

GOD'S LOVE AND GOD'S SOVEREIGNTY*

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The first address in this series outlined some factors that make the doctrine of the love of God a difficult thing to talk about. Some of these are cultural; others are bound up with the challenge of trying to integrate the many varied and complementary things the Bible says about the love of God. Further, what does such love look like in a God who is omnipotent, omniscient, sovereign, and transcendent? The Bible speaks of God's intra-Trinitarian love, His providential love, His yearning and salvific love that pleads with sinners, His elective love, and His conditional love. That first address also discussed what can go wrong if any one of these is absolutized.

The second address reflected on a few Bible passages that disclose the intra-Trinitarian love of God, and considered some of the implications. Now in this third address the focus is on God's love for human beings, but especially in relation to His own transcendence and sovereignty.

THE AFFECTIVE ELEMENT IN GOD'S LOVE

Though some have attempted to strip God's love of affective content, making it no more than willed commitment to the other's good, the philology does not support this view, nor does 1 Corinthians 13, where the apostle insists it is possible to deploy the most stupendous altruism without love.¹ It is worth pausing to note also some specific texts where the vibrant, affective element in the love of God is almost overpowering.

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¹ More on these points can be found in D. A. Carson, "On Distorting the Love of God," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 156 (January–March 1999): 3–12.

One of the most striking passages is Hosea 11. Of course the entire prophecy of Hosea is an astonishing portrayal of the love of God. Almighty God is likened to a betrayed and cuckolded husband. But the intensity of God's passion for the covenant nation comes to a climax in chapter 11. "When Israel was a child," God declares, "I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son" (v. 1).² The Exodus thus marks the origin of this covenant relationship. But the more God called Israel, the more they drifted away. God was the One who cared for them, taught them to walk, and healed them. He was the One who "led them with cords of human kindness" (v. 4). Yet they did not recognize Him. They sacrificed to the Baals and loved idolatry. So God promised judgment; they would return to "Egypt" and be subject to Assyria, that is, experience captivity and slavery, "because they refuse to repent" (v. 5). Their cities would be destroyed (v. 6). "My people are determined to turn from me. Even if they call to the Most High, he will by no means exalt them" (v. 7). Thus it sounds as if implacable judgment has been pronounced.

But then it is almost as if God cannot endure the thought. In an agony of emotional intensity He cries, "How can I give you up, Ephraim? How can I hand you over, Israel? How can I treat you like Admah? How can I make you like Zeboiim? My heart is changed within me; all my compassion is aroused. I will not carry out my fierce anger, nor will I turn and devastate Ephraim. For I am God, and not man—the Holy One among you. I will not come in wrath. They will follow the Lord; he will roar like a lion. When he roars, his children will come trembling from the west. They will come trembling like birds from Egypt, like doves from Assyria. I will settle them in their homes," declares the LORD" (vv. 8–11).

This passage as a whole means that the promised, impending judgment will not be the last word. Exile will be followed by return. When God declares that His heart is changed within Him and all His compassion is aroused, He does not mean He has changed His mind and Israel will be spared the punishment He decreed a few verses earlier. Rather, He means that any long-term threat of permanent judgment must be set aside: God will bring them back from captivity.

At one level this promise of return is common among the pre-exilic prophets. The emotional intensity of this passage is what especially draws our attention. Yet we should not be surprised. God repeatedly discloses Himself as a jealous God (as in the

² All Scripture quotations are from the New International Version, unless noted otherwise.

Decalogue), the God who abounds in "love and faithfulness." That glorious pair of words, constantly repeated in the Old Testament, was intoned to Moses as he hid in a cleft of the rock until he was permitted to peek out and glimpse something of the afterglow of the glory of God (Exod. 34:6). God grieves (Ps. 78:40; Eph. 4:30); He rejoices (Isa. 62:5); His wrath burns hot against His foes (Exod. 32:10); He pities (Ps. 103:13). And as already noted, He loves, indeed, with an everlasting love (103:17; Isa. 54:8).

In passages such as 1 John 4:7–11 believers are urged to love one another, since love is of God. The high point in the demonstration of God's love is His sending His Son as the "atoning sacrifice" for our sins. "Dear friends," John concludes, "since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another" (v. 11). Whatever the distinctive elements in the love of God, the same word is used for God's love and the Christian's love, and God's love is both the model and the incentive of our love. Doubtless God's love is immeasurably richer than ours, in ways still to be explored, but His love and our love belong to the same genus, or the parallelisms could not be drawn.

