

HOW IS GOD LOVE?

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Hos Is God Love?

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**“God is
love.”**

Really?

Why is everyone saying this?

*And if we do say it,
what do we really mean?*

*Does God love us like we love
each other?*

Or is his love...different?

If there's one thing everyone seems to be able to agree on these days, it's that God is a loving God.

In fact, just saying "God is love" can pretty much win you friends in any environment. Even people that don't really give much thought to God will probably nod their heads in approval. If you're a Christian, you're on board with this, because you know that it's right at the heart of the Christian message.

But if we can all agree that God is love (that is, Christians and others), then why do we disagree on other things at the same time? Why can't we agree on what things God loves, or on how God loves us? A little discussion with people of different persuasions will probably reveal that we humans don't really fundamentally agree on what this loving God is like at all.

This booklet is to help you start thinking through what it means that God is love. Specifically, it's to help Christians be able to know and discuss this awesome fact, and to understand where the confusion in the larger culture comes from. If you're not a believer in Christ, this booklet may provide you with some food for thought to help clarify your own thinking about God and who He is. Read on and discover a bigger God than you might have thought possible...

So let's get started.

WHAT ARE WE SAYING? WHERE DOES THIS IDEA COME FROM?

What are we really saying by saying that God is love?

There's a lot to think about here, but here's a way in: Have you ever stopped to think about the different ways we define love, and wondered how they apply to God? If God is love, does that mean he is...

- *a feeling of romantic attraction?*
- *an affirming stance towards who we are?*
- *help for what we need help with?*
- *a big smile and a thumbs up?*
- *all of the above?*

See the problems here? Which one should we pick? Are they all true? And in the end, how could we know if we were right or not?

Christians have a quick answer to this question: The Bible says that God is love. (It's in a letter known as 1 John, chapter 4, verse 8). And certainly, in our culture, that is where this idea has come from. In fact, it's debatable whether or not any culture ever comes to the idea that God is love apart from exposure to the Christian scriptures. Research it for yourself.

That's not to say that no other belief system has the idea of some sort of god with some sort of love; it's just to affirm that the idea "God is love" is a specifically Christian idea, and comes exclusively from the Christian scriptures. And of course, it's not just one verse or one book of the Bible that affirms that God is love. It's the constant message of the entire scriptures, and it is brought to light and explained in the New Testament.

In other words, this idea that God is love is not simply incidentally related to Christian thought—it's right at the heart of what Christians have to say to the world.

And so, the Christian thinking goes, if this idea of God came from the Bible, we will look to the rest of the Bible to tell us what it *means* that God is love.

The idea "God is love" is a uniquely Christian idea, and comes exclusively from the Bible.

WHAT DOES THE BIBLE MEAN BY SAYING "GOD IS LOVE"?

First, let's have a fresh look at the actual wording of our sentence by looking at it in its original context:

"Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God, and whoever loves has been born of God and knows God. Anyone who does not love does not know God, because God is love."¹

The author, the Apostle John, is intent on saying that true knowledge of God will lead people to be loving. He commands us to love,

because love “comes from” God, and then he says that if someone doesn’t love, it shows they don’t know God. Why? Now at this point he could have said, “because God is loving,” or he could have repeated “because love comes from God,” but instead, he goes deeper. It’s not just that God has love coming out of him, or that he is loving, but, he *is* love. That is, love is something central to the essence of who he is. God is, in the very center of his being, love. And evidently, to know this God is to be transformed into being like him. Since he is love, clearly a person who doesn’t love doesn’t know Love himself.

But wait—what does *this* mean? God *is* love? We could stop here and say that it must mean that the most ultimate thing there is this energy,

It’s not just that God has love coming out of him, or that he is loving, but, he is love.

this positive will, this good force that lifts everything up...but then we’d be back outside of Bible territory. We’d be moving away from the very writings that told us that God is love in the first place. And we’d be totally misrepresenting what John meant when he wrote “God is love.”

