

THE LOVE OF GOD

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The friction between Jewish traditionalism and Hellenistic philosophy became apparent among the members of the early Christian Church. Many of the Jewish Christians professed a commitment to Jesus Christ but still felt a loyalty to Jewish law. As a result, Christ's role as the Messiah was a difficult concept for most of them to accept. Many of the Hellenistic Christians, on the other hand, were influenced by an early form of Gnosticism and found it difficult to accept the humanity of Jesus Christ. On both accounts, the identity and role of Christ was distorted. It was under such circumstances that John attempted to appeal to the faithful Saints and correct the misguided teachings of the time. It makes sense that John testified of a corporeal (physical) resurrected Jesus (see 1 John 1–2) to counter Gnostic claims of a “phantom” (nonphysical) Savior. Likewise, Christ's role in our cleansing (see 1 John 1:7), His advocacy with the Father (see 1 John 2:1–3), and His overcoming the world through rebirth (see 1 John 5:4–6) testifies that Jesus Christ is the Messiah. Not to be forgotten, however, in providing a full understanding of the identity of Jesus Christ and the gospel is love. Love, as taught in John's writings, provides necessary insight for understanding the Savior, Jesus Christ.

WHAT IS LOVE?

I do not believe it is coincidence that love becomes one of the predominant themes¹ of the disciple “whom Jesus loved,” or “John the Beloved” (see John 13:2; 20:2; 21:7, 20). It is likely that because John felt he was beloved, he approached this topic in a simple yet deeply profound manner.

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To gain this comprehensive insight, however, we must consider all of John's writings rather than concentrate on a single verse, chapter, or book. Biblical scholars often use repeated textual analysis as a way of discovering meaning from religious texts. The process requires returning again and again to the text. That is especially helpful when studying a concept as broad as love. John's writings not only become clearer when compared with his other texts but reveal fascinating relationships as well. By returning to John's texts, we find that he unfolds the meaning of love and how it relates to the gospel of Jesus Christ.

"THAT YOUR JOY MAY BE FULL"

In an attempt to dispel the pervading philosophies of the time, John's writings reflect his desire that we obtain not a portion of truth but a fulness thereof. This is made clear as John writes, "And these things write we unto you, that your joy may be full" (1 John 1:4). *Full*, in this context, is used to translate the Greek word *pleroo*, meaning "replete, or finished." In some interpretations, *pleroo* is described as a "filler" that rounds out imperfections, or dents, or makes something complete. Because it was John's desire to provide a means whereby our joy may be made complete or full, his approach to love is not a doctrinal decoration but a load-bearing beam.

John approaches love in its fullest sense, and those who study his writings must be willing to consider that the scriptural essence of love might be something different from what they are either used to hearing or have come to expect. If one approaches John's text with a casual, self-satisfied attitude, only varying portions of the fulness can be realized. That is not to say that we are incapable of loving or that the love John describes is beyond our grasp but merely that John's message of love is profoundly simple. It is not wrought with distractions or pomp of its own. Therein lies the danger. With such a clean doctrine, we are tempted to spruce it up a bit, add our own agendas, become satisfied with a status quo vision, or allow the views of the world to define our doctrine. When properly understood, the love described in John's works provides direction for all mankind.

"GOD IS LOVE"

John invites us to "love one another" (John 13:34; 15:12; 1 John 3:11, 23; 4:11). Most of us have accepted this invitation at one time or another in our lives and have loved someone (or at least *something*). But John's

notion of what love is, however, does not mesh with traditional concepts. The fulness of love, according to John, is considerably narrow in comparison to the world's concept of love. "Love one another," John wrote, "for love is of God" (1 John 4:7). John continued: "He that dwelleth in love dwelleth in God, and God in him" (1 John 4:16). John connects the fulness of love not with casual emotions, affection, or even passion but with God. To ensure that he was not misunderstood, John taught in the simplest of terms that "God is love" (1 John 4:8, 16). If one desires true love, one must understand God.

