

CHAPTER 4

Love and the Supremacy of Christ in a Postmodern World

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My generation was taught to sing:

*What the world needs now is love, sweet love—
It's the only thing that there's just too little of.*

Apart from the effrontery of telling God Almighty that in creation and providence he got his ratios wrong, the song does not acknowledge other things we need: holiness, joy in the Lord, obedient hearts. It does not even call us to recognize our creatureliness, which is our first responsibility. Even in the realm of love, the song never descends to the level of specifics. Contrast the sentimentality of the song with Jesus' robust insistence that the first commandment is to love God with heart and soul and mind and strength, while the second is to love our neighbors as ourselves (Mark 12:28–34). The song has just enough fuzzy sentiment that we can feel good about ourselves, but not enough truth to reflect much on what God says about love, or how he himself has supremely shown us what love looks like. In short, the song is neither ethically nor theologically serious.

By contrast, the five specific petitions found in John 17—petitions that Jesus, on the night he is betrayed, offers to his heavenly Father—though they are varied and interwoven, are all tied to some profound facet or other of the love of God. These prayers Jesus offers for his

followers—and they are all bathed in the theme of love, not least the Trinitarian love of God. They are painted on a canvas of incalculable sweep.

Jesus' thought in these prayers is not linear. He circles around, adding perspective and layers of understanding as he cycles through his petitions. It is not long before we recognize that although there are five specific petitions, they are all woven together, such that none can be removed without unraveling all of them—and together they are anchored in the love of God and the supremacy of Jesus Christ.

I shall begin by identifying the *five petitions* that Jesus offers for his followers, the *ground* on which each petition is offered or the *reason* the petition is put forward, its *purpose*, and the manner in which it is tied to the *love theme* of this chapter. Only then shall I focus on the supremacy of Christ and its connection to the love of God.

Jesus' Five Petitions

Jesus Prays That His Father Will Keep His Followers Safe

First, Jesus prays that his Father will keep his followers safe. “I will remain in the world no longer,” he says, “but they are still in the world, and I am coming to you. *Holy Father, protect them by the power of your name*—the name you gave me—so that they may be one as we are one. . . . My prayer is not that you take them out of the world but *that you protect them from the evil one*. They are not of the world, even as I am not of it” (17:11, 15–16).¹ The *reasons* why Jesus offers this prayer are that (a) he himself is going away, and so in his physical existence he will no longer be there to protect them (17:11); and (b) they, like him, do not belong to the world (17:16). Unlike him, of course, they once did belong to the world. But Christ had chosen them out of the world (15:19), and now, in principle, they belong to the world no more than he does, and so they will need protection from the world. The long-term *purpose* of this protection is (Jesus says to his Father) “that they may be one as we are one” (17:11). And such unity has as its aim, Jesus goes on to say, the display of the incredible truth that the Father loves them just as he loves the Son (17:23) and that the love of the triune

¹Unless otherwise indicated, Scripture quotations are taken from *The Holy Bible: New International Version* (NIV).

God may be in them (17:26). So Jesus' first petition is that his Father will keep his followers safe.

Jesus Prays That His Father Will Make His Disciples One

Second, Jesus prays that his Father will make his disciples one. This oneness is the *purpose* of the *first* petition, the petition that God would protect Jesus' disciples; here it is the substance of the petition itself. That is what I mean by saying that these petitions are intertwined. Jesus prays,

“My prayer is not for them [i.e., my immediate disciples] alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, *that all of them may be one, Father*, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me. I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one: I in them and you in me. May they be brought to complete unity to let the world know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.” (17:20–23)

