



THEOLOGY IN COMMUNITY

THE LOVE OF GOD

Edited by CHRISTOPHER W. MORGAN



Contributions by D. A. Carson, Raymond C. Ortlund Jr., Andreas J. Köstenberger, Robert L. Plummer, John W. Mahony, Christopher W. Morgan, Daniel Strange, Dan Ebert, C. D. "Jimmy" Agan III, and Mariam J. Kamell

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—**Michael F. Bird**, Lecturer in Theology, Ridley College, Melbourne, Australia; author, *Evangelical Theology*

THE LOVE OF GOD

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THE LOVE OF GOD

Christopher W. Morgan, editor

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To the ones who have encouraged me most in the love of God:
my wife, Shelley,
and
my daughter, Chelsey

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

ApOTC	Apollos Old Testament Commentary
AUS	American University Studies
AUSTR	American University Studies, Series 7: Theology and Religion
BECNT	Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament
CTJ	<i>Calvin Theological Journal</i>
CTM	<i>Concordia Theological Monthly</i>
EvQ	<i>Evangelical Quarterly</i>
HALOT	<i>The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament</i>
ICC	International Critical Commentary
IJST	<i>International Journal of Systematic Theology</i>
JETS	<i>Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society</i>
NAC	New American Commentary
NICNT	New International Commentary on the New Testament
NIDOTTE	<i>New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis</i>
NIGTC	New International Greek Testament Commentary
NPNF [1 or 2]	<i>Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Series [1 or 2]</i>
PNTC	Pelican New Testament Commentaries
RTR	<i>Reformed Theological Review</i>
SBLDS	Society of Biblical Literature Dissertation Series
SJT	<i>Scottish Journal of Theology</i>
TDNT	<i>Theological Dictionary of the New Testament</i>
<i>Them</i>	<i>Themelios</i>
TNTC	Tyndale New Testament Commentaries
<i>TynBul</i>	<i>Tyndale Bulletin</i>
WBC	Word Biblical Commentary
WCF	Westminster Confession of Faith
ZAW	<i>Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft</i>
ZECNT	Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament

SERIES PREFACE

As the series name, *Theology in Community*, indicates, theology in community aims to promote clear thinking on and godly responses to historic and contemporary theological issues. The series examines issues central to the Christian faith, including traditional topics such as sin, the atonement, the church, and heaven, but also some which are more focused or contemporary, such as suffering and the goodness of God, the glory of God, the deity of Christ, and the kingdom of God. The series strives not only to follow a sound theological method but also to display it.

Chapters addressing the Old and New Testaments on the book's subject form the heart of each volume. Subsequent chapters synthesize the biblical teaching and link it to historical, philosophical, systematic, and pastoral concerns. Far from being mere collections of essays, the volumes are carefully crafted so that the voices of the various experts combine to proclaim a unified message.

Again, as the name suggests, theology *in community* also seeks to demonstrate that theology should be done in teams. The teachings of the Bible were forged in real-life situations by leaders in God's covenant communities. The biblical teachings addressed concerns of real people who needed the truth to guide their lives. Theology was formulated by the church and for the church. This series seeks to recapture that biblical reality. The volumes are written by scholars, from a variety of denominational backgrounds and life experiences with academic credentials and significant expertise across the spectrum of theological disciplines, who collaborate with each other. They write from a high view of Scripture with robust evangelical conviction and in a gracious manner. They are not detached academics but are personally involved in ministry, serving as teachers, pastors, and missionaries. The contributors to these volumes stand in continuity with the historic church, care about the global church, share life together with other believers in local churches, and aim to write for the good of the church to strengthen its leaders, particularly pastors, teachers, missionaries, lay leaders, students, and professors.

