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GOD IS LOVE, BUT IS LOVE GOD? Answering the Esoteric Interpretation of 1 John 4

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SYNOPSIS

If “God is love,” then “Love is God.” So say virtually all of the founders of the “metaphysical” or “mind science” sects, along with many Eastern and New Age teachers. This esoteric interpretation of 1 John 4:8 and 16 allows them to argue that God is an impersonal principle rather than a personal being. God cannot love or be loved by anyone but rather is the love in everyone. God therefore does not judge or punish people for their sins. This, in turn, supports the metaphysical teaching that God alone is real, and sin, sickness, and death are mere illusions sustained only by our belief in them.

This interpretation does not hold. The grammatical structure in the Greek prohibits inferring “Love is God.” In context, the phrase is rather used in association with God sending His Son to be the propitiation for our sin. This means Christ’s death satisfied the demands of the law and appeased the wrath of God, both of which were against us because of our sins. God’s wrath does not contradict His love because His wrath expresses His righteousness, and righteousness and love are both essential to, and fully integrated in, His being.

How we respond to God’s merciful provision in Christ determines whether we experience His mercy or His wrath. Denial of God’s just punishment of sin will only ensure that one experiences it; acceptance of God’s loving provision for our guilt will remove all fear of judgment and ensure one’s place in a world where there truly will be no sin, sickness, and death.

This past August I participated in a robust discussion about “What Happens at Death?” at the monthly meeting of the West Palm Beach chapter of Socrates Café, a philosophical discussion group moderated by Dr. Paul Copan. Thirty intellectually vigorous people of widely ranging ages and philosophical and religious perspectives assembled to explore, discuss, and debate the topic of life after death.

Several participants of atheistic orientation expressed their view that nothing happens at death except the annihilation of the person. One member who had been a lifelong atheist calmly announced that the previous January she had been diagnosed with cancer and given three months to live, but so far was feeling relatively fine. She stated that she had been receiving comfort from the thought, new to her, that although death would bring an end to her personal existence, she would dissolve into some sort of Universal Mind and, in a sense, live on. Another member, who had been our most adamant atheist in previous meetings, was so moved by what the first woman shared that she almost seemed to be converting to pantheism right on the spot.¹ Several others, also moved by the first woman's bravery, sought to assure her that personal existence seems to go on happily after death, according to near-death experience (NDE) research. A couple of Christian members then expressed their conviction that all does not necessarily go well after death, for we must all stand before the judgment seat of Christ. The first woman seemed moved neither by the near-death stories nor by the warnings of judgment.

During the casual conversation that follows the formal meetings, I discussed the Christian view of the afterlife with both the first woman, who remained firm in her position, and another woman, who strongly rejected the notion of judgment. In that second conversation the member, who said she has been a follower of both Christian Science and Religious Science (AKA Science of Mind), insisted that a God who judges and punishes people could not be a loving God. She kept reminding me that "God is love," as if to settle the debate. The view of God as wrathful judge, she believed, was simply anthropomorphism: ascribing to deity the traits of human beings. She pointed out that if God is Love, then Love is also God. The Love that is God, therefore, must not be a person or even a being, but rather a cosmic Principle at the core of all things. This Principle is also known as Truth and Life. It is Divine Mind, and It alone is real. Sin, sickness, and death are illusions sustained in our experience only because we believe in them, and orthodox Christian teaching perpetuates this problem.

