

A Religion of Love

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I

Christianity is a religion of love. That's what most Christians believe. Some, like the great Protestant theologian of the last century Karl Barth in his commentary on Paul's Epistle to the Romans, might object to the idea that Christianity is a "religion."¹ But still, most Christians would insist that, religion or not, Christian faith is all about love.

According to a study by the Fetzer Institute, between 90% and 95% of human beings want "meaningful love," and they want it more than they want anything else, more than riches, health, great food, or passionate sex.² We seem to have a happy situation: there is at least one religion—a way of life, a spirituality—which offers what people want most.

If you haven't detected a distancing chuckle in this suggestion, you may be inclined to remind me, perhaps with understatement, that things are more complicated than I make them to be. I grant that: there is both a match and a mismatch between Christianity as a religion of love and the desires of humanity for love. I will keep returning to this issue throughout the essay. But first I need to explore precisely what kind of love the Christian faith is and isn't about and whether, as many secularists and adherents of other religions claim, the Sacred Scripture and history of Christianity are at odds with the claim that the Christian faith is all about love. In the second part of the essay I will sketch the character of the Christian faith as a religion of love of a particular sort, rooting my sketch in the texts of the Sacred Scripture, and particularly in the writings of St. John.

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¹ Karl Barth, *The Epistle to the Romans*, transl. Edwyn C. Hoskyns (London: Oxford University Press, 1933).

² See Fetzer Institute, *Survey on Love and Forgiveness in American Society* (October 2010), <http://www.fetzer.org/resources/fetzer-survey-love-and-forgiveness-american-society>.

II

Like some “men of wealth,” “love” is a word too rich for its own good; it’s full of diverse and unruly meanings. We say, for instance, both that we love chocolate and therefore devour it and that we love our children and therefore sacrifice ourselves for them (though sometimes when we are particularly fond of them we say to them “You are so sweet that I could eat you up!”). When two people say that they want “love,” they may want two very different things. The match between what most people want and what the Christian faith is all about may, then, only be verbal and, in any case, less perfect than it may seem. Theologians are aware of this. That’s partly why many note that Christian faith doesn’t satisfy human desires without first transforming them—and that includes the desire for love and love as a form of desire.

“Meaningful love,” the supreme desire of most people, generally refers to deep and close connection with another human being—a lover, a child, a friend, a parent, or a sibling. We contrast it with work, especially in business and politics. “Love,” we think, belongs to the domain of tender feelings, generosity, and care; “work” belongs to the domain of hard-knocks, self-interest, and disregard for others. The contrast is too sharp, of course, for we recognize that there is love in good work and that there is work in good love. Still, it captures the popular sense of the characteristic features of the two domains.

As a religion of love, is the Christian faith all about such intimate ties of mutual belonging? That’s part of it, but not the whole or even the most of it. For the Christian faith is not a “mystical” religion, concerned only with the unity of the soul with God in a small community of the intimates; it is a “prophetic” religion oriented toward the vision of the kingdoms of the world with all their spheres, from the most intimate to the very public, being transformed into the kingdom of the one God.³ Can the Christian faith, then, still be a religion of love?

The contrast between “love” and “work” isn’t just too sharp; it’s seriously misleading. The sphere of work, including business and politics, is also about love—about desire for, attachment to, and care for something, whether the interests of the self, the well-being of the company or nation, or the global common good. In a sermon, St. Augustine famously said, “There is no one of course who doesn’t love, but the question is, what do they love? So we are not urged not to love, but to choose what we love.”⁴ Augustine is making two crucial points. First, all people love, and they love in all their activities, St. Francis’s enterprising merchant father dressed in finery no less than his Christ-obsessed son

³ For more on the distinction between “mystical” and “prophetic,” see Miroslav Volf, *A Public Faith: How Followers of Christ Should Serve the Common Good* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2011), 6-8.

⁴ Augustine, Sermon 34, in *The Works of Saint Augustine III/2*, ed. John E. Rotelle and Boniface Ramsey (New York: New City Press, 1990), 167.

married to the Lady Poverty.⁵ Second, though people cannot choose *whether* to love, they can choose *what* to love (merely themselves or also God and others) and *how* to love (with the mere feeling of attraction or with commitment to beneficence, for instance).

