

The Love of God and the Heresy of Exclusivism

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"God is love, and he who abides in love abides in
God and God abides in him." I John 4:16b

How should we interpret the declaration in I John 4:8 and 16 that God not only loves, but *is* love? Many philosophically trained Christians will no doubt interpret this, as I do, to mean that love is part of God's very essence; that loving kindness is an *essential*, not merely an *accidental*, property of God.

Of course the author of I John was not a philosopher and did not, fortunately, employ philosophical jargon in his writings; nor was he likely even familiar with the philosophical distinction between essential and accidental properties. He nonetheless seems clearly to employ "God" as a proper name (as opposed to a title), the name of a distinct person whom we ought to adore and worship, and he says concerning *this* person that he *is* love. The point, then, hardly seems to be that the person who is God just *happens* to love us, as if it were a happy accident that he does; the point seems to be that it is his very nature to love us. In a broadly logical (or metaphysical) sense, it couldn't have been otherwise.¹ That this is, at the very least, a natural interpretation seems indisputable. Commenting upon I John 4:8, the conservative New Testament scholar, Leon Morris, thus writes:

God is love. This means more than 'God is loving'. It means that God's essential nature is love. He loves, so to speak, not because he finds objects worthy of His love, but because it is His nature to love. His love for us depends not on what we are, but on what He is. He loves us because He is that kind of God.²

But this interpretation, which seems to me exactly right, is in fact more controversial than one might expect. Many theologians, particularly those in the Augustinian tradition, reject the idea that loving kindness is an essential property of God; John Calvin, for example, explicitly considers this idea and explicitly rejects it, as we shall see. And the reason for such rejection is clear enough: If God freely chooses to make *some* persons, but not *all*, the object of his love and mercy—if, that is, he freely bestows his love and mercy upon a limited elect, as the Augustinians insist—then it must be possible for him not to love someone; and if that is so much as possible, then loving kindness is not one of his essential properties. (Similarly, if it is so much as possible that God should not believe a true proposition, then omniscience is not one of his essential properties either.) So clearly, the question of whether loving kindness *is* an essential property of God goes to the very heart of Augustinian theology, and in this paper I shall therefore begin with a two-fold question: How *do* the proponents of limited election interpret the Johannine declaration that God is love?—and what are the exegetical and theological merits of their interpretation? I shall then argue that, contrary to what some have contended, the Johannine declaration clearly is an assertion about the essence of God; that St. Paul's inclusive understanding of election is also in perfect accord with the idea that it is God's very nature to love; and that any form of exclusivism in theology is therefore incompatible with the New Testament teaching.

In Search of an Augustinian Interpretation

When it first occurred to me, several years ago, to wonder how the proponents of limited election might interpret I John 4:8 and 16, I immediately encountered three difficulties as I began to search for an answer. First, not all the proponents of limited election seem to regard these texts as particularly important. Louis Berkof, for example, managed to write an entire systematic theology

without citing either of the texts in question;³ and though John Calvin does comment upon them briefly in his commentary on I John, he evidently did not regard them as important enough even to mention in his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. When one thinks about it, this is truly astonishing. Calvin's *Institutes* is a monumental work of over 1500 pages; in it he sought to provide an exhaustive summary of Christian doctrine, as he understood it, along with the biblical support for it. In the Westminster Press edition, the index of Bible references alone is 39 pages of small print with three columns per page. And yet, in this entire work, as massive and thorough as it is, Calvin never once finds the Johannine declaration that God is love important enough to discuss. How, one wonders, could this have happened? Here is a statement that, to all appearances at least, provides a glimpse into the very nature of the Christian God, and in his *Institutes* Calvin ignores it altogether; he does not even find it important enough to explain away.