For the glory of God and the good of the church,
Christopher W. Morgan

PREFACE TO *THE LOVE OF GOD*

This volume has been designed to help readers grow in their grasp of what it means to confess that God is love. Don Carson begins by helping us think deeply about the difficult doctrine of God's love, especially ways people distort it. Because Scripture is our foundation, there are three chapters devoted to it. Ray Ortlund answers the question, "Is the God of the Old Testament a God of love?" Andreas Köstenberger tackles, "What does Jesus teach about the love of God?" Rob Plummer addresses the query, "What do the apostles teach about the love of God?"

Theological chapters follow. John Mahony replies to the question, "Love in the triune community?" Chris Morgan addresses, "How does the Trinity's love shape our love for one another?" Dan Strange answers negatively the interrogative, "Does the love of God require universalism?" Dan Ebert replies to, "How does God's love in Christ relate to Islam?" Jimmy Agan addresses, "How does God's love shape the Christian walk?" Mariam Kamell rounds out the volume by answering, "How does God's love inspire social justice?"

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DISTORTING THE LOVE OF GOD?

D. A. CARSON



God is love. Everything we know about him teaches us that, and every encounter we have with him expresses it. God's love for us is deep and all-embracing, but it is not the warmhearted sentimentality that often goes by the name of love today. —Gerald Bray

Gerald Bray, in the quote above, is correct on two counts.¹ First, God is love, and this grand subject is a major theme of the Scriptures and of this book, which seeks to capture something of the Bible's content and ethos on the subject. Second, Scripture's presentation of God's love is far from the "warmhearted sentimentality" so commonly confused with love today. This book focuses on a positive presentation of God's love in Scripture, theology, and Christian living. Nevertheless, a correction of distortions of God's love is foundational and is the subject of this chapter. I will set the distortions over against the rich and nuanced biblical picture of the love of God.

Why the Doctrine of the Love of God Must Be Judged Difficult

There are at least five reasons that the doctrine of the love of God must be judged difficult.

1) If people believe in God at all today, the overwhelming majority hold that this God—however he, she, or it may be understood—is a loving being. But that is what makes the task of the Christian witness so daunting, for this widely disseminated belief in the love of God is set with

¹ Gerald Bray, *God Is Love: A Biblical and Systematic Theology* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), 17.

increasing frequency in some matrix other than biblical theology. The result is that when informed Christians talk about the love of God, they mean something very different from what is meant in the surrounding culture. Worse, neither side may perceive that that is the case.

Consider some recent products of the film industry, that celluloid preserve that both reflects and shapes Western culture. For our purposes, science-fiction films may be divided into two kinds. Perhaps the more popular ones are the slam-bang, shoot-'em-up kind, such as *Independence Day* or the four-part *Alien* series, complete with loathsome evil. Obviously the aliens have to be nasty, or there would be no threat and therefore no targets and no fun. Rarely do these films set out to convey a cosmological message, still less a spiritual one.

The other sort of film in this class, trying to convey a message even as it seeks to entertain, almost always portrays the ultimate power as benevolent. On the border between the two kinds of films is the *Star Wars* series, with its treatment of the morally ambiguous Force, but even this series tilts toward the assumption of a final victory for the "light" side of the Force. *ET*, as Roy Anker has put it, is "a glowing-heart incarnation tale that climaxes in resurrection and ascension."² And in Jodie Foster's *Contact*, the unexplained intelligence is suffused with love, wisely provident, gently awesome.

Anker himself thinks this "indirection," as he calls it, is a great help to the Christian cause. Like the writings of J. R. R. Tolkien and C. S. Lewis, these films help people *indirectly* to appreciate the sheer goodness and love of God. I am not nearly so sanguine. Tolkien and Lewis still lived in a world shaped by the Judeo-Christian heritage. Their "indirection" was read by others in the culture who had also been shaped by that heritage, even though many of their readers were not Christians in any biblical sense.

But the worldview of *Contact* is monistic, naturalistic, and pluralistic (after all, the film was dedicated to Carl Sagan). It has far more connections with New Age, Pollyannaish optimism than anything substantive. Suddenly the Christian doctrine of the love of God becomes very difficult, for the entire framework in which it is set in Scripture has been replaced.

