BIBLIOTHECA SACRA 156 (January–March 1999): 3–12

ON DISTORTING THE LOVE OF GOD*

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The title of this series, "The Difficult Doctrine of the Love of God," might lead some to question my sanity. If I were speaking about "The Difficult Doctrine of the Trinity," or "The Difficult Doctrine of Predestination," at least the title would be coherent. Is not the doctrine of the love of God easy, compared with such high-flown and mysterious teachings?

WHY THE DOCTRINE OF THE LOVE OF GOD MUST BE JUDGED DIFFICULT

This doctrine is difficult for at least five reasons. First, the overwhelming majority of people who believe in God, however they think he, she, or it may be understood, believe God is a loving Being. But that is what makes the task of Christian witnessing so daunting. For with increasing frequency this widely disseminated belief in the love of God is set 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 this is the case.

Consider some recent products of the film industry, that celluloid preserve that both reflects and shapes American culture. Science-fiction space films may be divided into two kinds. Perhaps the more popular ones are the slam-bang-shoot-'em-up kind, such as *July Fourth,* 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. Rarely do these

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*This is article one in a four-part series, "The Difficult Doctrine of the Love of God," delivered by the author as the W. H. Griffith Thomas Lectures at Dallas Theological Seminary, February 3–6, 1998.

sorts of 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. In the *Star Wars* series, it is "the Force." The film *ET,* as Roy Anker has put it, is "a glowing-heart incarnation tale that climaxes in resurrection and ascension."[1] 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 indirectly help people appreciate the sheer goodness and love of God.

Tolkien and Lewis, however, 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, pluralistic (after all, the film was dedicated to Carl Sagan). It has far more connections with new age, pollyannish optimism than anything more substantive. Suddenly the Christian doctrine of the love of God becomes difficult, for the entire framework in which it is set in Scripture has been replaced.

Second, to put this another way, in present-day Western culture many other and complementary truths about God are widely disbelieved. What the Bible says about the love of God cannot long survive in people's thinking if it is abstracted from the sovereignty of God, the holiness of God, the wrath of God, the providence of God, and 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 instructed 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 His love. 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

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1 Roy Anker, "Not Lost in Space," *Books & Culture* 3 (November–December 1997): 13.

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 OK, you're OK, and God loves you and me "

Even in the mid-1980s, according to Andrew Greeley, three-fourths of his respondents in an important poll reported that they preferred to think of God as "Friend" rather than as "King "[2] 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?

Christians, meanwhile, are not immune from these influences In an important book, Marsha Witten surveys what is being preached in many Protestant pulpits [3] Her pool of sermons was drawn, on the one hand, from the Presbyterian Church U S A , scarcely a bastion of confessional evangelicalism, and, on the other, from churches in 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 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 ' "[4] 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 the vocabulary of sin or 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

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2 Andrew Greeley, *Religious Change in America* (Cambridge, MA Harvard University Press, 1989), 37

3 Marsha Witten, *All Is Forgiven The Secular Message in American Protestantism* (Princeton, NJ Princeton University Press, 1993)

> 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."[5]

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

Third, some elements of the larger and still developing patterns of postmodernism relate to this problem. Because of remarkable shifts in the West's epistemology, more and more people believe 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 someone to your beliefs, since implicitly that is announcing that their views are inferior.[6]

This stance, fueled in the West, now reaches into many parts of the world. For example in a recent book Caleb Oluremi Oladipo shows the interplay between Christian beliefs and Yoruba traditional religion in the indigenous church.[7] Oladipo writes about "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."[8] He points out what he says are "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.

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4 Ibid., 40.

5 Ibid., 50, 53, 135.

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

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

8 Ibid., 144.

9 Ibid.

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. A fourth element is in certain respects more fundamental. In the cultural rush toward a sentimentalized, sometimes even nontheistic vision of the love of God, Christians have sometimes been swept along to the extent that we have forgotten that within Christian confessionalism the doctrine of God's love poses 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 this century—in the light of all these 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 sovereignty, extending as it does over even the domain of evil? What does love mean in a Being whom at least some Scripture passages seemingly treat as without emotion? How is God's love related to justice?

In other words one of the most dangerous results of the impact of contemporary sentimentalized versions of love on the church is the 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.

Fifth, 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.

Some Different Ways the Bible Speaks of the Love of God

Not all the passages I refer to in this discussion use the word "love." Some texts depict God's love without using the word, just as Jesus told parables that depict grace without using that word.

The Bible speaks of the love of God in five distinguishable ways. This is not an exhaustive list, but it is heuristically useful.

First is 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 *ἀγαπάω* (3:35), and once with *φιλέω* (5:20). John also insisted 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 monotheistic views, but it is bound up in surprising ways with revelation and redemption. (This will be addressed further in the second lecture in this series.)