A second difficulty I encountered as I began my search was that the proponents of limited election are sometimes inconsistent in the various claims they make. When he contemplates God's relationship with the redeemed in heaven, for example, Jonathan Edwards writes:

The Apostle tells us that God is love, I John 4:8. And therefore seeing he is an infinite Being, it follows that he is an infinite fountain of love. Seeing he is an all-sufficient Being, it follows that he is a full and overflowing and an inexhaustible fountain of love. Seeing he is an unchangeable and eternal Being, he is an unchangeable and eternal source of love.⁴

Here Edwards says that God is an "infinite," "overflowing," "inexhaustible," "unchangeable," and "eternal source of love." But when he contemplates God's relationship to the damned, Edwards also writes: "In hell God manifests his being and perfections only in hatred and wrath, and hatred without love."⁵ By "hatred without love," he evidently has in mind an attitude which is quite incompatible with love. So at this point, the question arises: How are we to reconcile the second quotation with

the first? Suppose Edwards had said, in one place, that God's *righteousness* is "infinite," "inexhaustible," "unchangeable," and "eternal," and then had said, in another, that God acts towards some people—say, the nonelect—in some expedient way *without righteousness*. That would have posed a similar problem of interpretation. How could God's righteousness be both infinite and eternal if it is also limited in the sense that he sometimes acts without righteousness? And similarly, one wonders, how could God be an infinite, inexhaustible, overflowing, and eternal source of love if his love is also limited in the sense that he sometimes acts without love?

Perhaps the most serious difficulty I encountered, however, was a seemingly intentional kind of subterfuge. Consider how J. I. Packer, a popular lecturer and influential writer in Reformed circles a couple of decades ago, handles the love of God in his book *Knowing God*.⁶ A strong proponent of limited election,⁷ Packer is one of the few recent proponents of such a doctrine who tries to provide a consistent interpretation of I John 4:8 and 16. He in effect asks whether the proposition, *God is love*, expresses "the complete truth about God." By way of an answer, he juxtaposes two assertions. He begins one section with this italicized sentence as a caption: "*God is love' is not the complete truth about God so far as the Bible is concerned*";⁸ then, three pages later, he begins his next section with this italicized sentence as a caption: "*God is love' is the complete truth about God so far as the Christian is concerned*."⁹ From the perspective of a Christian who looks to the Bible as an authority, however, these captions are no less perplexing than Edwards' apparent inconsistency. If the proposition, *God is love*, does not express the complete truth about God so far as the Bible is concerned, but does express the complete truth about God so far as the Christian is concerned, it would seem to follow that either the Bible or the Christian is mistaken. And what, one wonders, does Packer mean by "the complete truth about God" anyway? In a perfectly obvious

sense, the proposition, *God is love*, does *not* express the complete truth about God, not if God is also omnipotent and omniscient; but that would be true, I should think, both so far as the Bible is concerned (at least on Packer's account) and so far as the Christian is concerned. Does Packer really want to say that the Christian's perspective is different from that of the Bible?

Clearly not. Like Edwards, Packer has simply stumbled over a text that he finds difficult to incorporate into his overall theological perspective. As a close reading of his discussion will reveal, a recognizable pair of theses lie behind the confused forms of expression in the two captions quoted above. The thesis of his second caption is really this: "According to the Bible, God loves the Christian with a perfect form of love"; and the thesis of his first caption is really this: "According to the Bible, God does *not* love *all* human beings with a perfect form of love." We can show that these are indeed Packer's theses in the following way. Packer makes two excellent and very profound points. The first concerns the nature of God's actions: "This is what God does for those he loves—*the best He can*; and the measure of the best that God can do is omnipotence!"¹⁰ The second concerns a condition of God's own happiness, which "will not be complete," says Packer, "till all His beloved ones are finally out of trouble . . ."¹¹ Accordingly, Packer leaves us with exactly three possibilities: Either (a) all persons will eventually be reconciled to God, or (b) God's own happiness will never be complete, or (c) God does not love all created persons. Now Packer clearly rejects both (a) and (b), and that leaves only (c), namely, that God does not love all created persons.

So far as I can tell, moreover, Packer sees all of this clearly, though he fails to make it explicit. His confusing caption—"God is love' is not the complete truth about God so far as the Bible is concerned"—is merely his way of opting for (c) without calling too much attention to it. But in the end, his readers are bound to ask the obvious question: Does the Johannine declaration imply that

God loves all persons, or does it not? To this question, Packer can give one of three possible answers: "Yes," "No," and "I don't know." As we have just seen, the answer he in fact gives is, "No," but it almost seems as if he recoils from the very answer that he gives. He probably felt a burden to express himself with sensitivity and caution on a difficult matter, lest he put off his readers with a clear statement of his own position. So he ends up trying to conceal his position, even as he articulates it, behind a curtain of ambiguous and confusing language.