2) To put this another way, we live in a culture in which many other and complementary truths about God are widely *disbelieved*. I do not think that what the Bible says about the love of God can long survive at

² Roy Anker, "Not Lost in Space," *Books and Culture* 3 (November/December 1997): 13.

the forefront of our thinking if it is abstracted from the sovereignty of God, the holiness of God, the wrath of God, the providence of God, or the personhood of God—to mention only a few nonnegotiable elements of basic Christianity.

The result, of course, is that the love of God in our culture has been purged of anything the culture finds uncomfortable. The love of God has been sanitized, democratized, and above all sentimentalized. This process has been going on for some time. My generation was taught to sing, “What the world needs now is love, sweet love,” in which we robustly instruct the Almighty that we do not need another mountain (we have enough of them), but we could do with some more love. The hubris is staggering.

It has not always been so. In generations when almost everyone believed in the justice of God, people sometimes found it difficult to believe in the love of God. The preaching of the love of God came as wonderful good news. Nowadays, if you tell people that God loves them, they are unlikely to be surprised. Of course God loves me; he’s like that, isn’t he? Besides, why shouldn’t he love me? I’m kind of cute, or at least as nice as the next person. I’m okay, you’re okay, and God loves you and me.

Even in the mid-1980s, according to Andrew Greeley, three-quarters of his respondents in an important poll reported that they preferred to think of God as “friend” rather than as “king.”³ I wonder what the percentage would have been if the option had been “friend” or “judge.” Today most people seem to have little difficulty believing in the love of God; they have far more difficulty believing in the justice of God, the wrath of God, and the noncontradictory truthfulness of an omniscient God. But is the biblical teaching on the love of God maintaining its shape when the meaning of “God” dissolves in mist?

We must not think that Christians are immune from these influences. In an important book, Marsha Witten surveys what is being preached in the Protestant pulpit.⁴ Let us admit the limitations of her study. Her pool of sermons was drawn, on the one hand, from the Presbyterian Church (USA), scarcely a bastion of confessional evangelicalism; and, on the other, from churches belonging to the Southern Baptist Convention. Strikingly, on many of the crucial issues, there was only marginal statistical difference between these two ecclesiastical heritages. A more significant limitation was that the sermons she studied all focused on the

³Andrew M. Greeley, *Religious Change in America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), 37.

⁴Martha G. Witten, *All Is Forgiven: The Secular Message in American Protestantism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993).

parable of the prodigal son (Luke 15). That is bound to slant sermons in a certain direction.

Nevertheless, her book abounds in lengthy quotations from these sermons, and they are immensely troubling. There is a powerful tendency to “present God through characterizations of his inner states, with an emphasis on his emotions, which closely resemble those of human beings. . . . God is more likely to ‘feel’ than to ‘act,’ to ‘think’ than to ‘say.’”⁵ Or again:

The relatively weak notion of God’s fearsome capabilities regarding judgment is underscored by an almost complete lack of discursive construction of anxiety around one’s future state. As we have already seen, the sermons dramatize feelings of anxiety for listeners over many other (this-worldly) aspects of their removal from God, whether they are discussing in the vocabulary of sin or in other formulations. But even when directly referring to the unconverted, only two sermons press on fear of God’s judgment by depicting anxiety over salvation, and each text does this only obliquely, as it makes the point indirectly on its way to other issues while buffering the audience from negative feelings. . . . The transcendent, majestic, awesome God of Luther and Calvin—whose image informed early Protestant visions of the relationship between human beings and the divine—has undergone a softening of demeanor through the American experience of Protestantism, with only minor exceptions. . . . Many of the sermons depict a God whose behavior is regular, patterned, and predictable; he is portrayed in terms of the consistency of his behavior, of the conformity of his actions to the single rule of “love.”⁶

With such sentimentalizing of God multiplying in Protestant churches, it does not take much to see how difficult maintaining a *biblical* doctrine of the love of God can be.

