

**The Equivocal Doctrine of the Love of God: A Critique of  
D. A. Carson's *The Difficult Doctrine of the Love of God***

by Arminius Redivivus  
ANNO DOMINI 2022

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# **The Equivocal Doctrine of the Love of God: A Critique of D. A. Carson's *The Difficult Doctrine of the Love of God***

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## **INTRODUCTION**

There is much in this slim volume on the love of God that is theologically good and wise and helpful.<sup>1</sup> One expects no less from an evangelical scholar of Dr. Carson's stature and erudition. But in attempting to formulate a calvinistic *via media*, or *tertium quid*, on his chosen topic he has set himself up as a large target not only for the Arminian but also for the hyper-Calvinist, both of whom give simpler and more intuitively plausible answers to the all-important question of whom God loves and how he loves them: the former arguing contra Carson that God loves everyone everywhere *on any meaningful definition of the term love*; the latter arguing contra Carson that God loves only the elect *on any meaningful definition of the term love*. Note the italicized words, for therein lies a surprising and revealing convergence: surprising because the Arminian and the hyper-Calvinist are polar opposites theologically and, hence, strange polemical bedfellows; revealing because it spotlights a notable oversight. To wit: the book nowhere defines the term love!<sup>2</sup> Instead the book proffers five different "ways" of talking "about" the love of God the upshot of which is that *God loves all people in some ways and some people in all ways*. The book can be viewed as a sustained attempt to unpack and defend this statement.

## **THE FIVE "WAYS"**

The **first way** of speaking about the love of God is the most important of the five ways. This way refers to the perfect and eternal *intra-Trinitarian* love of the Father for the Son and of the Son for the Father (p. 16). Verses like John 3:35; 5:20; 14:31; 17:24; etc., belong here. This love is utterly foundational and undeniable. The only criticism of this "way" is not of the way itself, to which one can only say Amen!, but of the fact that Dr. Carson does not take it far enough. More on this problem anon.

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<sup>1</sup>The book was originally published in 2000 by Crossway Books. It has generously been made available online for free: proof of the sincerity and good will of both author and publisher. See: [http://s3.amazonaws.com/tgc-documents/carson/2000\\_difficult\\_doctrine\\_of\\_the\\_love\\_of\\_God.pdf](http://s3.amazonaws.com/tgc-documents/carson/2000_difficult_doctrine_of_the_love_of_God.pdf)

<sup>2</sup>Meaningful definitions of love are not hard to find. See examples in **Appendix 1** below.

The **second way** of speaking about the love of God is God's *providential* love for the entire world (pp. 16-17, 24). This way refers to God's caring, providential, *meticulous* ordering of everything in all of creation—animate and inanimate—at all times and in all places. (Dr. Carson is a theistic determinist.)<sup>3</sup> Verses like Matt 5:45 (the sun shines and the rain falls on the just and the unjust alike); Ps 104:21 (God feeds the lions); and Matt 6:26, 28 (God feeds the birds and clothes the lilies); etc., belong here. In this way, states Dr. Carson, God loves all people everywhere. But this “way” is initially suspect not least because the term love is not used to describe these divine activities, at least not directly.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, the Christian apologist would probably be wise to avoid beginning a theodicy of natural evil—not to mention supernatural or moral evil—here. For what is good providential news for the lion or the bird might not be such good providential news for the zebra or the earthworm! Be that as it may, and I have no wish to deny common grace or a benevolent God's benevolent providence,<sup>5</sup> the verses to which Dr. Carson alludes are being taken out of context in support of a supposition that is foreign to them, namely, that this is a distinct kind of love or a different “way” of loving.<sup>6</sup>

The **third way** of speaking about the love of God is, like the second, another way that God is said to universally love the whole world and everybody in it. According to this way of loving, God has a *salvific*, cross-based love for all people everywhere, including the reprobate (pp. 17-18). Verses like John 3:16 (“For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son”)<sup>7</sup> and Ezek 33:11 (“I take no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but rather that they turn from their ways and live”) belong here. Dr. Carson correctly interprets the Greek word *kosmos* in John 3:16 as referring to all people everywhere (pp. 17, 75) and rightly makes much of this way of loving throughout his book. This love, as he understands it, is and/or refers to:

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<sup>3</sup>I.e., he is an avowed “compatibilist,” which is to say that he is an avowed determinist. (At the risk of being pedantic, determinism is the genus of which compatibilism is the species.) For him “compatibilism,” that is to say determinism, “is a *necessary* component to any mature and orthodox view of God and the world” (p. 54). Most of Christendom, for most of its history, would beg to differ.

<sup>4</sup>The word “kind” in Luke 6:35 (the synoptic parallel to Matt 5:44-45) might have substituted for the missing word “love.” Unfortunately, this synonym for love that one finds in Luke 6:35, and significantly elsewhere in the NT (e.g., Rom 2:4; 1 Cor 13:4; Tit 3:4), is conspicuously absent from the book. This is no mere quibble to the effect that Dr. Carson should have written a different book, or a longer book. Imagine, *mutatis mutandis*, a 93 page Arminian account of Original Sin that used the word sin 570 times but never defined it, that never used the word “transgression” by way of elucidation, and that nowhere referenced or appealed to Rom 5:12ff. A Calvinist interpreter could hardly be faulted for thinking that something was amiss.

<sup>5</sup>I.e., to the verses alluded to in the book I would be quick to add Acts 14:17 and Jas 1:17.

<sup>6</sup>For further elaboration on this “way” see **Appendix 2** below.