The Christian faith is about love in this broad sense, love without which we wouldn't be able to act at all and the entire enterprise of the world would grind to a halt—and, more fundamentally, it is about Love that makes both us and all our ordinary loves possible. The key question with regard to love way is this: which varieties of such love are worthy of us as human beings and make for our individual and global flourishing, and which are not because engaging in them we betray of our humanity and ruin of our world?

III

Critics object that Christians delude themselves and mislead others by claiming that the Christian faith is all about love. Christian talk about love—or: Christian talk about the *Christian kind of love*—only serves to mask and legitimize the violent nature of Christianity, they argue. For the most radical and intelligent of such critics, Friedrich Nietzsche, the Christian faith is more about hatred than about love, or it is about hatred by being about love. At bottom, Christian love is inverted hatred. To put Nietzsche's point in St. Augustine's terms, Christian faith is about the perfidious love of a weakling self, a self which, resentful on account of its frustrating inability to achieve its overambitious dreams for itself, invents self-giving love so that those who stand in its way can be roped into its service. For Nietzsche, Christian love doesn't merely mask and legitimize violence but *is* itself violence, *is* hatred.

Christianity, a religion of hatred! This is the most serious charge against the Christian faith—more serious than the charge of “irrationality”—for it calls into question its central content rather than merely its plausibility. People want meaningful love, and the Christian faith, on this account, gives them the poison of hatred wrapped in white cellophane with red hearts. The critics believe that both Christian convictions and Christian practices warrant the charge (though Nietzsche himself, perhaps wisely, was more interested in Christian convictions). Are they right?

Let's take up first, and very briefly, the matter of practices. I will not strictly respond to the criticism but blunt its edge by making one additional clarification about the kind of love the Christian faith is about. I agree with the critics on two important matters. First, there is a disturbing trail of blood and tears

⁵ For Augustine, love is, as John Burnaby puts it in *Amor Dei*, “the directive energy of the will in its most general aspect” (*Amor Dei: A Study of the Religion of St. Augustine: The Hulsean Lectures for 1938* [1938; repr., London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1960], 94).

in the wake of Christianity's march through history (though many Christians console themselves—falsely, I believe—with the claim that Christianity has a comparative advantage over other religious and secular groups in this regard). Second, that trail stands, obviously, in deep tension with the claim that the Christian faith is a religion of love. The critical question is whether that trail contradicts the claim that the Christian faith is a religion of love. My sense is that it doesn't, for two main reasons. The first one is easy to state: it can be plausibly argued that the violence is due not to the illicit and unequal marriage of the faith to political power, a marriage in which faith becomes the servant of worldly power.⁶ The second reason is more complicated and has to do with the precise way in which Christianity is a religion of love.

Contrary to the opinion of many, the Christian faith doesn't have at its heart the commandment "you shall love your neighbor as your self," nor even the commandment "you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart." These two commandments—inseparable and, in a sense, one, as we shall see later—are an indispensable component of the Christian faith, but they are not its heart. If they were its heart—in fact, if *any* commandments were the heart of the Christian faith—it would be more a religion of *law* than a religion of love. In fact, in obliging people to love God with their *whole* hearts and neighbors *as* themselves, the Christian faith would then be a religion of an impossible law. As a religion of love, however, the Christian faith is not primarily about what human beings are obliged to do, about human beings' concrete relations to one another, their various neighbors and fellow creatures, and God. Instead, the Christian faith is primarily about God's relation to human beings and the world. Love here is not first of all *human* love but *God's* love; in relation to humans, it is primarily love received, not love practiced—or rather, practiced as love received.⁷ The Christian faith is a religion of love because it teaches that the God of love has embraced humanity before the foundation of the world and that human love—the push and the pull of all human willing—is truly love when it is an echo of that divine love, when God's gift giving love courses through them to both their own and their neighbors' good.

Critics may grant that the Christian faith so understood is a religion of love but may still object that love so understood issues in spoiled children.⁸ Chri-

⁶ See Miroslav Volf with Tony Blair, *Faith and Globalization* (New Haven: Yale University Press, forthcoming). See also Monica Duffy Toft, Daniel Philpott, Timothy Samuel Shah, *God's Century: Resurgent Religion and Global Politics* (New York: Norton, 2011).

⁷ The insight that the Christian faith isn't a religion of love because the command to love God and neighbor sums up the law and the prophets but because God is love and loves human beings unconditionally lies at the heart of Martin Luther's reformation discovery. For a simple statement of this insight, see Martin Luther, "Freedom of the Christian," in *Career of the Reformer: I*, ed. Harold J. Grimm, *Luther's Works*, vol. 31 (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1960), 327-77.

