

**The Divine Love**  
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**Walter Harrington**

### **A Fundamental Truth**

Over the past couple of years, I have been talking with a friend in Germany about many complex concepts and topics, and one that we seem to have come back to time and again is that of objective truth and whether or not it exists. Recently, I had a discussion with my sister-in-law about absolute truth, and, again, whether or not it exists. Each conversation started from a different angle and was nuanced by the starting beliefs of all parties involved, but they each sought to tackle a question that the human race has struggled with for a very long time. These are not easy discussions that end in simple answers, and I do not suppose here to answer these questions definitively, nor give a robust argument for the existence of objective/absolute truth. That would take a different medium, with more space (though I also can't promise this to be a short post)- and many greater minds than I have took on this task.

Rather, here I would like to make a proposal that there is at least one fundamental/absolute truth, and it is through our understanding of that truth that many of our biggest questions, both inside and outside of religion, can at least begin to be answered. I will not make an argument for the fact that this fundamental truth exists, but rather put it for as an axiom upon which the theory/understanding of life is built and makes sense. I want to make this point clear so that you do not read this as an apologetic for the absolute truth that I am proposing per say, except that by its explanatory power it may be established to be a fundamental truth.

This may seem a strange way of understanding truth, but it is actually how we understand most anything. All scientific disciplines are built on axioms and universal assumptions that cannot be proven- they are assumed and then the discipline is built on these assumptions. In mathematics, for example, there is the axiom of equality which states "For each variable  $x$ , the formula  $x = x$  is universally valid."<sup>1</sup> Some may condescendingly call this simply a tautology, and you may ask how this is an "assumption"- but that reaction precisely reveals the nature of the axiom. There is no theorem that can prove this statement- it is self-evident and must simply be assumed for mathematics to exist.

I say all this not to derail the discussion, but rather to set it up. I have come to believe that there is at least one fundamental truth, and it is through this fundamental truth that we can understand our existence, purpose and suffering.

I believe the fundamental truth is this: Love.

Throughout the rest of the discussion, I will assume this truth and discuss how love (in a Christian context) can answer some of our deepest questions. I will also define what I mean by the term "love" throughout.

### **Who is God?**

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<sup>1</sup> Check out the Wikipedia page on axioms for this example and more: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Axiom>.

I will begin with what perhaps may seem to be the most difficult question, but this is only because I want to be up front about what I am and am not answering, and then move on to further questions that I think I can answer more comprehensively (though not completely, of course). I do not claim to hold a complete answer to who God is, but rather I think the fundamental truth I have proposed can help us understand one of the hardest concept about the Christian God.

But I will start with the simple statement in I John 4:8 and 16: “...*God is love.*” This is one of the main reasons that I have assumed a/the fundamental truth to be love- I believe God is love. By this admission, I do not mean to say that you must simply believe it to be so because the bible says so- I am only explaining my starting point. I am a Christian, and I am taught that God is love. And this is the starting place to understanding the Christian God.

The Christian God is said to be three in one- Father, Son and Holy Spirit. There have been many explanations and analogies given over the years to try to explain this concept. I personally like the analogy of the flame, which pictures God as the flame that is generated from three candle sticks whose wicks are held in close proximity. However incompletely we explain how the Godhead works, there has always been a harder question in my mind- not how is God three in one, but why?

Historically, Christianity has argued vehemently that we are a monotheistic religion- we believe in one God, or that God is one. This obviously finds its roots in Judaism, really tracing its roots back to being an Abrahamic religion. But the thing is- it didn't have to be this way. When Christianity was born in the first century, it challenged and overturned many of the Jewish beliefs that it came from. Why should the notion that God is one need to remain? I believe that the tension between “God is One” and the trinity remains because the fundamental truth demands it to be so.

Interestingly, the idea of multiple persons in the Godhead is not necessarily completely of Christian origin. There is ambiguity in the Hebrew scriptures in certain books about the nature of God and how He could be in two distinct forms at the same time, such as when the deliverance of Israel from Egypt as God and the Angel of the Lord (see Judges 2:1-3, I Sam 8:8, Micah 6:4). This lead to a belief (whether it was always heretical or not cannot be clearly ascertained) of “two powers in heaven”, or binitarianism.<sup>2</sup> Dr. Heiser argues further that there are even hints at the trinity in the OT.<sup>3</sup> Whether this sheds light on what ancient Israelites actually believed or not, I believe it at least hints at the divine nature of God, and gives evidence that God has been seen as multiple persons in one being for a very long time.

But why must this be so? As seen above, I John 4:8 states that “God is love.” I didn't think that this verse held an answer to this question until I read C.S. Lewis' compelling thoughts on the matter in *Mere Christianity* when discussing the Godhead:

All sorts of people are fond of repeating the Christian statement that ‘God is love’. But they seem not to notice that the words ‘God is love’ have no real meaning unless God contains at least two Persons. Love is something that one person has for another person. If God was a single person, then before the world was made, He was not love. Of course, what these people mean

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<sup>2</sup> For more information about the “Two Powers in Heaven”, see Alan Segal's seminal work “Two Powers in Heaven: Early Rabbinic Reports about Christianity and Gnosticism.” In his dissertation, Dr. Michael Heiser expounds on Segal's to bridge the gap between Segal's book and the Hebrew bible. See <http://drmsb.com/the-naked-bible/two-powers-in-heaven/> for more information. Also see <http://www.thedivinecouncil.com/OTGodheadLanguage.pdf>.