Some may become nervous using God as the standard and definition of love. They may think such a standard is too restrictive or unrealistic. Some may feel that if God defines love, then romance will be replaced with benevolence and brotherly love. But when we understand John's teaching of love correctly, romantic love, brotherly love, and benevolence can be appropriate under God's divine guidance.² God's definition of love will, however, exclude feelings, actions, and motives that are contrary to his law. That filters out the misconceptions of love, leaving only a "pure" love. To those who feel that "God is love" is an unrealistic standard, I offer Elder Henry B. Eyring's advice: "You need not fear that using God as your standard will overwhelm you. On the contrary—God asks only that we approach him humbly, as a child."³ As we raise our standards to meet those of our God, we not only begin to act like Him but become more like Him as well.

"WE LOVE HIM, BECAUSE HE FIRST LOVED US"

Another important consideration in understanding the meaning of love is John's statement that "herein is love, not that we loved God, but that he loved us" (1 John 4:10). Although love is intended to eventually become a reciprocal relationship, we must understand that the love of God is not contingent upon our love for Him; love begins with God, not with us. John explained that "we love him, because he first loved us" (1 John 4:19). Rather than considering these statements as a reason for us to love God, we can see that John's point is that love begins with God. Thus His love is what allows us to love not only Him but everything.

"HE THAT DWELLETH IN LOVE DWELLETH IN GOD"

John makes it clear that "he that dwelleth in love dwelleth in God, and God in him" (1 John 4:16). Because the love of God is the genesis of our

ability to truly love, if we remove God for any reason we forfeit our ability to practice love in its fullest sense. For example, John taught that “if any man love the world, the love of the Father is not in him” (1 John 2:15). This is not to say that if one indulges in worldliness God will no longer love him. C. S. Lewis emphasized that “the great thing to remember is that, though our feelings come and go, His [God’s] love for us does not. It is not wearied by our sins, or our indifference.”⁴

Although God will always love us, John emphasized that our love of the world limits the degree to which God’s Spirit is manifest in our lives. How we embrace the world, whether with unabashed acceptance or with flirtatious encounters with its subtleties, creates a boundary between us and God. James, author of the Epistle of James, queried, “Know ye not that the friendship of the world is enmity with God?” He concluded, “Whosoever therefore will be a friend of the world is the enemy of God” (James 4:4). When we entertain that which removes God from our lives, it is not His love for us that decreases but the presence of His Spirit that diminishes (see D&C 121:37). Although God still loves us, our understanding and ability to truly love is forfeited because of the loss of His Spirit. Where God is not, love in its fulness cannot be.

This forfeiture is not restricted to wicked acts alone but can include using the world to define gospel principles. President Gordon B. Hinckley spoke of those who allow the world to define love. He said: “Their expression may sound genuine, but their coin is counterfeit. Too often the love of which they speak is at best only hollow mummery.”⁵ In a similar tone, Elder Marvin J. Ashton warned: “Too often expediency, infatuation, stimulation, persuasion, or lust are mistaken for love. How hollow, how empty if our love is no deeper than the arousal of momentary feeling or the expression in words of what is no more lasting than the time it takes to speak them.”⁶ Far too many of us have fallen for counterfeits of love. When we have a skewed understanding of what love really is, we are left in a frenzy to constantly feed an ever-fading emotion, or we become frustrated, discouraged, disillusioned, or even cynical.

President Hinckley taught that “love is like the Polar Star. In a changing world, it is a constant. It is of the very essence of the gospel. It is the security of the home. It is the safeguard of community life. It is a beacon of hope in a world of distress.”⁷ When seeking this type of love, we must understand that the night sky is filled with myriad unfixed and moving stars—counterfeit Polar Stars—each fawning for our attention as if it were

the sure guiding light. These counterfeits can provide some measure of illumination and guidance, but only one star provides the constant answer for an ever-changing world. That guiding love, as John so aptly describes, is free from the world's dilutions and wickedness and is inseparably connected with God and Jesus Christ.

