

Have we forgotten how to warn? (Part Two)

Is the love of Christ solely His merciful disposition, or is His love wedded to His purpose and power to transform His people?

By Jay Wegter

The love of Christ is not a benevolent wish; it is an active, transforming, almighty, efficacious power that takes possession of its objects of redemption. By contrast, the sentimentalizing of Christ's love by non-confessional Christendom has weakened the knowledge of Christ to professing believers. How we need clarity today in regard to His holy love—for it is a love which conforms the elect into the moral likeness of their Savior (Rom 8:29).

Scripture sets forth the love of Christ to His own as a *particular love* which brings former sinners to a final state of perfection in the presence of God (Eph 5:26-27). Thus, Christ's love is mighty in its proactive work of purifying, refining, and sanctifying its objects (Phil 1:6; Heb 10:10; 12:1-2). Indeed His love is longsuffering and patient, but it is also a jealous love, and for good reason—this world proposes countless things which compete with divine love. These idolatrous counterfeits of love tempt the heart to truancy, lust, and idolatry (Eph 4:22). Christ's *holy love* requires a focused response to sin's temptations—the child of God is to continually mortify sin by the power of the Spirit (Rom 8:12-13; 1 Cor 10:13).

Christ continually defends His tempted people and grants them fresh measures of grace and mercy amidst the trial of their faith (Rom 8:33-34; Heb 2:18; 4:15-16). Our Lord does not 'cross His fingers' in this matter of transforming His people, as if He is wishing for the best. No, His full authority over all things is seen in His faithful discipline of the people He loves. He chooses their trials, and He calls them to renewed and ongoing repentance. "Those whom I love, I reprove and discipline; therefore be zealous and repent" (Rev 3:19).

He brings down their pride and subdues them to Himself in His most excellent and wise works of providence. Christ will not have a cold and wayward apathetic Bride. No, those whom He loves He disciplines that they might fling from their breasts their false affections, their sloth and double-mindedness. Those corruptions grow so easily by neglect, indifference, and doubt. Christ warns slacking hearts in the most explicit ways: "I know your deeds, that you are neither cold nor hot; I wish that you were cold or hot. So because you are lukewarm, and neither hot nor cold, I will spit you out of My mouth" (Rev 3:15-16).

When we preach the love of Christ, have we forgotten to preach that Christ's love always requires a holy response? It is common to hear sermons about Christ's love but not about the specific obligations that His love places upon us. He calls for heart-searching repentance from those who profess to know Him (Rev 1:12-18). The Laodiceans professed to know Christ; the Lord called them to repentance and to fellowship with Him at the points of their 'spiritual poverty'. Think of it, Christ reveals to them their dire condition of spiritual bankruptcy and then He calls them to fellowship at the very points of their spiritual indigence! "I advise you to buy from Me gold refined by fire so that you may become rich, and white garments so that you may clothe yourself, and *that* the shame of your nakedness will not be revealed; and eye

salve to anoint your eyes so that you may see” (Rev 3:18). Christ is absolute ‘Source Person’ for His people—all that they need in relation to life and godliness is from Him (2 Pet 1:3). It is humbling and withering to receive the love of Christ because His love searches us, finds us utterly dependent and corrupt in ourselves, and then supplies what we need to commune with God and serve Him (Rom 5:1). This is an ongoing experience in the lives of the faithful.

There is a biblical case for exalting Christ’s love as that which promotes holy living. “God cannot be associated with anything that is unholy. . . For Israel [as with us] holiness is to be found in a relationship with the Holy One” (David Petersen, *Possessed by God*, p. 19).

When we preach Christ’s love as the cause of our progress in holiness, we are not preaching what John Piper designates, ‘the debtor’s ethic’—“Since Jesus did this much for you, the least you can do for Him is such in such.” No, the end or goal of Christ’s death was motivated by His love in the first place. “Christ also loved the church and gave Himself up for her, so that He might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, that He might present to Himself the church in all her glory, having no spot or wrinkle or any such thing; but that she would be holy and blameless” (Eph 5:25-27).

