

Where it all Begins

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Dear Friends,

"Perhaps more is said by preachers about God's love than any other single divine attribute. How do you define God's love? Our Western culture has so corrupted the word and concept that we must sweep away most of our cultural ideas about love to gain any sense of God's love as set forth in Scripture. One of the simplest and most basic definitions of the Greek word most frequently translated "love" in the New Testament passages that direct us to God's love means "love in a social or moral sense." Most Western Christians read these words and immediately shut down in near mental paralysis. The idea of love in a "social or moral" sense simply does not compute! The Western concept of love is superficial sentimental love. It relates to how you feel, not to how you act. Let me translate the idea into a concept that you might understand. When you say your wedding vows regarding lifelong faithfulness to your spouse, you pledge exclusive faithfulness to your spouse in all of life's potential circumstances, good, bad, and indifferent. How does love in a "social or moral sense" translate into your marriage relationship with your spouse? If one of the marriage partners forsakes those vows and becomes intimately involved with another person, how does the spouse react? The sense of moral violation is overwhelming—and should be. Your "love" for your spouse, as committed in your wedding vows, requires a specific and life-long "moral-social" commitment exclusively to your spouse. Violation of that vow not only breaks your spouse's trust; it is in fact a moral and social violation of your marriage contract, both with your spouse and with God. Ah, so we do perceive an element of "social and moral" dimension to our sense of love. This week's study explores the New Testament concept of love in a "social or moral sense" as it relates to God's love for His people. John, the "apostle of love," is the very best source for our study. After examining the sense of God's love for me in the New Testament and giving full weight to the "social and moral" implications of His kind of love, my first and strongest reaction is "I want to love Him more!" And my sense of love toward Him resonates with His "social and moral" love for me. My desire to love Him more does not relate to my sentimental or emotional feelings, but to the way I seek to live my life, reflecting His social and moral character in my conduct and attitudes toward both Him and other people in my life. Sometimes people will say—and many others say by their conduct—that they love God, but they don't especially like people. Given John's definition of God's love and his application of the corresponding principle to us, this comment—or action—is a true oxymoron, a wholly contradictory statement. John reasons rather specifically on this point in his first letter. You can't say that you love God and also say that you hate your brother or sister. The professing believer in God who lives in constant paranoia, distrust, and harshness toward other people in fact is making a dogmatic statement regarding his/her attitude toward God. We readily say that actions speak louder than words. Therefore, if we say that we love God while treating other people with suspicion and harshness, we are in fact saying quite loudly that we view God with suspicion and distrust! Years ago a dear friend and I were discussing the inherent problems of a group of people who held to a certain theological paradigm. I was altogether focused on their theological beliefs. After some discussion of the beliefs of these folks, my friend made an insightful observation, "XXXXXXXXXX have a mental problem, not a theological problem!" Given their conduct, I fear that a lot of professing Christians fit my friend's assessment. Arrogance, readiness to judge and condemn others, being always quick and eager to find fault or to criticize, constant and near paranoid suspicion of everything anyone does or says, all reveal far more mental problems than most people are willing to acknowledge, their theological problems aside. Years ago a Christian wrote the soul-searching question, "If you were arrested and charged with the crime of being a Christian, would there be enough evidence to convict

you?" Theological soundness based on Biblical teaching is only one dimension of true Biblical Christianity. How much evidence do you build against yourself in conduct, based on the allegation that you are in fact a Christian? John will open both theological and personal behavioral doors for our study in his extensive examination of this single—and amazingly significant—character trait of New Testament Christianity. **May we learn from the disciple of love, Joe Holder**

