

God's
SOVEREIGN LOVE:
OUR COMFORT

Robert D. Decker

About the Heritage Collection

The Heritage Collection consists of pamphlets on various subjects that were written by Protestant Reformed ministers from approximately the 1930s to the 1970s. At first they were printed and distributed as small plain covered pamphlets by the First Protestant Reformed Church Sunday School. Eventually, the printing was taken over by the church's evangelism society and their appearance was updated.

Background information on most of these pamphlets is sketchy. Some were written in response, occasionally fiery, to doctrinal struggles that took place at particular times. Often they were first delivered in lecture form and then printed to facilitate wider distribution. The earlier authors are in glory; the later ones are retired ministers.

Characteristics of the pamphlets are that they are solidly Reformed and Scripturally based – many abound in Scriptural proof texts – and, given the limited amount of space in pamphlets, provide a comprehensive overview and perspective on their topics. They are often not light reading, but taking the time to read them, study them, and savor the many insights they provide can be conducive to spiritual growth.

The writing of many of the pamphlets was sparked by debates decades ago, but the issues they address are still relevant for readers today. These issues always need to be clarified for those encountering the Christian faith for the first time and for each new generation of believers. Some of the more involved pamphlets may be of greatest benefit to believers who already have a background in the Scriptures.

It is our hope that these voices from a past era may continue to bless readers in the future as they have in many previous years.

Introduction

In this pamphlet, Robert D. Decker addresses a question that he was asked by a lecture committee: “Does an emphasis on the love of God lead to Arminianism or to comfort for God's people?” Arminianism is the widely held belief that God loves all men and seeks their salvation in Jesus Christ. Prof. Decker answers the question by carefully explaining what a biblical emphasis on God's love involves.

Prof. Decker served as a pastor in Doon, Iowa from 1965 to 1969 and in South Holland, Illinois from 1969 to 1973. He then became a professor in the Protestant Reformed Theological Seminary, where he served until 2006.

This speech was originally delivered on April 18, 1978, in the First Protestant Reformed Church of Holland, Michigan.

This pamphlet is a 2011 reprint of the original work.

GOD'S SOVEREIGN LOVE: OUR COMFORT

Robert D. Decker

The subject as assigned to me by the committee was put in the form of a question: "Does emphasis on the love of God lead to Arminianism or to comfort for God's people?" At first I did not understand the question. How could emphasis on the love of God lead to Arminianism? Upon a bit of reflection, however, I think I know what the committee had in mind.

There are those who emphasize the love of God. God is love, they say. And the Bible does indeed say that God is love. But these people say this means that God loves everyone, all men. It belongs to God's very nature to love all. Because He is love, God cannot hate. God cannot and does not reprobate people, determine to condemn them to everlasting punishment on account of their sins. God in His love gives everyone a chance to be saved. Only when a person obstinately and persistently refuses to repent of his sins does God condemn. God offers His love to everyone. And some even go so far as to say that God actually saves everyone—even unbelievers. Hence the church, according to this view, is called to preach the love of God in the form of a "well-meant offer." The church must tell people everywhere, God loves you; God has a wonderful plan for your life; God wants to save you! It's all love, love, love! And one must never talk about hatred or the wrath of God.

This extremely popular conception of the love of God not only leads to Arminianism—it is Arminianism, if not outright universalism. And this conception provides absolutely no comfort at all for the people of God. It may sound like a comforting doctrine to say that God loves everyone and hates no one, but in reality it makes the love of God depend upon the fickle and sinful will of man. If man accepts the offer of God's love, God will save him. In other words, God cannot love unless man loves! There is

nothing certain about that! A man may love one day and hate the next. There is no comfort in that. Besides, if that be true, who is God? According to the Arminian conception, man is really God for his love must be first. That is blasphemy. From this point of view Arminianism is just as destructive of the Christian faith as liberalism.

Out of all this comes a fear on the part of Reformed people, a fear that emphasis on the love of God will lead to Arminianism. I can well understand that Arminianism is the last thing we want! But in reality the fear is groundless. Why? Because the Arminian conception of the love of God is not a biblical conception, but is a distorted, corrupted conception of God's love. Emphasis on the biblical conception of the love of God (as that is expounded in our Reformed creeds) does not lead to Arminianism but is the death-blow to Arminianism. At the same time it is the sure, abiding comfort of God's people. Therefore the church must emphasize the love of God. It must, in order that the truth may be known and defended, in order that God's people may be comforted, and in order that God's name may be glorified!

Consider this subject with me under the topic:

God's Sovereign Love, Our Comfort.

Notice:

- What It Is,
- Its Characteristics, and
- Its Comfort for God's people.