Love and the Essence of Divinity

It is hard to avoid the conclusion that those Christians who would restrict God's love and mercy to a chosen few really have no clear idea of what to do with I John 4:8 and 16. In his commentary on I John, however, Calvin sees more clearly than Packer does exactly where the issue must be joined. The issue is not, as Packer has caricatured it, whether the proposition, *God is love*, expresses the complete truth about God. The issue is whether it expresses a truth about the very nature or essence of God—whether, in other words, it ascribes an essential property to the person who is God. If it does, then it is logically impossible that the person who is God should fail to love someone or fail to seek anything other than the best for those whom he does love.

But though Calvin sees clearly where the issue must be joined, his discussion in the commentary is not only brief and unsatisfactory; it appears to be flatly self-contradictory as well. He begins by observing, correctly, that the author of I John "takes as granted a general principle or truth, that God is love, that is, that his *nature* [my emphasis] is to love men." He then goes on to write:

But the meaning of the Apostle is simply this—that as God is the fountain of love, this effect flows from him, and is diffused wherever the knowledge of him comes, as he had at the beginning called him light, because there is nothing dark in him, but on the contrary he illuminates all things by his brightness. Here then he does not speak of the essence [or the nature] of God, but only shows what he is found to be by us [i.e., by

the elect].¹²

Having just told us that the Johannine declaration *is* a statement about the nature of God, Calvin here gives some additional reasons for taking it so: Just as God is light in the two-fold sense that "there is nothing dark in him" and "he illuminates all things by his brightness," so God is love in the sense that he is the very source or "fountain of love." But then, by way of a conclusion that seems to come from nowhere, Calvin flatly contradicts himself and takes it all back: In declaring that "God is love," he concludes, "the Apostle . . . does not speak of the essence [or the nature] of God, but only shows what he is found to be by us" [i.e., by the elect]. Nor does Calvin explain himself any further; he simply moves on to other matters.

Though such an explicit contradiction is no doubt bewildering, Calvin's final conclusion—namely, that the author of I John "does not speak of the essence [or the nature] of God"—remains just what his overall theological perspective requires. So let us now consider the exegetical merits of this particular claim. Is there anything to be said on its behalf? Very little; indeed, there is much to be said against it. For as Packer himself points out, there are two other Johannine statements "of exactly similar grammatical form": "God is light" and "God is spirit," and the "assertion that God is love has to be interpreted in the light of what these other two statements teach . . ."¹³ But these other two Johannine statements unquestionably *are* statements about the essence (or the nature) of God. In I John 1:5, we read that "God is light and in him is no darkness at all." That is not a declaration to the effect that, by a happy accident, God *happens* to be free from all darkness, all impurity, all unrighteousness; nor is it a declaration that God has *chosen* to remain free from all darkness in his relationship to some fortunate people only. It is instead a declaration about the very essence (or nature) of God. And similarly for the assertion in John 4:24 that God is spirit. As Calvin acknowl-

edges in a comment upon this very passage, "Christ himself calls God in his entirety `Spirit"; and this implies "that the whole essence of God is spiritual, in which are comprehended Father, Son, and Spirit."¹⁴ But then, if *God is spirit* implies "that the whole essence of God is spiritual," why should not *God is love* likewise imply that it is God's very essence (or nature) to love? According to Packer, the latter proposition is a mere "summing up, *from the believer's standpoint* [my emphasis], of what the whole revelation set forth in Scripture tells us about its author."¹⁵ But just what is that supposed to mean? Would Packer interpret the statement that God is spirit in the same way? Would he describe this as a mere "summing up, from the believer's standpoint," of the revelation about God? I doubt it. He would recognize that, given the spiritual nature of God, the expression "from the believer's standpoint" adds little but confusion. Given Packer's own principle of interpretation, therefore, we are entitled to conclude that, in Johannine theology at least, God is love in exactly the same sense that he is spirit and is light; that is, it is as impossible for God not to love someone as it is for him to exhibit darkness rather than light.