Many Christian traditions affirm the impassibility of God. The Westminster Confession of Faith asserts that God is "without . . . passions." If this is taken to mean that God is emotionless, it is profoundly unbiblical and should be repudiated. But the most learned discussion over impassibility is not so simplistic. Although Aristotle has exercised more than a little scarcely recognized influence on those who uphold impassibility, at its best impassibility is trying to avoid a picture of a God who is changeable, given to mood swings, and dependent on His creatures. *Our* passions shape our direction and frequently control our will. What should we say of God?

THE SOVEREIGNTY AND TRANSCENDENCE OF GOD

Five facts about God's sovereignty need to be noted, facts that relate to God's love.

First, God is utterly sovereign (He is both omnipotent and omniscient) and He is transcendent (in Himself He exists above time and space, i.e., above the created order with its intrinsic limitations). God is omnipotent, that is, He is able to do anything He wishes. Nothing is too hard for Him (Jer. 32:17); He is the Almighty (2 Cor. 6:18; Rev. 1:8). Jesus insists that with God all things are possible (Matt. 19:26). His sovereignty extends over the millions of stars in the universe, over the fall of a sparrow, over the exact count of the hairs of one's head. If you throw a pair of dice, the numbers that come up lie in the determination of God

(Prov. 16:33). Ecclesiastes shows that the ancients knew of the water cycle, but still the biblical writers preferred to say that God sends the rain. He is not the distant God espoused by Deism. Through the exalted Son He upholds all things by His powerful word (Heb. 1:3); indeed, He “works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will” (Eph. 1:11). This control extends as much to sentient beings as to inanimate objects. He can turn the heart of the king in any direction He sees fit (Prov. 21:1). He is the Potter who has the right to make some pottery for noble purposes and some for common use (Rom. 9:21). There can be no degrees of difficulty with an omnipotent God.

Moreover, He enjoys all knowledge. He not only knows everything; He even knows what might have occurred under different circumstances (more or less what philosophers call “middle knowledge”), and takes that into account when He judges (Matt. 11:20–24). The Bible includes several examples of God knowing what is labeled free contingent future decisions (e.g., 1 Sam. 23:11–13). God’s knowledge is perfect (Job 37:16). “He does not have to reason to conclusions or ponder carefully before he answers, for he knows the end from the beginning, and he never learns and never forgets anything (cf. Ps. 90:4; 2 Peter 3:8).”³ Precisely because He is the Creator of the universe, He must be independent from it. Indeed, in fine expressions that stretch the imagination, Isaiah affirms that God, the high and lofty One, “lives forever” (57:15) or “inhabits eternity” (RSV).

Second, God’s sovereignty extends to election. Election may refer to God’s choice of the nation of Israel, to His choice of all the people of God, or to His choice of individuals. The latter may be for salvation or for particular missions. Election is so important to God that He actually arranged to choose the younger of the two sons, Jacob and Esau, before they were born and therefore before either had done anything good or bad. This is so that “God’s purpose in election might stand” (Rom. 9:11). Even the highly diverse ways in which new converts are described in the Book of Acts reflects the comfortable, unembarrassed way in which New Testament writers refer to election. We often speak of people who “accept Jesus as their personal Savior.” These words are not found in Scripture, though they are not necessarily wrong as a synthetic expression. But Acts sums up evangelism at Pisidian Antioch by reporting that “all who were appointed for eternal life believed” (13:48). Writing of Christians, Paul says that God “chose us in him [Christ] before the creation of the world. . . . He

³ Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 191.

predestined us to be adopted as his sons through Jesus Christ" (Eph. 1:4–5). God chose the Thessalonian converts from the beginning to be saved (2 Thess. 2:13). Believers constitute a chosen race (1 Pet. 2:9). God's election even extends to angels (1 Tim. 5:21). This shows that election is not always tied to salvation (since there has arisen a Redeemer for fallen human beings but not for fallen angels), but is properly a function of God's sweeping sovereignty.

Moreover, the Lord's electing love is immutable. All that the Father has given to the Son will come to Him, and the Son will lose none of them because He came down from heaven to do the Father's will. And this is the Father's will, that He lose none of those the Father has given Him (John 6:37–40). In other words for the Son to lose any of those the Father has given Him, He would have to be either unable or unwilling to obey His Father's command. Small wonder, then, that John says Jesus knows His own sheep, and no one shall pluck them out of His hand (10:28–29).

