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The Love of God in Biblical and Reformed Theology

**Submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the Degree of Master of Theology at
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Declaration

This thesis has been composed by John William Reid. It has not been accepted in any previous application for a degree. The work has been done by the candidate. All quotations have been distinguished by quotation marks and the sources of information specifically acknowledged.

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Printed Name.....John Reid

ABSTRACT

God's love in Biblical and Reformed theology is a love that is both general and particular. The Old and New Testaments both show that God has a general love that He manifests upon all people, regardless of who they are. This general love is seen in His providence, His common grace and the free offer of the gospel. God's particular love is evidenced in His relationship with the nation of Israel in the Old Testament and the Church in the New Testament. Other examples of this particular love are God's love for certain individuals, such as Abraham and David, as well as His love for groups such as aliens. God's love does not just focus on nations, groups or individuals; He also loves cities such as Jerusalem, the place where he dwelt with His people. He also loves righteousness and those who actively pursue it. One aspect of His love that is focused on in the New Testament is His love for His Son, Jesus, whose love for His Father is also a key motif. It is this love of God that sends Jesus to be an atoning sacrifice for sinners at Calvary, which is where the love of God and the righteousness of God are seen. It is at the cross of Christ that God's love is seen in its greatest manifestation in contrast to God's love seen in creation and His providence. God's love supremely revealed in Christ is not just a self-giving love; it is a desiring love that jealously desires the complete commitment of God's people in return. That God desires to love those outside of His Trinitarian relationship does not affect who God is, for if He had chosen not to love anyone, He would still be a loving God and a God of Love. That God chooses to love others, though that love is often rejected, does not mean that God is changed by the love that He does or does not receive, for He is an impassible God who cannot be affected by that which is outside of Himself. This does not mean that God has no emotion or feeling, for He could not be a God of love without having feelings or emotions. The fact that evil exists in God's world does not mean that God does not love or is not love, for He has allowed humanity free will. While He allows sin and evil to enter into His creation, He is not responsible for it, yet has permitted it within the eternal counsel of His will. God's fore-ordination does not take our free will away but allows and permits it. The love of God is one of the attributes or perfections of God, but it is not the only one. God is God because He is the sum total of all His attributes or perfections. Reformed theology has generally placed the attribute of love within the goodness of God, yet one must question whether this goodness of God actually reflects the New Testament teaching on the Trinitarian love of God, or the atoning death of Christ. It appears that the New Testament highlights the love of God rather than His goodness. Reformed theology is distinct among other theologies because it believes that God is sovereign and chooses to

manifest His saving love to some people, the elect, and that He has chosen to pass over others leaving them in their sin (reprobation). This is not based on His foreknowledge of a person's faith, repentance, perseverance or good works, but because God has chosen to enter into a saving and loving relationship with not all people, but some people. Critics of this doctrine of reprobation question whether this is consistent with His loving nature and His desire to save all people. The reality is that God does not need to save anyone; the fact that He does choose to save some is a testimony to not only His loving nature but His sovereignty also. Reformed theology guarantees the salvation of at least some people because God ensures that some are given the ability to respond to the free offer of the gospel. The doctrine of a universal grace of God that pursues and invites sinners to come to Christ does not do justice to the doctrine of total depravity, which says that none can respond to God unless God Himself originates spiritual life in them, for we have no ability to believe and repent apart from His work in the human heart. Neither should it be doubted that God loves those who do not hear the good news of Jesus. He loves them with a general love. That they do not hear this good news for whatever reason shows us that they were not among the elect of God, for if they were He would have ensured that they heard it and responded to it. There is no firm evidence to suggest that those who do not hear of Jesus will be saved apart from a conscious knowledge of Him because of the sovereign grace of God; this is because they are condemned not because they did not hear of a saviour called Jesus, but because of their sin which makes them an object of God's wrath.

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Introduction

This thesis will explore the love of God in biblical and Reformed theology. Chapters 1 and 2 will look at the love of God in the Old and New Testaments, focusing on key Hebrew and Greek words, and there will be exegesis of key New Testament texts in chapter 3 to highlight some of the important aspects of the love of God with regard to God's relationship to the world, His triune nature and the person and work of Jesus. It is acknowledged, however, that the love of God cannot be understood wholly by looking at key terms and key passages. It must be understood in the light of the whole biblical revelation from Genesis to Revelation, although, of course, terms and concepts are useful in helping us understand important aspects of God's love. It will also attempt to prove in chapters 4 and 5 that there is a love of distinction and difference in the manifestation of God's love as it pertains to the world of humanity and His own elect people, yet this love of distinction and difference does not make God any less loving. Chapter 6 will attempt to investigate the love of God and the possible destiny of those who never get opportunity to hear about Jesus. Other important issues in Christian theology will be discussed in relation to God's love, such as His sovereignty and human free will, the problem of evil and how God's love relates to His other attributes or perfections.

Chapter 1

The Love of God in the Old Testament

Aheb

The most prominent Hebrew word for love in the Old Testament is the verb *aheb*, which describes divine and human love.¹ With regard to the latter, the stem of the verb *aheb* (*hb*) can be used to denote a number of personal relationships: the attachment that unites blood-relations, the selfless loyalty of friends, and the ties of social life, but the basic meaning of *hb* is the overwhelming passion that exists between men and women.² Concerning the former, in the Old Testament Israel is the main object of God's divine love (Deut. 33:3; Pss. 44:3; 47:4; Mal. 1:2).

God Loves Israel

God did not set His "affection" (*hasaq*) on Israel and "choose" (*bhr*) them because they were more numerous than other peoples, because numerically they were small (Deut. 7:7). The verbs *hasaq* and *bhr* are conceivably synonymous because of their parallelism in Deuteronomy 7:7 just as they are possibly synonymous in Deuteronomy 4:37, "Because he loved your forefathers and chose their descendants after them". God's love for His people (Deut. 7:8) and His choice of them cannot be separated from each other because to love is to choose and *vice versa*.³ Just as God did not set His love and affection, and choose Israel because of their numerical size; neither did He set His love and affection upon them and choose them because of their moral character, because they had no righteousness or integrity (Deut. 9:5-6). They were instead a stiff-necked people (Exod. 32:9; 33:5). God's love for Israel was therefore an unmerited love because nothing in Israel was good, beautiful or desirable.⁴ Israel did not deserve this love of God because by nature they were no better than other nations. Their sovereign election as the people of God was thus down to the grace of God alone. It was for no other reason other than that he loved Israel, that God chose them.

¹ Harold W. Hoehner, "Love," in Walter A. Ewell, ed., *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology* (Carlisle, Cumbria: Paternoster Press, 1984), 656-659.

² Walter Eichrodt, *Theology of the Old Testament*, vol. 1, trans. J.A. Baker (London: SCM Press, 1972), 250.

³ Eugene H. Merrill, *Deuteronomy: An Exegetical and Theological Exposition of Holy Scripture* (Nashville, Tennessee: Broadman & Holman, 1994), 132.

⁴ Norman H. Snaith, *The Distinctive Ideas of the Old Testament* (London: Epworth Press, 1953), 137.

It was because God loved them and kept the covenant that He had made with Israel's forefathers, which he confirmed to them by an oath, that God redeemed Israel from Egyptian slavery (Deut. 4:31; 7:8; Micah 7:20). God's faithfulness to that oath would remain a controlling factor in His relationship with Israel, demonstrated not just in their deliverance from slavery, but in their election as His chosen people, and in their possession of the land of Canaan. It was also further demonstrated in God's unfailing love (*hesed*) towards them throughout their history.

God Loves the Patriarchs

As with Israel, God's affection and love for the Patriarchs was mysterious in nature (Deut. 10:15). God loved the Patriarchs despite their weaknesses and moral shortcomings. Although His affection and love for the Patriarchs is made explicit in Deuteronomy 4:37, it is implicit from the time of the covenant He made with Abraham (Gen. 15:8-17; 17:1-21 cf. 12:2). God loved Israel's ancestors because He chose to love them. His choice of them, however, should not be regarded as mere exclusive favouritism because the ultimate goal of God's loving choice of Abraham and his descendants was the blessing of all nations of the earth, although it entailed a proximate judgement on specific nations (Deut. 4:38).⁵

God Loves Aliens

Although God has a particular love for the Patriarchs, Israel and the fatherless and the widow within the covenant community, whose cause He defends because of their unique needs and extreme vulnerability, God also loves "aliens" (Deut. 10:18). The term "aliens" (*ger*) refers to landless foreigners residing with the Israelites under their protection.⁶ They were not to be ill-treated by the Israelites, but to be treated as if they were one of their own native born: loved as they loved themselves, because they had once been aliens in Egypt (Lev. 19:34). In loving them the Israelite also imitates God, who provides for them food and clothing (Deut. 10:18). Chris Wright notes the similarity between God's loving grace experienced by Israel in the desert and God's love to the alien, manifested in His provision of food and clothing.⁷

⁵ Christopher J. H. Wright, *Deuteronomy*, New International Biblical Commentary (Peabody, Massachusetts, 1996), 56-57.

⁶ Duane L. Christensen, *Deuteronomy 1-11*, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas, Texas: Word Books, 1991), 21.

⁷ Wright, *Deuteronomy*, 149.

God Loves Particular Individuals

While God loves the Patriarchs and Israel, He also loves particular individuals. God promised to maintain His faithful love towards David forever, that His covenant with him would never fail and his line would be established forever (Ps. 89:28-29 cf. 2 Sam. 7:12-16). God also loved Solomon, who succeeded David as King (2 Sam. 12:24-25; Neh. 13:26). Of all the Patriarchs it appears that Abraham, “God’s friend” is particularly loved (2 Chron. 20:7 cf. Isa. 41:8). The term “friend” speaks of the intimacy of the relationship between God and Abraham (cf. Gen. 18:17-19), just as it speaks of the intimacy of the relationship between God and Moses (Exod. 33:11). Moses was a man who knew God by name and who had found favour with Him (Exod. 33:13). God delights in His chosen servant (Isa. 42:1). In Isaiah, ‘servant’ refers to the one who establishes justice on the earth (42:4). It cannot be Israel in this context, because the servant is far too ideal a figure to represent Israel in any direct sense. Unlike the servant who fills God with delight, and who is quiet, gentle, faithful, and persevering and does not falter or become discouraged, Israel is resentful, complaining, fearful, dismayed, blind, dead and disobedient.⁸ The unidentified servant whom God delights in is the one who will bring justice to the nations, including Israel (42:1).

God Loves Righteousness and Justice

The LORD also loves (*ohebh*) righteousness (*sedaqah*) and justice (*mispat*) (Ps. 33:5). These are the foundations of His throne (Ps. 89:14). Vincent E. Bacote remarks that both of these words reflect significant aspects of the biblical concept of justice.⁹ The former is a reflection of God’s righteousness in moral character and His covenant love, as well as the legislative, judicial and administrative aspects of His action in the world.¹⁰ The law of God thus reflects his perfection in character, and because of this He rules justly, and His providential interaction with the world throughout history will ultimately be shown to accord with His righteous character.¹¹ God’s external righteousness is demonstrated in all His actions and His external righteousness is predicated on His own internal righteousness.

⁸ Barry Webb, *The Message of Isaiah*, The Bible Speaks Today (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1996), 170.

⁹ Vincent E. Bacote, “Justice” in Kevin J. Vanhoozer, Craig G. Bartholomew, Daniel J. Treier, N. T. Wright, eds., *Dictionary for Theological Interpretation of the Bible* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2005), 415-416.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

Consequently, God cannot act in a way that is inconsistent with who He is. The Judge of all the earth will therefore do what is right (Gen. 18:25). All His ways are just (Deut. 32:4). He will thus judge the whole world in righteousness; He will govern the peoples with justice (Pss. 9:8; cf., 96:10, 13; 98:9). The universal and just rule of the Lord ensures that He judges all with fairness and impartiality.

Misphat and its cognates emphasize God's role as lawgiver and just judge as well as His attributes of righteousness and morality.¹² While God's justice and righteousness can be distinguished (although that is not without difficulty, and the context in which they appear must not be ignored), they cannot be divided, for God is both righteous and just.

The righteousness that God expects from those with whom He is in covenant relationship is obedience to Torah (Deut. 6:25).¹³ This involves keeping one's responsibilities towards God and one's neighbour (Exod. 20:2-17; Deut. 5:6-21). Those who live up to the standards of the covenant are loved by God (Ps. 146:8), as are those who pursue it (Prov. 15:9). Failure to live up to these standards results in God's retribution through the curses that accompany covenant disobedience (Deut. 28:15-68). Obedience to the demands of the covenant receives the blessings that accompany obedience (Deut. 28:1-14). God's righteousness is thus both retributive or punitive, and distributive. All the works of His people, whether good or bad, receive a response from the LORD. It is because He is a God whose eyes are too pure to look upon evil, and because He cannot tolerate wrong (Hab. 1:13), that He must punish all wrongdoing, including that of His covenant people. Both they and the world will be judged in righteousness. It is not in God's holy nature (His separateness and moral purity) to overlook sin and pass over it. He is the LORD who rewards each person according to what he or she has done (Ps. 62:12; Rom 2:6).

God's righteousness is distributive as well as retributive, as is demonstrated in His deliverance of His people from their enemies and persecutors (1 Sam. 12:11). Not only is the righteousness of God a divine attribute, it is also a divine activity in which God intervenes and acts on behalf of His covenant people to save them. The righteousness of

¹² Ibid.

¹³ John Ziesler, "Righteousness" in Bruce M. Metzger & Michael D. Coogan, eds., *The Oxford Companion to the Bible* (Oxford: University Press, 1993), 655-656.

God is closely linked with the salvation of His people in the Old Testament: “I am bringing my righteousness near, it is not far away; and my salvation will not be delayed. I will grant salvation to Zion, my splendour to Israel” (Isa. 46:13). The parallelism that exists between the righteousness and salvation of God is not one that is perfect, for the former is demonstrated in God’s covenant faithfulness which brings deliverance to His people. God’s distributive righteousness is thus salvific, and is in contrast to His retributive righteousness which is concerned with His justice. His salvific righteousness is an expression of his covenant love, while His retributive righteousness flows from His holy aversion to sin, and manifests itself in wrath. Yet, the justice of God cannot be separated from the mercy and long sufferance of God, for if there is repentance, God will pardon (Jer. 18:7-8).

God’s righteousness is thus concerned with saving and punishing. It is not the latter which is the main emphasis of the relationship that God has with His covenant people, but the former. God’s saving righteousness, evidenced in His covenant faithfulness, whether that is in working righteousness and justice for the oppressed (Ps.146:7-9) or rescuing His people from their enemies (Ps.144:11) or from their exile, is that which is the ground of His people’s hope and is good news to them. Although God punishes His people for their sin His covenant faithfulness, which is predicated on the covenant that He made with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, means that God will not forsake His people, but will intervene on their behalf and deliver them (Ps. 51:1-4; Mic.6:5; 7:9). This deliverance of His people is based solely on the righteousness of God: “In you, O Lord, I have taken refuge; let me never be put to shame; deliver me in your righteousness” (Ps. 31:1). In the Old Testament, the exile is the ultimate punishment that is inflicted upon God’s covenant people for their persistent failure to keep the covenant, and in exiling His people God reveals that He is, in fact, righteous. They learn that God is righteous because He has judged them for their sin, thus their exile, but when they repent and return to God, He delivers His people from their exile, revealing His covenant faithfulness to them (Deut. 30:1-10). The righteousness or covenant faithfulness of God as understood by His covenant people has an eschatological dimension, for God’s righteousness or salvation is also awaited by them. Isaiah says: “I am bringing my righteousness near, it is not far away; and my salvation will not be delayed. I will grant salvation to Zion, my splendour to Israel” (46:13). This eschatological dimension (the deliverance and rescue of His people) is, of course, ultimately fulfilled in the work and person of the Messiah, Jesus. In Him, the righteousness of God is manifested

in that a righteous status is bestowed upon all who place their trust in Him (Rom. 1:17; 3:21-22).

God Loves Jerusalem

God also loves Jerusalem (Ps. 78:68). He loves the gates of Zion more than all the dwellings of Jacob (Ps. 87:2). He chose this place, and desired it for his dwelling; it is His resting place for ever and ever (Ps.132:13-14). Perhaps the reason why God loves Jerusalem is that it was there that God called His people together for praise and prayer and the hearing of His word, centred on the one altar of sacrifice for the forgiveness of sins.¹⁴ God's love for Jerusalem did not, however, stop it being destroyed by Babylonian and Roman armies, a consequence of His people's sin.

God Loves the World

While God has a particular love towards His covenant people, the whole world receives His favour and benevolence. The fact that humanity is created in God's image and likeness (Gen. 1:26) suggests that in their very constitution they are adapted and designed for communion with God.¹⁵ The creation of the world and its inhabitants can also be considered as an expression of God's favour, because He was under no compulsion to create either, although He chose to do so. The creation and existence of all things is thus an act of the sovereign will of God and not something that he did because of necessity (Job. 41:11). God's providence, which is the continuing action of God in preserving His creation and guiding it towards His intended purposes, should also be considered as God's favour and benevolence towards humanity.¹⁶ For in His providence, God provides for all, despite sin entering into God's creation and spoiling it (Gen. 3:14-16). Despite failing to obey Him in the Garden, God's good will towards humanity is seen in His seeking after them, which reveals His most tender care and solicitude for them.¹⁷ God's favour and benevolence is not taken away even when wickedness reaches its pinnacle in Noah's time (Gen. 6:5). The everlasting universal covenant that God made between Himself and all

¹⁴ Michael Wilcock, *The Message of the Psalms 73-159*, The Bible Speaks Today (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 2001), 59.

¹⁵ Geerhardus Vos, *Redemptive History and Biblical Interpretation: The Shorter Writings of Geerhardus Vos*, ed. Richard B. Gaffin, Jr. (Phillipsburg, New Jersey: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Co. 1980), 429.

¹⁶ Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 2nd edition (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Books, 2003), 412.

¹⁷ Vos, *Redemptive love and Biblical Interpretation*, 429 - 430.

living creatures after the flood (Gen. 9:12-16) ensures that God's favour and benevolence extends to the whole of creation (Pss. 145:9; 13-17; 147:9). God's divine favour and benevolence must, however, be contrasted with the Lord's delight in those who fear Him and put their hope in His unfailing love (Ps. 147:11).

Hesed

The noun *hesed* occurs some two hundred and forty five times in the Old Testament.¹⁸ A.D.H. Mayes believes *hesed* means steadfast love and an attitude of faithfulness, firmness, loyalty and kindness that one person has towards another.¹⁹ J.G. McConville defines *hesed* as God's faithfulness to His covenant commitment, which he believes is the primary and essential quality of the covenant relationship.²⁰ Thompson notes that when this term is used of God it denotes that deep commitment of God to his people that reached out beyond the mere demands of reciprocal obligation such as those specified by law or custom.²¹

The Septuagint translated *hesed* as *eleos* (mercy), but a different understanding of *hesed* came about primarily through the work of Nelson Glueck, who believed *hesed* was that which was obligatory between two persons who were in relationship with each other, and was a feature of the laws of the ancient Near East. This view was popularized by Norman H. Snaith, who contended that *hesed* must be primarily understood as that loyalty which should mutually exist between two parties to a covenant.²² God's *hesed* was, therefore, His unchanging love to His erring and undeserving people, Israel, and His determination to be faithful to the covenant, no matter Israel's unfaithfulness. In the New Testament Snaith believed it developed into the concept of *charis*, with its additional emphasis on the fact that all of God's favour is undeserved.²³

¹⁸ John A. Thompson, *The Book of Jeremiah*, The New International Critical Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans, 1980), 319.

¹⁹ Andrew D. H. Mayes, *Deuteronomy*, The New Century Bible Commentary (London: Marshall, Morgan & Scott, 1979), 185.

²⁰ J. G. McConville, *Deuteronomy*, Apollos Old Testament Commentary (Leicester: Apollos, 2002), 127.

²¹ Thompson, *Jeremiah*, 319.

²² Snaith, *Distinctive Ideas of the Old Testament*, 128.

²³ Norman H. Snaith, (ed) *Leviticus and Numbers*, The Century Bible (London: Thomas Nelson & Sons, 1967), 245.

The formal, legal side of *hesed* as obligation and duty, has, however, according to others, been exaggerated. They argue that *hesed* has more to do with compassion and grace rather than justice, and can be understood as a generous and beneficial action not at all required.²⁴ *Hesed* may, therefore, be understood as being outside the domain of duty, even though the promise to do *hesed* can bring it within the domain of commitment.²⁵

That God is committed to being faithful to the covenant regardless of Israel's sin speaks of the tremendous loyalty that God shows towards His covenant partner, and includes His compassion and grace towards them, and His forgiveness of them, although a temporary punishment may have to be endured by His people because of their sin. The steadfast love of God (*hesed*) cannot thus be separated from the faithfulness (*emet*) of God in His relationship with his people (Ps.57:3, 10). Israel's unfaithfulness might lead to the destruction of a generation, as it did in the wilderness wanderings (Num. 14:29), but God never annihilates Israel completely because of His covenant love towards them, and his covenant promise to the Patriarchs (Deut. 7:12; cf. Ex. 32:13). God's love for His people tempers His punishment of them, despite their unfaithfulness and spiritual adultery (Hos. 11:1-11).

Even when exile occurs because of Israel's idolatry (Deut. 4:27), if they seek God with all their heart and soul, they will find Him (Deut. 4:29). Those who return to the land following exile would be changed by the Lord because He would circumcise their hearts and the hearts of their descendants to love God completely, and in doing so they would live (Deut. 30: 1-6). God's unfailing love (Ps. 77:7-9) ensures the preservation of a remnant (Micah 2:12; Zeph. 3:13; Zech. 8:6, 11-12).

Although Israel's unfaithfulness did not annul God's covenant promise, Israel was nevertheless aware the maintenance of the covenant and the enjoyment of its blessing were conditional on their obedience (Exod. 20:5-6; Deut. 5:9-10; 7:9-10, 13-24). Yet they also knew that their very survival depended on God's forgiving grace, and on His unswerving

²⁴ Francis I. Andersen, "Yahweh, The Kind and Sensitive God" in P.T. O'Brien and D. G. Peterson, eds., *God who is rich in mercy: Essays presented to Dr. D. B. Knox* (New South Wales: Lancer Books, 1986), 44.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 81.

commitment to the ancestral promise and oath.²⁶ Similarly the basis for their future hope was the merciful character of God (Deut. 4:31 cf. Exod. 34:6).²⁷

God's covenant faithfulness, grace, and compassion resulted in Israel becoming an established nation, ruled eventually by a monarchy. In the Davidic covenant God promised King David that his house and his kingdom would endure forever (2 Sam. 7:16; 23:5; 1 Kings 8:25; Pss. 89:3-4; 26-37; 132:11-18; Isa. 55:3). Despite the temple's destruction in 587 BC by the Babylonians, and Judah's end as a kingdom, David's line continued in unbroken succession because of God's covenant love. The disobedience of the Davidic rulers did not annul God's everlasting covenant with David, although disobedient kings were chastised by Him (2 Sam. 7:14). God's promise to build a house and a kingdom for David ultimately finds its fulfilment in the birth of Jesus, the Son of David. It is in Him that God fulfils His promises to Abraham (Gen. 12:3; cf. Gal. 3:16) that in his seed all the families on the earth will be blessed (Gen 12:3); and it is He who takes over the servant role of Israel (John 8:12; 9:5) because of Israel's disobedience. In Jesus God offers salvation to both Jews and Gentiles (Acts 13:45-49) through repentance and faith; and in Jesus God's promises to the Patriarchs find their fulfilment (Acts 3:25).

Aheb and Hesed

Snaith sees a distinction between God's elective love (*aheb*) and God's covenant love (*hesed*), the former being an unconditional love, the latter being a love that is conditional upon there first being a covenant.²⁸ Snaith believes *hesed* is the means of the continuance of the covenant, while *aheb* is its cause.²⁹ Eichrodt, however, believes that *hesed* constitutes the proper object of a covenant and may almost be described as its content.³⁰ For Eichrodt the possibility of the establishment and maintenance of a covenant rests on the presence of *hesed*.³¹ Snaith's distinction fails because *aheb* can also refer to human love, not just God's elective love. It is more likely that *hesed* speaks of God's unmerited favour by which He elects people to covenant relationship and on the basis of which He

²⁶ Wright, *Deuteronomy*, 54.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Snaith, *Distinctive Ideas of the Old Testament*, 95.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Eichrodt, *Theology of the Old Testament*, vol.1, 232.

³¹ Ibid.

extends all its blessings.³² Further evidence to suggest that *hesed* is God's unmerited favour by which He elects people to covenant relationship is that the terms *hesed* and *berit* ("covenant") are used as synonyms (Deut. 7:9) and interchangeable terms (Deut 7:12).³³ The frequent use of *hesed* and *berit* being used in zeugma in the Old Testament (Deut 7:9, 12; 1 Kings 8:23; Ps. 89:28, Isa. 54:10, 55:3) would appear to substantiate the claim that without the presence of *hesed* there would have been no establishment of a covenant.³⁴ *Hesed* is similar to *ahab*, but goes beyond it, because not only is it God's unmerited favour that creates the covenant, but His kindness is manifested within the covenant relationship. *Hesed* is unconditional, for there can be no election of a people to covenant relationship apart from the unmerited favour of God. As a basis for covenant election, *hesed* is unconditional, for it is a manifestation of the pure grace of God. Yet, within that covenant relationship *hesed* is part of the reciprocal process, a disposition conditioned upon the love (*ahaba*) and obedience of those who owe them (Deut 5:10).³⁵ In the covenant relationship that God has with Israel He will manifest *hesed* (goodness, grace, kindness) towards them when they love Him and obey His commands (Deut. 5:10, 7:10).

Hasaq

The verb *hasaq* is sometimes used in the Old Testament to describe passionate, committed love in human relationships and is often tinged with strong desire.³⁶ For example, Hamor's son Shechem delighted or took pleasure in Jacob's daughter, Dinah (Gen. 34:8); and Israelites, after defeating their enemies, are permitted to marry captive women to whom they are attracted (Deut. 21:10-11). *Hasaq* also describes God's deep passion, commitment and strong feelings towards unattractive Israel (Deut. 7:7; 10:15). Like *hesed*, *hasaq* conveys the idea of a strong emotional attachment that runs beyond any reasonable, explicable act.³⁷ *Hasaq* is therefore God's deep passion for Israel.³⁸ The jealousy of God with regards to the covenant relationship with His people means that He will not bear to share His people with another, for they belong to Him alone (Exod. 20:5). If Israel is unfaithful to God there will be a due punishment, but when they remain faithful to Him in

³² Merrill, *Deuteronomy*, 148.

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ Eichrodt, *Theology of the Old Testament*, vol. 1, 232.

³⁵ Merrill, *Deuteronomy*, 148.

³⁶ Wright, *Deuteronomy*, 116.

³⁷ Walter Brueggemann, *Deuteronomy*, Abingdon Old Testament Commentaries (Abingdon, Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2001), 96.

³⁸ Walter Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), 384.

love and obedience, God will continue to manifest His covenant loyalty towards them (Exod. 20:5-6).

Racham

The word *racham* can be translated as mercy.³⁹ It denotes compassion towards the helpless.⁴⁰ For example, it is used to speak of the mercy that Israel's conquerors showed to them (1 Kings 8:50; Jer. 42:12). In both of these instances, it is God who causes or will cause Israel's conquerors to show them mercy. *Racham* also speaks of God's compassionate nature (Exod. 34:6). This compassionate nature ensured that God's people were not consumed (Lam: 3:22-23 cf. Ps 78:32-38). A. A. Anderson has noted that when the singular form of the word *raham* is used, the mercy (or compassion) that is spoken of is a feeling that is similar to that which a mother normally has towards her baby (Isa. 49:15).⁴¹ It could also be described as a brotherly love,⁴² but no metaphor in the Old Testament does justice to the steadfast love of God for His people. Though God may bring grief towards his loved ones for a time because of their disobedience (Lam. 3:32), He will have compassion on them, because of the greatness of His unfailing love (*hesed*) towards them. He is the Lord *their* God (Zech. 10:6).