We know this because we know who John was. He could never have meant that God was some impersonal force or energy. We can say this with confidence,

because John himself wrote all kinds of things about who God was. In fact, in the very next sentence in his letter he writes: “In this the love of God was made manifest among us, that God sent his only Son into the world, so that we might live through him.”² John’s story is that he met God, in human flesh, in the person of Jesus Christ. So he knew that God is intensely personal, and could never be reduced down to a force or energy, even one as great as the force of love.³

WHAT JESUS HAS TO DO WITH IT

With that realization, we can start beginning to understand what the rest of the Bible says about how God is love. The New Testament tells us that when Jesus showed up, lived among us, and began to teach, he wasn’t just another prophet calling people back to God; he was also revealing new dimensions about who God is. One of the most shocking things he revealed was this new understanding of (get ready for a college word) *plurality* in God. What does *that* mean?

Well, as you read the gospel accounts, you see that Jesus was always talking about his “Father,” and it’s very clear that when he said that he meant “God.” But then he also referred to himself as “the Son” in a very unique way that showed that he thought of himself as much more than just another “child of God.” You really get this when you read the account of Jesus’ life that John wrote. He’s always pointing out how different Jesus was when he spoke. Here’s just one quote among many:

“As the Father raises the dead and gives life to whom he will, so also the Son gives life to whom he will. The Father judges no one, but has given all judgment into the hand of the Son, that all may honor the Son as they honor the Father. Whoever does not honor the Son does not honor the Father who sent him.”⁴

Then there was the time Jesus said, “I and my Father are one.” That one almost got him killed on the spot. His enemies knew exactly what he was saying, and they accused him of blasphemy—of making himself God.⁵

So back to that word *plurality*. What Jesus was showing us with all of this “Father-Son-One” talk was that God is not simply a big ONE—a solitary, unitary mono-God.⁶ No, he has *plurality* in himself—specifically, Jesus shows us that God is Father and Son in perfect unity.

Maybe you’ve never thought about it like this before, but there’s just no other way to understand what Jesus was talking about, and who he was, without seeing what the first followers of Jesus saw. As they walked around with him, they came to this startling discovery: while they had long understood that there was only one God, they now realized they needed to *include Jesus* in their concept of God.⁷

Amazingly, Jesus revealed that his relationship to his Father was one of intense personal love between the two of them. These statements Jesus made are very easy to miss, until you start noticing them, and seeing how frequently he spoke this way. “The Father loves the Son,” is a direct quote from Jesus, and he said things like this a lot.⁸ The night before he was crucified his disciples overheard him praying

Jesus revealed that his relationship to his Father was one of intense personal love.

this to the Father: “Father, I desire that they also, whom you have given me, may be with me where I am, to see my glory that you have given me because *you loved me before the foundation of the world.*”⁹ In fact, earlier that same night, he said that he was going through with his arrest, his suffering, and his death on the cross, *all so that the world would know that he loves the Father.*¹⁰

Late in his life, Jesus revealed one more crucial thing about God’s nature when he spoke to his followers about another whom he clearly equated with God, just like himself and his father. Jesus called him “The Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name.”¹¹ The Holy Spirit, as Jesus teaches about him, shares all the same attributes of God, and exists in the same kind of total unity with the Son and Father that they share with each other. In other words, the three are one.

It’s not just that he has good feelings for us, or smiles when he sees us coming his way.

What we can see from all this is what Christians have traditionally named “The Trinity.” This is the name for the idea in the Bible that God is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, loving each other in an eternal bond of perfect unity.

This is a big enough, world-shaking-enough truth to say it again from another angle. There is only one true God, and the only God that exists is Father, Son, and Spirit loving each other.

This is *the way* God is God.

And this is how God is love.