<sup>7</sup>The Father's giving of the Son in John 3:16 is clearly *salvific* because in context both salvation (“eternal life”) and the cross (being “lifted up” [John 3:14-15]) are explicitly in view. Moreover, it is equally explicit in context that God's *intent* for the cross, i.e., the *purpose* of the cross, is to save the entire *kosmos* (John 3:17) and not just a few elect. This is flatly contra pp. 73-79 wherein God's intent and the purpose of the cross are limited to the effectual salvation of the elect only.

“God’s salvific stance toward his fallen world” (p. 17);

“God’s yearning love, reflecting his salvific stance toward our fallen race” (p. 19);

“his yearning and salvific love that pleads with sinners” (p. 45);

“God’s yearning warning and invitation to all human beings as he invites and commands them to repent and believe” (p. 75);

“God displays a loving, yearning, salvific stance toward the whole world” (p. 76);

“Scripture portrays God as inviting, commanding, and desiring the salvation of all, *out of love*” (p. 77);

“God’s love for the world is commendable *because it manifests itself in awesome self-sacrifice*” (p. 79; emphasis added);

“God’s yearning, inviting, commanding love, *supremely displayed in the cross*” (p. 83; emphasis added).

But this alleged way of loving is, according to both the Arminian and the hyper-Calvinist, completely vacuous *on any meaningful definition of the term love* given Dr. Carson’s theological pre-commitments to such things as meticulous, deterministic, divine sovereignty (pp. 51-54; and *passim*) and limited atonement (pp. 73-79). A *salvific* love for the never-to-be-saved reprobate? A *cross-based* love for those on whose behalf no “awesome self-sacrifice” took place and for whom no blood was shed and no atonement was made? These are unusual combinations of words. To the Arminian and the hyper-Calvinist alike they are theological gibberish and have no meaning. But even if one could grant that this is a kind of love, or a way God loves, it is not a *meaningful* kind of love or a *meaningful* way of loving since it changes nothing and amounts to nothing for the non-elect who are “so loved” (John 3:16) by God. Only for the elect can the cross in any sense be *salvific* since they alone are *saved* by it; they alone are within its *salvific* purview. For the non-elect the door marked Salvation has been forever closed and locked—by God!

To reiterate: a *salvific* ‘love’ for eternally *unsaved* reprobates created for wrath and hell conflicts with essential calvinistic beliefs about God’s omni-comprehensive and immutable decree and meticulous divine sovereignty, God’s sovereign non-choosing (reprobation) of the non-elect, God’s deliberate withholding of irresistible saving grace from the non-elect, and God’s deliberate and intentional limiting of the atoning work of Christ to the elect who alone receive irresistible grace.<sup>8</sup> In fact, this *salvific* ‘love’ for those God has specially created to *damn* (as in *not save*),

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<sup>8</sup>For the Arminian there is something oxymoronic and incoherent in the very notion of “irresistible grace.” It sounds like “forced love.” And what is more, it would seem that in a world of meticulous divine sovereignty *everything* that happens—good or bad—is equally *irresistible*. Is regenerating/saving grace any more or less “irresistible” than anything else God has sovereignly determined or decreed? What, then, makes it so special? Why, then, single it out? The “**I**” in *TULIP* must thus really stand for “Irresistible *everything*,” else it is unintelligible or trivial. Also, and for the same reason, the “**T**” in *TULIP* must really stand for “Total *determinism*,” before it can properly stand for

and is elsewhere said to “hate,”<sup>9</sup> makes God appear irrational if not positively schizophrenic. God “yearns” for people to do what they cannot do without his help—while deliberately withholding that help. God “pleads” with people to do what he has decreed they not do. God “commands” people to *do* precisely what he has decreed they not do; and to *not do* precisely what he has decreed they do. God’s revealed will (“Thou shalt not”) is contrary to and contradicted by his omnipotent decretive will (“Thou shalt”). God contra God. A double-minded God is unstable in all his ways. A King divided against himself cannot stand.<sup>10</sup>

The **fourth way** that God loves refers to “God’s particular, effective, selecting, *electing* love” (pp. 18-19). That is to say, true love. Verses like Deut 7:7-8; 10:14-15 (God’s love of Israel);<sup>11</sup> Mal 1:1-2 (God’s love of Jacob and hatred of Esau); and Eph 5:25 (Christ’s love for the Church) belong here. This way comes as no surprise for it is standard Calvinism, though for the Arminian it is problematic at many levels (e.g., the meaning of sovereignty, free will, and foreknowledge; the validity of TULIP; and, above all, the nature and purpose of election as means or end).<sup>12</sup> This way also appears to conflate and equate true and meaningful love with unconditional election, and vice-versa, in a kind of theologically-driven semantic field collapse. God’s deterministic sovereignty, and the resultant view of election, has become a theological

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“Total depravity,” since not just the depravity of the human race but every single other thing about it was also 100% decreed and determined by God; the “**U**” in TULIP must, then, really stand for “Unconditional *everything*,” before it can properly stand for “Unconditional election,” since not just election but every single other thing in the entire universe was also unconditionally decreed and determined by God; the “**L**” in TULIP must stand for “Limited *altruism*” before it can properly stand for “Limited *atonement*”; and the “**P**” in TULIP must really stand for the “Predetermination of *everything*,” before it can properly stand for the “Perseverance of the predetermined,” since not just their perseverance but every single other thing about them was also 100% decreed and determined by God. In order then: Total determinism. Unconditional everything. Limited altruism. Irresistible everything. Predetermined everything. One man’s flower is another man’s weed. But I digress.

<sup>9</sup>“God loves the elect and hates the reprobate. Rightly positioned, there is truth in this assertion” (p. 22; cf. pp. 19, 68-69).