Second is God's providential love over all He has made. The Bible seems to avoid using the word "love" in this connection, but the theme is not difficult to find. God creates everything, and before there is a whiff of sin He pronounces all that He made "good" (Gen. 1:4, 10, 12, 18, 21, 25, 31). This is the product of a loving Creator.

The Lord Jesus depicted 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 (Matt. 10:29). If this were not a benevolent, loving providence, then the moral lesson that Jesus drove home, namely, that this God can be trusted to provide for His own people, would be incoherent.

Third is God's salvific stance toward His fallen world. God so loved the world that He gave His Son (John 3:16). Some try to take κόσμος 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 that 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 wrote of "the whole world" (1 John 2:2), 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 corners of the world, proclaiming it to people everywhere. To rebels He calls out, "As surely as I live, declares the Sovereign LORD, 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, O house of Israel?"

(Ezek. 33:11, NIV).[10]

Fourth is 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 affections on His chosen ones in a way in which He does not set His affections on others. The people of Israel were 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 that he swore to your forefathers 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 forefathers 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, nothing of personal or national merit is mentioned; the distinguishing feature is nothing other than the love of God. In the very nature of the case, then, God's love is directed toward Israel in a way in which it is not directed toward other nations. Obviously, then, this way of speaking of the love of God is unlike the other three ways. This discriminating feature of God's love surfaces not infrequently. For example God declared, "I have loved Jacob, but Esau I have hated" (Mal. 1:2–3). Of course to the Semitic mind, this absolute statement 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 states that God's love is directed toward those who constitute the church.

Fifth is God's love toward His own people in a provisional or conditional way—conditional, that is, on obedience. This is part of the relational structure of knowing God; it does not have to do with how a person becomes a true follower of the living God, but with his or her relationship with Him once He is known. "Keep yourselves in God's love," Jude exhorted his readers (Jude 21), leaving the unmistakable impression that someone might not

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10 The force of this utterance is not diminished by observing that it is addressed to the house of Israel, for not all Israelites were finally saved. In Ezekiel's day, many died in judgment.

All Scripture quotations are taken from the New International Version, unless indicated otherwise.

keep himself or herself in the love of God. Clearly this is not God's providential love; it would be rather difficult to escape that. Nor is this God's yearning love, reflecting His salvific stance toward the fallen race. Nor is it His eternal, elective love; if words mean anything, one does not walk away from that love either.

Jude is not the only one who wrote in such terms. The Lord Jesus commanded His disciples to remain in His love (John 15:9), and He added, "If you obey my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have obeyed my Father's commands and remain in his love" (15:10). To draw a feeble analogy: Although there is a sense in which my love for my children is immutable, 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 or 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 and will feel different.

Nor is this a phenomenon of the New Covenant alone. The Decalogue declares that God shows His love "to a thousand generations of those who love me and keep my commandments" (Exod. 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 verses we will examine, His people live under His love or under His wrath, in keeping with 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" (103:9–11, 13, 17–18). This is the language of relationship between God and the covenant community.

TWO PRELIMINARY OBSERVATIONS ON THESE DISTINCTIVE WAYS OF TALKING ABOUT THE LOVE OF GOD

First, it is easy to see what will happen if any one of these five bib-

lical ways of talking about the love of God is absolutized and made exclusive.

If we begin with the intra-Trinitarian love of God and use that as the model for all God's loving relationships, we will 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. However much the intra-Trinitarian love serves (as we shall see) 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 and awesome as the intra-Trinitarian love of God is, focusing exclusively 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, this is 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 goes from creation to new creation to the new heavens and the new earth, by way of the cross and the resurrection of our Master.

If the love of God is exclusively portrayed as an inviting, yearning, sinner-seeking passion, then this strengthens 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. Made absolute, however, it not only treats complementary texts as if they were not there, but it also steals God's sovereignty from Him and our confidence and security from us. It espouses a theology of grace rather different from Paul's theology of grace, and at its worst it 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. The term "hyper-Calvinism" is used here advisedly, referring to groups within the Reformed tradition that have forbidden the free offer of

the gospel. Spurgeon fought them in his day.[11] 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 concept of Reformed theology.[12]

If the love of God is construed entirely within the kind of discourse that ties God's love to human obedience (e.g., "Keep yourselves in God's love"), the dangers threatening believers change once again. True, in a church characterized rather more by personal preference and antinomianism than godly fear of the Lord, such passages 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, and 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; otherwise the doctrinal and pastoral ramifications will prove disastrous.

A second observation is that believers 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 other. Nor should any one of these ways of talking about the love of God be diminished by the others, nor should any one of them be allowed to domesticate all the others. God is God, and He is one. We must gratefully acknowledge that God in the perfection of His wisdom has thought it best to provide these various ways of talking of His love. These truths must also be held together and integrated in biblical proportion and balance, and applied with insight and sensitivity to our lives and the lives of those to whom we minister.

To sum up: Christian faithfulness calls for our growing in the grasp of what it means to confess that God is love.

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

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