Third, Christians are not fatalists. The central line of Christian tradition neither sacrifices the utter sovereignty of God nor reduces the responsibility of His image-bearers. In philosophical theology this position is sometimes called compatibilism. It simply means that God's unconditioned sovereignty and the responsibility of human beings are mutually compatible. It does not claim to show how they are compatible. It claims only that the evidence shows that they are not necessarily incompatible, and that it is therefore entirely reasonable to think they are compatible if there is good evidence for this.⁴

The biblical evidence is compelling. When Joseph told his fearful brothers that when they sold him into slavery God intended it for good while they intended it for evil (Gen. 50:19–20), he was assuming compatibilism. He did not picture the event as wicked human machination into which God intervened to bring forth good. Nor did he imagine God's intention had been to send him down there with a fine escort and a modern chariot but that unfortunately the brothers had mucked up the plan and so poor Joseph had to go down there as a slave. Rather, in one and the same event, God was operating and His intentions were good, and the brothers' intentions were evil. When God addressed Assyria in Isaiah 10:5–19, He told them they were nothing more than tools in His hand to punish wicked Israel. However, because

⁴ I have dealt with such matters at greater length in *Divine Sovereignty and Human Responsibility* (Atlanta: Knox, 1981; reprint, Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994) and in *How Long, O Lord? Reflections on Suffering and Evil* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1990), especially chapters 11–12.

they thought they were doing all this by their own strength and power, the Lord would turn around and tear them to pieces to punish their hubris after He had finished using them as a tool. That is compatibilism. There are dozens and dozens of such passages in Scripture, scattered through both Testaments.

Perhaps the most striking instance of compatibilism is recorded in Acts 4:23–29. The church had suffered its first whiff of persecution. Peter and John reported what had happened. The church prayed to God in the language of Psalm 2. Their prayer continued: “Indeed Herod and Pontius Pilate met together with the Gentiles and the people of Israel in this city to conspire against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed. They did what your power and will had decided beforehand should happen” (Acts 4:27–28). On the one hand there was a terrible conspiracy that swept along Herod, Pilate, Gentile authorities, and Jewish leaders. They conspired together and were accountable. On the other hand they did what God’s power and will had decided beforehand should happen.

A moment’s reflection discloses that any other account of what happened would destroy biblical Christianity. If the crucifixion of Jesus Christ is pictured solely in terms of the conspiracy of the local political authorities at the time, and not in terms of God’s plan (except perhaps that He decided at the last moment to use the death in a way He Himself had not foreseen), then this means the Cross was an accident of history. If it were an accident cleverly manipulated by God in His own interests, but not part of the divine plan, then the entire pattern of antecedent predictive revelation would be destroyed (including the Day of Atonement, the Passover lamb, the sacrificial system, and so forth). On the other hand if a person stresses God’s sovereignty in Jesus’ death, exulting that all the participants “did what your power and will had decided beforehand should happen” (4:28), while forgetting that it was a wicked conspiracy, then Herod, Pilate, Judas Iscariot, and the rest are exonerated of evil. If God’s sovereignty means that everyone under it is immune from charges of transgression, then there is no sin for which atonement is necessary. So why the Cross? Either way, the Cross is destroyed.

In short, compatibilism is a necessary component to any orthodox view of God and the world. Inevitably compatibilism raises important and difficult questions regarding secondary causality, how human accountability should be grounded, and much more that needs attention at another time.

Fourth, God is immutable. “But you remain the same, and your years will never end,” writes the psalmist (Ps. 102:27). “I the LORD do not change” (Mal. 3:6), the Almighty declares. His pur-

poses are secure, and their accomplishment inevitable. "Remember this, fix it in mind, take it to heart, you rebels. Remember the former things, those of long ago; I am God, and there is no other; I am God, and there is none like me. I make known the end from the beginning, from ancient times, what is still to come. I say: My purpose will stand, and I will do all that I please. . . . What I have said, that will I bring about; what I have planned, that will I do" (Isa. 46:8–11). "The plans of the Lord stand firm forever, the purposes of his heart through all generations" (Ps. 33:11; cf. Matt. 13:35; 25:34; Eph. 1:4, 11; 1 Pet. 1:20).