<sup>10</sup>This Janus-tendenz runs deep in calvinistic depictions of the deity. Consider further the “two wills” view of John Piper’s profoundly conflicted God, and the mistaken understanding of sovereignty that gave rise to it, as these are capably refuted by Thomas McCall in *Trinity Journal* 29 (2008): 205-226, 235-246.

<sup>11</sup>If God really does love Israel, all Israel, the whole nation of Israel, as such verses do indeed suggest, then the fourth way instantly collapses. The fourth way only works if God loves only the elect remnant *within* Israel. That God does not so limit his love for *Israel* is surely significant and bodes well for the *world*—all of it—which God is said to love.

<sup>12</sup>I.e., is God’s election of Israel the final goal and end or is it a means to a still greater good and higher goal, like the winning of the nations? Does God elect Abraham in order to reject others or as a means of blessing all the families of the earth? Is the election of believers the end, entailing reprobation, or is it the means of saving the non-elect (meaning the not-yet elect)? Does the fact that the Son is the Chosen/Elect One *par excellence* entail the reprobation or rejection of any other Person or person(s)? The Calvinist view of election is fixed, static, and immutable; but a more dynamic, magnetic, and centrifugal understanding certainly seems possible.

black hole that pulls everything else into its orbit and devours it. Case in point: to *know*, Calvinists tell us, really means to choose. To *foreknow* really means to forechoose. And now to *love* also virtually means to choose?<sup>13</sup> And vice-versa? Really? It seems instead far better to assume that when a biblical author does not choose a given word, like *choose*, but instead chooses a different word, like *love*, that such deliberate selection is semantically meaningful given the available options. But that is just one language-user's opinion. This fourth divine way of loving is, so far as human beings made in God's image are concerned, the only way that actually matters or makes a tangible difference since it is only on the basis of this kind of love, or way of loving, that God actually does anything significantly beneficial for anyone. Only on the basis of this kind of love does God have the true and ultimate good of the other in view. How happy the fortunate few!

The **fifth way** God loves is his temporal, *conditional* love toward the elect only (pp. 19-21). This way of loving understands God's love as being like that of a parent who disciplines and rewards his children, as needed, for their ultimate good. Verses like Jude 21 ("keep yourselves in God's love"); John 15:9 ("If you obey my commands, you will remain in my love"); and Ps 103:13 ("As a father has compassion on his children, so the LORD has compassion on those who fear him") belong here. This love follows the irresistible regeneration/salvation of the elect and is based on *them* and the degree to which *they* obey or disobey in this life. Or, to word it slightly differently, this love is based on *God* and the degree to which *he* sovereignly and irresistibly determines them to obey or disobey in this life. But this way, not least given the calvinistic doctrine of the perseverance of the elect, is better seen as a subcategory or entailment of the fourth way that is also exclusive to the elect: for the salvation of the unconditionally elect includes and entails their perseverance and would not even be worth calling salvation without it. The idea that God *conditionally* loves (fifth way) those whom he *unconditionally* loves (fourth way) strikes one as sounding a bit odd. But the real problem is much bigger and deeper than this.

The real problem is that it is difficult, by which I mean impossible, to make logical and theological sense of *anything* being 'conditional' in a world where *everything*—every event, every molecule, every synapse, every thought, every desire, every action and reaction, every cause and effect—has been meticulously determined and predetermined by a maximally and "utterly sovereign" God.<sup>14</sup> Such a world, in other words, is a world in which literally everything is unconditional. God is simply 'responding' (another meaningless word) to what God himself is

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<sup>13</sup>A word study on the terms in question is highly instructive and demonstrates, first, that to foreknow means to foreknow (as many, including the pre-Augustinian Greek Church Fathers, have always assumed); and, second, that all of the Greek and Hebrew terms used for choices and choosing and selecting and electing in Scripture are (without equivocation!) applied to both God and men because both have the ability (God intrinsically and humans by gift of *imago dei* and prevenient grace) to choose between alternatives and be praiseworthy or blameworthy as a result. Humans not only can choose chocolate or vanilla but also life or death, blessing or curse (Deut 30:19), God or Baal (Josh 24:15), repentance and faith or rejection of the Son of God (Mark 1:15). Ought implies can. Only a lunatic would command corpses to dance. And only a depraved lunatic would smash the corpses to a pulp in wrath for not dancing. Talk about Total Depravity!

<sup>14</sup>God, we are repeatedly told, is "utterly sovereign" (pp. 49, 51, 57, 58). God, in all things and at all times and in all places and in all ways, exhibits "sweeping sovereignty" (p. 51), "*unconditioned* sovereignty" (p. 52; *emphasis added*), "absolute sovereignty" (p. 57), and "transcendent sovereignty" (p. 58).

decreeing and causing. In such a world something could well be *sequential*. Or *consecutive*. But *conditional*? Again it seems to the Arminian that we have drifted into word games. Or incoherence. Or worse. By worse I mean that a maximalist view of God's sovereignty effectively eliminates human responsibility and makes God the author of evil. God is, then, also maximally unjust (evil) for judging and condemning (damning) people to eternal torment for thinking, willing, and doing exactly what he has irresistibly and meticulously decreed them to think and desire and will and do. Could they, in even a single instance, have thought or desired or wanted or willed or done otherwise? Dr. Carson is certainly aware of the problem (cf. pp. 51-54), but waves it away with a passing reference to "secondary causality."

