

The Love of God

James Danaher

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At the base of our understanding are a host of concepts that are largely the product of language acquisition, acculturation, and our own unique experience. Furthermore, the one undeniable truth of structuralism is that these concepts are all interrelated so that a change in one concept will effect a change in many other concepts. Our concept of God will change, as other concepts such as love, sin, or faith change. Thus, our idea of God is dependent upon a host of concepts that are not God-given but are the product of forces more human than divine. Given this fact, we will come to know only as much of God as our culture and experience will allow. If we wish to go beyond those limits, our minds must be renewed (Rom. 12:2). The nature of that renewal involves the rejection of the cultural concepts we have inherited in favour of concepts more compatible with the God whom Jesus reveals in the Gospels.

Compatible Concepts

In the past, some have seen a need for concepts more ideal than those passed on to us by our language communities and cultures. The criterion, by which such concepts were purported to be more ideal, was the fact that they were scientific or based upon the truth of human experience and a rigorous method of inquiry. Such a criterion, however, does not get us to the Christian ideal. For the Christian, the correct concept of love or faith rests within God's understanding and cannot be accessed through the traditional methods of science or academically rigorous philosophy. The Christian can, however, reject cultural concepts so long as they are replaced with concepts more compatible with the gospel and more conducive to making us into his likeness. Of course, we will never arrive at some final, definitive understanding of such concepts, but such an effort will begin to get us beyond the cultural concepts that keep us from a deeper understanding of the life to which God is calling us.

The Renewal of Love

One such concept that enormously effects our concept of God, and is in dire need of renewal, is that of love. God's concept of love is probably different from our cultural concept in countless ways, but three are immediately obvious.

The first way God's love differs from our own is that, unlike human beings who for the most part can love and have affection for only that which is good or beautiful, God has

the divine capacity to love the unlovely. Unlike human beings who seek a beloved that is at least as good or beautiful as themselves, God has chosen, as the objects of his attention and affection, imperfect creatures very different in goodness and beauty from himself. Indeed, 'while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us' (Romans 5:8KJV). This is the good news of the gospel: that God is a loving father who loves us because we are his beloved daughters or sons, and not because we are either good or beautiful.

Unfortunately, such a notion of God goes very much against who we imagine God to be. If we imagine that our human notion of love is true, we equally imagine that God loves the way we love. Being content with our human concepts makes it quite natural for us to anthropomorphize God and imagine that God, who is most good and most beautiful, must love only that which is good and beautiful like himself. Since he is perfect, he must love only perfect things. This very human concept of God is what we find in Aristotle, but it is not what we find in the gospel. Aristotle had imagined that God, being that which is most good, must be involved with that which is most good. Aristotle therefore thought that God must be involved in contemplation, which Aristotle, being a philosopher, believed was the greatest good. Furthermore, the object of God's contemplation must be focused upon God himself, since God is that which is most good and most beautiful (Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethic* 1178b:8-32).

Therefore it must be of itself that the divine thought thinks (since it is the most excellent of things). (Aristotle, *Metaphysics* 1074b)

This, however, is the nature of human rather than divine love. It is we, and not God, who focus our attention upon that which we believe to be most excellent. It is we who love only that which is good or beautiful, and cease to love when the objects of our affection are discovered to be less than perfect. That is the nature of human beings. It is our affection that is limited, and we are the ones who love only perfect things. When we imagine that something is no longer good or beautiful, our love for it ceases. We marry spouses because we believe them to be good or beautiful, but when we discover their imperfections, our love for them fades. Some of us even leave them in order to find objects of affection more perfect in goodness or beauty. We divorce our spouses and disown our children because of their lack of perfection. This is the nature of human love that loves only that which is good or beautiful.

In one regard, it is good that our human love is of such a nature, for it is just that desire for the good and the beautiful that causes us to seek God. But although it is this desire for the good and the beautiful that is the basis for our relationship with God, that is not what God ultimately has for us. The Christian life is not about us simply entering into a love relationship with God. That may be where the Christ-

ian life begins, but the Christian life is ultimately about transformation. Furthermore, the transformation that is the Christian life is not about being transformed into creatures who are morally good and meet God's standard as proper objects of love. Rather it is the much more radical process of being made into God's likeness and taking on the unique nature of his love. In taking on the nature of his love, we must become like God and take on the capacity to have as the object of our affection those who are neither good nor beautiful.