“THE LOVE OF GOD”

With the connection between love and God established, we can turn our focus to John's teachings about “the love of God” (1 John 3:16). When discussing God the Father's love for us, John provides critical commentary: “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son” (John 3:16). Here John links God's love for the world with Jesus Christ. Later, John writes, “In this was manifested the love of God toward us, because that God sent his only begotten Son into the world, that we might live through him” (1 John 4:9). According to John, the love of God manifest to us is Jesus Christ.

An earlier witness of this concept is found in the Book of Mormon. Young Nephi saw a tree, “and the beauty thereof was far beyond, yea, exceeding of all beauty; and the whiteness thereof did exceed the whiteness of the driven snow” (1 Nephi 11:8). When Nephi asked for an interpretation of what the tree is, rather than giving an immediate answer, a vision of the birth of Jesus Christ was opened to him (see 1 Nephi 11:13–20). As the vision closed, the angel proclaimed, “Behold the Lamb of God, yea, even the Son of the Eternal Father!” (1 Nephi 11:21). The angel then asked Nephi, “Knowest thou the meaning of the tree which thy father saw?” (1 Nephi 11:21). The angel seems to have been checking to see if Nephi grasped the relationship between the vision of the Savior and his inquiry concerning the interpretation of the tree. Immediately, Nephi astutely answered, “Yea, it [the tree] is the love of God, which sheddeth itself abroad in the hearts of the children of men; wherefore, it is the most desirable above all things” (1 Nephi 11:22). Both Nephi and John testified that Jesus Christ is the love of God manifest to us.

THE FATHER GAVE ALL THINGS TO THE SON

Although Christ emphasized “my Father is greater than I” (John 14:28), He did not diminish His authoritative role in manifesting the Father's love. John recorded Christ's words as “Father, I will that they also, whom thou hast given me, be with me where I am; that they may behold my glory,

which thou hast given me: for thou lovedst me before the foundation of the world" (John 17:24). Christ's glory was given to Him by God because of His Father's love. John further testified that "the Father loveth the Son, and hath given all things into his hand" (John 3:35). It was through God's love that Christ became the chosen and authoritative manifestation of the Father. John said of Christ's ministry that "the Father loveth the Son, and sheweth him all things that himself doeth: and he will shew him greater works than these, that ye may marvel" (John 5:20). Christ, commissioned of the Father, manifests the fulness of the Father to all mankind. Thus Christ is a mediator or a propitiator (see 1 John 4:10). Though a mediator and a propitiator are similar, Richard D. Draper explains that propitiation goes beyond mediation by uniting two parties in friendship.⁸ It is Christ, therefore, who makes it possible for us to receive the fulness of God's love. John emphasized this relationship as he taught, "I am the way, the truth, and the life: no man cometh unto the Father, but by me" (John 14:6).

"BORN OF GOD"

If we expect to obtain the fulness of God's love, we must receive it through the propitiation of Christ. John reminds us that "love is of God; and every one that loveth is born of God, and knoweth God" (1 John 4:7). To receive and exercise God's love requires us to be "born of God." To some, being born of God is receiving the realization that God is our spiritual Father and that we are His spiritual offspring. To others, being born of God involves recognizing that Christ is their Savior. It is clear that being "born of God," as spoken of by John, is more than realizing that our beginnings were with God the Father or proclaiming that Christ is our Savior.

As Jesus taught Nicodemus, He emphasized that one must be "born again" to see the kingdom of God (John 3:3). The Prophet Joseph Smith further clarified that "we must have a change of heart to see the kingdom of God."⁹ John later emphasized that our ability to love ("everyone that loveth") is born of God. It is true that our ability to love stems from God, but how is the love of God born in us? We may also ponder, how love relates to changing our hearts and becoming born again. Elder Bruce R. McConkie wrote: "To be born does not mean to come into existence out of nothing, but rather to begin a new type of existence, to live again in a changed situation. Birth is the continuation of life under different circumstances."¹⁰ John wrote that "whosoever believeth that Jesus is the Christ is born of God" (1 John 5:1). If we truly believe in Christ, we must

begin a renovation. We can no longer remain the same person we once were. Those who embrace the gospel of Christ become new creatures, born into new situations, new circumstances, new expectations, a new way to approach daily experiences, and a new way to love. When we believe in Christ, we begin a new existence, a life with Christ and of Christ. Those who were unable to love in the past can be transformed and find love born in them. This type of transformation is accomplished only through Christ.

