

## The Nature Of God— What's Love Got To Do With It?

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*“God is love, and he who abides in love abides in God, and God in him.” —I John 4:16*

In 1984, R&B singer Tina Turner resurrected her fading pop-music career with the release of the pop-single, “What’s Love Got to Do with It.” Written by Graham Lyle and Terry Britten, the Grammy-winning song cautions the listener to avoid confusing physical attraction and emotional affection with true love. A similar sentiment and warning also apply for Christians to exercise caution while attempting to understand or define the biblical concept of love—especially as it relates to the nature of God.

Lending weight to this concern, I John 4:7-8, 16 furnishes Christians critical marching orders and guidance while providing crucial insight into our Creator’s nature—all centered around the word “love”:

Beloved, let us love one another, for love is of God; and everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. He who does not love does not know God, for God is love. . . . And we have known and believed the love that God has for us. God is love, and he who abides in love abides in God, and God in him.

Twice in these three verses, John declares that “God *is* love” (emphasis ours throughout). He also implores us to “love one another” and to *know* God, and then he identifies God as the *source* of love. Furthermore, our Savior commanded His disciples, earlier in John 13:34-35 (see also John 15:12, 17), to love one another “*as I have loved you.*”

With these verses in mind, consider that God has created humanity physically in His image (Genesis 1:26), and further, is re-creating those whom He has called into His spiritual image (II Corinthians 3:18). To that, we must add our standing orders to love God (Deuteronomy 6:5), to seek Him (Matthew 6:33), and to establish an intimate relationship with Him that we might become more familiar with the image that Christ came to reveal and that we are to become (John 1:18).

### It’s the Relationship

Consider also the following quote from John Ritenbaugh’s 1992 sermon, “Do You See God?”:

We are beginning to see an application to you and me. Will God be working in our lives if we don’t *see* Him? If we don’t *recognize* Him? If we don’t *understand* His purpose, what He is working out in you and me? I don’t think so!

In like manner, from his 2006 sermon, “God, the Church’s Greatest Problem,” he opined:

Since eternal life lies in the relationship with God, it is extremely important how frequent and accurate our thoughts about Him are. We can conclude that what one knows about the true God Himself and how one uses that knowledge are the two most important issues in life.

We have established, then, that a strong relationship with God is critical to attaining eternal life, and the strength of that relationship depends upon an accurate understanding of who He is—His nature. To that end, we have the written Word of God, the Bible, to guide us as it reveals the true nature of God. Moreover, since the Bible teaches us that God is love and that our ability to know God will be determined by our willingness and capacity to love, it is vital that we understand the true meaning of love, particularly as intended by the apostle John's inspired writings. In fact, without this understanding, how can we possibly proceed with our marching orders to seek God—to know Him—and to reflect His will in our interactions with all mankind?

### **A Challenge for Defining Love**

But, everyone is familiar with the concept of love, right? After all, virtually all of civilization is absorbed—even obsessed—with the idea of love. Throughout man's history, countless writers, performers, pundits, and deep thinkers have devoted much—if not most—of their respective careers trying to define and even display love. So, determining the meaning of this simple, four-letter word should not be too great a challenge, right?

Perhaps it is not as easy as one might think. In fact, if we study the world's most common usages and descriptions of love, we find that they have little or nothing in common with the divine nature of our Creator. Stated another way, we discover that John's use of the word "love," as translated from the Greek word *agape*, has little to do with our modern, worldly concept of love.

So, what happened in the interim between the writings of the apostle John and today? Has our understanding of the concept represented by the word "love" been altered or adulterated? If so, by whom and why?

### **The Old Deluder**

With love playing such an enormous role in our calling, could our adversary, Satan the Devil, have influenced a gradual blurring or alteration of the definition of "love"? Just as Christ was sent to reveal the Father's nature (John 1:1-3, 18; John 14:6-10; Matthew 11:27; Colossians 1:15; etc.) and to exemplify love as His disciples' most definitive attribute (John 13:35), Satan, the archetypal antichrist, exists to misrepresent, obscure, and water-down the divine idea behind it all.

The Bible warns of Satan's cunning ways, but we must be able to read and study what is written in the Bible to figure that out (Genesis 3:1; II Corinthians 11:3; John 8:44; Revelation 12:9). Our ability to read and comprehend biblical truth—our literacy—is a gift from our Creator that we often take for granted today, but we were not always so dispassionate about it.

As a matter of fact, in 1642, the legislative body governing the Massachusetts Bay Colony zealously commenced a five-year effort to promote a more literate population to prevent Satan from using illiteracy to keep men from the knowledge of Scripture. From their efforts came three different pieces of legislation, the most famous of which was called the “Old Deluder Satan Act of 1647.”

Its first paragraph reflects a healthy sentiment that all God-fearing persons should appreciate:

It being one chief project of that old deluder, Satan, to keep men from the knowledge of the Scriptures, as in former times by keeping them in an unknown tongue [language], so in these latter times by persuading from the use of tongues, that so that at least the true sense and meaning of the original might be clouded and corrupted with love and false glosses of saint-seeming deceivers; and to the end that learning may not be buried in the grave of our forefathers, in church and commonwealth, the Lord assisting our endeavors.

Antiquated language notwithstanding, this legislation is credited for helping to establish the first public school system in America. By promoting and even requiring greater literacy among the colony's general population, the legislature hoped that more citizens would be able to read the Bible. They argued that literacy would lead to a greater comprehension of the truth. This truth, they believed, would expose the malicious efforts of the “old deluder, Satan,” to prevent all men from seeking, recognizing, and understanding the nature of God, as well as a prime responsibility of all Christians—both centered around the word “love.”