Packer no doubt employs the expression "from the believer's standpoint" in an effort to contrast the way in which, as he sees it, believers and unbelievers are apt to *experience* an encounter with God. The idea seems to be that, whereas a believer typically encounters the love of God, an unbeliever is apt to encounter the justice, or the holiness, or even the wrath of God. Packer thus writes:

It is perverse to quote John's statement, as some do, as if it called in question the biblical witness to the severity of God's justice. It is not possible to argue that a God who is love cannot also be a God who condemns and punishes the disobedient, for it is precisely of the God who does these very things that John is speaking.¹⁶

Though Packer here assures us that some "quote John's statement" in an effort to question "the se-

verity of God's justice" and to deny that God "punishes the disobedient," it is perhaps worth asking, at this point, whom he might have in mind. One would be hard pressed, I suspect, to name a single Christian writer, even among the most liberal, who denies that a loving God sometimes punishes the disobedient or condemns their sin. How else could God's purifying love reach the disobedient? Certainly those who insist that God punishes the disobedient as an expression of his love for them could hardly be charged with denying that God punishes the disobedient. Neither could they be charged with denying "the severity of God's justice"—though what Packer attributes to "the severity of God's justice," Paul attributes to the severity of God's mercy. For Paul's whole point in the eleventh chapter of Romans is that *all* of God's actions, his severity no less than his kindness, are expressions of his boundless mercy, which is in turn an expression of his purifying love.¹⁷

In at least one place, moreover, Packer seems to acknowledge all of this. For in one place, he writes:

To say 'God *is* light' is to imply that God's holiness finds expression in everything that He says and does. Similarly, the statement 'God *is* love' means that His love finds expression in everything that He says and does."¹⁸

If God's holiness "finds expression in everything that He says and does," and his love likewise "finds expression in everything that He says and does," then in God there is no such thing as a holy act devoid of love or a loving act devoid of holiness. Accordingly, God's holiness and his love must be, at the very least, logically compatible;¹⁹ and if that is true, then the presence of divine judgment and divine wrath—which are but particular expressions of God's holiness—would no more imply the absence of God's purifying love than the presence of his love would imply the absence of his holiness.

Perhaps we are now also in a position to clear up a possible misunderstanding. Even as Packer complains about those who deny "the severity of God's justice," so others sometimes inveigh

against sentimental conceptions of love. But there is nothing sentimental about the kind of purifying love we are talking about here. A father who does nothing when his teen-aged son is caught swindling old ladies might be indifferent, but not truly loving; he would have no real regard for the future happiness of his son. And similarly for God: If he should condone our selfishness, our vicious attitudes, our tendency to promote our own interest (as we perceive it) at the expense of others, he would be indifferent, not loving; he would have no real regard for *our* future happiness either. Accordingly, though God's love no doubt does preclude positive *hatred* and does preclude a final rejection of the beloved, it in no way precludes our *experiencing* that love as punishment, or as harsh judgment, or even as divine wrath. For if God is love and his purifying love, like a consuming fire (see Hebrews 12:29), destroys all that is false within us, the very thing we *call* ourself, then for as long as we cling to the false self we will continue to experience that love, not as kindness, but as harsh judgment and even wrath.

"Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated"

So far, we have seen that the Augustinians seem to have no plausible interpretation of the Johannine declaration that God is love. If God not only loves, but *is* love, then it is not so much as possible that he should fail to love someone. At this point, however, some might point out that Paul explicitly quotes Malachi to the effect that God hated Esau, and John Piper, another proponent of limited election,²⁰ sees great significance in this. Writes Piper:

What stops him [God] from saving some is, in fact, *ultimately* his own sovereign will. "In order that the *purpose of God* according to election might remain" he loved Jacob and hated Esau (Rom. 9:12,13). Therefore, I also accept the inference that there are people who are not the objects of God's electing love.²¹

If I understand him correctly, Piper here adopts the view that, according to Paul, God literally hated

Esau in this sense: From the very beginning, God willed that Esau should come to a bad end; that is, even before Esau was born, God had already rejected him and had destined him for eternal perdition.

