The Difficult Doctrine of the Love of God

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B. The Sovereignty and Transcendence of God

Here it will be helpful to organize what I wish to say into five parts. Initially you will have to take my word for it that this is not an excursus but highly relevant to our reflections on the love of God. Much of what I say in the next few paragraphs is no more than a spotty review. But it is essential to what will follow.

(1) God is utterly sovereign (he is both omnipotent and omniscient), and he is transcendent (in himself he exists above time and space, i.e., above the created order with its intrinsic limitations). God is omnipotent; i.e., he is able to do anything he wishes to do. Nothing is too hard for him (Jer. 32:17); he is the Almighty (2 Cor. 6:18; Rev. 1:8). Jesus insists that with God all things are possible (Matt. 19:26). His sovereignty extends over the mighty movements of the stars in their courses, over the fall of a sparrow, over the exact count of the hairs of my head. If you throw a pair of dice, what numbers come up lies in the determination of God (Prov. 16:3). Ecclesiastes shows that the ancients knew of the water cycle, but still the biblical writers preferred to say that God sends the rain. He is not the distant God espoused by deism. Through the exalted Son he upholds all things by his

powerful word (Heb. 1:3); indeed, he "works out everything in conformity with the purpose of his will" (Eph. 1:11). This control extends as much to sentient beings as to inanimate objects. He can turn the heart of the king in any direction he sees fit (Prov. 21:1). He is the potter who has the right to make out of the same lump of clay some pottery for noble purposes and some for common use (Rom. 9:21). There can be no degrees of difficulty with an omnipotent God.

Moreover he enjoys all knowledge. He not only knows everything —he even knows what might have been under different circumstances (more or less what philosophers call "middle knowledge"), and takes that into account when he judges (Matt. 11:20-24). There are plenty of examples where God knows what we now label free contingent future decisions (e.g., 1 Sam. 23:11-13). God's knowledge is perfect (Job 37:16). "He does not have to reason to conclusions or ponder carefully before he answers, for he knows the end from the beginning, and he never learns and never forgets anything (cf. Ps. 90:4; 2 Peter 3:8)."[1] Precisely because he is the Creator of the universe, he must be independent from it. Indeed, in fine expressions that stretch our imagination, Isaiah affirms that God the high and lofty one "lives forever" (Isa. 57:15) or "inhabits eternity" (RSV).

(2) God's sovereignty extends to election. Election may refer to God's choice of the nation of Israel, or to God's choice of all the

people of God, or to God's choice of individuals. God's choice of individuals may be for salvation or for some particular mission. Election is so important to God that he actually arranged to choose the younger of the two sons, Jacob and Esau, before they were born and therefore before either had done anything good or bad, "in order that God's purpose in election might stand" (Rom. 9:11).

Even the highly diverse ways in which new converts are described in the book of Acts reflects the comfortable, unembarrassed way New Testament writers refer to election. We often speak of people who "accept Jesus as their personal Savior" —words not found in Scripture, though not necessarily wrong as a synthetic expression. But Acts may sum up some strategic evangelism by reporting that "all who were appointed for eternal life believed" (Acts 13:48). Writing of Christians, Paul says that God "chose us in him [i.e., Christ] before the creation of the world. . . . [H]e predestined us to be adopted as his sons through Jesus Christ" (Eph. 1:4-5; cf. Rev. 13:7-8; 17:8). Indeed, God chose the Thessalonian converts from the beginning to be saved (2 Thess. 2:13).

God's election even extends to angels (1 Tim. 5:21) — which shows that election need not be tied to salvation (since there has arisen a Redeemer for fallen human beings but not for fallen angels), but is properly a function of God's sweeping

sovereignty. We are a chosen race (1 Pet. 2:9).

Moreover, the Lord's electing love is immutable. All that the Father has given to the Son will come to him, and the Son will lose none of them, we are told, because he came down from heaven to do the Father's will — and this is the Father's will, that he should lose none of those the Father has given him (John 6:37-40). In other words, for the Son to lose any of those the Father has given him, he would have to be either unable or unwilling to obey his Father's explicit command. Small wonder, then, that we read that Jesus knows his own sheep, and no one shall pluck them out of his hand.