3) Some elements of the larger and still developing patterns of post-modernism play into the problem with which we are dealing. Because of remarkable shifts in the West’s epistemology, more and more people believe that the only heresy left is the view that there is such a thing as heresy. They hold that all religions are fundamentally the same and that, therefore, it is not only rude but profoundly ignorant and old-fashioned to try to win others to your beliefs since implicitly that is announcing that theirs are inferior.⁷

⁵ Ibid., 40.

⁶ Ibid., 50, 53, 135.

⁷ I have discussed these matters at some length in D. A. Carson, *The Gagging of God: Christianity Confronts Pluralism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1996).

This stance, fueled in the West, now reaches into many parts of the world. For example, in a recent book Caleb Oluremi Oladipo outlines *The Development of the Doctrine of the Holy Spirit in the Yoruba (African) Indigenous Church Movement*.⁸ His concern is to show the interplay between Christian beliefs and Yoruba traditional religion on the indigenous church. After establishing “two distinct perspectives” that need not detain us here, Oladipo writes:

These two paradigmatic [*sic*] perspectives in the book are founded on a fundamental assertion that the nature of God is universal love. This assertion presupposes that while Western missionaries asserted that the nature of God is universal love, most missionaries have denied salvation to various portions of the world population, and in most cases they did so indiscriminately. The book points out the inconsistencies of such a view, and attempts to bring coherency between Christianity and other religions in general, and Yoruba Traditional Religion in particular.⁹

In short, the most energetic cultural tide, postmodernism, powerfully reinforces the most sentimental, syncretistic, and often pluralistic views of the love of God, with no other authority base than the postmodern epistemology itself. But that makes the articulation of a biblical doctrine of God and of a biblical doctrine of the love of God an extraordinarily difficult challenge.

4) The first three difficulties stem from developments in the culture that make grasping and articulating the doctrine of the love of God a considerable challenge. This fourth element is in certain respects more fundamental. In the cultural rush toward a sentimentalized, sometimes even nontheistic vision of the love of God, we Christians have sometimes been swept along to the extent that we have forgotten that *within Christian confessionalism* the doctrine of the love of God poses its difficulties. This side of two world wars; genocide in Russia, China, Germany, and Africa; mass starvation; Hitler and Pol Pot; endless disgusting corruptions at home and abroad—all in the twentieth century—is the love of God such an obvious doctrine? Of course, that is raising the difficulties from an experiential point of view. One may do the same thing from the perspective of systematic theology. Precisely how does one integrate what the Bible says about the love of God with what the Bible says about God’s

⁸ Caleb Oluremi Oladipo, *The Development of the Doctrine of the Holy Spirit in the Yoruba (African) Indigenous Church Movement*, AUSTR 185 (New York: Peter Lang, 1996).

⁹ Ibid.

sovereignty, extending as it does even over the domain of evil? What does love mean in a being whom at least some texts treat as impassible? How is God's love tied to God's justice?

In other words, one of the most dangerous results of the impact of contemporary sentimentalized versions of love on the church is our widespread inability to think through the fundamental questions that alone enable us to maintain a doctrine of God in biblical proportion and balance. However glorious and privileged a task that may be, none of it is easy. We are dealing with God, and fatuous reductionisms are bound to be skewed and dangerous.

5) Finally, the doctrine of the love of God is sometimes portrayed within Christian circles as much easier and more obvious than it really is, and this is achieved by overlooking some of the distinctions the Bible itself introduces when it depicts the love of God. This is so important that it becomes my next major point.

Some Different Ways the Bible Speaks of the Love of God

I had better warn you that not all of the passages to which I refer actually use the word *love*. When I speak of the doctrine of the love of God, I include themes and texts that depict God's love without ever using the word, just as Jesus tells parables that depict grace without using that word.

With that warning to the fore, I draw your attention to five distinguishable ways the Bible speaks of the love of God. This is not an exhaustive list, but it is heuristically useful.

