

D. A. CARSON'S DIFFICULT DOCTRINE OF THE LOVE OF GOD

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It is quite telling that in a book on the love of God, the author does not even attempt to define *love*, much less the love of *God*.

In his book, *The Difficult Doctrine of the Love of God*, D. A. Carson, a Reformed Baptist theology professor and founding council member of the Gospel Coalition, attempts to “prime” the reader on the subject of the love of God.¹ In particular, Carson appears to be warding off two “errors:” that of Arminianism, in which God loves all men equally without exception, and that of “hyper-Calvinism,” in which God loves only the elect and hates the reprobate.² The solution, states Carson, is that the Bible speaks of God’s love in “different,” “nuanced” and “complex” ways, such that, for example, there is both a general love of God for all *and* a particular love of God for the elect alone. In typical modern evangelical style, Carson manages to avoid harsh language and does not condemn anyone, not even the “open theists” who deny that God knows the future. In all of this—the refusal to condemn false views and the idea that God has different “degrees” of love—Carson is representative of modern popular “Reformed” theology as espoused by men such as R. C. Sproul, John Piper and C. J. Mahaney, for which reason we deem it necessary to write a thorough refutation.

We, on the other hand, have no unbiblical qualms about strongly denouncing error.³ *The Difficult Doctrine of the Love of God* is a horrendous, confused

¹ D. A. Carson, *The Difficult Doctrine of the Love of God* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 1999). It can be read on-line free of charge (http://s3.amazonaws.com/tgc-documents/carson/2000_difficult_doctrine_of_the_love_of_God.pdf).

² To be more precise, Carson states that such “simple and absolute bifurcation” of God’s love “engenders hyper-Calvinism” which “forbids the free offer of the Gospel” (p. 22).

³ There are many Scriptures where God shows us, by example, that error must be exposed and condemned. One of the main features of the earthly ministry of Christ was publicly to oppose, expose and condemn the Pharisees. Indeed, so devastating was Christ’s critique that even today to be called a “Pharisee” is synonymous with being called a hypocrite.

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ness of contradictory statements with the sad and disgraceful result of reducing the comforting, almighty love of God to nothing but a weak, ineffectual feeling.

We now proceed to refute the main arguments Carson gives in defence of his thesis that there is a love of God for all, head for head.

A Difficult Doctrine Indeed

Almost the only good part in this book is found in the opening chapters. Here, Carson explains why the doctrine of the love of God is difficult, contrary to the common opinion that God's love is the most, if not the only, self-evident attribute of God. In short, the love of God is actually difficult for us to understand, because we are sinners influenced by wrong conceptions of God from both the ungodly world and the traditions of the church. In this sense, all truth is "difficult" for sinful man.

Sadly, Carson's conception of the love of God is difficult for another reason entirely: his idea of the love of God actually *is* complicated, confused and contradictory, even for a regenerated believer with a renewed mind. Hence, "difficult" in the title of this essay is used as a criticism of Carson's ideas.

Five Different Loves

Carson claims that he is not describing five different "loves" of God but rather five different ways the Bible "speaks" about the *one* love of God:

We 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 can we allow any one of these ways of talking about the love of God to be diminished by the others, even as we cannot, on scriptural evidence, allow any one of them to domesticate all the others. God is God, and he is one. Not only must we gratefully acknowledge that God in the perfection of his wisdom has thought it best to provide us with these various ways of

talking of his love if we are to think of him aright, but we must hold these truths together and learn to integrate them in biblical proportion and balance (p. 23).

However, a quick listing of the five different ways in which the Bible, according to Carson, speaks of the love of God will demonstrate that they actually are *different loves*:

1. The intra-Trinitarian love between the Father and the Son
2. God's "providential" love over all creation
3. God's "salvific" love for all men without exception
4. God's effective love for the elect
5. God's conditional love for the elect (p. 16)

Now it is obvious that the same love cannot be both conditional (number 5) and unconditional (all the others); nor can the same love be both particular and general; and the intra-Trinitarian love certainly cannot be the same love as a non-saving, ineffectual love for all mankind, or be identical to a "conditional" love for the elect!

No, Carson describes different loves. Even though he claims they are actually only one love that must be "held together" and "integrated biblically," he never shows how this might be done. It is, in fact, impossible to integrate contradictory things, such as a conditional love and an unconditional love.

Let us now proceed to show that the second, third and fifth types of the "love" of God posited by Carson do not exist, and, finally, that the fourth is merely an extension of the first.

God's Providential Love Over All That He Has Made

Carson almost indicts himself with the first sentence explaining this particular "love:" "By and large the Bible veers away from using the word *love* in this connection" (p. 16).

Indeed, Carson does not give a single verse where "love" is used to describe God's attitude towards all creation. It is, of course, true that something might be taught in Scripture without being explicitly mentioned (such as the doctrine

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of the Trinity), but proving this requires a definition of the subject supposedly being taught—which is lacking in Carson's work. Let us, nevertheless, proceed to the implicit proofs that Carson gives of this "love."

First, Carson points to God pronouncing everything "good" after creation in Genesis 1, from which Carson reasons that God loves everything He has created without exception (p. 16).