(3) Christians are not fatalists. The central line of Christian tradition neither sacrifices the utter sovereignty of God nor reduces the responsibility of his image-bearers. In the realm of philosophical theology, this position is sometimes called *compatibilism*. It simply means that God's unconditioned sovereignty and the responsibility of human beings are mutually compatible. It does not claim to show you *how* they are compatible. It claims only that we can get far enough in the evidence and the arguments to show how they are not necessarily *in*compatible, and that it is therefore entirely reasonable to think they are compatible if there is good evidence for them.[2]

The biblical evidence is compelling. When Joseph tells his fearful brothers that when they sold him into slavery, God

intended it for good while they intended it for evil (Gen. 50:19-20), he is assuming compatibilism. He does not picture the event as wicked human machination into which God intervened to bring forth good. Nor does he imagine God's intention had been to send him down there with a fine escort and a modern chariot but that unfortunately the brothers had mucked up the plan, and so poor old Joseph had to go down there as a slave — sorry about that. Rather, in one and the same event, God was operating, and his intentions were good, and the brothers were operating, and their intentions were evil.

When God addresses Assyria in Isaiah 10:5ff., he tells them that they are nothing more than tools in his hand to punish the wicked nation of Israel. However, because that is not the way they see it, because they think they are doing all this by their own strength and power, the Lord will turn around and tear them to pieces to punish their hubris after he has finished using them as a tool. That is compatibilism. There are dozens and dozens of such passages in Scripture, scattered through both Testaments.

Perhaps the most striking instance of compatibilism occurs in Acts 4:23-29. The church has suffered its first whiff of persecution. Peter and John report what has happened. The church prays to God in the language of Psalm 2. Their prayer continues (4:27-28): "Indeed Herod and Pontius Pilate met together with the Gentiles and the people of Israel in this city to conspire against your holy

servant Jesus, whom you anointed. They did what your power and will had decided beforehand should happen." Note carefully: On the one hand, there was a terrible conspiracy that swept along Herod, Pilate, Gentile authorities, and Jewish leaders. It was a conspiracy, and they should be held accountable. On the other hand, they did what God's power and will had decided beforehand should happen.

A moment's reflection discloses that any other account of what happened would destroy biblical Christianity. If we picture the crucifixion of Jesus Christ solely in terms of the conspiracy of the local political authorities at the time, and *not* in terms of God's plan (save perhaps that he came in at the last moment and decided to use the death in a way he himself had not foreseen), then the entailment is that the cross was an accident of history. Perhaps it was an accident cleverly manipulated by God in his own interests, but it was not part of the divine plan. In that case, the entire pattern of antecedent predictive revelation is destroyed: *Yom Kippur*, the Passover lamb, the sacrificial system, and so forth. Rip Hebrews out of your Bible, for a start.[3]

On the other hand, if someone were to stress God's sovereignty in Jesus' death, exulting that all the participants "did what [God's] power and will had decided beforehand should happen" (4:28), while forgetting that it was a wicked conspiracy, then Herod and Pilate and Judas Iscariot and the rest are exon-

erated of evil. If God's sovereignty means that all under it are immune from charges of transgression, then all are immune. In that case there is no sin for which atonement is necessary. So why the cross? Either way, the cross is destroyed.

In short, compatibilism is a *necessary* component to any mature and orthodox view of God and the world. Inevitably it raises important and difficult questions regarding secondary causality, how human accountability should be grounded, and much more. I cannot probe those matters here.

(4) We must briefly pause to reflect on God's immutability, his unchangeableness. "But you remain the same, and your years will never end," writes the psalmist (Ps. 102:27). "I the LORD do not change" (Mal. 3:6), the Almighty declares. The entailment is that his purposes are secure and their accomplishment inevitable. "Remember this, fix it in mind, take it to heart, you rebels. Remember the former things, those of long ago; I am God, and there is no other; I am God, and there is none like me. I make known the end from the beginning, from ancient times, what is still to come. I say: My purpose will stand, and I will do all that I please. . . . What I have said, that will I bring about; what I have planned, that will I do" (Isa. 46:8-11). "But the plans of the LORD stand firm forever, the purposes of his heart through all generations" (Ps. 33:11; cf. Matt. 13:35; 25:34; Eph. 1:4, 11; 1 Pet. 1:20).

Rightly conceived, God's immutability is enormously important.

It engenders stability and elicits worship. Bavinck writes:

> The doctrine of God's immutability is of the highest significance for religion. The contrast between being and becoming marks the difference between the Creator and the creature. Every creature is continually becoming. It is changeable, constantly striving, seeks rest and satisfaction, and finds rest in God, in him alone, for only he is pure being and no becoming. Hence, in Scripture God is often called the Rock. . . .[4]

Yet when God's immutability is carefully discussed, theologians acknowledge that he is not immutable in every possible way or domain. He is unchanging in his being, purposes, and perfections. But this does not mean he cannot interact with his image-bearers *in their time*. The purposes of God from eternity past were to send the Son, but at a set moment in our time-space continuum the Son was actually incarnated. Even the most superficial reading of Scripture discloses God to be a personal Being who interacts with us. None of this is meant to be ruled out by immutability.