Love and Sin

The good news of the gospel is that God loves us in spite of our sin. The fullness of the gospel is that God wants us to become like him in order that we can love others in spite of their sin.

The great misconception is that sin separates us from God. There is some truth to this, but it is not that sin causes God to withdraw his love from us. The cause of our separation from God is not that God has turned away from us because we have disobeyed some commandment that has been laid down for us to follow, but that we have turned away from God. The good news is that our separation from God can be overcome simply by returning to him, since he is the father who awaits the return of the prodigal son with open arms. The message of the gospel is that forgiveness and restoration are freely given, and God is more accessible than we had previously thought. In fact, the gospel begins with John baptizing people for the forgiveness of sin with water from the Jordan River. Unlike the rituals that had to be performed in order to forgive sin and overcome separation from God in the Old Testament, the forgiveness of sin, as presented in the gospel, is now as accessible and abundant as the water of the Jordan River. Jesus tells us that the kingdom of God has been opened to everyone, and what keeps us from the great banquet God has prepared for us is not that God has deemed us unworthy, but rather that we have deemed God unworthy.

A certain man was preparing a great banquet and invited many guests. At the time of the banquet he sent his servant to tell those who had been invited, 'Come, for everything is now ready.'

But they all alike began to make excuses. The first said, 'I have just bought a field, and I must go and see it. Please excuse me.'

Another said, 'I have just bought five yoke of oxen, and I'm on my way to try them out. Please excuse me.'

Still another said, 'I just got married, so I can't come.'

The servant came back and reported this to his master. Then the owner of the house became angry and ordered his servant, 'Go out quickly into the streets and alleys of the town and bring in the poor, the crippled, the blind and the lame' (Luke 14:16-21).

With this parable nothing is required to come to the banquet God has prepared for us and our separation from God is totally on our part and not God's. In the version of this story that appears in the Gospel of Matthew a garment is required, just as so many parables speak of requirements that must

be met in order to follow in the way that Jesus has prepared, but sin or separation from God is overcome by simply turning from those things that so easily capture our attention and affection. Our not being at the banquet that God has prepared for us is a result of our choice to be somewhere else and not a result of God thinking that we are not worthy.

It is also interesting to note that what we choose over being in God's presence is not the crack house or bordello. What we choose to do are good things like getting married or doing business. Certainly these are not the kinds of things for which God would condemn us? But God does not condemn us or exclude us from his great banquet at all, but rather we exclude ourselves, and we do so not by committing immoral acts but by seeking our happiness in things apart from God.

The good news of the gospel is that the kingdom of God is open to everyone who would come. God's love is not restricted by narrow ideas of what is good or beautiful the way our human love is. The unworthy sinner is as much the object of God's love as the saint. As good as this news is, however, it is not the entire story. God's desire is that we would not only become the recipient of divine love, but that we would be transformed by it and thus be made into his image – the image of one able to love the unlovely as he loves.

A Distasteful Gospel

This is perhaps the most distasteful part of the Christian life and the aspect of Christianity that we are least willing to embrace. We are all willing to follow Jesus into the power of his resurrection. We are even reluctantly willing to enter into the fellowship of his suffering. What we are not willing to do, however, is to follow him in his love for those who are not good – those who are, in fact, our enemies. This is the part of our transformation that is the more difficult. In fact, it is so distasteful that we most often simply refuse to acknowledge this aspect of the gospel and instead insist that God's love is like our own, and God, like us, loves only good and beautiful things.

In order to do so, however, we must ignore the story of the prodigal son, or at least imagine that the prodigal is someone very different from ourselves and therefore the story does not apply to us. But the story is not simply about the prodigal son. It is in fact a story about two sons and a father. Even if many of us have such an image of ourselves that we cannot identify with the prodigal son, we should be able to easily identify with the older son, since nearly all of us are older sons who want to be rewarded for our goodness rather than merely for our sonship.

Our general experience with human beings is that we are loved more for good behaviour and less for bad behaviour. We come to expect the same from everyone, including God. What the story of the prodigal tells us, however, is that God can love us no more than he already does, and his love for us does not increase or decrease because of our behaviour. His is the love of a father for his daughters or sons, and the love of a creator toward his creation. Until we realize this, we remain the older son who refuses to come to the banquet and celebrate the return of the prodigal.