On the other hand, God's compassion is not just directed towards Israel. He promised to show compassion to Nineveh if they turned from their evil ways (Jonah 3:9); and He did show them compassion when they repented (Jonah 3:10). God was concerned about the inhabitants of Nineveh (Jonah 4:11), despite them not being able to appreciate or understand His care for them.

Conclusion

God's love cannot be restricted to those with whom He is in covenant relationship such as Israel and the Patriarchs, because He also loves, for example, aliens. While the term *ahab* never refers to God's love for the world, His creation of the world, the bestowal of His

³⁹ Eichrodt, *Theology of the Old Testament*, vol. 1, 237.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 250.

⁴¹ Arnold A. Anderson, *Psalms 1-71*, Vol. 1, The New Century Bible (London: Marshall, Morgan & Scott, 1981), 391.

⁴² *ibid.*

image upon all, His promise to preserve His world and His creatures, His providential provision towards them, and His promise of salvation reaching to all nations, all strongly suggest that God is benevolent and favourable towards all. Concerning His relationship with His covenant people, God's love (*hesed*) is unconditional because it is based on the unmerited free grace of God who chooses His people and brings the covenant relationship into existence, although the benefits of the covenant are conditioned on their obedience. Yet even if His people are disobedient, God continues to manifest faithfulness, grace and compassion to them, as well as forgiving them, because of His great love for them and His faithfulness to the oath He made to the Patriarchs. God's love for Israel is one of deep passion, commitment, and strong feeling towards an unattractive people whom He will not share with any other god. But it is also a love which has as its ultimate purpose the blessing of all nations through Jesus, the promised royal seed of David, who is the definitive fulfilment of all God's covenant promises.

Chapter 2

The Love of God in the New Testament

New Testament Terminology for Love

The New Testament has two key words that refer to the dimensions of what Christians call love.⁴³ These are the nouns *agape* and *philia* and their verbs *agapao* and *phileo*. Other Greek words were also current to describe love, such as *storge*, and *eros*, but do not appear in the New Testament. *Philia* is a love of friendship and was the most commonly used term

⁴³ Stanley J. Grenz, *The Moral Quest: Foundations of Christian Ethics* (Downers Grove, Illinois: Inter-Varsity Press, 1997), 279. The word *philostoroi* appears in Romans 12:10 and denotes the love that is typically expected in a family.

for love in Greek literature.⁴⁴ *Storge* is natural affection, especially within families.⁴⁵ *Eros* was understood as love between the sexes or being in love.⁴⁶ Yet in its original form, *eros* was not understood in a sexual manner, even though at the time of the New Testament, the Greek god, *Eros*, was widely venerated and popular.⁴⁷ He was seen as the personification of love as sexual desire.⁴⁸ In pre-philosophical Greek cosmogonies, however, *Eros* appears as a uniting force drawing everything together, one of the first to emerge from the dark abyss of chaos.⁴⁹ One of the classical Greek expressions of the effort to exert rational control over *eros*, or at least to gain an understanding of such a type of love, is Plato's *Symposium*.⁵⁰ For Plato (c. 427-347 BC), love is a mystical communion with the Supreme Being - the desire for the beautiful and ascension to it.⁵¹ The focus in Platonism was on the higher ecstatic state rather than the earthly sensuous state. By attaining the former it was believed one would become a whole person in contrast to those who had not yet reached that higher ecstatic state and so remained divided selves.⁵² Despite this search for the spiritual and divine in Greek philosophy, which brought about wholeness if found, there was no conception of a self-sacrificing love for the other in its understanding of *eros*, whether the latter took the form of sensual intoxication or the more sublime experience of ecstatic union with the one.⁵³

Agape

Agape is the distinctive New Testament word to describe the love of God. The reason why *agape* in particular came to be used to describe love both human and divine probably was that it was little used in comparison to the other words, and was therefore free from the compromising associations of the usual words for love.⁵⁴ It was an empty, conveniently available vessel, into which Christian revelation could pour the full meaning of its own

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Werner. G. Jeanrond, *A Theology of Love* (London: T & T Clark, 2008), 32.

⁴⁸ Carter Lindberg, *Love: A Brief History through Western Christianity* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2008), 2.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 4-5.

⁵¹ *The Dialogues of Plato: Volume 1*, 3rd edition, trans. Brian Jowett (Oxford: Clarendon Place, 1892), 581-582.

⁵² Gary D. Braddock, "The Concept of Love: Divine and Human" in K. Vanhoozer, ed., *Nothing Greater, Nothing Better: Theological Essays on the Love of God* (Cambridge: W. .B. Eerdmans, UK 2001), 30-46

⁵³ Grenz, *The Moral Quest*, 280.

⁵⁴ Donald Macleod, *Behold Your God* (Fearn, Ross-shire: Christian Focus, 1990), 144.

unique proclamation of love.⁵⁵ Perhaps another reason *agape* was chosen was that it had been used in the Septuagint to speak of God's love.⁵⁶

God's Love is a Desiring Love

Despite choosing not to use *eros* to describe the self-giving divine love of God, it is clear that God's love is a desiring love and has an almost erotic aspect. We saw in our brief overview of some of the Hebrew words used to describe the love of God that desire and longing are features of God's love for His people. Just as God's passion for His people is seen in the metaphor of marriage (Hos.3:1), so in the New Testament, the image of marriage is used to describe the loving bond between Christ and His Church (2 Cor.11:2; Eph. 5:31-32). We can thus predicate *eros* of God, yet we can do this without making God dependent on that which He has created, for in the relationships of love that exist within the Godhead there is a desire for communion with one another.⁵⁷ As Donald Macleod notes, "Within himself He has always had the basis of fellowship and community and the possibility of love".⁵⁸

Because of this we must reject the absolute contrast between *agape* and *eros* suggested by Anders Nygren (1890-1978). Nygren argued that from the time of Augustine (354-430) up until the period of Martin Luther (1483-1546) and the Reformation the Church had synthesized the concept of love as both *eros* and *agape* because of the influence of classical Platonism. This combination, he claimed, had occurred in Augustine's concept of '*caritas*', which he supposed was a distortion of the *agape* of the Gospel, but had with Luther and the Reformers been set free again, because they returned to the New Testament theme of God's love as His mercy that He freely pours out to the unworthy. Nygren believed that *agape* and *eros* were two distinct, irreconcilable loves because they were from two different spiritual worlds - *agape* from the world of the New Testament and *eros* from the world of classical Platonism, and, because of this, no direct communication was possible between them.⁵⁹

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Gordon D. Fee, *God's Empowering Presence: The Holy Spirit In The Letters of Paul* (Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson, 1994), 201.

⁵⁷ Grenz, *The Moral Quest*, 289-290.

⁵⁸ D. Macleod, *A Faith To Live By: Understanding Christian Doctrine* (Fearn, Ross-shire: Christian Focus, 2002), 53.

⁵⁹ Anders Nygren, *Agape & Eros*, trans. Phillip S. Watson (London: SPCK, 1982), 31.

Nyrgren's contrast is, however, flawed, because he failed to understand that if there is an absolute contrast between *agape* and *eros* there cannot be any positive relationship between them. *Eros* and *agape* are true loves in their own right, but they cannot be distinguished as self-seeking love and self-giving love. Altruistic love (*agape*) and desiring love (*eros*) can co-exist together, and these can be seen in both the intra-Trinitarian life of God and his relationship with His covenant people. Nygren contrasted altruistic love and desiring love on the basis of an *a priori* theological distinction rather than on the basis of an adequate reading of the Greek text of the Bible or on a survey of its linguistic usage.⁶⁰ The Greek words *agape* and *phila*, Jeanrond notes, have often been selected for reasons of style rather than for reasons of semantic distinction or contrast.⁶¹ No theological case on the uniqueness of Christian love can thus be erected on linguistic or terminological observation.⁶² Don Carson concurs with Jeanrond and argues that we cannot begin to fathom the nature of the love of God by something as superficial as methodologically flawed word studies.⁶³

While it is *agape* that is the distinctive word in the New Testament to describe love, the verb *phileo* is also used to describe divine love. *Phileo* is used to refer to God the Father's love for Jesus His son (John 5:20), as is the verb *agapao* (John 3:35). That both *agapao* and *phileo* are used to speak of the Father's love for Jesus shows us that these words are used interchangeably in the Fourth Gospel, making it impossible to detect any difference in their meaning.⁶⁴ An understanding of love cannot, therefore, according to Carson, be tied in any univocal way to the *agapao* word group.⁶⁵

⁶⁰ Jeanrond, *A Theology of Love*, 28.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

⁶² *Ibid.*

⁶³ Don A. Carson, *The Difficult Doctrine of the Love of God* (Nottingham: Inter-Varsity Press, 2000), 34.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 31.

⁶⁵ Carson gives another six reasons why love cannot be tied in any univocal way to the *agapao* word group. (1) Excellent diachronic reasons exist in Greek philology to explain the rise of the *agapao* word group. (2) Within the Septuagint it is far from clear that the *agapao* word group always refers to some higher or more noble or less emotional form of love. (3) There is a danger of falling into the trap of what linguists call 'illegitimate totality transfer' – the illegitimate importing of the entire semantic range of a word into that word in a particular context. (4) The context defines and delimits the word, precisely as it does the verbs for 'love' in the pages of holy scripture. (5) 1 Corinthians 13 shows that *agape* cannot be reduced to willed altruism. (6) The heritage of understanding *agama* as referring to a willed love independent of emotion and committed to the other's good has been influenced by the schoolmen and other philosophical theologians of a bygone era, who denied there was feeling in God. *Ibid.*, 30-33.

The Reciprocal Love of the Father and Son

In the New Testament, particularly the Gospel of John, the reciprocal love between God and Jesus is a major motif. God's love for His son, Jesus (John 3:35; 15:9; 17:23, 26) existed before the world's creation, and was declared at His baptism (Matt 3:17; cf. Mark. 1:11) and transfiguration (Matt. 17:5; Mark 9:7; cf. 2 Peter 1:17). He is the beloved, (*agapetos*) the Son of the Father's love, the one whom He delights in (Matt. 12:18). The love of Jesus for His Father (John 14:31) was manifested in Him keeping His commands which included His sacrificial death (John 10:17). Jesus remains in His Father's love by His obedience in His incarnate life (John 15:10). Yet His obedience is the response to an already existing eternal love of the Father for Him which, amazingly, is the same eternal love that the Son has for His disciples (John 15:9a cf. 13:1a, 34b). And, like the Son, the disciples remain in the love of Jesus by obeying His commands (John 15:9-10). When one remains in the love of Christ through obedience one's joy is complete, because the obedient inherit the complete joy of Christ (John 15:11). In a sense, the benefits of the love of Christ are conditional on one's obedience which has its motivation in the prior love of Christ for His disciples and results in their complete spiritual joy. Yet, in another sense, the eternal love of Christ for His disciples is unconditional, for it is an undeserved love. Similar parallels were noted in the Old Testament section with the concept of God's *hesed*.

The Father's love for His Son is demonstrated by the unlimited gift of the Spirit and the placing of everything into His hands (John 3:34-35). This includes the Son being His Father's plenipotentiary, envoy, perfect spokesman and revealer.⁶⁶ As His plenipotentiary, Jesus has complete authority to act in His Father's name, including the judgement of all people with regard to their response to Him. Those who believe in Him will receive eternal life (John 3:16). Those who reject Him, however, will not receive eternal life, for God's wrath remains on them (John 3:36).

God's Love Manifested Supremely in Jesus and his Atoning Death

According to the New Testament, it is in the atoning sacrifice of Jesus that the divine love is supremely manifested (1 John 4:9-10). Christ's incarnation and His subsequent earthly life, however, cannot be separated from His atoning death, because in Romans 5:18-19, Paul contrasts the disobedient life of Adam with the obedient life of Christ including everything that led up to His sacrificial death. Similarly, in Philippians 2:8, Paul speaks of

⁶⁶ Frederick F. Bruce, *The Gospel of John* (Basingstoke, Hants: Pickering & Inglis, 1983), 97.

Christ humbling Himself and becoming obedient to death. Christ was obedient up until the point of His death on the Cross and continued that obedience by His death. Paul, however, while not separating Christ's active and passive life, specifically emphasizes the latter and its message as the power of God for salvation (Rom. 1:16; 1 Cor. 1:18). It is, therefore, not inaccurate to say that God's love is seen in its greatest manifestation in Christ's atoning death, in contrast to the limitations of God's love in creation and providence which are somewhat ambiguous, unlike at the Cross where God's love is shown fully and without ambiguity.⁶⁷

Defining *Agape*

Don Carson believes *agape* is a willed love, an act of self-sacrifice for the good of another.⁶⁸ Carter Lindberg considers *agape* to be an expression of God's absolute and redemptive love shown in the person and work of Christ.⁶⁹ *Agape* can therefore be that love of God in Christ that is concerned with the good of the other and acts towards achieving that well-being. It is a love that is manifested to the whole of humanity, which, although the object of God's care, is sin-laden and exposed to the judgement of God and in need of salvation (John 3:16).⁷⁰ The salvific love of God that offers eternal life to all who believe in Jesus is not a love that is manifested because of the loveliness of the object. Yet *agape* cannot always mean a love for the unlovely, for this does not describe the relationship of love between the Father and Son. When God manifests His own love to the world providentially and in a salvific manner it is clear that it is not based on any quality or qualities that humanity has, because the fall has distorted the image and likeness of God (Gen. 1:26-27) in those who are the special and direct creation of God. Sin has distorted the image and likeness of God in all people in its formal (human personality), material (true knowledge of God) and dominical (ruling as God's vice regents on earth) aspects. It has, however, not eradicated the image and likeness of God in all people (Gen. 9:6; James 3:9).

⁶⁷ James M. Boice, *Foundations of the Christian Faith: A Comprehensive and Readable Theology*, rev. in one Volume (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1986), 332.

⁶⁸ Carson, *Difficult Doctrine of the Love of God*, 30.

⁶⁹ Lindberg, *Love*, 14.

⁷⁰ William Hendriksen, *The Gospel of John*, New Testament Commentary (London: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1954, first British edition, 1959, reprinted in 1973), 140.

Consequently, humanity cannot do anything to gain the favour of God so that He might bestow salvation on them. Not that this means that humanity cannot do good in any sense, for human experience belies that idea. Yet that good can never be meritorious. Nonetheless, the good must ultimately be attributed to God, for even with a defaced image, it is still His image that we possess. Accordingly we must agree with Bavinck that when God loves, He loves His own virtues, works and gifts in fallen humanity. No good exists within us except that which comes from God, and through Him, and this includes natural, moral and spiritual good.⁷¹ Only through the redemptive work of Christ and faith in Him is that image progressively restored (Col. 3:10). This progressive restoration culminates in a complete renewal of our distorted image into conformity with the image of Jesus (Rom. 8:29; cf. 1 Cor. 15:49) who Himself is the image of God (2 Cor. 4:4; Col. 1:15). Because humanity is made in God's image there is not one person in whom He takes no interest, and He offers to all the possibility that their defaced image might be restored through faith in His Son. All humanity after the fall is sinful, and none deserve God's salvation or His goodwill and benevolence, yet graciously He freely bestows the different dimensions of His love on undeserving sinners who are dead in their sins and transgressions and by nature objects of wrath (Eph. 2:2,3).

Reformed theology has traditionally held that Christ died only for the elect, and that all those who Christ died for will because of the grace of God finally and fully persist in faith (John 6:38-40, 10:27-29; Rom 8:30; Eph. 1:13-14; Phil 1:6). All those who are God's people will thus be saved (Matt 1:21; John 17:6, 9). Other theological traditions (Arminianism and Wesleyan) argue that the atoning death of Christ provided sufficient grace to counteract the universal influence of sin on all humanity, and enables sinners to positively respond to God (John 16:7-11) and accept His offer of everlasting life through faith in Christ (John 3:16). But they do not believe that God's universal grace ensures that one will continue to believe in Christ. At any time one can turn one's back on God and return to a life of sin and rebellion against Him (Rom. 8:12-13; Gal. 5:21; 6: 7-8; Heb. 6: 1-8; Rev. 2:2-7).

⁷¹ Herman Bavinck, *The Doctrine of God*, trans. William Hendriksen (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1979), 204-205

We will return later to the issue of whether God predestines certain individuals to be saved and fore-ordains others to everlasting death, to see if it is scriptural and accords with the message of the gracious nature of God's offer of salvation.

God's Love Is a Self-sufficient Love

While God's love can be understood as a gift given to the undeserving, God commanded Israel to love Him (Matt. 22:37; Mark 12:30; Luke 10:27; cf. Deut. 6:5). Not that this means that God needs human love, because the Lord of heaven and earth who made the world and everything in it does not need anything. On the contrary, it is He who gives all humanity life and breath and everything else (Acts 17:24 cf. Ps. 50:8-12). The Westminster Confession in Chapter 2:2 "Of God and the Holy Spirit" says the following about God's *aseity* or self-existence:

God hath all life, glory, goodness, blessedness in and of Himself; and is alone in and unto Himself all-sufficient, not standing in need of any creatures which He hath made, nor deriving any glory from them, but only manifesting His own glory in, by, unto, and upon them. He alone is the fountain of all being of whom, through whom, and to whom are all things, and that most sovereign dominion over them, to do by them, for them, or upon them whatsoever Himself pleaseth.⁷²

God does not need human love because He is love (1 John 4: 8, 16). God's essence is not dependent upon the existence of creatures or their love for Him, because before the creation of the universe, the triune God's love found its proper object within the persons of the Godhead to His own perfect satisfaction and happiness.⁷³ The triune God did not therefore create the universe (and its inhabitants) out of an ontological need to complement Himself.⁷⁴ Instead, God created the universe (and its inhabitants) because He willed to do so for the purpose of glorifying Himself by the working out of His redemptive activity.⁷⁵ Although God does not need His people for anything, an amazing part of our existence is that He chooses to delight in us and allows us to bring joy to His heart (Zeph. 3:17-18), this being the basis for personal significance in the lives of all God's people.⁷⁶

⁷² *Westminster Confession of Faith*, 2:2, first published in 1646 (Glasgow: Free Presbyterian Publications, 2001), 26.

⁷³ Robert L. Reymond, *What is God? An investigation of the perfections of God's nature* (Fearn, Ross-shire: Christian Focus 2007), 27.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

God's Love and His Impassibility

God's relationship with the world is contingent because it is a matter of divine choice, not of divine necessity. Yet God in his creation of the world and its inhabitants shows that He desires fellowship with humanity, whom He created in His image and likeness. When, however, God's love is rejected, God experiences sadness, anger, hurt and pain (cf. Hos. 11: 8-9). When human emotions are often ascribed to God in Scripture to communicate information about His acts or His nature they cannot be dismissed as only language that is used in accommodation to our capacities.⁷⁷ While God in scripture does speak to us in a form that is suited to our capacity to hear and understand, the resemblance that exists between God and humanity, which is made in God's image and likeness (Gen. 1:26-27), suggests that when Scripture speaks about God's emotions the language is literal. This is because the nature of God and the nature of humanity bear many attributes in common, although in God's attributes there is a surpassing perfection and excellence above and beyond that of our own.

The God of classical Christian theism is one who is conceived to be impassible and immutable: impassible in that He cannot be moved in an emotional sense, and immutable in the sense that He does not change. This is in contrast to the God of process theologians, open theists and some free-will theists who have challenged many aspects of classical theism, including His immutability, impassibility and foreknowledge. These theologians argue that the God proclaimed by classical theism has resulted from the unsuccessful synthesis of the Hellenistic idea of an absolute, timeless and unchangeable being with the teaching of the Bible, resulting in a being who is unrelated to the world and cannot be affected by anything outside of Himself. Yet, despite this overdrawn claim that postulates a disjuncture between Hebrew and Greek thought,⁷⁸ the God of classical theism is still believed by the advocates of this new conception of God to be so absolutely sovereign that He determines and accomplishes His will without regard to what His creatures think or do. His relationship to the world is not one in which He combines with humanity to achieve

⁷⁶ Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1994), 162-163.

⁷⁷ Robert Shaw, *An Exposition Of The Confession of Faith* (Locharron, Ross-shire: Christian Focus, 1992), 26-27.

⁷⁸ Stanley J. Grenz, *Renewing the Centre: Evangelical Theology in a Post-Theological Era* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2000), 162.

His purposes, but is believed to be one of mastery and control. Because of this creator-creature relationship what is assumed to be the libertarian free will of humanity is in effect irrelevant and of no consequence, because God will bring His will to pass regardless of our libertarian free will, even if that means disregarding and overriding it. In contrast to this control-relationship to the world, God in His relationship to the world is believed by these advocates to be vibrant rather than fixed, because He gives His creation a degree of autonomy.⁷⁹ God does not, therefore, arbitrarily and unilaterally control the world for he shares that control with humanity.⁸⁰ This vibrant rather than fixed relationship means that the future is determined not by God alone, but in partnership with human agents, to whom He gives a role in shaping what the future will be.⁸¹ God is flexible and does not insist on doing things His way, according to Clark Pinnock.⁸² He adjusts His plans because He is sensitive to what humans think and do.⁸³ The course of history is not, therefore, the product of divine action alone, but the combined result of what God and His creatures decide to do, because of the significant freedom that He gives to humanity. Human beings are thus seen as participating with God in loving dialogue to bring the future into being.⁸⁴ The world that God created is, therefore, not one in which He is in meticulous control; instead it is one in which humanity is free in a libertarian sense. Yet God is no less sovereign because He chooses to create people who are free to accomplish His purposes through their undetermined choices.⁸⁵

The sovereignty of God in Reformed theology affirms that God is working out all things (including the salvation of His people) according to the counsel of his will (Eph. 1:11). This does not necessarily mean that human freedom is abolished. God has ordained that we have creaturely freedom, but this lies within the scope of a God who has fore-ordained all that comes to pass. Jesus was Himself delivered to death by the determined purpose and foreknowledge of God, yet it was wicked men who put him to death (Acts 2:23). Those who put Jesus to death are held responsible for this act, but God also fore-ordained that

⁷⁹ Millard J. Erickson, *The Evangelical Left: Encountering Post Conservative Evangelical Theology* (Carlisle, Cumbria: Paternoster Press, 1998), 86.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ Clark Pinnock, "Systematic Theology" in Clark Pinnock, Richard Rice, John Sanders, William Hasker, David Basinger, eds., *The Openness of God: A Biblical Challenge to the Traditional Understanding of God* (Carlisle, Cumbria: Paternoster Press, 1994), 101-125.

⁸² Ibid., 116.

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ Clark Pinnock, *Most Moved Mover: A Theology of God's Openness* (Carlisle, Cumbria: Paternoster Press, 2001), 4.

⁸⁵ Jerry L. Walls & Joseph R. Dongell, *Why I Am Not A Calvinist?* (Downers Grove: Illinois, 2004), 145.

Jesus would die. Similarly, the brothers of Joseph are held responsible for selling him into slavery. This was an action which they freely chose to do, yet, it was included within the fore-ordination of God (Gen. 45:4-5, 7-8). Moral responsibility for our actions can in no way function without libertarian free will. One cannot be held responsible for one's actions if one is deprived of the ability to make free decisions. Reformed theology does not believe that God gave those responsible for the death of Christ the desire to do this and the resolve to carry it out. No force was applied upon them, neither were they coerced into their actions. This also applies to the actions of Joseph's brothers. God may be sovereign but He does not coerce anyone to do that which is contrary to their own free will. This does not mean, however, that God does not turn hearts wherever he wishes (Prov. 21:1). He can and does move the human heart at times, creating desires and intentions within them, but the actions that flow from these desires and intentions are our own. God hardened Pharaoh's heart so that he would pursue the Israelites after they left Egypt. This was so that He would gain honour over Pharaoh and his army, and that the Egyptians would know that He is the LORD (Ex. 14:4). Pharaoh was not coerced by God to pursue the Israelites: he chose freely to do this, although God had already given him the desire to carry it out, and he acted according to that implanted desire. The hardening of Pharaoh's heart, the pursuit of the Israelites and all that occurred because of their pursuit including the Egyptians knowing that Israel's God was the LORD was all part of the eternal plan of God.

Nothing is then believed to occur in God's universe without it being fore-ordained by God (Eph. 1:11), including even sin, which has been permitted by Him within his overall purpose. Yet at the same time, Reformed theology has been eager to defend God as not the author of sin. God's foreordination also includes those acts that appear to be random events or chance events (contingency). God does not bring about his sovereign will by completely disregarding humanity's free will. Instead, He includes this within his overall purposes. The human race does have a degree of autonomy, but an autonomy that is included under the fore-ordination of God. There is vibrancy within the creature-creator relationship, yet it lies within the fixed limits of God's fore-ordination. The future is thus brought about by God who works all things according to the counsel of His will, yet amazingly he allows humanity to partner with him in the fulfilling of his purposes. The future plans of God will be brought to fruition, even through the libertarian free actions of humanity; yet, this does not conflict with the meticulous control of God as ruler and King of His creation. God's all-embracing fore-ordination does not override the human will, but includes it.

God is vitally related to humanity, not unrelated to them, yet, he is immutable in the sense that they cannot change who He is, what He resolves to do, and the assurances that He has given to his people. Yet Christian theism should affirm that God can suffer, while still being immutable in His being, perfections, purposes and promises.⁸⁶ God is impassible in the sense that humanity cannot inflict any type of pain, suffering, hurt and distress upon God unless He, Himself, wills that to happen, which He does as a consequence of entering into relationship with the world, humanity and His Church. The feelings that God has are therefore part of his own eternal and unchangeable nature, not a result of actions that are imposed on Him by others.⁸⁷ Gerald Bray uses the analogy of a doctor and his patients to describe the impassibility of God: the great physician must sympathize with his patients' diseases and be able to alleviate their suffering, but he is not called upon to experience it along with them.⁸⁸ He argues that the implications of a doctrine of divine passibility when applied to God's essence are catastrophic, because we are left with a God who is crippled with pain.⁸⁹ And that is cold comfort to sinners who need a God who is strong to save and not one who is weakened by our infirmities.⁹⁰

If we believe that God is a God of love who manifests that love to others, then we must believe that He is a God who has feelings, for, as Charles Hodge rightly points out, if there is no feeling in God there can be no love.⁹¹ If He is a God without love He cannot be triune, for the essence of the triune God is an eternal, dynamic, and outgoing love between Father, Son and Spirit. The Christian God is not a solitary monadic being without anyone to love and being Himself incapable of love. In the New Testament the incarnate Christ, who took upon Himself human nature and suffered and died in that human nature, shows us that God has knowledge and experience of human suffering because of the mutual indwelling of the Father and the Son, yet His divine essence is not affected by it. While God is unaffected, though not unmoved, by the condition of His sin-spoiled world, in His triune essence, because He is an unchangeable being, this does not mean that the triune God is immobile or inactive. Instead, He is a God who acts in His world because He is

⁸⁶ Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 163.

⁸⁷ Norman L. Giesler & H. Wayne House, *The Battle for God: Responding to the Challenge of Neotheism* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Kregel Publications, 2001), 170.

⁸⁸ Gerald Bray, *The Doctrine of God*, *Contours of Christian Theology* (Downers Grove, Illinois: Inter-Varsity Press, 1993), 99-100.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 100.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

⁹¹ Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, vol.1 (London: James Clarke & Co Ltd, 1960), 428-429.

concerned about His creation and cares for His creatures, unlike the transcendent God of Deism, who is detached from the world and its inhabitants. This same God does not sustain His world and He does not intervene within it supernaturally. Unlike humanity and the universe, which is changing and will be changed, God remains the same and His years will never end (Heb. 1:12). God is not dependent on humanity or on the universe for His existence, whereas they are dependent on God for their existence and continued preservation (Acts 17: 28). God's relationship to His creation and His creatures is one of choice, not one of dependence. If God had chosen not to create at all, God would still be God in all His perfection, being and love. Because God's eternal nature cannot change, God cannot suffer, for suffering involves change. God does experience emotions, but these emotions are grounded in His eternal unchangeable nature. It is because God is a necessary and independent being that there can be no change for good or for worse in Him, for He is already perfect in Himself. Shifting shadows may change, but God does not (James 1:17). In him there is no variation or shadow of turning (NKJV, James 1:17). A God who is changeable in His nature, and not absolutely perfect in his eternal nature is a limited and imperfect God and gives His people little confidence that he will work out all things for their good (Rom. 8:28).