The upshot of all of this subtlety and complexity, as noted above, is that *God loves all people in some ways and some people in all ways*. All people receive some loves; some people receive all loves. All people are equally loved by God (p. 24); some people are just more equal than others. Some people are loved in more *ways* than others. Variety is the spice of life; perhaps also of love. If so, allow me to suggest **SPICE** as complementary acronym to TULIP:

Salvific  
Providential  
Intra-Trinitarian  
Conditional  
Elective

### THE BETTER WAY

The cursory critique above has thus far left untouched by any degree of censure or criticism only the **first way** of speaking about the love of God, which is necessarily also the most important way of speaking about the love of God. This is the perfect and eternal, *intra-Trinitarian* love of the Father for the Son and of the Son for the Father. And this is the way that is not taken far enough or seriously enough by Dr. Carson. Per his advice regarding how best to proceed, we must *not* make any one of God's ways of loving "the controlling grid by which the other ways of talking about the love of God are relativized."<sup>15</sup> Specifically, we must *not* "begin with the intra-Trinitarian love of God and use that as the model for all of God's loving relationships" (p. 21; cf. p. 75). If we do this, he avers, we will fail to maintain necessary distinctions and go astray.

On the contrary! The intra-Trinitarian love of God is the only biblically justifiable controlling grid! It is the only proper place to begin. It is the only proper place to end. It is the ground and basis of all of God's loving. God is one and his love is one. God's love is seamless, woven in one piece from top to bottom. The idea that God is one and that his love is one is so fundamentally and inescapably biblical that not even Dr. Carson can escape it, try as he might

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<sup>15</sup>This is not to say that Dr. Carson himself has no controlling grid. I suspect his can be found in the preceding footnote.

(p. 21; cf. p. 75).<sup>16</sup> But what does it mean to begin here? To us this love as our grid? Where does this first way lead? Come stray with me a while, and you will see.

### Love is Other-Oriented

The intra-Trinitarian love of God is *eternal* and *essential* to the Godhead. It is, as it were, “constitutional” (pp. 40-41). It is one of God’s “intrinsic perfections” (p. 67). This love is unique to the Christian God (praise God!); and this love is utterly basic and foundational to all that God is and does. This love is also necessarily and essentially *other-oriented* (p. 39). In fact:

in eternity past, the Father loved the Son, and the Son loved the Father. There has *always* been an other-orientation to the love of God. All the manifestations of the love of God emerge out of this deeper, more fundamental reality: love is bound up in the very nature of God. God is love. (p. 39).

Love is eternal and essential to the Godhead; and love is also *other-oriented* or “relational” (p. 40). So far so good! But please do not miss the significance of this: God’s intra-Trinitarian love is essentially and intrinsically *neighbor love*. All of the manifestations of the love of God emerge out of *neighbor love*. There is no other kind of divine love except *neighbor love*: not internally, not externally; not temporally, not eternally. How one frames this and words this is of the utmost importance. For the only question that matters an iota is: Am *I* God’s neighbor? Does God, having created me in his image, as a person, consider *me* a neighbor? I know that *I* am to consider all others my neighbors, including my enemies, and sacrificially seek their best interests. I know that *I* am to love them meaningfully, i.e., as I love myself. I know that *I* am to treat them as I would wish to be treated (the Golden Rule). But what about *God*? Does he hold himself to the same (divine?) standard to which he holds me? And if not, then wouldn’t that be hypocritical and inconsistent? Wouldn’t that be a sham ‘do as I say, not as I do,’ kind of ethic?

### Love is Self-Originating

But we can say more than that love is *other-oriented*. In addition to being other-oriented, love is also inherently (for God) and ideally (for us) *self-originating* (pp. 63-64). Because God is love; and because it is his nature to love; and because his love “emanates from his own character” (p. 63), it would seem to be self-evident that God cannot *not* love. Correction: God cannot *not meaningfully* love! “God in his perfections *must be loving* toward his rebel image-bearers *for he is that kind of God*” (p. 69; emphasis added). This is not a limitation imposed from without, but a limitation (pardon the word) that flows from his very nature in the same way that he cannot *not* exist (being self-existent and eternal) or that he cannot *not* be truthful or omniscient or just or holy or good, etc. Thus when God extends his love beyond himself to others he extends it to them because of who *he* is, not because of who *they* are. The fact that love is “self-originating” means that the love that God has for others—and that we also are to have for others—is “not elicited by the loveliness of the loved” (p. 64). It is not based on the intrinsic worthiness or merits of the

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<sup>16</sup>See the statements collected in **Appendix 3**, wherein Dr. Carson seemingly fails to take his own advice (p. 21; cf. p. 75) on how *not* to proceed. Thankfully, as we have all learned from the Fourth Gospel, people sometimes speak better than they know.



beloved. Self-originating love—which God perfectly displays and which we imperfectly imitate—is spontaneous, unmerited, gratuitous (in the best sense), and *unconditional*.

This last word is absolutely crucial and necessary, theologically loaded though it may be, if one is to correctly understand meaningful love. It is thus regrettable that Calvinists have attached this crucial word to *election* (as in TULIP) instead of to God’s *love*, where it most rightly and appropriately belongs. God loves everyone everywhere (“the world”) *unconditionally*. God does indeed act unilaterally and without reference to the object! To that extent the Calvinists are correct. But he does so in love, not power (sovereignty); and he does so toward all, not merely a few. “U” for *Unconditional* love? What a prettier TULIP that would be!

The idea that God’s love is unconditional is not just an “evangelical cliché” or “mere sloganeering” (pace p. 24). It simply follows ineluctably from the fact that God is love, from the fact that it is his nature to love, and from the fact that he cannot *not* love. God “*must be loving ... for he is that kind of God*” (p. 69; emphasis added). Unconditionality is, thus, of the essence of meaningful love and a necessary part of its definition. God’s unconditional love cannot and should not be limited exclusively to the unconditionally elect (contra p. 24). God’s love is infinitely better and greater than that; let us not truncate it on the procrustean beds of our theological systems.