The first *reason* Jesus advances for this petition is also the *standard* he establishes: “that all of them may be one, Father, *just as you are in me and I am in you*” (17:21). The second *reason* Jesus advances is that he himself has already given them the glory that his Father had given him (17:22). We shall return to this intriguing thought in a few moments. The *purpose* of this petition, Jesus says, is “to let the world know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me” (17:23), or, more simply, “so that the world may believe that you have sent me” (17:21). In the context of the Gospel of John, this not only invites the world to believe the gospel, making this a prayer with evangelistic purpose, but, even more fundamentally, it wants to see the vindication of Jesus. The world despises and hates Jesus so much it will be satisfied with nothing less than a cross. But if Jesus' prayer is answered, the world itself will learn that God sent him, that God truly loved Jesus' followers even as he loved his own precious Son. All this is the *purpose* of the prayer that the disciples may be one. And once again, we cannot fail to observe that this unity for which the Savior prays is inextricably entangled with the display of the incredible truth that the Father loves

Jesus' followers just as he loves the Son (17:23) and that the love of the triune God may be in them (17:26).

Jesus Prays That God Will Sanctify His Followers

Third, Jesus prays that God will sanctify his followers. “Sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth. As you sent me into the world, I have sent them into the world. For them I sanctify myself, that they too may be truly sanctified” (17:17–19). The *means* of this sanctification is “the truth,” namely God’s own word. In the context of the whole Bible, one cannot but remember the many passages in which God’s word is his appointed means of making his people holy—whether a leader like Joshua (Josh. 1:8–9), an Israelite king (Deut. 17:18–20), or any faithful believer (Ps. 1:2). In the context of John’s Gospel, the “word” primarily in view is the message of this book, the gospel itself. That is made clear by the way Jesus ends this petition: “For them I sanctify myself, that they too may be truly sanctified” (John 17:19). Jesus does not sanctify himself in the sense of making himself more holy. Rather, what he means is that he sets himself to do his Father’s will, and his Father’s will alone—and that means he readily goes to the cross, however repulsive and horrifying the prospect is. He does this for the sake of his disciples: “*For them* I sanctify myself,” he declares. But the purpose of this is “that they too may be truly sanctified.” None of us poor sinners can ever be sanctified, set apart for God, apart from what the Lord Jesus has done by sanctifying himself. By sanctifying himself, Jesus perfectly obeyed his Father and therefore went to the cross to bear our sins in his own body on the tree. That is the good news; that is the gospel. The truth of the gospel is what truly sanctifies us. The result, of course, is that we are no longer “of the world”—and that is why we will need protection from the world and from the evil one, which brings us back to the first petition. Moreover, such a marvelous conversion among Jesus’ initial disciples, taking them out of the world and making them no longer of the world, is only the initial step to worldwide ministry that sees others converted: Jesus goes on to say, “I pray also for those who will believe in me *through their message*” (17:20). Thus, part of the *purpose* of the sanctification of Jesus’ followers is their evangelistic faithfulness, which results in yet more conversions. For this Jesus prays.

Jesus Prays That His Followers Will Experience the Full Measure of His Own Joy

Fourth, Jesus prays that his followers will experience the full measure of his own joy. “I am coming to you now,” Jesus says to his Father, “but I say these things while I am still in the world, so that they may have the full measure of my joy within them” (17:13). In part, Jesus is saying something akin to what he said three chapters earlier: “I have told you now before it happens,” he says to his disciples, “so that when it does happen you will believe” (14:29). Events were unraveling so fast before the eyes of the confused and still largely blind disciples that they had no category for a crucified Messiah. But by Jesus’ saying these things now, by praying these things now, the disciples would soon learn, even if his words were opaque to them at the moment of utterance, that their Master really did know what he was doing, that his path to the cross was his Father’s will and for their good, and all the joy that would be theirs would spring from what was still, to them, horribly confusing and disappointing. So here was the true *ground* of their joy: Jesus’ own joy in doing his Father’s will would be the very basis on which they would come to delight in salvation, in intimate knowledge of God, and share in the heartfelt pleasure of obeying the Father that is of the very essence of Jesus’ own joy in his Father. This, too, is tied to the inner-love of the triune God. For although verse 24 does not use the word *joy*, it percolates through the lines of intimacy that the Son has always enjoyed with his Father: “Father, I want those you have given me to be with me where I am, and to see my glory, the glory you have given me *because you loved me before the creation of the world.*” And this is the joy Jesus now prays for his disciples.