The Westminster Confession in Chapter 2:1 appears to err in its declaration that God does not have passions.⁹² Yet this must be understood in the sense of God not having bodily passions as humanity has bodily passions.⁹³ Unlike humanity, God does not have the desire to fulfil Himself sexually, nor does He need to satisfy hunger.⁹⁴ To deny that God has feelings robs God of His personal character and a God who has no feelings is a God without affection and, ultimately, a God who has no capacity for love.⁹⁵ God's knowledge and experience of human suffering does not change His triune essence, for there can be no improvement or deterioration in God because of His already present excellence in His being and perfections. If God could change in His essence He would be a contingent being in need of His creation. He would be a limited God, rather than a boundless, omnipotent one (Gen. 18:14; Matt. 19:26). Yet He never exercises His omnipotence in a manner that is inconsistent with His other attributes. As Lord, He can only do what is consistent with His

⁹² *Westminster Confession of Faith*, 2.1, 25.

⁹³ Robert L. Reymond, *A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1998), 179.

⁹⁴ Reymond, *What is God?* 102.

⁹⁵ Robert C. Sproul, *Loved By God* (Nashville: Word Publishing, 2001), 133.

wisdom, love, righteousness and so on.⁹⁶ He cannot do that which is ethically contrary to his nature.

While it might be correct to say that our understanding of the divine perfection falls short of the reality, we can have no conception of the perfection of God other than what He has revealed to us in his Word and particularly through the incarnate life of His Son. Both the Old and the New Testament point us to a God who is unchangeable in His eternal nature, which strongly implies a state of perfection in Himself (Num. 23:19; 1 Sam, 15:29; Ps. 102: 25-27; Mal, 3:6; Tit. 1:2; Heb. 1:10-12; 6:18; James 1:17).

God's Omnipotent Goodness and the Problem of Evil

God cannot do direct evil for that would be inconsistent with His omnipotent goodness, though, of course, He does foreordain evil deeds through the willing actions of His moral creatures, the Crucifixion of Christ being the greatest example of this (Acts 2:23). Jews and Romans who were involved in the death of Christ were serving the plan and purposes of God (Acts 4:28), who had decided beforehand what should happen, yet at the same time they were also responsible for their actions as has already been noted.

That God is good and omnipotent is affirmed by classical theists, but that evil exists is also affirmed by classical theists. The apparent contradiction between a good God and the existence of evil cannot be overcome by denying either of them. It is another biblical and theological paradox. God has made evil possible through the free will that He has given, but it is humanity that bears responsibility if it chooses to do evil, in contrast to God who made possible the entrance of evil into His good creation. Just as no moral blame can be attributed to God for the crucifixion of Christ, so no moral blame should be attributed to Him for the entrance of sin into His creation, even though it is His eternal will that is fulfilled through the actions of His free creatures. This brings us to the limits of what we can say. As Herman Bavinck remarks, “The question of God’s will in relation to sin is vexing”.⁹⁷

⁹⁶ John M. Frame, *The Doctrine of God: A Theology of Lordship* (Phillipsburg, New Jersey: Presbyterian & Reformed Publishing, 2002), 544.

⁹⁷ Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics, Sin and Salvation in Christ*, vol.3, ed. John Bolt, trans. John Vriend (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2006), 28.

Even evil, however, is used by God for the achieving of His good purposes (Rom. 8:28). If we deny that God uses the evil that occurs in His world for the fulfilling of His purposes, we must conclude that God is not sovereign, and that evil has an independent existence apart from God and outside of His plans for His creation. While we can never blame God for evil, classical theists have a genuine hope that God will overcome evil and bring His purposes to pass, because He knows the future actions of all His free creatures. How can free-will theists have any genuine hope that God will eventually overcome all evil if he does not infallibly know the future actions of all His free creatures? If humanity has the ability to resist God because of creaturely freedom, then God must at some point overcome that creaturely freedom in order to vanquish evil once and for all but this is not achieved through force or coercion, but through the fore-ordination of God who includes human choice and desire within the counsel of His will.

Clark Pinnock cannot simultaneously say that God is not in complete control of his world *and* that God's creation will be restored with a victory over evil in the end.⁹⁸ The reason he cannot say this is that this type of libertarian free will is inconsistent with God's victory over evil. To achieve this final victory God's will must be in pursuance of an eternal counsel rather than a response to created partners constantly able to frustrate God's ultimate purposes by their libertarian free will. An absolute freedom totally free of God's control is, as Wayne Grudem notes, not possible in a world that is providentially sustained and directed by God Himself.⁹⁹ The God of open theism is an inconsistent one, for he gives humanity libertarian free will but somehow denies them the ability to frustrate His own divine purposes. One might disagree with the concept of coercion to ensure that God's will finally be brought to pass, but one is correct to say that God's will will finally be realized, but it is not through coercion, but through God's fore-ordination which includes human choice and desire. Millard Erickson is, therefore, incorrect when he says that if God does not coerce human action there is no certainty that His will will finally be realized.¹⁰⁰

Reformed theology argues that God does have foreknowledge of the free actions of His creatures, because God has decreed all things and has decreed them with their causes and

⁹⁸ Pinnock, *Most Moved Mover*, 36-37.

⁹⁹ Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 331.

¹⁰⁰ Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 307.

conditions in the exact order in which they come to pass, and that His foreknowledge of future things, including contingent events, rests on His decree.¹⁰¹ God will bring His will to pass, yet His will includes human desire and the free choices and actions that flow from this desire.

Though we cannot fully understand it in all its dimensions, the Scriptures strongly suggest the compatibility of divine sovereignty and human freedom. In the outworking of God's will for His world, God includes whatever means are necessary to accomplish those ends, yet he does it in a way that avoids *compelling* those agents to do what He has already eternally decreed. This makes human actions free but also fore-ordained. The mysterious nature of the relationship between the divine sovereignty of God and human freedom must be affirmed, for a denial of the mystery can only lead to a totally non-mysterious God who has been so domesticated that He becomes completely un-puzzling.¹⁰²

God's Divine Love and Its Relationships to His Other Perfections

While the love of God overflows from His own triune being to the world and its inhabitants, He reveals Himself to us as the immanent one who works within human history to achieve His own eternal purposes. Yet, at the same time, He is the transcendent God who is in heaven, while we are on earth (Eccl. 5:2). God, despite His overflow of love to the world and His immanent presence and activity in the world, remains distinct from all He has created in His universe. His activity of love and goodness in the world does not take away from the fact that He is the high and exalted one who is the holy, Lord almighty (Isa. 6:1-3). The love of God cannot be separated from the holiness of God, for that holiness is as much an aspect of His nature as is His love, for it speaks of both the nearness of God and the distinctive distance and otherness of God from His created creatures. It is interesting to note that according to 1 John 1:4, the message that the apostles first received from Jesus was that "God is light" (1 John 1:5). This term speaks about an essential aspect of God's being: that is, His truth and righteousness reveal error and evil for what it is.¹⁰³ This appears before the teaching that "God is Love" (1 John 4:8, 16), yet the apostle uses both terms to describe God. Both the holiness and the love of God, as well as all His other

¹⁰¹ Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 2000), 67-68.

¹⁰² Don A. Carson, *How Long, O Lord? Reflections On Suffering and Evil*, 2nd edition (Nottingham: Inter-Varsity Press, 1992), 200.

¹⁰³ Stephen S. Smalley, *1, 2, 3 John*, Word Biblical Commentary (Waco, Texas: Word Books, 1984), 20.

perfections, are essential to His nature, for they are included within the characteristics which distinguish Him as God, and it is in the sum total of all His attributes or perfections of God that His godly essence finds expression.¹⁰⁴ Without them God would no longer be God.¹⁰⁵ With them He is distinguished as God from all other entities.¹⁰⁶ Older Reformed theologians such as Herman Bavinck,¹⁰⁷ Louis Berkhof¹⁰⁸ and William Shedd,¹⁰⁹ while separating God's attributes into 'incommunicable' and 'communicable', do not attribute a greater and more exalted status to God's love (as one of His 'moral' attributes) than to His other attributes.¹¹⁰ For example, Berkhof says, "The moral attributes of God are generally regarded as the most glorious of His perfections. Not that one attribute of God is in itself more perfect and glorious than another, but relatively to man the moral perfections of God shine with a splendour all their own".¹¹¹ Shedd believed that God's holiness occupies a place second to none among God's communicable attributes.¹¹² He did not exalt God's love at the expense of His holiness. Bavinck argued that God is the sum total of all His perfections and that every attribute of God was precious to believers.¹¹³ He said, however, that in regard to God's ethical attributes first place is due to God's goodness because that can even be known from nature.¹¹⁴ Herman Hoeksema, by contrast, believed that there is an ethical virtue *par excellence* in God, namely His holiness, under which all the other ethical attributes of God may be subsumed, and of which they are aspects.¹¹⁵

While there may be some difference among Reformed theologians as to whether there is a primacy among God's attributes, they all brought all the attributes together as constituting

¹⁰⁴ Reymond, *A New Systematic Theology*, 161.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁷ Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics: God and Creation*, vol. 2, ed. John Bolt, trans. John Vriend, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2006), 148-255.

¹⁰⁸ Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 57-81.

¹⁰⁹ William G. T. Shedd, *Dogmatic Theology*, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, ndc), 334-392

¹¹⁰ Donald Macleod has noted that the division of classifications of the attributes of God, particularly that of Reformed Theologians into incommunicable and communicable attributes, is an artificial and misleading one because the qualities of God that have been classified as incommunicable adhere unalterably to those we refer to as communicable and vice versa, e.g., the mercy of God is an infinite, eternal and unchangeable mercy, *Behold Your God*, 20-21. Contrast this with Francis Turretin who argues that the distinction of God's attributes into communicable and incommunicable is a good one. *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, vol. 1, trans. George Musgrave Giger, ed. James T. Dennison, Jr. (Phillipsburg, New Jersey: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing 1992), 189.

¹¹¹ Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 70.

¹¹² Shedd, *Dogmatic Theology*, 364.

¹¹³ Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, vol.2, 182.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 210.

¹¹⁵ Herman Hoeksema, *Reformed Dogmatics* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Reformed Free Publishing Association, 1966), 100.

what distinguishes God who is both creator and redeemer. Love was never seen as the pre-eminent attribute. The danger of exalting any of God's attributes or perfections such as love, or even goodness, over the others, or subordinating all of them under one primary perfection, is that it can lead to a less than balanced picture of the God who reveals Himself in the person and work of His Son. The love of God is not the holiness of God, nor is His holiness His love, yet God's love is a holy love. Every attribute or perfection of God is identical with God's essence, yet each of them is a real and distinguishable characteristic of His own divine being.¹¹⁶

God's Love and God's Goodness

The Reformed theologians noted above all subordinate the love of God under the moral attribute or perfection of His 'goodness'. Francis Turretin is another Reformed theologian who does this and he argues that from God's goodness flows love by which He communicates Himself to the creature.¹¹⁷ Typically, the goodness of God in Reformed theology is seen as that ethical perfection of God which prompts Him to deal bountifully and kindly with all His creatures (Pss. 36:6; 104:21; Matt. 5:45; 6:26; Luke 6:35; Acts 14:17).¹¹⁸ It flows from His absolute perfection and perfect blessedness in Himself.¹¹⁹ God's ethical perfection thus flows from His absolute perfection. The goodness of God as it pertains to God's rational creatures, according to Berkhof, assumes the higher character of love.¹²⁰ And it is in God's love that He communicates Himself to His creatures.¹²¹ God's love can thus be considered as that which is limited to responsive persons or those that are capable of reciprocation. When God's love is communicated to non-responsive creatures it must be recognised as His goodness towards them. Turretin recognises that a threefold love of God is commonly held; that is, there are three aspects of one and the same love.¹²² These are benevolence, beneficence, and complacency.¹²³ Benevolent love is that love by which God willed good to the creature from eternity.¹²⁴ Beneficent love is that love of God by which He does good to the creature in time according to His good will.¹²⁵ The love of

¹¹⁶ Reymond, *A New Systematic Theology*, 163.

¹¹⁷ Turretin, *Institutes Of Elenctic Theology*, vol. 1, 241.

¹¹⁸ Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 70-71.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 70.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, 71.

¹²¹ Turretin, *Institutes of Elenctic Theology*, vol. 1, 241.

¹²² *Ibid.*, 242.

¹²³ *Ibid.*

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*

complacency is that love of God by which He delights Himself in the creature on account of the rays of His image in them.¹²⁶ God's benevolent love is seen in the incarnation of Christ because it is an expression of the good will of God. Similarly, the offer of eternal life to all who believe in Jesus is an expression of God's good will (John 3:16). The beneficent love of God is the good will of God towards His creatures which finds its expression in his good actions towards them.¹²⁷ The third aspect denotes that love whereby God is pleased with those who are His children, beginning with Christ and then proceeding to those who are renewed after the image of Christ, His elect people.¹²⁸ It is they alone who experience the riches of God's kindness, tolerance and patience, which leads them to repentance (Rom. 2:4). And it is they alone who experience the riches of God's mercy which makes them alive in Christ Jesus, even when they are dead in transgressions and sins (Eph. 2:4-5). Only they receive all the benefits of the salvation that God offers through faith in His Son, such as reconciliation with God, others and creation, and membership of the new community that God is building - His Church in which *agape* is to be visibly demonstrated.

Yet one wonders whether Reformed theologians and Reformed theology in general have, in this connection, done justice to the proportions of the New Testament on the subject of the divine love. While it may be correct to see the love of God for humanity as the exercising of God's goodness towards the world (Matt. 5:45; John 3:16), it must be asked whether the 'goodness' of God fully captures the image of the inner-Trinitarian life of God: the eternal self-giving of Father and Son and Spirit to each other, overflowing to the world as love.¹²⁹ Each of the members of the Godhead is a responsive person, and each of them communicates to each other their infinite richness, but the term 'goodness' fails to capture the richness of their personal relationships. Further, it might be asked whether the 'goodness of God' does justice to the concept of *agape* as shown in the sacrificial death of Jesus (John 15:13), and in God's special electing love for His people (Gal. 2:20).

¹²⁶ Ibid.

¹²⁷ Sproul, *Loved By God*, 135.

¹²⁸ Ibid., 144.

¹²⁹ In a concordance check (NIV) there is only one direct reference to divine goodness in the New Testament. Peter in his second epistle reminds Christians that Christ has called them by his own glory and goodness (1:3). And even here it has been argued that in its context "goodness" is virtually synonymous with glory and denotes the manifestation of divine power. Richard Bauckham, *Jude, 2 Peter*, Word Biblical Commentary (Waco, Texas: Word Books, 1983), 179. The Apostle Paul uses the word kindness (*chrestotes*) to speak about God's goodness shown to sinners in Christ to stimulate them to repentance (Rom. 2:4; cf. Eph. 2:7). It is also through God's kindness that Gentiles are incorporated into the people of God, yet they must continue in that kindness of God or like the Jews they also will be cut off from God (Rom. 11:22). Those who continue in that kindness prove that they are God's people (cf. Heb. 3:14; 1 John 2:19).

Stanley J. Grenz, unlike some older Reformed theologians who understood God's goodness as including such terms as grace, mercy, and long-suffering believes all of these words are best seen as various dimensions of the fundamental character of God, which is love: "Because God is love, God is Good – that is, gracious, merciful, and long-suffering in all that He does".¹³⁰ Some older Reformed theologians would have said, in contrast, that because God is good, He is loving, gracious, merciful and long suffering in all that He does. One might disagree with Grenz in his highlighting of one characteristic (love) as being fundamental to the nature of God, but in terms of what both the Old Testament and particularly the New Testament has to say about God's love, Grenz may be closer to the truth when he says that terms which speak of God's goodness such as grace, mercy and long-suffering are best seen as various terms to describe the dimensions of God's fundamental character – love – as it is experienced by His creation.¹³¹

Conclusion

Agape was the main Greek word chosen to describe human and divine love in the New Testament. At times, however, the word *phila* and its verbal forms are also used interchangeably with *agape*, particularly in the Fourth Gospel. *Agape*, as it refers to God, is the self-giving love of God supremely seen in the person of Christ, His life and, particularly, His atoning death. *Agape* also expresses God's love for the world and for His elect people, and describes the relationship between the members of the Trinity. In the latter God's love is self-sufficient, for He needs no other creatures, being complete in Himself. *Agape* can be a love for the unlovely, as well as a love of delight in the other, yet, with regards to humanity it is Himself in us that God loves. Those made in His image are loved because each one of us is impressed with his divinity, albeit it is a finite impression of it. God's love is not just a self-sacrificing love for the good of the other; it is also a love that has elements of desire in it. The God of orthodox Christian theism is not a passionless deity. Despite being an immutable being whose essence does not change, God freely chooses to experience pain, hurt and suffering by choosing to enter into relationship with the world. The love of God as a perfection of God should not be given a more exalted status than His other attributes, because this can lead to a disharmony within them and lead

¹³⁰ Stanley J. Grenz, *Theology for the Community of God* (Carlisle, UK: Paternoster Press, 1994), 95.

¹³¹ Ibid. Wayne Grudem in his *Systematic Theology* treats love as a separate attribute of God, since it is so prominent in scripture, 198.

to an imbalanced picture of God, whose essence includes all His perfections. While Reformed Theology has generally subordinated God's love to His goodness, one must question whether this accurately reflects the New Testament's teaching on the atoning death of Christ, the love between the members of the Trinity and God's special love for His elect people.

Chapter 3

Key New Testament Texts on the Love of God

Matthew 5:43-48

Matthew 5:43-48 is a section of Jesus' teaching to His disciples in which He exhorts them to love their enemies and pray for their persecutors (5:44).¹³² This is contrasted by Jesus with what they had heard: love their neighbours, but hate their enemies (5:43).

5:43. Lloyd-Jones believes that Jesus is referring to the teaching of the Scribes and Pharisees and not the Law of Moses, because He says, 'you have heard that it was said', rather than 'you have read in the Law of Moses', or 'it was written and you have read'.¹³³ Because tradition was very important to the religious leaders and teachers of Israel they were always quoting the Fathers of Israel.¹³⁴ William Hendriksen similarly argues that the statement "you shall love your neighbour and hate your enemy" must have been the popular way in which the average Israelite during the days of Christ's ministry summarized the second table of the law and regulated his life with regard to friend and foe. Moreover, it would have been from the Scribes and Pharisees that they would have learned it, though not necessarily from all of them without exception.¹³⁵

Mounce notes that some verses of the Old Testament seem to speak of love towards one's enemies: 'If your enemy is hungry, give him food to eat; if he is thirsty, give him water to drink' (Prov. 25: 21), but other verses call for Israel to actively oppose their national

¹³² Jesus' audience in this context may be his twelve disciples (5:1), or the crowds who were present (5:1; 7:28). Alternatively the term disciples may include all those who followed Jesus in order to listen to what he had to say, Robert H. Mounce, *Matthew*, New International Biblical Commentary (Peabody, Massachusetts: Hendrickson, first printing 1985, reprinted in 1991), 37.

¹³³ D. Martin Lloyd-Jones, *Studies in the Sermon on the Mount*, vol. 1, *Matthew V* (London: Inter-Varsity Press, 1962), 212.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*

¹³⁵ William Hendriksen, *The Gospel of Matthew*, New Testament Commentary (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, first British edition, 1974), 312.

enemies (Deut. 7:2; 20:16; 23:6).¹³⁶ This does not mean that individual Israelites did not hate those who hated the Lord (Ps. 139:21). David had nothing but hatred for those who hated the Lord and counted them as enemies (Ps. 139:22). His attitude may reflect God's own hatred of evil.¹³⁷ An attitude of hatred towards all the sons of darkness also permeated the Qumran community.¹³⁸ While there is justification for saying that there is evidence to suggest that an attitude of hatred permeated some Jewish literature, it is much more difficult to say that the words 'love your neighbour and hate your enemies' are the words of God. John Nolland in attributing these words to God goes beyond what is said in the Old Testament.¹³⁹ This statement, therefore, must be understood as having been carried down to the current generation by the oral tradition of the elders of Israel, who may have understood hating one's enemies as the natural corollary of loving your neighbour, a term, which, in Jesus' time, may have been understood in an exclusive sense by some Jews. Alternatively, it may have come about because the identification of one's neighbour was then a live issue.¹⁴⁰

This oral teaching is a blatant perversion of the law because it omits the fact that Israel are to love their neighbours as they love themselves (Lev. 19:18) and also adds to it an attitude of hatred towards their enemies.¹⁴¹ The Scribes and Pharisees, because of this distorted teaching, were in error, and this erroneous teaching was passed down through the generations.

5:44. Jesus is not abolishing the law of God (the Pentateuch and Prophets) by teaching about love for one's enemies, but fulfilling it (5:17). He is, therefore, actually showing what the true interpretation of the law and prophets is. The antithesis that exists is between Jesus and the oral interpretation of the law, not between Jesus and the Torah. Unlike the oral teaching of contemporary Judaism, Jesus taught His disciples to love inclusively-cf., Luke 10:27. This inclusive love included one's enemies. The scope of one's enemies may

¹³⁶ Mounce, *Matthew*, 50.

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*, (1 QS 1. 4. 10).

¹³⁹ John Nolland, *The Gospel of Matthew*, The New International Greek Testament Commentary (Bletchley, Milton Keynes: Paternoster Press, 2005), 229.

¹⁴⁰ Don A. Carson, *The Sermon on the Mount: An Evangelical Exposition of Matthew 5-7*, *Biblical Classics Library* (Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 1978, reprinted in 1998), 58.

¹⁴¹ John R. W. Stott, *The Sermon on the Mount*, *The Bible Speaks Today* (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1978), 115.

include those at the national and personal level, including those within the fold of Judaism.¹⁴²

Love for one's enemies is not primarily concerned with having sentimental feelings or emotions. It is, instead, volitional acts for the benefit and well-being of others.¹⁴³ This includes praying for one's persecutors, which may include asking God to help His disciples to see their enemies as He does, and, consequently, to love them as God does. It may also involve asking God to change their attitude and behaviour.

5:45. When the disciples love inclusively they prove that they are sons of their Father in heaven. They do not become sons because they love and pray for their enemies, because this would make salvation a work, and salvation is not based on works, but on faith in Christ (John 3:16). Although salvation is not based on one's works, loving one's enemies proves that one is a true disciple and truly saved, because faith works by love (Gal. 5:6) and by the labour of love (1 Th.1:3). God shows his indiscriminate love to all by providentially causing His sun to rise on the evil and the good, and by sending rain on the righteous and the unrighteous. Christ's disciples, in imitation of their Father's love to all, are to show an inclusive love to all.

5:46. Jesus warns his disciples that if they love only those who love them there will be no reward for them, because even tax collectors love those who love them. Even sinful fallen humanity is capable of returning love to those who love them (Luke 6:32) although, as Stott points out, this love is contaminated to some degree by humanity's impure self-interest.¹⁴⁴ What Jesus wants his disciples to understand is that they will only be rewarded if they love inclusively and universally.

5:47. Jesus further elaborates his point about loving inclusively, saying that if his disciples greet their brothers only, they are doing no more than others do, because even tax collectors do that. Jesus then refers to Pagans to further expound his point, because they

¹⁴² John Riches, *The World of Jesus: First-Century Judaism in Crisis* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, first published 1990, reprinted 1998), 114.

¹⁴³ Donald A. Hagner, *Matthew 1-13: Word Biblical Commentary* (Dallas, Texas: Word Books, 1993), 136.

¹⁴⁴ Stott, *Sermon on the Mount*, 120.

only greet their own brothers. “Brothers” in this context refers to those other than siblings and points to people belonging to the same group.¹⁴⁵ Unlike Pagans, who may be those unbelievers who lie outside the circle of Christ’s disciples, if Christ’s disciples limit their love they in effect are acting no differently from those outside the kingdom of God.

5:48. Jesus then exhorts his disciples to be perfect just as their heavenly Father is perfect. The Greek adjective *teleios* is not concerned with an abstract, philosophical or metaphysical perfection.¹⁴⁶ Instead, perfection occurs when God’s children imitate the impartial nature of God who shows kindness to all people without exception.¹⁴⁷ This, of course, includes one’s enemies and persecutors.

John 3:16

Chapter 3 of John’s gospel begins with Jesus in dialogue about the new birth (John 3:3) with a high-profile Pharisee named Nicodemus. Jesus tells Nicodemus that if he cannot understand His teaching about earthly things (the new birth), how can he ever hope to understand when he speaks of heavenly things (3:10-12), that is his death and the promise of eternal life (3:16) To explain the concept of eternal life, Jesus uses an Old Testament story in which everyone who looked at the bronze serpent which Moses had erected was physically healed (Num. 21:4-9). Similarly, Jesus must be lifted up so that everyone who believes in Him may have eternal life (John 3:14-15 cf., 12:32).¹⁴⁸

3:16. God’s offer of eternal life to everyone who believes in Jesus flows from His love for the world. Christ’s mission is thus the consequence of his Father’s love. The word for world in John 3:16, is *kosmos*. It appears 185 times in the New Testament, of which 78 occurrences are in the gospel according to John.¹⁴⁹ *TDNT* gives a number of meanings for

¹⁴⁵ Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to Matthew* (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1992), 133.

¹⁴⁶ William Barclay, *The Gospel of Matthew*, vol. 1, Chapters 1-10 (Edinburgh: St Andrews Press, revised edition 1975), 177.

¹⁴⁷ R. V. G. Tasker, *The Gospel According To St. Matthew: An Introduction and Commentary* (Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (London: The Tyndale Press, 1961), 70.

¹⁴⁸ The word used for lifted up is *hypsso* and was used by John only with regard to Jesus’ passion (8:28; 12:32, 34). Merrill C. Tenney, *John: The Gospel of Belief, An Analytic Study of the Text* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: W. B. Eerdmans, 1976), 88.

¹⁴⁹ Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to John*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, Michigan: WM. B. Eerdmans, 1984), 126.

kosmos, three of which have relevance for John 3:16. Firstly, it can mean the created universe, the sum of all created being (John 1:10; 3:17), which is synonymous with the Old Testament term “heaven and earth” (Gen. 1:1).¹⁵⁰ Secondly, it can refer to the abode of humanity, the theatre of history, the inhabited world, the earth (John 1:10; 9:5).¹⁵¹ Thirdly, it can refer to humanity, fallen creation and the setting of salvation history (John 4:42).¹⁵² There is another possible meaning for the word *kosmos* in 1 John 2:15, where it can refer to an evil organized earthly system controlled by the power of the evil one, that has aligned itself against God and His kingdom (cf. John 4:3-5; 5:19).¹⁵³

The word *kosmos* in John 3:16 cannot refer to the abode of humanity, the theatre of history, the inhabited world, the earth or the created universe, because it cannot make a personal response to the offer of eternal life that God gives. Neither, for the same reason, can it mean an evil, organized system controlled by Satan. Arthur W. Pink argued that the word *kosmos* refers only to the elect whom God has chosen from the foundation of the world to receive eternal life.¹⁵⁴ This, however, fails to do justice to an understanding of *kosmos* as the world of human persons. The world of human persons that Jesus came to (potentially) save is a world that is alienated from and hostile to its creator’s purposes.¹⁵⁵ Jesus was in the world but it did not know Him (John 1:9). It did not recognise Jesus even though He made the world (John 1:10). It is a world that hates Jesus (John 7:7; 15:18). John 3:16 is therefore not meant to display the world in a positive light, but to show us the extreme graciousness of God’s dealings with it.¹⁵⁶ The term *kosmos* in John 3:16, is not a term of extension but a term of intensity.¹⁵⁷ Its primary connotation is ethical and its point is not that because the world is so big it takes a great deal of love to embrace it, but to show that,

¹⁵⁰ Gerhard Kittle and Gerhard Friedrich (eds), “kosmos” in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, vol. 3, trans. and ed. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1978), 867-898.