So God does not, according to Piper's interpretation of Paul in Romans 9:13, love all persons equally; and neither, from Paul's perspective, does the proposition, *God is love*, express a truth about the very essence of God.

Has Piper interpreted the text in question correctly? Does it really teach that God hated Esau in some literal sense? It is important, at this point, to avoid distracting irrelevancies. Charles Hodge, among others, tries to ameliorate things a bit by suggesting that in Romans 9:13 "hatred" means merely "*to love less, to regard and treat with less favour.*"²² But that is not of much help. If God so much as loved Esau *less* than he did Jacob, that would itself suffice to diminish his holy character and to contradict the Pauline claim that God shows no partiality to anyone. Others—for example, F. F. Bruce—point out that the prophet Malachi, from which Paul takes his quotation, has in view, not the Old Testament characters who bore the names "Jacob" and "Esau," but the peoples of Israel and Edom.²³ It is doubtful, however, that even Malachi would have disassociated the individuals, Jacob and Esau, from their progeny, the latter being seen as but an extension of the former. And furthermore, when Paul indicates that the election of Jacob took place before the twins were "born" or had done anything "good or bad" (9:11), he does seem to have the individuals, Jacob and Esau, principally in view. I do not mean to deny that he *also* had in view the nations they fathered.²⁴ But the whole point of his discussion at this point is to illustrate "God's purpose of election": how it continues "not because of works but because of his call" (9:11), and the familiar struggle between Jacob and Esau for the birthright—the fact that the birthright went to the younger brother rather than to the older one—is just what illustrates his point in a forceful way.

But though Paul seems clearly to have had in mind the election of individuals, there remains the issue of the nature of that election. Just what is the connection between election, as Paul understood it, and personal redemption? It will not do, at this point, to suggest that, in Pauline theology, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob were chosen *merely* for positions of national prominence or historical privilege, without any implication of personal redemption. When Paul speaks of God's "purpose of election" in Romans 9:11 and cites some historical examples in the previous verses, he seems precisely to have in mind the history of God's redemptive acts, the chosen means by which God fulfills his promise to Abraham. One could hardly separate the historical circumstances of a person's life from the chosen means by which God draws the person to himself anyway. So the real issue is not whether the elect are eventually redeemed; they are. The real issue is whether election is exclusive or inclusive. Does the election of Isaac and Jacob, for example, imply the rejection of Ishmael and Esau? For that matter, does the election of Abraham imply the rejection of all others, living at the time, whom God could have put in his historical position but did not? Though a thorough discussion of this issue would be a paper in itself, I want to suggest that Paul's understanding of election carries no implication of rejection at all. As Paul saw it, God does indeed elect or choose individuals for himself. But the election of an individual inevitably reaches beyond the elected person to incorporate, in a variety of ways, the community in which the person lives and, in the end, the entire human race. That is why the election of Abraham is ultimately a blessing to all nations (Galatians 3:8), including Esau and his progeny, and why the idea of a "remnant, chosen by grace" (Romans 11:5) plays such an important role in Paul's argument that God is merciful to all (11:32). The remnant is always a pledge on behalf of the whole; it is the proof that God has not rejected the whole (see 11:1-6) and also the proof that "the word of God" or his "purpose of election" has not failed (9:6). For

even in the case of the nonremnant Jews—those who had defected and had been cut off for a season (11:17)—God never permitted them, says Paul, to fall with ultimate consequences (11:7);²⁵ instead, he permitted them to stumble, first, as a means of saving the whole (11:25-26), and second, so that the fallen ones, the very ones who had stumbled and were hardened, could themselves become objects of his mercy. In Paul's own words, "they too have now become disobedient in order that they too may now receive mercy" (11:31—NIV). For God is, in a word, merciful to all who fall into disobedience (11:32).