Of course, the person in the story with whom we ought to

ultimately identify is the father. The Christian life is a process of transformation the end of which is to be made into God's likeness. That likeness amounts to becoming the father of the prodigal who loves, not because his sons are good or beautiful, but because they are his sons. Ultimately, we are to love others because they are God's children and not for their goodness or beauty.

The reason it is so easy to ignore this story and imagine that God's love is like our own, is because few of us have ever experienced anything like the kind of unconditional love that God has for us. Those who have experienced such love, either from God or one of his human agents, are able to enter into the transformative process whereby we too are made into creatures who, like Jesus, are able to love the unlovely. This is the perfection that God desires for us – not that we would become morally pure and thus a proper object of divine affection, but that we would become like God with the capacity to love the unlovely.

Love, attention abnormally fixed?

The second important way that God's love is different from human love is in regard to the matter of attention. Jose Ortega y Gasset had claimed that love was essentially a matter of attention abnormally fixed.

Falling in love, initially, is no more than this: attention abnormally fastened upon another person. (Ortega y Gasset, 64)

His claim is that within the consciousness of the lover there is the constant presence of the beloved. This certainly seems true of the love that exists between people who are 'in love', for lovers are individuals who have their attention abnormally fixed upon their beloveds. 'For the lover his beloved . . . possesses a constant presence' (Ortega y Gasset, 65), and occupies the lover's attention in a way that nothing else can.

Of course, when Ortega y Gasset says that 'falling in love is a phenomenon of attention' (62), he is referring specifically to the relationship between a man and a woman, or the idea of romantic love, but what he describes is descriptive of other forms of love also, and it is what we all desire in terms of being loved. The affection children desire from their parents largely involves attention, in the same way that the affection we desire in a romantic relationship largely involves attention. Even friendships, if they are to be meaningful, require that we are capable of fixing our attention upon our friend, and if someone we consider a friend is unwilling to give us her attention, we feel we may have been mistaken in considering her a friend in the first place.

Unfortunately, however, as much as we desire the attention of spouses, parents, or friends, we human beings are not very good at fixing our attention on any one thing for very long periods of time. Ortega y Gasset points out that the attention of a normal human being is constantly changing from one object to another (62-63). Because of this, we are a constant disappointment to our spouses, children, and friends. My wife's disappointment in me, as a lover, usually focuses on my lack of attention. 'You're not here' is her complaint. And although I try to assure her that I was listening and can even repeat what she said, her complaint is still

valid. I may have been listening, but I wasn't attentive. My wife knows that to be truly loved is a matter of attention, and she is frustrated by my lack of attention. Small children seem instinctively to know the same thing and evidence it by clamouring to their mothers, 'watch me!'

Of course, parents disappoint children, just as husbands disappoint wives, because human attention is fleeting even concerning the things we love most. Indeed, if a lover is one who fixes his attention on his beloved, then the vast majority of human beings make poor lovers. Fortunately, our desire to be loved by one who gives us extraordinary attention is not completely frustrated, and 'there is a friend who sticks closer than a brother' (Prov. 18:24 NIV). God's omnipresent and omniscient nature makes him quite different from human beings in this regard. He is capable of giving us attention in ways that other human beings are not. Unlike other human beings who constantly fail us in this regard, God says, 'My eyes and my heart will always be there' (2 Chr. 7:16 NIV). Indeed, his 'eyes will be open' and his 'ears attentive' (2 Chr. 7:15 NIV), and 'like an eagle that stirs up its nest and hovers over its young' (Deut. 32:10-11 NIV), he will attend to us as 'the apple of his eye' (Zech. 2:8 NIV).

The Supreme Lover

It is his omnipresent and omniscient nature that makes God the supreme lover and the only one who can truly satisfy our desire for attention. Of course, the attention he gives us is not mechanical and the result merely of his omniscient and omnipresent nature. It is rather the result of his will. His nature makes him aware of the whole of his creation, but he has chosen to make us into the image of his son and the centerpiece of that creation.