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.thedivinecouncil.com/OTGodheadLanguage.pdf>.

when they say that God is love is often something quite different: they really mean 'Love is God'. They really mean that our feelings of love, however and wherever they arise, and whatever results they produce, are to be treated with great respect. Perhaps they are: but that is something quite different from what Christians mean by the statement 'God is love'. They believe that the living, dynamic activity of love has been going on in God forever and has created everything else.<sup>4</sup>

Lewis goes on to describe how he views the Holy Spirit arising from the Love that is shared between the Father and the Son, so that this love itself is in fact the third person of the Trinity. I believe this is one of the best rationales for why the Godhead exists as multiple persons. If Love is a/the fundamental truth (as I believe can should be derived from I John 4:8, at least in a Christian context), and God is love, then He must exist as multiple persons.

God in three persons- Father, Son and Holy Spirit- is the ultimate embodiment of the fundamental truth of love.<sup>5</sup>

### **Who are we?**

Building on the concept that God is love, I think we can begin to answer another question that has plagued mankind for thousands of years: who are we? Or rather, why are we here? There are different answers that have been given over the years to this question, and I do not claim that mine is in any way all that novel. However, if we take a/the fundamental truth to be love, then our very existence falls right in line with this ideology. We must be careful to point out here, however, that mankind is not needed for love to exist- at least if we take what has been said previously as truth. God is love, and always has existed as love in the Trinity. Mankind does not fulfill some need of God to love. However, I do believe that we can view our existence as stemming from the overflow of the love of God. In what is perhaps the most quoted verse of all time, John tells us:

*"For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life."*  
(John 3:16)

And further in I John:

*"In this the love of God was made manifest among us, that God sent his only Son into the world, so that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins."*  
(I John 4:9-10)

There will be much more to say about the concepts that these verses convey in context, but here I only want to point out that we exist because of and for the love of God. In Genesis 1:26 we are told that man was made in the image of God- or rather to be His representatives on earth. This why I believe the

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<sup>4</sup> C.S. Lewis, Mere Christianity, book 4, chapter 3 (p. 142-143 in "the Complete C.S. Lewis signature classics" paperback).

<sup>5</sup> Please note here that I am in no way speaking of causality here. I'm not saying the fundamental truth of Love created God. I am simply saying that God is love, and because of that He exists in three persons. With the equivalence given that God=love, the two cannot be separated in any way, and thus one did not "cause" the other. They simply are.

fundamental truth of love to be evident- we were created for this purpose, to be like God. In fact, John goes on to say in verse 11 of I John 4, "*Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another.*" I will come back to this idea in my concluding section.

### **Why does evil/suffering exist?**

When I said that I believed that the fundamental truth of love could answer some of the most difficult questions that mankind has ever asked, I was not speaking in vain. Throughout history, the 'problem of evil' (as it has been termed) has been addressed in many different and much more comprehensive forms that will be seen here. Perhaps I myself will expound on what I write here later in life. But for now, I want to take a few minutes to discuss how love being the fundamental truth can even address and answer the question of suffering. At first glance, this may seem counterintuitive (unless of course you know where I'm going with this, as I'm sure many of you do).

I believe that at its most fundamental level, love is inherently a choice, and anything that does not involve a choice cannot be said to truly be love. I think it isn't necessary to make the point (though I'm going to anyway) that an inanimate object cannot love. It would be senseless to say "my textbook loves me." But going further, it would also be senseless to say that an animated object that has been programmed (as opposed to having chosen) to love someone. This one probably hits closer to home, and even could more easily deceive us. But let's look at it more carefully. You could, in theory, program a robot to tend to your every need, to protect you from any danger and even to say phrases that make you *feel* loved. But can you truly say that the robot loves you in the same way that a spouse that has chosen to live and care for you for the rest of his/her life loves you? I do not believe so. The robot has been trained to *do* certain things- things that we know someone who actually loves us would do. But there would never be any sure way of proving/knowing that the robot would do the things that indicate love if it had not been programmed to do so (the analogy breaks down a little here because we can be pretty sure that the robot would in fact not do these things if it had not been programmed to do so). If the robot had no choice, there can be no true sense in which we can say that the robot loves us. It simply functions as it has been programmed to function. In the same way, we too cannot love if we are not given a choice.