“CALLED THE SONS OF GOD”

It is interesting that John linked the love of God with not only a symbolic rebirth but a metaphorical adoption as well. John taught that the love of God necessarily leads to both a rebirth and an adoption. “Behold, what manner of love the Father hath bestowed upon us,” John wrote, “that we should be called the sons of God” (1 John 3:1). This verse possesses a flavor of wonderment that God’s love is so grand that mere men can be called the sons of God. To some it may seem odd that John wrote of this event with wonder. John understood that we were created by God, thus becoming, as God’s creations, His “sons and daughters.” But John stated that God’s love was bestowed upon us so that we *should* be called sons of God.

Other prophets testify of this relationship between love, rebirth, and becoming the children of God. The prophet Moroni was emphatic about obtaining the love of God and thus becoming sons of God. He pleaded with those who would hear his message to “pray unto the Father with all the energy of heart, that ye may be filled with this love [the love of Christ, or charity], which he hath bestowed upon all who are true followers of his Son, Jesus Christ; that ye may become the sons of God” (Moroni 7:48).

Another prophet, King Benjamin, addressed the importance of understanding this adoptive process. He explained that “because of the covenant which ye have made ye shall be called the children of Christ, his sons, and his daughters; for behold, this day he hath spiritually begotten you; for ye say that your hearts are changed through faith on his name; therefore, ye are born of him and have become his sons and his daughters. And under this head ye are made free, and there is no other head whereby ye can be made free” (Mosiah 5:7–8). Benjamin testified that this adoption was made possible because of the covenant we made with God.

This adoptive process is an essential part of the rebirth taught by John. Again we return to Christ’s discourse to Nicodemus. After teaching of the

necessity of the rebirth of the heart, Christ told Nicodemus, “Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except a man be born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God” (John 3:5). He summarized, “Marvel not that I said unto thee, Ye must be born again” (John 3:7). The Prophet Joseph Smith, when referring to these passages, taught that we must “subscribe [to] the articles of adoption to enter therein.”¹¹ John taught that the process of being born again requires more than acknowledging Christ and His mission. It requires even more than a change of heart. It also requires subscribing to the articles of adoption—making covenants. Elder Bruce R. McConkie stated that the sons and daughters of Jesus Christ “take upon them his name in the waters of baptism and certify anew each time they partake of the sacrament that they have so done; or, more accurately, in the waters of baptism power is given them to become sons of Christ, which eventuates when they are in fact born of Spirit and become new creatures of the Holy Ghost.”¹² Because the love of God is manifest through Christ, we can know God only through Christ. We can experience the fullness of God’s love only by entering into a covenant relationship with Jesus Christ. By maintaining our covenantal status, we are born of God and thus become the sons and daughters of Christ.

Whether discussing rebirth or becoming children of God, Christ is always at the center of the discussion. John testified that we have received Christ and exercised the power given us by Him to become His sons (see John 1:12). Elder McConkie further clarified the connection between rebirth/adoption and Jesus Christ when he explained: “Those accountable mortals who then believe and obey the gospel are born again; they are born of the Spirit; they become alive to the things of righteousness or of the Spirit. They become members of another family, have new brothers and sisters, and a new Father. They are the sons and daughters of Jesus Christ.”¹³

Although this adoption is necessary, it is not a culminating event but a part of a continual process of change. That is apparent in John’s writing: “Beloved, now are we the sons of God, and it doth not yet appear what we shall be: but we know that, when he shall appear, we shall be like him; for we shall see him as he is” (1 John 3:2). The process of receiving God’s love, rebirth, and becoming the children of Christ is not a one-time event but a gradual experience. In this process, we shall, as John described, become like Christ (see 1 John 3:2).