### **Love is Volitional**

In addition to being *other-oriented* and *self-originating* (i.e., *unconditional*), love is also *volitional*. Love is volitionally altruistic and benevolent. So also, of course, is God. In fact, God is omnibenevolent, which is just another way of saying that he is love! He thus *wills* what is good and best for all who bear his image and reflect his likeness. He has a *volitional* commitment to the ultimate good of the other: in fact, to *all* others. Note the following three helpful statements:

- (1) Love is “an act of willed self-sacrifice for the good of another” (p. 26; cf. p. 79);
- (2) Love is “willed altruism” (pp. 28, 60);
- (3) Love is “willed commitment to the other’s good” (p. 46).

Indeed it is! And lest it appear that these three statements are being taken out of context, let it be duly noted that in the context of each statement above Dr. Carson’s intent is not, strictly speaking, to *affirm* the statements on their own merits (he seems almost dismissive) but rather to *negate* the idea that God’s love is merely willed self-sacrifice for the good of another or merely willed altruism or merely willed commitment to the good of others. God’s love is also—and this is the point of each negation—profoundly affective and emotional. The bottom line logically, however, of the three statements above is that if God’s love is not *merely* willed self-sacrifice for the good of another and not *merely* willed altruism and not *merely* willed commitment to the other’s good, it must at least *include* these things if words have any meaning.

### **Love is Emotional**

Finally, in addition to being *other-oriented*, *self-originating* (i.e., *unconditional*), and *volitional*, love is also profoundly and perfectly *affective* or *emotional*. God, in other words, is not

“impassible” as that term has so often wrongly been construed in classical theology (cf. pp. 58-64). God’s love, while related to and inseparable from his will, is also perfectly and powerfully and profoundly *emotional*. It is “a vulnerable love that feels the pain and pleads for repentance” (p. 59; cf. pp. 46-49). It is a love that is *emotional* without being mawkish or sentimental; it is a love that does not manipulate and that cannot be manipulated. This love is a sincere and sympathetic and *passionate* commitment to the ultimate good of the other, in addition to being a resolute, unwavering volitional commitment to their ultimate good. “God’s love is real love, of the same genus as the best of love displayed by God’s image-bearers” (p. 61; cf. p. 48). We display it, at least imperfectly and occasionally; and we know it when we see it. In fact, we are seeing it quite clearly now—seeing in outline the beautiful face of Christ, which is the face of God. *Venite adoremus!*

### ALMOST HOME

So where are we? Thus far we have learned not only that love is eternal and essential to God because God is triune and God is love, but also that:

*love is other-oriented, love is self-originating (and unconditional), love is volitionally altruistic and self-sacrificing for the ultimate good of others, and love is profoundly emotional and passionately invested in, and committed to, the ultimate good of the other.*

Not bad for a book that never actually defines the term in question. Not bad because we now have a meaningful definition of love with which to work. Not bad because we’ve just described God. And Christ. And God in Christ. Not bad because we have just landed, albeit by a strange and circuitous route ... in 1 Corinthians 13. And perhaps here is the single biggest problem and puzzler in this problematic and puzzling book: *it nowhere refers to 1 Corinthians 13!* Talk about a sin of omission! How could a book entirely devoted to the concept of love fail to reference the Bible’s own inspired definition of love in 1 Corinthians 13? It is truly inconceivable! Yet here it is. Or rather isn’t.<sup>17</sup>

Perhaps had Dr. Carson given the reader early on and up front the meaningful definition of love found in 1 Cor 13:4-8a, or even the meaningful definition of love that has just been painstakingly ferreted out of his own book, the smoke would have cleared and only two stark alternatives would have remained: the Arminian and the hyper-Calvinist. Namely, that God obviously loves everyone everywhere *on any meaningful definition of the term love* because God is love; or, that God mysteriously loves only the elect *on any meaningful definition of the term love* in spite of the fact that God is love. Take your pick. Either way, Dr. Carson’s calvinistic *via media* must be deemed a *cul-de-sac*—not because it fails to measure up to Arminian or hyper-Calvinist theological expectations; nor because it fails to measure up to fallen or postmodern or situational or sentimental or moralistic/therapeutic/deistic pseudo-definitions of love; but simply

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<sup>17</sup>It seems safe to say that every Christian is (or soon becomes) familiar with 1 Corinthians 13 and its glorious and poetic definition of love. Dr. Carson even more so! See his *Showing the Spirit: A Theological Exposition of 1 Corinthians 12–14* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1987), pp. 61-66. How doubly, nay triply, puzzling then is the omission here! It almost reminds one of another equally glaring and puzzling omission: that of the single most important statement in the Bible on the nature and character of God (i.e., “God is love” [1 John 4:8, 16]) from Calvin’s *Institutes*.

and solely because it fails to measure up to the plain and obvious meaning of Scripture. If this be doubted, read again the definition of love in 1 Corinthians 13, or even the meaningful definition provided above from Dr. Carson's book. This is what love is. This is who God is. This is how God loves. This is the love that manifests itself providentially to all people everywhere. This is the love that sent Christ to the cross for all people everywhere. This is the love that those who trust in Christ experience fully and eternally. This is the love by which God parents his adopted children. There is no other.

