



# **The Difficult Doctrine of the Love of God**

*D.A. Carson*

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At first thought, understanding the doctrine of the love of God seems simple compared to trying to fathom other doctrines like that of the Trinity or predestination. Especially since the overwhelming majority of those who believe in God view Him as a loving being.

That is precisely what makes this doctrine so difficult. The only aspect of God's character the world still believes in is His love. His holiness, His sovereignty, His wrath are often rejected as being incompatible with a "loving" God. Because pop culture has so distorted and secularized God's love, many Christians have lost a biblical understanding of it and, in turn, lost a vital means to knowing who God is.

*The Difficult Doctrine of the Love of God* seeks to restore what we have lost. In this treatment of many of the Bible's passages regarding divine love, noted evangelical scholar D. A. Carson not only critiques sentimental ideas such as "God hates the sin but loves the sinner," but provides a compelling perspective on the nature of God and why He loves as He does. Carson blends his discourse with discussion of how God's sovereignty and holiness complete the biblical picture of who He is and how He loves.

In doing away with trivialities and cliches, this work gets to the heart of this all-important doctrine from an unflinching evangelical perspective. Yet it does so without losing its personal emphasis: for in understanding more of the comprehensive nature of God's love as declared in His Word, you will come to understand God and His unending love for you more completely.

## **The Difficult Doctrine of the Love of God Details**

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# From Reader Review The Difficult Doctrine of the Love of God for online ebook

## Ryan Jankowski says

Though brief, this was a very helpful book. Highly recommended.

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## Eli says

This is an excellent, level-headed reflection upon the God of love as He is revealed in Scripture. We need more theologians like D.A. Carson who can handle the Bible with care, intelligently yet with real feeling, and who are brave enough to hold to the difficult doctrines of word of God. This book will yield many insights for all those who are willing to consider thoughtfully what he has to say.

Carson discusses five different aspects of the love of God:

- 1) the intra-Trinitarian love of God (that is, the love of the Father for the Son and of the Son for the Father.
- 2) the providential love of God (that is, God's love for all His works)
- 3) the yearning love of God for all sinners
- 4) the special electing love of God
- 5) the disciplining love of God for His people

Carson is correct in observing that we fall into error whenever we isolate and absolutize any one of these aspects of the love of God to the neglect of the others. We need to realize that God's love means many things and not just one thing, and that all the different aspects of God's love, as they are found in Scripture, are complementary to each other. I did take some issue with Carson's view on the fifth aspect of the love God (God's disciplining love for His people), but this doesn't spoil the overall thesis of the book and won't keep me from recommending it.

The book also has many helpful things to say about the relationship between the love of God and God's other attributes and perfections. God's manifold perfections are in harmony and not at variance with each other. His perfections do not become subsumed and lost in the love of God, nor does His love get subsumed and lost in His many perfections. This is critical to understand, as our culture and much of Christendom too often embraces a notion of "the love of God" that fails to do justice to the "God" of love. When we fail to uphold the truth of "God", we lose both God and His love altogether.

Carson's reflection on the bearing the love of God has upon the intent/extent of the atonement is also outstanding. Here he offers a realistic and sober analysis of the tired debate and puts forth a solution for both Arminians and Calvinists that should, in my opinion, be embraced by all as a much needed correction. When all the different aspects of the love of God are understood and given their due, we can affirm both that God loves and sent Christ to die for all people, while at the same time affirm the special intent of God in effectively rescuing His elect.

Any person wishing to study the love of God (which should be us all!) cannot afford to miss reading this very helpful book. It should be required reading. May more and more people attain to the Scriptural view of the difficult doctrine of the love of God, well-expressed in this book by D.A. Carson.

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## **Demetrius Rogers says**

Carson shows that the word 'love' has semantic range, but I found his way of categorizing texts to be fairly subjective and strongly guided by Reformed presuppositions. To me this was a frustrating read because I take Carson to be a brilliant expositor, but his generalizations and inconsistencies seemed fairly patent. For example, the guiding principle of his book was to nuance the word 'love' (agapao), yet when juxtaposing John 3:16 with 1 John 2:15-17 he failed to do that for the word 'world' (kosmos) [pp 79-80], which changes the meaning considerably between the two texts.

And to what end did he write this book? I don't think he ever made that clear, other than perhaps placing the love of God on a scale - the strongest being intra-trinitarian love and the weakest being for the reprobate.