We do not deny that God loved His original creation—although we strenuously except the devil and all his demons from this love. Does Carson really believe that God loves even the demons? Such a view is absurd.⁴ Be that as it may, it ought to be obvious that one cannot presume God's attitude towards creation *as fallen into sin* is the same as towards creation *in the state of perfection before the Fall*. Therefore, this proves nothing about God's attitude toward fallen creation today (which is what Carson is interested in).

The only other proof listed is Jesus' describing God as "clothing the grass of the field" in Matthew 6, as well as allusions to Psalms which talk about God giving food to all creatures. From all of this, Carson concludes,

If this were not a benevolent providence, a loving providence, then the moral lesson that Jesus drives home [that is, the gospel lesson in Matthew 6, MK], viz. that this God can be trusted to provide for his own people, would be incoherent (p. 17).

Obviously, we agree that a non-benevolent providence cannot be trusted to be good to anyone. But Carson here means benevolent *toward all creation without exception*. Again, this involves the absurdity of God being benevolent even to Satan. Furthermore, this position is exegetically incorrect. Christ says,

Wherefore, if God so clothe the grass of the field, which to

⁴ It may be objected, "How can God hate a being that is at that time upright and perfect?" To which we reply, "How can God love a sinner who is at that time a sinner?" Or alternatively, "How can God love a being whom He knows (and has in fact decreed and purposed) will become the devil?" The answer is as follows: First, God's love and hatred are sovereignly determined within Himself and not dependent on anything in the creature (Rom. 9:11-13). Second, God is not bound by time, and therefore "sees" the devil, even in his original upright state, according to what the devil in God's decree of predestination would become, even as He sees the elect not only as in Christ by election, but as what we become in time—righteous by the imputation of Christ's righteousness.

day is, and to morrow is cast into the oven, shall he not much more clothe you, O ye of little faith? (Matt. 6:30).

Note, Jesus says “shall [God] not *much more*...,” that is, considering how God provides for the grass of the field, which is only grass and is “cast into the oven” already tomorrow, *how much more* will He not provide for you who believe (though only with a little faith), you for whom He sent His Son to die, you whom He loves with an everlasting, eternal love? Note, the text teaches nothing about, and does not require, a “providential” love of God for all of creation without exception, and especially not for all of *fallen* mankind. It is addressed to those of “little faith,” that is, to believers, to the elect.

Carson’s implicit assumption is that the giving of good gifts to someone (or something) implies love for them. However, this is patently unbiblical, as the Scriptures often identify God’s reason for giving good gifts to the reprobate wicked, not that He loves them, but that He purposes righteously to destroy them (e.g., Ps. 73:3-28; 92:7-9). More generally, the Scriptures explicitly state that “no man knoweth either love or hatred by all that is before them,” that is, all the good things which God gives to every man (Ecc. 9:1).

Finally, Carson argues that God’s giving of good gifts can only be motivated by love for the recipient of these good things. If that is so, what must be God’s attitude towards the many believers from whom He not only withholds good things, but even gives things such as sickness, suffering, heartache, torture and death? Is not this the carnal, evil reasoning of Job’s three erring friends, that God’s love and hatred may be determined by the material things one possesses or loses? And is not this the reasoning of a “beast” of which Asaph was guilty, which caused him to “almost slip” from salvation, until he “went into the sanctuary of God” and understood God’s purpose behind His giving good things to the wicked (Ps. 73)?

And that already concludes Carson’s proofs for God’s “providential” love and our refutation of the same.

God’s “Salvific” Love for All Men

Now we come to the heart of the controversy. The previous section was merely a skirmish preceding the real battle.

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Carson contends that God loves *and* “yearns” to save (hence “salvific”) all men without exception (p. 75).

John 3:16

Not surprisingly, his main proof text is John 3:16. Immediately after referencing it, Carson writes,

I know that some try to take *kosmos* (“world”) 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 the 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 can speak of “the whole world” (I 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 (p. 17).

Considering that Carson engages in detailed analysis of the original Greek in the second chapter entitled “God Is Love,” his weak exegesis of John 3:16 is really quite shocking.

In Scripture, as in every-day life, the word “world” has many different meanings. “Every human being absolutely” *is* a possible, though uncommon, meaning. Our contention is that in John 3:16 it most clearly does not mean “every human being absolutely.”

First, the Gospel of John itself contains several instances where “world” obviously does not include all humans (e.g., 7:4; 12:19), clearly contrary to Carson’s assertion in the previous quote that “all the evidence of the usage of the word in John’s Gospel is against the suggestion [that “world” does not refer to everyone].” There are numerous further instances of “world” not having a

universal, absolute meaning in the rest of the New Testament (e.g., Luke 2:1; Rom. 1:8; I Cor. 4:9; Col. 1:6).

Second, the very verse that Carson uses on page 17 to prove that “world” in John’s vocabulary includes the reprobate actually proves the exact opposite:

If ye [i.e., Jesus’ disciples] were of the world, the world would love his own: but because ye are not of the world, but I have chosen you out of the world, therefore the world hateth you (John 15:19).

Notice, Jesus’ disciples are *not* “of the world.” In fact, the “world” hates them—and therefore the “world” does not include them. The “world,” in this instance in the Gospel of John, does not refer to everyone without exception.

Two chapters later, Jesus is even clearer: “I pray for them [i.e., Jesus’ disciples]: I pray not for the world, but for them which thou hast given me; for they are thine” (John 17:9).