Notice the intent clauses: “*that He might sanctify,*” “*that He might present . . .*” By the use of the word, ‘*might*’ the grammar captures Christ’s full intent—He gave Himself in order to accomplish His holy purposes for His bride.

His love is at the heart of the covenant redemption—the eternal ‘pact’ between Father and Son which planned our redemption (Heb 10:10-14). Christ’s love will gain its goal completely; there is no possibility of it miscarrying. Human weakness will not interrupt its aim. Christ’s might and love are joined—He subdues the hearts of His elect ones and makes them His own (Gal 1:15-16). Christ’s love takes possession of His people and thereby produces consecration. His love sanctifies those who are His own—His love purifies and ultimately perfects and glorifies.

But we should always give thanks to God for you, brethren beloved by the Lord, because God has chosen you from the beginning for salvation through sanctification by the Spirit and faith in the truth. It was for this He called you through our gospel, that you may gain the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ (2 Thess 2:13-14).

The church today has been severely weakened by offering a domesticated Jesus who differs from the sovereign sanctifying Christ of Scripture. Because of the pervasive droning input of man-centeredness, psychology, and obstinate self-love, it is far too easy to hear these truths of Christ’s love through a filter of sentimentality. To ‘sentimentalize’ Christ’s love is to regard His love primarily as His merciful disposition. That tendency divorces His love from His power and His purpose to subdue His people to Himself and thereby transform them (Eph 1:3-4).

The sentimentalizing of Christ’s love makes Him into a domesticated mascot who has benign wishes and who patiently puts up with His church, and who is ultimately dependent upon her responses. What we have lost in the process is the robust masculinity of Christ’s love. In His redemptive work He faced the greatest obstacles, crushing wrath, the most intimidating army of demons, the greatest agonies of body and soul, and the most humbling shame. He faced

all of these sufferings in order to spiritually resurrect, and someday physically resurrect His celestial Bride (Gal 3:13-15). This kind of love is the opposite of sentimentality because it never exists merely as a feeling and it refuses to be reduced to such.

Shall Christ lay down His life and then leave the results of His infinitely efficacious work to the whims of ‘religious’ men and women? In other words, will their willingness to obey the Master, or lack thereof be the determining factor in what Christ’s love is able to do? Will their degree of appropriation of Christ’s love be the ‘X factor’ in determining its power, grip, and fruit? That may likely be the prevailing view in Evangelicalism today, but the Word of God asserts something dissimilar. Scripture states that Christ’s love animates, constrains, controls, and transforms— causing the true believer to live for Him and no longer for self (2 Cor 5:15).

This radical change in the believing sinner is traceable to the cross-work of Christ which administers a death blow to the flesh so that the forgiven sinner no longer lives for himself (Rom 6:3-6; Gal 2:20). That is the guaranteed result of the atonement applied. Many passages speak of the efficaciousness of Christ’s work by employing ‘intent’ clauses. “Who gave Himself for us to redeem us from every lawless deed, and to **purify** for Himself a people for His own **possession**, zealous for **good deeds**” (Titus 2:14). Christ ‘gave Himself for us’ with the full intent that His death would secure our *purity, possession, and productivity.*

The cross applied produces surrender. Those who are the objects of that love willingly abide by Christ’s terms of discipleship. In other words, they do not regard His requirements of self-denial, and daily taking up the cross to be a great sacrifice (Lu 9:23-26). Now set this in stark contrast to the sentimentalizing love depicted by much of today’s comfortable preaching. In that view Christ’s love is portrayed as mere potentiality—like a huge warm lightbulb *hopefully attracting and drawing* some ‘baby chicks’ to its heat and luminescence. No, that is not an accurate metaphor. What we really see is that Christ’s love is so closely tied to its response and goal that He could pray the High Priestly prayer of John chapter 17. Our Lord prayed with the full assurance that His redeeming love could not fail to secure its objective:

The glory which You have given Me I have given to them, that they may be one, just as We are one; I in them and You in Me, that they may be perfected in unity, so that the world may know that You sent Me, and loved them, even as You have loved Me. Father, I desire that they also, whom You have given Me, be with Me where I am, so they may see My glory which You have given Me, for You loved Me before the foundation of the world (Jn 17:22-24).