¹⁵¹ Ibid.

¹⁵² Ibid.

¹⁵³ Daniel L. Akin, *1, 2, 3 John: An Exegetical and Theological Exposition of Holy Scripture*, The New American Commentary (Nashville, Tennessee: Broadman & Holman, 2001), 108.

¹⁵⁴ Arthur W. Pink, *The Sovereignty of God* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker, 1930), 29-30. When The Banner of Truth of Trust published the first British edition of *The Sovereignty of God* in 1961 they believed that they were justified in making a revision. This revision included the removal of Pink’s belief at that time that the presentation of the gospel to all people did not represent any desire on the part of God to save all people. The desire or love of God, Pink believed, was restricted to the elect. The 1961 revised edition is believed to be a more accurate presentation of Pink’s mature thought, and more likely to do good than the 1929 USA edition. I. H. Murray, *The Life of Arthur W. Pink* (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1981), 196.

¹⁵⁵ Andrew T. Lincoln, *The Gospel according to St. John*, Black’s New Testament Commentaries (Continuum, London 2005), 154.

¹⁵⁶ Ben Witherington, *John’s Wisdom: A Commentary on the Fourth Gospel* (Cambridge: The Lutterworth Press, 1995), 101.

¹⁵⁷ Benjamin Breckenridge Warfield, *Biblical and Theological Studies*, The B. B. Warfield Collection (Philadelphia., Pennsylvania: The Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1968), 515.

despite the whole world being so bad, it takes a great kind of love to love it at all - and much more to love it as God loved it when he gave Jesus for it.¹⁵⁸ John 3:16 was not, therefore, intended to teach, nor does it teach that God loves all people alike and visits all of them with the same manifestation of his love. Neither was it intended to teach that God loves the elect alone. Instead it was intended to arouse in hearts a wondering sense of the marvel and the mystery of the love of God for a sinful world.¹⁵⁹ It therefore makes better sense not to see God's love for the world as something so vast that it takes a great deal of love to embrace it, but rather to see that the world has become so estranged from God that it takes an exceptionally great kind of love to love it at all.¹⁶⁰

God's love for the world thus has a salvific intention that will not be thwarted, because those who believe in Jesus will be saved and receive eternal life (*zoe aionios*). They will not perish, whereas those who do not believe in Jesus will. The word perish (*apollumi*) means to destroy, and signifies in the middle voice to perish. It can refer to things (Matt. 5:29-30; Luke 5:37; Acts 27:34) or people (Matt. 8:25; John 3:15-16; 10:28; 17:12).¹⁶¹ Whether this means elimination or annihilation, or an everlasting punishment for those who do not believe in Christ is beyond our present scope of enquiry, but what is certain is that the meaning of eternal life (*zoe aionios*) in John's gospel appears to be equivalent to the Kingdom of God (John 3:3, 5) and to knowing the one true God and Jesus Christ, His Son (John 17:3). Those who are given the gift of eternal life through faith in Christ experience the life of the age to come in the present (John 3:36; 5:24). They do not have to wait for death to experience it. Eternal life is, therefore, not just for the future, but is a present experience, and the length of that life is one that is everlasting in that it does not cease, because a believer's relationship to Christ is continued even through death. The conferring of eternal life is thus the consequence of God's love for the world and eternal life is thus characterized by both its duration and its quality, although it is the latter that it is stressed by the evangelist.¹⁶²

Romans 5:5-7

¹⁵⁸ Ibid., 516.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid.

¹⁶⁰ Lincoln, *John* 154

¹⁶¹ William E. Vine, *Vine's Dictionary of New Testament Words: Unabridged Edition* (McLean, Virginia: MacDonald Publishing Company, ndc), 858.

¹⁶² Randolph V. G. Tasker, *John: An Introduction and Commentary*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1960), 72.

Romans 5:5-7 is preceded by a section in which Paul sets forth some of the blessings that belong to those who have been justified through faith.¹⁶³ This includes peace with God through Jesus Christ, which is the consequence of being justified by faith (5:1). It also includes access or introduction into God's presence (5:2).¹⁶⁴ It also enables them to rejoice in the steadfast hope of seeing the glory of God manifested in His eternal kingdom (5:2).¹⁶⁵ Because of this steadfast hope, believers can rejoice in their sufferings because it produces within them the qualities of perseverance, character and hope (5:3-4).

5:5. The steadfast hope that Paul is speaking of does not disappoint God's people because God has poured out His love into His people's hearts by the Holy Spirit. Rom 5:5 appears to be concerned with God's love for His people (*he agape tou theou*), because it was while they were still ungodly, powerless sinners that Christ died for them (5:6-8). This strongly suggests a subjective genitive rather than an objective genitive. Christian hope is a poor hope if it depends on our love for God. Instead, it is a greater and more certain hope if it is based on God's love for us, especially during trials. Christian hope must be grounded in God's love (subjective genitive) which has been poured out into our hearts by the Holy Spirit. Also, the confidence the people of God have for the day of judgement is not based on their intellectual recognition of the fact of God's love, or even only on the demonstration of God's love on the Cross, but also on the inner subjective certainty that God does love them.¹⁶⁶ This inner subjective certainty that God loves them comes through the gift of the Holy Spirit who pours out the love of God into their hearts.¹⁶⁷

Cranfield believes the outpouring of God's love into the hearts of His people is a metaphor that is chosen to express the idea of God lavishing His love upon them cf., Mal 3:10.¹⁶⁸ It results in God's people recognizing and rejoicing in that love lavished upon them through

¹⁶³ Being justified or declared righteous in this context is not in the present participle (being declared righteous) but in the aorist participle which refers to the state one is in because of a fact that has actually occurred (having been declared righteous)

¹⁶⁴ Frederick F Bruce, *The Epistle of Paul to the Romans: An Introduction and Commentary*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Leicester: Inter-Varsity press, 1963 reprinted in 1976), 123.

¹⁶⁵ It may also refer to the hope of seeing believers changed and as a consequence become glorious at the *parousia* of Christ: see Leon Morris, *The Epistle to the Romans* (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1988), 220.

¹⁶⁶ Douglas J. Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Cambridge: UK, 1996), 304.

¹⁶⁷ Thomas R. Schreiner, *Romans*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, Michigan: 1998), 257.

¹⁶⁸ Charles E. B. Cranfield, *The Epistle to the Romans*, vol. 1-8 The International Critical Commentary (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1977), 263.

the Holy Spirit.¹⁶⁹ Calvin considers this outpouring of the love of God into the hearts of believers by the Holy Spirit to be a revelation of God's divine love towards His people, a revelation that is so plentiful that it fills their hearts.¹⁷⁰ Dodd accepts as true that this "outpouring" is not simply concerned with the fact that God's people become aware that God loves them, but in that same experience they receive a deep and undeniable assurance of His love for them, and consequently that love becomes the central motive of their own moral being.¹⁷¹ The outpouring of the love of God by the Spirit thus brings about a knowledge and experience of God's love within God's people, and consequently motivates them to love in response to His prior love (cf., 1 John 4:11, 19). In manifesting his love to others, God actually imparts something of His own nature to those who have been justified - His Spirit.¹⁷² This, in turn, enables them to love.

Käsemann argues that the outpouring of God's love by His Spirit into the lives of His people is an ongoing experience founded on a once and for all act - baptism.¹⁷³ For Barrett, the gift of the Spirit comes to believers at a particular point in the past, conversion or baptism, as can be seen in the definite past tense "who was given to us".¹⁷⁴ Conversion, however, may be the more likely event that brings about the pouring out of the Holy Spirit, particularly in the light of Paul's teaching on justification and the benefits that flow from it (Romans 5: 1-5). When justification occurs, the Spirit is given to believers, and God's love is poured out into their hearts instantaneously, but it does not end there, because that love is continually experienced. Dunn agrees that Romans 5:5 speaks of a continuing effect of a past event.¹⁷⁵ As long as they possess the Spirit, Christians will always know and experience the love of God in their lives. Through the divine aid of the Spirit, Christians taste and enjoy the love of God not only in the first stage of their experience, but ever afterwards.¹⁷⁶ The Spirit thus continuously communicates the love of God to His people.

5:6. Before Christians came to a personal experience and assurance of the love of God through the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, they were powerless. "Powerless" means they

¹⁶⁹ Ibid.

¹⁷⁰ John Calvin, *The Epistle of Paul The Apostle to the Romans and the Thessalonians*, trans. Ross Mackenzie, ed. David W. Torrance & Thomas F. Torrance (Carlisle, Cumbria: The Paternoster Press, 1995), 108.

¹⁷¹ Charles H. Dodd, *The Epistle of Paul to the Romans*, The Moffatt New Testament Commentary Series (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1932), 74.

¹⁷² Ibid.

¹⁷³ Ernst Käsemann, *Commentary on Romans* (London: SCM Press, 1980), 135.

¹⁷⁴ Charles K. Barrett, *The Epistle to the Romans*, Black's New Testament Commentaries (London: A & C Black, 1979), 105.

¹⁷⁵ James D. G. Dunn, *Romans 1-8*, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas, Texas: Word Books, 1988), 253.

¹⁷⁶ George Smeaton, *The Doctrine of the Holy Spirit* (Edinburgh; The Banner of Truth Trust, 1974), 78.

were unable to please God.¹⁷⁷ This inability is moral frailty rather than physical weakness.¹⁷⁸ Seeing this powerless condition in His people, God in a time of his choice sent Christ to die for ungodly sinners (cf. Gal. 4:4). God thus sent Christ to die for those without reverence for God.¹⁷⁹

5:7. While Christ died for the ungodly, very rarely will anyone die for a righteous man, though Paul believed someone might dare to die for a good man. It is not clear whether Paul places the good man above the righteous man and tries to distinguish between them.¹⁸⁰ A righteous man could be one whose uprightness is cold, clinical and unattractive, in contrast to a good man, whose goodness is warm, generous and appealing.¹⁸¹ The good man may be one who goes beyond doing what is right, in that there is a warmth of good feeling and generosity about his actions.¹⁸² Paul wants to bring into focus what a person might do for a righteous or a good man (die) in contrast with what Christ actually did - dying for the ungodly. His focus is on the love of God demonstrated in the death of Christ, which is far superior to human love because it goes above and beyond it. Calvin states: “The passage thus employs a comparison to amplify what Christ has done for us, since there does not exist among mankind such an example as Christ has showed to us”.¹⁸³ A man may die for a good or righteous man, or a good cause,¹⁸⁴ or for a relative or benefactor,¹⁸⁵ but God gave His Son to die for His enemies (Rom. 5:10).

Titus 3: 4-5a

Paul tells Titus to remind the Cretan Christians that they are to be subject to governmental authorities (3:1),¹⁸⁶ to be peaceable and considerate and to show true humanity towards all

¹⁷⁷ D. M. Lloyd-Jones, *Romans: Chapter 5, Assurance* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth Trust, 1988), 113.

¹⁷⁸ Morris, *Romans*, 222.

¹⁷⁹ Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *Romans: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, The Anchor Bible (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1993), 399.

¹⁸⁰ Moo has noted that the distinction between “righteous” and “good” does not have much New Testament Support. It does, however have some support in extra – biblical materials, *Romans*, 308.

¹⁸¹ John R. W. Stott, *The Message of Romans With Study Guide*, The Bible Speaks Today (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1994), 145.

¹⁸² Morris, *Romans*, 223.

¹⁸³ Calvin, *Romans and Thessalonians*, 109.

¹⁸⁴ If *tu agathou* is neuter it could mean dying for a good cause.

¹⁸⁵ Anders Nygren, *Commentary On Romans* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press first American edition, 1974), 200.

¹⁸⁶ Although the combination of *archai and exousia* can refer to supernatural powers/angelic powers, cf. Eph. 3:10; Col. 2:10, it cannot in this case because the context rules that out. It must therefore be a reference to human rulers cf. Romans, 13: 1-3.

people (3:2). He may be referring to works connected with good citizenship, rather than general works of charity,¹⁸⁷ because he wants the Cretan Christians to live in such a way as to foster good relations with pagan society.¹⁸⁸ If they do this no one will be able to malign the word of God (2:5) or be able to say anything bad against Titus and the Cretan Christians (2:8). It will also make the teaching of God, their Saviour, attractive (2:10).

This standard of Christian conduct, and the relationships that are to be fostered with Pagan society, are contrasted with the former lives that Paul and Titus had lived before their conversion. Then their lives had been characterised by foolishness, disobedience, enslavement to all kinds of passions, malice, envy and hatred (3:3). This, however, changed when the kindness and love of God appeared. Paul, by using the words “we too”, however, may rhetorically be identifying with his readers, (which included Titus) before their conversion, or it may be a reflection of his own view of the past (cf. 1 Tim. 1:13).¹⁸⁹ Hanson does not believe that this phrase is a reference to Paul and Titus, but part of the scheme of Paul in contrasting the old pre-conversion life and the life of the Christian convert.¹⁹⁰ This would, however, certainly include Paul, Titus and the Cretan Christians as well as all other Christians.

3:4. Regardless of those to whom Paul is speaking, he is emphasizing that lives had been changed when the kindness and love of God their Saviour appeared. God can be called ‘saviour’ (Titus 1:3; 2:10) because salvation comes from God (Phil. 1:28). Christ can also be called ‘saviour’ (Titus 1:4; 2:13; 3:6) because he saves his people from their sins (Matt. 1:21).

Kindness (*chrestotes*) is a noun exclusive to Paul in the New Testament, and with regard to God it refers to his pitying concern (Rom 2:4; 11:22; Eph. 2:7).¹⁹¹ This pitying concern is an important factor in bringing sinners to repentance (Rom 2:4; 11:22). Love

¹⁸⁷ J. N. D. Kelly, *1 & 2 Timothy, Titus: The Pastoral Epistles*, Black’s New Testament Commentaries (London: A & C Black, 1963), 249.

¹⁸⁸ Phillip H. Towner, *1 – 2 Timothy, & Titus: The IVP New Testament Commentary Series* (Leicester: Inter – Varsity Press, 1994), 252.

¹⁸⁹ Luke T. Johnson, *Letter to Paul’s Delegates: 1, Timothy, 2 Timothy, Titus*, The New Testament in Context, (Valley Forge, Pennsylvania: Trinity Press International, 1996), 247.

¹⁹⁰ A. T. Hanson, *The Pastoral Epistles*, The New Century Bible Commentary (London: Marshall, Morgan & Scott, 1982), 190.

¹⁹¹ Kelly, *1, 2 Timothy, Titus*, 251.

(*philanthropia*) refers to God’s love for humanity (cf. John 3:16).¹⁹² Kelly understands the words “But when the kindness and love of God our saviour appeared” as a reference to Jesus and as a parallel verse to Titus 2:11, “For the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men”.¹⁹³ *Epephane* (‘appeared’) signifies the earthly appearance, or incarnate life, of Jesus Christ, according to Kelly.¹⁹⁴ Hanson concurs, and argues that it refers to the whole redemptive action of God in Christ.¹⁹⁵ Fee, in contrast, argues that the reference to the kindness and love of God appearing in Titus 3:4 does not speak of the historical appearance of Christ, but of the believers’ own experience of that kindness and love at the time of their rebirth and renewal (Titus 3:5-7).¹⁹⁶ While it is true that *epephane* is a technical word that was used to speak of a divine manifestation (and in the time of Jesus it was used with regard to the imperial cult of that period),¹⁹⁷ this does not rule out the possibility of it also referring to the believers’ own experience of God’s kindness and love at the time of their rebirth and renewal. While Paul may be saying that the historical manifestation or appearance of Christ is the divine manifestation *par excellence* of the kindness and love of God towards humanity (cf. Titus 2:11, 13; 3:4),¹⁹⁸ that kindness and love is also experienced (as we noted in Romans 5:5) at conversion and in sanctification.

3:5. When the kindness and love of God appeared, this led to His people being saved in the sense of a once and for all act of deliverance from a life of slavery to sin (3:3). For Paul, salvation could never be earned (Rom 3:21-28; Gal. 3:8-9; Phil. 3:9; 2 Tim.1:9). God’s mercy, which is His goodness towards those in misery and distress,¹⁹⁹ is the sole cause of His people’s salvation, not human action or works of righteousness (Eph. 2:8-9; 2 Tim 1:9). God saved believers not because they deserved it, but because He is a merciful God.²⁰⁰

¹⁹² Towner, *1, 2 Timothy, Titus*, 255.

¹⁹³ Kelly, *1, 2 Timothy, Titus*, 250.

¹⁹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁹⁵ Hanson, *The Pastoral Epistles*, 190.

¹⁹⁶ Gordon D. Fee, *1, 2 Timothy, Titus*, New International Biblical Commentary (Carlisle, Cumbria: Paternoster Press, 1988), 203.

¹⁹⁷ J. L. Houlden, *The Pastoral Epistles: I and II Timothy, Titus*, TPI New Testament Commentaries (London, SCM Press, 1989), 101.

¹⁹⁸ Titus 2: 11 appears to be a reference to the advent and life of Christ, while Titus 2:13 may be a reference to the *parousia* of Christ.

¹⁹⁹ Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 200.

²⁰⁰ William D. Mounce, *Pastoral Epistles*, Word Biblical Commentaries (Thomas Nelson, Nashville: Word Books, 2000), 447.

1 John 4:8

4:8. In 1 John 4:7, the author (whom we know as John, although he does not name himself) encourages his friends as well as himself to love one another, for love comes from God (4:7, 11). By loving one another they show that they are born again and know God. Being born again is a description of one who does not continue to sin (3:9; 5:18), who believes that Jesus is the Christ (5:1), and who overcomes the world (5:4). Knowing God here does not refer to information or doctrinal knowledge, but to personal, relational knowing: the ‘knowing’ among members of the same family.²⁰¹ Who is it that is to be loved? While no particular group is mentioned, it could be love for all (those in the Christian community and non-Christians),²⁰² God and humanity,²⁰³ God and all Christians,²⁰⁴ all other Christians,²⁰⁵ or love for the Johannine brothers²⁰⁶ - a Johannine community, perhaps a number of churches, probably somewhere in the neighbourhood of Ephesus, over whom John had some kind of pastoral charge.²⁰⁷

In the light of 1 John 2:10, which speaks of those who love their brother living in light, 1 John 3:10, which refers to the one who does not love his brother not being a child of God, and 1 John 3:16, which speaks of laying down our lives for our brothers in imitation of Christ who laid down His life for His people, the exhortation to love one another strongly suggests love for the Christian community or, at the very least, love for the Johannine community. It is, therefore, only those who love their fellow Christians that have been born of God and know Him (1 John 4:7).

4:8 Those who claim to be Christians, but who do not love their fellow Christians, show that they do not love God and do not know God because God is love. If they had known that “God is Love” they would have loved their fellow Christians, but that they do not love

²⁰¹ Thomas F. Johnson, *1, 2 and 3 John* (Carlisle, Cumbria: Paternoster, 1995), 102.

²⁰² Smalley, *1, 2, 3 John*, 237.

²⁰³ John R. W. Stott, *The Epistles of John: An Introduction and Commentary*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, first edition, 1960), 160.

²⁰⁴ Rudolph Schnackenburg, *The Johannine Epistles: A Commentary*, trans. Reginald and Isle Fuller (London: Burns & Oates, 1992), 229.i

²⁰⁵ Colin. G. Kruse, *The Letters of John*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Leicester: Apollos, 2000), 156-157.

²⁰⁶ Raymond Brown, *The Epistles of John: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, The Anchor Bible (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1982), 514.

²⁰⁷ Ian H. Marshall, *The Epistles of John*, The New International Commentary On the New Testament (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1978), 3.

their fellow Christians demonstrates that they know not the God who is love. This love has not been poured into them by the Holy Spirit (Rom. 5:5) and, consequently, they do not know and have not experienced God's love which would have motivated them to love others (1 John 4:11).

The statement "God is Love" (1 John 4:8, 16) is the most well-known of all biblical definitions of God.²⁰⁸ Yet, as we noted earlier, the love of God cannot be separated from His other attributes or perfections. The essence of God is love, but He has other fundamental attributes which make Him so unique and different from all others. Marshall is therefore correct to say that we do wrong when we exalt the love of God as His supreme feature.²⁰⁹ It is doubtful in the light of the context of 1 John 4:7-10 that John was making an explicit ontological statement about the essence of God, and he probably had no intention of describing an inner-Trinitarian relationship.²¹⁰ Surely, however, it is questionable to speak about the loving nature of God revealed in His saving action on behalf of humanity and separate that from God's essence, which is love (1 John 4:8, 16), because without this essence of God there can be no saving action on behalf of humanity. The sending of the Son, and all that transpired because of it, including His atoning death, only reveals what God already is in His own essence - love. Carson appears to understand this when he notes that when John tells us that "God is love", he probably means more than that 'God is loving'.²¹¹ There may not be an explicit ontological statement about the constant interactive relationship of love that exists and flows between the three members of the Trinity in 1 John 4: 8, but it can surely be implied from it.

Because all three members of the Godhead are love, those who have come to a personal, relational, knowledge of God and have experienced the love of God through the gift of the Holy Spirit are also enabled to love because of the impartation of the loving nature of God into their hearts. Colin Gunton has noted that 1 John chapter 4 is implicitly Trinitarian: 'This is how God showed His love among us: He sent His one and only Son into the world

²⁰⁸ Bruce Milne, *Know the Truth: A Handbook of Christian Belief*, 2nd edition (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1998), 87.

²⁰⁹ Marshall, *The Epistles of John*, 212.

²¹⁰ George Strecker, *The Johannine Letters: A Commentary on 1, 2, and 3 John*, trans. Linda M. Maloney, ed. Harold Attridge (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1996), 148.

²¹¹ Don A. Carson, *The Gagging of God: Christianity Confronts Pluralism* (Leicester: Apollos, 1996), 239.

that we might live through Him. . . We know that we live in Him and He in us, because He has given us of His Spirit' (vv.9, 13).²¹²

1 John 4:8 cannot therefore be understood apart from the realm of the interpersonal relationships between the members of the Trinity. The statement "God is love" must take into account the mutual self-giving that characterizes their relationship. This Trinitarian relationship consists of a unity of equal, not subordinate, persons who love each other and live in perfect harmony with one another, although, of course, each of the persons is distinguishable from each other. This *perichoretic* relationship between the members of the Godhead is a mutual self-giving love which in turn is to be a motivating principle in the life of God's people. They are to love one another because love flows from the God who is love. Those who do manifest love towards their fellow Christians prove that they are born of God and know Him, in contrast to those who do not love their fellow Christians, and thus show that they do not know God.

1 John 4: 9-12

4:9. John tells his friends that God showed His love among them by sending His one and only Son into the world that they might live through Him. The verb (*zesomen*), translated 'live', implies that those to whom the Son was sent were in a condition of spiritual death (Eph. 2:3). Jesus' mission was thus to impart life to them.²¹³ This He did by His atoning death, which must be appropriated, because, without faith in Christ, no-one receives eternal life (John 3:16). To live, one must positively respond to God's love in Jesus.²¹⁴

4: 10. Love, according to John, is not seen in the Johannine community loving God, but in the sending of God's Son into the world as an atoning sacrifice. The word for atonement is *hilasmos*. It appears twice in the New Testament (1 John 2: 2; 4:10). Stott notes that the crucial question with regard to *hilasmos* is whether the object of the atoning action is God or humanity. If it is the latter, then the right word is expiation (dealing with sin and guilt);

²¹² Colin E. Gunton, *Father, Son and Holy Spirit: Toward A Fully Trinitarian Theology* (London: Continuum, 2002), 17.

²¹³ Akin, 1, 2, 3, *John*, 179-80.

²¹⁴ Kruse, *The Letters of John*, 158.

but if it is the former, then it is propitiation (appeasing God).²¹⁵ Does God, therefore, send His Son to take the place of sinners, and then suffer the penalty that was due to them because of their sins, so that his anger at sinners can be placated (cf. 2 Cor. 5:21; Gal. 3:13)? Or does God send Jesus so that the sin and guilt of sinners can be covered or taken away, and reconciliation with God occur? Or is it possible that both occur, that is, expiation and propitiation?

Just as the sacrifices in the Old Testament were primarily meant to put sinners right with God (Exod. 30:10; Lev. 1:4), so Christ's sacrifice fulfils the same function and is a fulfilment of them. Just as the blood of animals was offered as an atonement for sin (Lev. 17:11), so the blood of Christ provides atonement for sin, because His death frees His people from their sins (Rev. 1:5). In his atoning death Christ died in the place of others (Rom. 5:6-8; Gal. 2:20; 2 Cor. 5:15). He was thus a substitute for others, receiving the punishment that sinful humanity deserved.

Christ's death is not just expiatory in that it deals with the sin and guilt of sinners, effectively taking it away. It is also propitiatory, because it turned away God's wrath. In the light of Romans 1:18 – 3:20, in which Paul speaks of God's wrath against humanity, all of whom have sinned (Rom. 3:23), it appears that Paul is arguing that Christ's death is the solution to the wrath of God as it relates to human sin and guilt. In his death, Christ averts God's wrath because He freely takes God's wrath upon Himself.

Millard J. Erickson defends *hilasmos* as an appeasing of God:

In the Old Testament sacrificial system, the offering was made before the Lord and there it took effect as well: "the priest shall burn it on the altar on top of the offerings made to the Lord by fire. In this way the priest will make atonement for [the sinner] for the sin he has committed, and he will be forgiven" (Lev. 4:35). In view of God's anger against sin and the statement that the offering should be made to the Lord and forgiveness would follow, it follows that this verse points to an appeasement of God.²¹⁶

²¹⁵ John R. W. Stott, *The Cross of Christ* (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1986), 169-170.

²¹⁶ Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 829-830.

John Murray similarly argues that the idea of propitiation is so woven into the fabric of Old Testament ritual that it would be impossible to regard that ritual as the pattern for the sacrifice of Christ if propitiation did not offer a similar place in the one great sacrifice that was offered.²¹⁷ The only way a righteous God can justify the ungodly without compromising his own righteous character is by the loving act of propitiating his own wrath, and this is achieved by the sacrifice of Jesus, who not only represents sinners but stands in their place and takes the full force of God's wrath.²¹⁸

There is clear precedence for propitiation in the Old Testament. God swore that the guilt of Eli's house would never be atoned for by sacrifice and offering (1 Sam. 3:14). David said to Saul that if God had stirred up Saul against him, then God may accept an offering (1 Sam. 26:19). After David sacrificed burnt offerings and offerings of fellowship, God answered prayer on behalf of the land, and the plague that had come about because of David's illegal census was stopped (2 Sam. 24:25). These passages show that sacrifices can be propitiatory and turn aside God's anger. Not all sacrifices are, however, propitious. Abraham offers Isaac, not to turn away God's anger, but as a sign of his obedience (Gen. 22:1-16). Noah sacrificed burnt offerings after leaving the ark (Gen. 8:20), but the guilt of the generation which died in the flood had already been atoned for by their death. Noah did not offer burnt offerings to turn away God's anger at sin. Propitiation had already occurred.

1 John 4:10 does not explicitly affirm that God is opposed to sinners and that His wrath must be appeased, but, instead, affirms that God sends or puts forward his Son to take away sin so that forgiveness and reconciliation can result. Sin, however, is an offence that must be atoned for, and Christ's atonement takes away the wrath that humanity must face from a holy God. When sin is covered God is appeased, his anger is placated and his justice is satisfied. Expiation thus precedes propitiation, but they cannot be separated, for the latter can only be removed by the former. Christ is thus the sin-bearer for His people, for He takes away their sin and satisfies the demands of God's justice. It is unwise to create a dichotomy between these two actions, because it is God who provides the remedy for

²¹⁷ John Murray, *Redemption - Accomplished and Applied* (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1979), 29-30.

²¹⁸ Phillip H. Evison, *The Great Exchange: Justification in the Light of Recent Thought* (Leominster: Day One Publications, 1996), 127.

sins committed against Himself, and the effect of this action is to deliver sinners from the wrath which they would be otherwise exposed to at the Last Judgement.²¹⁹

4:11. Since God showed His love in the atoning death of Christ, His people are exhorted to love one another (cf. I John 4.7). This love might require them to lay down their lives for their brothers (1 John 3:16). The ability to love one another can occur because the love of God is present within them by the Spirit. It is not beyond their capability to love one another, because they have come to know and experience the God who is love.

