

God's Love and Justice—A Point of Tension?

from *Christian Theology* by Millard J. Erickson

We have looked at many characteristics of God, without exhausting them by any means. But what of the interrelationships among them? Presumably, God is a unified, integrated being whose personality is a harmonious whole. There should be, then, no tension among any of these attributes. But is this really so?

The one point of potential tension usually singled out is the relationship between God's love and his justice. On one hand, God's justice seems so severe, requiring the death of those who sin. This is a fierce, harsh God. On the other hand, God is merciful, gracious, forgiving, long-suffering. Are not these two sets of traits in conflict with one another? Is there, then, internal tension in God's nature?¹

If we begin with the assumptions that God is an integrated being and the divine attributes are harmonious, we will define the attributes in the light of one another. Thus, justice is loving justice and love is just love. The idea that they conflict may have resulted from defining attributes in isolation from one another. While the conception of love apart from justice, for example, may be derived from outside sources, it is not a biblical teaching.

What we are saying is that love is not fully understood unless seen as including justice. If love does not include justice, it is mere sentimentality. The approach which would define love as merely granting what someone else desires is not biblical. It runs into two difficulties: (1) Giving someone what would make him or her comfortable for the moment may be nothing more than indulging that person's whim—such action may not necessarily be right. (2) This is usually an emotional reaction to an individual or situation that is immediately at hand. But love is much wider in scope—it necessarily entails justice, a sense of right and wrong, and all humankind. As Joseph Fletcher has correctly shown, justice is simply love distributed.² It is love to all one's neighbors, those immediately at hand, and those removed in space and time. Justice means that love must always be shown, whether or not a situation of immediate need presents itself in pressing and vivid fashion. Love in the biblical sense, then, is not merely to indulge someone near at hand. Rather, it inherently involves justice as well. This means there will be a concern for the ultimate welfare of all humanity, a passion to do what is right, and enforcement of appropriate consequences for wrong action.

Actually, love and justice have worked together in God's dealing with the human race. God's justice requires that there be payment of the penalty for sin. God's love, however, desires humans to be restored to fellowship with him. The offer of Jesus Christ as the atonement for sin means that both the justice and the love of God have been maintained. And there really is no tension between the two. There is tension only if one's view of love requires that God forgive sin without any payment being made. But that is to think of God as different from what he really is. Moreover, the offer of Christ as atonement shows a greater love on God's part than would simply indulgently releasing people from the consequences of sin. To fulfill his just administration of the law, God's love was so great that he gave his Son for us. Love and justice are not two separate attributes competing with one another. God is both righteous and loving, and has himself given what he demands.³

Notes:

¹ Nels Ferré, *The Christian Understanding of God* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1951), pp. 227-228.

² Joseph Fletcher, *Situation Ethics: The New Morality* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1966), pp. 86-102.

³ William G. T. Shedd, *Dogmatic Theology* (Grand Rapids, Zondervan, 1971 reprint), vol. 1, pp. 377-378.