THE METAPHYSICAL INTERPRETATION OF "GOD IS LOVE"

This woman knew her metaphysical doctrine well. Mary Baker Eddy, the founder of Christian Science, wrote in *Science and Health with Key to the Scriptures*: "The starting-point of divine Science is that God, Spirit, is All-in-all, and that there is no other might nor Mind,—that God is Love, and therefore He is divine Principle."² Eddy explained how this doctrine impacts the Judeo-Christian concepts of sin, its punishment, and its forgiveness: "'God is Love.' More than this we cannot ask, higher we cannot look, farther we cannot go. To suppose that God forgives or punishes sin according as His mercy is sought or unsought, is to misunderstand Love and to make prayer the safety-valve for wrong-doing."³ To this she added: "Jesus' life proved, divinely and scientifically, that God is Love, whereas priest and rabbi affirmed God to be a mighty potentate, who loves and hates. The Jewish theology gave no hint of the unchanging love of God."⁴

Ernest Holmes, the author of *The Science of Mind* and the founder of Religious Science, agreed with Eddy's definition: "Love is the central flame of the universe," he wrote, "nay, the very fire itself. It is written that God is love, and that we are His expressed likeness, the image of the Eternal Being. Love is self-givingness through creation, the impartation of the Divine through the human. Love is an essence, an atmosphere, which defies analysis, as does Life itself. It is that which IS and cannot be explained." Undeterred by love's inexplicability, Holmes presses on: "The essence of love, while elusive, pervades everything, fires the heart, stimulates the emotions, renews the soul and proclaims the Spirit. Only love knows love, and love knows only love. Words cannot express its depths or meaning. A universal sense alone bears witness to the divine fact: God is Love and Love is God."⁵

The same ideas show up in virtually all metaphysical or mind science teachings. Charles Fillmore, cofounder of the Unity School of Christianity⁶ (which, like Religious Science, is a member of the New Thought Alliance⁷), wrote, "God is not loving. God is love, the great heart of the universe and of man, from which is drawn forth all feeling, sympathy, emotion, and all that goes to make up the joys of existence. Yet God does not love anybody or anything. God is the love in everybody and everything. God is love; man becomes loving by permitting that which God is to find expression in word and act."⁸

Eastern and New Age Sources Concur

This view is not limited to followers of metaphysical or mind science teachers. The same verse is often quoted by Eastern gurus and New Age/new spirituality teachers and their followers.⁹

To draw an example from my experience as a late '60s hippie/New Age seeker, "God is love" was one of the "revelations" I received in an altered state of consciousness and jotted down in my spiritual journal. It seemed to be extremely profound, providing a metaphysical basis for the hippie ethic to love everyone while at the same time keeping God safely impersonal and nonjudgmental as we pursued the hedonistic hippie lifestyle, which certainly included casual sex among other biblically prohibited practices. Few if any of us were interested in demarcating the boundaries between love and lust or asking hard questions such as whether love in its highest sense is compatible with hedonism. As long as God was an impersonal Principle within us and not a personal Judge above us, it seemed good enough to lump free love in with other forms of love and leave it at that.

"GOD IS LOVE" IN ITS BIBLICAL CONTEXT

We've now seen that in pantheistic systems such as mind science, Eastern monism, and New Age (which all can accurately be grouped together for the purposes of this article as "esoteric"), the phrase "God is Love" commonly means that God is not a person who can love or be loved but rather a cosmic force called "Love" with which we love each other.

But from where did this idea that “God is Love” first emerge? The phrase demonstrably originated in 1 John 4 verses 8 and 16. An examination of the context of this passage will reveal how the words were intended to be taken, but esotericists are not known for their concern about context. As Eddy taught her followers: “The divine Science taught in the original language of the Bible came through inspiration, and needs inspiration to be understood. Hence the misapprehension of the spiritual meaning of the Bible.”¹⁰ Esotericists disregard context and use Mrs. Eddy’s “Key to the Scriptures” or some other esoteric interpretative system supposedly to unlock the true, spiritual meaning of Scripture.

Followers of esoteric teachings need to be challenged on this. If they consider themselves seekers of truth and of God, they should not take the word of any modern interpreter of the Bible but go to the primary sources and see if any kind of esoteric approach to understanding them holds up.