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## **Aaron Ventura says**

What I liked: D.A. Carson articulates well the problems we have when we talk about the love of God. He does a good job of explaining cultural definitions of love over against the Bible's definition of love. There is a real need for preachers to make the necessary qualifications here so that the gospel can be understood.

What I didn't like: I was not satisfied with Carson's attempt to harmonize impassibility with the language of God's emotions in Scripture. I still have many questions about this and am not sure what to make of Carson's position. There is also some intra-trinitarian stuff here that makes me wonder where Carson would land in the whole eternal subordination of the Son debate.

My overall impression is that this was good food for thought, but I am left with more questions than answers.

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## **Patrick Mulcahy says**

There were some things I really liked about this book, in particular how he talked about five aspects of God's love, and the danger of absolutizing any one of them. In some ways I felt like he had things just a bit too well figured out though - as though he had God and God's love and wrath figured out so that it fit his theological viewpoint. I do think what Carson does well in this book is to show that God's love and wrath aren't necessarily incompatible. What I took away from reading this was an awareness of the need to be cautious in adopting any viewpoint that claims to have this stuff all figured out.

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## **Jeffrey Niles says**

The doctrine of the love of God is not an easy doctrine. Compared to other dialogs in theology, one may be tempted to relegate this teaching as material which is mastered in the early days of Sunday School. Certainly, God loves and is love; toddlers and adults alike can taste this truth with ease. However, D. A. Carson has masterfully displayed that the doctrine of God's love is indeed difficult, and as such, is worthy of careful attention. "Christian faithfulness entails our responsibility to grow in our grasp of what it means that God is

love.” The doctrine remains central to the message of Christianity and therefore, especially in light of its complexity, should be the focus of disciplined study. Carson sets forth in this book to outline how Christians should proceed toward an understanding of this great doctrine.

Carson’s work is short, but contains much depth and carries great weight in its ability to challenge the scholar and layman alike. An edited form of four sessions which he presented during the 1998 W. H. Griffith Thomas lectures, his book covers ninety-three pages, and in it Carson addresses the topic of God’s love in four concise, but well argued chapters.

In the first, he addresses the question as to why the doctrine is difficult and how it has been distorted. Carson poses three cultural and two theological reasons for its complexity: (1) a missing Christian framework, (2) modern sentimentalism, (3) postmodern pluralism, (4) the complexity of God himself, (5) and various distinctions (Intra-Trinitarian love, God’s love for what he has made, salvific love for the world, God’s selecting and effective love, and provisional love which is conditioned upon obedience) that are made within Scripture regarding God’s love. Carson concludes the first chapter with some preliminary observations regarding the absolutizing and compartmentalizing of God’s love; he also addresses the convention of certain clichés.

Carson then progresses to a discussion on how one must proceed to an understanding of divine love. He warns in his second lecture/chapter against flawed word studies and illegitimate totality transfer. Much of this section is a review of another book by Carson.

Chapter three deals with the complexities of a God who is love, but is also sovereign. He addresses the transcendence of God, the concept of election within God’s sovereignty, and divine immutability, yet points out the thirty-five passages that portray God as relenting or repenting. Unpacked, an infinite God has established a relationship with finite beings. “But what does it mean to have a personal relationship with the transcendent, sovereign God? We cannot easily imagine this, whether by extrapolation of our finite experience or by strategic negations.” Carson maintains that rightly constrained impassibility needs to be seen. God’s love cannot be separated from his knowledge; his will cannot be divorced from his love. There is a distinction between falling in love and God setting his affections on man. Theologians must recognize that God’s love does not function exactly like man’s and must remember that he exercises his love in conjunction with his other perfections; his love always emanates from his own character.

In his final chapter, Carson deals with the difficulty of the coinciding doctrine of God’s wrath. He addresses misconceptions about God’s wrath and then concentrates on the implications of the love of God in regard to the intent of the atonement, in regard to God’s love for the world, and in regard to God’s love for his people.

*The Difficult Doctrine of the Love of God* is not an exhaustive study of the theology of divine love, nor of its implications for the church in a postmodern society. However, in this brief work, Carson has masterfully called believers to further and careful study of this great doctrine and has successfully charted the way for that endeavor by warning believers of the mistakes which have been made in the past and by drawing specific distinctions in how God’s love is to be viewed biblically.