The final point that needs to be made about this theologically troubling book can now be made. At least one significant impetus, if not the *raison d'être*, for the book is so that "young Reformed preachers" might with a clear conscience, and without in any way violating their sensitive theological scruples, be able to say to all and sundry, "God loves you" (pp. 23; 77-78). But this is exactly what they cannot and must not say *on any meaningful definition of the term love!* Why not? Because any normal human being—any image-bearing father or mother or son or daughter or lover or friend or *neighbor(!)*—who hears the words "God loves you" will understand the words in terms of a normal and meaningful definition of the term love: namely, that God cares for them altruistically and benevolently, sincerely wills and desires what is best for them, and *acts* on their behalf and in their best long-term interests because there is no true love without action. Love is as love does! "To love is to act; anything short of action is not love at all."<sup>18</sup> Again: any normal human being (including for present purposes both the Arminian and the hyper-Calvinist) who hears the words "God loves you" will assume and infer a definition of love consistent with 1 Corinthians 13 and with the definition above that was gleaned from Dr. Carson's book.<sup>19</sup> A normal human being will never—and I repeat *never*—understand the words "God loves you" to mean:

**God 'loves' you** *in one or more different and distinct and distinguishable "ways" some of which are fully compatible (!) with your being a hated, reprobate vessel of wrath specifically created by God for everlasting (never-ending) conscious torment in hell and, moreover, effectually determined by pre-temporal decree and by the meticulous, temporal, irresistible, providential(!) activity of an infinitely powerful and "utterly sovereign" God for that sole and exclusive and ultimately God-willed and God-desired outcome. **Have a nice day.***

This is a stark, stunning, and stupendous example of double-speak and equivocation. Such a prodigy of casuistry would make even a 17<sup>th</sup>-century Jesuit blush. Such equivocation is unworthy of any human being, unworthy of any scholar,<sup>20</sup> and unworthy of any follower of him who said let your Yes be Yes, and let your No be No, and for God's sake let your love be love!

Dr. Carson, to put it bluntly, is unintentionally urging young reformed preachers to lie. May it never be! Dr. Carson is unintentionally encouraging young reformed preachers to deceive normal human beings who would rightly protest were the underlying calvinistic subtleties of these

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<sup>18</sup>Gordon Fee, *1 Corinthians* (NICNT), p. 628. Cf., with reference to St. Paul's description of love in 1 Corinthians 13, "Not one element in this pithy list is sentimental; *everything is behavioral*" (Carson, *Showing the Spirit*, p. 61; emphasis added).

<sup>19</sup>And see also the definitions collected in **Appendix 1** below.

<sup>20</sup>For an incisive critique of equivocal argumentation see: D. A. Carson, *Exegetical Fallacies*, 2d ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996), pp. 118-119.

slippery and shifting so-called “ways” of loving actually spelled out up front and in plain English. God forbid! Yet such is the awkward position that Dr. Carson’s equivocal *via media* places him in. For the love of God, Dr. Carson, reconsider! Nay, for the love of God, Dr. Carson, repent! Better simply to grasp the nettle and honestly say to people, leaving the consequences to God, “If you are elect God loves you. If not, then not.” Better that than trying in vain to distill meaningful love from rain water or salvific, self-sacrificial love from atoning blood that God had no intention whatsoever of applying to everyone—however unlimited (“sufficient for all”) and potentially infinite it *could have been* (pp. 76-77) had God sovereignly chosen otherwise—because it isn’t there. God sovereignly *didn’t* choose otherwise. Thankfully, there is a more excellent way.

### “LOVE NEVER FAILS”

In creating others made in his own image God cannot *not* love them. God is love! God’s love never fails; and God never fails to love. He loves all people with the same kind or genus of perfect other-love that he himself has been exhibiting and enjoying for all eternity. God creates others—let us call them *neighbors*—so that he might meaningfully love them and so that they, in turn, might finitely but meaningfully and everlastingly reciprocate that love. This, I submit, is God’s good and primary and ultimate and only purpose in creating people. All people. Every person. Every person without distinction or exception. Every person without casuistry or qualification. All people. This is why God lovingly and self-sacrificially acted on behalf of all of them, every last one of them, the whole world, at the cross. It is thus only the Arminian who can say to anyone and everyone—who has the biblical *right* to say to anyone and everyone—“God loves you” and truly mean it. Period.

If you, dear reader, loved by God, want to be able to say “God loves you” to others and truly mean it, you can:

for you now know the Way.

May his love compel us.

May this love never fail.

Soli Deo Gloria!

Amen.

## APPENDIX 1

### Meaningful Definitions of Love

1. “Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. Love never fails”. (1 Cor 13:4-8a) (NIV).
2. “Love does no wrong to a neighbor” (Rom 13:10) (NASB).
3. Love is other-oriented; self-originating and unconditional; volitionally altruistic and self-sacrificing for the ultimate good of others; and profoundly emotional and passionately invested in, and committed to, the ultimate good of the other (cf. D. A. Carson, *The Difficult Doctrine of the Love of God*).<sup>21</sup>
4. “God, who needs nothing, loves into existence wholly superfluous creatures in order that He may love and perfect them. ... [Love] desires what is simply best for the beloved.” (C. S. Lewis, *The Four Loves*, 127-128).
5. Love is “a consuming passion for the well-being of others.” (F. F. Bruce, *The Epistles of John*, p. 107).
6. “the nature of love is to do good and relieve need” (J. I. Packer, *Evangelism and the Sovereignty of God*, p. 99).
7. “to love someone (as a verb) is to desire with ardent affection, to do everything possible to establish an ethically perfect bond of fellowship with them and to do all possible good to them. Love thus has three parts: ardent affection, determination to do good and seeking a bond of fellowship.” (Manuel Kuhs, “D. A. Carson’s Difficult Doctrine of the Love of God,” *British Reformed Journal* 59 [2014], p. 38).<sup>22</sup>
8. Agape is “a self-giving love that is not merited. ... God’s love is seeking the highest good in the one loved” (H. W. Hoehner, in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, ed. W. Elwell, pp. 657, 659).

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<sup>21</sup>The pearls were all there; lacking only was a (scarlet) thread to make a necklace.