But this concept goes beyond animated objects that behave according to predetermined programming. I believe this concept holds true for living beings as well, though it might be harder to understand through analogy simply because it is hard for us to imagine a situation in which an animal or even fellow human being would be in a situation in which they are not given a choice. Even if one doesn't believe in free will or the ability to make choices, this is how we experience the world, and it's hard to imagine a human that has been programmed as a robot would be programmed. Maybe the closest concept we have to this is the concept of brainwashing. When we think of someone who has been kidnapped and brainwashed to either believe a certain set of beliefs, or do particular tasks, or even love certain people as family that they would not have if they did not go through the process of brainwashing, most onlookers would look at the situation and conclude that the person doesn't truly love the people who she was kidnapped by because it was not her decision to do so. She was not given a choice. I'm not suggesting that people cannot love "unlovable people" (if there even is such a thing as "unlovable people"). What I am suggesting is that love is a choice, and if someone is "forced to love" someone, it isn't love at all- it's something completely different. Love demands a choice.

With this in mind, I hope you can see how I believe this explains the presence of evil/suffering. Inherent in the concept of love, there must be a possibility of non-love, or rejection of love. For love to exist, free will must exist, and with free will comes the inherent possibility of evil. This does not make God the author of evil, evil simply must exist as a possibility if Love is a/the fundamental truth. Usually this question is asked in a theological context/discussion, such as “If God is an all-loving God, why is the world he created full of suffering?” Why couldn’t God just create an existence in which evil isn’t even a possibility? I propose that this is an illogical question if love exists at all. It is the same as asking why God can’t create a square circle. Omnipotence does not mean the power to do what is logically contradictory/impossible, rather it is the power to do anything that is logically possible.<sup>6</sup>

At this point some may question the motives of God, or even his ethics for creating a world knowing that the possibility of evil would exist, but I think that we should take a step back before we make claims like this. To begin, if God does exist and is omniscient, this would mean that his knowledge and wisdom would fully exceed anything that we can boast today. We simply do not have all the information to make such a judgement/condemnation on an omniscient being. And if we do not have the power to make this ethical conclusion, we cannot use the conclusion to dismiss the possibility of God’s existence, or even make the claim that he is not who he says he is. Further, if a/the fundamental true is Love, we might say that creation, regardless of risk, is good, as it corresponds with the fundamental truth. There is more that could be said here, but I think it would get away from the main topic at hand.<sup>7</sup>

God is love, we were created through and for the love of God, and our vocation is to image the divine love in the present creation. However, since Love demands a choice, we all have the free will to reject our true vocation and choose not to love God. This rejection has consequences, just as anything that does not function as it is supposed to function has consequences. The consequences of our choices has led to the evil we see today. It should be noted here that evil is not the plan of God, nor is it his intention. It is a consequence of our actions. Again, I do not claim to give a comprehensive treatise on suffering and the problem of evil here, rather I only mention its origin. The rest of the conversation is still very complex, and deserves much more space and time if it is to be adequately addressed.

The next question that could be asked here is even if we allow that the concept of true love leaves open a door to suffering, if God is love, then why doesn’t he do something about it? This is a good question, and one we will discuss shortly. But first, I think we need to begin to wrap our minds around what Love truly means.

### **What is love?**

This is a question that we probably all think we know the answer to, at least in some form, yet when we truly try to define it, it seems to elude our explanation. Further, our culture and society has taken this word and made it to mean many different things, much of which has nothing at all to do with love truly defined. I do not think this has been done completely with ill intention. Much of how society defines love holds some connection to the foundation of love, yet ripped from its own context and made to

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<sup>6</sup> This is the same solution to the common question of “Can God make a rock bigger than he can pick up?”, though the problem is concealed in the example. It is illogical to propose that an all-powerful being could do something that would contradict the concept of being all-powerful.

<sup>7</sup> I’d be happy to discuss this more in a personal setting.

mean something different. Love is not a feeling, though it can produce feelings. Love is not an emotion, though it can involve emotion. Love is not just anything I think is good, though true love is indeed good. As I have said before, I believe fundamentally love is a choice. But what choice?

In what might be one of the most beautiful (however cliché) passages about love by the apostle Paul, we can begin to understand what love is:

*“Love is patient and kind; love does not envy or boast; it is not arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends...”*  
(1 Corinthians 13:4-7)

In context, Paul is writing to a congregation who seem to have forgotten what love is. Instead of being united in Christ, they were struggling with much division. The church had formed groups and become self-serving and arrogant, even with the gifts they had been given by God. He begins this passage with stress on the importance of love over all other “good” things, including great knowledge, divine revelation and martyrdom (v. 1-3). Reading through his passage on love, we get the sense of what he is trying to convey. Patience, kindness, not insisting on your own way, bearing all things. Love is a sacrifice, in every sense of the word. Love is deciding that you want what is good and true for the person whom you love. You want what is best for them, and are willing to sacrifice to make it happen. Love is a choice that demands an action. It is not the warm fuzzy feeling you get when you see someone, though this can be involved. Love is self-sacrifice.