1) *The peculiar love of the Father for the Son and of the Son for the Father*. John's Gospel is especially rich in this theme. Twice we are told that the Father loves the Son, once with the verb *agapaō* (John 3:35), and once with *phileō* (5:20). Yet the Evangelist also insists that the world must learn that Jesus loves the Father (14:31). This intra-Trinitarian love of God not only marks off Christian monotheism from all other monotheisms but is bound up in surprising ways with revelation and redemption.

2) *God's providential love over all that he has made*. By and large the Bible veers away from using the word *love* in this connection, but the theme is not hard to find. God creates everything, and before there is a whiff of sin, he pronounces all that he has made to be "good" (Genesis 1). This is the product of a *loving* Creator. The Lord Jesus depicts a world in which God clothes the grass of the fields with the glory of wildflowers seen by no human being, perhaps, but seen by God. The lion roars and hauls down its prey, but it is God who feeds the animal. The birds of the

air find food, but that is the result of God's loving providence; and not a sparrow falls from the sky apart from the sanction of the Almighty (Matthew 6). If this were not a benevolent providence, a *loving* providence, then the moral lesson that Jesus drives home, viz., that this God can be trusted to provide for his own people, would be incoherent.

3) *God's salvific stance toward his fallen world.* God so loved *the world* that he gave his Son (John 3:16). I know that some try to take *kosmos* ("world") here to refer to the elect. But that really will not do. All the evidence of the usage of the word in John's Gospel is against the suggestion. True, *world* in John does not so much refer to bigness as to badness. In John's vocabulary, *world* is primarily the moral order in willful and culpable rebellion against God. In John 3:16 God's love in sending the Lord Jesus is to be admired not because it is extended to so big a thing as the world, but to so bad a thing; not to so many people, as to such wicked people. Nevertheless, elsewhere John can speak of "the *whole* world" (1 John 2:2),¹⁰ thus bringing bigness and badness together. More importantly, in Johannine theology the disciples themselves once belonged to the world but were drawn out of it (e.g., John 15:19). On this axis, God's love for the world cannot be collapsed into his love for the elect.

The same lesson is learned from many passages and themes in Scripture. However much God stands in judgment over the world, he also presents himself as the God who invites and commands all human beings to repent. He orders his people to carry the gospel to the farthest corner of the world, proclaiming it to men and women everywhere. To rebels the sovereign Lord calls out, "As surely as I live . . . I take no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but rather that they turn from their ways and live. Turn! Turn from your evil ways! Why will you die, people of Israel?" (Ezek. 33:11).¹¹

4) *God's particular, effective, selecting love toward his elect.* The elect may be the entire nation of Israel or the church as a body or individuals. In each case, God sets his affection on his chosen ones in a way in which he does not set his affection on others. The people of Israel are told, "The LORD did not set his affection on you and choose you because you were more numerous than other peoples, for you were the fewest of all peoples. But it was because the LORD loved you and kept the oath he swore to your

¹⁰ Scripture quotations in this chapter are taken from The Holy Bible, New International Version®, NIV®. Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by Biblica, Inc.™ Used by permission. All rights reserved worldwide.

¹¹ The force of this utterance is not diminished by observing that it is addressed to the house of Israel, for not all in the house of Israel are finally saved; in Ezekiel's day, many die in judgment.

ancestors that he brought you out with a mighty hand and redeemed you from the land of slavery, from the power of Pharaoh king of Egypt" (Deut. 7:7–8; cf. 4:37). Again: "To the LORD your God belong the heavens, even the highest heavens, the earth and everything in it. Yet the LORD set his affection on your ancestors and loved them, and he chose you, their descendants, above all the nations—as it is today" (10:14–15).

The striking thing about these passages is that when Israel is contrasted with the universe or with other nations, the distinguishing feature has nothing of personal or national merit; it is nothing other than the love of God. In the very nature of the case, then, God's love is directed toward Israel in these passages in a way in which it is *not* directed toward other nations.