(5) Before I press on, I must frankly acknowledge that this sketch of God is coming under increasing attack, not only from numerous process theologians whose primary recourse is to philosophical analysis and synthesis, but also from some who seek to ground their work in the Bible. This view is now sometimes called the "open" view of God.[5] Sophisticated responses are now beginning to appear, though I cannot track the debate here. But

some of these writers appeal to the approximately thirty-five texts where God is clearly said to "repent" (KJV) or "relent" (NIV) or change his mind. What shall we make of these texts?

God relents over a step he has already taken (Gen. 6:6-7; 1 Sam. 15:11, 35). He relents over what he has said he would do or even started doing (Pss. 90:13; 106:44-45; Jer. 18:7-10; 26:3, 13, 19; Joel 2:13-14; Jonah 3:9-10; 4:2), sometimes in response to the prayer of an intercessor (Exod. 32:12-14; Amos 7:3-6). For those in the "openness of God" camp, these sorts of texts control the discussion, and the passages already discussed that affirm God's immutability are the ones that must be softened or explained away.

I do not see how this can be responsibly done.[6] Many of these texts relate to God's refusing to destroy some party because that party has repented (e.g., God relenting in the matter of destroying Nineveh because the city repents, Jonah 3:9-10). Mind you, some of the prophets *tell* their readers that that is what God's purpose has been all along when he makes such threats (e.g., Ezek. 3:16-21; 33). This is simply a way of saying that God's purposes are immutable when the situation is such and such; his purposes are different for a different set of circumstances. As for God relenting in response to the prayers of his people, one cannot think of such prayer warriors arising apart from God raising them up, whether Moses or Amos; yet on the other hand, he condemns the people for *not* producing intercessors in the hour of need (e.g., Ezek.

22:30-31). This is compatibilism: the same components recur. God remains sovereign over everything, and his purposes are good; he interacts with human beings; human beings sometimes do things well, impelled by God's grace, and he gets the credit; we frequently do things that are wicked, and although we never escape the outermost bounds of God's sovereignty, we alone are responsible and must take the blame.

I do not claim that any of this is easy or straightforward. Sooner or later one retreats into the recognition that, so far as we are concerned, there are some mysteries in the very Being of God. The deepest of these, I think, are tied to the fact that God as he has disclosed himself in Scripture is simultaneously sovereign/transcendent and personal.

Let me unpack each of these two poles. *First*, with respect to God's sovereignty and transcendence, clearly we cannot experience at some personal level what it means to be utterly sovereign or genuinely transcendent. We are finite creatures tied to time and space, with impregnable limitations on our authority and power. But we can do two things: (a) We can extrapolate what authority and power mean until we glimpse in imagination what absolute sovereignty means, and we see that that is what Scripture ascribes to God. (b) Sometimes we can proceed by reflective negations. As little as we know about time and space, we can roughly imagine what transcendence means by such a series of negations

(transcendence is *not* being tied to time; it is *not* being tied to space), and we see that the Bible can talk about God that way.

Second, by way of contrast, "personal" in our experience is so tied to finite beings interacting with finite beings that it is difficult for us to attach "personal" to God. If I enter into a "personal" friendship with you, I ask questions, get to know you, share things with you, find myself rebuked by you, rebuke you in return, surprise you, listen to your conversation—learn what I did not know, and so on. Sequence and finitude are presupposed. And you experience the same things at the other end of this "personal" relationship.

But what does it mean to have a personal relationship with the transcendent, sovereign God? We cannot easily imagine this, *whether by extrapolation of our finite experience or by strategic negations*. We can see from his gracious revelation in Scripture and in Jesus himself that this God is personal, but it is difficult for us to conceive exactly what that means. Lose that element, and you retreat into deism or pantheism or worse. We must maintain an active insistence on his personhood, but if we remain faithful to Scripture, we end up acknowledging some profound mysteries.

God's sovereign transcendence and his personhood are both maintained in the Bible. They are both parts of the *givens*. Elevate his personhood to the exclusion of his transcendent sovereignty, and sooner or later you have a finite God, progressively reduced,

and certainly not the God of the Bible. You destroy one of the *givens*. That is the track being adopted by the proponents of the "open" God portrait. Here I can do no more than firmly set it aside in favor of biblical compatibilism and press on toward my third point.