⁸ Immanuel Kant expressed a similar idea, though not in rejection of the Christian faith as such, with the image of an "undisciplined servant" who appeals exclusively to God's grace: "It is ar-

stians see themselves as God's favorites without them having done much to deserve God's favor. They smugly let God love them, and scream bloody murder when they are not pampered. Or they lazily let God do all the loving through them, which ends up not being very much. Such a religion of love seems complaisantly otherworldly, especially in secular cultures permeated by a deep conviction—mostly unthematized but, for just this reason, very powerful—that human beings alone act in the world. And it seems self-servingly morally irresponsible, especially in cultures shaped by religions concerned primarily with salutary human practices.

If “meaningful love,” which human beings desire above all things, is love to be given, received, and passed on without conditions, then Christian faith offers the kind of love most people, all happy to be God's favorite children, desire. But is that kind of love also what human beings need? Is this non-moralizing account of love true to the moral fabric of our lives, a pattern of life for responsible adults rather than bratty princes and princesses? That is the fundamental question about the character of the Christian faith as a religion of love. The Christian contention is that the Christian account of love is true to both our highest moral aspirations and our inescapable moral failures and that, far from being otherworldly, it is the key to the flourishing of persons, communities, and our whole world.

But how exactly does this love unconditionally given and received look, and how does God figure in it? To answer, we need to remind ourselves of some basic Christian convictions.

IV

What follows is a brief sketch of the Christian faith as a religion of love, a Christian “credo” of sorts, organized around love.

Before all beginnings there was God, existing eternally as Love, the one and undivided divine reality internally differentiated in three “persons,” a field of perfect love. Then—though not really “after” God had existed for a while as such a field of perfect love—then God created the world out of the overabundance of divine love. As the crown of creation, God created human beings so that they would recognize themselves and the world as gifts of God's eternal love and would be channels of God's love to each other and the world—so that they themselves would be a creaturely field of love.

duous to be a good *servant* (here one always hears only talk of duties); hence the human being would rather be a *favorite*, for much is then forgiven him, or, where duty has been too grossly offended against, everything is again made good through the intercession of some one else who is favored in the highest degree, while he still remains the undisciplined servant he always was” (*Religion within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*, transl. Allen Wood and George di Giovanni [Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1998], 190).

But human beings failed to recognize the world and themselves as fruits of God's love and to pass on the always-already-received love of God to each other. In that very failure they severed themselves from the paradise of the Field of Love for which they were created. Yet, the God of love did not abandon them—and, in a sense, *could not* abandon them—to their own misguidedly chosen fate. Though they wronged God by failing to recognize their own and the world's existence as a gift and claiming it as their own possession apart from God, God sought to return them to themselves—and did so just because God is love and therefore always loves, irrespective of the behavior or the state of the creatures to whom God is relating.

In the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, the unique self-expression of God in human life, God undertook to justify and restore the humanity marred by the deficiency of love. This, too, was a gift of God, utterly gratuitous and therefore not to be “earned” in any way. Instead, as a gift of love it was to be received “in faith,” faith being the only proper posture for receiving love: the empty hands stretched out to God with an open heart to honor God's love in receiving God's gifts, gifts which are all summed up in the gift of God's own loving self.

More, through the power of the Spirit, God dwells in human beings who have embraced God and themselves in faith and seeks to be the force of love in them. After their earthly pilgrimage, whose goal is for them to learn to love God and those outside the community of faith no less than those inside it, God promised to glorify them, to give them eternal life in the fullness of unfailing love in God's everlasting loving embrace.

According to this sketch, the Christian faith is not primarily about the ordinary or heroically self-sacrificial love of human beings but about God, the original and originating Lover, bringing about a world of love out of the inexplicably crooked timber of a both tragically and culpably self-centered humanity.⁹ A main purpose of human history is the turning of these self-centered and self-indulgent creatures—spoiled children, as are most of us—into true lovers.