Rightly conceived, God's immutability is enormously important. It engenders stability and elicits worship. Bavinck speaks of God's unchangeable nature this way: "The doctrine of God's immutability is of the highest significance for religion. The contrast between being and becoming marks the difference between the Creator and the creature. Every creature is continually becoming. It is changeable, constantly striving, seeks rest and satisfaction, and finds rest in God, in him alone, for only he is pure being and no becoming. Hence, in Scripture God is often called the Rock."⁵

Yet when God's immutability is carefully discussed, theologians acknowledge that He is not immutable in every possible way or domain. He is unchanging in His being, purposes, and perfections. But this does not mean He cannot interact with His image-bearers in their time. The purposes of God from eternity past were to send the Son, but at a set moment in time and space the Son was actually incarnated. Even the most superficial reading of Scripture discloses God as a personal being who interacts with humans. None of this is ruled out by immutability.

Fifth, this view of God's sovereignty is coming under increasing attack, not only from numerous process theologians, whose primary recourse is to philosophical analysis and synthesis, but also from some who seek to ground their work in the Bible. This is now sometimes called the "open" view of God.⁶ Sophisticated responses are beginning to appear, though the debate cannot be discussed here. Some of these writers appeal to the approximately thirty-five texts where God is clearly said to "repent" (KJV) or "relent" (NIV) or change His mind. What shall we make of these verses?

⁵ Herman Bavinck, *The Doctrine of God*, trans William Hendriksen (Edinburgh Banner of Truth, 1951), 49 Cf Carl F H Henry, *God, Revelation and Authority*, vol 5 *God Who Stands and Stays, Part One* (Waco, TX Word, 1982), chapter 15

⁶ Clark Pinnock et al, *The Open View of God A Biblical Challenge to the Traditional View of God* (Downers Grove, IL InterVarsity, 1994)

God relented over a step He had already taken (Gen. 6:6–7; 1 Sam. 15:11, 35). He relented over what He had said He would do or even had started doing (Pss. 90:13; 106:44–45; Jer. 18:7–10; 26:3, 13, 19; Joel 2:13–14; Jon. 3:9–10; 4:2), sometimes in response to the prayer of an intercessor (Exod. 32:12–14; Amos 7:3–6). For those in the “openness of God” camp, these passages control the discussion, and the passages already discussed that affirm God’s immutability must be softened or explained away. But this cannot be done responsibly.⁷

Many of these verses relate to God’s refusing to destroy some party because that party had repented (e.g., God relented in the matter of destroying Nineveh because the city repented; Jon. 3:9–10). Some of the prophets *told* their readers that that is what God’s purpose had been all along when He made such threats (e.g., Ezek. 3:16–21; 33:1–20). This is simply a way of saying that God’s purposes are immutable when the situation is such and such; His purposes are different for a different set of circumstances. As for God relenting in response to the prayers of His people, one cannot think of such prayer warriors, whether Moses or Amos, arising apart from God raising them up; yet on the other hand, He condemned the people for not producing intercessors in the hour of need (e.g., 22:30–31). This is compatibilism; the same components recur. God remains sovereign over everything, and His purposes are good; He interacts with human beings; human beings sometimes do things well, impelled by God’s grace, and He gets the credit; they frequently do things that are wicked, and although they never escape the outermost bounds of God’s sovereignty, they alone are responsible and must take the blame.

This is not to suggest that any of this is easy or straightforward. Sooner or later one retreats into the recognition that there are some mysteries in the very being of God. The deepest of these are related to the fact that God as He has disclosed Himself in Scripture is simultaneously sovereign/transcendent, and personal. We cannot experience what it means to be sovereign or transcendent. We are finite creatures limited by time and space, with impregnable limitations on our authority and power. But we can extrapolate what authority and power mean until we glimpse in imagination what absolute sovereignty means, and we see that that is what Scripture ascribes to God. As little as we know about time and space, we can roughly imagine what transcendence means by a series of reflective negations (transcendence is not limited by time and space), and we see that the Bible can talk

⁷ See the excellent essay by Millard Erickson, “God and Change,” *Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* 1 (1997): 38–51.

about God that way. But in our personal experiences we are finite beings interacting with finite beings so that it is difficult for us to attach "personal" to God.

If I enter into a "personal" friendship with you, I ask questions, get to know you, share things with you, find myself rebuked by you, rebuke you in return, surprise you, listen to your conversation, learn what I did not know, and so forth. Sequence and finitude are presupposed. And you experience the same things at the other end of this "personal" relationship. But what does it mean to have a personal relationship with the transcendent, sovereign God? We cannot easily imagine this, whether by extrapolation of our finite experience or by strategic negations. We can see from His gracious revelation in Scripture and in Jesus Himself, that God is personal, but it is difficult for us to conceive exactly what that means. Lose that element, and you retreat into Deism, or pantheism, or something worse. God's sovereign transcendence and His personhood are both maintained in the Bible. Elevating His personhood to the exclusion of His transcendent sovereignty leads to the view that God is finite, progressively reduced, and certainly not the God of the Bible. That is the track being adopted by the proponents of an "open" God.