Jesus Prays That His Followers Will Be with Him Forever

Fifth, Jesus prays that his followers will be with him forever. It is worth repeating verse 24: “Father, I want those you have given me *to be with me where I am*, and to see my glory, the glory you have given me because you loved me before the creation of the world.” The *ground* of this petition is the eternal love of the Father for the Son. Because the Father has loved the Son “before the creation of the world,” he wants all those whom he has given to the Son to witness the Son’s glory—and *that means that they must be where he is*. Thus the ultimate *purpose*

of the petition is the glory of the Son, the final vindication of the Son, which is achieved because those the Father has given to him will see him as he is, for all eternity: “I want those you have given me to be with me where I am, *and to see my glory*.” The Son had brought the Father glory on earth; the Father is resolved that all of Jesus’ followers will witness the Son’s glory forever. Small wonder that Jesus prayed, a little earlier in this chapter, “I have brought you glory on earth by completing the work you gave me to do. And now, Father, glorify me in your presence with the glory I had with you before the world began” (17:4–5). And this glory is itself the product of the *love* within the triune God from eternity past (17:24).

Transparently, then, even this slimmest of sketches of Jesus’ petitions recorded in John 17 discloses their tight interconnections, and how each petition is in some way or other tied to Jesus’ understanding of love, not least the love between the Father and the Son. At this juncture it will be helpful to trace out some of this Gospel’s themes as they work their way into John 17, with the result that we can perceive some immensely enriching things about the supremacy of Jesus Christ and of love.

The Themes of John’s Gospel Woven into John 17

The Supremacy of Jesus Christ in the Mediation of God’s Love

There are a lot of ways one could usefully get at this theme in John. But perhaps it will be simplest to pick up on a word that has repeatedly come up during the last few pages—the word *glory*. Within this prayer in John 17, Jesus uses *glory* or its cognate *glorify* as follows:

“Father, the time has come. *Glorify* your Son, that your Son may *glorify* you [17:1]. . . . I have brought you *glory* on earth by completing the work you gave me to do. And now, Father, *glorify* me in your presence with the *glory* I had with you before the world began [17:4–5]. . . . All I have is yours, and all you have is mine. And *glory* has come to me through them [17:10]. . . . I have given them the *glory* that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one [17:22]. . . . Father, I want those you have given me to be with me where I am, and to see my *glory*, the *glory* you have given me because you loved me before the creation of the world” [17:24].

The important thing to recognize is that this glory theme did not fall from heaven into John 17. It is first introduced in John 1, in the Johannine Prologue itself (1:1–18). When we trace this glory theme, we quickly learn how it is tied to the love of God, to the cross itself.

The word *glory* first appears in John's Gospel in John 1:14: "The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his *glory*, the *glory* of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth." John 1:14 is part of the block of verses, John 1:14–18—and these verses make several conspicuous allusions back to Exodus 32–34, those great chapters where Moses receives the Law, including the Ten Commandments, and shatters the tablets of stone when he learns that the people have sunk into debauched idolatry while he has been receiving the Law of God on Mount Sinai. I cannot take the time to trace all the connections between Exodus 32–34 and John 1:14–18, but it is important to identify at least three or four of them.

(1) John 1:14 reads, literally, "The Word became flesh and *tabernacled* among us"—and the giving of the law at Sinai includes the giving of the detailed instructions on how to construct the tabernacle, the forerunner of the temple. In other words, if the Old Testament tabernacle is supremely the meeting place between God and his old covenant people, and the place of sacrifice, so Jesus himself is the supreme meeting place between God and his new covenant people, and he himself is the sacrifice.