But does the Bible, the holy book of the Christian faith, support this rendering of the love that God is and that God intends to bring about? Or have I, perhaps nudged by the criticism that Christian faith is a religion of violence and hatred masquerading as a religion of love, offered here a velvety version of a jaggedly steely original, unyielding in its insistence on a single truth, implacably judgmental and bent on imposing itself on all irrespective of their wishes? To put the question differently: is John Winthrop of the would-be “city on the

⁹ The “crooked timber of humanity” is Kant's phrase in “Idee zu einer allgemeinen Geschichte in weltbürgerlicher Absicht,” (1784): “aus so krummem Holze, als woraus der Mensch gemacht ist, kann nichts ganz Gerades gezimmert werden” (“Out of the crooked timber of humanity no straight thing was ever made.”) Translated by Isaiah Berlin in *The Crooked Timber of Humanity: Chapters in the History of Ideas*, ed. Henry Hardy (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013).

hill,” who executed blasphemers and adulterers and imposed fines on religious slackers, a better representative of the original faith than St. Francis of Assisi, who sought not so much “to be loved as to love” because he believed that “it is in giving that we receive”? To find the answer to these questions we need to return to the biblical sources of the Christian faith.

V

If the Christian faith is a religion of love and the Bible is its holy book, then the Bible must be a book of love. But is it? To many non-Christians, the claim that Bible is a book of love seems self-delusionally and dangerously false. In their view the Bible is “one long celebration of violence”¹⁰ which, to apply the phrase Christopher Hitchens used to describe religions more generally, “poisons everything.”¹¹ How could a book which on its first pages endorses God’s destruction of the whole humanity in a global flood (Genesis 6), which contains a long narrative of a people acting on God’s command to wipe out entire populations, women, children, livestock, and all (the book of Joshua), and which at its end tells of a fearsome rider on a white horse executing the fury of God’s wrath upon the world’s inhabitants (Revelation 19)—how could such a book be a book of love? Isn’t it a book, instead, of festering resentment and fierce revenge?

In the reminder of this essay, I will make one small step toward showing that the Bible is indeed a book of love and therefore that the Christian faith is originally, and not just in some of its modern versions, a religion of love. I will make this task easier for myself by limiting myself to the writings of St. John, namely his Gospel and Epistles. This biblical writer was known early on as a “theologian of love,” not just because, as the tradition would have it, he was the “disciple whom Jesus loved” and who reclined next to Jesus at the Last Supper (John 13:23) but because more than anyone else in the Bible he writes about love. Elsewhere, I have undertaken the slightly more difficult but still relatively easy task of interpreting St. Paul as a theologian of love—a theologian of God’s utterly gratuitous gift of creation and, above all, of salvation (“What do you have that you did not receive?” [1 Corinthians 4:7]).¹² The ease of reading John and Paul as theologians of love is telling, for of all biblical writers, John and

¹⁰ Steven Pinker, *The Better Angels of Our Nature: Why Violence Has Declined* (New York: Viking, 2011), 6. For a literary presentation of the same point, see José Saramago, *Cain*, transl. Margaret Jull Costa (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2011). See also José Saramago, *The Gospel According to Jesus Christ*, transl. Giovanni Pontiero (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1994).

¹¹ Christopher Hitchens, *God Is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything* (New York: Twelve, 2007).

¹² Miroslav Volf, *Free of Charge: Giving and Forgiving in a Culture Stripped of Grace* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2006).

Paul together have arguably shaped the Christian faith more than anyone or anything else.¹³ If they are theologians of love, then the Christian faith is a religion of love.

Let's assume for a moment that my argument about John and Paul is sound. Though the texts of these two writers are substantively central to the Christian Bible, they comprise a relatively small portion of it. If the rest of the Bible cannot also be read as a book of love, then the claim that Christianity is a religion of love will rest on a foundation that's firm in two of its central pillars but wobbly elsewhere. So before taking up John's texts, a few comments on the Christian interpretation of the Bible as a whole are needed. They will amount to the claim that hermeneutically, too, and not just substantively, Paul and John, or rather, what Paul and John are all about, is central to the Christian faith.

Consider the precise way in which Bible is the holy book of the Christian faith. Though properly counted among "religions of the book," in one sense Christianity is not a religion of the book. It is the religion of the Word or, more precisely, a religion of the divine Word-become-flesh. Jesus Christ, the *self-revelation* of God, is at the center of the Christian faith; the Christian faith is most properly the "religion of Jesus Christ"; he is the source and the content of the Christian faith.