Other New Testament passages clearly exclude the elect when referring to the “world” (e.g., I Cor. 11:32; Rev. 13:3).

Third, and this is conclusive, the very verse following John 3:16 uses “world” to refer only to the elect: “For God sent not his Son into the world to condemn the world; but that the world through him might be saved” (John 3:17).

Note that God’s purpose for the “world” which He “so loved” was to save it. And unless God fails to achieve His purpose in the sending of Christ (which idea is blasphemous for suggesting God could ever fail, and even more blasphemous for suggesting God could fail *in the giving of His most precious, only begotten Son*), the “world” is most certainly saved (cf. II Cor. 5:19; Col. 1:20). And who are saved but the elect alone? As Turretin comments on this exact point,

If therefore God sent Christ for that end (that through him the world might be saved), he must either have failed of his end or the world must be necessarily saved in fact. However it is certain that not the whole world, but only the chosen out of the world are saved; therefore to them properly this love has reference.⁵

⁵ Francis Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 1992), vol. 1, p. 405.

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We only add that the “world” which God loves and for whom He sent Christ includes not just all elect humans, but also all of (elect) creation, animals and nature, according to Romans 8:19-22.

Has Carson forgotten that even in common speech “world” rarely ever means “every single human being without exception, dead, alive, and to be born”? When did you, reader, in a conversation *not* involving John 3:16, use “world” in this extreme sense? We might say, “The whole world has seen the Eiffel tower.” Even if we actually meant “everyone alive without exception” and were not merely generalising, we would not be so foolish as to include the long-dead Babylonians or Adam and Eve!

In fact, the strange phenomenon that most people when reading the Bible suddenly think “world” changes its meaning to “everyone absolutely without exception, regardless of context,” merely demonstrates that the idea of a universal love of God is not *taken from* such texts as John 3:16 (exegesis), but rather *read into* them (eisegesis).

Fourth, “world” here cannot mean “everyone without exception,” because the rest of Scripture clearly reveals that God hates some people—Psalm 5:5; 11:5; Romans 9:13. For now, we again content ourselves with this short observation of Turretin:

Nor can it be conceived if a universal love is here understood, how such and so great love (which is by far the cause of the greatest and most excellent good, viz., the mission of Christ) can consist with [i.e., be reconciled with] the hatred of innumerable persons whom he willed to pass by and ordain to damnation (to whom he never has revealed either his Son or willed to bestow faith, without which it is set forth in vain).⁶

Finally, the rest of Scripture teaches many things about the love of God which make it impossible for God to love everyone, such as the truth that God’s love always leads to salvation (e.g., Rom. 8:35).

The reason Jesus uses the word “world” here is very simple. He is speaking to Nicodemus the Pharisee, who, like most Jews at the time, thought the Messiah would come only for Jews, and for whom “the world” meant the

⁶ *Ibid.*

“uncircumcised,” the filthy Gentiles. And to counter this notion, Jesus emphasizes “world” to show that the sending of the Messiah was the product of the Father’s love for all *kinds* of people, Jew and Gentile, for those who would believe (not for unbelievers!), no matter what nationality. If Jesus had said, “God so loved the elect,” Nicodemus would simply have thought that God loved the nation of the Jews.

As has already been indicated with quotations from Turretin, the view that the “world” in John 3:16 does not include the reprobate has strong support in historic Reformed theology. John Owen’s outstanding work, *The Death of Death in the Death of Christ*, contains an entire chapter devoted solely to an exegesis of John 3:16 that defends the love of God to the “world” as to the elect.⁷ Similarly, John Flavel devotes a full chapter of his work, *A Display of Christ*, to the same issue.⁸ Some of the leading and most orthodox divines of the Westminster Assembly held the same position. In the famous John 3:16 debate at the Assembly, Gillespie expounded the verse as “God so loved the elect that whosoever believes in him . . .,”⁹ while Samuel Rutherford went on record declaring the love of John 3:16 as “restricted to the church.”¹⁰ In one of his books, Rutherford further explained,

The loved world, the world saved (v17), the world of which Christ is the Saviour (John 4:42), the world that Christ giveth His life unto (John 6:33) and for whose life he giveth His life (v55), the world of which Abraham, but much more Christ, is heir (Rom 4:13) the reconciled world, occasioned by the Jews falling off Christ (Rom 11:15). All these are the Elect, Believing, and Redeemed World.¹¹

⁷ John Owen, *The Death of Death in the Death of Christ* (Edinburgh: Banner, 1963), Book 4, Chapter 2. This chapter can be read on-line free of charge (www.the-highway.com/Jh3.16_Owen.html).

⁸ John Flavel, *A Display of Christ*, Chapter 4. This chapter, which is solely an exegesis of John 3:16, can be read free-of-charge online (www.graceonlinelibrary.org/doctrine-theology/christology/the-adorable-love-of-god-in-giving-his-own-son-for-us-by-john-flavel/).

⁹ Quoted in Alex F. Mitchell and John Struthers (eds.), *Minutes of the Sessions of the Westminster Assembly of Divines* (UK: W. Blackwood & Sons, 1874), p. 156.

¹⁰ Quoted in *ibid.*, p. 158.