(2) In Exodus 33:20, God reminds Moses, "You cannot see my face, for no one may see me and live." Similarly, in John 1:18 the apostle writes, "No one has ever seen God." But John also adds, "But God the One and Only"—a clear reference to Jesus, the Word-made-flesh—"who is at the Father's side, has made him known." So although God in his unshielded splendor remains unseen until the last day, we have seen the Word-made-flesh, Jesus Christ—and he who has seen him has seen the Father (14:9). (3) In Exodus 34, when God permits Moses to look outside the cleft in the rock and glimpse something of the afterglow of the trailing edge of the glory of God, God intones several magnificent utterances to disclose himself, including the words, "The LORD, the LORD, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, *abounding in love and faithfulness . . .*" (34:6). The pair of words "love and faithfulness" in Hebrew can equally be rendered "grace and

truth,” and so rendered, they describe the Word made flesh, for he is “full of grace and truth” (John 1:14), and from this “fullness” we have all received, literally, “a grace instead of a grace” (1:16). The next verse provides the explanation, with its explanatory “For”: “For the law was given through Moses [the very stuff of Exodus 32–34]; *grace and truth* came through Jesus Christ” (John 1:17). In other words, Jesus Christ, the Word-made-flesh, is the very expression of “The LORD, the LORD . . . abounding in love and faithfulness / in grace and truth.”

With all of these connections between Exodus 32–34 and John 1:14–18, then, we cannot fail to observe one more. Moses, desperate to be anchored in God at a time of horrific rebellion among his own people, cries out in prayer, “Now show me your *glory*” (Ex. 33:18). God replies, “I will cause all my *goodness* to pass in front of you, and I will proclaim my name, the LORD, in your presence” (Ex. 33:19). Moses asks for glory; God promises him goodness. What Moses sees is something of the trailing edge of glory—but the words intoned emphasize God’s goodness. So now in the Johannine Prologue, John writes, “We have seen his *glory*”—and anyone familiar with the Old Testament text will immediately wonder how, in John, God’s glory is manifested in his goodness.

We do not have long to wait. After Jesus has completed the first of his “signs,” the turning of the water into wine, John comments, “[Jesus] thus revealed his *glory*, and his disciples put their faith in him” (John 1:11). Of course, this was a miracle; there was something of glory in it. But it was a sign: it pointed beyond itself to the provision of the “new wine” of the new age that would be inaugurated by Jesus’ death and resurrection. This glory theme keeps recurring in John, replete with evocative ambiguities, until John 12, when the ambiguities disappear. At the arrival of some Gentiles, Jesus knows his “hour,” the hour of his death and resurrection, has arrived. Deeply afflicted, he testifies,

“Now my heart is troubled, and what shall I say? ‘Father, save me from this hour?’ No, it was for this very reason I came to this hour. Father, *glorify* your name!” Then a voice came from heaven, “I have *glorified* it, and will *glorify* it again.” . . . Jesus said, “This voice was for your benefit, not mine. Now is the time for judgment on this world; now the prince of this world will be driven out. But I, when I am lifted up from

the earth, will draw all men to myself.” He said this *to show the kind of death he was going to die.* (12:27–33)

In other words, the place where God is supremely glorified is in the death, resurrection, and exaltation of his Son. Jesus’ “glorification” is his return to the glory he had with the Father before the world began (17:5), but this “return” is via the wretched odium and ignominy of the cross. Here God’s *goodness* is supremely displayed. God has indeed caused all his goodness to pass before us.

With this rich background in John’s Gospel the glory theme takes on fresh dimensions in John 17, and these dimensions show how Jesus mediates God’s love to us. Let me run through the relevant glory passages in John 17 one more time, but this time I will fill in further asides and comments:

“Father, the time has come [i.e., the time of Jesus’ death and resurrection]. *Glorify* your Son (not least in this wretched cross, and in the vindication and exaltation to come, perfectly in line with John 12), that your Son may *glorify* you [17:1] {for by this means all your goodness will be displayed}. . . . I have brought you *glory* on earth by completing the work you gave me to do (not only in the words and works of my entire ministry, including the “signs” that have pointed forward to the cross, but also now in the passion and resurrection that lie immediately ahead). And now, Father, *glorify* me in your presence with the *glory* I had with you before the world began [17:4–5] {for the end of this “glorification” on the cross is the “glorification” of vindication, returning to the glory of heaven itself with all its unshielded radiance—the ultimate vindication of the Son}. . . . All I have is yours, and all you have is mine. And *glory* has come to me through them [17:10] {i.e., through the disciples, for the fruitfulness of Jesus’ ministry is demonstrated in the disciples who follow him and are transformed by him, as they are taken out of the world and become truly his. They thereby bring glory to Christ Jesus.}. . . . I have given them the *glory* that you gave me [i.e., I have revealed you to them, in my person, words, works, and supremely in the cross and resurrection: here your glory, your goodness, are truly displayed], that they may be one as we are one [17:22]. . . . Father, I want those you have given me to be with me where I am, and to see my *glory* {the glory of ultimate vindication}, the *glory* you have given me *because you loved me before the creation of the world.*” (17:24)