4:12. When God's people love each other this is a sign that God lives in His people and His love is made complete in them. God does not dwell in His people when they begin to love, because their love for one another is evidence of the indwelling presence of God in their lives. The reciprocal love of the people of God ensures that His love is made complete in them. This might mean that when God's people are active in loving there is a process of a maturing apprehension of God's love within their own lives.²²⁰ Alternatively, it might mean that the love of God is not perfectly what it should be until He begets children in His image, who themselves love.²²¹ Put simply, is it God's love that is completed or perfected (*teteleiomene*) in them, or is it His people's love that is completed or perfected when they mutually love one another? It appears that it is the former, because the whole flow of the passage is concerned about God's love. "Love comes from God" (4:7); "God is love" (4:8); God loved us and sent His Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins (4:10); God's love for us is to be the motivation for us to love one another (4:11); and God lives in His people, and when they love one another His love is made complete in them (4:12). The essence of God is love (1 John 4: 8, 16), but the God who is invisible only becomes manifest in the reciprocal love of His people. By loving each other the invisible God who is Spirit is revealed to the world through the love of God's people. By their lives of mutual love the Church demonstrates that the unseen God lives in them.²²²

Conclusion

²¹⁹ Ian Howard Marshall, *New Testament Theology: Many Witnesses, One Gospel* (Downers Grove, Illinois: 2004), 310.

²²⁰ Johnson, *1, 2, 3 John*, 107.

²²¹ Brown, *The Epistles of John*, 555.

²²² Kruse, *The Letters of John*, 162.

The New Testament texts that have been surveyed show us some of the main emphases of God's love. Matthew 5:43-48 speaks of God's love or kindness to all people seen in His providential gifts. Because God does not limit His love Christ's disciples are not to limit their love; an inclusive love proves that one is a true Christian. John 3:16 argues that God loves the world and offers to all the possibility of eternal life through faith. The emphasis in this text is not the scope of God's love but the greatness of God's love for a sinful world that is in rebellion against Him. Romans 5:5-7 speaks of the pouring out of the love of God by the Holy Spirit at conversion and continuing in and through sanctification. It also highlights the fact that God demonstrates His love in the death of Christ for sinners. Titus 3:4-5a focuses on the kindness and love of God appearing in the historical manifestation of Christ, who saved His people not because of their works of righteousness but because of God's mercy realized in the work of the Spirit, who brings about rebirth and renewal in those that have been justified by God's grace. It, therefore, also speaks of the kindness and love of God manifested in conversion and sanctification. The First Epistle of John speaks implicitly about the Trinitarian nature of God, who is love (1 John 4:8), and because love comes from God His people are to love one another. When this occurs it is proof that one has been born of and knows God. 1 John 4: 9-12 denotes the manifestation of God's love seen in the sending of Christ into the world to be an expiatory and propitiatory sacrifice for sins. Because of this demonstration of the love of God His people are exhorted to love one another. When this occurs, they reveal to the world the invisible God who exists in them.

Chapter 4

God's Love for the World

In Chapter Three it was argued that God shows love to all and that this is evidenced by His gracious, indiscriminate bestowal of blessings upon all people (Matt. 5:45). Writing about God's love for the world, Don Carson said:

God loves the world, in the sense that He providentially rules over it with mercy, alike over those who hunger for Him and over those who do not. He “causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous” (Matt: 5:45). God's profuse provision in the Garden is the first demonstration of God's love in this sense.²²³

This profuse provision is an aspect of God's common grace and can be understood as God's providential care in creation. The Apostle Paul does not use the word 'love' to describe God's blessings on humanity. Instead, he uses the word 'kindness' to describe God's gracious provision to all people (Acts 14:17). John Calvin (1509-1564) commenting on Acts 14:17 declares that these blessings flow from God's Fatherly love which still breaks through even to the unworthy, however mean they may be.²²⁴ It should not be forgotten that in the manifestations of these temporal gifts God is calling all people to faith

²²³ Carson, *The Gagging of God*, 240.

²²⁴ John Calvin, *The Acts of the Apostles 14-28*, Calvin's Commentaries, trans. John W. Fraser, ed. David W. Torrance & Thomas F. Torrance (Edinburgh: The Saint Andrew Press, 1996), 14.

and repentance (Acts 14:15-16). Paul reminded those at Lystra that the world of nature should have led them to recognize the existence, power and goodness of God, but this revelation had now been supplemented by the good news which he was bringing to them, telling them to turn from worthless things to the living God who made heaven, earth, the sea and everything in them.

Whether one describes God's generous provision to all humanity as love, kindness, goodness or mercy, according to Reformed theology generally, the many natural blessings that humanity receive from God come under the heading of common grace. A contemporary Reformed theologian who slightly differs from this perspective is John Frame, who argues that Scripture never uses the old Testament word *hen*, or the new testament word *charis*, to refer to God's blessing on creation generally or on non-elect humanity, and therefore he believes that it is better to speak of God's common goodness or God's common love than God's common grace. Yet he admits that if God's goodness and His love apply universally in some senses, the same is true of God's favour, his grace.²²⁵ We shall therefore continue to use the term 'common grace' as a general definition to speak of God's indiscriminate love, goodness or kindness to all.

Common Grace

God's general or common grace is that which is applied to all of humanity (as opposed to His universal grace, which is a grace that extends to all creatures). Common grace is distinguished from God's special grace in Reformed theology because the latter is believed to be given to the elect alone.²²⁶ This does not mean that there is more than one grace of God, only that God's grace is manifested in different gifts and operations.²²⁷ The richest manifestation of God's special grace is seen in those gracious operations of God which aim at, and result in, the removal of guilt and pollution, the punishment of sin and the ultimate salvation of sinners.²²⁸

²²⁵ Frame, *Doctrine of God*, 429-430.

²²⁶ Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 436.

²²⁷ *Ibid.*, 435.

²²⁸ *Ibid.*

Common grace, despite not being salvific, is believed to have a number of operations, one of which we have already discussed - the natural blessings that God freely bestows on all people. Before we look at the other ways in which God's common grace functions it must be noted that for the finally impenitent, their abuse of the good gifts that God has bestowed upon them brings greater condemnation upon them and demonstrates the greater guilt of their impenitence (Luke 12:48).²²⁹ That the bestowal of God's blessings brings greater condemnation on the finally impenitent does not take away from the fact that God has manifested love, kindness or goodness towards them. Even those from whom God has chosen to withhold His regenerating grace, passing them by and leaving them in their sin (the non-elect), receive the benefits of God's kindness, which does not discriminate in its general manifestation (Matt. 5:45). In this sense, God is favourable to them, although that favour does not extend to their election as the people of God.

Other fruits of God's common grace are the enabling of humanity to perform that which is right in civil or natural affairs (Luke 6:33; Rom. 2:14-15).²³⁰ Also, common grace allows humanity to retain some sense of the true, good and beautiful, as well as a desire for truth, external morality and for certain forms of religion.²³¹ Further, common grace is believed to restrain sin in the lives of individuals and in society (Gen. 20:6; 31:7; Job 1:12; 2:6; 2 Kings 19:27-28; Rom. 13:1-4).²³² Likewise, it is only because of His common grace that God did not fully execute the sentence of death on sinners following the fall. Instead, God maintains and prolongs the natural life of sinners, affording them an opportunity to repent, thereby removing all excuses from humanity, and justifying the coming manifestation of His wrath upon those who persist in sin unto the end (Isa. 48:9; Jer. 7:23-25; Luke 13:6-9; Rom. 2:4; 9:22; 2 Pet. 3:9).²³³

This love, kindness, goodness or favour of God in His common grace flows from His own nature of goodness and love, and has been in operation since His creation of the world. It is this which brings about cultural and social life and an ordered society. Because God's common grace restrains sin in individuals and in society through the gracious operation of

²²⁹ John Murray, *Collected Writings of John Murray, 2: Systematic Theology* (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1977), 106.

²³⁰ Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 443.

²³¹ *Ibid.*, 442-443.

²³² *Ibid.*, 442.

²³³ *Ibid.*

the Holy Spirit stopping the world from becoming chaotic it must also be seen as reflecting a favourable attitude on God's part towards all humanity. Although God has ordained other instruments to prevent absolute chaos in His world, such as the civil magistrate (Rom. 13-4-5), which no doubt hinders evil people from carrying out every possible sin because of the potential consequences of being caught, even this must be seen as a gracious operation of the Holy Spirit working in creation and in the human conscience.

God's common grace in all its manifestation cannot be seen apart from Christ, through whom all things were made (John 1:3) and are sustained (Heb. 1:3). The bestowal of common grace even after the Fall occurs because God freely chooses to manifest it, when He could have just as easily withdrawn it. Further, the manifestation of God's common grace cannot be separated from the atoning work of Christ. God's common grace must also flow indirectly from the atoning work of Christ because God did not fully and finally judge and condemn the world when sin entered into human history in Eden (Gen. 3). The reason for this is that in God's eternal decree He had planned to save His elect people through the death of His Son (Eph. 1:4). In its relationship to special grace common grace serves the purposes of the latter, the salvation of God's elect. The doctrine of common grace does not do away with the Reformed emphasis on God's special or saving grace, because it is a different manifestation of the grace of God entirely. One is general but does not save; the other is special and particular, and does save. With this distinction kept intact, the doctrine of particular saving grace need not be absorbed into a doctrine of universal saving grace.

Not all Reformed theologians accept the concept of common grace, because they believe it leads to a denial of the doctrine of total depravity.²³⁴ Total depravity is the belief that human beings as they come from the womb are morally and spiritually corrupt in their disposition and character, and consequently every part of their being, mind, will, emotions, affections, conscience and body has been affected by sin.²³⁵ The Synod of Dort, which condemned the five theses of the Remonstrant Articles that were presented by the followers of Jacob Arminius (1560-1609), affirmed the total depravity of humanity in its first three articles under its third and fourth heads of doctrine 'Of The Corruption of Man, His Conversion To God, and the Manner thereof.' Article one stated that humanity was

²³⁴ Hoeksema, *Reformed Dogmatics*, 207.

²³⁵ Reymond, *A New Systematic Theology of the Christian Faith*, 450.

originally formed after the image of God. Their understanding was adorned with a true and saving knowledge of his Creator, and of spiritual things; their heart and will were upright, all their affections pure, and the whole race was holy; but revolting from God by the instigation of the devil, and abusing the freedom of their will, they forfeited these excellent gifts, and on the contrary entailed on themselves blindness of mind, horrible darkness, vanity, and perverseness of judgement; became wicked, rebellious, and obdurate in heart and will, and impure in [all] his affections.²³⁶ The second article spoke of humanity after the fall bringing forth children in their own likeness, a corrupt stock producing a corrupt offspring, thus all the posterity of Adam, with the exception of Christ, have derived corruption from their original parents, not by imitation, as the Pelagians of old asserted, but by the propagation of a vicious nature, in consequence of the just judgement of God.²³⁷ Article three speaks of all humanity being conceived in sin, and as being by nature children of wrath, incapable of saving good, prone to evil, dead in sin, and, apart from the regenerating grace of the Holy Spirit, they are neither able nor willing to return to God to reform the depravity of their nature, or to dispose themselves to reformation.²³⁸ While the Synod of Dort affirmed the total depravity of humanity, they denied that humanity was absolutely depraved, because there remains in humanity since the Fall the glimmerings of natural light, whereby they retains some knowledge of God, of natural things, and of the difference between good and evil, and is able to show some regard for virtue, and for good outward behaviour.²³⁹ This light of nature, however, is not sufficient to bring people to a saving knowledge of God or to true conversion, because we are incapable of using it aright even in things natural and civil.²⁴⁰ These “glimmerings of natural light” appear to speak of God’s common grace manifested in four distinct ways. These are: (a) the retention of some knowledge of God; (b) the retention of some knowledge of natural things; (c) the retention of some knowledge of the difference between good and evil; and (d) the ability to display some concern for virtue and good outward behaviour. With regard to (d), this glimmering of natural light that remains in all people as a gift of God surely makes it incumbent upon Christians to work with others, Christian or not, in matters that are important to God, such as justice, concern for the poor and environmental issues. This co-operation with others does not and should not destroy the spiritual antithesis between the Christian and non-

²³⁶ P. Schaff, *The Creeds of The Protestant Evangelical Churches with translations*, vol. 1 (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1877), 521-522.

²³⁷ *Ibid.*, 522.

²³⁸ *Ibid.*

²³⁹ The Canons of Dort, “The Corruption Of Man, His Conversion To God, And The Manner Thereof”, Article, 4 in Peter Y. De Jong (ed) *Crisis in the Reformed Churches: Essays in Commemoration of the great Synod of Dort*, 1618-19, (Grand Rapids, Michigan, Reformed Fellowship, Inc, 1968), 245.

²⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

Christian. God's common grace should be the basis for the Christian's active life in society, just as the doctrines of creation and providence are also the basis for working in the world with the ungodly, because the earth and everything in it belongs to the Lord (1 Cor. 10:26). Yet it must be noted that while there can be co-operation in issues that God is concerned about, this does not apply to the building of God's Kingdom, for this is a spiritual work that can only be undertaken by Christ and His Church. Civil and general good can be achieved by sinful humanity, although these cannot occur apart from God's common grace, and those who are controlled by the sinful nature cannot please God (Rom. 8:8). Jesus Himself affirms that even sinners love those who love them and can do good to those who have done good to them (Luke 6:32-33). This love and good are, however, not motivated by faith and love for God, and while they may benefit others, these good works are considered sinful by God and do not please Him. John Murray calls this a paradox of common grace: that is, good can be attributed to the unregenerate, yet there is not one that does good (Rom. 3:12).²⁴¹ This paradox according to Murray does not deny the doctrine of total depravity on the one hand, nor does it deny the doctrine of common grace on the other hand.²⁴²

In the light of these "glimmerings of natural light" it can be said that the doctrine of common grace did appear in the Reformed confessions, although it was not clearly called common grace. These "glimmerings of natural light" appeared in the work of Reformed theologians before the Synod of Dort and can be seen in the writings of John Calvin. Paul Helm notes that there are numerous references in Calvin to the moral and other effects of 'common grace' or 'general' or 'heavenly' grace, though he records that Calvin seldom, if ever, uses the phrase 'common grace'.²⁴³ Helm believes that a further reason for hesitation over Calvin's view on 'common grace' is the fact that not only is there reference to natural law and God's restraining and enriching goodness sitting side by side, but also that he sometimes refers such goodness to both the general grace of God and to His special grace.²⁴⁴ Even if Calvin did not use the term 'common grace', preferring general and special grace as Helm suggests, it was Calvin, argued Berkhof, that especially developed the idea of common grace as a universal expression of the favour of God, yet one that does

²⁴¹ Murray, *Systematic Theology*, 106.

²⁴² *Ibid.*, 107.

²⁴³ Paul Helm, *John Calvin's Ideas* (Oxford: University Press, paperback 2006), 384. Helm notes in a footnote on this same page that Calvin speaks of 'heavenly grace' in his *Institutes* I. 5. 3 and 'general grace' in his *Institutes* II. 2: 17

²⁴⁴ *Ibid.* Helm notes that this can be seen from Calvin's *Institutes* II. 3-4.

not have a saving effect.²⁴⁵ Calvin was thus responsible for developing the doctrine of common grace alongside that of particular grace.²⁴⁶ In Calvin's *Institutes* and commentaries we appear to find the five fruits of God's common grace that appear in the *Systematic Theology* of Louis Berkhof. These are: (a) a stay of execution of the sentence of death on sinful humanity; (b) the restraint of sin in the lives of individuals and in society; (c) the preservation of some sense of truth, morality and religion in humanity; (d) the performance of outward good and civil righteousness; and (e) all the natural blessings that humanity receives in this life.²⁴⁷

Common Grace in the works of John Calvin

The Execution of the Stay of Death on Sinful Humanity

Commenting on Genesis 2:17, Calvin wrote:

The miseries and evils both of soul and body, with which man is beset so long as he is on earth, are a kind of entrance into death, till death entirely absorbs him; for the Scripture everywhere call those dead, who being oppressed by the tyranny of sin and Satan, breathe nothing but their own destruction. Wherefore the question is superfluous, how it was that God threatened death to Adam on the day in which he should touch the fruit, when He long deferred the punishment? For then Adam was consigned to death, and death began its reign in him, until supervening grace should bring a remedy.²⁴⁸

Adam, according to Calvin, is consigned to death because of sin, and death begins its reign in him until God intervenes with His supervening grace. Without that grace, however, there would have been an immediate end of life. Adam, however, did not die straight away, because God's supervening grace delayed the ultimate physical manifestation of death, although it did not stop it. Just as God's goodness and mercy warned Adam of the consequences of disobedience, so the goodness and mercy of God did not implement those consequences immediately concerning his physical life.

²⁴⁵ Bekhof, *Systematic Theology*, 430.

²⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 434.

²⁴⁷ Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 442-444.

²⁴⁸ John Calvin, *A Commentary on Genesis*. A Geneva Series Commentary, trans. and ed. John A. King, (London: The Banner of Truth Trust, first published in Latin 1554, first English translation 1578, reprinted from the Calvin Translation Society edition of 1847, 1965), 127-128.

The Restraint of Sin in Individuals and In Society

According to the *Institutes*, II: III, headed, “Everything proceeding from the corrupt nature of man damnable”, Calvin believed that there is no part of human nature that has not been perverted or corrupted by sin.²⁴⁹ Yet, despite the extent of this corruption, Calvin believes that it is clear that in every age there have been some who, under the guidance of nature, have devoted themselves to virtue.²⁵⁰ This warns against supposing that the nature of humanity is utterly vicious, since under its guidance some individuals have not only excelled in illustrious deeds, but, in human terms, conducted themselves honourably through the whole course of their lives.²⁵¹ Notwithstanding the corruption of human nature, there is some room for divine grace, which may lay human nature under internal constraint without purifying it.²⁵² It is only because of this grace of God that this happens.²⁵³ God’s grace does not therefore let every mind loose to lust wantonly.²⁵⁴ Only in the elect, however, does God cure this corruption of nature.²⁵⁵ Yet the non-elect are placed under such restraint as may prevent them from breaking forth to a degree incompatible with the established order of things.²⁵⁶ God in his providence thus curbs the perverseness of nature, and prevents it from breaking forth into action, yet without rendering it inwardly pure.²⁵⁷ Calvin appears here not to differentiate between God’s common grace and God’s providence, because in both of these our corrupt nature is laid under some type of inner restriction which controls its rebelliousness. If this is not a favourable attitude of God to humanity, what is it? It is certainly not an unfavourable attitude, for if it were, God would not have restrained human sin, leading to a greater increase in guilt. Yet we have instances in which God does restrain so that a person’s guilt will not increase. For example, God prevented Abimelech from committing sexual sin with Sarah, Abraham’s wife (Gen. 20:6). Calvin believes that God brought a timely remedy to the heathen king Abimelech, who had not been guilty of deliberate wickedness - he was deceived by Abraham into thinking Sarah was his sister - in order that his guilt would not be increased.²⁵⁸

²⁴⁹ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, vol. 1, II, III trans. Henry Beveridge (London: James Clarke & Co, Ltd, 1962) 249.

²⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 251.

²⁵¹ *Ibid.*

²⁵² *Ibid.*

²⁵³ *Ibid.*

²⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 252.

²⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁵⁸ Calvin, *Genesis*, 525.

David Engelsma's criticism that a confusion of grace and providence is inexcusable for Reformed theologians and churches has little legitimacy in the light of what Calvin says above.²⁵⁹ Engelsma is correct to state that providence follows on from God's work of creation in the beginning and that it is God's divine power that keeps all things in existence and governs them.²⁶⁰ He is wrong, however, to limit grace to the sphere of redemption as that divine power that blesses and saves guilty depraved sinners.²⁶¹ For Engelsma, God's providence serves God's grace, because in his upholding and governing of all things, God accomplishes the spiritual and eternal good of the elect.²⁶² Because providence serves grace it cannot be grace.²⁶³ However, though providence does serve God's special grace, this does not mean that it cannot be a grace, for in God's on-going relationship to His creation He preserves and governs the actions of all His creatures (including the restraining of human sin) for the bringing to pass of His sovereign will, which includes the salvation of His elect people, the passing-by of the non-elect, and the restoration of His cursed creation. Divine providence is a grace of God common to all, because it is a free gift of God, albeit in order, ultimately, to bring about His purposes of redemption and cosmic restoration.

The Performance of Outward Good and Civil Righteousness

Calvin believed that because humanity is by nature a social animal their natural instinct is disposed to cherish and preserve society.²⁶⁴ Despite the fall, the human mind still has impressions of civil order and honesty.²⁶⁵ Every individual thus understands how human societies must be regulated by laws, and is able to comprehend the principles of these laws.²⁶⁶ There is, Calvin believed, a universal agreement in regard to such principles, both among the nations and individuals, the seeds of them being implanted within them without the need of a teacher or a lawgiver.²⁶⁷ Thus some principle of civil order is impressed on all people.²⁶⁸ The fact of this impression is proof that no person is devoid of the light of

²⁵⁹ David J. Engelsma, *Common Grace Revisited: A Response to David J. Mouw's He Shines in All That's Fair* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Reformed Free Publishing Association, 2003), 58.

²⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 58-59.

²⁶¹ *Ibid.*

²⁶² *Ibid.*, 59.

²⁶³ *Ibid.*

²⁶⁴ Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, vol. 1, 234.

²⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 235.

²⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁶⁸ *Ibid.*

reason in the constitution of this present life.²⁶⁹ It is only because of God's grace that humanity even in its sinful state knows that society needs to run in an ordered way and that laws and morality are needed so that it can exist and flourish. Once again we see God's common grace impressed on all people in the constitution of their present life, and it is this common grace that ensures that society exists, flourishes and is run in a well-arranged and well-organized way.

Common Grace Is Responsible for All Humanity's Natural Blessings

Even after the Fall, Calvin believed that there was scarcely an individual who does not display intelligence in some particular art, whether manual or liberal.²⁷⁰ This common capacity is not just extended to the learning of art, but to the devising of something new, or the improvement of what had previously been learned.²⁷¹ This obliges all humanity to acknowledge that the principle of a universal reason and intelligence has been naturally implanted in the human mind.²⁷² Because of the universality of this reason and intelligence, all humanity should recognise it as a gift of God.²⁷³ This natural gift should be regarded as a gratuitous gift of God's beneficence to each person.²⁷⁴

Calvin believed the Holy Spirit dispenses divine blessings wherever He wills, for the common benefit of mankind.²⁷⁵ Regenerate humanity should not neglect the gifts that the Lord has given to the ungodly in such fields as physics, dialectics, mathematics and other similar sciences; instead they should avail themselves of them.²⁷⁶ The reason that most of sinful humanity still retains reason, which is one of the essential properties of human nature, is all due to the general kindness of God.²⁷⁷ Without this divine indulgence of God the revolt of humanity (sin) would have carried along with it the entire destruction of nature.²⁷⁸ God's kindness to all humanity is seen not just in the preservation of its whole nature from the absolutely corrupting effects of sin, but also in the gifts that flow from it.

²⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

²⁷¹ *Ibid.*

²⁷² *Ibid.*

²⁷³ *Ibid.*

²⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 236.

²⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 236-237.

²⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 37.

²⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

God's Holy Spirit is responsible for all the skill, strength, knowledge and excellence that exist in the nature of fallen humanity, and through these God pours out manifold blessings on all people, whether or not they give glory to Him for it.

The Preservation of Some Sense of Religion in Humanity

In Book One of Calvin's *Institutes*, "Of the Knowledge of God the Creator", chapter 3, "The Knowledge of God Implanted in the Human Mind", Calvin notes that there exists in the human mind, and indeed by natural instinct, some sense of Deity, and that this is beyond dispute, since God himself, to prevent any person from pretending ignorance, has endowed all humanity with some idea of his Godhead. He constantly renews and occasionally enlarges humanity's memory of this, so that all being aware of a God who is their Maker may thus be condemned by their own conscience when they neither worship Him nor consecrate their lives to His service.²⁷⁹ Even those who in other respects seem to differ least from the lower animals constantly retain some sense of religion.²⁸⁰ From the very first, there has never been any quarter of the globe, any city, or even any household, without religion; a sense of the Deity has thus been inscribed on every heart.²⁸¹ Even those who practice idolatry show this to be true.²⁸² Despite this knowledge that has been implanted in the human mind, this true knowledge of God can be suppressed by superstition and wicked revolt against Him.²⁸³ When this occurs, all become so degenerate with regard to true knowledge of God that in no part of the world can genuine godliness be found.²⁸⁴ It is only because of God's grace that humanity even has some knowledge of Him, yet they suppress that knowledge by their misconceptions of God and their rebellion against Him. If there were no common grace, there would be no knowledge of God at all.

Calvin, as we have seen from his own writings, believed that God manifested a common grace to all, although he did not use that terminology, preferring to speak of the heavenly and general grace of God. At times, however, Calvin speaks of God's providence as a grace. In the light of Scripture and the thinking of influential Reformed theologians such as Calvin, and in Reformed writings such as the Canons of Dort, the doctrine of common

²⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 43.

²⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

²⁸¹ *Ibid.*

²⁸² *Ibid.*

²⁸³ *Ibid.*, 46.

²⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

grace cannot be denied. Considering all the benefits of common grace, we have to say that God manifests a degree of universal love, goodness or kindness towards the world, which is seen in His restraint of sin in individuals and in society and in his manifestation of general gifts to all people. It is, however, only the remedy of divine grace that corrects and cures our natural corruption.²⁸⁵

The Free offer of the Gospel

The love that God has for humanity can also be seen in His offer of eternal life to all who believe (John 3:16). The Synod of Dort under its second head of doctrine, The Death of Christ, and the Redemption of Men Thereby, in Article 5, says:

Moreover, the promise of the Gospel is that whosoever believes in Christ crucified shall not perish, but have eternal life. This promise together with the command to repent and believe ought to be declared and published to all nations, and to all persons promiscuously and without distinction, to whom God out of His good pleasure sends the Gospel.²⁸⁶

Calvin also believed in the free offer of the Gospel. Commenting on the word ‘world’ (*kosmos*) in John 3:16, he states: “For although there is nothing deserving in the world of God’s favour, He nevertheless shows He is favourable to the whole world when He calls all without exception to the faith of Christ, which is indeed an entry into life”.²⁸⁷ God thus loves the world with a specifically salvific intent because whoever believes in Christ will not perish, but receive eternal life.²⁸⁸

This free offer of the Gospel is known in Reformed theology as the general call because it is a universal offer made to all (who hear it) without distinction, inviting all to come to Christ (John 3:16). This is in contrast to what Reformed theology has understood as the effectual call (Rom 8:30; Heb. 9:15). The effectual call is limited in its scope because in this internal call the Holy Spirit performs a work of grace within the elect people of God, working with His word, quickening those who had been formerly spiritually dead to spiritual life so that they can actually respond to the free offer of the Gospel and be saved

²⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 255.

²⁸⁶ De Jong, *Crisis in the Reformed Churches*, 240.

²⁸⁷ John Calvin, *The Gospel according to St John*, 1-10, trans. T.H.L Parker, ed. David W. Torrance and Thomas F. Torrance (Carlisle, Cumbria: The Paternoster Press, 1995), 74.