God is not love because he has good feelings towards us, or smiles when he sees us coming his way, or wants to date us, or approves of us just the way we are. All of those ideas might be nice from a fellow human, but they fall far short of what John meant all those years ago when he wrote “God is love.” They’re small and weak compared to what Jesus revealed about himself, the Father, and the Spirit as God.

No, God is love because he exists forever in a bond of love so strong, that the Three bonded by that love are totally and fully One.

No other god people believe in shares this characteristic—this three-in-oneness—so this sets the God of the Bible completely apart from any other contenders. He’s totally unique. And since this is the only way that God could be love, by existing as God in this bond of love, then we can see that no other god who’s ever been promoted can truly be called “Love.” Unless you’re the Trinity, you’re not love.

SO, WHAT IS LOVE?

This leads us to be able to give a much needed definition. What is love? I mean, fundamentally, at the root of it—what *is* love?

Here is our answer: Love is the eternal bond of unity and affection between Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. God is love—united in harmony forever.

This not only tells us what love is, it tells us where love comes from, and what it’s doing in our universe at all, and what our human love is measured against, and why we just know, deep in our guts, that love is, like, the most important thing there is. It’s because love is at the center of what our universe is. We came from the overflow of this love.¹² Any true love that we’ve ever experienced comes from, and finds its significance because of, this original love, the love of God.

*Love is at
the center of
what our
universe is.*

What this means is that when we turn to examine our human love, we need to see that anything which goes by the name of “love” but is disconnected from, and unrelated to, this love, isn’t really love.

Because if this is what love is, how can anyone claim to have love but ignore this love? This is why Christians get all excited about telling people about Jesus—they realize that the most loving thing they could do is to talk about the love God displayed in Christ.

HOW DO WE GET LOVE?

If all this is true, how do we get love? The Bible's storyline gives us our answer. This love that God is—this love that overflowed into the creation of our world and humanity as God's special image-bearers, this love is the love we're cut off from right now. Our sins, our turning our back on God who is love, our trusting things opposed to him to fulfill us—all this has separated us from this true, supreme love. But because God is love, and because he loves us, his love is still overflowing to us.

Remember that verse we looked at earlier from John's letter? "In this," John wrote, "the love of God was made manifest among us, that God

*He loves us
by giving
Jesus in our
place to die
and rise
again for us.*

sent his only Son into the world, so that we might live through him."¹³ Or, as he says in the next sentence, "In this is love, not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his son to be the propitiation for our sins." That word "propitiation" means that Jesus took our sin, and paid the price of bearing God's wrath in our place.

So we see that not only did Jesus reveal to us how God is love, but he also revealed how God loves *us*. He loves us by giving

Jesus in our place to die and rise again for us.

Or you could say it like this: the Father loved us, and wasn't satisfied with all humanity being separated from him for eternity through their sin and guilt, so he gave the Son to come take care of that separation. The Son loved us by coming and being "God with us," and by dying the death we deserved and bearing the wrath of God we should have had to bear.

Or you could say it in a sentence: God loves us by overcoming the barrier between us and his love, so that we could enjoy him, the God who is love, forever. He wants us in the circle of his love, always.

You might be thinking, "great, but that happened two thousand years ago. What does that do for me now? I need God's love today!" That's where the final piece of the puzzle comes in. After Jesus rose

from the dead he sent the special carrier of God's love to his followers—into their very beings! This was none other than the Holy Spirit himself. The God who is love moves *into* those who trust Christ. He comes in the person of his Spirit, and brings all his eternal, cosmic, personal love into the center of who they are.

The apostle Paul says it like this: “God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us.”¹⁴ This is the way to begin to experience the awesome love God has for us. Then, we love him back by knowing and enjoying this love, and sending it back his way in total affection.¹⁵

Which means that when we want to learn how to truly love each other, we have to start here. We say, “If I have now found the real love, wouldn't the only loving thing be to help others find it too?”