And there it is: all of this manifestation of glory, of the goodness of God, is displayed *because the Father loved Jesus before the creation of the world*. The thought is stunning. All this display of the glory of God focuses finally on the goodness of God in the cross and vindication of the Son for the sake of poor sinners—and all of it is grounded in the sheer love of the Father for the Son—the same love, Jesus insists, that the Father has for us (17:23). And thus Jesus himself becomes, uniquely, the mediation of God’s love to us.

The Role of Jesus Christ in the Trinitarian Experience of God’s Love

Here again it will be helpful to begin with an earlier passage in John’s Gospel. This time I shall choose select parts of John 5:16–30, which is one of the most moving and insightful passages in all of holy writ on the meaning of Jesus’ sonship. I cannot here take the time to expound the entire passage. I merely note that Jesus’ words about his sonship are precipitated by a Sabbath conflict (5:1–18). Jesus claims that he has the right to act as he does because his heavenly Father “is always at his work to this very day” (5:17), and so Jesus, too, is working. But these words sound as if Jesus is claiming the very prerogatives of God, prerogatives that belong *only* to God. That prompts outrage on the part of his Jewish opponents: “For this reason the Jews tried all the harder to kill him; not only was he breaking the Sabbath, but he was even calling God his own Father, making himself equal with God” (5:18). They were simultaneously right and wrong: they rightly captured the drift of his extraordinary claim, his claim to have the prerogatives of God, but almost certainly they thought he was claiming, in effect, to be another god, a second god. Monotheism would give place to theism. They found the thought blasphemous, and so should we. There is but one God. Christians are adamant monotheists. But that means that in the following verses Jesus unpacks the unique nature of his sonship, the unique relationship he has with the Father. He is truly God; he has all the prerogatives of his Father; he is to be honored as God; yet he is distinguishable from his Father; and there is but one God.

We will follow at least part of Jesus’ argument. *First*, Jesus claims to be utterly dependent on his Father: “I tell you the truth,” he says, “the Son can do nothing by himself; he can do only what he sees his Father doing” (5:19). Some Christians, intent on preserving the full

deity of Christ, are slightly embarrassed by texts like this. After all, they say, doesn't John's Gospel frequently stress Jesus' deity? After all, we are familiar with many important statements to that effect: "The Word was God" (1:1); "Before Abraham was born, I am" (8:58); "My Lord and my God!" (20:28). All true—and they are not to be weakened. Yet we also hear Jesus saying, "By myself I can do nothing; I judge only as I hear, and my judgment is just, for I seek not to please myself but him who sent me" (5:30); or again, "The one who sent me is with me; he has not left me alone, for I always do what pleases him" (8:30). The reciprocal claim is never made by the Father with respect to the Son. In other words, while the Gospel of John insists that Jesus is God, it insists, equally loudly, on Jesus' *functional* subordination to his Father.

But *second*, Jesus' dependence on his heavenly Father is utterly unique. After saying that the Son "can do only what he sees his Father doing," he immediately adds, "because whatever the Father does the Son also does." That is staggering. A baker's son may learn all that his father knows about baking; Stradivarius Junior may end up making violins that are just as good as those of Stradivarius Senior. But neither will be able to duplicate all that the heavenly Father does. I may be able to duplicate, in some small measure, certain things that God does. For instance, I may be a peacemaker, and since God is the supreme peacemaker, at a certain functional level that would make me his "son" (Matt. 5:9). But I could never say, "Whatever the Father does, I also do." The thought is preposterous. For a start, I haven't made a universe recently; I shall never be able to raise the dead on the last day. But Jesus says, "Whatever the Father does *the Son does also*." John has already established, for instance, that the preexistent Word was God's own agent in creation (John 1:1–3). This passage insists that the Son raises people on the last day, just as the Father does (5:21). So although Jesus is functionally dependent on his Father, his deeds and words, in John's Gospel, are finally coterminous with those of his heavenly Father. In short, Jesus does the kinds of things that only God can do.