By expanding, adulterating, and reshaping the meaning of love, Satan has promoted and encouraged its overuse, and, at the same time, diluted its meaning.

### **Watering Down Love**

Is there a more abused, overused, or bastardized word in the all the English language? Consider all the ways we use the word “love.”

We *love* a dress on a particular actress or a sharp-looking suit on an actor. We *love* those shoes, that song, that band, that movie, or the weather, a baseball team, a color, a car, or a restaurant.

Do we not *love* a good bottle of wine with our steak?

We *love* chocolate. We *love* our children. Yes, we can even love wallpaper!

How about the act of procreation? We *make love* to our spouse!

Tennis anyone? *Love* also designates zero points.

So far, we have a word used to express our desires or our preferences, our affections for family (which we count on being reciprocal), the act of sexual intercourse, and zero points in a tennis match. Is God's nature in there yet?

Let's look at how the rest of the world uses the word “love.”

A recent Internet search for the expression “love is” returned over one billion hits, while “love songs” yielded over two hundred million. There were just under eight million possibilities for “classic love poems,” while “books about love” yielded over one billion more. Searching for “Shakespeare’s love sonnets” produced over eight million hits. The Internet Movie Database claims there are nearly fourteen thousand different movies with “love” in the title, and one website even boasted that it contained exactly 34,250 different quotes on love. The following is a tiny sampling:

Love is a temporary madness.

Love is a four-letter word.

Love is fleeting.

Love is to be avoided at all costs.

Love is a second-hand emotion.

Love is blind.

Popular music teaches us:

*Love Is a Battlefield*<sup>1</sup>

*Love Bites*<sup>2</sup>

*Love Lies Bleeding*<sup>3</sup>

*Love Hurts*<sup>4</sup>

*Love Stinks*<sup>5</sup>

We sing along to *Love Will Keep Us Together*<sup>6</sup> and *You Make Loving Fun*.<sup>7</sup>

There is *Radar Love*<sup>8</sup>, *Tainted Love*<sup>9</sup>, and *A Groovy Kind of Love*<sup>10</sup>.

And one day we are a *Prisoner of Love*<sup>11</sup>, but the next day *Your Love Has Set Me Free*<sup>12</sup>.

We become *Lost in Love*<sup>13</sup> but then learn that *Love Will Lead You Back*<sup>14</sup>.

We wonder *Where Is the Love?*<sup>15</sup> and then learn that *Love Is All Around*<sup>16</sup>.

Finally, if *Your Love Keeps Lifting Me Higher*<sup>17</sup>, why do we cry, *Don’t Let Love Get You Down*<sup>18</sup>?

Is there any other word that has captured our imagination and inspired such a diversity of thought?

Have we ever considered the ultimate message behind *If Loving You Is Wrong, I Don't Wanna Be Right*<sup>19</sup> or *All In Love Is Fair?*<sup>20</sup> Should love be something that justifies lying, infidelity, or abandonment, or the breaking of any of God's commandments?

Moreover, many of our poets, scriptwriters, and songwriters insist that we “fall” in love in the same way we fall into a trap, as if love is something to be feared and avoided—as if love somehow weakens our resolve.

### **Must Love Feel Good?**

Let us contemplate the considerable efforts of Christian or “faith-based” charities, dominated by the mainstream Protestants, Evangelicals, and Catholics and their mainstream ideas of love.

In the name of love, these charities do many good works for the needy of our society. From soup kitchens, shelters for the homeless, poor, orphaned, battered, and addicted, their list of good works is virtually endless. Their works are difficult to criticize.

Even so, how many of the volunteers—the laborers on the front lines of these charitable efforts—would continue to volunteer if their efforts to “love” their fellowman were not reciprocated with a strong sense of emotional well-being? Though all Christians should respect their efforts and learn from their zeal, these faith-based organizations tend to reduce love to an emotional experience that is heightened in response to doing good.

### **A Dangerous and Deceptive Conclusion**

Then there is the “self-help” or “self-love” crowd, popularized by the secular humanist movement, which teaches that to give and accept love, we must first learn to love ourselves. Not only do these movements encourage us to let go of our inhibitions and to put our own aspirations ahead of others, but they reverse the direction that true love moves by definition—from outward to inward—teaching us, instead, “to thine own self be true.”

If we carry those thoughts to their logical, but dangerous, conclusion by restricting or defining love based on our level of self-indulgence—being true to our carnal nature and our wickedly deceptive heart (Romans 8:7; Jeremiah 17:9)—we will eventually arrive at the deceptive conclusion that love for self must trump everything, including our love for God.

It is this conclusion for which Satan has worked so hard for so many years to place inside the hearts of men and women. Instead of a selfless, outgoing, and unifying attribute that defines the nature of God, love becomes a selfish, introverted, and destructive force that prevents a person from ever knowing or loving Him—or others—in the manner He commands. With this kind of “love” dominating us, God will not be able to complete His task of spiritually re-creating each us in His image, and our final steps in this sanctification journey will come to nothing.

However, our destiny does not have to be tied to that deceptive conclusion.

As cunning and crafty as that old deluder, Satan, is, let us counter his efforts by continuing to read, study, and work to comprehend the Word of God. We must resist Satan and his sad, sick world (Ephesians 6:11-16; James 4:7), as they try to redefine the nature of our loving God, who has, is, and

always will supply our every need (Philippians 4:19). He completed the Creation, gave us His commandments, became human, gave us His Spirit, and inspired each word written in the Bible—all to define and reveal His nature—to show us definitively *what love's got to do with it*, after all (John 14:21-23).