But if all of this is true, if Paul nowhere contemplates the final rejection of anyone including Esau, why does he attribute to God a hatred for Esau? I see no reason to suppose that he literally does. He merely adopts a perfectly natural way of talking. When he contemplates the election of Jacob, he clearly has in mind the struggle between Jacob and Esau for the birthright and for their father's blessing. Now, as the brothers themselves perceived the struggle, their interests had come into conflict; hence it was not possible that both should have their perceived interests satisfied. Any arbitration of the matter would have to favor one set of perceived interests over the other, so one of the brothers would inevitably seem to be favored and the other disfavored. According to Paul, moreover, God had already decided the matter even before the brothers were born: In the struggle for the birthright, Jacob would win, not because he deserved to win, but in order that God's "purpose of election"—that is, the means by which he extends his mercy to all, including Esau—might continue. So even before the twins were born, says Paul, Rebecca "was told, 'The elder will serve the younger'" (9:12). That, I want to suggest, gives us the full meaning of God's so-called "hatred" of Esau. It is a thoroughly anthropomorphic idea, a *human* way of speaking—even as, so Paul tells us in Romans 3:5, his own talk about the wrath of God is merely a human way of speaking. God's "hatred"

of Esau implies nothing more than this: Esau lost—and was destined to lose—in a struggle that he wanted, or thought he wanted, to win.

Nor will it do to say with John Murray that God's "hatred" of Esau implies, at the very least, "disfavour" or a "positive outflow of his displeasure" towards a sinner.²⁶ That may be true enough, but it is also beside the point. For God's "hatred" is no different from his love in this respect. According to Murray, "the mere absence of love or favour hardly explains the visitations of judgment mentioned" in Malachi 1-5,²⁷ to wit: "I have hated Esau; I have laid waste his hill country and left his heritage to jackals of the desert. . . . I will tear down till they are called the wicked country, the people with whom the Lord is angry for ever."²⁸ But then, neither would a "mere absence of love" explain such judgments as these upon the house of Jacob: "The Lord God has sworn by himself . . . : `I abhor the pride of Jacob, and I hate his strongholds, and I will deliver up the city and all that is in it'" (Amos 6:8); "And the mountains will melt . . . and the valleys will be cleft, like wax before the fire, like waters poured down a steep place. All this is for the transgression of Jacob and for the sins of the house of Israel" (Micah 1:4-5). It is not the mere *absence* of God's perfecting love that explains such judgments as these; Murray is right about that. It is rather the *presence* of such love which explains such judgments as these. For does not God's love for Jacob imply a rejection of all that is false within Jacob?—and does not his love for Israel likewise require that he destroy her wickedness forever? If so, then God's *love* for Jacob is no different, in that respect, from his so-called *hatred* of Esau. For surely, God's "hatred" of Esau also implies a rejection of all that is false within Esau, and his "hatred" of Edom requires that he destroy her wickedness forever. So if there is any difference at all between God's "hatred" and his love, it lies only in this: From a certain human perspective, such as Esau's perspective in his struggle with Jacob or Edom's perspective in her

struggle with Israel, God's perfecting love will consume the very thing which, in our present condition, we continue to hold dear.

But even as God's perfecting love destroys, like a consuming fire, all that is false within us, so our perspective is bound to change. According to the account in Genesis, Esau eventually did forgive his cheating brother and the two did come to love each other as brothers. In fact, the account of their reconciliation is one of the most moving stories in the entire Old Testament: "But Esau ran to meet him [Jacob], and embraced him, and fell on his neck and kissed him, and they wept" (Genesis 33:4). So complete was their reconciliation and so sincere was Esau's forgiveness that Jacob declared: "for truly to see your face is like seeing the face of God, with such favor have you received me" (33:10). Yet, this man—in whom Jacob was able to see the very face of God—is one whom, as some would have it, God had already rejected and had destined for eternal perdition even before he was born.

Exclusivism: The Perennial Heresy

The Pauline idea of inclusive election—the idea that the elect are chosen instruments through whom God's mercy will eventually reach those who have stumbled—sets Paul squarely against a temptation as old as religion itself: the temptation to distinguish between the favored few—to which, of course, we belong—and everyone else. We see the clearest manifestation of this temptation, perhaps, in some of the primitive religions, where people seek the favor of God (or the gods) in an effort to achieve an advantage over their enemies. Here the idea seems to be to possess the tribal god, or at least to pacify him with sacrifices, so that one can control him and even use him as a weapon against one's enemies. The last thing one may want, at this stage in one's religious development, is a God whose love and mercy extends to all persons including the members of enemy tribes, and the

last commandment one may want to hear is that we must love our enemies as well as our friends.