¹¹ Samuel Rutherford, *Christ Dying and Drawing Sinners to Himself* (Edmonton, AB: Still

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Some of the greatest “Reformed” Baptists also held that John 3:16 refers to the elect alone. In his commentary on John 3:16, as part of his massive exposition of the entire Bible, John Gill states,

... not every man in the world is here meant [by “world”], or all the individuals of human nature: for all are not the objects of God’s special love, which is here designed, as appears from the instance and evidence of it, the gift of his Son: nor is Christ God’s gift to every one; for to whomsoever he gives his Son, he gives all things freely with him [Rom. 8:32]; which is not the case of every man.¹²

A. W. Pink similarly devotes a large section of his excellent work, *The Sovereignty of God*, to the same. After a lengthy exposition of the verse, he concludes,

In like manner, the “world” in John 3:16 must, in the final analysis, refer to the world of God’s people. Must we say, for there is no other alternative *solution*. It cannot mean the whole human race ...¹³

It is certainly true that not all took this view, such as possibly John Calvin. But we mention this because many modern Reformed theologians are busy re-writing history to make it appear as if no respected Reformed theologian ever taught such a thing.¹⁴

Carson has apparently heard many of these arguments before, for later on he states, “Clever exegetical devices that make ‘the world’ a label for referring to the elect are not very convincing” (p. 75).

Waters Revival Books), pp. 487-488.

¹² John Gill, *Gill's Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1980), vol. 5, p. 620.

¹³ A. W. Pink, *The Sovereignty of God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1984), pp. 203-205. Pink examines John 3:16 in more detail in Appendix 3, pp. 253-255.

¹⁴ A prime example is the Banner’s edition of Pink’s *The Sovereignty of God*, which removes more than half of Pink’s original—all the content in which Pink argues that God’s love is always saving and only for the elect, etc.—which removal the preface describes as “certain minor revisions and abridgements.” The interested reader may peruse two articles from the *British Reformed Journal* which document this shameful revision entitled “The Forgotten Pink” and “Edited Half Away,” available online (www.britishreformedfellowship.org.uk/index.php/journal).

We find it very disconcerting that Carson is not convinced by such arguments. We hope that he has so far only heard faulty arguments, and not the Reformed exegesis above.

The Extent of the Atonement

Carson's second, and only other, proof that God loves all men without exception, is to connect the extent of Christ's atonement to the extent of God's love. In other words, God surely loves as many as Christ died for. And since (supposedly) Christ died in some sense for all men, God must love all men (in some sense).

With the first premise, that God loves as many as Christ died for, surely no Christian would disagree. God would never sacrifice His only begotten Son for those whom He does not love. It is, however, the second premise, namely, that Christ died in some sense for all, that we challenge as unbiblical.

For proof that Christ died for all men (in some sense), Carson quotes I John 2:2 and then claims there exist "much more of the same" type of verses which he does not list (p. 75). We venture to guess he had in mind the "classic" so-called Arminian passages (Carson himself ascribes this universalistic interpretation of these passages to the Arminians), such as John 1:29, Romans 5:18 and I Timothy 4:10.

What we have written above concerning "world," namely, that in Scripture it rarely means "everyone without exception," can be equally applied to the biblical usage of the word "all" (a simple search for the word "all" in a good Bible concordance will reveal this). Thus the burden of proof is on the Arminians and Carson to demonstrate that in these verses these words suddenly have an absolute, universal meaning, regardless of context, and contrary to the conventional and normal biblical usage. Of course, neither Carson nor the Arminians bring this proof. In fact, most Arminians and modern "Reformed" theologians do not even attempt to do so.

Even though the burden of proof is on them, we will now prove, conclusively and in a most simple manner, that in all these texts only the elect are in view. We will do this by refuting Carson's interpretation of I John 2:2. Note, also, that when pushed, this is the interpretation of nearly all Arminians when

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asked about all the passages above.¹⁵

Says Carson,

As far as I can see, a text such as 1 John 2:2 states something about the potential breadth of the Atonement ... The context, then, understands this to mean something like "*potentially* for all without distinction" (pp. 76-77; italics mine).

(Did you notice how unsure Carson is about the exact meaning of this verse, using wording such as "as far as I can see," "states something about," and "means something like"? It sounds like not even Carson is convinced of his own interpretation. And yet it is one of the few texts he brings to prove that God loves everyone.)

In short, according to Carson, 1 John 2:2 teaches a *potential* universal atonement.

And here is the simple refutation: 1 John 2:2 does not mention a *potential* atonement. It teaches an *actual* atonement: "And he is the propitiation for our sins: and not for ours only, but also for the sins of the whole world."

Please re-read that verse. Did you find any potentiality? Any conditionality? Does it say, "Jesus is the *potential* propitiation for the sins of the whole world" or "Jesus propitiated God for your sins *if you believe*"? That's right. It does not. It says, "he *is* the propitiation ..." Carson's use of "as far as I can see" and "something like" in his "exegesis" of 1 John 2:2 is surely the result of this glaring absence. It is a perfect example of reading into the text what is not there (eisegesis).

It is no different with the other "Arminian" passages. Please read them and note *the complete lack of potentiality or conditionality or ineffectiveness*.

The next day John seeth Jesus coming unto him, and saith,
Behold the Lamb of God, which taketh away [actually, not
potentially or conditionally] the sin of the world (John 1:29).