We typically think of this self-sacrifice in the most drastic of terms, and this can certainly be true. We will discuss that shortly. However, self-sacrifice does not mean self-abuse or slavery. That is an aberration of love. The parent who loves her child does not suffer because of this love; to the contrary, she is fulfilled through her love. Love, functioning properly, builds up and edifies, as we are in agreement with that for which we were created. Even when self-sacrificial love leads us to suffering on behalf of the one we love, our suffering does not out way the fulfillment we receive through our sacrificial act. Love is more important than me. Love is a fundamental truth.

I want to make one more note here before moving on. Paul says that “love rejoices in truth.” I don’t think this point should be overlooked. I mentioned earlier that some believe love to be anything that they think is right or anything that feels good. This is not the case. Love that is not in line with truth is not love at all, but rather a feeling driven by culture and personal emotion. If love is a fundamental truth, it cannot be contrary to its own core. It rejoices when the creation is functioning as it is intended to function. This is why many of the things that we might call love, such as a sexual feeling (as this is probably where we have the deepest confusion), lead to heartache and brokenness when used improperly. It is an aspect of love ripped from the framework that it was designed to work within. It is no longer functioning properly, no longer rejoicing in truth. In the moment it feels perfectly fine, yet the consequences again and again prove severe. Children around the world today grow up without fathers and in broken homes because someone confused lust for love. There are parents who scream and abuse one another in front of their children because they confused a feeling for a dedicated choice. Again, more could be said, but this is not the place. I take this moment to simply warn against the temptation of shallowly defining love to fit our current feelings and desires and to seek deeper truth.

## **So, why hasn't God done anything about evil?**

Now I believe we are in a good position to address this question. The question often comes Korea's an indictment against God than as an honest question about the nature of reality. But we will take it as the latter. Even if love inherently opens the door for evil and our choices have led to a world full of evil and suffering, why will God, being all-loving, not do anything about it? Why not stop the evil that has been created by us? Does he not have the power to do so?

This is a good question. Sometimes as Christians we might get the answer confused and say something about justice and punishment, or the coming judgement. And no doubt, these answers must be included in any robust dealing with the question. However, I do not believe these to be the main thrust of the Christian answer to "Why doesn't God do something about suffering?" The Christian answer is that he has done something. He has done something so powerful, that both evil and death have been dealt the death blow (pun intended). The Christian answer to the problem of evil is the cross. However, many Christians do not understand what happened on the cross. I must admit that until recently, I hadn't really given it a proper amount of thought. Many of us have been fed a superficial version of the victory that God won on that day nearly two thousand years ago, a version that has led to poor theology and mistaken understanding (in my view, at least). I believe the fundamental truth of love gives us the framework to truly understand what happened on the cross, and the implications for us today.

With the ground work that has been laid previously, I think we can quickly start from the beginning to recap the necessary elements that will give us a better understanding of the cross. My thesis is that a fundamental truth is love, and that God is this love. We, then, were created from and for this love. Love inherently demands a choice, and thus each one of us has the free will to either serve in our true vocation in the love of God, or to reject this vocation in favor of another ethic, often one that is self-serving. No one has perfectly lived in accordance with the fundamental truth, and thus evil and suffering abound in our world.<sup>8</sup> The consequence of our rejection is ultimately death. We are separated from God, who is love, the fundamental, because of our rejection of this truth, and justly so. However, because God is love, he did not look at his creation and decide just to let it go because of our choice. Yet, he cannot just snap his fingers and make everything "right" again- for that would remove our free will and destroy any aspect of love we might have. In effect, that would mean the destruction of humanity as we know it. So what can he do?

Love is self-sacrifice. What God did on our behalf was so profound that no one, human or beyond, truly understood what was happening when it happened. Though the plan had been formed before the foundation of the world, though the prophets had been sent to testify to what would surely take place, and though the people through whom all nations of the world would be blessed had been called, the plan, and the success thereof, was not known until after it all unfolded. Paul, possibly quoting an older hymn, has this to say about what God did to answer the problem of evil:

*"Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others. Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant,*

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<sup>8</sup> Forgive my brevity at this point. This concept is in no way simple, I am only approaching it in this manner because of the foundation I have already laid previously.

*being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.”*

*(Philippians 2:3-11)*

The Christian virtue of love is what it is only in light of what we learn from Jesus. Unfortunately, some still misunderstand what Jesus did to this day. To answer the problem of evil, God himself became man, to suffer what we suffer, to be rejected as we have rejected, and to die an unjust death on a cruel cross, completing his experience as part of his own creation. The death of Jesus on the cross was the ultimate self-sacrifice of love. In the gospel of John, Jesus says:

*“This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends.”*

*(John 15:12-13)*

God does not only teach us what love is, he continually embodies it for us. The sacrifice of Jesus on the cross was not about appeasing an angry god, as some systems claim, but rather it was God acting in accordance with himself as the fundamental truth. The death of Jesus was the ultimate point of the Divine Love.