C. A Rightly Constrained Impassibility

We are now in a position to reflect on the affective element in the love of God and its relation to God in his transcendence and sovereignty. We might provocatively ask: If God is utterly sovereign, and if he is utterly all-knowing, what space is left for emotions as we think of them? The divine oracles that picture God in pain or joy or love surely seem a little out of place, do they not, when this God knows the end from the beginning, cannot be surprised, and remains in charge of the whole thing anyway?

From such a perspective, is it not obvious that the doctrine of the love of God is difficult?

It is no answer to espouse a form of impassibility that denies that God has an emotional life and that insists that all of the biblical evidence to the contrary is nothing more than anthropopathism. The price is too heavy. You may then rest in God's sovereignty, but you can no longer rejoice in his love. You may rejoice only in a linguistic expression that is an accommodation of

some reality of which we cannot conceive, couched in the anthropopathism of love. Give me a break. Paul did not pray that his readers might be able to grasp the height and depth and length and breadth of an anthropopathism and know this anthropopathism that surpasses knowledge (Eph. 3:14-21).

Nor is it adequate to suggest a solution that insists that the immanent Trinity (which refers to God as he is in himself, transcendent from the creation and focusing on his internal acts) is utterly impassible, while the economic Trinity (which refers to God as he is immanent in his creation, focusing solely on God's deeds outside of himself and in relation to his creation) does indeed suffer, including the suffering of love.[7] I worry over such a great divorce between God as he is in himself and God as he interacts with the created order. Such distinctions have heuristic usefulness now and then, but the resulting synthesis in this case is so far removed from what the Bible actually says that I fear we are being led down a blind alley. If because the Father loves the Son and the Son loves the Father, we affirm the love of God as he is in himself (the immanent Trinity), how is that love of God connected with the love of God as he interacts with the world (the economic Trinity), which is clearly a vulnerable love that feels the pain and pleads for repentance? John, after all, clearly connects the two.

Yet before we utterly write off the impassibility of God, we

must gratefully recognize what that doctrine is seeking to preserve. It is trying to ward off the kind of sentimentalizing views of the love of God and of other emotions ("passions") in God that ultimately make him a souped-up human being but no more. For instance, a God who is terribly vulnerable to the pain caused by our rebellion is scarcely a God who is in control or a God who is so perfect he does not, strictly speaking, *need* us. The modern therapeutic God may be superficially attractive because he appeals to *our* emotions, but the cost will soon be high. Implicitly we start thinking of a finite God. God himself is gradually diminished and reduced from what he actually is. And that is idolatry.

Closer to the mark is the recognition that all of God's emotions, including his love in all its aspects, cannot be divorced from God's knowledge, God's power, God's will. If God loves, it is because he chooses to love; if he suffers, it is because he chooses to suffer. God is impassible in the sense that he sustains no "passion," no emotion, that makes him vulnerable from the outside, over which he has no control, or which he has not foreseen.

Equally, however, all of God's will or choice or plan is never divorced from his love—just as it is never divorced from his justice, his holiness, his omniscience, and all his other perfections. Thus I am not surreptitiously retreating to a notion of love that is merely willed altruism; I am not suggesting that God's love be dissolved in God's will. Rather, I am suggesting that we will suc-

cessfully guard against the evils that impassibility combats if we recognize that God's "passions," unlike ours, do not flare up out of control. *Our* passions change our direction and priorities, domesticating our will, controlling our misery and our happiness, surprising and destroying or establishing our commitments. But *God's* "passions," like everything else in God, are displayed in conjunction with the fullness of all his other perfections. In that framework, God's love is not so much a function of his will, as something that displays itself in perfect harmony with his will — and with his holiness, his purposes in redemption, his infinitely wise plans, and so forth.

Of course, this means that in certain respects God's love does not function exactly like ours. How could it? God's love emanates from an infinite Being whose perfections are immutable. But this way of wording things guards the most important values in impassibility and still insists that God's love is real love, of the same genus as the best of love displayed by God's image-bearers. And if large areas of uncertainty remain as to how all this works out in the being and action of God, I suspect it is because we have returned by another route to the abiding tension between the biblical portrait of the sovereign, transcendent God and the biblical portrait of the personal God — and thus to the very mystery of God.