²⁸⁸ Carson, *The Gaging of God*, 240.

through faith. We thus have an irresistible call from God that conquers all of their resistance and ensures their salvation because it draws them to Christ. This is in contrast to the general call which, subject to the missionary zeal of the church, is potentially something that all peoples may hear, although, of course, this general call will be resisted by all those not internally called. In much of Reformed theology the free offer of the Gospel is understood as an expression of God's favour towards sinners whom he desires to save. Thus, James Packer writes:

The belief that God is sovereign in grace does not affect the *genuineness* of the Gospel invitations or the truth of the Gospel promises. Whatever we may believe about election, and, for that matter, about the extent of the atonement, the fact remains that God in the Gospel really does offer Christ and promises justification and life to 'whosoever will'.
'Whosoever shall call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved'²⁸⁹

Not all in the Reformed camp, however, believe that there is grace in the proclamation of the Gospel. Herman Hoeksema believes that both Scripture and experience testify to exactly the opposite.²⁹⁰ The preaching of the Gospel, he believes, is no grace for those that are lost.²⁹¹ Hoeksema believes God's grace is only particular and not general.²⁹² While affirming that the calling that comes through the Gospel comes to all people, Hoeksema argues that its preaching is not a means of grace for those whom God has not elected, but is instead a savour unto death for them in contrast to what preaching is for the elect, a savour of life.²⁹³ If Hoeksema is correct, the offer of the Gospel is not a well-meant offer for the non-elect, because it has no positive benefit to them. However, while the preaching of the Gospel may have a hardening effect on some people, that is because they have closed their hearts to its message. It does not negate the love of God offered in the Gospel to them (John 3:16). Neither does it negate the promise of eternal life if they repent and believe. In fact, it might well be said that the love of God is seen to be even more glorious when some harden their hearts to the free offer of the Gospel, because God continues to offer eternal life to them, and will do so until the offer is removed. There is grace in the proclamation of the Gospel because God offers eternal life to all who believe. The grace of God in the Gospel can thus be both general and specific, because it offers eternal life to all who repent and believe, but actually ensures salvation only to all who do actually repent

²⁸⁹ James I. Packer, *Evangelism and the Sovereignty of God* (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1970), 100.

²⁹⁰ Hoeksema, *Dogmatics*, 470.

²⁹¹ *Ibid.*

²⁹² *Ibid.*

²⁹³ *Ibid.*, 655.

and believe the Gospel. Those who fail to repent and believe in the Gospel are condemned because they refused to do so. The Synod of Dort affirmed this in Article 6, “The Death of Christ and the Redemption of Men”:

And, whereas many who are called by the Gospel do not repent nor believe in Christ, but perish in unbelief, this is not owing to any defect or insufficiency in the sacrifice offered by Christ upon the Cross, but is wholly to be imputed to themselves.²⁹⁴

The Reformed belief that God is sovereign in His grace and has predestined a certain number to be saved while passing by others does not affect the necessity of the Gospel, because no one can be saved without it; neither does it affect the urgency of Gospel-preaching, because all are lost without Christ; and it does not affect the genuineness of the Gospel invitation or the truth of its promises.²⁹⁵ While the preaching of the Gospel is no saving grace to those that are lost, no one is actually lost until the final and full rejection of Christ. The free offer of the Gospel is gracious in its presentation and in its promises, and continues to be so until it is completely and totally rejected. It is an expression of God’s favour towards humanity whom He desires to save, despite them being in rebellion against Him. The free offer of the Gospel promises salvation and eternal life to all who believe, and because of this it means that there is grace in the preaching of the Gospel to all, even though God has not decreed to save all. That there is grace in the preaching of the Gospel does not deny either explicitly or implicitly the Reformed doctrine of unconditional predestination.

Conclusion

God’s love for the world is seen in His common grace and the universal offer of the Gospel. In the former, God’s love is manifested in His abundant provision to all people and has been present since creation. God’s mercy to the world is thus manifested in His providential rule over His creation, evidenced by His indiscriminate blessings to all. This is an aspect of God’s common grace, which is distinguished from His saving grace which is manifested to His elect people alone and brings about their salvation. Another feature of God’s love to the world is seen in the fact that humanity does not receive the punishment of immediate physical death following the entrance of sin into God’s creation, even though

²⁹⁴ De Jong, *Crisis in the Reformed Church*, 240.

²⁹⁵ Packer, *Evangelism and the Sovereignty of God*, 96-100.

they deserve it because of their sin. The common grace of God also restrains the perverseness of human nature so that humanity is not entirely and fully rebellious. Without God's restraining action the world would be suffering the full consequences of human sin. Not only does God restrain human sin from reaching its zenith, but His common grace ensures that His world continues, flourishes and is run well and in an organized manner. God's common grace also pours out on all humanity many gifts such as their reason and all their natural abilities. By these, God manifests kindness to all people whether or not they thank Him for it, and whether or not they give glory to Him for all that they possess. Humanity would be devoid of its natural blessings without the kindness and goodness of God. Because of God's common grace humanity still preserves some sense of the Creator, although by their sinfulness they repress this universal truth by their misconceptions of God and by their rebellion against Him. In the free offer of the Gospel, God also manifests His love towards all people, offering all eternal life through faith in Jesus. This does not mean that all will respond, because not all people receive the effectual call which is the work of the Holy Spirit in conjunction with the word of God, regenerating those who are spiritually dead, enabling them to respond to Jesus and his offer of eternal life positively. That God has a particular salvific grace which brings about the salvation of His chosen people does not mean that the offer of eternal life is ungracious, for it promises eternal life to all who believe, though God has not decreed to save all people. There is, therefore, in the proclamation of the Gospel the grace of God, because He desires to save those who are in rebellion against Him. Those who reject the offered Christ are responsible for their destiny, for they refused to repent and believe the Gospel.

Chapter 5

God's Love for the Elect

Election

Election, according to Calvinism, is a doctrine that postulates that God chooses certain persons for His favour.²⁹⁶ It may refer to God's choice of Israel as God's special covenant people, or to the choice of certain individuals to some special office, or to the choice of certain persons for salvation.²⁹⁷ The Synod of Dort under in its first head of doctrine, "Divine Election and Reprobation", Article 7 says this about election:

Election is the unchangeable purpose of God, whereby, before the foundation of the world, He has out of his mere grace, according to the sovereign good pleasure of His own will, chosen from the whole human race, which had fallen through their own fault from their primitive state of rectitude into sin and destruction, a certain number of persons to redemption in Christ, whom He from eternity appointed the Mediator and Head of the elect and the foundation of salvation.²⁹⁸

That God shows some kind of preference is clear in the Old Testament from God's election of Israel to be His own special people, notwithstanding that their election had a universalist salvific focus. This preference is also seen in the New Testament. According to Paul in his Epistle to the Romans, only those whom God foreknew has He predestined to be conformed to the likeness of His Son (Rom. 8:29). The verb *proginoskein* (to foreknow) can refer to knowing beforehand (Acts 26:5; 2 Pet. 3:17), and this is the most common meaning of that particular verb.²⁹⁹ It is also the minimum meaning of the word.³⁰⁰ Foreknowledge is more than just God knowing in advance who will repent, believe, and persevere in faith, and God electing them because of this, because the New Testament usage of the verb *proginoskein* and its cognate noun *prognosis* (apart from Acts 26:5 and 2 Pet. 3:17) speaks of entering into a relationship, or choosing or determining beforehand.³⁰¹ Paul, referring to the remnant of Israel, believes that God has not rejected His people whom He foreknew (chose) (Rom. 11:2). In Romans 9, Paul speaks of God's election of Israel above other nations, but this does not mean a rejection of individual election, because he speaks of God loving Jacob and hating Esau (9:13). While it is possible that

²⁹⁶ Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 929.

²⁹⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁹⁸ De Jong, *Crisis in the Reformed Churches*, 231-232.

²⁹⁹ Moo, *Romans*, 532.

³⁰⁰ Thomas R. Schreiner, *New Testament Theology: Magnifying God in Christ* (Nottingham: Apollos, 2008), 339.

³⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 340.

this statement may be referring to the nations that Jacob and Esau bore, Israel and Edom respectively, this cannot be separated from God's preference of Jacob over Esau as an individual.³⁰² Just as God chose Israel to be His covenant people and not Edom, so God had a higher regard for Jacob than He had for Esau. It can thus be said that God has made a corporate preference of Israel over Edom and an individual preference of Jacob over Esau. In both cases this was so that God's purpose in election might stand: not because of works, but because of the call of God (9:12). God's eternal purpose is not based on human works but on His sovereign will (cf. Eph. 1:11).

That God elects individuals is further validated because Paul speaks of elect individuals not just from the Jews but also from the Gentiles (Rom. 9:24). God's foreknowledge as it refers to individuals and groups cannot be separated from His love, affection and care for them. In the light of Romans 8:29 those whom God foreknew and predestined to be conformed to the image of His Son are called not because of God's foresight but according to His purpose (8:28). The doctrine of election must be understood in both a corporate and an individual sense; it cannot be reduced to either of them. This is because those whom God chooses to save are saved to be His people (the Church), yet God has also chosen them as individuals.³⁰³ The elect are therefore not just all those collectively that God has chosen to be the objects of His grace and favour, but each one in particular.³⁰⁴ Paul affirms this when he speaks of the Son of God, who loved Him, and gave Himself for Him (Gal. 2:20).

Foreknowledge in classical Reformed theology can therefore be understood as a reference to God having a personal relationship with an individual in advance.³⁰⁵ This does not rule out the prescient view of knowledge, but Calvin puts the relationship of prescience and predestination into perspective when he says: "we ascribe both prescience and predestination to God; but we say that it is absurd to make the latter subordinate to the former".³⁰⁶ This is because predestination is God's eternal decree by which He determines

³⁰² While the meaning of the word 'hate' can mean love less (cf. Gen. 29:30-31; Deut 21:15-17; Luke 14:26), it cannot mean this in Romans 9:13 because the context of Malachi 1:2-4 speaks of God's hatred for Esau (Edom) demonstrated in his judgement and punishment of them.

³⁰³ Paul K. Jewett, *Election & Predestination* (Exeter, Devon: Paternoster Press, 1985), 47.

³⁰⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁰⁵ Carson, *How Long O Lord*, 220.

³⁰⁶ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, vol. 2, 206.

with Himself whatever He wishes to happen to every person.³⁰⁷ With regard to the election of some people, those whom God foreknew were all those whom God long ago thought of in a saving relationship to himself.³⁰⁸ Election is not based on the fact that God knows in advance who will believe in Christ and consequently predestines them to salvation, because the ultimate cause of election lies in God, not in a person's faith. God's omniscience includes knowledge of human decisions; He knows the path we take (Job 23:10). He knows the future because He has established the future. God's exhaustive foreknowledge of all acts, past, present and future, consequently means a foreknowledge of acts that are bound to occur, but this does not mean that the liberty of contrary choice is taken away, rather it is established. Our choices are free choices, but within the scope of God's divine determination, and thus all our choices are divinely foreknown by Him. Foreordination thus implies foreknowledge. Our free choices that occur under the hand of a providential, personal God need not be restricted to choices about accepting or rejecting Christ, for they include the least important choices we make as well as the most important ones. There must be a certain determinism in the order of grace as well as a certain determinism in the order of all events of our lives if God has an infallible knowledge of the future.

Robert Reymond has argued that one of the major distinctions between the God of the Bible and all the other gods of the world is His infallible ability to predict the future and to bring that future to pass precisely as He declared it to be.³⁰⁹ This is in contrast to the inability of all false gods, either to predict the future or bring it to pass.³¹⁰ The fulfilment of predictive prophecy demonstrates that the God of the Bible is the one true God. Even the concept of middle knowledge, which argues that our future choices are known by God, but not determined by Him, because God knows all possible worlds, and thus all his decisions are based on these foreseen actions, fails to convince, because even though it is in agreement with Reformed theology that God knows exactly what will happen before it occurs, it argues that God does not determine human choices. Instead, our choices are determined by our circumstances, character, nature and personality. In both the Reformed doctrine of fore-ordination and the theory of middle knowledge, the prior conditions for all decisions that we make have been determined. The difference is that in the former, it is

³⁰⁷ Ibid.

³⁰⁸ Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 676.

³⁰⁹ Reymond, *What is God*, 127.

³¹⁰ Ibid.

God who has determined them, in the latter it is our free will. Yet even the power of contrary choice lies with the absolute determinism of God, for our moral choices are certain to occur because God knew in advance what choices we would make and made sure that the correct circumstances came about to bring about the decisions that we make. If this is the case, then, God also ensured that we had the correct disposition to make those free choices. Reformed theology's belief in a God who infallibly knows all things because He has ordained all things is logically more consistent than the mysterious nature of middle knowledge which fails to convincingly answer the question of how God knows our future free choices. Middle knowledge leads inevitably to a God who has no control over the choices that we make, even though He knows what we might do. In the realm of salvation, one must question the logic of middle knowledge also, because in it God has ordained that particular individuals will come to a saving faith, but this is dependent on the fact God knew in advance who would repent and believe in Christ, because He has brought about or allowed the circumstances that would make this happen. The weakness of this type of thinking is that God's foreknowledge of our choices is once again the determining factor in who will be saved, not the personal saving relationship that he fore-ordained between Himself and His elect people. God choose certain people to be in that saving relationship with Himself, not because He knew in advance that they would repent and believe, but because he predestined some people to be adopted as His children according to the good pleasure of His will. Although God knows all that can or may come to pass upon all supposed conditions, He has not decreed anything that occurs simply because he knew in advance that it would occur. Instead, He has decreed all that comes to pass, including the salvation of his people. God's sovereign decrees are not therefore contingent on his creatures' choices. The future is known by God because He has determined all that comes to pass, including our free choices.

Christ, Himself, was chosen or foreknown by God before the creation of the world, but revealed in these last times (1 Pet. 1:20). In eternity past, God did not just know that Christ would become incarnate at a certain point in history. Rather, He planned in His love that Jesus should be crucified (Acts 2:23), then become Lord and Christ (Acts 2:36). Christ says that He knows those whom He has chosen (John 13:18) from out of the world (John 15:19). Election is presupposed, because Christ only knows this special group of people (relational knowing). They alone are chosen out of the world and they alone are the ones

Jesus prays for (John 17:9). It is this group of people that has been given to Jesus by God the Father (John 17:6, 9).

Those whom God has chosen are chosen by God in Christ out of His mere free grace and love, and according to the secret counsel of His will (Eph. 1:11). If God had chosen people based on anything other than these, then salvation would not be of grace at all. With regard to God's election or predestination of some to eternal life, this has as its ultimate motive the praise of God's glorious grace (Eph. 1:6; cf. 1:12). The ultimate purpose of the salvation of the elect is thus the glory of God.

If God has chosen a particular number of people in Christ out of His mere free grace and love the natural corollary of this is that God has not chosen some out of His mere free grace and love. The latter in classical Reformed theology is known as reprobation.

Reprobation

Reprobation is God's eternal purpose, in which He passes some people by with the operations of His special grace and punishes them for their sins to the manifestation of His justice.³¹¹ Reprobation, like election, is included within God's eternal decree and is summarised in the Westminster Confession of Faith Chapter 3:3, which states that, 'By the decree of God, for the manifestation of His glory, some men and angels are predestinated unto everlasting life, and others foreordained to everlasting death'.³¹² The Synod of Dort, in upholding the teachings of the Belgic Confession and the Heidelberg Catechism and rejecting the Remonstrance put forward by the disciples of Jacob Arminius (1560-1609), maintained the doctrine of election and reprobation, affirming that God in His eternal decree softens the hearts of the elect, however obstinate, and inclines them to believe, while He leaves the non-elect in His just judgement to their own wickedness and obduracy.³¹³ Those who are passed over are those who God has not chosen to soften so that they can be inclined to believe the free offer of the Gospel. This group is instead ordained to dishonour and wrath for their sin, for the praise of the glorious justice of God. Sin is the reason why some are judicially punished by God. Sin, however, is not the reason why God

³¹¹ Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, 116.

³¹² *Westminster Confession of Faith*, 3:3, 29.

³¹³ De Jong, *Crisis in the Reformed Churches*, 231.

has not chosen them to receive the grace of regeneration. God's will was not to show them mercy, and He did this by withholding from them saving faith and the grace of conversion. The notion that God shows mercy to some people and not to others can be seen in Romans 9:13 where Paul notes that it was God's will and purpose to show mercy to Jacob, but that it was not His will and purpose to show mercy to Esau. Paul does not see God as being unjust by loving Jacob and hating Esau, who are the representatives of Israel and Edom respectively (9:13). Instead, he sees it as the sovereign choice and good pleasure of God to love Jacob and hate Esau. Those scholars who believe that this verse is concerned about the fate of nations³¹⁴ rather than the predestination of individuals to "grace" or "glory"³¹⁵ have not yet fully successfully explained how the corporate election of two peoples, Israel and Edom in Romans 9:12, 13, fits together in Paul's argument with the statement that not all who are descended from Israel are Israel (9:6b).³¹⁶ Douglas Moo further gives other reasons, apart from the one just mentioned, with which he agrees,³¹⁷ as to why he believes that Paul is thinking of Jacob and Esau as individuals. First, Paul mentions their conception, birth and works (Rom. 9:10b-11a).³¹⁸ This language, he argues, is not easily applied to nations.³¹⁹ Second, several of the key words and phrases that Paul uses in this passage are words he generally uses elsewhere with reference to the attaining of salvation; and significantly, they occur with this sense in texts closely related to this one: "election" (Rom. 11:5, 7); "call" (Rom. 8:28), and "[not] of works" (Rom. 4:2-8, 11:6).³²⁰ Similarly, these words are difficult to apply to nations, or peoples, because Paul did not believe that people or nations – not even Israel – are chosen and called by God for salvation apart from their works.³²¹

Paul does not regard God as being unjust in choosing one above the other (Rom. 9:14). This is because none deserves his mercy, for all are sinful. So when God decides to bestow mercy and compassion on some and not on others, it is His sovereign prerogative to do so. This same Godly prerogative also applies if He chooses to harden some sinners (Rom. 9:18). God reserves absolute liberty in the exercise of His mercy and compassion, yet this

³¹⁴ Ziesler, *Romans*, 241.

³¹⁵ Fitzmyer, *Romans*, 563.

³¹⁶ John Piper, *The Justification of God: An Exegetical and Theological Study of Romans 9: 1-2* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 1983), 40.

³¹⁷ Moo, *Romans*, 585

³¹⁸ *Ibid.*

³¹⁹ *Ibid.*

³²⁰ *Ibid.*

³²¹ *Ibid.*

should not imply that God has an arbitrary and capricious attitude to humanity, because Romans 9:15 shows us that God delights to show mercy. It also shows that judgement is His strange work (Isa. 28:21, AV). If not all are chosen to become the elect people of God, then this means that those whom God has passed over are those whom He has rejected. Both election and reprobation stand and fall together - one cannot exist without the other (cf. Rom 9:13).

Paul does not see as problematic the fact that God chooses to show His wrath and make His power known by bearing with great patience the objects of his wrath prepared for destruction (9:22). Paul seems to be saying in Romans 9:22-24 that God ordains both the objects of mercy and the objects of wrath. This double emphasis on predestination, however, is not one of equal ultimacy, because God chooses the eternal destiny of men from those who are already fallen. God as the Potter 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). Because God is sovereign, He can pass over some and leave them in their sin, or He can choose to save some from their sin and make them His beloved people. God's saving intentions can thus be restricted to a proportion of humanity, because if He had loved the non-elect in the same manner as the elect He would have made them the recipients of His regenerating grace, thus enabling them to repent (Acts 11:18) and have faith in Christ (2 Pet. 1:1). Because He did not, they remain in their current state as objects of wrath (Eph. 2:3) and so continue to be dead in their transgressions and sins (2:1).

Is God An Arbitrary Tyrant?

Does the doctrine of election make God an arbitrary tyrant? No! God may be 'arbitrary' in the sense that it is a matter of his free-will (Latin, arbitrium) who will be saved. But a tyrant? God can hardly be called a tyrant if He chooses to love some in particular and allows them to share in His life when none deserves to experience it. In the light of the sinfulness of humanity and its inability to choose Christ for salvation, that some are saved from the consequences of their spiritual alienation from God actually highlights His loving nature, choosing freely, as he does, to love some particularly, saving them and enabling them to be reconciled to Him. While it is true that God wants all people to be saved and come to a knowledge of the truth (1 Tim. 2:3-4), no one can come to a knowledge of the truth by themselves, because in our fallen state we will not choose Christ as our Saviour (1

Cor. 2:11-14; Eph. 2:1-3). Both classical Arminian and Reformed theology agree on the inability of fallen sinners to turn to Christ. They differ, however, in the way this condition is reversed. Reformed theology believes that God acts to bring about faith in the elect sinner; classical Arminians and Wesleyans believe that God's grace is prior to conversion but does not bring about faith in sinners. God pursues fallen sinners and invites all of fallen humanity to believe in Christ, but only those who believe in Jesus will actually have their sins forgiven. The weakness of this type of theology is that ultimately it fails to take into account the actual depth of fallen human nature, for it does not believe that God transforms a sinner's fallen nature. Instead, He only pursues them and invites them to enter into the salvation that He has made possible through the atoning death of Christ. But, how can this occur when sin has affected every facet of the human personality and makes us unwilling to turn to Christ? Only Reformed theology can guarantee that there will be an actual salvation for some people. This is because God does not just pursue sinners and invite them to trust in Christ, He actually transforms them without violating their free-will so that they can freely choose Christ. God's particular love for His people ensures that people will be saved, but only those whose names have been written in the Lamb's book of life (Rev. 21:27). It is they alone that receive all the benefits of the children of God (Eph. 1:6-14).

The word "all" as used above in I Timothy 2:3-4, cannot be restricted to particular groups of people, for to do this takes away from the universal desire of God to save all who are lost. If God had no universal desire to save all who are lost it would have made no sense for Him to have bound all people over to disobedience so that He may have mercy on them all (Rom. 11:32). That not all are in fact eventually saved shows us that God's desire to save all is subservient to his actual saving of some. God might want to have mercy on all (and to a certain extent He does in the atonement of Christ, whose sacrifice is sufficient for the sins of the whole world), but without the regenerating grace of God in the hearts of sinful men and women none will be saved. If God had wanted to save all, He would have bestowed universal grace on all to counteract the universal scope of sin that makes humanity opposed to God and His will. Instead, God chooses by His sovereign grace to enable some to respond to Christ's offer of eternal life. That universal desire of God to save all appears then to be subservient to God's sovereign grace, which chooses some and passes over all others. It would not therefore be wrong to say that God's saving love is restricted in contrast to his general love, which is universal. God's love is a love that offers all the possibility of eternal life if they repent and believe the good news concerning Jesus,

but this love does not give all of fallen humanity the opportunity to repent and believe the good news. Donald Macleod speaking about our incapacity to repent or believe says the following:

We have no desire for Christ, no appreciation of Him, no patience with him. By ourselves we cannot want Him. We cannot stand Him. We cannot resist Him. We cannot prepare for Him. We cannot even not be averse to Him until God Himself comes and gives us that faith which is not of ourselves but is the gift of God (Ephesians 2:8). The risen Christ pours upon us the grace of repentance. Or, as 1 Peter 1: 2 puts it, ‘elect . . . through sanctification [consecration] of the Spirit’. God’s chosen ones, when God chooses them, are spiritually dead. They have to be born again. They have to be quickened into life by the impulse of grace. It is this intervention that makes the difference between this man and that man. Some are spiritually alive – why? Because God has quickened them; and He quickened those whom He chose to quicken and there is no other reason for the difference.³²²

Scripture reveals a God who genuinely does desire that all be saved; yet, it also reveals a God who wills only to save some. This is a mystery beyond human reasoning and to a certain extent appears to be beyond what might be understood as logically consistent (at least from a human perspective), although with regards to God it appears to be logically consistent. Both of these truths, a desire to save all, but God actually saving the elect alone, are taught in scripture. It is impossible to reconcile them no matter how hard we try. They are truths that are revealed not explained. Any attempt to reconcile both only leads to the minimising of one or other of them. Although there appears to be an apparent contradiction or paradox in God’s desire to save all, and His quickening of the elect alone, it is not a real contradiction. To be a real contradiction would mean that God at one and the same time wants to save all but does not want to save all, or God acting to save the elect alone and not acting to save the elect alone. It is an apparent contradiction, because God desires to save all, but does not act to save all. It appears that the desire of God is regulated by the will of God. The greater will of God does not act to create within all of fallen humanity the ability to respond positively to the good news of Jesus. He creates that ability only in some. God’s deepest desire or will must therefore be understood as desiring or willing only to save some and not all people.

God’s Love and Sovereignty

³²² Macleod, *A Faith to Live By*, 74.

If God has decided in advance who and will and will not be saved, what is the relationship between the love of God (which most Christians understand as the essence of God) and the sovereignty of God? Classical Reformed theology, it appears, has understood the sovereignty of God to be more important than His love. Ulrich Zwingli (1484-1531) and John Calvin both treated God's sovereignty as the first principle of Christian thought.³²³ By contrast, Martin Luther treated God's sovereignty as part of the gospel of grace.³²⁴ The election of a particular number is rooted in God's sovereign majesty. He has thus decreed all that comes to pass for His own good and glory, including the salvation of some and the passing over of others. This suggests that the love of God does not regulate His sovereignty and majesty. In fact, the opposite appears to be true: the love of God is directed by His sovereignty and majesty. But do we have to separate these concepts? Earlier on we noted in the Westminster Confession of Faith that the election of some in Christ is due to the free grace and love of God, but this cannot be separated from God's eternal and immutable purpose or from the secret counsel and good pleasure of His will. God's sovereignty and love cannot be separated, because both are intrinsic to God and both are aspects of God's essence, although, of course, as we noted earlier, they are distinct perfections of God. God chooses in love those He desires to be His people, and God also sovereignly chooses those whom He loves to be his people. The sovereignty of God must, however, at times regulate His love as it pertains to its manifestation with regard to God's eternal decree. This must be the case if God loves the elect specially and particularly, and all generally. Biblical texts that speak of the comprehensive scope of God's saving intentions (John 3:16; I John 2:2; 4:8-10; Rom. 11:32; 1 Tim. 2:3-4; 5-6, 4:10) must be understood in the light of God's divine will to issue and dispense special saving grace to His elect people alone. Reformed theology and its understanding of God's sovereignty does not conflict with the Bible's teaching on the love of God for all. Neither does it contradict the free offer of the gospel, for all who believe in Jesus will receive everlasting life (John 3:16). This is despite the fact that God does not enable all to respond to it._

One key text that seems to indicate that the will of God regulates His love is a verse that we have already noted, Romans 9:15: "I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion". The sovereign freedom of God is an absolute freedom, unlike human freedom, which is not an absolute freedom, and because

³²³ Roger E. Olson, *The Story of Christian Theology: Twenty Centuries of Tradition & Reform* (Leicester: Apollos, 1999), 402.

³²⁴ *Ibid.*

of this God can, if He chooses, exercise mercy and compassion on some and not on others. God does not have to bestow salvation on all, or on any, yet in bestowing mercy on some and withholding it from others, God reveals the riches of His glory to those who are the objects of His mercy (Rom. 9:23).

God, because he is both loving and sovereign, freely manifests His love to all in His providential rule over His world, in His common grace and in His free offer of the Gospel, but it is also because He is both loving and sovereign that He chooses to manifest a special and particular love towards His chosen ones. The arbitrary nature of the selection of some and the rejection of others is rooted in the unsearchable judgements of God (Rom. 11:33) and His free grace and love. No one deserves the mercy, grace or love of God. Instead all of us deserve the justice of God, but in His mercy, grace and favour, He chooses to save some but not all people.

If God has indeed ordained all that comes about, and this is in conformity with the purpose of His will (Eph. 1:11) and ultimately to the praise of his glorious grace (Eph. 1:6) and his glory (Eph. 1:12), then it must be that He decides the destiny of all people before they are even born and before they actually do anything moral or virtuous or anything evil or wicked. We know that the Lord is patient and does not want anyone to perish, but, rather, everyone to come to repentance (2 Pet. 3:9). We also know that God also wants all men to be saved and come to a knowledge of the truth (1 Tim. 2:4), Likewise, we know that God does not take any pleasure in the death of the wicked (Ezek. 18:23 cf. 33:11) or of anyone at all (Ezek. 18:32), and also that He has also bound all people over to disobedience so that He may have mercy on them all (Rom. 11:32). Yet we also know that not all, in fact, will be saved, because God has not decreed to do so, although He desires to save them, as we indicated previously. God's decretive will thus appears to be connected with His love for His people, while His will of disposition appears to be connected with His love for the world and its salvific intent.