¹⁵ Universalists who teach everyone will actually be saved, correctly interpret these verses to mean Jesus actually saves those for whom He dies, but incorrectly interpret "world" and "all" to mean everyone without exception.

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Therefore as by the offence of one judgment came upon all men to condemnation; even so by the righteousness of one the free gift came upon all men unto justification of life [i.e., all are actually, not potentially, justified] (Rom. 5:18).

For therefore we both labour and suffer reproach, because we trust in the living God, who is [not potentially, but actually] the Saviour of all men, specially of those that believe (I Tim. 4:10).

Words such as “world” and “all” always have a context which determines their exact meaning. They rarely ever mean “every single human being who was ever born or will ever be born without exception.” This is true not only in common usage throughout all history, but also in biblical usage.

We summarize with the simple, biblical logic of John Owen:

God imposed his wrath due unto, and Christ underwent the pains of hell for, either all the sins of all men, or all the sins of some men, or some of the sins of all men. If the last, some sins of all men, then have all men some sins to answer for, and so shall no man be saved ... If the second, that is it which we affirm, that Christ in their stead and room suffered for all the sins of all the elect in the world. If the first, why, then, are not all freed from the punishment of all their sins? You will say, “Because of their unbelief; they will not believe.” But this unbelief, is it a sin, or not? If not, why should they be punished for it? If it be, then Christ underwent the punishment due to it, or not. If so, then why must that hinder them more than their other sins for which he died from partaking of the fruit of his death? If he did not, then did he not die for all their sins. Let them choose which part they will.¹⁶

God’s Conditional Love for the Elect

Carson's teaching here is not only erroneous but dangerous. Says Carson,

¹⁶ Owen, *The Death of Death*, pp. 61-62.

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God's love is sometimes said to be directed toward his own people in a provisional or conditional way—conditioned, that is, on obedience. It is part of the relational structure of knowing God; it does not have to do with how we become true followers of the living God, but with our relationship with him once we do know him. “Keep yourselves in God's love,” Jude exhorts his readers (v. 21), leaving the unmistakable impression that someone might not keep himself or herself in the love of God (p. 19).

The love of God for his people is sometimes likened to the love of a parent for the child (e.g., Heb. 12:4-11; cf. Prov. 4:20). The Lord disciplines those he loves (the fifth category from the first chapter). I have said least about that category in this book. But we must never forget that we are held responsible to keep ourselves in the love of God (Jude 21), remembering that God is loving and merciful to those who love him and who keep his commandments (Exod. 20:6) (p. 80).

Carson's error is to confuse the *experience* of the love of God with a different *type* of love that is supposedly conditional. Carson is correct in using the analogy of a father-son-discipline relationship, but he applies it incorrectly. The truth is that every good father loves his son unconditionally, and never gives the impression that his love for the son is conditioned on anything the son does. What loving father, when disciplining his children, will tell them, “I hate you right now and will only love you again once you obey”? Far be it! Any good father will tell such a disobedient child that it is exactly *because* he loves him that he is disciplining him. He is merely withholding the *experience* of the *enjoyment* of that love from the child when the child is disobedient. So at most one could say that the *experience* of the father's love is conditioned on the obedience of the child, as long as “condition” is understood as necessary means and not as cause (however, because “condition” is usually understood as “dependent upon” in the sense of “cause,” it is not wise to use it this way). In the same way, we as God's children do not always experience God's love as we ought because of our sin.

In fact, God's chastisement (which differs from punishment, the latter having simply the satisfaction of justice as its aim, while the former is motivated

by love for, and the improvement of, the one being chastised) is actually *proof* that God loves someone. Hebrews 12:5-8 declares,

And ye have forgotten the exhortation which speaketh unto you as unto children, My son, despise not thou the chastening of the Lord, nor faint when thou art rebuked of him: For whom the Lord loveth he chasteneth, and scourgeth every son whom he receiveth. If ye endure chastening, God dealeth with you as with sons; for what son is he whom the father chasteneth not? But if ye be without chastisement, whereof all are partakers, then are ye bastards, and not sons.

Note that the writer of Hebrews, especially in the verses that follow, actually teaches that we ought to be *encouraged* by the fact that we are chastised—because it proves God is our Father and loves us! As an aside, it also clearly implies that God does not love everyone—because He does not chasten everyone. The elect are “chastened” (the act of a loving father whose purpose is correction), while the reprobate are “punished” (the act of a judge whose purpose is the satisfaction of justice). We, the elect, are never punished, because Christ was punished in our stead.

However, what Carson goes on to say is very serious error. Whether intentionally or not, he gives the distinct impression that sanctification depends on us, with statements such as “God’s love is ... conditioned ... on obedience,” or even implying that one could lose his or her salvation—“leaving the unmistakable impression that someone might not keep himself or herself in the love of God.”

The Scriptures are filled with the comforting teaching that our perseverance depends not upon us, but upon God’s sovereign act of preserving us in salvation and faith (e.g., Ps. 37:24; John 10:28-30; Rom. 8:31-35; I Pet. 1:5; Jude 24). We are indeed exhorted to faith and perseverance, but even this is based on the knowledge that this faith and perseverance are worked in us by God (e.g., Phil. 2:12-13), and that those who do not persevere in faith never had true faith in the first place (I John 2:19).