The Bible is related to Christ in a two-fold way. On the one hand, since his ascension the Bible has been our main source of knowledge about Christ and, therefore, the criterion for everything that claims to be Christian. On the other hand, the main purpose of the Bible is to "bear Christ"; its "holiness" as a book derives from its "Christ-bearing" function, more precisely, the Spirit inspired Christ-bearing function. Martin Luther, the great Protestant reformer, famously stated that the content of the Bible—a book written over a millennium and a half of God's engagement with the people of Israel, the church, and humanity more broadly—must be assessed by whether it "inculcates Christ" ("was Christum treibet").¹⁴ So the Bible gives and norms access to Christ, but Christ is the purpose and the measure of the Bible.¹⁵

¹³ St. Luke the Evangelist, with his Gospel and Acts, rivals John and Paul in influence on the course of Christianity when all three are considered individually, though not if John and Paul are taken together. It would not be difficult to show that Luke, too, slightly differently than either Paul or John, is a theologian of love. Between the three of them, they cover most of the formative scriptural influence on the development of Christianity, as they provide lenses through which Christians have read the rest of the Bible. To the three of them, one could also add St. Peter. Though not as influential as the writings of Luke, Paul, and John, his First Epistle pulls together various strands from the whole New Testament and can easily be read as a text governed by the idea of love.

¹⁴ Martin Luther, "Preface to the Epistles of St. James and St. Jude," in *Word and Sacrament I*, ed. E. Theodore Bachmann, *Luther's Works*, vol. 35 (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1960), 396.

¹⁵ Particularly significant is Christ's teaching about his relationship to the law (Matthew 5:1-48). In the process, he (1) radicalizes the commands against murder and adultery (turning them into commands against anger and lust) and provisions for divorce (turning them into a prohibition against divorce with one exception only) and he (2) overturns the law of retaliation (re-

When we ask whether the Bible, as the holy book of Christians, is a book of love, we ask first of all whether Christ—on whom the whole Bible, read as the Christian scripture, pivots—is a person of love. For Christians, the answer is plain:¹⁶ Christ is love, is the self-revelation of God as love. It follows that the extermination of whole peoples in the book of Judges, the laws demanding the death penalty for adultery in Leviticus, the fury of God's wrath in Revelation and the like must all be measured by the yardstick of Christ and fitted to his pattern. And that takes us back to the evangelists and the apostles and their account of Christ, the one who on the cross embraced the whole of humanity irrespective of their deeds and misdeeds—or as John, to whom I now turn, puts it: the one who is the Lamb of God who bears the sin of the world.

VI

The last words of Jesus' last prayer are the culmination and summary of the entire Gospel of John. The prayer marks the end of his private instruction to the disciples (John 13:1-17:26), which follows the end of his public ministry (John 1:19-12:50). After the prayer, Jesus is arrested and crucified, and upon rising from the dead and appearing to his disciples, he returns to where he, the Word-

placing it with the requirement to turn the other cheek) and the command to love one's neighbor but hate the enemy (replacing it with the command to love one's enemies). Most relevant for how Christians ought to interpret the Old Testament passages about violence in Joshua, for instance, is that Jesus grounds the teaching about the love of enemies in the character of God, who makes the sun shine on the evil and the good and sends rain on the just and on the unjust (Matthew 5:45). This generosity of God toward all—this love of God—is God's perfection, and the children of God ought to imitate it, ought to be perfect as their "heavenly Father" is perfect (Matthew 5:48). In line with Christ's teaching early Christian theologian Origen interpreted the violence against enemies in the Old Testament allegorically as violence against vices in the soul (see, for example, Homily 15.1, *Homilies on Joshua*, ed. Barbara J. Bruce and Cynthia White [Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 2010], 138: "Unless those physical wars bore the figure of spiritual wars, I do not think the books of Jewish history would ever have been handed down by the apostles to the disciples of Christ, who came to teach peace, so that they could be read in the churches. For what good was that description of wars to those to whom Jesus says, 'My peace I give to you; my peace I leave to you,' and to whom it is commanded and said through the Apostle, 'Not avenging your own selves,' and, 'Rather, you receive injury,' and, 'You suffer offense?'). Similarly, in their daily recitation of Psalms, monks have interpreted the often-mentioned enemies as the internal enemies of the soul (Katherine Allen Smith, *War and the Making of Medieval Monastic Culture* [Woodbridge, U.K.: Boydell Press, 2011], 9-38, especially 23-28).