A RIGHTLY CONSTRAINED IMPASSIBILITY

Since God is utterly sovereign and all-knowing, what space is left for His emotions? The divine oracles that picture God in pain or joy or love surely seem a little out of place when this God knows the end from the beginning, cannot be surprised, and remains in charge of everything.

From such a perspective, is it not obvious that the doctrine of the love of God is difficult?

It is inadequate to answer by espousing a form of impassibility that denies that God has an emotional life, and that insists that all the biblical evidence to the contrary is nothing more than anthropopathism. The price is too heavy. This means that though you rest in God's sovereignty, you can no longer rejoice in His love. This means you can rejoice only in a linguistic expression that is an accommodation of some reality of which we cannot conceive, couched in the anthropopathism of love. Paul did not pray that his readers might be able to grasp the height and depth and length and breadth of an anthropopathism, and to know this anthropopathism that surpasses knowledge (Eph. 3:14–21).

Nor is it adequate to suggest that the "immanent" Trinity (which refers to God as He is in Himself, transcendent from the creation and focusing on His internal acts) is utterly impassible,

while the “economic” Trinity (which refers to God as He is immanent in His creation, focusing solely on deeds outside of Himself and in relation to His creation) does indeed suffer, including the suffering of love.⁸ I worry about such a great divorce between God as He is in Himself and God as He interacts with the created order. Such distinctions have heuristic usefulness now and then, but the resulting synthesis in this case is so far removed from what the Bible actually says that this leads down a blind alley. If we affirm the love of God as He is in Himself (the immanent Trinity), how is that love connected with His love interacting with the world (the economic Trinity), which is clearly a vulnerable love that feels pain?

Yet before writing off the impassibility of God, we must gratefully recognize what that doctrine is seeking to preserve. It is trying to ward off the kind of sentimentalizing views of the love of God and of other emotions (“passions”) in God that ultimately make Him a souped-up human being, but no more. For instance a God who is terribly vulnerable to the pain caused by our rebellion is scarcely a God who is in control or a God who is so perfect He does not, strictly speaking, need us. The modern therapeutic God may be superficially attractive because He appeals to our emotions, but the cost will soon be high. Implicitly this leads to a finite God. God Himself is gradually diminished and reduced from what He actually is. And that is idolatry.

Closer to the mark is the recognition that all God’s emotions, including His love in all its aspects, cannot be divorced from His knowledge, power, and will. If God loves, it is because He chooses to love; if He suffers, it is because He chooses to suffer. God is impassible in the sense that He sustains no “passion” or emotion that makes Him vulnerable from the outside, over which He has no control or which He has not foreseen. Equally, however, God’s will or choice or plan is never divorced from His omniscience and all His other perfections. Thus I am not surreptitiously retreating to a notion of love that is merely willed altruism; I am not suggesting that God’s love be dissolved in His will. Rather, I am suggesting that we will successfully guard against the evils that impassibility combats if we recognize that God’s “passions,” unlike ours, do not flare up out of control, changing our direction and priorities, domesticating our will, controlling our misery and our happiness, surprising and destroying our commitments. Rather, God’s “passions,” like everything else in God, are dis-

⁸ The most recent defense of this position is that of Peter D. Anders, “Divine Impassibility and Our Suffering God: How an Evangelical ‘Theology of the Cross’ Can and Should Affirm Both,” *Modern Reformation* 6 (July/August 1997): 24–30.

played in conjunction with the fullness of all His other perfections. In that framework God's love is not so much a function of His will as it is something that displays itself in perfect harmony with His will—and with His holiness, His purposes in redemption, His infinitely wise plans, and so forth.

Of course this means that in certain respects God's love does not function exactly like ours. How could it? God's love emanates from His infinite being, whose perfections are immutable. But this way of wording things guards the most important values in impassibility and still insists that God's love is real love, of the same genus as the best of love displayed by His image-bearers. And if there remain large areas of uncertainty as to how all this works out in the being and action of God, it is because we have returned by another route to the abiding tension between the biblical portrait of the sovereign, transcendent God and the biblical portrait of the personal God—and thus to the very mystery of God.