To teach or even imply that perseverance depends in the least degree upon us is to instil the “doubts of the papist” (*Canons* V:R:5) and results in salvation by works (for how do we prevent ourselves losing our salvation? By doing good works)—which leads to hell.

Telling Unbelievers God Loves Them

Not surprisingly, one of the shocking practical results of Carson's difficult doctrine of the love of God is spelled out near the end of the book. In the context of evangelism and mission work, Carson says,

From what I have already said, it is obvious that I have no hesitation in ... [advising] young Reformed preachers ... : *Of course* I tell the unconverted that God loves them (p. 78; italics Carson's).

Although, almost surprisingly, he continues to say that the "Reformed" preacher ought still preach the exclusive love of God for the elect, this does not negate the damage done. Telling wicked unbelievers that God loves them? Nowhere in Scripture is there found such an absurd practice! For the sinner outside Christ there is only wrath—which is exactly why he is commanded to come to Christ.

In fact, little does more to encourage a sinner to remain away from Christ than to tell him that God loves him whether he comes to Christ or not.

Be that as it may, we challenge every such "Reformed" preacher who believes and declares a universal "love" of God: Do you tell unbelievers that the "love" with which God supposedly "loves" them is a weak, ineffectual, non-saving "love"? Do you tell them that God has actually chosen to withhold from nearly all of those He supposedly "loves" the things they need most—repentance and faith? Do you tell them that God actually *hardens* and *blinds* most of those He so "loves" so that they perish in hell for their sins (John 12:39-40; Rom. 9:18ff.)? Do you tell them that God *hates* those who never repent (Lev. 20:23; Ps. 5:5; 11:5; Rom. 9:11ff.)? Or do you just like to say "God loves you," without clarification and explanation?

The Simple Doctrine of the Love of God

Love Defined

It goes beyond the scope of this article to give an exhaustive definition—and especially to give biblical proof for such an exhaustive definition—of love in general, and of God's love in particular. For this, the interested reader is

referred elsewhere.¹⁷ We will confine ourselves to dealing with the parts most pertinent to the question of *whom* God loves, and as such will merely summarize Herman Hoeksema's excellent treatment.

The Old Testament uses two Hebrew words for love, the former of which refers to a bond of fellowship between parties with the root meaning of "bind," "join together," "stick together" (e.g., Deut. 7:7) and the latter referring more to the living action of that love with the root meaning of "breathing after" (e.g., Deut. 6:5). In the New Testament, especially one Greek word is used to describe God's love, and this is defined in Colossians 3:14 as "the bond of perfectness." Combining all these ideas leads to the following formal definition of love in Scripture:

[Love is] the spiritual bond of perfect fellowship that subsists between ethically perfect, personal beings, who, because of their ethical perfection, have their delight in, seek, and find one another. The love of God is the infinite and eternal bond of fellowship that is based upon the ethical perfection and holiness of the divine nature and that subsists between the three persons of the holy Trinity.¹⁸

Hence, to love someone (as a verb) is to desire with ardent affection, to do everything possible to establish an ethically perfect bond of fellowship with them and to do all possible good to them. Love, thus, has three parts: ardent affection, determination to do good and seeking a bond of fellowship.

Already from this, it is apparent that God does not love the reprobate, for God certainly does not do everything in His power to save and have fellowship with the reprobate, nor can God ever establish a "bond of perfectness" with the unrighteous reprobate.

The Simplicity of God

Belgic Confession 1 begins, "We all believe with the heart, and confess with the mouth, that there is one only simple and spiritual Being, which we call God ..." Did you notice the word "simple"?

¹⁷ Herman Hoeksema, *Reformed Dogmatics* (Grandville, MI: RFP, 2005), vol. 1, pp. 148-153.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, vol. 1, p. 153.

D. A. Carson's *Difficult Doctrine*

Central to Reformed theology is the simplicity of God.¹⁹ This does not mean that God is a simpleton or so simple that a child (or for that matter anyone else) can fully understand Him.

We will quote Herman Hoeksema at this point, for his explanation is superb and impossible for us to surpass:

God's simplicity ... signifies that God is not composed [of parts], that his essence and his virtues are identical, that he *is* his virtues, and that all his virtues are absolutely one in him. God *is* absolute goodness, perfection. There is none good but one, that is, God (Matt. 19:17). He is the God of truth; truth is his very essence (Jer. 10:10); he is the God of all grace (1 Pet. 5:10); he is the God of peace (Heb. 13:20). "This then is the message which we have heard of him, and declare unto you, that God *is* light, and in him is no darkness at all" (1 John 1:5). The Lord Jesus declares, "I *am* the resurrection, and the life," implying the identity of the divine essence and nature with life itself (John 11:25). He *is* the truth and the life (John 14:6). He *is* the true light, "which lighteth every man that cometh into the world" (John 1:9). And God *is* love (1 John 4:8).

This implies that he *is* all his attributes, for they are all implied in the figure of light. God's virtues cannot be separated. His being *is* righteousness, holiness, justice, power, might, love, grace, mercy, and so forth. Of the creature, who has a dependant existence, it may be said that it *possesses* certain virtues, though only as a reflection of the perfections of God. But God *is* pure perfection; he *is* goodness in his very essence; his very being *is* virtue. He *is* the one pure beam of revelation in his manifold perfections and beauties. Therefore, it follows that all God's perfections are one in him.