¹⁶ This may not be so plain to those who are not Christians, partly because they may be operating with a different notion of love. If any dimension of culture is generically human, it seems that love should be. And yet, this is not the case. We love in culturally and religiously specific ways—for the most part recognizable to others as modalities of love, but sometimes very alien. Christians, of course, have to answer probing and sometimes uncomfortable question about their claim that Christ is the embodiment of love, such as why would he, according to the Gospels, curse the fig for not bearing fruit when it was not its season (Matthew 21:18-20) or send demons into a heard of pigs who, as a result, ended up drowning (Mark 5:1-13).

become-flesh, had originally come. "Righteous Father," Jesus says at the very end of his prayer, "the world does not know you, but I know you; ... I made your name known to them [the disciples], and I will make it known, so that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them" (John 17:25-26).

(1) *Love in Eternity and in Time*. Before all beginnings, there was love; after all endings there will be love. This is the love with which the "Speaker" (or the "Father") has loved the "Word" (or the "Son") before the foundation of the world and therefore apart from any of the world's beginnings and endings. The Son is eternally the only begotten of the Father and therefore utterly loved by the Father (John 1:18). Radically set apart from everything created, these two, along with the Spirit, dwell in each other in indivisible unity, giving to and receiving from each the single and singular divine glory. This one God, in principle indivisible and yet internally differentiated, "is love" (1 John 4:8). Love is what God is. God is the Everlasting One whose nature *is* love.

But God is invisible, inaccessible to human senses. How, then, do we know God's love, its character and extent? The first time the word "love" shows up in John's writings is three chapters into his Gospel, in the most famous verse of the entire Bible, John 3:16: "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son..." Similarly, in his first epistle John notes that we know that God is love, that "God's love is revealed among us," in that "God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him" (1 John 4:9). God loves, and therefore God gives. To love is to give—or love is that much *at least*. With regard to God's own reality, the Holy Three, who dwell in each other and are indissolubly One, give divine glory to each other (John 17:4-5) and in this way constitute the divine reality. With regard to the world, God gives existence to all creatures as "all things came into being through him" (John 1:3); the Word, which enlightens everyone, is the Son who makes known the Father's "name," makes God accessible to human beings (John 17:25); and, as the Word-become-flesh, Jesus Christ bears the sin of the tragically and culpably wayward world (John 1:29) and grants them communion with the Triune God. In sum, God's love is creatively and empathetically giving love, generating realities, intensifying joys ("glory"), identifying with the troubles ("sin") of others, generating a life of love in them ("love in them"), and opening the circle of its communion to all ("I in them").

(2) *Love, Pain, and Dance*. A central feature of love in John is the readiness to give one's life for another person. "No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends" (John 15:13). "We know love by this, that he laid down his life for us—and we ought to lay down our lives for one another" (1 John 3:16). The measure of love is the sacrifice of life.

Sacrifice for whom? For friends alone? It may seem that it is on account of their friendship and attachment to Christ that Christ gives his life for disciples. But in a crucial sense, it is the other way around: Christ's giving of his life for them elicits (or deepens) their friendship and attachment and constitutes them

as his friends and followers. As John puts it in his first epistle, “In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins” (1 John 4:10). God loves the whole world, not just God’s friends, and therefore Christ dies for the whole world—for those who sin, for those who don’t love God and indulge the “desire of the flesh, the desire of eyes, the pride of riches” (1 John 2:16), and even for those who seek to kill Jesus because he doesn’t conform to their religious convictions and practices by speaking what they deem to be blasphemy and transgression of law (John 5:18). God’s love manifest in Jesus’ death on the cross isn’t just utterly self-giving but is also universal and unconditional. Self-sacrificial in measure, this love is utterly gratuitous in character.

Is self-sacrifice an eternal aspect of divine love in the same way that utter gratuity is?¹⁷ From the claim that God *is* love (as distinct from the claim that God loves), follows the utter gratuity of divine love. Just as there is “no darkness at all” in the God who is light (1 John 1:5), so there is absolutely no absence of love in the God who is love; God loves everyone all the time. Is self-sacrifice implied in the claim that God is love as well? It is not. Notice how John links God’s love to Christ’s self-sacrificial death: “We *know* love by this, that he laid down his life for us” (1 John 3:16); “God’s love was *revealed* among us in this way: God sent his only Son” (1 John 4:9). Christ’s self-sacrifice manifests God’s eternal love, but it is not identical with it. It is the form God’s love takes when faced with contingent human sin and enmity.