One of the greatest contributions Carson has made in this particular work is his clear portrayal of the distinctions made in Scripture between God’s love toward different persons, whether that be the Father’s love for the Son (John 3:35; 5:20), his salvific love for the whole world (John 3:16), or his selective, effective love toward the elect (Mal 1:2-3; Eph 5:25). Much confusion has been flooded through churches over the centuries because men have muddled those distinctives or compartmentalized the various aspects of God’s love. “Because we tend to emphasize one proposition over and above other propositions, we naturally

alienate the various propositions that Biblically fit together.” Carson notes the distinctives which Scripture makes regarding God’s love while at the same time warning his reader of compartmentalizing independent “loves” of God.

The fruit of Carson’s study and clear definitions have implications not only for theology proper, but carry weight into other fields as well, such as Soteriology. Two illustrations should suffice. Postmodern society has failed to note the distinctives addressed above and with that have attacked the concept of divine wrath. Carson notes that God’s wrath is not one of his perfections, but rather is a willed response against his holiness. In contrast, God’s love “wells up amidst his perfections and is not generated by the loveliness of the loved.” The implications this bears upon universalism and other views of salvation are vast.

D. A. Carson also deals specifically with the issue of limited atonement and the debate over whether God truly loves the world. Drawing from the foundational issue of the distinctives within God’s love, Carson affirms the declaration of Scripture that God directs his love toward the lost. Summarizing Carson’s section on the atonement, Dr. Scott Horrell writes, “Especially helpful is his suggestion that the debate between ‘limited’ and ‘unlimited’ atonement may be better conceived as ‘general’ and ‘definite’ atonement. God’s offer of salvation is genuinely extended to all, but the elect are those sinners to whom is granted the grace to believe.” With the understanding that God’s love is directed toward various individuals in different ways, the discussion of the atonement may be able to take new shape.

The Difficult Doctrine of the Love of God is a brief work and in no way attempts to bring resolution to various theological discussions, such as the extent of the atonement. However, Carson has issued an appropriate challenge to pursue a correct and deeper understanding of God’s love in its various aspects. In addition, he has provided an appropriate framework for this pursuit. His book is not a difficult read, but is definitely recommended for its great insight, careful thought, and for its implications upon multiple areas of theology and life.

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### **Ryan Bare says**

Very good reminder of God's love for us, though undeserving. Because it is based off of a lecture series, it is easy to read, while still including deep theological content.

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### **Callum Iles says**

Donald Arthur Carson is a Canadian theologian currently serving as the Professor of New Testament at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School in Illinois. He is a remarkable man with the understanding and confidence to tackle the most complex theological issues of our time such as evangelizing to post-moderns and the Emergent Church. The content of *The Difficult Doctrine of the Love of God* is no exception. The manuscript came from a series of lectures made to the Dallas Theological Seminary in 1998 and was put together a few years later. The revelation contained within this book is life-changing. Carson begins with a commentary on how these days, when we speak of the love of God we speak of him in our comfortable image. We say that God feels the emotions that we feel, and through this we purge God of anything uncomfortable. It is a true but confronting word. Carson goes on to say people are no longer surprised that God loves them, and the systematic journey we are taken on brings us to a new revelation on

what the love of God really looks like.

By picking and choosing the aspects of God we like, we are treading on dangerous ground, and Carson eloquently and sensitively walks the reader through a way back to true understanding. We learn that God 'is' and us humans are always only 'becoming.' We learn that God doesn't experience emotions like we do, he is certain characteristics and he is unchangeable in them.

For example, we have all heard God is love, what that means though, is that God doesn't just love us when we are good, but no matter what we do God loves us, because he cannot do anything else. For another example, God hates sin, meaning God never changes in his hatred for sin.

The 100-page study ends with a studious elegance as we see how God's love and God's wrath sit side by side the entire New and Old Testament, only to come to a crescendo in the cross of Jesus. Carson finishes with the powerful words, 'Do you wish to see God's love? Look at the cross. Do you wish to see God's wrath? Look at the cross.' And it is there we meet with Jesus once more, our mediator and only hope.

I thoroughly recommend The Difficult Doctrine of the Love of God to anyone who wants to understand God more, so that you can love God more.

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## **Bruno says**

We tend to oversimplify and to sentimentalize the love of God. The Bible describes God's love in five different facets. We need to keep them all in mind and not focus on one to the exclusion of the others.