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And we have known and believed the love that God hath to us. God is love; and he that dwelleth in love dwelleth in God, and God in him. ([1Jo 4:16](#)) The most unsophisticated believer in God possesses an intuitive sense of God that is tightly integrated with John's concept of love as expressed in this verse. "He loves me!" becomes the most amazing realization that a mortal can comprehend about God, and, if this idea takes root in the heart, it becomes the most powerful transforming principle in that person's life. For years I struggled with my own dislike for the artificial segregation of "doctrine from practice" that dominates so much of Christian thought and writing. I could not find this segregation in Scripture. In the midst of the most doctrinal (or theological) passages Scripture routinely introduces clear practical exhortations. What does it mean to say that "God is love"? First of all, we must realize that John leads us down a carefully worded path that reasons from a foundational premise to a conclusion. Many professing Christians fail to recognize this fact and falsely live as if they believed that "Love is God," clearly not what John teaches in this passage. Love in the passage identifies a fundamental character trait of God. We must not confuse God's intimate persona with His attributes. Attributes are an expression of His being. We worship Him because of His character, but we worship Him, not His attributes. If "God is love" expresses a central character trait of God, what are the implications of this idea? How do we define "love" in this context? The basic definition of the Greek word translated "love" in this passage is "...to love in a social or moral sense," according to Strong's lexicon of New Testament Greek words. Kittell expands this idea. "Johannine (agape) is quite explicitly condescending love (agape), or rather a heavenly reality which in some sense descends from stage to stage into this world. This heavenly reality, however, achieves revelation and victory in moral action. It is thus that John sees that which Paul clarifies in terms of the interrelation of divine work and human. The world of light and life is expressed in this world in the form of love. Hence John not only can but must emphasise [sic] the active character of ???p? both in the life of Christ and in that of Christians."1 "Social or moral" direct us specifically to the two most fundamental characteristics of the intimate persona of God. If God had not created the universe, He would be no less God than He is today. If the Bible did not reveal the doctrine of the Trinity, God would be no less God—and no less social—than He is. Revelation opens the doors of heaven for us to gain an intimate glimpse of the incredible majesty and being of God, but our sense of God does not make Him any more or less God than He is. This basic premise appears throughout the first epistle of John. In the opening verses of the letter John asserts the social character of God. Rather than remaining mysteriously aloof and out of sight from His children, "...we have heard...seen...looked upon...and our hands have handled of the Word of life" ([1Jo 1:1](#)). John also affirms God's moral character as a fundamental premise for his letter, "...God is light, and in him is no darkness at all" ([1Jo 1:5](#)). John uses light and darkness as equivalents of righteousness and sin. In the verses that follow in the first chapter John will use God's social-moral character as commandments to those who profess faith in him. If we realize the assurances of our personal relationship with God, we will follow the divine example, walk in the light, live in fellowship with Him, and promptly confess our sins when we fail to live up to that perfect model of God's moral light.2 When we acknowledge the ugliness of sin in our lives, confessing our sins rather than rationalizing them, God restores intimate fellowship between Him and us by continually cleansing us from "all unrighteousness." The point of these verses is not how lost sinners gain eternal life, but how saved sinners live in fellowship with God, emphasizing both the social and the moral qualities inherent in God's personal character. **What is the dominant message or theme of First John? John's emphasis on**

the literal reality of the Incarnation leads many scholars to believe that John wrote this letter to refute growing docetic Gnosticism in the churches under his sphere of influence. Typical Gnostic teaching rejected the social dimension of the supreme deity. Ironically, despite Gnosticism's claim of secret knowledge, they believed that the supreme deity was not approachable or knowable—wholly non-social if not anti-social, the mirror opposite trait of the God of Scripture. Further, Gnosticism was inclined toward a rather relativistic view of morality, a thorough-going rejection of the Biblical view of God and His absolute moral code and nature. Given these leading features of ancient Gnosticism, this letter forms the ideal setting for John to affirm God's social and moral character. What better way to accomplish this objective than with the unique word that John uses to depict God's love? [1Jo 2:1](#) addresses the implication of the moral and social qualities of God's love with respect to our behavior, "My little children, these things I write unto you, that that ye sin not. And if any sin we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the Righteous." John admonishes us to refrain from sinning, addressing the moral quality of God's love. But if we do sin we have an advocate. This statement signifies the social quality of Gods' love. Jesus Christ, who is righteous, serves as an advocate to the Father on behalf of those for whom he died. The implication is direct and simple. "Do not sin. But if you do sin go to God through Christ for forgiveness." A major proof of the doctrine of the Trinity relates to the social character of God. Each member of the Trinity (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit) appears in Scripture as communicating with each other and in perfect harmony in everything they do. We must either accept the doctrine of the Trinity or conclude that God is a cosmic ventriloquist when we read in Scripture of the Son praying to the Father, the Father speaking to the Son, or the Holy Spirit receiving and bringing the things of Christ to our remembrance. Where ever we go in Scripture or in our study of Biblical doctrines, we must maintain our bearing with these two fundamental traits of God. He is social and He is moral. No doctrinal explanation that compromises either of these traits will stand the test of Scripture. When God created the universe ([Ge 1](#)), the Biblical account repeatedly affirms, "...and God saw that it was good" ([Ge 1:10](#)). God even reveals His moral character in creation, for the word "good" not only conveys the physical attribute of benefit or beauty, but it also explicitly conveys a moral quality. Paul affirms this truth in [Ro 1](#) when he affirms God's self-revelation in nature, specifically His wrath against sin, the moral opposite to His fundamental character. It is no leap that immediately in this setting Paul illustrates God's moral character in the creation by appealing to the fact that God reveals His eternal power and godhead (His deity) in the material creation ([Ro 1:18-23](#)). Because wicked men willfully chose to ignore God's self-revelation, specifically His moral character, in nature, Paul will unfold in [Ro 1:24-32](#) God's three-fold judgment ("...gave them up...") against man's moral rejection of Him and of His creation. Apart from this specific unifying concept that defines God's most intimate character trait as social and moral, we will plod hopelessly and often aimlessly through a maze of doctrines and concepts that never find cohesive unity or integration. The single integrating key to our correct perception of God appears in this simple statement of inspired Scripture, "...God is love." While folks from various theological traditions offer an endless maze (of either causes or evidences) to indicate an individual human's intimate relationship with God, salvation in its ultimate sense, John sweeps away the complicated maze and establishes a fundamental truth by which we may bridge the staggering gap between God and sinful man. We must not belittle the significance of faith, for Scripture fully affirms it. However, John takes us behind the various expressions of faith to the underlying premise, "...he that dwelleth in love dwelleth in God, and God in him." In God's most intimate act with man, salvation, God creates an amazing intertwining of His love in us, depicted here by John's dual "dwelleth" comment. God's social and moral love becomes our characteristic by His work in us. If the unique features of God's love are social and moral, we should expect any impact of God's work on, and in, man to create compatible attitudes and behaviors in the person whom God saves. When Jesus described the final day of Judgment ([Mt 25:31-46](#)), He did not identify the saved by what they believed, by what church they attended, by what theological concepts they embraced, or by whether they had been baptized or not. All of these actions have their role in the life of a believing and

