

BOOK REVIEW
of
D.A. Carson,
The Difficult Doctrine of the Love of God,
Crossway Books, 2000.

This book is in the Evangel Library,
and this review is by Larry D. Paarmann.

What could possibly be difficult about the doctrine of the love of God? Surely it is the love of God that gives us assurance, and confidence, and hope in an otherwise very troubling world. What could be more sure? What could be more hopeful? What could possibly be difficult about it? If you don't want your world to be a little disturbed, or your thoughts about God perhaps challenged, then you should perhaps avoid this book by D.A. Carson. And perhaps you should stop reading this review at this point as well. The basic problem comes into play because of who God is. God differs from man in that he is omnipotent, omniscient, and sovereign over all of His creation. Does He love all men equally? If not, how does His love differ from one to another, and what is the basis for those differences? On the other hand, if He does love all equally, how is it possible that some know Him and will spend eternity with Him, while others will not, given that He is omnipotent, omniscient, and sovereign over all of His creation. These are challenging questions no matter what your overall theological stance may be. If you have these questions, and really you should, then this book may be very helpful towards getting some answers.

D.A. Carson is a research professor of new testament at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School in Deerfield, Illinois, and is a prolific writer. Carson is a critical thinker, and seems to enjoy tackling difficult subjects. A review of his book *Divine Sovereignty and Human Responsibility: Biblical Perspectives in Tension* was reviewed in the June & July issue of *Evangel News*.

The Difficult Doctrine of the Love of God has but 84 pages and only four chapters. After a Preface, Chapter 1 is On Distorting the Love of God. Chapter 2 is God is Love. Chapter 3 is God's Love and God's Sovereignty. Chapter 4 is God's Love and God's Wrath.

In Chapter 1, Carson gives five reasons why the doctrine of the love of God must be judged difficult. If a person today believes in God at all, he or she is likely to believe that God is a loving being. Why would they assume that? Carson says it is just part of our culture. After all, we are surely lovable! God may not be sovereign, or omniscient, or omnipotent, but He is assumed to be loving. That's the way He is portrayed in the movies, so it must be true! The "love of God in our culture has been purged of anything the culture finds uncomfortable. The love of God has been sanitized, democratized, and above all sentimentalized." "Nowadays if you tell people that God loves them, they are unlikely to be surprised. Of course God loves me; he's like that, isn't he?" "Precisely how does one integrate what the Bible says about the love of God with what the Bible says about God's sovereignty, extending as it does even over the domain of evil?" Also in Chapter 1, Carson explains that there are different ways in which the Bible speaks of the love of God. For example, the love shared within the godhead, God's providential love over all that He has made, God's salvific stance toward His fallen world, and God's special love toward His elect.

In Chapter 2, Carson writes "mark well the *distinction* between the love of the Father for the Son and the love of the Son for the Father. The Father commands, sends, tells, commissions – and demonstrates his love for the Son by 'showing' him everything, such that the Son does whatever the Father does. The Son obeys, says only what the Father gives him to say, does only what the Father gives him to do, comes into the world as the Sent One – and demonstrates his love for the Father precisely by such obedience. Not once is there any hint that the Son commissions the Father, who obeys." "We are Jesus' *friends* if we do what he commands. This sounds rather like a definition of a slave. Certainly such friendship is not reciprocal. I cannot turn around to Jesus and thank him for his friendship and tell him he is my friend, too, if he does everything I command him. Strange to tell, not once is Jesus or God ever described in the Bible as our friend. Abraham is God's friend; the reverse is never stated." The "Bible is reluctant to descend into the kind of cheap intimacy that brings God or Jesus down to our level." We "have been incalculably privileged not only to be saved by God's love, but to be shown it, to be informed about it, to be let in on the mind of God. God is love; and we are the friends of God."

In Chapter 3, Carson writes "We often speak of people who 'accept Jesus as their personal Savior' – words not found in Scripture, though not necessarily wrong as a synthetic expression. But Acts may sum up some strategic evangelism by reporting that 'all who were appointed for eternal life believed' (Acts 13:48). Writing of Christians, Paul says that God 'chose us in him [i.e., Christ] before the creation of the world. ... [H]e predestined us to be adopted as his sons through Jesus Christ' (Eph. 1:4-5; cf. Rev. 13:7-8; 17:8). Indeed, God chose the Thessalonian converts from the beginning to be saved (2 Thess. 2:13)." However, Carson goes on to write "Christians are not fatalists. The central line of Christian tradition neither sacrifices the utter sovereignty of God nor reduces the responsibility of his image-bearers. In the realm of philosophical theology, this position is sometimes called *compatibilism*. It simply means that God's unconditional sovereignty and the responsibility of human beings are mutually compatible." According to Carson, "compatibilism is a *necessary* component to any mature and orthodox view of God and the world." Carson does concede that he does "not claim that any of this is easy or straightforward. Sooner or later one retreats into the recognition that, so far as we are concerned, there are some mysteries in the very Being of God. The deepest of these, I think, are tied to the fact that God as he disclosed himself in Scripture is simultaneously sovereign/transcendent and personal." However, the "modern therapeutic God may be superficially attractive because he appeals to *our* emotions, but the cost will soon be high. Implicitly we start thinking of a finite God. God himself is gradually diminished and reduced from what he actually is. And that is idolatry." "If God loves, it is because he chooses to love; if he suffers, it is because he chooses to suffer. God is impassible in the sense that he sustains no 'passion,' no emotion, that makes him vulnerable from the outside, over which he has no control, or which he has not foreseen." "God does not 'fall in love' with the elect; he does not 'fall in love' with us; he *sets his affection* on us. He does not predestine us out of some stern whimsy; rather, *in love* he predestines us to be adopted as his sons (Eph. 1:4-5)."

In Chapter 4, Carson writes of God's wrath as well as His love. God's wrath is real and justified. Carson writes, "the cliché (God hates the sin but loves the sinner) is false on the face of it and should be abandoned. Fourteen times in the first fifty psalms alone, we are told that God hates the sinner, his wrath is on the liar, and so forth. In the Bible, the wrath of God rests both on the sin (Rom. 1:18ff.) and on the sinner (John 3:36)." God's wrath is not, as commonly believed, in only the Old Testament. Both "God's love and God's wrath are ratcheted up in the move from the old covenant to the new, from the Old Testament to the New. These themes barrel along through redemptive history, unresolved, until they come to a resounding climax – in the cross. Do you wish to see God's love? Look at the cross. Do you wish to see God's wrath? Look at the cross." God is love. But God is also just and righteous. How do we sinners reconcile these attributes of God? We don't! But God does! In the cross. Where there was no way, He made a way. In the cross. The price was high! He paid the price! Holy be His Name!