This approach to these matters accounts well for certain biblical truths of immense practical importance. God does not “fall in love” with the elect; He does not “fall in love” with us; He sets his affection on us. He does not predestine us out of some stern whimsy; rather, *in love* He predestines us to be adopted as His sons (Eph. 1:4–5). The texts of Scripture themselves associate the love of God with other perfections in God.

An example may be useful at this point. Picture Charles and Susan walking down a beach, hand in hand, at the end of the academic year. The pressure of the semester has dissipated in the warm evening breeze. They have kicked off their sandals, and the wet sand squishes between their toes. Charles turns to Susan, gazes deeply into her large, hazel eyes, and says, “Susan, I love you. I really do.”

What does he mean?

Well, in this day and age he may mean nothing more than that he feels like testosterone on legs and wants to go to bed with her. But if we assume he has even a modicum of decency, let alone Christian virtue, the least he means is something like this: “Susan, you mean everything to me. I can't live without you. Your smile poleaxes me from fifty yards. Your sparkling good humor, your beautiful eyes, the scent of your hair—everything about you transfixes me. I love you!”

What he most certainly does not mean is something like this: “Susan, quite frankly you have such a bad case of halitosis it would embarrass a herd of unwashed, garlic-eating elephants. Your nose is so bulbous you belong in the cartoons. Your hair is so greasy it could lubricate an eighteen-wheeler. Your knees are so disjointed you make a camel look elegant. Your personality

makes Attila the Hun and Genghis Khan look like wimps. But I love you!”

So when God comes to us and says, “I love you,” what does He mean?

Does He mean something like this? “You mean everything to me. I can’t live without you. Your personality, your witty conversation, your beauty, your smile—everything about you transfixes me. Heaven would be boring without you. I love you!” That, after all, is pretty close to what some therapeutic approaches to the love of God spell out. We must be pretty wonderful because God loves us. And dear old God is pretty vulnerable, finding Himself in a dreadful state unless we say yes to His love. Suddenly serious Christians unite and rightly cry, “Bring back impassibility!”

When God says He loves us, does He not mean something like the following? “Morally speaking, you are the people of the halitosis, the bulbous nose, the greasy hair, the disjointed knees, the abominable personality. Your sins have made you disgustingly ugly. But I love you anyway, not because you are attractive, but because it is my nature to love.” And in the case of the elect, God adds, “I have set my affection on you from before the foundation of the universe, not because you are wiser or better or stronger than others but because in grace I chose to love you. You are mine, and you will be transformed. Nothing in all creation can separate you from my love mediated through Jesus Christ.”

Is that not a little closer to the love of God depicted in Scripture? Doubtless the Father finds the Son lovable; doubtless in the realm of disciplining His covenant people, there is a sense in which His love is conditioned by our moral conformity. But God loves, whomever the object, because He is love. There are thus two critical points. First, God exercises this love in conjunction with all His other perfections, but His love is no less love for all that. Second, His love emanates from His own character; it is not dependent on the loveliness of the loved, external to Himself.

John’s point in 1 John 4:8, 16, “God is love,” is that those who really do know God come to love that way too. Doubtless we do not do it very well, but aren’t Christians supposed to love the unlovable, even our enemies? Because we have been transformed by the gospel, our love is to be self-originating, not elicited by the loveliness of the loved. For that is the way it is with God. He loves, because love is one of His perfections, in perfect harmony with all His other perfections.

That is the way God’s image-bearers should love too. In one of her loveliest sonnets, not written to be published, Elizabeth Barrett Browning wrote to her husband Robert Browning:

If thou must love me, let it be for naught,
 Except for love's sake only. Do not say,
 "I love her for her smile—her looks—her way
 Of speaking gently—for a trick of thought
 That falls in well with me, and certes brought
 A sense of pleasant ease on such a day"—
 For these things, in themselves, Beloved, may
 Be changed, or change for thee—and love, so wrought,
 May be unwrought so. Neither love me for
 Thine own dear pity's wiping my cheeks dry—
 A creature might forget to weep, who bore
 Thy comfort long, and lose thy love thereby!
 But love me for love's sake, that evermore
 Thou may'st love on, through love's eternity.

This we have learned from God as He has disclosed Himself in His Son: For "we love because he first loved us" (1 John 4:19). "While we were still sinners, Christ died for us" (Rom. 5:8). "Herein is love, not that we loved God, but that he loved us, and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins" (1 John 4:10, KJV).