Here it needs to be acknowledged that there are ancient Gnostic texts that are precursors to modern-day esoteric approaches to Christianity. But these second-to-fourth-century documents demonstrably were not written by any of the apostles (even when they claim to be) or by any eyewitnesses of the events surrounding Jesus.¹¹ To get at the source, modern-day seekers should look to the New Testament documents themselves. If they desire further corroboration, they can consult the writings of the earliest church fathers (e.g., Clement of Rome and Polycarp¹²). They can also find a few references to Jesus and Christians in first century non-Christian sources.¹³ The purpose of such research would be to see if there is any evidence whatsoever that Jesus and the apostles actually rejected the Old Testament concepts of sin, divine judgment, and expiation of guilt through blood atonement.

While I do not have the space to demonstrate it here (see my previous two-part effort¹⁴), such diligent study would reveal to them that no such evidence exists. There is no objective reason to believe that Jesus, John, Paul, and the other apostles were not faithful followers of orthodox Judaism who simply believed that Jesus fulfilled that tradition’s messianic prophecies.

What was controversial about Jesus and the apostles was not that they renounced the law of Moses with its sacrificial system in favor of some form of Gnosticism but rather that they claimed that the Law was fulfilled by the life, sacrificial death, and resurrection of Christ. It was on that basis alone that the Law was set aside; thus, there was never a denial of the Law’s legitimacy but rather a confirmation of it.

Like the ancient Gnostics, contemporary esotericists are filtering the Scriptures through a Greek (or Indian) philosophical grid foreign to Jewish thought. They simply presume that a figure as brilliant as Jesus could not possibly have endorsed blood atonement theology. Here they are assuming what they want to prove and not allowing for the possibility that they could be seriously mistaken.

With this in mind, let’s look at 1 John 4:7–9:

Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God; and everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. The one who does not love does not know God, for God is love. By this the love of

God was manifested in us, that God has sent His only begotten Son into the world so that we might live through Him. In this is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins.

This was the context in which the phrase “God is love” was introduced to human consciousness. Note the phrase “propitiation for our sins.” *Propitiation* means both satisfaction and appeasement. Satisfaction of what? The demand of the Law that death must be meted out as punishment for sin. Appeasement of what? The just wrath of God against sin.

These concepts are incredibly difficult for esotericists to consider seriously, but we should exhort them: “For prudence’s sake, set your biases aside and give the gospel message a full and open-minded hearing. Do you really want to risk an eternity of regret that you passed up this opportunity?”

In his theological/devotional classic *Knowing God*, J. I. Packer makes the following important clarifications about these issues:

When Scripture speaks of God anthropomorphically, it does not imply that the limitations and imperfections which belong to the personal characteristics of us sinful creatures belong also to the corresponding qualities in our Holy Creator....

..... God’s wrath in the Bible is never the capricious, self-indulgent, irritable, morally ignoble thing that human anger so often is. It is, instead, a right and necessary reaction to objective moral evil. God is only angry where anger is called for. Even among men, there is such a thing as righteous indignation, though it is, perhaps rarely found. But all God’s indignation is righteous. Would a God who took as much pleasure in evil as He did in good be a good God? Would a God who did not react adversely to evil in His world be morally perfect? Surely not.¹⁵

To understand and benefit from the fact that “God is love,” we must first come to terms with the reality of our sin, God’s righteousness, and the inevitability of judgment (John 16:7–11). Then we can appreciate the Son of God’s sacrificial identification with us as the most amazing demonstration of love in the history of the universe.

Mind Scientists in particular have built their whole theology on the premise that “God is love” while emptying it of its meaning. This is irony in its most tragic form. “God is love” is a warm and fuzzy idea, a vacuous concept, until we appreciate the sacrifice on our behalf by which it is measured.