It is also interesting that attention is an attribute of both divine and human love and, although existing in an imperfect degree in human beings, our love for God is largely a matter of attention just as his love toward us is largely a matter of attention. Thus, unlike the desire to impregnate and bring forth offspring in the beloved, attention is a characteristic of divine love that is reciprocal. Indeed, we love God to the extent that God is in all our thoughts. Just as children measure the love of their parents by the amount and quality of the attention they give them, and wives measure the love of their husbands by their attention, we can measure our love toward God by attention as well. It is good that we consider the measure of our attention toward God, for when we see how minuscule our attention is in comparison to his worthiness, and likewise, how perfect his attention is in spite of our unworthiness, we should be humbled and brought to a correct perspective of God and ourselves.

Non-Acquisitive Love

The third important way in which God's love is different from human love is found in the fact that human love is essentially acquisitive. We love those things that we can acquire to satisfy our many needs. God, on the other hand, is not needy and thus has no desire to acquire anything. This, however, does not mean that God is passionless and without desire. God certainly has desire, but his passion is not to acquire

but to create. This difference between human acquisitive love and God's love of creation is brought out in the story of Jonah. After Jonah had preached repentance to Nineveh, he sat down outside of the city and waited to see what would become of it.

Then the Lord God provided a vine and made it grow up over Jonah to give shade for his head to ease his discomfort, and Jonah was very happy about the vine. But at dawn the next day God provided a worm, which chewed the vine so that it withered. When the sun rose, God provided a scorching east wind, and the sun blazed on Jonah's head so that he grew faint. He wanted to die, and said, 'It would be better for me to die than to live.'

But God said to Jonah, 'Do you have a right to be angry about the vine?'

'I do,' he said. 'I am angry enough to die.'

But the Lord said, 'You have been concerned about this vine, though you did not tend it or make it grow. It sprang up overnight and died overnight. But Nineveh has more than a hundred and twenty thousand people who cannot tell their right hand from their left, and many cattle as well. Should I not be concerned about that great city?' (Jonah 4:6-11 NIV).

God says that Jonah was concerned for the vine that he did not tend or make to grow. In fact, however, Jonah's only concern for the vine was that it brought him pleasure. That is the nature of human affection. We like those things that bring us pleasure or satisfy some need within us. Once the object of our affection no longer satisfies our need, our affection ceases. Jonah, in fact, did not care about the vine at all. His only concern was for his own need and what would satisfy that need.

God's love for Nineveh, however, is quite different. They are his creation, and for that he loves them. His desire is to see his creation continue, and he knows that if the people of Nineveh could be brought to repentance and turn back toward him, there would be an ever-greater capacity for God to continue his creation within them. What this story communicates concerning God's love is that unlike human love which is basically a desire to have our needs gratified, God's love is a passion for his creation. God's glory is his creation and it is his love of that glory which motivates God just as our human, acquisitive love motivates us.

Love in Jonathan Edwards

John Piper has written extensively on Jonathan Edwards' idea that the end for which God created the world is 'his own glory, and that this aim is no other than the endless, ever-increasing joy of his people in that glory' (Piper 32). The specific form of God's glory, which yields the 'endless, ever-increasing joy of his people' is to create within them the image of his son. This is what God loves to do – the thing for which he has a passion.

Thus, the question of whether God acts in his own interest or the interest of his beloved cannot be put to God the way it can be put to human beings. Since human love is acquisitive, when I acquire those things that satisfy my needs. I am satisfying my desires and not the desires of

another. Furthermore, the satisfying of my acquisitive desires often preclude others from satisfying their desires with the same object. By contrast, when God satisfies his desire and creates his glory within a beloved, it is as much in the beloved's interest as it is God's, since the nature of his desire is to create the 'ever-increasing joy of his people' as they are transformed and made evermore into the image of his son.

God in seeking his glory seeks the good of his creatures, because the emanation of his glory (which he seeks and delights in, as he delights in himself and his own eternal glory) implies the communicated excellency and happiness of his creatures. And in communicating his fullness for them, he does it for himself, because their good, which he seeks, is so much in union and communion with himself (Edwards 176).

The fact that God's love is a desire to impart or create is obvious when we consider that divine affection is the affection of a father for his children or a creator for his creation. God's desire for creation is not limited to his being our father or creator, however. His desire for creation is also seen in the affection he has for us as our lover.

In the *Song of Songs*, *Hosea*, *Revelation*, and the fifth chapter of *Ephesians*, the analogy that God uses to express the kind of love he has for us is that of a husband's love toward his wife. Since God's desire is for creation and he tells us that he loves us the way a husband loves a wife, it would seem to follow that one aspect of God's love for us is something close to a husband's desire to impart life to his wife by impregnating her and bringing forth new-life.