And that's the right thought! Real love is to help others connect with this eternal love. What else would love be, except to do the highest good for someone else? And what else could be the highest good for everyone, except to be livingly, eternally connected to their eternally loving God?

Can we say it again?

Anything that does not connect us to His love...is not love.

Let that digest slowly in you if you've never thought about it before.

There are so many arguments today about love. Aren't there?

In the Bible, Christians possess a truth that offers a solid, eternal way forward: love connects people to the only true God, the only God who is love—the God revealed in the Bible. Jesus is the ultimate picture of him.

And what the Bible calls sin, well, those are the things God identifies as what cut people off from him, distract from him, or drive people in another direction. To help people down a road that will lead to separation from the ultimate love, cannot, in the end, be called loving.

Right?

THIS ETERNAL GOOD NEWS ABOUT LOVE

The implications of this are such good news.

Instead of...

*...a materialism that makes love a meaningless chemical reaction, or
...an aimless set of opinions about some spiritual version of love, or
...just assuming love matters, Disney style...*

...we encounter the message of Christ: love is real, love matters, and we can have it, forever. The love we feel for others can take on its highest possible significance. The earth is not a cold, dead place.¹⁶

Our love can be gathered up into the eternal Love—into God himself, and become a part of the love that he is working all through the world.

*And we have seen and testify
that the Father has sent his Son
to be the Savior of the world.
Whoever confesses that Jesus is the Son of God,
God dwells in him,
and he in God.
So we have come to know and to believe
the love that God has for us.
God is love,
and whoever dwells in love
dwells in God,
and God dwells in him.*

(1 John 4:14-16)

Notes:

1. 1 John 4:7-8. All the scripture quotations in this booklet are from the English Standard Version translation (ESV)...Except for the last quote, which I tweaked a bit (by substituting “dwell” for the word “abide”).
2. 1 John 4:9
3. New Testament scholar Robert Yarbrough points out that “John does not say that love is God, a statement found nowhere in Scripture...To do so would be to replace a living, personal God with an intellectual, ethical, volitional, or emotional abstraction.. This is the last thing that the language of 1 John, or the graphic portrayal of God incarnate in the Gospels, would permit.” [From his commentary *1-3 John*, p. 237]
4. John 5:21-23
5. John 10:30-33
6. Like, for instance, Allah—who is *one* and only one, and could never be described the way Jesus talks about God.
7. See, for instance, what Thomas, a good monotheistic Jewish man, says to Jesus in John 20:28. I believe I first heard this concept phrased this way in a lecture on the Trinity by Michael Reeves. Google “Trinity Lectures by Michael Reeves” and listen to all of them. They’re excellent.
8. See John 3:35, John 5:20, John 10:17, John 15:9,
9. John 17:24
10. John 14:31
11. John 14:26
12. That might sound like a big statement, but I invite you to dive into the teachings of the Bible to see for yourself how our universe is best described as a creation of God’s love.
13. 1 John 4:9
14. Romans 5:5
15. You could call this “worship.”
16. Apologies to Explosions in the Sky.

RESOURCES FOR FURTHER STUDY

If any of the ideas in this booklet got you thinking, here are some excellent books to further explore the vision of life and God you read about here.

On topic of the Trinity, three current books are excellent guides:

First, **Fred Sander's book *The Deep Things of God***, a medium length book on the subject, will blow your mind and increase your faith.

Robert Letham's Book *The Holy Trinity* will give you a longer look at the subject, complete with a study of the doctrine through church history.

Finally, **Michael Reeve's book *Delighting in the Trinity*** is a shorter introduction.

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Who we are:

Truth On Campus seeks to equip students on college and university campuses, to cultivate Christian thinking and living in the academic environment, and to spread the gospel. Working with existing campus groups, we aim to help you with free resources discussing the issues Christian students face, as well as addressing the “big questions” that all people ponder. Truth On Campus is based out of Calvary Chapel of Philadelphia, online at www.ccphilly.org.

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