in cogent language what exactly this means, why love is the most powerful – or rather, empowering – divine concept, and why traditional, all-controlling images of power are destructive to humanity and to the earth. You will discover why the question of love and power is especially critical in light of our current world crises, e.g., the rise of fundamentalism, dictatorial leaders, spiraling climate change, religious intolerance, and social injustice. All of these evils eventually return to our concept of the divine. Theology matters, and David Polk will convince you that it matters now more than ever.

Theology often entangles divine power and divine love in complicated ways. And that entanglement makes up a rich history – an intellectual and lived history of old questions of theodicy. If God is all-powerful and all-loving, one question goes, why is suffering so rampant? In this book,

Polk unearths historical testimonies to divine power and countertestimonies to divine love and reframes the question for our current moment. Instead of asking, “How is an all-powerful God loving?” Polk flips the question on its head: “How is an all-loving God powerful?” (ii). Reflecting on this question with the convictions of the gospels and process thought, Polk lifts up a compendium of historical voices and constructs a lovely category of divine “empowerment, where God neither coerces creation nor “leave[s] me floundering about on my own” (253). For Polk, God “loves me into moment-by-moment existence, empowering us to work for harmony, love, and justice, and intimately related and affected by all that goes on in creation in each of those loving moments. This is good book for those who desire to lean more into questions of theodicy, love, and power.

Although this book by theologian David Polk is valuable in many ways, most readers will likely be most grateful for the way Polk shows that the most well-known version of Christianity is not the only one and certainly not the best one. For Polk, the most important statement in the Bible is I John’s affirmation, “God is love.” But this doctrine was not central to the most influential theologians in Western Christianity: Augustine, Aquinas, Luther, and especially Calvin - who, as Polk quipped, “updated Augustine with a vengeance.” Indeed, Polk added, in a 80-page subject index for Calvin’s Institutes of the Christian Religion, there are only four paragraphs about the divine love. Rather than focusing on the love of God, he emphasized the divine omnipotence, which leaves no room for human freedom. It did not have to be that way, Polk points out. The second-century anonymous Letter to Diognetus said: “[God] willed to save man by persuasion, not by compulsion, for compulsion is not God’s way of working.” And the third-century theologian Origen said that “the universe is held in subjection by reason and wisdom, and not by force and necessity.” But the idea of divine omnipotence won out, so Christianity was saddled with a view of divine power that created an insoluble problem of evil, making it impossible to affirm that God is love in a coherent way. The idea that God is love was also contradicted by other attributes that were implied by divine omnipotence, that God is unchanging and impassive and incapable of empathy and suffering. It became a heresy, in fact, to affirm patripassianism: that when Jesus suffered on the cross, God the Father (first person of the Trinity)

suffered. Having explained these ideas, Polk then has a chapter entitled *Challenges to an Unchanging God* and a great chapter entitled *Odes to a Suffering God*. In that latter chapter, Polk introduces us to the Irish vicar Geoffrey Studdert-Kennedy, of whom most theologians including myself had not heard. Having been a chaplain in WW I, he wrote in 1925: "If the doctrine of the sovereign Kaiser-God was impossible to hold on the fields of Flanders and of France, it is even more impossible in the Europe of today. That God is dead." Polk then discussed the Russian theologian Nicholas Berdyaev, who called Christianity "the religion of the suffering God." Also the wonderful Dorothee Sölle, who blasted "the omnipotence of a heavenly being who decrees suffering" and said there is "no way to combine omnipotence with love." These are only a few of the things you will find in Polk's book, which he closes by discussing his own position, process theology, based on philosophers Alfred North Whitehead and Charles Hartshorne and theologian John Cobb.

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