At this point, we should take a step back, because the story does not end here. Going back to I Corinthians 13, quoted above, I want to point out something else that is happening in that context. As Paul is describing love, he is describing it as a better way, in contrast to spiritual gifts such as healing, tongues and prophecy. This says something about love that I think we miss amid the controversial nature of “spiritual gifts.” What Paul is describing as love is not just an abstract idea- it is a true power. In fact, it is more powerful and more important than physical miracles that the Corinthian church experienced. That power that they experienced would eventually come to an end- but love never will. Even when our true vocation is restored, and we live completely in harmony with the Divine Love, this love will still continue to be, just as it has always been. The Divine Love is truly eternal, and there is true power in it.<sup>9</sup> And it is this power that won the victory on that decisive day of history.

If you think about it, by our own superficial logic, we wouldn't see the plan of God coming. If the problem of evil is caused by sin, and someone was coming claiming that he was going to deal with sin and defeat the power that it held, we would probably think this person would come in great power and fight a battle (whatever that might look like) to win victory over the power of sin and death. Indeed, this was the common Jewish conception of the coming Messiah, the one who would restore the world to its original intention. However, this shows our own misunderstanding of the fundamental truth. The omnipotent God came not as a conquering King, but rather in humility, as a servant to those he created. God acted in accordance to his very nature in effort to set a message of good news to all nations, that though we have rebelled and given ourselves over to the power of sin and death, there is hope. The

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<sup>9</sup> If you will not think me irreverent, I actually think the Harry Potter series provides a good analogy to the Divine Love. The foundation of the entire plot is the power of the self-sacrificial love of Harry's mother.



God-Man has come and won the victory through his self-sacrifice of love. The Divine Love. This was always the mission of Jesus, as he quotes from Isaiah after healing many people:

*This was to fulfill what was spoken by the prophet Isaiah: "Behold, my servant whom I have chosen, my beloved with whom my soul is well pleased. I will put my Spirit upon him, and he will proclaim justice to the Gentiles. He will not quarrel or cry aloud, nor will anyone hear his voice in the streets; a bruised reed he will not break, and a smoldering wick he will not quench, until he brings justice to victory; and in his name the Gentiles will hope."*

*(Matthew 12:17-21)*

Note the gentleness and love that is seen in the coming Messiah, yet also pictured is his decisive victory that brings forth hope. For so long, many Protestant and evangelicals have proclaimed a message of divine wrath and Jesus' sacrifice as a satiation thereof. We have focused so heavily on the gruesome nature of the cross, the pain and agony that Jesus went through, and the blame that we all share for crucifying him, that I fear we have missed the big picture that the cross embodies. The cross was the acting of the Divine Love, God himself sacrificing for us because of his love for us. The pain and suffering that Jesus went through prior to and during his death only highlights the love he had for us to willingly die, as a sheep lead to the slaughter, knowing that through his sacrifice of love, the power of sin and death would be defeated, and a new hope would arise- a hope that we know we can be restored to our true vocation through Christ (more on this later). Jesus won the victory on the cross.<sup>10</sup>

*"None of the rulers of this age understood this, for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory. But, as it is written, "What no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the heart of man imagined, what God has prepared for those who love him."*

*(1 Corinthians 2:8-9)*

There is a true power that comes from love, and through that power death's hand has been tied. You might say, how does Jesus death say anything about defeating death? Jesus died- how can that mean victory over death? And this is true, if the story ended there. But since the beginning, the core message of Christianity has been not that Jesus died, but that Jesus died and was raised to life again. The resurrection is the lynchpin of Christianity, and without it, the message has no power. Paul makes this point clear in his letter to the Corinthians:

*"Now if Christ is proclaimed as raised from the dead, how can some of you say that there is no resurrection of the dead? But if there is no resurrection of the dead, then not even Christ has been raised. And if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain and your faith is in vain. We are even found to be misrepresenting God, because we testified about God that he raised Christ, whom he did not raise if it is true that the dead are not raised. For if the dead are not raised, not even Christ has been raised. And if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins. Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished. If in Christ we have hope in this life only, we are of all people most to be pitied.*

*(1 Corinthians 15:12-19)*

But through the power of Love, Jesus was raised, and thus Paul can go on to say:

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<sup>10</sup> For a more robust treatment of the Christus Victor theory of atonement, see N.T. Wright's *The Day the Revolution began*. Much of this section relies heavily on this book.

*“But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. For as by a man came death, by a man has come also the resurrection of the dead. For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive. But each in his own order: Christ the firstfruits, then at his coming those who belong to Christ. Then comes the end, when he delivers the kingdom to God the Father after destroying every rule and every authority and power. For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. The last enemy to be destroyed is death. For “God has put all things in subjection under his feet.” But when it says, “all things are put in subjection,” it is plain that he is excepted who put all things in subjection under him. When all things are subjected to him, then the Son himself will also be subjected to him who put all things in subjection under him, that God may be all in all.”*  
(1 Corinthians 15:20-28)

This is the message of victory, and the victory is won through the Divine Love.