What It Is

Before anything else we must understand that love, all love, is of God. This means that love is not what the world calls love. The world speaks of love: parental love, marital love, love among friends, etc. The world talks about love in many senses. In fact the world speaks of love as the cure for all of its problems. All the world needs, so it is said, is a little bit of love. That is not love. At

best it is only a certain natural affection or attraction. For the rest it is only earthly, sensual, and devilish; it belongs to the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life. The world's love, in fact, is the very opposite of God's love. The world's love is hatred against God and His Christ and against His people. That is all it ever can be. No matter how sweetly the world may talk about love, the world, when it comes right down to it, hates God and His cause. This is not merely my opinion; it is God's Word. The Bible teaches that "the carnal mind [literally, *the mind of the flesh*, R.D.D.] is enmity [hatred] against God: for it is not subject to the law of God, neither indeed can be" (Romans 8:7).

Positively, love is of God. God is the only source of all love. There can be no love outside of God. This means that the only love there is, is God's love. Love is an attribute of God, a characteristic of His divine being, along with other characteristics such as holiness, grace, mercy, etc. And if we may indeed make comparisons, love is the chief characteristic of God's being. In 1 John 4:8 we read the utterly amazing statement, "God is love." God *is* love. We do not read that of the other virtues of God, to the best of my knowledge. We read that God is the God of all grace, that He is merciful, holy, full of lovingkindness, etc. But in 1 John we read that God *is* love. That means that, whatever else God may be, He is preeminently love. Love belongs to the very essence of God's being. In all that He is and in all that God thinks, wills, determines, and does, He *is* love. God as God, the Almighty, sovereign Creator, Sustainer of all things, and the Redeemer of His elect in Christ—in all that, God is love.

What is that love? In Colossians 3:14 we read that "Charity [love]...is the bond of perfectness." Love is a bond. It unites or makes one. In love, two become one. They are united in a bond with one mind, one will, and one desire. Love is a unity in fellowship. What is more, love is the bond of *perfectness*—that is, *moral* perfectness. It is what the Bible calls *holiness*. That is the kind of bond love is. This, by the way, is precisely why love cannot exist in the world of sin and unbelief. Love unites in a bond of righteousness and of moral goodness. And again, let it be emphasized, love is first of all in God. God the Father, Son, and

Holy Spirit live in an intimate bond of fellowship, a bond based upon the perfection of God's own righteousness and holiness. God loves Himself and has no need of any being outside of Himself. God lives in the bond of perfectness.

The *wonder* is that God loved and still loves us! He loved us in eternity. Before the foundation of the world God in His love predestinated us to be conformed to the image of His Son (Ephesians 1). God, Who has no need of us, determined to set His love upon us and take us into His covenant fellowship. This love of God is of course especially manifest in Christ and His cross. "God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life" (John 3:16). "But God commendeth His love toward us, in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us" (Romans 5:8). God loved us so much that He gave His only begotten Son to the cross, to the agonies of hell, to death and the grave for us. Looking at that amazing love of God and considering our worthlessness as depraved, filthy sinners, we can only exclaim with the inspired apostle: "Behold, what manner of love the Father hath bestowed upon us, that we should be called the sons of God" (1 John 3:1). That is the love of God! Behold that love of God! Marvel at it and be thankful for it.

The question is, how do we receive the love of God? The answer is: from the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit, poured out by the ascended Christ, sheds abroad the love of God in our hearts. The Bible says: "But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, temperance" (Galatians 5:22, 23).

Note that the text does not say the *fruits* of the Spirit, but the *fruit* of the Spirit. Hence, there are not many fruits but only one fruit. That one fruit of the Spirit is the love of God. And that love-fruit of the Spirit is composed of many virtues and blessings. Joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, etc., all belong to the love of God that is the fruit of the Spirit. It is indeed a rich fruit!

That love of God that we receive from the Holy Spirit is seen in us. We manifest that love of God exactly in loving the brethren, our

fellow saints. This means that we never hurt them or speak evil of them. Always we seek their welfare. We are willing even to lay down our lives for the brethren. This is emphasized very strongly in Scripture. First John chapters three and four make the point that we cannot love God if we love not the brother. Jesus said: “By this shall all men know that ye are my disciples, if ye have love one to another” (John 13:35).

The Characteristics of Love

That love of God has two main or chief characteristics. It is first of all a *sovereign* love. That is written on almost every page of Scripture. In Deuteronomy 7:7, 8 we find Moses addressing Israel: “The LORD did not set his love upon you, nor choose you, because ye were more in number than any people; for ye were the fewest of all people: but because the Lord loved you.” God’s love did not depend upon anything in Israel. As a matter of fact, Israel was repeatedly manifest as a rebellious and a stiff-necked people. There was nothing in them that made them worthy of God’s love.

