

**Random Extracts from "The Difficult Doctrine of the Love of God"
Don Carson**

We live in a culture in which many other and complementary truths about God are widely disbelieved. I do not think that what the Bible says about the love of God can long survive at the forefront of our thinking if it is abstracted from the sovereignty of God, the holiness of God, the wrath of God, the providence of God, or 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 instruct 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 the love of God. 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 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 okay, you're okay, and God loves you and me.

Even in the mid-1980s, according to Andrew Greeley, threequarters of his respondents in an important poll reported that they preferred to think of God as “friend” than as “king.” 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?...

In the cultural rush toward a sentimentalized, sometimes even non-theistic vision of the love of God, we Christians have sometimes been swept along to the extent that we have forgotten that within Christian confessionality the doctrine of the love of God poses its 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—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 even over the domain of evil? What does love mean in a Being whom at least some texts treat as impassible?

How is God's love tied to God's justice?

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

our 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...

Many think it is easy for God to forgive. I recall meeting a young and articulate French West African when I was studying in Germany more than twenty years ago. We were both working diligently to improve our German, but once a week or so we had had enough, so we went out for a meal together and retreated to French, a language we both knew well. In the course of those meals we got to know each other. I learned that his wife was in London training to be a medical doctor. He himself was an engineer who needed fluency in German in order to pursue doctoral studies in engineering in Germany.

Pretty soon I discovered that once or twice a week he disappeared into the red light district of town. Obviously he went to pay his money and have his woman. Eventually I got to know him well enough that I asked him what he would do if he discovered that his wife were doing something similar in London.

"Oh," he said, "I'd kill her."

"That's a bit of a double standard, isn't it?" I replied.

"You don't understand. Where I come from in Africa, the husband has the right to sleep with many women, but if a wife does it, she must be killed."

“But you told me that you were raised in a mission school. You know that the God of the Bible does not have double standards like that.”

He gave me a bright smile and replied, “Ah, le bon Dieu; il doit nous pardonner; c’est son métier [Ah, God is good; he’s bound to forgive us; that’s his job].”

It is a common view, is it not? I do not know if my African friend knew that the same words are ascribed to Catherine the Great; he may have been consciously quoting her, for he was well read. But even when people do not put things quite so bluntly, the idea is popular, not least because, as we have seen, some ill-defined notions of the love of God run abroad in the land—but these notions have been sadly sentimentalized and horribly stripped of all the complementary things the Bible has to say...

How, then, should the love of God and the wrath of God be understood to relate to each other? One evangelical cliché has it that God hates the sin but loves the sinner. There is a small element of truth in these words: God has nothing but hate for the sin, but it would be wrong to conclude that God has nothing but hate for the sinner. A difference must be maintained between God’s view of sin and his view of the sinner. Nevertheless the cliché (God hates the sin but loves the sinner) is false on the face of it and should be abandoned. 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 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.