*“When the perishable puts on the imperishable, and the mortal puts on immortality, then shall come to pass the saying that is written:*

*“Death is swallowed up in victory.”*

*“O death, where is your victory?*

*O death, where is your sting?”*

*The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.”*  
(1 Corinthians 15:54-56)

It was through suffering and self-sacrificial love that the power of sin and death was defeated. It has been said before that instead of giving a clear, simple answer to the problem of suffering, God came to suffer with us. Just like the friends of Job (for the first seven days at least), sometimes the best answer to suffering is simply to sit and bear the suffering with those affected. That’s not to say there isn’t a much to be developed theologically from the death and resurrection of Christ, but just to say that we shouldn’t miss the actual event due to our theological treatises. We may never in this age have the perfect answer to suffering- but we do have the perfect example. And it is through Him that we understand everything else.

### **What about justice?**

I think we must go on, however, with this understanding and framework to address what all this means for us, if anything. Sure, it is good to develop theology and to think well about the world- a practical gain in and of itself. But the Divine Love goes further, because it asks us all the questions- What will you do with this Jesus? The death and resurrection does not leave option for a neutral state. To quote once again from C.S. Lewis:

“I am trying here to prevent anyone saying the really foolish thing that people often say about Him: I’m ready to accept Jesus as a great moral teacher, but I don’t accept his claim to be God. That is the one thing we must not say. A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic — on the level with the man who says he is a poached egg — or else he would be the Devil of Hell. You must make your choice. Either this man was, and is, the Son of God, or else a madman or something worse.

You can shut him up for a fool, you can spit at him and kill him as a demon or you can fall at his feet and call him Lord and God, but let us not come with any patronizing nonsense about his being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us. He did not intend to.”<sup>11</sup>

The Christian understanding about what the death and resurrection did is clear: Through the power of divine love, Jesus is Lord (Acts 10:36, Romans 10:9, I Cor. 1:2, 8:6, Phil. 2:5-11). Those who put their faith in (pledge allegiance to<sup>12</sup>) Jesus enter into a new kingdom, a kingdom of love.

*“He has delivered us from the domain of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.”  
(Colossians 1:13-14)*

Though we chose to rebel against our true vocation, God has provided a way through love that we can once again be restored to this vocation. However, just as God cannot snap his fingers and make sin and evil go away (without also taking love away in the process), there must be a free will choice involved on our part. This is where I think justice comes into the picture.

The God of the bible is consistently pictured as a God of love and justice. Sometimes these two concepts seem to be in tension with one another, but they need not be. In fact, many times we wouldn't dare separate love and justice. The mother of a daughter who has been sexually assaulted is driven by her love for her daughter to seek justice. The hearts of the jury moved with love for a poor (financially) old man who is has been scammed by a large corporation seek justice in their determination. It is love, truly wanting the best for someone else, which moves us to make things right for those who are oppressed. This is, too, the love of God.

*“For the Lord your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great, the mighty, and the awesome God, who is not partial and takes no bribe. He executes justice for the fatherless and the widow, and loves the sojourner, giving him food and clothing. Love the sojourner, therefore, for you were sojourners in the land of Egypt.”  
(Deuteronomy 10:17-19)*

*“The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me,  
because the Lord has anointed me  
to bring good news to the poor;  
he has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted,  
to proclaim liberty to the captives,  
and the opening of the prison to those who are bound;  
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor,  
and the day of vengeance of our God;  
to comfort all who mourn;  
to grant to those who mourn in Zion—  
to give them a beautiful headdress instead of ashes,  
the oil of gladness instead of mourning,*

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<sup>11</sup> C.S. Lewis, [Mere Christianity](#) (1952; Harper Collins: 2001) 51-52.

<sup>12</sup> For a better understanding of what the early Christians meant by “faith”, see *Salvation by Allegiance Alone* by Matthew Bates.

*the garment of praise instead of a faint spirit;  
that they may be called oaks of righteousness,  
the planting of the Lord, that he may be glorified.*

...

*For I the Lord love justice;  
I hate robbery and wrong;  
I will faithfully give them their recompense,  
and I will make an everlasting covenant with them.”  
(Isaiah 61:1-3, 8)*

*“He has told you, O man, what is good;  
and what does the Lord require of you  
but to do justice, and to love kindness,  
and to walk humbly with your God?”  
(Micah 6:8)*

If love is the fundamental truth, it means that love itself is truth. It cannot act in a way that is contrary to truth; this is why Paul can say that love “rejoices with truth” (1 Cor. 13:6). Love seeks that which is wrong to be made right, restored, reconciled. Justice and love are two sides of the same coin. Love as the fundamental truth says that evil and suffering are real- we can’t make them disappear by deciding they don’t exist. Nor can they simply be “declared right.”

Yet, if we all have partaken in the rebellion and have contributed to the overall evil in the world, how can we say that we ourselves are exempt from justice? In truth, I don’t believe we can. This is where forgiveness, grace and mercy come into play. Again, these terms often are thought to be in conflict with one another, fundamentally. But I think that if we consider more closely, we will see that they complement each other.

