

John Calvin (1509-1564)

That nothing might stand in the way of his love toward us, God appointed Christ as a means of reconciling us to himself. . . . Therefore, to take away all cause for enmity and to reconcile us utterly to himself, he wipes out all evil in us by the expiation set forth in the death of Christ; that we, who were previously unclean and impure, may show ourselves righteous and holy in his sight.

This is the wondrous exchange made by his boundless goodness. Having become with us the Son of Man, he has made us with himself sons of God. By his own descent to the earth he has prepared our ascent to heaven. Having received our mortality, he has bestowed on us his immortality. Having undertaken our weakness, he has made us strong in his strength. Having submitted to our poverty, he has transferred to us his riches. Having taken upon himself the burden of unrighteousness with which we were oppressed, he has clothed us with his righteousness.

God, therefore, *confirms*, i.e., declares His love toward us to be most certain and true, because He did not spare Christ His Son for the sake of the ungodly. Herein is His love manifested, that without being influenced by any love of ours, He first loved us of His own good pleasure, as John tells us (John 3:16). . . . Christ is such a shining and remarkable proof of the divine love toward us that, whenever we look to Him, He clearly confirms to us the doctrine that God is love.

[The contradiction appears: John 3:16 vs. Romans 5:10] “*For if, when we were enemies, we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son, much more, being reconciled, we shall be saved by his life.*” We were enemies, he says, when Christ interposed for the purpose of propitiating the Father: through this reconciliation we are now friends; since this was effected by his death, much more influential and efficacious will be his life. **But the Apostle seems here to be inconsistent with himself; for if the death of Christ was a pledge of the divine love towards us, it follows that we were already acceptable to him; but he says now, that we were enemies.**

[1. God’s love removes the cause of hatred] It is a wonderful goodness of God and incomprehensible to the human mind, that He was benevolent towards men whom He could not but hate and removed the cause of the hatred that there might be no obstruction to His love. . . . This could be accomplished only by His suffering in our place the punishment that we were unable to endure. ‘The chastisement of our peace,’ says Isaiah, ‘was upon Him’ (Is. 53:5).

If Christ had died only a bodily death, it would have been ineffectual. No—it was expedient at the same time for him to undergo the severity of God’s vengeance, to appease his wrath and to satisfy his just judgment. . . . This is what we are saying: he bore the weight of divine severity, since he was ‘stricken and afflicted’ [cf. Is. 53:5] by God’s hand, and experienced all the signs of a wrathful and avenging God. He could not be outside God’s grace, yet He endured His wrath.

[2. God’s wrath is placated by God’s free mercy] But since it is also needful for us to know that Christ came forth to us from the fountain of God’s free mercy, Scripture explicitly teaches both; the Father’s wrath has been placated by the Son’s sacrifice and thus the Son was offered for the

expiation of men's sins, because God has had mercy on them and has made this sacrifice the pledge of His receiving them into His favor.

[3. God loves creatures but hates sin] God does not hate in us His own workmanship, that is, the fact that He has created us as living beings, but He hates our uncleanness, which has extinguished the light of his image.

[4. God's love in secret election is only revealed in faith] Because God hates sin, we are also hated by Him in so far as we are sinners. But in so far as He receives us into the body of Christ by His secret counsel, He ceases to hate us. Our return to grace, however, is unknown to us, until we attain it by faith. With regard to ourselves, therefore, we are always enemies, until the death of Christ is interposed to propitiate God.

[5. Divine/human perspectives] These two statements seem to contradict each other, but it is easy to reconcile them, for in the second we are viewing the thing from God's side, and in the first from our own. For God, as far as He Himself is concerned, loved us from before the foundation of the world and redeemed us solely because He loved us, but we, when we look at ourselves, see nothing but sin which provokes God's wrath, and we cannot grasp God's love without a Mediator. Thus, as far as we are concerned, Christ's grace is the beginning of God's love.

[6. Wrath therefore refers to our feeling] I reply that when Christ is said to have reconciled the Father to us, it is to be referred to our feeling; for as we are conscious of sin, we can only conceive of God as angry and hostile until Christ absolves us from guilt. For whenever sin appears, God wants His wrath and the judgment of eternal death to be felt.

We now see that the variety of expressions occurring in Scripture and corresponding to the different aspects, is most appropriate and useful for faith. God interposed His Son to reconcile Himself to us . . . because He loved us. For we were yet enemies to God, continually provoking His wrath. . . . Therefore, as to the feeling of our faith, God began to love us in Christ.

[7. Wrath is not just our feeling] For since He necessarily hates sin, how shall we be convinced that He loves us until those sins for which He is justly angry with us have been expiated? Thus before we can have any feeling of His fatherly kindness, the blood of Christ must intercede to reconcile God to us.

[8. From God alone to God in Christ] I do agree that the love of God was first in time and in order also as regards God; but, as regards us, His love has its foundation in the sacrifice of Christ. For when we think of God apart from a mediator, we can only conceive of him as being angry with us, but when a mediator is interposed between us, we know that He is pacified towards us. . . . We are taught by Scripture to perceive that apart from Christ, God is, so to speak, hostile to us, and his hand is armed for our destruction; to embrace his benevolence and fatherly love in Christ alone.

[9. Paradox] God interposed His Son to reconcile Himself to us because He loved us. For we were yet enemies to God, continually provoking His wrath. . . . See how we are both enemies and friends until atonement has been made for our sins and we are restored to favor with God!