Before all beginnings—prior to the world with its sin and pain—God’s love was gratuitous but non-sacrificial, pure delight in the glory of each and in the mutual glorification of all. After all endings—after the world as we know it—both divine and human love will be just that: pure delight in the glory of each and the mutual glorification of all—a love without suffering or loss.

(3) *All Love is God’s Love*. Why do Christians love (when they do, which is not nearly as often as they should, of course)? “Beloved, since God loved us so much [so that God sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for us] we also ought to love one another” (1 John 4:12). We learn that God loved us completely, we are moved, and we love.

¹⁷ Famous Catholic theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar argues as much: “In giving himself, the Father does not give something (or even everything) that he *has* but all that he *is*—for in God there is only being, not having. So the Father’s being passes over, without remainder, to the begotten Son ... This total self-giving, to which the Son and the Spirit respond by an equal self-giving, is a kind of ‘death,’ a first, radical ‘kenosis,’ as one might say. It is a kind of ‘super-death’ that is a component of all love and that forms the basis in creation for all instances of ‘the good death,’ from self-forgetfulness in favor of the beloved right up to that highest love by which a man ‘gives his life for his friends’” (Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theo-Drama: Theological Dramatic Theory*, vol. V: *The Last Act*, transl. Graham Harrison [San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1998], 84). On this aspect of von Balthasar’s account of Trinitarian love, see also Linn Marie Tonstad, “Sexual Difference and Trinitarian Death: Cross, Kenosis, and Hierarchy in the *Theo-Drama*,” *Modern Theology* 26, no. 4 (Oct. 2010), 603-31.

How should Christians love? “This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you,” says Jesus to his disciples (John 15:12). We hear or read that Jesus gave his life for the life of the world, we recognize the greatness of that love, and we try to emulate it in our own limited way.

Most people—even those who are serious about life of love—think that to understand love (and to actually love) you need only to know the answer to two questions: “Why should I love?” which takes care of the motivation, and “How should I love?” which gives you a model. For John, the motivation for love and the model of love are clearly important; he elaborates on them repeatedly. The heart of his theology of love lies elsewhere, however. The purpose of the Word’s becoming flesh, indeed the purpose of the Word’s creating the world, consists in this: “so that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them” (John 17:26). From John’s angle, we understand love properly only when we realize that all love is God’s love because “love is from God” (1 John 4:7). All human love is participation in the divine love. The eternal love of the Holy Three that are uniquely and indivisibly One, the love out of which the Word created the world, the love out of which God, in Jesus Christ, redeemed the world, that very love (and not merely a love like it) is to be in the followers of Christ. How is that possible? Only if they dwell in God and if God dwells in them. That’s why the four last words of the last prayer of Jesus for his disciples are “and I in them”: “so that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them” (John 17:25-26). When God gives love, God doesn’t give merely something God *has* but something God *is*. We love when Christ is in us, when Christ loves through us. And when we love, we are “Christs” to others.¹⁸

The idea that human love isn’t just motivated by divine love and modeled on it but is, in fact, a modality of divine love helps us understand two things: why we are to love both God and our neighbors and why these two loves are inextricably united. First, if human love is God’s love, then just as God’s love is the love of the Holy Three for each other and for the world, so also proper human love is love for God and for the world. Second, if human love is God’s love, then if we don’t love God—and we would have to explore what love for God means here and how explicit it must be—we won’t truly love either ourselves or our neighbors, for without abiding in the Word-become-flesh, we are unable to bear the fruit of love, like a branch cut off from the vine (John 15:1-10).¹⁹ Inversely, if we don’t love our neighbors, then God’s love is not in us and we therefore don’t truly love God either, which is why John insists that those who say that they love God but “hate their brothers and sisters, are liars” (1 John 4:20).

¹⁸ See Luther, “Freedom of the Christian,” 368. On the idea, see also Volf, *Free of Charge*, 49-52.

¹⁹ Most Christians believe, at least upon reflection, that a person cannot truly love without the *reality* of the God of love as revealed in Jesus Christ. After all, it is this God that created human beings for love. But that is an entirely different matter from the claim that a person cannot love without *faith* in the God of love, for it roots the practice of love in God rather than in human faith in God.

By loving our neighbor—by keeping God’s commandments—we love God; in loving God—in abiding in Jesus’ love—we love the neighbor. If we love, we love both God and neighbor because we love with God’s love, love among the Holy Three and love of the Holy One for the world.

