



# The Love of God

By Peter Barnes

The Bible declares most emphatically – and repeats it - that ‘God is love’ (1 John 4:8, 16). It is a sentiment which resonates with more than just the Christian population, although the unbeliever tends to think more in terms of ‘Love is God’ rather than ‘God is love.’ The world has ever been addicted to slogans, but today we are immersed in them. Bob Dylan sang:

*Love is all there is, it makes the world go 'round;  
Love and only love; it can't denied.*

It might seem straightforward but it is not. There are conclusions drawn from ‘God is love’ which are damaging and misleading.

For example, one often hears that ‘God loves everybody equally.’ It is argued that if He does not do so, He would be betraying His own character. Yet God tells Israel that He loves them and chose them over other nations simply because He loves them (Deut.7:6-8). It is not our loveliness that attracts His love. Quite the reverse, He set His love on His people for no reason that we can discern. Both Malachi and Paul tell us that God loved Jacob but hated Esau (Mal.1:2-3; Rom.9:13). That requires some explanation, but it is clear that God cannot be said to love everybody equally.

It is true that there is a love of God for all. We are to love our enemies and to do good to them because in doing so we will be imitating our Father in heaven (Matt.5:43-48). God gives to all mankind life and breath and everything (Acts 17:25). But when I say ‘I love my enemy’; ‘I love my wife’; ‘I love music’ and ‘I love my dog’, I am using the same word ‘love’ in four different senses. These do not even have to be good senses, such as when Demas is said to be in love with this present world (2 Tim.4:9). Amnon was said to love Tamar (2 Sam.13:1), but it soon turned to hate

(2 Sam.13:15). While he thought in terms of ‘love’, he operated in terms of ‘want’.

God does genuinely love His whole creation, but that does not at all mean that He loves all equally. There is a love which is not a saving love. The Saviour loved the rich young ruler, but that did not save him (Mark 10:21). God told Ezekiel that He has no pleasure in the death of the wicked (Ezek.33:11). We are all guilty before Him so if He acted in strict justice, He could condemn us all (Rom.3:9-20). He exhibits a saving love for some of His ‘children of wrath’, and so shows mercy (Eph.2:1-3). For others He exhibits a love which is not saving, and which culminates in His terrible justice. His wrath remains on such people, who have refused to look to the Son of God for salvation (John 3:36).

Another dangerous slogan is ‘God’s love is unconditional’. Shakespeare’s sonnet number 116 might be cited:

*Let me not to the marriage of true minds  
Admit impediments. Love is not love  
Which alters when it alteration finds,  
Or bends with the remover to remove.  
O no! it is an ever-fixed mark  
That looks on tempests and is never shaken;  
It is the star to every wand'ring bark,  
Whose worth's unknown, although his height be taken.  
Love's not Time's fool, though rosy lips and cheeks  
Within his bending sickle's compass come;  
Love alters not with his brief hours and weeks,  
But bears it out even to the edge of doom.  
If this be error and upon me prov'd,  
I never writ, nor no man ever lov'd.*

Despite the rather jarring directness of the last two lines, there is much nobility in this, and much that is true, but so far as the Bible is concerned, it is only true of the elect. The husband is to love his wife as Christ loved the church and gave Himself for her (Eph.5:25). This is a particular love, not for all and sundry but for the bride of Christ. This is the kind of love which endures all things and never ends (1 Cor.13:7-8). To say, however, that God's love to all humanity is unconditional is to assure people who may well be under the judgment of God that they are basking in His love.

It is sin that corrupts everything, including our view of the love of God. As Calvin said: 'Until we are ruled by obedience to God, each one of us will love himself too much, desire to

draw attention to himself, and glory in himself.' 'Love is a many-splendoured thing,' says the song, and that is true of God's love. The God who is love is also light (1 John 1:5) and a consuming fire (Deut.4:24; Heb.12:29). He cannot be easily summarised in glib slogans. When we hear that 'God is love,' we ought to be humbled that the infinitely holy God could love us. If it does not have that effect, and we presume upon that love, we may well find it was the most dangerous thing we ever heard.

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