On a surface level, I think we understand this. When we think about love, we often pair love with forgiveness and mercy. It makes sense that love and forgiveness go hand in hand. But why is this so, especially if love and justice also go hand in hand? I think the problem and tension we often see between these concepts comes from situations in which they truly do stand in tension. Justice is about restoring a situation to its properly functioning context. When the offending party is not willing to seek this restoration, it is often hard to see forgiveness and reconciliation.<sup>13</sup> However, if the party is willing and has a heart of repentance, reconciliation can be made, often without even “fixing” everything that we done (i.e. things that cannot physically be restored).

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<sup>13</sup> Note here that I am going to speak about forgiveness in the ultimate sense of a restoration, of God setting things right. I am not speaking here of forgiveness on the personal level- I think that we must extend forgiveness personally regardless of whether the offending party is remorseful or not. It is not our job to take vengeance- that is the Lord’s, for He is the one that can do it perfectly. Further, forgiveness on the personal level is often more about releasing our own heart from bitterness and anger and liberating ourselves to live holy lives more than it is about the other person; though if they are willing, forgiveness heals all parties involved.

*“But if a wicked person turns away from all his sins that he has committed and keeps all my statutes and does what is just and right, he shall surely live; he shall not die. None of the transgressions that he has committed shall be remembered against him; for the righteousness that he has done he shall live. Have I any pleasure in the death of the wicked, declares the Lord God, and not rather that he should turn from his way and live?”*

*(Ezekiel 18:21-23)*

In the criminal justice world I believe this concept is called “restorative justice.” In Christianity, it is called repentance and reconciliation. And reconciliation is one of the core goals of love when things are out of place. This is why it was through Divine Love that God forged a path of reconciliation. Not because we deserved it, but because he truly has our best interests in mind. It is in love that he throws out the lifeline, giving himself as a sacrifice and rising again to offer us hope.

However, because love is a choice, we must choose to love God to act in harmony with the fundamental truth. Just as we cannot pretend that evil doesn’t exist, we too cannot be reconciled without true repentance, a turn from our rebellion and willing submission to the Lord. This process of conversion is pictured as death with the Messiah and rising again with him to new life:

*“What shall we say then? Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound? By no means! How can we who died to sin still live in it? Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life. For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his. We know that our old self was crucified with him in order that the body of sin might be brought to nothing, so that we would no longer be enslaved to sin. For one who has died has been set free from sin. Now if we have died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him. We know that Christ, being raised from the dead, will never die again; death no longer has dominion over him. For the death he died he died to sin, once for all, but the life he lives he lives to God. So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus.”*

*(Romans 6:1-11)*

Jesus’ death and resurrection won the victory over the power of sin and death, and it is through uniting with Jesus’ death and resurrection that we too gain the victory that Christ won. But this submission to Christ, putting him in in baptism, necessitates a loyalty change. It calls for true repentance, for we can no longer live out of harmony with the fundamental truth- that’s what put us in the place we were to begin with. Justice says things must be restored to their proper function, and this is precisely what happens when we come to Jesus. We leave the path of rejection behind and pledge to be restored to our true vocation through the power of the Spirit. We have been raised to new life, a restored life, with Christ, and we now seek the things that are above (Col. 3:1-4).

It may be necessary here to point out that though we have indeed been raised to new life, the kingdom of God has been set forth in a two stage plan. The kingdom has been inaugurated, but waits to be consummated at the second coming of Christ. We too start living the new life now, but that in no way means that we are expected to be perfect. We still live in a fallen world; we still reside in a corruptible body. One day all creation will be restored (Rom. 8:18-24, Isaiah 65:17-25) and we will put on an

incorruptible body (I Cor. 15:42-57). For now, we ever seek to continually be conformed to the image of Christ, until that day when we will be ultimately glorified to be like him; then, we will be truly functioning with the fundamental truth of love. At that point, justice will find its ultimate fulfillment in love.

### **What is our purpose?**

But what does this all say about the meaning of life? Does this give purpose to who we are? Much in every way. Though the love of Jesus we are given the opportunity to be restored to our true vocation—the original meaning of life. We can once again be true imagers of God through the example of Christ, the exact imprint of God’s nature (Heb. 1:3). Once again, we can begin to be molded into reflecting God in this world and the world to come, acting in harmony with the fundamental truth.

This is, and was always, the purpose of our lives, to be imagers of God. With this, we can truly begin to understand our calling through Christ. In a way, our purpose in life can be boiled down to the fundamental truth. Consider the words of Jesus when a lawyer tried to test him.

*“Teacher, which is the great commandment in the Law?” And he said to him, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the great and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets.”*

*(Matthew 22:36-40)*

This is a very well-known passage, but do we truly grasp the profound teaching here? The two greatest commandments are (you guessed it!) love—love for God and love for our fellow man. How can this one concept encompass all the law and the prophets<sup>14</sup>?