Now what does this mean for the church today? First of all it means we must adhere to the Biblical truths of Christ’s full-orbed love and reject its sentimental counterfeit. The counterfeit was invented to pamper the consciences of the religiously lukewarm and carnal. That is tantamount to a radical reduction of the meaning of Christ’s love. In contradistinction to this, in Christ’s High Priestly prayer, His love is joined to the joy, felicity, holiness, and oneness of the eternal Triune community. Through our Mediator, the holy love within the Godhead is brought down to sinful men. This is the marvel of particular redemption that this eternal love within the Holy Trinity is communicated to elect sinners so that the life of the Trinity is imported

to them through Christ. “In that day you will know that I am in My Father, and you in Me, and I in you” (Jn 14:20). This is made possible, and it is secured because the Son of God took upon Himself our nature, and now a human being, Jesus of Nazareth has been brought into the heart of the Trinity. His exaltation is the reason the elect will be in glory (Heb 6:17-20). As our ‘Forerunner’ in glory He is the reason we will be welcomed and made fit to fellowship with God forever.

How sad it is that the sentimentalizing of Christ’s love has cast a long shadow over the glory of Christ. This trend has made the glory of Christ more difficult to perceive. This unfortunate teaching of sentimental love conceals the truth that Christ’s love enables and even secures what it requires—namely the consecration which leads to holy conformity to the Son (Eph 1:4). We reiterate that Christ’s love requires a response from those who know it and receive it. We are to respond by presenting ourselves back to God unconditionally—as living sacrifices (Rom 12:1-2; 6:11-13). We return Christ’s love back to Him so that He has first place in our affections and is our first love (Mt 10:37; 1 Jn 4:19; Rev 2:4-5).

Genuine believers respond to Christ’s love by consecrating themselves to Him. They die to a self-directed life in order to live as Christ’s disciples (Lu 14:26-27, 33). His love demands single-minded devotion and adoration. Sentimental love can neither require all of these nor enable them. Therefore, man-centered ‘sentimental’ love can rightly be designated humanistic or natural love. It exists for man’s good and with man at its center. Therefore, it is timid about using language which obligates us, demanding our obedience and holy response to Christ (as if that obedience militates against unconditional love).

Sentimental love is symptomatic of a man-centered gospel in which the sinner’s action ‘triggers’ God’s love—making the atonement effectual and man’s faith the cause of God’s favor. In that view, saving faith is regarded as intrinsic to man and inherently inert from man’s depraved nature (John MacArthur, *The Gospel according to the Apostles*, pp. 21, 26-30). Warfield describes this man-centered gospel as ‘autosoterism’ (man saving himself) (Warfield, *The Plan of Salvation*, pp. 33-51). “[Autosoterism] is, negatively the denial of the true God, and of the gift of His grace; and positively, the notion that salvation can be secured by man’s own power and wisdom” (Herman Bavinck in Warfield, p. 33).

In that conception of salvation the sinner is never fully dethroned. Christ becomes a commodity as the sinner makes the final call—exercising his unquestioned prerogative. This is a very disturbing doctrine because it places man at the center and religion and its benefits in orbit around him. Far from existing as merely a benevolent feeling; Christ’s love gains its goal.

Christ’s sovereign almighty particular electing love is inseparable from His glory and holiness. Understanding the love of Christ is central to our grasp of the purposes of grace.

That He would grant you, according to the riches of His glory, to be strengthened with power through His Spirit in the inner man, so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith; *and* that you, being rooted and grounded in love, may be able to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ which surpasses knowledge, that you may be filled up to all the fullness of God (Eph 3:16-19).

This transforming love is at the heart of Christ's glory revealed. By contrast, Arminian schemes of salvation tear and rip the prerogative of salvation from Christ's hands (Mt 11:27) and make the sinner sovereign in his own salvation. Thus, the *commodification* of Christ makes Him dependent upon the sinner's beck and call—Christ must subject His own will to the sinner's will so that human contingency or self-determination may have first place.

This man-centeredness is like a thick shroud which conceals the glory of Christ. The Arminian assumption of human ability overshadows the vastness and infinite dignity of our Savior and His authority and power to bring about the Father's will for the world, the church, and the cosmos itself (Col 1:18).