Obviously, this way of speaking of the love of God is unlike the other three ways of speaking of God's love that we have looked at so far. This discriminating feature of God's love surfaces frequently. "I have loved Jacob, but Esau I have hated" (Mal. 1:2–3), God declares. Allow all the room you like for the Semitic nature of this contrast, observing that the absolute form can be a way of articulating absolute preference; yet the fact is that God's love in such passages is peculiarly directed toward the elect.

Similarly, in the New Testament: Christ "loved the church" (Eph. 5:25). Repeatedly the New Testament texts tell us that the love of God or the love of Christ is directed toward those who constitute the church.

5) *Finally, God's love is sometimes said to be directed toward his own people in a provisional or conditional way—conditioned, that is, on obedience.* It is part of the relational structure of knowing God; it does not have to do with how we become true followers of the living God but with our relationship with him once we do know him. "Keep yourselves in God's love," Jude exhorts his readers (v. 21), leaving the unmistakable impression that someone might *not* keep himself or herself in the love of God. Clearly this is not God's providential love; it is pretty difficult to escape that. Nor is this God's yearning love, reflecting his salvific stance toward our fallen race. Nor is it his eternal, elective love. If words mean anything, one does not, as we shall see, walk away from that love either.

Jude is not the only one who speaks in such terms. The Lord Jesus commands his disciples to remain in his love (John 15:9) and adds, "If you keep my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commands and remain in his love" (v. 10). To draw a feeble analogy: although there is a sense in which my love for my children is immutable, so help me God, regardless of what they do, there is another

sense in which they know well enough that they must remain in my love. If for no good reason my teenagers do not get home by the time I have prescribed, the least they will experience is a bawling out, and they may come under some restrictive sanctions. There is no use reminding them that I am doing this because I love them. That is true, but the manifestation of my love for them when I ground them and when I take them out for a meal or attend one of their concerts or take my son fishing or my daughter on an excursion of some sort is rather different in the two cases. Only the latter will feel much more like remaining in my love than falling under my wrath.

Nor is this a phenomenon of the new covenant alone. The Decalogue declares God to be the one who shows his love to a “thousand generations of *those who love me and keep my commandments*” (Ex. 20:6). Yes, “the LORD is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in love” (Ps. 103:8). In this context, his love is *set over against* his wrath. Unlike some other texts, his people live under his love *or* under his wrath, in function of their covenantal faithfulness: “He will not *always* accuse, nor will he harbor his anger forever; he does not treat us as our sins deserve or repay us according to our iniquities. For as high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is his love *for those who fear him*. . . . As a father has compassion on his children, so the LORD has compassion *on those who fear him*. . . . But from everlasting to everlasting the LORD’s love is *with those who fear him . . . with those who keep his covenant and remember to obey his precepts*” (vv. 9–11, 13, 17–18). This is the language of relationship between God and the covenant community.

Three Preliminary Observations on These Distinctive Ways of Talking about the Love of God

In concluding this chapter, it will be useful to draw some strands together.

1) It is easy to see what will happen if any one of these five biblical ways of talking about the love of God is absolutized and made exclusive, or made the controlling grid by which the other ways of talking about the love of God are relativized.

If we begin with the intra-Trinitarian love of God and use that as the model for all of God’s loving relationships, we shall fail to observe the distinctions that must be maintained. The love of the Father for the Son and the love of the Son for the Father are expressed in a relationship of perfection, untarnished by sin on either side. However much the intra-Trinitarian love serves as a model of the love to be exchanged between

Jesus and his followers, there is no sense in which the love of the Father redeems the Son, or the love of the Son is expressed in a relationship of forgiveness granted and received. As precious, indeed as properly awesome, as the intra-Trinitarian love of God is, an exclusive focus in this direction takes too little account of how God manifests himself toward his rebellious image bearers in wrath, in love, in the cross.