God, the 'Impregnator'

This idea of God as the impregnator, and we being the ones who are impregnated, can be seen throughout the New Testament in several seed parables. In these parables, Jesus is the sower and we are the receptacles who receive his seed. In the Gospel of Luke, Jesus explains one of the seed parables by saying, 'Now the parable is this: The seed is the word of God' (Luke 8:11 KJV). This seems to be different from other seed parables where Jesus says the seed are the children of the kingdom (Matt. 13:38). In fact, however, it is quite possible that the seed in both parables refers to the same thing, for just as our physical existence began as a seed; in the same way our life in Christ began as a seed – namely, the word of God. Indeed, our life in Christ began when we opened ourselves and allowed the word of God to impregnate us and produce new life within us.

Being born again, not of corruptible seed, but of incorruptible, by the word of God, which liveth and abideth forever (1 Peter 1:23 KJV).

How exactly this happens, we do not know (Mark 4:26-27). As mysterious as this process is, however, the analogy is quite clear, and the seed that is implanted is not unlike the husband's implanting of a seed within his wife. Consequently, the transformative process whereby we are made into God's likeness seems to begin as we open ourselves in order to receive God's love and the supernatural life that comes with it.

As creator, God spoke the universe into existence, and there was no participation on our part, but the words of a lover do require the consent of the beloved. In order for that deeper creation to begin, we must choose to open ourselves and allow God's word to continue to bring about his creation within us. As God's creatures or children, we had no choice but to accept his creative love, but as his beloved, we do have a choice. We must choose to become his beloved and receive his seed. If we are to be made into the fullness of his likeness and bring forth new life, we must first be impregnated and that requires a consent on our part. Those who have not opened themselves to God, and allowed his word to begin to create new life after his likeness, may look and act religious, they may even work miracles in Jesus' name, but, unless they have been impregnated by him, he never knew them, and they are not his beloved.

Many will say to me in that day, Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in thy name? and in thy name have caste out devils? And in thy name done many wonderful works? And then will I profess unto them, I never knew you (Matt. 7:22-23 KJV).

It is difficult to interpret this passage, and in particular the word *knew*, in any other way but as a personal intimacy, as when Scripture says, 'Adam knew Eve his wife; and she conceived' (Gen. 4:1 KJV). To understand the word in any other way simply does not make sense. God knows all things. The hairs of our head are all counted, so no one escapes his notice, but many refuse the kind of intimacy that would allow his seed to produce the fullness of life within them. He may be their creator, and even their loving father, but they have never become his beloved because they have never received his seed in order to bring forth the new life that is after his likeness.

As our father and creator, God gave us life, over which we had no choice, but concerning the creation of a new life made evermore after his likeness, we do have a choice. In order to have that newness of life, which starts the process of making us evermore into his image, we must allow him to become our lover and impregnate us with his seed. This is the union God desires: one in which he is the lover and giver of life, and we are the beloved who willingly receive that new life.

The life that comes out of this intimate union will certainly resemble the God who fathered it, but, since this new

life is created in us, it will also bear a striking resemblance to us as well. Thus, the Christian life that comes forth from within us looks different in every individual, while at the same time looking the same in everyone because of its resemblance to him who fathered it.

Interestingly, this aspect of divine love, whereby God impregnates us in order that we might begin to bring forth new life, is not an aspect of love that can be returned toward God. Toward God we will always be the feminine and receptor of the seed. With this notion of love there is no reciprocity. We cannot impregnate Christ or give our seed to him as he gives his seed to us. The consequence of this is that we can never be God's lover, and we can never have toward him the same kind of divine love he has toward us. Toward God, we will always be the beloveds, having a human love that desires to acquire rather than to impart. Thus, if we are to be like him, and have his kind of love, it must be toward other human beings and not toward God. Although we cannot be God's lover, we can be the lovers of other human beings and have for them the same love that God has for us. We are the body of Christ, and God uses us to pass on his seed and create new life in others as we impregnate them with the same words of life that we have been impregnated with.

This is the holiness God has for us, not an outward moral purity, but a God-given ability to love the unlovely and create within them the capacity to do the same. It is by this divine love for the unlovely, and the impregnating of them with words of life in order that they too become agents of the divine love, that the virus of the gospel spreads.

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