<sup>22</sup>The hypothetical hyper-Calvinist to whom I have referred several times in this critique is no mere hypothesis. His article makes for bracing reading. But at least he knows what love is.  
[www.britishreformed.org/s/BRJ59carson-1.pdf](http://www.britishreformed.org/s/BRJ59carson-1.pdf)

9. “Love ... gladly meets the needs of others.” (John Piper, *The Dangerous Duty of Delight*, p. 44).
10. “Agape’s object is always the concrete individual, not some abstraction called humanity. ... Love is the willing of another’s good.” (Peter Kreeft, *Fundamentals of the Faith*, pp. 182-183).
11. “*Agapē* ... is a love given quite irrespective of merit, and it is a love that seeks to give.” (Leon Morris, *Testaments of Love*, p. 128).
12. “divine love [is] characterized by sacrifice in the pursuit of another person’s good. ... [L]ove of benevolence is not based on the loveliness of the object of the love, but rather your good will—benevolence—your good will toward the person or the thing that you are loving. Your aim in that kind of love is to do good, to bring about something beautiful, not respond to beauty. ... [T]he love of benevolence ... is the kind of love, which in the Bible, is celebrated as the heart of God’s love. So the magnitude of God’s love of benevolence is measured in the Bible by four criteria that it can see:
  1. The degree to which the person loved does not deserve to be loved.
  2. The greatness of the price paid to love a person.
  3. The greatness of the good that is done for the person when he is loved.
  4. The level of desire that God has for the good of the one loved.

.... So the most beautiful love in the world is this divine love that pays the highest price, the life of the Son of God, for completely undeserving enemies, to give us the longest and greatest happiness in his presence. And he loves doing it.”  
(John Piper, [www.desiringgod.org/interviews/what-is-love](http://www.desiringgod.org/interviews/what-is-love)).
13. “love does good to those who do harm ... it is prepared to give up for the sake of others even what it is entitled to.” (C. K. Barrett, *1 Corinthians*, p. 303).
14. “to act lovingly means, as in the case of Christ, actively to seek the benefit of someone else.” (Gordon Fee, *1 Corinthians*, p. 631).
15. “**Love.** *n.* Benevolence; good will. God is *love*. 1 John 4:8.” (Webster’s 1828 Dictionary).

## APPENDIX 2

### A Providential Excursus

The alleged **second way** of speaking about the love of God is God's *providential* love for the world. It was suggested above that the well-known verses to which Dr. Carson alludes under this rubric are being taken out of context in support of a supposition that is foreign to them. In the context of Matt 5:45, for example, God's indiscriminate, generous, and universal providential blessings of sunshine and rain neither presuppose, nor are they adduced by Jesus as an example of, a "different" or "distinctive" or "distinguishable" way that God loves all people everywhere including the reprobate, as over against other different and distinctive and distinguishable ways that God loves other people. Jesus adduces these providential blessings as a vivid illustration of how generous, indiscriminate, and universal *our* love should be. *We* must meaningfully love all people everywhere—including our enemies—because *God* meaningfully loves all people everywhere—including his enemies. The supreme model of meaningful love is God himself. And what *our* meaningful love looks like in the immediate context (e.g., praying for our enemies) is seeking the ultimate good of others and not merely their temporary or occasional or sporadic or haphazard good. Why? Because that is what *God's* meaningful love looks like.<sup>23</sup> And we resemble him and display a family likeness ('like father, like son') when we love as he does (Matt 5:45; Luke 6:35). One must not lose sight of the meadow for the lilies by separating sunshine and rain from the big idea of the passage which is that *meaningful love seeks the ultimate good of others, all others, including one's enemies*. Matthew 5:45 does exemplify the truth that "God loves everyone in exactly the same way" (p. 24). It does indeed! Just not in the constricted or disjointed way Dr. Carson thinks.

I said above regarding the **second way** that the word love is not directly used to describe God's benevolent providential activities. To be more precise: the word is *indirectly* used of God's providential activities *but only on the condition that the parallel set up by Jesus is valid*. Does *God* love his enemies as much as, and as meaningfully as, *we* are to love our enemies? (Or, rather, does God love them infinitely more than we do?) *Our* love for all people without exception is to be real, meaningful love: that is, it is to be indiscriminate and benevolent and longsuffering and extravagant and forbearing and sacrificial (Luke 6:27-36). Is *God's*? If not, then the parallel collapses and Jesus' exhortation falls to the ground like a dead sparrow. I.e., *We* must love all people with true and meaningful love because *God* loves all people in a lesser, different "way" that in the long run amounts to precisely nothing. Seriously? What kind of comparison is that?

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<sup>23</sup>If our meaningful love for others in seeking their ultimate good happens to look like praying for *our* enemies, that is only because God's meaningful love for others in seeking their ultimate good happens to look like praying for *his* enemies: "Father forgive them, for they know not what they do" (Luke 23:34). Those for whom Jesus generously and indiscriminately prays on the cross, and for whom he also generously and indiscriminately sheds his salvific atoning blood, are his *enemies*: i.e., those who are persecuting, mocking, and crucifying him, not just the elect among them (unless one wishes to beg that question too, as has sadly been done by overzealous Calvinists like John Owens).

Perhaps a little thought experiment will help: Is it possible that we must meaningfully and sacrificially love *all people* including our enemies simply and solely because we do not know who among them is reprobate and who is not? And if we *did* know who was reprobate and who was not, could we then love the elect with true and meaningful love but ‘love’ the reprobate in other lesser “ways,” perhaps by sometimes letting our sprinkler water their gardens gratis? That is, in ways that don’t cost us anything or matter in the long run since they are dying of a terrible cancer for which we possess unlimited stockpiles of cure. We could also, *and at the same time*, hate them passionately. (“Rightly positioned,” of course.) Or is simply withholding the cure hateful enough, rendering passion otiose? Such love, and hate, especially at the same time and toward the same persons, would make us much more like God. And shouldn’t that be a good thing? If it doesn’t sound godly or good, but malicious and capricious (re-enter Total Depravity?), then perhaps you are not far from the kingdom of God.