It would be a mistake, however, to suppose that such attitudes of exclusivism are limited to primitive religion; to the contrary, they are widespread and persistent, and they lie behind some of the most important religious struggles in many different ages. In the Old Testament, no less than in the New, we encounter a prophetic tradition that not only condemns such attitudes, but testifies to their persistence and destructive power. A good early example is the story of Jonah and his refusal to preach to the Ninevites. According to the story, Jonah's disobedience arose from his hatred of the Ninevites: the fact that he simply did not want them to repent and be saved. When they did repent and the Lord therefore spared their city, Jonah became so angry and so distraught that he literally wanted to die:

But it displeased Jonah exceedingly and he was angry. And he prayed to the Lord and said, "I pray thee, Lord, is not this what I said when I was yet in my country? That is why I made haste to flee from Tarshish; for I knew that thou art a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and repentest of evil. Therefore now, O Lord, take my life from me, I beseech thee, for it is better for me to die than to live" (Jonah 4:2-3).

So great, and so self-destructive, was Jonah's hatred for the Ninevites that he would have preferred to die himself than to see them spared. Observe his whining complaint: "for I knew that thou art a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and repentest of evil." The very thing that should have been his greatest source of hope was transformed by his hatred into a source of despair. But in one respect, at least, he exhibits more insight than some. For as much as he detested—so he thought—God's loving and merciful nature, he did not try to explain it away; instead, he lashed out at God angrily and asked to die. So perhaps he recognized, on some level of consciousness at least, that what he really wanted—namely, for God to extend mercy to him, but not

to the Ninevites—was an impossibility.

Even as Jonah did not want God's mercy to reach the Ninevites, so many of Paul's contemporaries did not want it to reach the Gentiles. We thus read in the book of Acts that, when Paul defended himself before a large gathering of his kinsmen, they listened respectfully until he declared that he had been called to preach to the Gentiles—at which point "they lifted up their voices and said, `Away with such a fellow from the earth! For he ought not to live'" (Acts 22:22). They were so angry that they also "waved their garments and threw dust into the air" (vs. 23), in effect starting a riot. They no more wanted God's mercy to reach the Gentiles, it seems, than Jonah wanted it to reach the Ninevites, and they objected in particular to Paul's teaching that Gentiles could attain "righteousness through faith" (Romans 9:30) without converting to Judaism, without keeping the Jewish ceremonial law, and without having their males circumcised. For as they saw it, such teaching implied that God, having broken his promise to Abraham, was unjustly extending his mercy to the Gentiles. That God's original promise to Abraham, as recorded in Genesis, had already included a reference to all nations (see Genesis 12:3 and 18:18) seemed not to matter at all; whatever the original promise had stated, many in Paul's own day believed that the election of Israel implied the rejection of other nations (even as many Christians have also believed that the election of Jacob implies the rejection of Esau). Hence, if God were to extend his mercy to the Gentiles, that would imply, by the same twisted logic, a rejection of Israel.

Now it is against the background of this controversy that we must understand Paul's question concerning God's justice and the answer he gives in Romans 9:14-16. After reviewing briefly the election of Isaac and Jacob, Paul goes on to write:

What shall we say then? Is there injustice on God's part? By no means! For he says

to Moses, "I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion." So it depends not upon man's will or exertion, but upon God's mercy.

Why, first of all, did a question concerning justice even arise in the present context? Was it because Paul really did accept a seemingly unjust doctrine of limited election? Clearly not. It was Paul's opponents, not Paul, who believed in limited election; his opponents would have seen no injustice, for example, in the election of Isaac and Jacob, or even in a literal interpretation of "Esau I hated." It was not this reminder of history, in other words, that motivated the question about injustice; it was rather the implication in Paul's teaching that election depends not upon physical descent from Abraham (9:6-8) and not upon works (9:12), but upon God's sovereign mercy alone (9:16). What seemed unjust to Paul's contemporaries was precisely the implication in his teaching that the Gentiles, who are not descended from Abraham and have not kept the Jewish law, might nonetheless be an object of God's mercy.