1. Within the trinity the love of the Father for the Son and the Son for the Father.

"For the Father loves the Son and shows him all that he himself is doing..." (John 5:20)

"...but I do as the Father has commanded me, so that the world may know that I love the Father...  
(John 14:31)

2. The providential love of God where he provides the just and the unjust.

"...For he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust." (Mat 5:45)

3. God's yearning love for rebellious humanity not because God needs us but because he is love.

"For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. (John 3:16)

4. God's love for the elect

"...even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him. In love he predestined us for adoption as sons through Jesus Christ, according to the purpose of his will..." (Eph 1:4-5)

5. God's disciplinary love for his children.

"For the Lord disciplines the one he loves, and chastises every son whom he receives." (Heb 12:6)

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## **Ben House says**

A short book that is long on challenging doctrinal thoughts and clarifications on the love of God. It is easy to read right past the title, for it seems like God's love would be one of the easiest of doctrines to grasp. But that truth, which is never separated from other attributes of God, is rich and more powerful than a simple gushy feeling God is often projected as having.

Four chapters growing out of four lectures make up this short book of some 93 pages. Worthy for a quick read, a re-reading, a series of messages, or a short group study.

D. A. Carson continues to climb in my estimation. I read his book *Exegetical Fallacies* years ago and used his book on the Sermon on the Mount in a sermon series. I find his work quite challenging and full of good instruction.

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## **David Sarkies says**

### **Don Carson and his difficult doctrines**

24 October 2011

I am going to sound very heretical by saying this but I have yet to be impressed by a Don Carson book. Granted, Carson is probably a great theologian, and many people say that they have been greatly encouraged by his books, and when he speaks he probably does have a substantial drawing power (when he came to Melbourne, each of his talks were sold out). Okay, I did find his daily devotionals quite helpful but the other books that I have read of his (and this probably makes it number four, including his two daily devotional books) I have found quite dry and, to be honest, boring.

Now this book, as can be seen from the title, is about the Love of God and through this rather short book he struggles with what the Bible actually means by God's love. Is it a question of God loving everything on one level, and the elect on another (it is clear from this book that Carson is a Calvinist), or is there a consistent love of God. He also explores the nature of whether God hates just sin, or the sinners that commit the sin as well. I will agree that this is a difficult doctrine, but then again when has anything about Christianity been simple. Granted, there is the basic concept of Christ dying for our sins so that through the grace of God and our faith in him, we are granted eternal life, but even then that is not all that simple. What is grace, and how do we have faith?

Though despite all of these difficult doctrines, Christianity is embraced by people from all walks, many of them having the simple faith of the child that Christ praises. Christianity is not just a faith for the intellectuals, and we even see this in the biblical account where scoffers laugh at Paul when he speaks on the Rock of Ares (the Aeropagus, or Mars Hill) in Athens. We are also told that to the Jews the message is blasphemous while to the Greeks it is foolish, however it was embraced by slave and freeman alike, both the wealthy and the poor, as well as the intelligent and the simple. Christianity in all its forms has always been a faith that is open to all.

But what about the love of God? Isn't God love, and doesn't God love us all. Well yes and no. Yes he does: he created us and like all creators he loves that which he created. However, I say no because the deeper form of love, that of a love between two individuals (and I am not talking about sexual love, but rather about a familial bond between two friends) is reserved for those who love him. Carson says that it is those he chooses, but then we get into another difficult doctrine, and that is of predestination. Now that is most definitely a difficult doctrine and will be left for another day. Instead, I will simply say God loves those who



love him, though we must remember that God's love is not reciprocal, meaning that it does not only respond to somebody who loves him, but rather it is unconditional, namely that it is freely offered to those who want it, and it is through that that our relationship with God is formed.

However the other thing we must keep in mind is in fact a title of an old 80's song 'I Want to Know What Love Is'. Well, Foreigner, if you want to know what love really is then you need to look at God because God is Love. Now, that is a pretty vague statement because how can an object (God) be a concept (Love). I don't think it means that though because what John is saying is that if we want to know what love is (just as Foreigner asks) then we must look at God and what he did on the cross. As it says in the Bible 'greater love hath no man than he give up his life for another'. That is what Christ did on the cross, taking the full punishment that was due to us upon himself so that we might re-enter that relationship with God.