“IF YE LOVE ME, KEEP MY COMMANDMENTS”

As sons and daughters of Christ, we have covenanted to keep His commandments. Jesus taught, “If ye love me, keep my commandments” (John 14:15). This implies that we will keep the commandments because we love Christ (see 1 John 5:2–3; 2 John 1:6). Though this is true, an additional aspect of obedience is presented in John’s writings. Christ taught that “he that hath my commandments, and keepeth them, he it is that loveth me: and he that loveth me shall be loved of my Father, and I will love him, and will manifest myself to him” (John 14:21). When we keep the commandments, we find that Christ manifests Himself to us.

This simple concept presents an interesting situation. Many of those who keep the commandments do so because they already possess a love of Christ. They, according to the prophetic blessing, will have a manifestation of Christ. But consider these verses applied in other circumstances. What of those who have not yet come to love Christ? Are they to be obedient to God’s commandments as well? C. S. Lewis felt that some people worry because they are unsure if they love God. He said concerning these people: “They are told they ought to love God. They cannot find any such feelings in themselves. What are they to do? . . . Act as if you did. Do not sit trying to manufacture feelings. Ask yourself, ‘If I were sure that I loved God, what would I do?’ When you have found the answer, go and do it.”¹⁴ Lewis further observed: “As soon as we do this we find one of the great secrets. When you are behaving as if you loved someone, you will presently come to love him.”¹⁵ John taught that “if any man will do his [God’s] will, he shall know of the doctrine, whether it be of God, or whether I speak of myself” (John 7:17). Not only will the obedient know the divine source of the doctrine but they will grow in love toward the Master as well. Thus the cycle of love and obedience begins anew, ever deepening with each act of obedience and receipt of divine manifestation.

Our obedience maintains our covenant relationship with Christ, which facilitates the manifestation of God’s love. We can feel the fulness of the Father only when our covenants with Christ are in effect. As we become more proficient in maintaining our covenant of keeping the commandments, not only do we draw ever closer to the Savior but He becomes a constant fixture in our lives. Christ taught, “If a man love me, he will keep my words: and my Father will love him, and we will come unto him, and make our abode with him” (John 14:23).

LOVE ONE ANOTHER

John reminded the disciples of Christ that mere familiarity with the Savior's message was not sufficient to obtain the full love of God. "My little children," John counseled, "let us not love in word, neither in tongue; but in deed" (1 John 3:18). President Howard W. Hunter taught: "Merely saying, accepting, believing are not enough. They are incomplete until that which they imply is translated into the dynamic action of daily living."¹⁶ A disciple of Christ, therefore, is one who not only receives Christ's law but also seeks to follow the given counsel (see D&C 41:5). In the same manner, we find that a disciple of Christ is not only one who receives God's love and who loves God but also one who seeks to love others. Christ commanded "that he who loveth God love his brother also" (1 John 4:21). This commandment was at the heart of Christ's ministry from the beginning (see 1 John 3:11; John 15:17).

Loving others is regarded as the badge of Christianity. Christ taught that "by their fruits ye shall know them" (Matthew 7:20). The discerning fruit of discipleship was determined by whether the followers of Christ loved others. "By this shall all men know that ye are my disciples," Christ taught, "if ye have love one to another" (John 13:35).

"LOVE ONE ANOTHER; AS I HAVE LOVED YOU"

Although we have covenanted to love others, it is not enough to merely go through the motions in hopes of checking off one more requirement of discipleship. It is true that Christ admonished us to "love one another." But His commandment was not merely to learn to love others but to "love one another; as I have loved you, that ye also love one another" (John 13:34; see also John 15:12; 1 John 3:23). This pattern was familiar to Christ, for He taught that "as the Father hath loved me, so have I loved you: continue ye in my love" (John 15:9). No wonder John, who was self-described as "the disciple whom Jesus loved," wrote so much concerning loving others. Since John received Christ's love, he was in a position to love others; and he understood that he must continue in that love by loving others as Christ loved him. Elder C. Max Caldwell said: "Jesus' love was inseparably connected to and resulted from his life of serving, sacrificing, and giving in behalf of others. We cannot develop Christlike love except by practicing the process prescribed by the Master."¹⁷