Third, this Father-Son relationship is bathed in unfathomable love. John has already written, "The Father loves the Son and has placed everything in his hands" (3:35). Here Jesus testifies, "For the Father loves the Son and shows him all he does" (5:20). Indeed, springing

from this love, the Father's will is "that all may honor the Son just as they honor the Father. He who does not honor the Son does not honor the Father, who sent him" (5:23). Moreover, the Son loves the Father no less than the Father loves the Son, even though the outworking of that love is slightly different. In John 14:31, Jesus insists that "the world must learn that I love the Father and that I do exactly what my Father has commanded me."

All of this is the understood precursor to John 17. It cannot now be surprising that Jesus in his prayer speaks of "the glory that you have given me because you loved me before the creation of the world" (17:24), or that he testifies, "I have brought you glory on earth by completing the work you gave me to do" (17:4). Here we witness the role of Jesus Christ within the Trinitarian experience of God's love—a love that is anchored in eternity.

The Exclusiveness of Jesus Christ in Our Experience of God's Love

All that I have said so far constitutes the matrix of thought in John's Gospel that enables us to see the supremacy of Christ, the exclusiveness of Christ, in *our* experience of the love of God. To focus more sharply:

1) These truths enable us to understand *the perfection of the revelation of God in Christ*. If out of love the Father "shows" *all* that he does to the Son, and if out of love the Son perfectly obeys his Father and therefore does *all* that the Father does, then, springing from this inner-Trinitarian love, the words and deeds of Jesus are the words and deeds of God. Small wonder Jesus in John 17 prays, "I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one" (17:22).

2) These truths enable us to understand that *the unity among his followers for which Jesus prays is modeled on the love-unity within the Godhead*. After the words just cited, "that they may be one as we are one," Jesus immediately goes on to say, "I in them and you in me. May they be brought to complete unity to let the world know that you sent me, and have loved them even as you have loved me" (17:23). In other words, when Jesus prays for the unity of his followers akin to the unity he has with his Father, he is not expecting them to somehow constitute another mystical Trinity. Rather, he wants them to love each

other with the perfection of love already displayed between the Father and the Son.

3) These truths enable us to understand that *the cross itself, the very foundation of all of redemption, is first and foremost the result of the love of the Father for the Son and the love of the Son for the Father*. The former guarantees that all will honor the Son; the latter guarantees that the Son perfectly obeys his heavenly Father. Jesus came to complete the work that his Father gave him to do (17:4). We so often think that the *ultimate* motivation behind the cross is God's love *for us*. I do not want to downplay the importance of that love; indeed, I shall return to it in a minute. But we must see that in John's Gospel the motivating power behind the entire plan of redemption was the Father's love *for his Son* and the Son's love *for his Father*. When Jesus found himself in an agony in Gethsemane, he did not finally resolve to go through with the plan of redemption by saying, "This is awful, but I love those sinners so much I'll go to the cross for them" (though in a sense he might have said that), but "Not my will but yours be done." In other words, the dominating motive that drove him onward to perfect obedience was his resolution, out of love for his Father, to be at one with the Father's will. Though we poor sinners are the unfathomably rich beneficiaries of God's plan of redemption, we are not at the center of everything. At the center was the love of the Father for the Son and the love of the Son for the Father.