The Bible teaches (cf. Ephesians 1:3–11) that we are blessed with all spiritual blessings in heavenly places in Christ Jesus, chosen in Christ before the foundation of the world, and predestinated unto the adoption of children by Christ. And God did all of this *in love*, in His sovereign love. There is no other reason, therefore, for our election into Jesus Christ than the sovereign love of God.

According to this same passage of Scripture, that love of God is according to the good pleasure of His will! God freely determined to love us in Christ. Then there is the classic passage, 1 John 4:10: “Herein is love, not that we loved God, but that he loved us.”

Literally the text reads: “In this is love,” all love: God’s love to us and our love to God and our fellow saints. All love consists in this, not that we loved God, but that He loved us. God’s love is always first. Apart from that there could be no love.

That is the sovereign character of God’s love. Negatively this means that God’s love does not depend upon anything outside of God Himself. God set His love upon Israel and chose them to be His people, not because of Israel’s worth or love, but simply

because God loved them. In love God chose His elect in Christ Jesus before the foundation of the world. That was not because of anything in the elect. In order to love us God does not need our love. His love is sovereign. He loved us according to the good pleasure of His will, His own sovereign determination. Positively this means that God's love is always first. It is always the fountain of all our love both to God and to the neighbor. In fact the love that is in us is not ours but God's.

This is the death-blow to all Arminianism. Arminianism makes God's love second. God loves all men, according to the Arminian, but He cannot save unless man loves Him. Hence, according to Arminianism, man's love must be first and then God can love him. God's love, according to this, does not sovereignly produce man's love but is dependent, bound and limited by man, a response to man's love. That is the opposite of the Bible's dear teaching, and it makes all comfort for the child of God impossible.

The second main characteristic of God's love is that it is *particular*. This too is written on nearly every page of Scripture. The classic is Romans 9:13: "Jacob have I loved, but Esau have I hated." Some, many in fact, have tried to explain that away by saying it means, "Esau have I loved less." That is sheer nonsense. The word is hate. God hated Esau, while His love was for Jacob. This became very obvious in the history of the two nations that came out of Jacob and Esau. Israel was God's chosen and precious, while Edom appeared as the reprobate enemy of God's cause. Jesus taught the same truth repeatedly. In John chapters six and ten our Lord tells us that He comes and lays down His life for those whom the Father loved and gave to Him: His sheep. He tells the unbelievers that they are not of His sheep and, therefore, they do not hear Him and follow Him. In John 17 Jesus prays for and loves those whom the Father has given Him out of the world, and He does not pray for the world.

All this means that God's love is particular. It is for His elect in Christ Jesus. God's wrath abides upon the rest, who are vessels of wrath fitted unto destruction (Romans 9). One can trace that too throughout the history of the Bible. According to Genesis 3:15,

God puts enmity between the seed of the woman and the seed of the serpent. That seed of the woman is Abel, Seth, Enoch, Noah, Shem (with Japheth dwelling in his tents), Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Israel, David, Christ. Galatians 3 teaches that that one seed is Christ and all who are in Him by faith. That one seed is the beloved of the Lord.

The Comfort for God's People

This precious truth of God's sovereign and particular love affords a marvelous comfort for God's people. Let us return to our question for a moment. Does emphasis on the love of God lead to Arminianism, or to comfort for God's people? To Arminianism? Never! God's love is sovereign and particular. Arminianism cannot stand that! To comfort for God's people? Most assuredly. This is *all* of our comfort. Knowing that God's love is sovereign and particular, I am assured of my election into Christ; God's love does not depend upon me. Looking at that love of God as manifest in the cross of Jesus Christ, I am assured of my redemption. Considering that that love is always the same and never changes, I am assured of my preservation unto glory. That is my comfort. It is a comfort grounded in the almighty sovereign God.

This is precisely the thrust of that victory song of Romans 8. After speaking of eternal predestination, the apostle issues the challenge: who shall separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus? The answer is this: nothing! In all these things we are more than conquerors through Him that loved us. For I am persuaded that nothing shall separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord! That same apostle has this prayer recorded in 2 Thessalonians 2:16, 17: "Now our Lord Jesus Christ Himself, and God, even our Father, which hath loved us, and hath given us everlasting consolation and good hope through grace, comfort your hearts, and stablish you in every good word and work."

That is the love of God. It must be emphasized because Scripture emphasizes it. Only, the *love of God* must be emphasized, not some distorted, corrupted notion of it. And that is, indeed, all our comfort.

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