God's Intervening Love

Arminian theology argues that God provides the opportunity of salvation to all people, while classical Reformed theology argues that while God actually promises salvation to all

who believe, those who actually do believe are those for whom God has personally intervened. In Arminian theology, the offer of eternal life to all who are willing to choose to believe in Christ does not actually offer assurance of the salvation of anyone, unlike classical Reformed theology which argues that there is a guarantee that a number only known by God will actually be saved. Two contrasts are presented before us: the possible salvation of all, or none, and the actual salvation of some rather than all. The possibility of some actually being saved as opposed to the possibility of none being saved seems to make the classical Reformed understanding of God to be as gracious and loving – if not more so – than an Arminian or Wesleyan understanding of God.

Instead of God being seen as a tyrannical, arbitrary despot who creates humanity just to damn some of it, is it not more appropriate to see Him as a loving Deity who manifests love to those who do not deserve it? God loves all because it is in his nature to love (1 John 4:8, 16). Nevertheless, God sovereignly chooses to manifest different types of love to different people. Some people receive God's special salvific love, and those who do should respond to that electing love with adoration and humility for God's divine mercy towards them. Those who do not receive God's salvific love are not excluded from God's love, because they receive God's love in His common grace and the offer of eternal life in the Gospel, even though He has chosen not to manifest His regenerating grace to them.

Don Carson has argued that a God who loves everyone and everything in exactly the same way does not love anyone or anything at all; such a singularly indiscriminating love is remarkably amoral and sounds more like a blind, impersonal benevolence.³²⁵ Can it justifiably be said that God loves boa constrictors, Mother Theresa, Hitler, fleas, Michael the Archangel, Augustine, the Aurora Borealis, and Genghis Khan in exactly the same way?³²⁶ Because only humanity is made in God's image it should not surprise us that God loves those made in His image more than those who are not. It is true that God providentially provides and cares for those that are not human; He feeds young ravens when they call and He provides food for the cattle (Ps.147:9), but He does not love them in the same way that He loves humanity. If God can discriminate in His love for that which he has made, is it not possible that he can also be discriminating in His salvific love towards those made in His image - saving some and passing by others?

³²⁵ Carson, *The Gagging of God*, 238-239.

³²⁶ *Ibid.*, 238.

Conclusion

God's special love is directed towards the elect alone, those whom He has chosen in Christ according to His free grace and love and according to His eternal and immutable purpose and the secret pleasure and council of His own good will. They alone are given saving faith and the grace of conversion. To those whom God has not given saving faith and the grace of conversion, they remain in their sin and receive the due penalty for it. Election has both corporate and individual connotations. It cannot be reduced to the former. Those whom God has chosen to be His people are chosen from fallen humanity, just as those whom God passes over are passed over from fallen humanity. God is 'arbitrary' only in the sense that He alone chooses who will be the recipients of His regenerating grace, thus enabling them to repent and exercise faith in Christ.

Chapter 6

God's Love for the Unevangelized

God's Benevolent Love for the Unevangelized

As members of the human race, the unevangelized are included within the world that God loves (John 3:16). Despite not hearing the Gospel of God's love and the possibility of salvation through faith in Christ, they, in common with all other people, are recipients of His divine favour and goodness, evidenced in His common grace towards them. Why, then, do the unevangelized not hear the good news if God loves the world with a salvific intent?

God's Love and His Will to Save All

God's desire is that his people take the message of Jesus to a world that He loves with a salvific intent (Matt. 28:19-20; Mark 16:15; Luke 24:47; cf. Acts.1:8). That is because God wants none to perish, but everyone to come to repentance (2 Pet. 3:9, cf. Ezek. 18:23; 33:11). Not everyone will be saved (universalism), because in the Second Epistle of Peter false teachers and scoffers are condemned and face destruction (2:3; 3:7). Simon J. Kistemaker notes that while God wants these false teachers to be saved they disregard God's patience towards them, they employ their knowledge of Jesus against him, and they wilfully reject God's offer of salvation.³²⁷ They, therefore, bear full responsibility for their own condemnation.³²⁸ Despite God's will of disposition that none perish, many do so because they exercise their God-given free will to reject Christ, although in their fallen state they cannot do otherwise, because the sinful mind is hostile to God (Rom. 8:7).

That not all will be saved is included within the decretive will of God, which in Reformed theology is understood as that secret will of God by which He purposes or decrees whatever shall come to pass - both what He has willed to accomplish causatively, and what He has willed to permit to occur through the unrestrained free agency of His creatures (cf. Gen 50:20; Acts 2:23; 4:27-28).³²⁹ God exercises His sovereignty without violating the will of His creatures and without destroying secondary causes.³³⁰ His love for humanity is so great that He calls all to salvation and will save all who turn to Him in repentance and exercise faith in Jesus (Acts 20:21). Yet God's saving love is actually only bestowed on the elect, and this is done not solely with regard to His foreknowledge of their faith, good works, or perseverance.

Where does this, then, leave the unevangelized? That they do not hear the Gospel - is that something God has purposed or decreed to come to pass, and if so, does that then mean that the unevangelized are included within the non-elect? That they do not hear the Gospel

³²⁷ Simon J. Kistemaker, *Exposition of the Epistles of Peter and of the Epistle of Jude*, New Testament Commentary (Welwyn, Hertfordshire: Evangelical Press, 1987), 334.

³²⁸ *Ibid.*

³²⁹ *Westminster Confession of Faith*, 3:1, 28.

³³⁰ *Ibid.*

must be something that God has purposed or decreed; yet, paradoxically, God does not desire that they be lost, hence the Great Commission.

The preceptive will of God (those moral commands of which the Great Commission is one that God through Jesus has given to His people) can be resisted by human free will, unlike God's decretive or sovereign efficacious will which cannot be resisted. By free will I mean the capacity to make choices, commitments and decisions.³³¹ The choices that we make are freely made by genuinely free beings, for without free will human beings would not be genuinely free. While humanity has the ability to make free choices, these choices, commitments and decisions are motivated by human desire, and these predetermine the choices that we make. These choices, commitments and decisions may be free and self-determined but this is not the same as theological determinism or fatalism, because our choices, commitments and decisions are not coerced by anyone, including God. While human free will allows us the ability to choose between different options, human freedom is not incompatible with God's absolute sovereignty, which has rendered all human decisions and actions absolutely certain. The freedom that humanity has is the ability to choose between different options. Consequently, it is a compatible freedom, not a sovereign freedom because only God has a sovereign freedom. Our freedom, however, is compatible with the divine determinism which still allows humanity to make its own free choices. The Church has the choice to carry out the Great Commission or not to carry it out. Regardless of the choice that the Church makes, God, in His sovereignty, has absolutely ensured that it will occur.

But it is not entirely the Church's fault that all do not hear the Gospel. The Church is often frustrated in her attempts to fulfil the Great Commission because in some countries the opportunities to make Jesus known are hindered and sometimes even forbidden. Just as humanity can at the individual, communal and societal level accept the message of the Gospel, (albeit with the help of God's regenerating grace), it can be rejected by individuals, communities and societies. This does not mean that in countries such as North Korea and others no one in them comes to faith, only that numbers are limited because of the limited opportunities that people have to hear about Jesus Christ. That some individuals,

³³¹ John M. Frame, *The Doctrine of the Knowledge of God: A Theology of Lordship*, (Phillipsburg, New Jersey: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1987), 343.

communities, and countries reject the message of the nearness of the Kingdom of God should not surprise us, as Jesus indicated that this might happen (Matt. 10:14-15; Luke 9:5; 10:11-12; cf. Acts 13:51). He warned that the guilt of their failure to respond is greater than that of the inhabitants of Sodom and Gomorrah, who did not hear the message of God's Kingdom (Matt. 10:14-15; Luke 10:12-16). Those individuals, communities and nations who reject the message will therefore be judged accordingly. That the good news of Jesus does not reach all people is the fault both of the church which refuses to obey the Great Commission, and of those individuals, communities and countries that refuse to let the good news of Jesus enter their lands and territories, or attempt to stop it from reaching their people. God's love for His elect people respects the freedom they have to obey or disobey Him, and His love for humanity respects the freedom that individuals, communities and nations have to refuse His offer of eternal life through faith in Christ. The fact that the unevangelized are denied access to the Gospel might appear difficult and mysterious, but this should not be considered any more problematic than the fact that some people hear the Gospel and do not respond to it.

God desires to save all people (1 Tim. 2:4), yet, as we have attempted to show, He chooses not to save all people. While human reasoning cannot resolve what appears to be a contradiction, both truths are taught in the Scriptures, although, of course, in the mind of God there is no contradiction (cf. Rom 8:29). While He desires to save all people, not all people desire to be saved by Him. If God saved those who have no desire to be saved this would deny the freedom that people have to refuse Him and His love. It is people who worship and love God, not puppets, or robots, which is what they would be if they had no freedom of choice. Belief in the doctrine of universalism (one day all will eventually be saved) in either its ancient, modern or evangelical forms raises significant questions with regard to the essential nature of our human freedom. If all people, including the unevangelized, will eventually be saved because God's love eventually wins out in the end and ensures that all will eventually accept His salvation, Universalists must find an answer to the question of why Jesus gave His people the Great Commission.

God's Love and the Destiny of the Unevangelized

If God's love does not eventually win over all, what is the destiny of the unevangelized: are they forever separated from God and doomed to receive eternal punishment? It might

be argued that since the unevangelized are not spoken of directly in Scripture it might be better to have a reverent agnosticism about this subject, and our concern must be directed to following Jesus and obeying the Great Commission, leaving the eternal destiny of the unevangelized in the hands of God, the judge of all the earth who will do what is right (Gen. 18:25). Yet the ethical and moral implications of the possible destiny of this group of people are hard to ignore, and the Church needs to be able to at least give possible answers to this difficult question. The apologetic problem of the fate of the unevangelized is a problem that cannot be ignored.

While God loves the unevangelized, paradoxically they are also at one and the same time the object of God's wrath, as is the whole world which is described by Paul as 'dead in transgressions and sins' (Eph. 2:1). This refers to spiritual death, which is alienation from the life of God. This alienated life is one that is devoted to the cravings of sinful nature and to following personal desires, feelings, appetites and thoughts (Eph. 2:3). All those who live like this are according to Paul 'by nature objects of God's wrath' (Eph. 2:3). Wrath is God's personal opposition to human sin and His response to it (Eph. 2:3 cf., Rom. 1:18; 2:5, 8; 3:5; Col. 3:6). It is more than an impersonal force or a natural law by which sinners receive the consequences of their sin, for, as Morris notes, wrath is the word the Bible uses to express the settled and active opposition of God's holy nature to everything that is evil.³³² The only way of escaping this wrath of God is if He spiritually quickens people, which is exactly what He has done for Paul and the Ephesian believers to whom he (Paul) is writing: 'but because of his great love for us, God who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgression' (Eph. 2:4-5). The source of anyone's salvation is God's grace, and the instrumental cause of receiving this is faith in Christ (Eph. 2:8).

The unevangelized, too, are spiritually dead because of their sin, and therefore also under the wrath of God, and will continue to be so unless He provides for them a way in which they can be saved apart from a personal faith in Christ. Christian exclusivism denies that salvation is possible on any terms other than that of personal faith, and this was the dominant position within both Roman Catholicism and Protestantism until the nineteenth

³³² Morris, *Romans*, 76.

century.³³³ For the former, there was no salvation outside of the Church.³³⁴ For the latter, those who never responded to Jesus Christ in faith were forever lost.³³⁵ This position, however, has in the last century been rejected by many theologians and mission leaders in favour of more positive views of other faiths.³³⁶ The main reasons for this erosion of Christian exclusivism, according to Netland, were: the emerging higher-critical views of Scripture, the conclusions of Darwinian science, the developing disciplines of the history of religions and the extensive contact of the west with the cultures of China, Japan, India and Latin America.³³⁷ These factors, especially the last, have led to a greater optimism, even in evangelical thought, that there is a possibility of the salvation of the unevangelized based on the light they have already enjoyed or on the sovereign grace and mercy of God.

God Condemns the Unevangelized for Their Sin

If God were to condemn on the basis that some did not believe in His Son (John 3:16), even though He had not provided for them to hear about Jesus, then the accusation that God is unjust might well be a valid one. In fact, Millard Erickson points out that this is one of the increasing crescendos of criticism that is levelled at the traditional exclusivist approach.³³⁸ If God condemned only on the basis of rejecting Christ, then it would be better for many not to hear the Gospel, because one cannot be condemned for something that one does not know about. Instead, however, the unevangelized are guilty before God and under divine condemnation for their sin and face eternal spiritual death which is the wages of sin (Rom 6:23). Yet the unevangelized do not hear of the need of Jesus or the necessity of appropriating the salvation that He accomplished through His atoning death. Unlike many people who have been evangelized and have rejected Jesus, the unevangelized will be judged according to the light they have and not according to the light that they do not have.

The Unevangelized Are Judged According To the Light They Have

³³³ Harold A. Netland, *Dissonant Voices: Religious Pluralism and the Question of Truth* (Leicester: Apollos, 1991), 14.

³³⁴ *Ibid.*

³³⁵ *Ibid.*

³³⁶ *Ibid.*, 15.

³³⁷ *Ibid.*, 14-15

³³⁸ Millard J. Erickson, *How Shall They Be Saved: The Destiny of Those Who Do Not Hear of Jesus* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Books, 1996), 24.

The light that the unevangelized have is first of all a general knowledge of the existence of God and of some of His invisible qualities (His eternal power and divine nature) through the created order (Rom. 1:20 cf. Acts 14:16-17; Ps. 19:1-3). This, God has made plain to them (Rom. 1:19) in His general or natural revelation. It is general because it is made available to everybody and natural because it can be seen in creation and the created order.

If the general revelation of God is plain to all, then it is clear that it penetrates the human mind, resulting in knowledge of God. This challenges the claim of Immanuel Kant (1724-1804), who argued that humanity could not reason from this world back to a creator, that the things that are made by God do not clearly reveal His eternal power and divine nature. Paul, by contrast, argues that since the creation of the world God has been made known to all, and, consequently, all people are without excuse. The knowledge of God the Creator is therefore something that all people, including the unevangelized, possess, but the godlessness and wickedness of humanity have suppressed this truth (Rom. 1:18). This suppression of the truth revealed through the created order has led humanity into not glorifying God and not giving thanks to Him. Instead, it has steered it into idolatry (Rom. 1:21-22, 25). The excuse of ignorance of God is thus invalid, because the manifestation of God by which He makes his own glory known among His creatures (including the unevangelized) is sufficiently clear as far as its own inherent light is concerned. It is inadequate only on account of human blindness.³³⁹

Another aspect of the light that has been given to the unevangelized is that God has also given knowledge of Himself and His moral will to them through the very constitution of human nature (Rom. 2:14-15 cf. 1:28-32). Even those who do not have access to the written laws of God (as did the Jews) still have in their conscience some understanding of God's moral demands, and when these moral demands are not lived up to they know that they deserve to be punished (Rom. 1:32). Not only does the conscience bear witness to their failure to keep God's moral law, it also excuses them when they make valid moral choices (Rom. 2:15). The human conscience is thus that which can be used as a reflective mechanism by which people can measure their conformity to a norm.³⁴⁰ That the conscience can both defend and accuse people will be a witness against all people, including the unevangelized, on the day that God has set aside for judging their secrets

³³⁹ Calvin, *Romans and Thessalonians*, 31.

³⁴⁰ Moo, *Romans*, 152.

through Jesus Christ (Rom. 2:16). On that day not only will all public deeds be judged - our secrets will also be judged. In this judgement, God will be impartial and will deal fairly with both Jew and Gentile, because He will give to each person according to what he has done (Rom. 2:6). Rewards will be given by God to each one of us for our good deeds, while those who do evil will be punished. Both God's rewards and punishments will be administered in accordance with what each one of us has done (Rom. 2:7, 9-10). Those whose lives are defined by the characteristics of persistently doing good works will receive glory, honour and immortality - that is, eternal life - in contrast to those whose lives are characterized by self-centeredness, rejection of the truth and the following of evil, and who will face God's wrath and anger.

This does not mean that salvation is based on one's good works, for this contradicts what Paul says in Romans 4:1-5:1- that justification is through faith. In the light of the doctrine of total depravity, even if Paul is saying that God truly offers salvation to all those who persistently do good works, it is not possible for anyone to meet that requirement, for there is not one righteous person alive (Rom. 3:9 cf. Ps. 143:2). All people, including Jews (2:1-29) and the unevangelized are, therefore, universally guilty before God, for no one can be declared righteous before Him by observing the law (Rom. 3:19-20).

Millard Erickson has argued that Paul might be laying open the possibility in Romans 2:1-16 that humanity's knowledge of God should bring it to the conclusion that it is guilty in relation to Him, unless we suppress it.³⁴¹ Knowing of their guilt, if someone were to throw himself or herself on the mercy of God, even though they did not know on what basis this mercy was provided, Erickson argues that they would be in the same position as Old Testament believers who themselves did not have a full revelation of the doctrine of Christ and his atoning work.³⁴² That person who comes to belief in a single powerful God, and who despairs of any works-righteousness serving to please this one, holy, powerful, deity, and throws himself or herself upon His mercy - would they not be accepted by God, as were the Old Testament believers who were accepted by Him on the basis of the work of Christ, without actually knowing how this provision has been made for her or his salvation?³⁴³

³⁴¹ Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 197.

³⁴² *Ibid.*

³⁴³ *Ibid.*

It is doubtful whether Paul is saying that this is possible, because the whole thrust of Paul's argument from Romans 1:18 to Romans 3:20 is that all are under the power of sin (Rom. 3:9). There is no one who understands or seeks God (Rom. 3:11 cf. Pss. 14:2; 53:3). Apart from receiving and responding to God's special revelation (Rom. 1:16; 3:22), Paul does not hold out any hope for the salvation of anyone. Ronald H. Nash has stated that nowhere in Romans 1-3 does Paul give general revelation enhanced status as an instrument of salvation,³⁴⁴ so it is somewhat strange that Erickson argues that Paul seems to hold out the possibility that through the knowledge of God in creation and in the light of nature one can be saved by faith without having special revelation. Erickson himself admits that Paul in Romans 3 suggests that no one is saved without special revelation, whilst also acknowledging that in chapter 10 of the same epistle Paul urges the necessity of preaching the gospel that people might believe.³⁴⁵ Erickson knows and admits that general revelation makes one guilty before God, but refuses to take this truth to its logical conclusion: that none can be saved without receiving and responding to special revelation. Instead, he holds out a theoretical hope that one might actually experience salvation without having special revelation. In the light of the Fall and the universal power of sin over all humanity which has led to humanity's rejection, suppression and distortion of the truth of God in general revelation, there is no firm evidence to suggest that any will be saved apart from special revelation.

Norman Anderson is correct when he argues that the whole of the Bible denies the possibility that anyone who tries to be religious and moral will earn salvation.³⁴⁶ In the light of our total inability to do anything spiritually good, Anderson is, however, mistaken when he argues that when one realizes something of his sin and need, and throws himself on the mercy of God, one would find it without understanding it.³⁴⁷ There is no evidence in the whole of Scripture that those without some kind of special revelation cried out to God because of their sin and threw themselves on His mercy. The Jewish tax collector who cried out to God to have mercy on him because he was a sinner (Luke 18:13) could base

³⁴⁴ Gabriel Fackre, Roland H. Nash, John Sanders, *What About Those Who Have Never Heard? Three Views on the Destiny of the Unevangelized*, ed. John Sanders (Downers Grove, Illinois: Inter-Varsity Press, 1995), 111.

³⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 198.

³⁴⁶ Norman Anderson, *Christianity and World Religions: The Challenge of Pluralism* (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press 1984), 151.

³⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

his plea only on the special revelation that the covenant God of Israel had already given of Himself to His people. Further, the Jewish tax collector would also have received the benefits of forgiveness from God through the sacrificial system that had been set up to restore His people to relationship with Him, forgiving them of their inadvertent sins, although the blood of animal sacrifices could never completely atone for them (Heb. 10: 11).

If one is judged according to the greater knowledge or light that one has, this strongly suggests there are degrees of punishment in the final state (cf. Luke 12:47-48). From those that have been given much (the evangelized who reject Christ), much more will be demanded, and from the one who has been entrusted with much, much more will be required. This is in contrast to the unevangelized, whose light is of a lesser degree. Because of this the unevangelized, according to Ajith Fernando, have a diminished responsibility: although they are guilty, their guilt is less than others.³⁴⁸ Further evidence of degrees of punishment in the final state comes from Matthew 11:20-24 where Jesus rebukes the cities of Korazin and Bethsaida for their unbelief and indicates that more severe judgement falls on those who have received greater opportunity for belief (cf. Luke 10:13-16). In Paul's Epistle to the Church at Rome, he warns us that some people are storing up for themselves wrath in the day of wrath (Rom. 2:5). As R. C. Sproul observes, how can one store up wrath if the punishment of sinners in hell is equal?³⁴⁹ Belief in degrees of punishment is, as Larry Dixon remarks, the "Achilles heel" of annihilationism.³⁵⁰

Will God Save The Unevangelized Because Of His Sovereign Grace?

Ajith Fernando does not believe the principle that just because Jews were saved in the Old Testament before the coming of Christ in the world it follows that some who do not hear the Gospel today can be saved because they fear the Lord as did Old Testament saints.³⁵¹

³⁴⁸ Ajith Fernando, *Crucial Questions About Hell* (Eastbourne: Kingsway Publications, 1991), 105.

³⁴⁹ Robert C. Sproul, *Knowing Scripture* (Downers Grove, Illinois: Inter-Varsity Press, 1977), 93.

³⁵⁰ Larry Dixon, *The Other Side of the Good News: Confronting The Contemporary Challenges to Jesus' Teaching On Hell* (Geanies House, Fearn, Tain; Ross-shire 2003), 115.

³⁵¹ Ajith Fernando, *Jesus and the World Religions: Is Christianity just another religion?* (Eastbourne, East Sussex: Kingsway Publications, 1988), 136. It is possible that the faith of believers in the Old Testament was Christo-centric even though it was shrouded in the shadows and types of the Old Testament sacrificial system. Their faith would have been either implicit or proleptic. See D. Strange, *The Possibility of Salvation among the Unevangelised: An Analysis of Inclusivism in Recent Evangelical Thought* (Carlisle, Cumbria: Paternoster Press, 2002), 167-191.

This is because two key features were necessary for their salvation and these also pertain to the Gospel of Christ.³⁵² First, those saved in the Old Testament were recipients of a special revelation of God and His ways.³⁵³ This special revelation presented a covenant relationship between God and His people, which was mercifully initiated by God and received by them through faith.³⁵⁴ Second, in the Old Testament a covenant relationship with God required the offering of sacrifices of atonement.³⁵⁵ These two requirements cannot, therefore, be fulfilled by those who have not heard the Gospel post-Christ, and so they cannot be saved.³⁵⁶ Consequently, because some people in the pre-Christ era were saved without actually knowing Christ, salvation does not automatically follow for those who do not know Christ in the Christian era. Fernando goes on to argue that there are no exceptions in the Old Testament to the method of salvation outlined above.³⁵⁷ Men such as Abraham (Gen. 12:1-3, 7), (Job. 1:5; 38:1-41: 39:1-30; 40:1-2; 41:1-36; 42:1-6), Balaam (Num. 22:31, 39) Jethro (Exod. 18:8-12) and Melchizedek (Gen. 14:18) were all recipients of special revelation in some form or another, and also participated in sacrificial offerings to God.³⁵⁸ On the basis of these two key features, Fernando goes on to conclude that the Bible does not give us sufficient grounds to entertain a hope of salvation apart from the Gospel.³⁵⁹

While Fernando denies that God might exercise some kind of mercy upon the unevangelized and provide for them a way of salvation apart from a conscious knowledge and explicit faith in Christ, others do believe that there is a 'wider hope' for the unevangelized. W.G. T. Shedd argues that even though God is not obliged to offer pardon to the unevangelized here or hereafter, this does not mean that the unevangelized heathen are not pardoned, because the electing mercy of God reaches out to them.³⁶⁰ Shedd, even within the boundaries of a firm Calvinism, thinks that a majority of humanity would be saved, and argues that the hope and belief of Christendom has been that some of the unevangelized are saved in this present life by an extraordinary exercise of redeeming

³⁵² Fernando, *Jesus and the World Religions*, 136.

³⁵³ *Ibid.*

³⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 137.

³⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 137-139.

³⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 139.

³⁶⁰ William G. T. Shedd, *The Doctrine of Endless Punishment* (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1986), 109.

grace in Christ.³⁶¹ In an attempt to prove this he argues that this teaching draws support from the Second Helvetic Confession, The Westminster Confession of Faith and from men such as Jerome Zanchius, Calvin and Augustine.³⁶² God, he believes, can, through the Holy Spirit, produce an inward disposition and frame of mind in pagans (the habit of faith) which is a broken and contrite heart that cries out to God to have mercy on them as sinners, without employing the preaching of the written word, His usual method.³⁶³ He argues that the case of Cornelius warrants the belief that the Holy Spirit sometimes works in the individual heart and produces a sense of sin and a believing disposition, prior to the actual presentation of Christ, the object of faith. Cornelius is thus not a virtuous pagan who claimed to have lived up to the light that he had, and who upon this ground esteemed himself to be acceptable to God.³⁶⁴ Instead, Cornelius was a convicted sinner who was seriously enquiring about the way of salvation from sin, evidenced by the fact that Peter preached to this just man who feared God, the forgiveness of sin through the blood of Christ; and he believed and was baptized (Acts 10:44-47).³⁶⁵

A weakness in Shedd's attempt to prove a habit of faith without its exercise in an individual such as Cornelius is that Cornelius was an individual who would have had some knowledge of the Messiah to come because of his association with the Jewish religion, which had resulted in him and his family becoming God-fearing (Acts 10:2). Cornelius was, therefore, one who was ready to hear the Gospel and accept Jesus as his Lord and Saviour because he was already one who possessed a genuine faith in Israel's God and, having a true knowledge of God's precepts, expected the coming of the Messiah.³⁶⁶ Cornelius would have had knowledge of God through his Jewish connections, and it appears that he had some knowledge of the person and story of Jesus ("This is the message God sent to the people of Israel telling the good news of peace through Jesus Christ who is Lord of all", Acts 10:36), but he only received the Holy Spirit when Peter was speaking to him (Acts 10:44). The case of Cornelius cannot be used to substantiate the claim that God works a habit of faith in some individuals who do not know of Christ, because he did come to know and believe in Christ. Cornelius was not without special revelation. The unevangelized *are*, of course, without such access. If Peter had not taken the message of

³⁶¹ *Ibid.*

³⁶² Shedd, *Dogmatic Theology*, vol. 1, 436-441.

³⁶³ Shedd, *Endless Punishment*, 110.

³⁶⁴ Shedd, *Dogmatic Theology*, vol. 1, 439.

³⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶⁶ Simon J. Kistemaker, *Exposition of the Acts of the Apostles*, New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 1990), 371.

Christ to Cornelius and his household, they would not have been saved (11:14). This would have been regardless of their association with Judaism or their good works.

God, according to Shedd, is sovereign in the exercise of His mercy, but what is an extraordinary and strange work of God and we should not expect it either in the kingdom of nature or in the kingdom of grace. Instead, His ordinary and established method is to direct His Church, and that is the law of missionary effort, which is that faith comes by hearing and hearing by the word of God (Rom. 10:17).³⁶⁷ Shedd held to a form of the ‘wider hope’ that the divine mercy of God may save a part of the unevangelized millions of humanity, but this did not require the extension of the work of redemption beyond this life, because the ‘washing’ of regeneration and renewing of the Holy Spirit can accomplish this salvation here in this world, before the spirit leaves the body and returns to God who gave it.³⁶⁸ Shedd argued that instead of hoping that there may be a second period of redemption, we should hope that God may save a part of the heathen world in this ‘day of salvation’.³⁶⁹ The operation of the Spirit, Shedd thought, was something that happened in this life, and this, he argued, was the overwhelming testimony of Scripture, and could not be invalidated by the lonely text that speaks of Christ speaking to the spirits in prison (cf. 1 Pet. 3:19).³⁷⁰ Shedd could not accept the dogma of a future redemption for all the unevangelized, because not only was it contrary to what the Church had believed for the last twenty centuries (that there is no salvation after death), but because for him it was another gospel and if adopted would result in another Christendom.³⁷¹

Contemporary evangelicals such as Clark Pinnock have argued that the several broad hints in Scripture about post-mortem probation, coupled with God’s universal salvific will, gives hope that none will perish who, through no fault of their own, lacked opportunity to embrace God’s love.³⁷² This appears to be far too an optimistic assessment in the light of much clearer affirmations that after death comes judgement (Heb. 9:27, cf. Heb. 6:2).

