

drulogion

thursday theological thoughts

WEDNESDAY, NOVEMBER 29, 2006

Attributes of God (VIII): Love

As a recent commentator noted "God is love. Does it get any simpler than that? Does it get any more magnificent? I think not." Thanks, anonymous, for supplying a segue to this **third and final segment of our series on the attributes of God.**

We began with the negative attributes (the NOTs) and then turned to the super-eminent attributes (the OMNIs). Now we come to what I will call, for lack of a better term, **the character attributes.** These terms attempt describe the quality of God's being and act. They are generally less "metaphysical" and thus require less explanation and/or criticism. However, they raise equally interesting and deep questions about who God is and how we come to know him.

We will start with that most famous appellation: **God is love.**

The love of God has earned its fame for good reason. It is one of the few things the Bible straightforwardly says God *is* (cf. 1 John 4:16). The Prophets state many divine attributes in the form of first person oracles. The Psalms declare many divine attributes in the form of second person praise. But the First Epistle of John states the attribute of divine love in the form of a third person proposition. God is love. In light of its unique character as a **direct biblical statement**, the attribute of divine love must be attended to with all seriousness despite contemporary romantic distortions.

But the very form of the statement raises a serious question. **Can the statement "God is love" be revered to say "love is God"?** It is certainly grammatically possible, since the verb "is" can function as an equals-sign, implying that the subject and predicate nominative can switch places without any change in meaning. The formula $5 + 7 = 12$ is exactly the same as $12 = 5 + 7$. That's the point of an equals-sign.

Although the phrase "love is God" may sound odd to some, **the substance of this reversal can be found sprinkled throughout our**

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God-talk. For example, we say that where there is love, God is there. We say that God is mysteriously present in the love between human beings. We wax eloquently about the superiority of agape and that we draw near to God when our love for others becomes agape in form. We talk about "seeing God" in the midst of loving acts. All these notions imply that God and love are equivalent terms: we can enter the proposition from either side and get the same result.

However, I would like to post a warning against reversing the statement "God is love." My warning is not because I do not believe God is present in genuine human love. It seems to me that [divine omnipresence](#) would take care of that. I raise a warning flag because I think it is crucial that in the case of divine love (as with every other divine attribute), **we ought to let God himself define the meaning of love.** The reversal of the phrase plays too easily into our inclination to control God by means of our pre-conceived definitions. A ubiquitous example of this kind of definitional control would be the rejection of a doctrine by identifying its inconsistency with divine love. This kind of argument is made so often that it makes one wonder whether love has been defined in a way that prevents the God of the Bible from ever fitting without significant remainder. When find ourselves cornered by such contradictions, we are better off going back to the drawing board in order to try to define divine love in accordance with the character of God revealed in the history of the covenant with Israel fulfilled in Jesus Christ.

In support of my warning, I dare to suggest that **this procedure of definition is actually the logic of the Biblical proposition** within its literary context. A few verses prior to saying "God is love," the First Epistle of John states clearly that God's love is revealed in the incarnation of the Son of God: "This is how God showed his love among us: he sent his one and only son into the world that we might live through him" (I John 4:9). The apostle goes on to differentiate the content of this love from other human loves: "This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins" (I John 4:10). The apostle Paul concurs: "But God demonstrates his own love toward us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us" (Roman 5:8). So, at least the apostolic witnesses have tried their best to define divine love according to God's own self-defining action. Why should we do any different?

Any thoughts?

Can you think of examples where the statement "God is love" has been implicitly or explicitly reversed?

Do you see the implications of this reversal as negative or positive?

What other implications might there be?

Do you have any examples of rejecting a doctrine by appealing to God's love?

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If we take our cue from the history of God with us when defining divine love, what might we say about the meaning of the statement, "God is love"?

Labels: [Attributes of God](#)

posted by JohnLDrury @ 3:15 PM

[6 comments](#)

6 Comments:

At [5:28 PM, November 29, 2006](#), [Keith.Drury](#) said...

It seems to me that this attribute of God is the least understood and most abused of all. It is made the central attribute by many--controlling all others... will you comment on that?

At [6:51 AM, November 30, 2006](#), [Sean Carter](#) said...

loving people means loving god! as all human beings are his child. the most pure form of love is love for god! i feel be it any religion or sect all of us give our heart and soul to love Him. there is a specific day for lovers but i think we can't only express through a single day....as we pray to god everyday we should keep on loving him and his creations!

At [9:43 AM, November 30, 2006](#), [JohnLDrury](#) said...

I do think that Love has a special status in understanding God's attributes. It seems that this primacy is sanctioned by the New Testament. However, I agree that it has been abused and misused. The solution to abuse is not non-use but proper use. The theological task in every generation is to think through our God-talk from the bottom up in a way that best corresponds to God's reality, even if that means engaging in the difficult task of re-definition.

At [9:44 AM, November 30, 2006](#), [JohnLDrury](#) said...

It is also worth noting that the doctrine of simplicity would encourage us to not think of one attribute controlling others, but all the attributes characterize God's single being. So love should be lifted up but never in a way that undermines what else we may and must say about God

At [12:51 PM, November 30, 2006](#), [David Drury](#) said...

Wonderful continuation of this series into the "creative attributes" of God. These are the attributes that I believe we can more readily experience in God... more readily relate to.

I agree that the "equation cannot be reversed"

As parallel, I don't think we can say "Faithfulness is God" or "Peace is God" or "Power is God" even though God is faithful, peaceful and

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powerful. This hits at the definitional incongruence. Certainly God's faithfulness is not measured on the same scale of faithfulness that mine is. I may be a relatively faithful person, but God is an ultimately faithful Divinity.

So, echo.

God's definition of Love is what God is... but perhaps not all Love is God, and certainly not all Love can contain God's definition.

At [4:02 PM, December 01, 2006](#), [Dave Ward](#) said...

Can an out-law chime in on the drury discussion? :)

Of course it can't be switched...great focus, John. I believe there is a name for this logical fallacy. I just can't remember it at the moment. You do I am sure.

one example of this abuse is the "there can't be a hell because God is love" or "of course divorce is okay in difficult relationships (even without unfaithfulness) since no loving God would force someone to stay in that kind of a situation."

Are those good examples?

As to the controlling issue, how does one in theological thinking NOT allow one characteristic to somewhat dominate the others? I am not saying we should, it just seems to be so prevalent as to be nearly universal.

Better...how does this connect with the anxiety of religion John? Or does it?????

THANKS!

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