Paul's question, then, is essentially this: "Has God acted unjustly in extending his mercy to Gentiles as well as to Jews?" Paul's remarks about Jacob and Esau, which occur just prior to the question, are not what generate the question, but part of his *answer* to the question. Like a good debater, he meets his opponents on their own ground and prepares them for his answer even before raising the question. For as we just saw, none of Paul's opponents would have denied God's right to violate human tradition and convention in the matter of Jacob and Esau. According to tradition—that is, according to the conventions governing ancient Semitic society—the birthright, the blessing, and the headship of the tribal family should have passed from Isaac to Esau rather than from Isaac to Jacob. But if none of Paul's opponents would have denied God's right to violate that tradition, then neither, Paul in effect argues, should they deny God's right to violate the tradition which would re-

strict God's mercy to the physical descendants of Abraham, or at least to the circumcised and to those who keep the Jewish law.

Having disarmed his opponents even before raising his question, Paul then sets forth his unsailable answer, a quotation from Exodus 33:19 in which the Lord declares: "I will have mercy on whom I have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion." This is an idiomatic expression that stresses not the *indeterminacy* of God's mercy, as some Augustinians have supposed, but rather its *intensity* and *assuredness*. As one Old Testament scholar, Frederick Bush, has pointed out,²⁹ "the meaning that the expression is normally given in English, i.e. an arbitrary expression of God's free, sovereign will, makes almost no sense in the context" of Exodus 33:19, where it is a revelation of the very name, or essence, or goodness of God. It is, says Bush, "equivalent to 'I am indeed the one who is gracious and merciful.'" And similarly for Paul's own context. To all of those who, having succumbed to the perennial heresy, insist that God has no right to extend his mercy to a given class of persons—whether it be the Ninevites in Jonah's day, the Gentiles in Paul's day, or the non-Christians in our own day—Paul in effect quotes the Lord as saying: "I will have mercy upon whomever I damn well please." There is absolutely nothing in view here except God's unlimited and inexhaustible mercy—a mercy which, though no doubt severe at times (as Esau and Pharaoh might well have attested), is nonetheless utterly reliable and therefore secures our hope for the future. For as Paul had already contended in the first part of Romans 3, no human disobedience or unfaithfulness can nullify the faithfulness of God. He will continue to meet our true spiritual needs and to consume all that is false within us, regardless of what choices we make, good or bad. So however important these choices may be for the here and now, or even for the immediate future, our *destiny* "depends not upon man's will or exertion, but upon God's mercy."

Conclusion

In this paper, we have examined the Johannine declaration that God *is* love. The most plausible interpretation, I have contended, is that we have here something more than an assertion about the *experience* of believers; we have an assertion about the very nature (or essence) of God, an assertion to the effect that it is God's very nature to love. The interpretations of those, such as Calvin, Edwards, Packer, and Piper who seem to hold that God sometimes acts without love, are untenable, both from the perspective of Johannine theology and from the perspective of Paul's inclusive understanding of election. For according to Paul, God is merciful to all.

Paul's inclusive understanding of election also explains why some of his contemporaries found his views so offensive. But in the early Christian Church at least, Paul's view of the matter won the day; as a result, the doctrine of a limited (or exclusive) election virtually disappeared from the Church for several centuries. Of course Paul combated the specific form that the doctrine had taken in his own day: the idea that God restricts his mercy to a single nation, namely, the nation of Israel. He did not address—or try to anticipate—every conceivable form that it might take in the future; he did not specifically discuss, for example, the Augustinian view that restricts God's mercy to a limited elect drawn from all classes and all nations. He did not discuss this view, because he had never heard of it. For his purposes, it was enough to point out that God saves "every one who calls upon the name of the Lord" (Romans 10:13) and "every one who has faith" (Romans 1:16), whether the person be a Jew or a Greek. But though Paul did not explicitly discuss the Augustinian view, he nonetheless did rule it out with his doctrine that God is merciful even in his severity. Even in the case of the disobedient, those who have refused to call upon the name of the Lord, Paul insists that God permits them to stumble only as a means by which they might receive additional mercy. So in

Pauline theology, no less than in Johannine, *all* of God's actions are, in the end, an expression of his loving nature. Not only does God love; he *is* love.