When the Apostles speak of Christ's love, they phrase this wonderful love in rational but not common categories. In 2 Corinthians 5:14-15 the apostle Paul speaks of this love as confining, restricting, controlling and animating. John describes this love as foreign to natural human experience, exotic, other-worldly, "See how great a love the Father has bestowed on us, that we would be called children of God; and *such* we are. For this reason the world does not know us, because it did not know Him" (1 Jn 3:1).

This holy love of Christ takes possession of its objects: Believers are "bought with a price," as objects of the price of redemption we are no longer our own—we are God's possession (1 Cor 6:20) (Petersen, p. 43). "[Thus,] sanctification is about being possessed by God and expressing that distinctive and exclusive relationship by the way we live" (Ibid, p. 48).

In Philippians 3:7-8, Paul says that he 'judges' (counts, concludes) that the things that were gain to him, he has 'counted' as loss. Thus Paul 'counts', as in a radical business loss or shipwreck the weight and value of knowing Christ compared to the loss of all things this present life could provide (Rienecker, Rogers, eds. *Linguistic Key to the Greek NT*, p. 557). Notice, that the 'treasure of knowing Christ' constitutes a well-formed reasoned judgement of how absurd it is to live for self. By a personal knowledge and acquaintance with Christ, the Apostle Paul knows beyond a shadow of a doubt that knowing Christ and His love is his surpassing treasure. There is sanctifying power in living for the end goal of Christ's love—those who do so will, "Press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus" (Phil 3:14).

Christ's voluntary covenantal entrance into the existential situation of His people allowed Him to take on their wrath, slavery to sin, deadness and alienation from God. The efficacious love of Christ is witnessed in His personal work of substitution for His people. In this redemptive work His love is bound up in His complete solidarity with His people so that the tearing of His flesh becomes the effectual cause of neutralizing the dominion of the Adamic nature. These *federal facts* or *identification truths* are found concentrated in Romans chapter 6.

The great exchange that Christ accomplished in this guilt transfer not only was a transfer of our sin for His righteousness, but also His death for our life, and the exchange of our bondage for His freedom. His death is our death to sin; His resurrection is our rising to newness of life (Rom 6:3-7). His incarnation, Person and passion constitute the sphere in which His Bride is raised, justified, purified and glorified—"in Him" our deliverance took place (Col 2:9-14).

The church today is weak and anemic on these identification truths—namely that her life is granted, sustained, and realized by union with Christ. This theme of 'Christ our life'

goes back to “we proclaim Him” teaching, instructing, and warning every man with striving according to God’s power (Col 1:28-29). In His great condescension, God regards believers to be His fellow laborers (1 Cor 3:9). The proclamation of Christ is the *means of grace* in this blessed work in God’s field (1 Cor 3:10). His faithful servants bring these redemptive truths to light in the world and in the church so that they are written on the mind, heart, and wills of His people by the Spirit of God. Without these truths being systematically proclaimed, there can be no consistent progress in the transformation of God’s people.

The love of Christ won’t let go of its ultimate purpose; therefore it is a holy jealous love which takes possession of us and creates clear, holy boundaries in our lives. It is time we marvel over the fact that Christ Jesus the man is the elect of God. It is a boundless mystery that Jesus of Nazareth is elected to be the incarnate Son of God so that all the elect to be redeemed in all ages are chosen in Him (Eph 1:4-6). It is breath-taking that God’s particular love for the elect is joined to His love for the Son (John 17:26). Christ as the original elect one is given to be a covenant for His people (Is 42:6-7). God ‘covenants’ with the Son before time and creation that the Son shall be the Head of an innumerable company (Heb 2:12-13).

Christ loves the elect before they know Him, before they are fit to receive this holy love through redemption. By His Spirit’s call, He makes them fit and able to receive His supernatural love. For, Christ is their eligibility, qualification, surety, covering, righteousness and acceptance before God. What a profound contrast this is from the sentimental love so common in our churches today in which His love is reduced to an emotion. In that anemic form of love, His affection for His people is unhinged from His glory and from His purpose and power to perfect His people. So what is the solution? Repentance first of all—we need to be staggered again by the love of Christ, for in Christ’s own Person—divine glory, holiness and good are joined and become the revelation of who God is. He is His own reference point—all His dealings with us are born out of who He is (Is 43:25; Ez 20:44).