There is no division or conflict in God. He is the one adorable and infinite fullness of glorious perfections and virtues.

¹⁹ See also *Westminster Confession* 2:1, speaking of God being without "parts."

Even as God is love, light, life, righteousness, holiness, mercy, grace, justice, and truth, so it may be said that his righteousness *is* his love, his justice *is* his mercy, his holiness *is* his grace, and so forth. His righteousness is a loving righteousness; his mercy is a just mercy. Never may these attributes of God be separated or presented as if they were in conflict with one another and mutually exclusive. God is one, and his essence is infinite and simple perfection. Purest goodness is he.²⁰

To give a practical example which already approaches the point under discussion: It is wrong to conceive of the cross of Jesus Christ as the place where God's love "triumphed" over His justice. The opposite is, in fact, true: On the cross, God showed that His love *is just*. Both God's justice and His love triumphed together. God's love for sinners and forgiveness of their sins is based on the substitutionary atonement of Christ fully to satisfy divine justice (e.g., Rom. 3:25-26). There is no conflict between any of God's attributes! In fact, internal conflict is a mark of the creature. It is impossible for God. He is a simple being such that there is no conflict in Him at all. God is love and God is justice. God's love is just and His justice is loving.

The Simple Love of God

We make the following applications of the doctrine of God's simplicity to the question of whom God loves:

1. God's love is always just. Therefore, God cannot love a wicked sinner apart from that sinner being (eventually) justified and sanctified (II Chron. 19:2; Col. 3:14). For this reason, Scripture always grounds God's love for sinners in Christ (John 3:16; Rom. 5:8-10; 8:32; I John 3:16; 4:9-11). Outside of Christ (i.e., outside of being righteous), there is only wrath, hatred and cursing—the response of God's love for His justice towards the reprobate for their sins (Deut. 28:15ff.; Ps. 5:5-6; 11:5; Prov. 3:33; John 3:18, 36; Rom. 9:22-23). *Conclusion:* A love of God for the reprobate, who are by definition never made righteous, is an unjust love, and therefore impossible for God (reverently speaking).

²⁰ Hoeksema, *Reformed Dogmatics*, vol. 1, pp. 106-107; italics mine.

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2. God's love is omnipotent, almighty. It is not a mere wish, a mere desire, but an actual power which brings about the intended goal: fellowship with the person loved. This attribute of God's love is explicitly taught in Romans 8:35, 38-39 and implied in passages such as Jeremiah 31:3 and John 13:1.²¹
Conclusion: Any person that is not brought into loving fellowship with God was never loved by Him.
3. God's love is eternal and unchangeable (Jer. 31:3). It is the same "yesterday, and to day, and for ever" (Heb. 13:8). It has neither beginning nor end. God sets His love upon His creatures before they are created, in eternity, in His counsel of predestination (Eph. 1:4-5). And God's love will never cease towards a person (Rom. 8:35-39). Let us make it plain: Does God love the reprobate even as they suffer eternally under His fierce wrath in hell? If not, if God stops loving them at that point, then God has changed, for, whereas He once loved them, He does so no more. But God cannot change! Therefore, this is impossible.
Conclusion: If God loves someone, He will love them throughout all eternity.
4. God's love is sovereign. It is not motivated or caused by anything in the creature (Rom. 9:11-23). Therefore, God is under no obligation or necessity of character to love someone simply because He created that person, or because that person is miserable and suffering. In fact, God loves no one, not even the elect, *because* they are miserable, or because of anything in them at all. "The LORD did not set his love upon you, nor choose you, because ye were more in number than any people; for ye were the fewest of all people: But because the LORD loved you ..." (Deut. 7:7-8).
Conclusion: God is not obligated to love any of His creatures.
5. God's love is satisfied. As the ever-blessed, eternally and exclusively happy Being, God's love is always reciprocated. A love that is not reciprocated is a weak, imperfect, unsatisfied love that implies sadness and disappointment. This is impossible for God, because it is in the very essence of being God that "our God is in the heav-

²¹ Some attempt to evade this by arguing that in view here is only that love of God which is "in Christ." But as we have shown in the previous point, there is no love of God for sinners apart from Christ.

ens: he hath done whatsoever he hath pleased.” It is the mark of idols and false gods that they have unfulfilled desires: “Their idols are silver and gold, the work of men’s hands” (Ps. 115:3-4).

Conclusion: All those whom God loves will eternally love Him in return.

God’s Hatred

The hatred of God is not an attribute of God, because within Himself, apart from creation, God does not hate. In eternity past, “before” God created anything, God did not hate; there was nothing for God to hate. There was only beautiful, unending, infinite love between Father and Son in the Holy Spirit.

Hatred is the manifestation of God’s love—in particular, God’s love for goodness and justice—with respect to evil and sin and all that is wicked. The love of good *necessarily implies* the hatred of evil. Hatred is also the opposite of love in its end and means—where love desires fellowship, hatred desires separation; where God’s love actually achieves the “bond of perfection,” His hatred actually achieves the complete and eternal destruction of those whom He hates.