“GREATER LOVE HATH NO MAN”

As we consider the depth of the love that is God’s to give, it is really quite amazing to think that it has been made available to us. The pinnacle of our understanding of the love of God is centered not only upon Christ but also upon His sacrifice (see 1 John 4:9). John taught that we “perceive . . . the love of God, because he laid down his life for us” (1 John 3:16) and that the love of God is manifested toward us, *because* God sent His Only Begotten Son into the world so “that we might live through him” (1 John 4:9). Paul taught that “if any man live in Christ, he is a new creature; old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new” (JST, 2 Corinthians 5:17).¹⁸ The Savior’s mission—His sacrifice—in some miraculous way changes not only how we live and love but also changes us. “The Atonement in some way,” wrote Elder Bruce C. Hafen, “apparently through the Holy Ghost, makes possible the infusion of spiritual endowments that actually change and purify our nature, moving us toward that state of holiness or completeness we call eternal life or Godlike life. At that ultimate stage we will exhibit divine characteristics not just because we think we should but because that is the way we are.”¹⁹ It is through this change that we can find everlasting life. John reminded us that “God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth on him should not perish, but have everlasting life” (John 3:16). Jesus Christ, the love of God, provides hope of salvation. No wonder John exults, “There is no fear in love; but perfect love casteth out fear: because fear hath torment. He that feareth is not made perfect in love” (1 John 4:18).

“THE FULNESS”

“What manner of love the Father hath bestowed upon us?” (1 John 3:1). The writings of John clearly teach of a fulness of love: not a counterfeit love, nor a portion of love, but a fulness thereof. John taught that the full measure of love is founded in God. It is from God that all love springs forth. He taught that Jesus Christ is, in reality, the love of God, and thus we can feel of the fulness of God’s love as we enter into a covenant and become born of Christ. We reciprocate God’s love by keeping the commandments and loving others. It is because of the ultimate sacrifice, the fulfilling of the mission of Christ, that we are able to become new creatures and thereby love others as Christ loved us. John taught that the only way to find the love that will guide and direct our lives for peace, dispose

of fear, and bring us to a fulness of joy, is to be filled with pure love—even Jesus Christ.

NOTES

1. Bruce R. McConkie, *Doctrinal New Testament Commentary*, 3 vols. (Salt Lake City: Bookcraft, 1965–73), 3:371.
2. Dr. Richard D. Draper, associate dean of Religious Education at Brigham Young University, concludes that all of the forms of love (*agape*, *philos*, and *eros*), when used appropriately, are necessary to achieve the highest or noblest love (“Love and Joy,” unpublished manuscript).
3. Henry B. Eyring, *To Draw Closer to God* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1997), 68.
4. C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: Macmillan, 1952), 102–3.
5. Gordon B. Hinckley, in Conference Report, April 1969, 61.
6. Marvin J. Ashton, “Love Takes Time,” *Ensign*, November 1975, 108.
7. Gordon B. Hinckley, “Let Love Be the Lodestar of Your Life,” *Ensign*, May 1989, 66.
8. Draper, “Love and Joy” (unpublished manuscript).
9. Joseph Smith, *Teachings of the Prophet Joseph Smith*, comp. Joseph Fielding Smith (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1976), 328.
10. McConkie, *Doctrinal New Testament Commentary*, 2:471.
11. Smith, *Teachings*, 328.
12. McConkie, *Doctrinal New Testament Commentary*, 2:471–72.
13. McConkie, *Doctrinal New Testament Commentary*, 2:471.
14. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, 102.
15. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, 101.
16. Howard W. Hunter, in Conference Report, October 1967, 116.
17. C. Max Caldwell, in Conference Report, October 1992, 40.
18. See *The Holy Scriptures: Inspired Version* (Independence, MO: Herald Publishing House, 1991).
19. Bruce C. Hafen, *The Broken Heart* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1989), 18.