The Simplicity of God

If God is a person and not a mere principle, why did John say “God is love” instead of “God is loving”? The Bible commentary by Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown does a good job of answering this:

There is no Greek article to love, but to God; therefore we cannot translate, Love is God. God is fundamentally and essentially LOVE: not merely is loving, for then John’s argument would not stand; for the conclusion from the premises then would be this, This man is not loving: God is

loving; therefore he knoweth not God IN SO FAR AS GOD IS LOVING; still he might know Him in His other attributes. But when we take love as God's essence, the argument is sound: This man doth not love, and therefore knows not love: God is essentially love, therefore he knows not God.¹⁶

God's attributes therefore are essential to His nature such that it can be stated correctly that He *is* love, *is* truth (1 John 1:5; cf. John 14:6), *is* righteousness, and so on. These qualities in their fullest, highest, and purest senses cannot be known apart from knowing Him.

This interpretation of 1 John 4 is consistent with the classical theistic doctrine of divine *simplicity*.¹⁷ By this is meant that, unlike humans, God's being does not consist of a complex aggregation of parts. He does not *have* or *possess* attributes such that He might act on one (e.g., righteousness) at the expense of another (e.g., love), as Mary Baker Eddy and other metaphysical teachers have mischaracterized the orthodox view. We perceive His righteousness as separate from His mercy, but they are not separated within His being. All of His attributes inform all of His actions, and He never acts inconsistently with any of them. The cross of Christ is the ultimate example of this (see Rom. 3:25–27; cf. Ps. 85:9–11).

We are the ones who change and can be capricious; God remains ever the same (Mal. 3:6; James 1:17). Which of His attributes we experience depends on our response to Him: if we repent, we experience His mercy; if we consistently reject His merciful provision for our sin, ultimately we experience His wrath. But when we reject Him, He does not delight in our punishment: "'As I live!' declares the Lord God, I take no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but rather that the wicked turn from his way and live. Turn back, turn back from your evil ways! Why then will you die, O house of Israel?" (Ezek. 33:11; cf. 2 Pet. 3:9).

Living in Denial Never Works

The phrase "God is love" is used one more time in 1 John 4. In context, it puts the lie to the notion that God loves no one but is the love in everyone: "We have come to know and have believed the love which God has for us. God is love, and the one who abides in love abides in God, and God abides in him. By this, love is perfected with us, so that we may have confidence in the day of judgment....There is no fear in love; but perfect love casts out fear, because fear involves punishment, and the one who fears is not perfected in love" (vv. 16–18).

Note that those who accept Christ's sacrifice as the propitiation for their sins become so assured of His love and acceptance that they lose all fear of punishment. That should sound good to esotericists. But look at what John says earlier in the same letter (1:8–10): "If we say that we have no sin, we are deceiving ourselves and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. If we say that we have not sinned, we make Him a liar and His word is not in us." The esotericists' strident rejection of the very notion of sin is simply their part in humanity's ongoing rebellion against God. Yet even now, God

reaches out to them with the offer of complete forgiveness, restoration, adoption into His family, citizenship in His kingdom, and, ultimately, resurrection into a new world where there will be no sin, suffering, sorrow, and death (Rev. 21:4).

Here we encounter yet another tragic irony about metaphysical theology. It denies the existence of sin, judgment, sickness, and death plainly out of a longing for a world where such features do not exist. Well, that is exactly what God has undertaken to provide them with! But they're not going to get there by denying reality or by refusing to deal with the root cause of what is wrong with the world and with them.

The answer, therefore, is not to deny the unpleasant realities of our mortal existence. This approach to the problem is clearly unworkable. All the founders of the above sects succumbed to sickness and died. Jesus said, "A disciple is not above his teacher....It is enough for the disciple that he become like his teacher" (Matt. 10:24–25). What hope then do the disciples of Eddy, Holmes, Fillmore, and other esoteric teachers have? Those who ignore all these wake-up calls and persist in this denial sentence themselves to an endless state of cognitive dissonance. I suspect most of us have known Christian Scientists and New Thought adherents in whom this was sadly evident.

The answer is rather to embrace the fact that God has dealt with all of these things at their root on the cross of Jesus Christ. Instead of protesting, esotericists would do well to fall on their knees, receive His free gift of salvation, and give thanks!