The love of God is like the rays of the sun, which give life and succour to plants and animals. Yet that same sunshine in its intense brightness and purity will burn others in the desert. In the same manner, the intense, powerful love of God, that works salvation and joy in the elect, works death and destruction in the wicked reprobate. Or to use biblical imagery, it is like the rain, which causes the growth of the good seed into fruitful plants that are blessed, and at the same time the growth and subsequent destruction of the weeds (Heb. 6:7-8).

A great evangelical cliché is that “God hates the sin but loves the sinner.”

Scripturally, nothing is further from the truth. The Bible explicitly teaches that God hates not only sin, but also sinners (Lev. 26:30; Deut. 18:12; 25:16; 32:19; Ps. 5:5-6; 10:3; 11:5; Prov. 6:16-19; 16:4-5; 17:15; 22:14; Isa. 41:24; Jer. 12:8; Hos. 9:15; Zech. 11:8; Mal. 1:2-5; Rom. 9:13). Note that all these passages refer to reprobate sinners outside of Christ.

Even though Carson acknowledges that the Scriptures speak of God hating some, he still attempts to reconcile this with his idea that God “loves” everyone:

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Fourteen times in the first fifty psalms alone, we are told that God hates the sinner, his wrath is on the liar, and so forth. In the Bible, the wrath of God rests both on the sin (Rom. 1:18ff.) and on the sinner (John 3:36).

Our problem [in understanding these verses, MK], in part, is that in human experience wrath and love normally abide in mutually exclusive compartments. Love drives wrath out, or wrath drives love out. We come closest to bringing them together, perhaps, in our responses to a wayward act by one of our children, but normally we do not think that a wrathful person is loving.

But this is not the way it is with God. God's wrath is not an implacable, blind rage. However emotional it may be, it is an entirely reasonable and willed response to offenses against his holiness. But his love, as we saw in the last chapter, wells up amidst his perfections and is not generated by the loveliness of the loved. Thus there is nothing intrinsically impossible about wrath and love being directed toward the same individual or people at the same time. God in his perfections must be wrathful against his rebel image-bearers, for they have offended him; God in his perfections must be loving toward his rebel image-bearers, for he is that kind of God (p. 69).

Note how quickly Carson moves away from God "hating" sinners to God being filled with "wrath" toward sinners. They are not the same at all! We suspect Carson does so in part because, in our modern day, it is easier to make "wrath" into less of an absolute, exclusive, negative attribute than "hatred."

It is certainly true that chastisement or even wrath is compatible with love. A parent will be angry at an erring child exactly *because* he or she loves the child, and will chastise the child out of love.

However, "hatred," unlike wrath, is not compatible with love. Ask any child what the opposite of "love" is, and he will tell you "hatred." Check any dictionary. More importantly, the Scriptures present them as opposites (Mal. 1:2-3; Matt. 6:24; Rom. 9:13).

Again, it is true that man—fallen, sinful, fickle, changeable man—can both hate and love the same person. The believer loves his neighbour as himself according to the new man, but hates that same person according to his old, sinful man. Conversely, the believer righteously hates God’s (not his own!) enemies according to the new man, but sinfully loves them according to his old man (Ps. 139:22; II Chron. 19:2).

However, such dichotomy, such dualism, such inner division and conflict, are impossible for God. God is a simple being, without parts or contradiction. God does not consist of conflicting desires or an old, sinful nature and a new, perfect nature. Even the human will of Christ submits to the divine will *in perfect agreement* (Luke 22:42). In fact, it is an action of wicked unbelief to reason from man to God: “thou thoughtest that I was altogether such as one as thyself: but I will reprove thee” (Ps. 50:21). To do so is to forget the very basic truth that we are creatures, finite, changeable, confused, and that God is God!

No. God’s love is absolute, exclusive, efficacious—as is God’s hatred, which is the opposite of God’s love. Therefore, O how blessed are we who know the love of God! And therefore how urgently must those who do not yet know if they are loved of God flee to Christ in whom alone the love of God is found and experienced by sinners!

The Simple Doctrine—A Great Comfort

Though complicated for sinful, corrupt man to understand, though probing its depths will take all eternity and more, the love of God is most simple: *God’s love always saves*. It is efficacious, omnipotent, just, wise, sovereign, eternal, unchangeable.

Any doctrine of God’s love which renders it ineffectual, weak, unjust, changeable, or any other attribute not appropriate for the Most High, is to be rejected as incompatible with His infinite majesty. Such a “love” may in derision and shame be ascribed to sinful, weak creatures, but never to the Creator.

When the love of God is preached or discussed or thought upon, no lowly, creaturely thought such as of an ineffectual “love” must pollute God’s divine attribute of love (or any other attribute of His).

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Equally, God's hatred must be preached with the highest urgency, and it must never be diluted with any common "love." The unrepentant sinner must not be left with a single refuge apart from Christ.

This is our comfort—our only comfort: God loves us in Christ; He sent His only begotten Son to accomplish, fully and completely, our salvation; the Holy Spirit sheds this love abroad in our hearts; God's love for us means we will spend eternity in His presence in pure, never ending, covenant love and fellowship; nothing shall separate us from His love.

John 3:16-18:

For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life. For God sent not his Son into the world to condemn the world; but that the world through him might be saved. He that believeth on him is not condemned: but he that believeth not is condemned already, because he hath not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God.