Perhaps surprisingly for “religious” texts, in John’s writings the test of whether we love at all is not whether we show extraordinary devotion to God but whether we help neighbors “in need” and, in extreme situations, are willing to lay down our lives for them (1 John 3:16-17). One might have expected John to say the exact opposite, namely that our devotion to God means that we are true lovers. After all, John insists that those who do not love God can do “nothing” when it comes to love (John 15:5). Yet, John is clear that the only way we can tell whether someone loves God is by observing his or her love of neighbors. Since God is invisible, love for God is invisible as well; unlike God, though, the neighbor is visible, and love for neighbor is visible as well. Since the love for neighbor and for God is one, “those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen” (1 John 4:20).

(4) *Love, Judgment, and Hate*. Love elicits love, we might think. If all people search for love, they must love love. And yet this isn’t true, or at least it isn’t true in a straightforward way. Sometimes love elicits hatred. Of course, injustice and hatred elicit hatred as well. That’s what we expect: hatred to be returned for hatred. Similarly, we expect love to be returned for love and are disheartened when we see hatred being returned for love. And yet, hatred is love’s stubborn shadow—not just hatred of the very people we love (when they disappoint our expectations) or hatred of us by people we love (when we don’t meet their expectations), but hatred of true lovers by those unwilling or unable to love anyone but themselves and their own cliques (as when couples or adherents of a religion carve out spaces for themselves in tight-knit familial or religious communities).

“If the world hates you,” says Jesus to his disciples in John’s Gospel, “be aware that it hated me before it hated you. If you belonged to the world, the world would love you as its own. Because you do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world—therefore the world hates you” (John 15:18-19). Often enough, of course, the world has perfectly good reasons for hating disciples of Jesus either because they lead despicable lives or because they are insufferably proud of their own presumed goodness. But sometimes the world hates those who love just because they love; people hate those who love those they hate.

The disciples shouldn’t be surprised if the world hates them. What is this world, which God loves but which hates those who love God? The “world” consists of people governed by the principles of the “world,” the domain that rejects love as God’s character and the determining reality of creation. This rejection doesn’t amount to the utter absence of love; it amounts to corrupt love, twisted and turned toward the lover alone. John describes it as “the desire of the flesh,

the desire of the eyes, the pride in riches" (1 John 2:16). Put in more contemporary terminology, corrupt love is the internal self-centered cravings of the self, augmented by external attractions, and accompanied by boastfulness about the means of their satisfaction.

There are two kinds of love: a genuine, unconditional, and generous love and a corrupted, conditional, and self-seeking love. Those whose love is genuine love both themselves and all others, God and neighbors; the righteous Abel is their representative. Those whose love is corrupted love themselves alone but hate all others or are indifferent toward them; Cain, murderer of his righteous brother, is their representative (1 John 3:12). Each of us is never only either an Abel or a Cain but almost always both at the same time, the two brothers struggling in our souls, hopefully with Abel winning over Cain, with the struggle continuing until the day when God will transform this present world into the world of God's unadulterated love.

When our flesh trembles with desire, when our soul is made alive by the attractions around us, and we are brimming with pride on account of our ability to satisfy our desires—in other words, when in loving everything else we love ourselves—we may seem to ourselves extraordinarily alive, but in fact we may be in the realm of death. When we give ourselves to others, even when we, like seeds, fall to the ground and die, we are in the realm of life, God's life of love coursing through us. For "those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life" (John 12:24-25; cf. 1 John 3:14). The choice between life and death is not a choice between love and non-love. It is the choice between loving only ourselves in all our loves and being voided thereby of God's love or loving God and neighbor and being filled with God's love and thereby flourishing.

VII

All people are equal, but all loves aren't. The Christian faith is all about love—about mean and perfidious loves that eat away and, at times, devour both the beloved and the lover, about truthful and nourishing loves that make people flourish and bring genuine and lasting joy, about healing and purifying loves that turn devouring loves into ones that bring joy. Above all the Christian faith is about divine love in which all our truthful, nourishing, healing, and purifying loves participate.

The great calling of human beings is to receive themselves, the world, and God as gifts of love and to become Love's instruments themselves. From the perspective of the Christian faith, *this* is the kind of love for which we are made, whether or not it is the kind of love we say that we want more than we want anything else.