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## **Paul says**

This book is classic Carson. This is a brief book and is not meant to be a detailed exposition of this doctrine but rather offer doctrinal sketchings.

The book is short, 97 pages. Made up of four chapters: (1) On Distorting the Love of God; (2) God is Love; (3) God's Love and God's Sovereignty; and (4) God's Love and God's Wrath.

## **Summary:**

### Chapter 1

Carson uses three sections to explain why the doctrine of God's love, of all doctrines (!), is a *difficult* doctrine.

A. Why the Doctrine of the Love of God must be judged difficult.

Carson gives 5 reasons:

(i) The doctrine is set in a matrix other than biblical theology. Often niches of contemporary pop culture determine what it is to be "loving."

(ii) Contributing to the above, we live in a culture where *other* complementary truths about God are widely *disbelieved*.

(iii) In line with the cultural theme above, the postmodern turn has contributed to the problem. Today, the only belief that is heretical is the belief that anything is heretical.

(iv) Certain theological beliefs contribute to the problem. How does God's love fit in with the observed and undeniable existence of evil in the world? With a God who is sovereign and plans and determines that evil?

(v) The idea of the love of God is viewed simplistically, forgetting that the Bible itself makes distinctions the Bible introduces on this topic.

B. Some Different Ways the Bible Speaks of God's Love:

- (i) The peculiar love the Father has for the Son and vice versa.
- (ii) God's providential love over all that he has made.
- (iii) God's salvific stance toward his fallen world.
- (iv) God's particular, effective, selecting love toward his elect.
- (v) God's love toward his redeemed people conditioned on obedience.

### C. Three Preliminary Observations on These Distinctive Ways of Talking About the Love of God

- (i) Problems ensue if one of these 5 ways are granted hermeneutical priority by which the other ways of talking about God's love are relativized.
- (ii) We should not view these ways of talking about the love of God as independent, compartmentalized *loves* of God.
- (iii) Within this framework we must ask how well certain evangelical clichés stand up. Is God's love unconditional? In the fourth sense, yes, not in the fifth sense, though. Does God love everyone in exactly the same way? Perhaps in the second category, not in the fourth.

If I may interject, why can we humans have discriminating love but not God? Why is it problematic if God doesn't love every single person in the same way? I am to love my neighbor and my wife. Should I sleep with my neighbor, therefore? No, the loves are *different*.

## Chapter 2

This section has three parts as well. Carson expounds on how one should not proceed when trying to figure out some teaching of the Bible, and then on how we should proceed, he then offers concluding reflections.

### A. How Not to Proceed

Carson looks at those who have tried to figure out this doctrine by word studies and have landed on the  $\alpha\gamma\alpha\pi?$  word group as higher, more noble, or less emotional. Something close to willed altruism. Carson has discussed the problems with this method in his *Exegetical Fallacies*. He notes 7 problems with this approach:

- (i) Careful diachronic work has been done on the Greek words for love. Greek philology can explain the rise of certain word groups without having to rush to a theological explanation.
- (ii) In the OT when Amnon rapes his sister we are told, in the LXX, that he loves her.  $\alpha\gamma\alpha\pi?$  is used here. It's not clear then that the word is higher, more noble, or less emotional.
- (iii) In the Gospel of John we are told that the Father loves the Son ( $\alpha\gamma\alpha\pi?$ ) in 3:35 and that the Father loves the Son ( $\phi\iota\lambda\epsilon?$ ) in 5:20, there's no detectable difference in meaning.
- (iv) This method may be valid to figure out the *lexical* meaning of words, but it has no bearing on any concrete passage.

(v) Even in the English word "love" we can see differences in meaning depending on context: intercourse, platonic, emotional, etc.

(vi) Willing altruism isn't enough for love because 1 Cor. 13 says one can exhibit *that* yet still not "have love."

(vii) Probably an improper view of the impassibility of God has played into our accepting the  $\alpha\gamma\alpha\pi\epsilon\iota$  word group.

#### B. How To Proceed: Text in Context

In this section Carson exegetes John 5:16-30 and shows how one comes up with one view of God's love, the first view.

#### C. Some Concluding Synthetic Reflections

In this section Carson tackles objections that the label "the Son" is rightly attached only to the incarnate Word, not the word in pre-incarnate glory, and, hence, Carson's exegesis in (B) does not select for sense (1) (see ch. 1, B. 1). His counters are:

(i) The Son does *whatever* the father does, this would include *creation*, and, hence, would be pre-incarnate.