No evil can be done out of love. No sin can be committed against someone who you love. If I love you, I will not steal from you. I am not going to seek your harm. I am not going to swindle or cheat you. If I truly love you, I am always going to have your best interests in mind. This is how all the law and the prophets are summed up in these two commands. If I have true love for you, I don’t have to worry about doing you wrong.

Why then have the commandments in the first place? Why not just list these two commands and expect Israel to fall in line? There are many things that can and should be said here, but I want to focus on our limited scope in this life. Paul says that he would not have known sin if the law had not been put into place (Rom. 7:7). We often do not know what the loving answer is in every situation. Sure, there are contexts in which it is easy to see how we are to love our neighbor. But there are many other contexts in which we simply cannot fully ascertain the outcome. I think this is where commands come into play. We must have some instruction and guidance if we are going to learn the way of love. The law was our guardian or tutor until Christ (Gal. 3:23-29), the embodiment of God’s love, came to give us the ultimate picture of love. But now that Christ has come, we are no longer held captive under the law. The law just told us when and how we were wrong. In Christ, we are being transformed into a new creation. We

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<sup>14</sup> In Jewish context, the “Law and the Prophets” contained all the commandments that the Jews were to live by to be holy to God.

have been liberated from the law to be transformed in the way of love. This is our purpose in life. We are to image the fundamental truth to the world.

### **The way of Love.**

The more I mature in Christ, the more I realize that Christianity truly isn't about following a list of rules in order to make God happy and secure a place with him in heaven one day. No, Christianity is learning what it means to love in every situation. I am beginning to understand see my vocation through the eyes of love. N.T. Wright has, in my judgement correctly, claimed that the Western church has "moralized our anthropology."<sup>15</sup> By this he means we have turned our notion of what it means to be truly human into keeping a list of rules. But our vocation is so much larger than that, filled with so much more meaning. Don't get me wrong, in the process of being conformed to the image of Christ, we will certainly "keep the rules"- but not because this is our goal. Our goal is to love as Christ loved. The rules were only there to teach us something about love. They were never meant to be love itself.

If it sounds like I'm laying out a walk that is easier than "keeping all the rules", let me assure you that I am not. That's part of the problem with the rules in the first place- they cannot be comprehensive enough to cover every situation in life. They never could. That's why religious people have struggled with the interpretation and application of scripture in our own lives. I think Jesus is showing us a better way when he brings all the Law and the prophets into essentially one command: love. Instead of looking for a rule, we must ask ourselves, "What does love demand in this situation?" I'm not claiming we will always have an answer for that, nor will we always choose the right answer. Again, I must stress that love is not a gut feeling or a subjective thought of my own. If love is the fundamental truth, then it is absolute, though we may understand it incorrectly at times. But this is why Jesus came to earth, to embody love and to show us the way of love. This is why Christians are given the Spirit to guide us in the way of love (Rom. 14:12-17). The way of love is much harder than following a list of rules- and it is so much more rewarding. Through the power of the love of God which has been poured into our hearts (Rom. 5:5), we truly can be transformed into the image of Christ.

This process, however, will not be easy. Choosing to walk in the way of love means walking as Christ did for us. In attempt to bring restoration and reconciliation to the world, we will likely bear the suffering that human rejection has brought into the world. One of the early messages of Christianity is one that is not too popular in Western Christianity today: Love for the world will mean self-sacrifice and suffering, just as our Lord. This is the thrust of Philippians 2:1-11. Many NT writers saw it as a privilege to suffer for the name of Christ, to bring the good news to the world (Phil. 1:29-30, I Peter 4:12-19, James 1:2-4).

I think one of the reasons that this suffering was seen as a privilege and vital to the mission of the early church is because through our suffering, reconciliation is offered to the world. As Christians, we take some of the brunt of the evil that has overtaken the world, so that love can have its effect on people. The Divine Love calls us into a ministry of reconciliation:

*"For the love of Christ controls us, because we have concluded this: that one has died for all, therefore all have died; and he died for all, that those who live might no longer live for themselves but for him who for*

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<sup>15</sup> N.T. Wright, *The Day the Revolution Began: Reconsidering the Meaning of Jesus's Crucifixion*, (New York, NY, USA: HarperOne, 2016), 76-77.

*their sake died and was raised. From now on, therefore, we regard no one according to the flesh. Even though we once regarded Christ according to the flesh, we regard him thus no longer. Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come. All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation. Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us.”*

*(2 Corinthians 5:14-20)*

Walking in the way of love means being patient and kind (I Cor. 13:4), counting others as more significant than ourselves and looking to the interests of others (Phil. 2:3-4), and ultimately loving as Christ loves (John 13:14, 15:13). This is not an easy. However, this is how we mature in the Divine love. Let us ever seek to love like Christ, and to bring the ministry of reconciliation to the world.

One day the fundamental truth will be restored to its full vigor in the renewed creation. The love of God wishes for you to be there, in harmony with this truth. The way of love calls out for you. Will you answer?

**Suggested Reading: I Corinthians 13, Philippians 2, Romans 8, II Corinthians 5.**

In Christian love.

-Walter