If the love of God is nothing more than his providential ordering of everything, we are not far from a beneficent if somewhat mysterious “force.” It would be easy to integrate that kind of stance into pantheism or some other form of monism. Green ecology may thereby be strengthened but not the grand storyline that takes us from creation to new creation to new heaven and new earth by way of the cross and resurrection of our Master.

If the love of God is exclusively portrayed as an inviting, yearning, sinner-seeking, rather lovesick passion, we may strengthen the hands of Arminians, semi-Pelagians, Pelagians, and those more interested in God’s inner emotional life than in his justice and glory, but the cost will be massive. There is some truth in this picture of God, some glorious truth. Made absolute, however, it not only treats complementary texts as if they were not there, but it steals God’s sovereignty from him and our security from us. It espouses a theology of grace rather different from Paul’s theology of grace and at its worst ends up with a God so insipid he can neither intervene to save us nor deploy his chastening rod against us. His love is too “unconditional” for that. This is a world far removed from the pages of Scripture.

If the love of God refers exclusively to his love for the elect, it is easy to drift toward a simple and absolute bifurcation: God loves the elect and hates the reprobate. Rightly positioned, there is truth in this assertion; stripped of complementary biblical truths, that same assertion has engendered hyper-Calvinism. I use the term advisedly, referring to groups within the Reformed tradition that have forbidden the free offer of the gospel. Spurgeon fought them in his day.¹² Their number is not great in America today, but their echoes are found in young Reformed ministers who know it is right to offer the gospel freely but who have no idea how to do it without contravening some element in their conception of Reformed theology.¹³

¹² See Iain H. Murray, *Spurgeon and Hyper-Calvinism* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1995).

¹³ There are echoes as well in R. K. McGregor Wright, *No Place for Sovereignty* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1996).

If the love of God is construed entirely within the kind of discourse that ties God's love to our obedience (e.g., "Keep yourselves in God's love," Jude 21), the dangers threatening us change once again. True, in a church characterized rather more by personal preference and antinomianism than godly fear of the Lord, such passages surely have something to say to us. But divorced from complementary biblical utterances about the love of God, such texts may drive us backward toward merit theology, endless fretting about whether we have been good enough today to enjoy the love of God—to be free from all the paroxysms of guilt from which the cross alone may free us.

In short, we need *all* of what Scripture says on this subject, or the doctrinal and pastoral ramifications will prove disastrous.

2) We must not view these ways of talking about the love of God as independent, compartmentalized *loves* of God. It will not help to begin talking too often about God's providential love, his elective love, his intra-Trinitarian love, and so forth, as if each were hermetically sealed off from the others. Nor can we allow any one of these ways of talking about the love of God to be diminished by the others, even as we cannot, on scriptural evidence, allow any one of them to domesticate all the others. God is God, and he is one. Not only must we gratefully acknowledge that God in the perfection of his wisdom has thought it best to provide us with these various ways of talking of his love if we are to think of him aright, but we must hold these truths together and learn to integrate them in biblical proportion and balance. We must apply them to our lives and the lives of those to whom we minister with insight and sensitivity shaped by the way these truths function in Scripture.

3) Within the framework established so far, we may well ask ourselves how well certain evangelical clichés stand up.

a) "God's love is unconditional." Doubtless that is true in the fourth sense, with respect to God's elective love. But it is certainly not true in the fifth sense: God's discipline of his children means that he may turn upon us with the divine equivalent of the "wrath" of a parent on a wayward teenager. Indeed, to cite the cliché "God's love is unconditional" to a Christian who is drifting toward sin may convey the wrong impression and do a lot of damage. Such Christians need to be told that they will remain in God's love only if they do what he says. Obviously, then, it is pastorally important to know what passages and themes to apply to which people at any given time.

b) "God loves everyone exactly the same way." That is certainly true in

passages belonging to the second category, in the domain of providence. After all, God sends his sunshine and his rain upon the just and the unjust alike. But it is certainly not true in passages belonging to the fourth category, the domain of election.

To sum up: Christian faithfulness entails our responsibility to grow in our grasp of what it means to confess that God is love.



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