(ii) The text says that "the person sent" is "the Son."

(iii) John 5:26 most plausibly reads as an *eternal* grant from the Father to the Son.

(iv) There are texts where Jesus addresses God as *Father* and refers to experiences shared in eternity past (...glorify me in your presence with the glory I had with you before the world began).

Carson wraps this section up with some comments on the Trinity and how his exegesis demonstrates that God is love. Not only do we see relational matters, we see *constitutional* matters as well. We see some distinguishing elements to God's love too. We are not slaves anymore, but friends. But, we are Jesus' friends if we do what he *commands*! Sounds like slaves. Carson parses this out a bit. Problems stem from our understanding terms in light of a post Antebellum South era.

### Chapter 3

Carson tries to establish three points in this chapter.

#### A. The effective element of God's love

Basically Carson sets out to show that God's love is not some unemotional stance. He looks at various passages and concludes that it is mere tradition to conclude that the Bible doesn't claim that God has feelings. But this doesn't mean God is subject to mood swings, is changeable, or dependant upon his creatures. God's love is *a se*.

#### B. The Sovereignty and Transcendence of God

Carson argues that:

- (i) God is sovereign.
- (ii) God's sovereignty extends to election.
- (iii) Christians are not fatalists, we are (should be!) compatibilists.
- (iv) God is immutable, unchangeable.
- (v) The above has come under attack by Open Theists. Misunderstandings have arose because of the mysteries involved in noting that God is transcendent and personal. Absolutizing any of these leads to problems, viz. hyper-Calvinism, Open Theism.

### C. A Rightly Constrained Impassibility

Carson answers some problems and holds to impassibility by invoking the traditional conception that God's attributes cannot be divorced from one another. All that he does he chooses to do. He ordains that he do. He is able to do. But none of this, no plan of God's, is divorced from his love. Thus God is *a se*. He needs *nothing* outside of himself. God's love arises without recourse to the loveliness of the loved. God's passions do not flare up out of control. But *they are* passions. So we do not have a rote unemotionalism.

## Chapter 4

Some view God as all-forgiving, but they down play or ignore his wrath. This view is popular, but sub-biblical. Carson offers some reasons:

### A. The Love of God and the Wrath of God

- (i) The Bible speaks of the wrath of God in high-intensity language, much like it does of his love.
- (ii) How, then, should the love of God and the wrath of God be related to each other? God's wrath is not blind rage (cf. comments on impassibility and *aseity*). However emotional it may be it is entirely reasonable and willed response to offenses against his holiness.
- (iii) Other misconceptions arise:
  - (a) The OT God is a God of wrath and the NT God is a God of love. This view arises because of temporal categories. God's wrath was brought forward in time in the OT. We read of its horrors. But in the NT God's wrath is brought forward in time and administered to Jesus. Sinners have a gracious period to repent. So, in the NT we can ask, Do you wish to see God's love? Look at the cross. Do you wish to see God's wrath? Look at the cross.
  - (b) The OT God is a God of wrath who must be playacted by a loving Jesus. Briefly, the *Father* is the one who *sent* Jesus.

### B. The Love of God and the Intent of the Atonement

Carson discusses limited atonement and opts for "definitive atonement" as the better term. He likes the sufficient for all, efficient for the elect phrasing. We need to ask of the intent. Did Jesus intend to accomplish salvation, or make it possible?

### C. The Love of God for the World

We can be told not to love the world yet God can love it because our love is evil, God's isn't. But in another sense we are to love it by going through it and presenting the gospel. We image God's love of the world in this.

### D. The Love of God and the People of God

Carson concludes with three reflections on (D).

- (i) God's love for his people is likened to that of a parent for child.
- (ii) The love of God is not merely to be analyzed and adopted into holistic categories of integrated theological thought. It is to be received, absorbed, and felt.
- (iii) Never underestimate the power of the love of God to break down and transform the most hardened individuals.

"To sum up: Christian faithfulness entails our responsibility to grow in our grasp of what it means to confess that God is love" (p. 24), Carson's little book is a step in the right direction. I recommend it.