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NOTES

- 1 Belief in a Universal Mind ontologically requires pantheism. I have long held that atheists can more easily be converted to pantheism than theism because they must only abandon materialism; they remain naturalists.
- 2 Mary Baker Eddy, *Science and Health with Key to the Scriptures*, authorized ed. (Boston: The First Church of Christ, Scientist, 1875, 1934), 275.
- 3 *Ibid.*, 6.
- 4 *Ibid.*, 42.
- 5 Ernest Holmes, *The Science of Mind: The Definitive Edition* (New York: Jeremy P. Tarcher/Putnam, 1938), 478.
- 6 The group has recently jettisoned much of its reference to "Christianity" and related terms in order to draw a wider following and now goes simply by Unity. On this see Rev. Jesse E. Tanner, Ph.D., "Reclaiming Unity's Christian Roots," <http://theunitychristian.blogspot.com/2011/12/blog-series-on-reclaiming-unity.html>.
- 7 The New Thought movement, like Christian Science, looks back to mesmerist, mind-cure healer, and mind science teacher Phineas Parkhurst Quimby (1802–1862) as its spiritual father. However, unlike Christian Science, which dogmatically and exclusively follows the teachings of Mary Baker Eddy (as she taught them to do), these groups are open and inclusive, encouraging their members to benefit from spiritual teachings and practices originating outside their own circles.
- 8 Charles Fillmore, *Jesus Christ Heals* (Unity Village, MO: Unity School of Christianity, 1939), 26.
- 9 See, e.g., Paramahansa Yogananda, "A Scripture of Love," Paramahansa Yogananda,

<http://www.yogananda.com.au/pyr/love0.html>; Andrew Cohen, "God Is Love," Big Think, March 9, 2012, <http://bigthink.com/the-evolution-of-enlightenment/god-is-love>.

- 10 Eddy, *Science and Health*, 319.
- 11 See Douglas Groothuis, "The Gnostic Gospels: Are They Authentic?" *Christian Research Journal* 13, 3 (Winter 1991): 15–19. Available online at <http://www.equip.org/articles/the-gnostic-gospels-are-they-authentic/>.
- 12 See J. B. Lightfoot, *The Apostolic Fathers*, ed. and completed by J. R. Harmer (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1956).
- 13 On this see F. F. Bruce, *Jesus and Christian Origins outside the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1974). For a concise summary, see Hank Hanegraaff, *Has God Spoken?* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2011), chap. 5.
- 14 Elliot Miller, Effective Evangelism, "Discussing the Bible with New Agers (Part One)," *Christian Research Journal* 17, 2 (Fall 1994): 9. Available online at <http://www.equip.org/articles/discussing-the-bible-with-new-agers-part-one/>; Elliot Miller, Effective Evangelism, "Discussing the Bible with New Agers (Part Two)," *Christian Research Journal* 17, 3 (Winter 1995): 7, 42. Available online at <http://www.equip.org/articles/discussing-the-bible-with-new-agers-part-two/>.
- 15 J. I. Packer, *Knowing God* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1973), 150–51.
- 16 Robert Jamieson, A. R. Fausset, and David Brown, *A Commentary, Critical, Experimental, and Practical on the Old and New Testaments*, vol. 3 (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1973), 641.
- 17 Despite being advanced by leading minds throughout church history and supported by many evangelical thinkers today, the doctrine of divine simplicity is not without detractors. See, e.g., J. P. Moreland and William Lane Craig, *Philosophical Foundations for a Christian Worldview* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2003), 524–26. For a rebuttal see Edward Feser, "William Lane Craig on Divine Simplicity," November 1, 2009, <http://edwardfeser.blogspot.com/2009/11/william-lane-craig-on-divine-simplicity.html>. I acknowledge that the doctrine can be taken to incoherent and biblically unsupported extremes, but even Moreland and Craig see the value of a modified divine simplicity doctrine. I submit that my articulation of divine simplicity here is both logically coherent and biblically supported.