The depth of God’s commitment to His own name and glory is beyond the powers of our investigation. He loves His own image that is reflected by mankind. This is why we are appointed to do all things for the sake of His name (Ez 36:33 etc.). Salvation is anchored in God’s love for His name. Now this means that redemption is radically theocentric (Ez 36:31).

In view of this, consider for a moment what a claim to be saved really is. It is a claim to be the object of eternal infinite unconditional love which will never let you go and will bring you all the way into God’s holy presence. It is the claim to be the object of a love which we did not trigger by our own decision. It is a claim to have received a love which unites a person to God, adopts them and prepares them for eternal life in His presence. It is the claim to be the object of a love that refines and purifies a people for the promised nuptial feast (Rev 19:9).

Thus, to claim to be saved is a claim to know God in Christ and to have all of the effects which His love secures including the securing of the ultimate glory of His love objects. This claim to be loved eternally by Christ demands a response from us—a response that is commensurate with our claim—a response which begs the question: “Is the ultimate goal of Christ’s love for me my controlling hope—that I will be made like Christ?” “Am I ‘all in’ in my commitment to Christ in terms of the obedience that must accompany my confession of faith?”

“Am I seeking to know the love of the holy One in order to be holy?”

We are created to be worshippers, created to thrive upon the glory of God. That means that our yearning and hunger for the sublime is at the core of what it means to be human.

God has placed eternity in our hearts (Eccl 3:11). Therefore, desire, delight, satisfaction, awe, wonder and fear are part of the experience of knowing Christ. We need frequent reminders that the miracle of regeneration ‘installed’ the very faculties needed to behold the glory of the Lord. Wonder of wonders, God’s holiness is revealed in the reconciliation of justice and mercy at the cross by the blood of the Lamb. God wills to be known savingly by the satisfaction of His unchanging standard of righteousness through Christ’s atoning work.

God is giving Himself to believers through the Person of Christ. He is holding back nothing. This requires a response from us that is complete, comprehensive and unconditional (Mt 10:39). Genuine Christ-followers are living sacrifices called to behold the glory of Christ. And, in so doing the broken image of God which they bear is increasingly repaired (2 Cor 3:18).

The hard truths about Christ’s sovereign Lordship have been smoothed away by comfortable preaching. The devastating realities of His majesty, pre-eminence, and His wrath have been overshadowed by His immanence (Is 63:1-6; 2 Thess 1:7-10; Rev 6:15-17). The sentimentalizing of Christ’s love is not a harmless error; it actually renders the counterfeit gospel afflicting the church today all the more believable.

On the last day untold millions will say to Christ, “Lord, Lord” (Mt 7:21-22). Then Christ will utter those most awful words, “I never knew you.” They will claim to have known and served Him, but the Jesus whom ‘they did not know’ is the Jesus who will condemn them to eternal hell with these words: “I never knew you” (Mt 7:23). What a wake-up call this must be for the church. We must have our sensibilities shocked, alarmed and jarred to the core if we are to be discerning. For, an error is seducing the people of God—the substitute Jesus of cultural Christianity has been tailored to fit the tastes of our age.

We who preach Christ will give an account of which Jesus we have preached—for there is a ‘different Jesus’ (2 Cor 11:4). This is an urgent call of return to a soul-examining commitment to display Christ’s holy, sovereign love to the church again. For, only as Christ is exhibited in His full-orbed glory to His people will they know, obey, and adore Him as they ought. “If anyone does not love the Lord, he is to be accursed. Maranatha” (1 Cor 16:22).

Now the God of peace, who brought up from the dead the great Shepherd of the sheep through the blood of the eternal covenant, *even* Jesus our Lord, equip you in every good thing to do His will, working in us that which is pleasing in His sight, through Jesus Christ, to whom *be* the glory forever and ever. Amen (Heb 13:20-21).