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## John says

DA Carson is one of the clearest and deepest thinkers in the Reformed evangelical world. In *The Difficult Doctrine of the Love of God* Carson tackles what is perhaps the most difficult issue for Reformed thinkers to grapple with: if the God of the Bible is sovereign, can he really be loving? Before making his case for what the love of God looks like, Carson grapples with the distortion of the love of God. In Carson's words, "The love of God has been sanitized, democratized, and above all sentimentalized."

Carson spends the first two chapters parceling out the love of God. First, Carson lays out what is his most significant contribution in the book: a layered understanding of the love of God. In doing so, Carson comes to grips with the multitude of ways God is talked about scripturally. For instance, how does one reconcile God's love of the world with his love of the elect? It is a surprisingly difficult task that Carson has an elegant solution for.

Carson suggests that encapsulating all other loves is the intra-Trinitarian love of God. Within that love is "God's providential love over all that he has made." This is God's love as a Creator. There is nothing that God has made that he does not love. Within that circle is God's love of the fallen world. Within the circle of that love is God's "particular, effective, selecting love toward his elect." And finally, at the center is God's provisional love of the obedience of his children. Later in the book Carson reminds us that to absolutize any of these forms of love is to create "a false system that squeezes out other important things the Bible says, thus finally distorting your vision of God."

Next, Carson tackles the weight that has been given in different camps of the Greek word *agape* in describing the love of God. Carson asserts that we have made too much of distinctions between *phileo* and *agape* and that more important is the way all of these loves reflect out the intra-Trinitarian love to us: "Thus we move

from the intra-Trinitarian love of the Father for the Son, to the Son's love of his people in redemption. Jesus thus becomes the mediator of his Father's love. Receiving love, so has he loved."

Next, Carson tackles the difficult relationship between the love of God and God's sovereignty. Why is this so difficult? In some sense, you could say that the ongoing battle between Reformed and Arminian camps centers around which of these attributes of God trumps the other. The Reformed thinker has to be able to reconcile how her God is still truly loving in light of this intrinsic conflict.

Carson fleshes out just how raw the love of God is biblically. God's love at times makes the staid reader blush. In Hosea, the Most High rhapsodizes, "How can I give you up, Ephraim... my heart is changed within me; all my compassion is aroused." Carson asserts that when it comes to the impassability of God, "If this is taken to mean that God is emotionless, it is profoundly unbiblical and should be repudiated."

So, how do election and God's love fit together? First, any position must begin with compatibilism: "God's unconditioned sovereignty and the responsibility of human beings are mutually compatible." We must continuously place ourselves under the scriptural witness, which attests both a transcendent sovereignty and his personhood. To throw in the towel of transcendence leaves us with "the modern therapeutic God [who] may be superficially attractive because he appeals to our emotions," but is, in the end, no God at all.

Part of the solution of bridging the gulf between transcendence and personhood is understanding that God does not "'fall in love' with the elect" but rather "sets his affection on us."

Finally, Carson tackles how to reconcile God's love with his wrath. God's wrath, a thoroughly biblical concept "is not an implacable, blind rage." It is, in fact, an "entirely reasonable and willed response to offenses against his holiness." Contrary to popular understanding, when we come to the New Testament we find, in fact, that God's wrath is ratcheted up alongside his love. How is this the case? We see that God's justice is meted out, and not on those who deserve it, but that God himself, in Jesus Christ, bears the full weight of his wrath. "Thus God is necessarily both the subject and object of the propitiation." This love of God displayed for us on the cross is a love that swallows up wrath and compels our love. As John reminds us, "we love because he first loved us."

Carson's contribution in *The Difficult Doctrine of the Love of God* significant. I just added it, in fact, to my discipleship group curriculum as it is the most thoughtful wrestling through of what is at the crux of one of the most important theological issues a Christian has to come to grips with. As a reproduction of a series of lectures, I wish that there would have been a stronger editor. It's a book that pushes the lay Christian because it can read unevenly (at times very understandable to any Christian, at other times it is very academic) and the thread of the argument is hard to follow at times, particularly in the second chapter. That said, it is a book any thoughtful Christian would benefit from. I highly recommend it.

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I enjoyed the book. Dr. Carson did a good job of making sure the reader was sober in their understanding of God's love in multiple facets, and defended essential truths of God's love such as His immutability, wrath, holiness, etc. I'd recommend the book as a good primer to obtaining a foundation for this doctrine.