³⁶⁷ Shedd, *Endless Punishment*, 114.

³⁶⁸ William G. T. Shedd, *Calvinism: Pure & Mixed: A Defence of the Westminster Standards* (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1986), 130.

³⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 120. Other verses that have been used to defend a belief that salvation is possible on the other side of the grave are (Isa. 26:19; John 5:25-29; Eph. 4 8-9; 1 Pet. 4:6).

³⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 121.

³⁷² Clark Pinnock, The Finality of Jesus Christ in a world of Religions, in *Christian Faith & Practice in the Modern World: Theology from an Evangelical Point of View*, ed. Mark A. Noll and David F. Wells (Grand Rapids, Michigan; W. B. Eerdmans, 1988), 152-168.

God's judgement follows because of sin, but for God's people their hope is grounded in Jesus who, having been perfected, has become the source of eternal salvation for all who have obeyed Him (Heb. 5:9). The unambiguous nature of the statement that "man is destined to die once and after that to face judgement" must be favoured above the ambiguity of inconclusive post-mortem evangelism verses.

Chris Wright, an Old Testament scholar, believes, like Shedd, that the unevangelized can be saved apart from hearing the Gospel. He affirms that one's condemnation is based on one's sinful actions, and not on one's ignorance.³⁷³ Our sin lies in what we do in the wake of what we know, not in what we do not do because we did not know, that is, failure to trust in Jesus because of never having heard of Him.³⁷⁴ Wright denies universalism, arguing that the Bible does not hold out any basis for the belief that all people will be saved no matter what they believe or how they have lived.³⁷⁵ Wright, however, rejects the idea that there is no hope for salvation for any among the unevangelized, believing that this position is not an adequate account of what the Bible as a whole teaches.³⁷⁶ Instead, he argues that there is hope of salvation for some among the unevangelized because he believes that the whole emphasis of the Bible lies on salvation as being something that God has accomplished in history and that belongs to His sovereignty.³⁷⁷ He affirms that people can only be saved by Christ, and the normal way that God brings about salvation is through those who know Christ witnessing to those who do not yet know Him and leading them to repentance and faith. Wright does not believe that God is somehow unable or unwilling to save anybody at any time in human history unless and until a Christian reaches them with an intelligible explanation of the story of the Gospel.³⁷⁸ He holds out the hopeful possibility that God may, in His sovereign grace, save some whom the Church never reaches with the Gospel (or who died before the Church could ever reach them), but at the same time he does not believe that the possibility that God, in His sovereignty, might work apart from the Great Commission should lessen the Church's obligation in mission and evangelism.³⁷⁹ However, the logical consequence is that if God does work apart from the Great Commission, this will affect the Church's commitment to carrying it out. For

³⁷³ Christopher J. H. Wright, *Salvation Belongs to Our God: Celebrating the Bible's Central Story* (Nottingham: Inter-Varsity Press, 2008), 169.

³⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 169-170.

³⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 174.

³⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 175.

³⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 176.

³⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 176.

³⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 177.

Wright, God's sovereign grace cannot therefore be restricted to the operation of human evangelistic efforts.³⁸⁰ People can, he argued, be saved apart from having heard of Christ.³⁸¹

Criticisms of Protestant Exclusivism

Not only have men like Shedd and Wright argued for the hope that some of the unevangelized may be saved, other Protestant inclusivists such as Augustus Hopkins Strong, Norman Anderson, John Sanders and Clark Pinnock have all argued the same point. In contrast, Protestant exclusivists believe that there is no salvation outside of the Christian faith and belief in Christ as He is presented in the Gospel. John Calvin, Charles Hodge, Louis Berkhof, Lorraine Boettner, R. C. Sproul, Carl Henry³⁸² and, as already noted, Ajith Fernando all deny salvation apart from a personal and conscious faith in Christ. Millard Erickson, in evaluating the views of these men (Fernando being the exception), has four criticisms of their exclusivism.

The first criticism is that texts such as Romans 10:9-15, and Acts 16:31 do not necessarily say that only those who believe in Jesus or call on His name will be saved.³⁸³ The second criticism is that too much is inferred from the Great Commission, and although Christ confers an importance and urgency on the task of mission and evangelism this does not mean that some cannot be saved apart from this method.³⁸⁴ His third criticism is the one which he believes is the most problematic for Protestant exclusivism: human responsibility. How can people who have not heard the Gospel be without excuse if they could not have possibly believed?³⁸⁵ The last of Erickson's criticisms is that if some people are placed in situations where they cannot hear the Gospel, does this mean that God does not will for them to be saved? Or is it the case that God intended for them to live where they are, but that Christians have the responsibility of taking the message to them?³⁸⁶

³⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 176.

³⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 174.

³⁸² Erickson, *How Shall they be Saved*, 49-64.

³⁸³ *Ibid.*, 63.

³⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 63-64.

³⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 64.

We will respond to these criticisms in reverse order. We noted previously that God's will of disposition does not want anyone to perish, even though some of them might be placed in situations where they might not hear the Gospel. Yet, at the same time, God, in His sovereignty, has decreed that they do live where they are because they do in fact live there. Nevertheless, at the same time, it is God's people who are responsible for taking the message of the Gospel to them. Unfortunately, this task of the Church to take the message of the Gospel to all can be frustrated by human free will, unlike the decretive will of God, which has chosen only a certain number of people to be actually saved, and which cannot be frustrated. The unevangelized do not appear to be part of the elect people of God, because they do not hear the good news of Jesus.

Erickson asks: how can some people who have not heard the Gospel be without excuse if they could not have possibly believed? We have already noted that those who do not hear the Gospel are judged and condemned not by the light that they do not have, but by the light they do have (creation and conscience). They are not judged and condemned on something they could not do, namely, believing in a Saviour they have never even heard of. Instead, they are condemned because of their sin. Ignorance cannot be used by them as an excuse. Their punishment is, however, according to the light they have, and not the light they do not have. In effect, their responsibility is diminished because their guilt is less than others, and thus their suffering in the final state will not be the same as the unrepentant evangelized.

Erickson affirms the importance and urgency of the Great Commission, but he does not believe that God is restricted to saving by this method only. It is entirely possible that because God is sovereign He does not have to bind Himself to this one method. If He chooses to save some in other ways apart from hearing the good news then that is His sovereign prerogative. Calvin in his exegesis of Romans 10:14 ("How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them?") does not believe that Paul had any desire to prescribe a law to God's grace, although he believes Paul was saying that the preached word alone is the normal mode which the Lord has appointed for imparting His word, which is that which is required for a true knowledge of

Himself.³⁸⁷ While the preached word is God's normal way of imparting a true knowledge of Himself, Calvin recognises that God is able, if He so desires, to bestow the grace of salvation without the preaching of the word. The belief that God is able to save some people apart from the preached word because He is sovereign in His grace should give us hope that God may save some, if not all, of those who have died in infancy, the severely mentally handicapped, and the many Old Testament believers who died without hearing of Christ and, consequently, without having the chance of verbally confessing Him. We should have less confidence, however, that the unevangelized that have knowledge of God through general revelation will be saved, because the knowledge of God they have is inadequate to save them since it has not yet been supplemented by God's special revelation. The knowledge of God as good that the unevangelized have through general revelation is not informed by the word concerning Christ and is therefore a knowledge that Calvin calls no sure and genuine faith but one which flows from an unstable and fleeting imagination.³⁸⁸ The hope that God may save some apart from hearing the preached word concerning Christ should not, however, I believe, lessen the urgency and tasks of missions and evangelism, because no-one, including the Church, knows exactly how many people, if any, might be saved by the sovereign grace of God.

Erickson has argued that texts like Romans 10:9-12 and Acts 16:31 do not necessarily say that only those who believe in Jesus or call on His name will be saved. Passages such as these, alongside other exclusivist texts such as Acts 4:12; 1 Corinthians 3:11; John 14:6; and 1 John 5:11-12 are used, according to Sanders, by exclusivists to prove that the unevangelized are damned, and to affirm the particularity and exclusiveness of salvation in Jesus Christ.³⁸⁹ Protestant inclusivists argue that these exclusivist texts do not teach exclusivism, but only teach that in Christ there is the particularity and finality of salvation.³⁹⁰ Christ, for the Protestant inclusivist, is ontologically, but not epistemologically, necessary for salvation.³⁹¹ For the inclusivist, explicit knowledge of the historical Christ is not necessary for salvation (epistemological necessity), although, of

³⁸⁷ Calvin, *Romans and Thessalonians*, 231.

³⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 231.

³⁸⁹ John Sanders, *No Other Name: Can only Christians Be Saved?*, (London: SPCK, 1994) 38. Sanders notes that exclusivists use four sets of text that support restrictivism. Those that affirm the particularity and exclusiveness of salvation in Christ, those that point to the utter sinfulness of humanity and the utter hopelessness of life without Jesus, those that speak of hearing the gospel and repenting, and those that speak of the narrowness of the true path to God and the few that find this path, 3 *ibid.* 8-42.

³⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 215.

³⁹¹ *Ibid.*

course, there is no salvation without the historical person of Christ and His saving work (ontological necessity). Jesus, according to inclusivists, does not need to be the conscious object of saving faith, although He is the locus and focal point of salvation; and because of this, they believe there is hope for the unevangelized. The uniqueness and finality of Christ can be upheld in the sense that while salvation is always through Christ, it is not necessary for a person to have an explicit knowledge of Him to be saved.

We shall test this belief that a conscious faith in Jesus is not necessary for salvation by looking at just one text, Acts 4:12 which, surprisingly, Erickson does not mention, although it is arguably the strongest expression of Christian exclusivism in the New Testament.³⁹² Peter, in Acts 4, proclaims to the rulers, elders, teachers of the law who met in Jerusalem, and the High Priest and other male members of his family (4:5) that salvation is found in no-one else, for there is no other name under heaven, apart from Jesus by which they must be saved (4:12). Joseph Fitzmyer, in his Commentary on Acts, notes that while Luke depicts Peter proclaiming the exclusive role of Jesus Christ in the divine plan for human salvation, he does not envisage the modern problem of salvation for human beings who have never heard of Christ or who are devotees of other religions.³⁹³ Several factors, however, suggest that Peter is actually saying that a personal faith in Jesus is absolutely necessary to be saved. First, for Peter the name of Jesus is the only name “under heaven” upon which they can be saved. This strongly suggests that all other names “under heaven” are excluded from providing salvation. Second, “no other name” apart from Jesus implies the rejection of all other names, including Mohammed, Buddha, and Confucius etc. Third, the name of Jesus offers salvation to “men” - a universal reference to all of humanity, not just Jews, who are Peter’s immediate audience (cf. 1:8). Fourth, if the name of Jesus is the only name which is given to humanity by which people must be saved, this strongly suggests that a conscious knowledge of that name and consequently of that person must be had before any one can be saved. Fifth, the word “must” (*dei*) strongly suggests a divine necessity which God has established, according to His plan and decree, to save us through the person and work of Jesus.³⁹⁴ Furthermore, the word “must” (*dei*) signifies that

³⁹² Hywel R. Jones, *Only One Way: Do You Have to believe in Christ to Be Saved?* (Bromley, Kent: Day One Publications, 1996), 7.

³⁹³ Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *The Acts of the Apostles: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, The Anchor Bible (New York: Doubleday, 1998), 302.

³⁹⁴ Kistemaker, *Acts*, 156.

humanity is under the moral obligation to respond to the call to believe in Jesus and thus gain salvation. They therefore have no recourse to salvation other than through Jesus.³⁹⁵

The evidence presented above argues that all people need to hear about Jesus and call upon His name, for these are absolutely essential for salvation. Coming into contact with the messengers of salvation appears to be an absolute necessity if one is to be saved.

Inclusivists like Sanders, who argues that the point that Peter was attempting to make in Acts 4:12 was that salvation has come in the full messianic sense because Jesus of Nazareth is the one whom God has appointed to be the “name” or the source of the prophesied messianic salvation (Ps. 118:22), fail, in their exegesis of this passage, to take into account the importance of needing to hear about Jesus and calling upon His name.³⁹⁶

The question of the destiny of the unevangelized may not be explicit in Acts 4:12, but is surely one that can be inferred and deduced from it. Strange makes an important point that cannot be overlooked in the debate: the New Testament apostles did not separate salvation in Christ from an explicit confession of Christ.³⁹⁷ The Apostles in Acts preached repentance and forgiveness in the name of Jesus Christ.³⁹⁸ They did not preach repentance and confession apart from the name of Jesus (cf. Acts 10:43; 22:16; 2 Tim. 2:19). Carson has noted that inclusivists who make a distinction between ontological and epistemological necessity distort the biblical emphasis that the preaching of the Gospel which contains facts about Christ cannot be separated from a personal faith in the subject of the Gospel, Christ.³⁹⁹ Carson acknowledges that Acts 4:12 does not directly address the fate of those who have never heard of Jesus, but he argues that if Peter can speak in such an exclusive formulation to devout Jews (cf. Acts. 4:2) whose heritage was steeped in the biblical revelation, would he have been more flexible for those whose religious heritage from the vantage point of the Bible is steeped in idolatry?⁴⁰⁰ The answer is, of course, that he would not. In the light of the context of Acts 4:12 (the healing of a crippled beggar, Acts 3:16), Peter asserts that it is through Jesus’ name and the faith that comes from Him that the man has complete healing; yet, to receive this healing he must exercise faith in the name of Jesus. This strongly suggests that there is a positive aspect in Acts 4:12 (salvation is found only in Jesus for there is no other name given under heaven by which men must be saved)

³⁹⁵ Ibid.

³⁹⁶ Sanders, *No Other Name*, 63.

³⁹⁷ Strange, *The Possibility of Salvation Among the Unevangelised*, 194.

³⁹⁸ Ibid.

³⁹⁹ Carson, *The Gagging of God*, 297.

⁴⁰⁰ Ibid., 305.

and that one must have faith in Him. It also presupposes a negative aspect: without a personal explicit faith in Christ one is lost for eternity. That one can be saved without exercising that faith is the contradiction or negation of the truth that Peter has already expressed, namely, that one must have a personal conscious faith in Christ to be saved.

Conclusion

It appears that without hearing of Jesus the unevangelized have no recourse to the salvation that God freely offers in Him. Although the Church has been given the task of taking the message of Jesus to the whole world, human free will often frustrates, hinders and even disobeys God's preceptive will with regard to the evangelisation of the world. Yet it cannot frustrate God's decretive will, which ensures that all He has chosen before the foundation of the world to be saved in Christ will actually be saved. This does not mean that human free will is incompatible with the divine fore-ordination of God, for He has decreed the free acts of humanity, yet these acts are freely chosen and thus, whether good or bad, will be held to account. Human free will is therefore entirely compatible with the divine fore-ordination of God. There is no contradiction between human free will and that which God has decreed to come to pass. In the case of the unevangelized, God desires that they hear the good news of Jesus and commissions the Church to go forth into the world and reach them with this good news, but that does not always happen, because of human free will. Even so, the free acts of humanity which hinder many from being reached with the good news of Jesus are not inconsistent with the divine decree of God.

That the unevangelized do not hear the good news of Jesus should not lead us to think that God does not love the unevangelized. He does, and this is evidenced both by His common grace towards them and His will of disposition that none be lost and that all come to repentance. Yet the fact that they do not hear the Gospel means that they cannot appropriate the full and free salvation that God offers in Jesus. This would strongly suggest that the unevangelized are therefore not the objects of God's particular love. If they had been, then God would have ensured that they heard the good news of Jesus through the free acts of his Church, and given them the ability to respond to it. The unevangelized cannot therefore be included with the elect people of God. It is the elect people of God and they alone who hear the good news of Jesus and are enabled to respond to it.

Despite not being the objects of God's saving grace, the unevangelized, as noted, are the recipients of His general love, but that love can do nothing to change their perception in God's eyes as being spiritually dead and, as sinners, objects of His wrath. The only way of escape is if God makes them alive with Christ whilst they are sinners, so that the salvation that He offers in Christ can be appropriated by faith. Yet this does not occur, because they do not hear the good news of Jesus. The unevangelized are, therefore, not condemned because they have not heard of Jesus, but because of their sin. God is not so unjust that He condemns some for not responding to a saviour of whom they never have the opportunity to hear. If this were the case, then there would be an argument for saying that God was unjust and immoral. Nevertheless, the unevangelized cannot plead ignorance before God on the day of judgement, because God has revealed himself to them through the vehicles of creation and conscience, yet they, like all of humanity, have suppressed the truth of God in general revelation by their unrighteousness. For them to have the opportunity of salvation they would have needed to be the recipients of God's special revelation. The argument that the unevangelized might be saved apart from an explicit knowledge of Christ, based on a belief that many people in the Old Testament were saved, likewise has no foundation. This is because there is little evidence, if any, to suggest that these Old Testament characters were saved, apart from them receiving special revelation from God in some form or another and because they were partakers in offering sacrifices to God. The example of Cornelius, a God-fearing Gentile, further substantiates the fact that special revelation was needed for him to be saved. Until he heard the word of God preached by Peter he was still under the wrath of God for his sin despite him being a God-fearing and righteous man. The punishment that the unevangelized will receive for their sin in the final state will be a lesser one than that received by those who have known about Christ but who have rejected Him and His offer of eternal life. God's dealings with the unevangelized will be entirely fair. It might even be said that, despite their precarious situation in the final reckoning, the unevangelized are in a better state than those who did hear about Jesus and rejected Him as He was offered to them in the Gospel.

There is no firm evidence in Scripture from which to argue that God in His sovereign grace will save the adult and mentally competent who are unevangelized in this life, apart from an explicit faith in Christ, or that He will give them an opportunity after death. While God in His sovereign grace is free to act and do as He pleases, we have no basis for saying with

regard to intelligent adults that God may save apart from an explicit faith in Christ. Special revelation is thus vital if any competent unevangelized person is to be saved.

Those Protestant inclusivists who argue that it is not beyond the realms of possibility for God to save some of the unevangelized because of His sovereign grace fail to give one example of this actually occurring in Scripture. If one example could be given, their case would be much stronger than it is. In contrast, Protestant exclusivists can muster a number of texts, such as Acts 4:12 in both its negative and positive aspects, that appear to argue strongly the case that there is no hope for the unevangelized apart from receiving special revelation and having a personal conscious faith in Christ. Inclusivists who insist that Christ is the locus and focal point of salvation, but that one does not need to have an explicit knowledge of Christ to be saved, do not do justice to the fact that in the New Testament salvation in Christ always appears to be connected with calling on the name of Jesus, and if that is necessary then this means that an explicit knowledge of Him is required. The main way of coming to knowledge of Christ was, of course, coming into contact with the messengers of Christ, who did not separate His name from His person. They did not posit a distinction between salvation in Christ and confession of Christ. Their call for repentance before God was also joined with the necessity of confessing faith in Christ.

With regard to the destiny of the unevangelized, it appears that there is no hope for them unless they are reached with the Christian message. God has given His people the task of taking this saving message to the world. He has given it to no one else but them, but He has promised that He will be with His people in this crucial work. The sovereign grace of God is not restricted by human evangelistic efforts, but actually works through it. In the light of the precarious situation of the unevangelized, the Church must devote more of its time and energy in evangelizing the world, but even if there is renewed enthusiasm with regard to carrying out the Great Commission, if some still do not hear they must be grouped with the non-elect people of God.

Summary and Overall Conclusion

In the Old Testament there is a twofold love of God - a love for the whole world and for His covenant people. The former is manifested in God's creation of the world and its inhabitants, particularly humanity, which is made in God's image and likeness, strongly suggesting that it has been created for fellowship and intimacy with God. God's kindness and benevolence to the world is also seen in His providential ruling over it, in its preservation, and in all the good gifts it receives.

The main focus of God's love in the Old Testament, however, is Israel, a nation that God chooses above all others. It is this nation alone for which God has a deep passion (*hasaq*), so much so that He will tolerate no rivals in His people's affection. He will punish its unfaithfulness, but will restore it when it returns to Him as the object of its love and obedience. Israel's election, which was based on the unmerited favour (*hesed*) of God, was for a particular purpose - to be God's servant and a blessing to the nations, a task in which it failed; yet that purpose was ultimately fulfilled in the Messiah, Jesus. This unmerited favour of God also established the covenant relationship and ensured that the covenant relationship was maintained even when there was a temporary punishment for Israel's failure to keep the covenant. It was also the means by which all the blessings of the covenant were poured out to His people when they obeyed the terms of the covenant.

God's love is not just directed towards Israel, but towards particular people within it, such as the Patriarchs, Moses, David, Solomon, and the "suffering servant" of Isaiah, who is the one who will bring justice to the nations. Particular groups within the nation are also loved by God, including aliens - landless foreigners who live among the people of God. It is not just a nation, individuals and groups within the covenant people of God that He loves, but also people who love righteousness and pursue it, and this righteousness is conformity to the demands of the covenant. God's righteousness is both retributive and saving. He punishes His people for their sin, but his covenant promises to the Patriarchs ensure that His people will still survive and a remnant will be preserved. This retributive righteousness of God does not give Israel a sure and certain ground for hope, although it was aware of the merciful and compassionate nature of God, so that, if it repented He would show mercy towards it. The saving righteousness of God, which is the ground of His people's hope, has an eschatological dimension which is ultimately fulfilled in the Messiah, Jesus, who will finally and fully save the people of God. God's love is not just directed towards a nation, groups and individuals, particularly individuals who love and pursue righteousness. God also loves the city of Jerusalem, the place where He resided, yet His love for Jerusalem and

His people does not mean that they will be excluded from His judgement if they persist in sin.

Regarding the New Testament love of God, it can be summarised in this way. Like the Old Testament, there is a substantial amount of evidence to show that both the world and His elect people are the objects of His love, kindness and benevolence. There is, however, a further love of God that is clearly revealed in the New Testament, the love between the Father and Son. This is a love that has always existed, because God is love and thus is complete in Himself. He is a self-sufficient being, not in need of the existence of created creatures or of their love for Him, yet when His love is rejected, God experiences sadness, anger, hurt and pain, just as we do when we suffer the same rejection. Yet at the same time His essence remains immutable, nor is His divine will affected. The existence of evil in God's world does not contradict the fact that He is good and loving, for He has given His creatures a relative free will in which they choose evil actions, although God has foreordained that to occur. No moral blame can be placed at God's door for the existence of evil, although He, of course, has allowed it to enter into His creation and uses it for the fulfilling of His eternal will. God brings His eternal will to fruition and this includes the free actions of His moral creatures. God's divine sovereignty is therefore not incompatible with human freedom. While the nature of God is love, Reformed theology has generally not elevated the love of God above His other attributes, for He is understood to be the sum total of all His attributes or perfections, and this is that which makes up His essence. Nonetheless, the love of God has often in Reformed theology been subordinated to the moral attribute or perfection of God's goodness. It must be asked, however, whether this reflects the New Testament teaching on the triune nature of God, the atoning death of Christ and God's special, elective love for his people.

The New Testament love of the Father for the Son is a prominent feature in scripture particularly in the fourth Gospel, as is the Son's love for his Father. The Father loves the Son and in his incarnate life gives Him the unlimited gift of the Spirit as well as placing everything in His hands, which includes the authority to judge all people with regard to their response to Him. Jesus, the Son, loves the Father, as is evidenced in His obedience, both passive and active. This obedience is His response to an already existing love that the Father has for Him. This active obedience is the keeping of Torah, and the passive

obedience is His sacrificial and substitutionary death on the Cross. The atoning death of Christ, which is an expiatory and propitiatory sacrifice for sins, is the greatest manifestation of God's love, going beyond what can be seen of it in creation and providence, because these present limitations to what we can understand about God's love. It is the atoning death of Christ at the Cross of Calvary that is to be emphasized with regards to that love, for this is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes.

Reformed theology has argued that the Old and New Testament attest to the fact that the whole world is a recipient of the kindness, goodness, and love of God. All the blessings of life that humanity receives flow from the hand of God and in Reformed theology these have been subsumed under the concept of common grace. God's common grace includes the execution of the stay of death upon sinful humanity, the restraint of sin both in the lives of individuals and in society in general, the ability of people to perform outward good and civil righteousness and all the natural blessings that all people receive, whether good or bad, regenerate or unregenerate, elect or reprobate. None of the natural blessings that humanity receives comes apart from the graciousness of God.

One further aspect of God's common grace that many within humanity receive is the free offer of the Gospel. The Church has been commanded to take the good news of Jesus into all creation which offers eternal life to all who believe and repent of their sin. While all people are commanded to repent and believe the Gospel, not all will do so, because God in His sovereign grace has chosen to regenerate only the elect. While many receive the outward call only the elect receive the internal call, enabling them to respond to the offer of the Gospel and to trust in Christ freely for their salvation. The Gospel is to be preached to all; that it is only effective for the elect does not lessen the obligation of the Church to take it into the whole world. The doctrines of predestination, which include election and reprobation, are not at variance with the free offer of the Gospel. Those who reject it are held accountable for their refusal to believe in Christ, even though they do not have the ability to respond to it positively.

Those who are God's elect people in the New Testament are not chosen because of God's foreknowledge, but according to His love, grace, and sovereignty. God's foreknowledge cannot just be understood as His knowing in advance who will believe in Christ for salvation, but as His choosing in advance. The elect have been chosen by God from eternity to be His holy people, yet they must freely trust in Christ to receive all the benefits of His atoning death. There can be no saving benefits without faith in Jesus, although these flow to all people in a general way, and not in a redemptive way.

This twofold love of God (God's love for the world and God's love for His elect people) is a particular feature of Reformed theology in contrast to other types. Reformed theology is therefore in line with the overall witness of the Old and New Testament. Reformed theology believes that the love of God is manifested to all people, although that love is actually only saving for the elect. Because God is sovereign and free in all his dealings with the world, He can, and does, choose to touch different people in different ways with regard to His love. For some, God's love ensures the salvation of the elect; for others it passes them over and leaves them to receive the due penalty for their sin. That God passes over some is His sovereign prerogative. He could have passed over all people, had He so chosen, for none deserves His mercy, yet He does in fact choose to save some. Reformed theology should not be accused of misrepresenting God, for it actually teaches that He is gracious because some people, the elect, will in fact actually be saved. By contrast Arminian theology cannot actually guarantee that God will save any, because human free will can resist Him. Reformed theology argues the certainty of salvation for some, but not all.

The question of the love of God and the destiny of those who have no opportunity to hear about Jesus is an emotive issue. Although God wants all to hear and respond to the good news of Jesus, His preceptive will can be hindered by human free will, although His decretive will cannot be resisted. That some do not hear about Jesus is, therefore, not inconsistent with the divine decree of God. While God desires that none be lost and that all come to repentance, the unevangelized, because they do not hear the Gospel, cannot turn to Christ for salvation, and thus they cannot be counted among His beloved elect people, although they are the recipients of His general love. The unevangelized are not condemned for their failure to believe in a saviour of whom they have never heard, but because of their

sin, which makes them the object of God's wrath. They cannot plead ignorance, because God has revealed Himself to them in the vehicles of creation and conscience, but they have suppressed the truth of God in general revelation by their unrighteousness. What the unevangelized need for any hope of salvation is access to special revelation. Without that access it appears that no one in the Old or New Testament was saved. Christ is both the locus and focal point of salvation, but this cannot be separated from an explicit knowledge of Him. No one can call on the name of Christ for salvation apart from an overt awareness of who He is and what He has done.

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