This approach to these matters accounts well for certain biblical

truths of immense practical importance. God does not "fall in love" with the elect; he does not "fall in love" with us; he *sets his affection* on us. He does not predestine us out of some stern whimsy; rather, *in love* he predestines us to be adopted as his sons (Eph. 1:4-5).[8] *The texts themselves tie the love of God to other perfections in God.*

We may gain clarity by an example. Picture Charles and Susan walking down a beach hand in hand at the end of the academic year. The pressure of the semester has dissipated in the warm evening breeze. They have kicked off their sandals, and the wet sand squishes between their toes. Charles turns to Susan, gazes deeply into her large, hazel eyes, and says, "Susan, I love you. I really do."

What does he mean?

Well, in this day and age he may mean nothing more than that he feels like testosterone on legs and wants to go to bed with her forthwith. But if we assume he has even a modicum of decency, let alone Christian virtue, the least he means is something like this: "Susan, you mean everything to me. I can't live without you. Your smile poleaxes me from fifty yards. Your sparkling good humor, your beautiful eyes, the scent of your hair — everything about you transfixes me. I love you!"

What he most certainly does *not* mean is something like this: "Susan, quite frankly you have such a bad case of halitosis it

would embarrass a herd of unwashed, garlic-eating elephants. Your nose is so bulbous you belong in the cartoons. Your hair is so greasy it could lubricate an eighteen-wheeler. Your knees are so disjointed you make a camel look elegant. Your personality makes Attila the Hun and Genghis Khan look like wimps. But I love you!"

So now God comes to us and says, "I love you." What does he mean?

Does he mean something like this? "You mean everything to me. I can't live without you. Your personality, your witty conversation, your beauty, your smile — everything about you transfixes me. Heaven would be boring without you. I love you!" That, after all, is pretty close to what some therapeutic approaches to the love of God spell out. We must be pretty wonderful because God loves us. And dear old God is pretty vulnerable, finding himself in a dreadful state unless we say yes. Suddenly serious Christians unite and rightly cry, "Bring back impassibility!"

When he says he loves us, does not God rather mean something like the following? "Morally speaking, you are the people of the halitosis, the bulbous nose, the greasy hair, the disjointed knees, the abominable personality. Your sins have made you disgustingly ugly. But I love you anyway, not because you are attractive, but because it is my nature to love." And in the case of the elect, God adds, "I have set my affection on you from before

the foundation of the universe, not because you are wiser or better or stronger than others but because in grace I chose to love you. You are mine, and you will be transformed. Nothing in all creation can separate you from my love mediated through Jesus Christ" (Rom. 8).

Isn't that a little closer to the love of God depicted in Scripture? Doubtless the Father finds the Son lovable; doubtless in the realm of disciplining his covenant people, there is a sense in which his love is conditioned by our moral conformity. But at the end of the day, God loves, whomever the object, because God is love. There are thus two critical points. *First*, God exercises this love in conjunction with all his other perfections, but his love is no less love for all that. *Second*, his love emanates from his own character; it is not dependent on the loveliness of the loved, external to himself.

John's point in 1 John 4, "God is love," is that those who really do know God come to love that way too. Doubtless we do not do it very well, but aren't Christians supposed to love the unlovable—even our enemies? Because we have been transformed by the Gospel, our love is to be self-originating, not elicited by the loveliness of the loved. For that is the way it is with God. He loves because love is one of his perfections, in perfect harmony with all his other perfections.

At our best, we know that that is the way God's image-bear-

ers should love too. In one of her loveliest sonnets, never written to be published, Elizábeth Barrett Browning wrote to her husband Robert Browning:

> *If thou must love me, let it be for naught,*
> *Except for love's sake only. Do not say,*
> *"I love her for her smile – her looks – her way*
> *Of speaking gently – for a trick of thought*
> *That falls in well with me, and certes brought*
> *A sense of pleasant ease on such a day."*
> *For these things, in themselves, Beloved, may*
> *Be changed, or change for thee – and love, so wrought,*
> *May be unwrought so. Neither love me for*
> *Thine own dear pity's wiping my cheeks dry –*
> *A creature might forget to weep, who bore*
> *Thy comfort long, and lose thy love thereby!*
> *But love me for love's sake, that evermore*
> *Thou may'st love on, through love's eternity.*

And this, brothers and sisters, we have learned from God as he has disclosed himself in his Son; for "we love because he first loved us" (1 John 4:19). "While we were still sinners, Christ died for us" (Rom. 5:8). Here is love, not that we loved God, but that he loved us, and gave his Son to be the propitiation for our sins (1 John 4:10).