As another example of scriptural misrepresentation under the **second way**, God’s feeding birds and clothing lilies in the context of Matt 6:26, 28 neither presuppose, nor are they adduced by Jesus as an example of, God’s universal providential love for all people everywhere *including the reprobate*, much less as an example of God’s providing for the material needs (food and clothing) of all people everywhere *including the reprobate*. Jesus adduces them simply as another vivid, homespun illustration, but this time with a much narrower focus: that if God can provide for the needs of (relatively) worthless birds and plants, then surely “God can be trusted to provide *for his own people*” (p. 17; emphasis added). In context Jesus is strictly speaking to and about the children of God (note the repeated “*your* heavenly Father,” vv. 26, 32; emphasis added) and chiding them picturesquely on the littleness of their faith (v. 30). Even if the love here in Matthew 6 is somehow a distinct kind of love from other loves, perish the thought, yet because of its exclusive application to *God’s own people*, it would have to belong in God’s *limited* way of loving under the **fourth way** above and not in God’s *universal* way of loving under the **second way**, on Dr. Carson’s five way grid. It almost seems as if things are being seen that are not there, or as if disparate verses are being marshalled willy nilly in order to make the grid work, since the grid collapses if at least some kind—*any kind!*—of divine ‘love’ for the reprobate cannot be found in Scripture. And if it *can’t* be found, then to whom would one ever dare say “God loves you” without risking a reprehensible falsehood?



### APPENDIX 3

#### **God is One and His Love is One: Statements on the Logical, Temporal, and Heuristic Priority of the “First Way” (the Intra-Trinitarian Love of God)**

“We must not view these ways of talking about the love of God as independent, compartmentalized, *loves* of God ... as if each were hermetically sealed off from the other. ... God is God, and he is one.” (p. 23)

“this marvelous self-disclosure of the Father in the Son turns, ultimately, not on God’s love for us but on the Father’s love for his unique Son. It is *because the Father loves the Son* that this pattern of divine self-disclosure pertains. ... there is endless ground for wonder in the Father’s love for us, in Jesus’ love for us. ... But undergirding them, more basic than they are, is the Father’s love for the Son. ... Indeed, this love of the Father for the Son is what makes sense of John 3:16.” (p. 35)

“this love of the Father for the Son is what makes sense of John 3:16. ... there the object of God’s love is the world. But the standard that tells us just how great that love is has already been set. ... the relationship between the Father and the Son is the standard for all other love relationships.” (p. 35)

“in eternity past, the Father loved the Son, and the Son loved the Father. There has *always* been an other-orientation to the love of God. All the manifestations of the love of God emerge out of this deeper, more fundamental reality: love is bound up in the very nature of God. God is love.” (p. 39)

“the texts distinguish how the love of the Father for the Son is manifested, and how the love of the Son for the Father is manifested—and then how such love further functions as lines are drawn outward to elements of Christian conduct and experience. ... In John 15, Jesus tells his disciples, ‘As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you’ (15:9). 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.” (p. 40)

“This pattern of love, both relational and constitutional, in the very being of God becomes, according to Jesus, the model and incentive of our relation to Jesus. ... our relation to Jesus mirrors the relation of Jesus to his heavenly Father”. (p. 41; cf. p. 21)

“We are the friends of God by virtue of the intra-Trinitarian love of God .... God is love; and we are the friends of God.” (p. 43)

“God’s intra-Trinitarian love ensures the plan of redemption. The Father so loves the Son that he has decreed that all will honor the Son even as they honor the Father. ... the Son so loves the Father that out of obedience he goes to the cross on our behalf, the just for the unjust. The entire plan of redemption that has turned our hearts toward God is a function, in the first place, of this intra-Trinitarian love of God”. (p. 83)

## APPENDIX 4

### **“To Each His Own Kind of Love” or “Enjoy the Ride”: A Parable**

It was a bitterly cold day in February of 1939. Breath condensed and froze in tiny beads and icicles on ragged beards and frayed scarves. A squad of Nazis who loved Jews had just dutifully filled another long transport train full to overflowing with them. The last Jewish passenger had been lovingly herded into the last frigid box car. It would be a long, grueling journey to the concentration camp where the Jews, whom the Nazis dearly loved, were to be tortured and gassed. To make the trip a bit less tedious, and to tangibly show their love, the Nazis one evening tacked up a tattered white bed sheet and played a few worn film clips from Charlie Chaplin silent movies. (This, of course, was before the October 31, 1940 release of *The Great Dictator*.) But very little Jewish laughter broke the silence. Perhaps doomed Jews haven't much sense of humor. Or maybe it was just the cold. In addition to the film clips, these loving Nazis one morning benevolently poured into each box car an assortment of complementary snacks for the Jews to enjoy, mostly shriveled fruit and decaying vegetables along with a few glittering and brightly-wrapped confections. But there were not enough snacks for everyone. Some Jews fought and kicked and scratched like rabid animals in their frenzied, wild-eyed struggle to obtain a morsel. One mother went without food so that her sobbing, emaciated child could have a small bite to eat.

On arriving at their final destination the beloved Jews were all tortured and gassed to death, as planned. Their wasted, broken bodies were bulldozed into a common unmarked grave.

*Where their worm dieth not.*



Photo by Martin Kraft; wikipedia.org