When these truths have fully taken hold of our minds and imaginations, we are ready for the final truth:

4) These truths enable us to understand *something of the measure of God's love for us in Christ Jesus*. We have all learned to recite, "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son" (3:16). So here: the world must learn, Jesus says to his Father, "that you sent me, and have loved them even as you have loved me" (17:23). The love of the Father for the Son is the love of one perfect Person for another; the love of the Son for the Father is the love of one perfect Person for another; and this in the mysterious unity of the Godhead. But in John's usage, this "world" that God loves is not understood to be a *big* place so much as a *bad* place. The "world" is all that is anarchic in the human domain, all that rebels against God. For God to love this world with the love that he has for his eternal Son is simply past finding out. The love

of the Son for the Father, though we understand so little of the Trinity, is comprehensible enough. But for Jesus to say to us, “Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another” (13:34–35)—this is simultaneously incomprehensible and incalculably wonderful. We fall at his feet in adoration and worship; we are hushed, convicted, lifted up; we know ourselves to be immeasurably privileged, nothing other (to use Paul’s expression) than the sons of God by adoption.

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Doubtless many who read these lines are aware that much contemporary scholarship on John’s Gospel views this Gospel as irremediably sectarian. The dominant reason that is advanced is this: In Matthew’s Gospel, Jesus’ disciples are told to love their enemies (Matt. 5:44), while here in John they are told to love each other, and the enemies are not mentioned. Surely (it is argued) this reflects a community that has turned in on itself, a community that must therefore be labeled sectarian. But since our love for one another within the church is to be modeled on the intra-Trinitarian love of God, would anyone be so bold as to suggest that God’s intra-Trinitarian love is sectarian? Contemporary sociological categories come nowhere near understanding what Jesus says in this Gospel.

Or consider what many ecumenical voices say about John 17. These voices tend to read a selection of lines from this chapter, and then say that if we do not sign on to the ecumenical movement, bury all differences of doctrine, and simply love each other for Jesus’ sake, Jesus’ prayer will never be answered. We have an obligation, they say, to ensure that Jesus’ prayer is answered, “that they may be one.” Otherwise Jesus’ himself is frustrated by unanswered prayer. Such exhortations rarely wrestle with what this chapter says about God, about Christ, about Christ’s mission, about the place this chapter has on the way to the cross, resurrection, and vindication of the Son, about the nature of the love between the Father and the Son. Moreover, Christians reading these words toward the end of the first century, when this Gospel started to circulate, were not wringing their hands and wondering how they could help poor old Jesus by encouraging the ecumenical movement along. They were exuberantly thanking

God that Jesus' prayer was being fulfilled before their eyes, as men and women were being converted from many tribes and tongues and peoples and languages, and were loving one another for Jesus' sake. Of course, this love is still far from perfect: nothing in these dimensions is perfect until the consummation. But Jesus' glorious prayer "that they may be one" is manifestly being answered to a superlative degree in the confessional church around the world today, as Christians bask in God's love and understand that all of our love is but a grace-driven response to the intra-Trinitarian love of God which has issued in the glorification of the Son by means of the cross, in the Son's perfect obedience to his Father, all the way to the cross.

Or what shall we make of postmodern voices that, in the name of love, deny the exclusive role that Jesus plays in mediating God's love to us? Will their siren tones increase love, or even our understanding of love? Sadly, no: they merely restore idolatry under a new guise. These voices are among the least tempered and least loving of our time, especially with those who do not agree with their vision.

Christian love is anchored in the Godhead, anchored in eternity, anchored in Christ, anchored in the cross. Other New Testament Christians, apart from the initial readers of the Gospel of John, understood these things, of course. "I live by faith in the Son of God," Paul writes—and then he cannot restrain himself, but adds, "who loved me, and gave himself for me" (Gal. 2:20). Again, we read, "We love, because he first loved us" (cf. 1 John 4:7–12).

*I love you because you first loved me: your love
With irresistible enticement paid
In blood, has won my heart; and, unafraid
Of all but self, I'm driven now to love.
I love because you first loved me: your love
Has transformed all my calculations, made
A farce of love based on exchange, displayed
Extravagant self-giving from above.
I love because you first loved me: without
Regenerating power provided by
Your Son's propitiating death, no doubt
My strongest love would be the mighty "I."
Your self-originating love's alone—
The motive, standard, power of my own.*