obedient child of God. However, Jesus directs us to the ultimate trait that provides evidence of salvation, what they did that reflected His social and moral love-trait in their personal conduct. Here both the Arminian and the Reformed concepts of salvation fail the final measure that Jesus sets forth to affirm and to identify those whom He saved in time. If God's most fundamental personal trait is social and moral, we must conclude that His saving impact on an individual person will create a compatible social and moral outlook in that person. The final judgment, according to Christ, will manifest every person's spiritual state by what they did, not by what they believed or thought. Our passage appears, not as an exhortation, but as a description of the person whom God has saved and touched with His unique love. John further affirms this basic truth, "If ye know that he is righteous, ye know that every one that doeth righteousness is born of him" ([1Jo 2:29](#)). When Jesus was preparing the disciples for His departure, he taught them the essential value of this love, "By this shall all men know that ye are my disciples, if ye have love one to another" ([Joh 13:35](#)). In this verse Jesus used the same word that appears in our passage from First John. We assure ourselves and others of our salvation by living in ethical harmony with God's most fundamental character trait, social and moral love. Conduct, not sentiment, defines this trait. This unique quality of God's social and moral love explains the necessity of the Incarnation and Jesus' suffering and death for our sins. He could not honor His most basic attribute and simply "look the other way" and forgive us without dealing with the moral consequences of our sins. The person whom God has saved will in some way manifest that moral quality in conduct. In this way God's unique love will bridge the gap between—and harmoniously integrate—every doctrine that appears in Scripture. The ethics of God's love will appear in every doctrine that Scripture teaches, as well as in the appropriate conduct of the person whom God has saved. It will bring cohesion and harmony to the full fabric of Biblical doctrines, both as they reveal God and His work to us and as they instruct our appropriate conduct toward God and each other. Stop here and reflect. Drive a landmark deeply into this solid rock. It will set the course of your whole life, your fellowship with God and with His people. Any other landmark will only serve to confuse and establish false boundaries in the landscape of Biblical doctrine.

Elder Joe Holder

1Theological Dictionary of the New Testament, Vols. 5-9 edited by Gerhard Friedrich. Vol. 10 compiled by Ronald Pitkin., ed. Gerhard Kittel, Geoffrey William Bromiley and Gerhard Friedrich, electronic ed., 1:53 (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1964-c1976).

2It should be noted that assurance and reality are not necessarily the same. A person may be saved, but so live as not to enjoy the assurance of that life. Assurance relates to the individual, not to other people. God reserves the ultimate right to judge every person; He has not—and will not—relinquish that position to any. Assurance, the joy of our salvation, occurs in faithful obedience. A person may well be saved, but not enjoy its assurance, nor give evidence of a saved state to others. For one human to judge another's eternal state based on external criteria, often quite narrow and subjective, violates this principle of exclusive divine judgment.