

## Foreword

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John 3:16 was the first Bible verse I memorized. Most likely it is the single most memorized verse of Scripture. The reference even appears on signs in the end zones of televised football games. It's like the Magna Charta of evangelicalism. But it also may be one of the most misunderstood verses of the Bible.

“God so loved the world that he gave his only Son...” is not a prelude to an altar call with a half sentence of an atonement theology. Rather, is a profound glimpse into the scope of God's love for the whole “cosmos” (the world), the nature of God's self-giving love, and the relational love of the Trinity. It's just one of a multitude of biblical declarations, metaphors, prayers and parables testifying that God is love. Said differently, that God's essence and presence is known most fully as God's Love. This is what John Armstrong is explaining, with care and passion, on the following pages of this insightful book, *The Transforming Fire of Divine Love*.

Focusing on God's love—what Armstrong comes to call “God-Love” since this is not an attribute of God, but God's being—is where all theology should begin and find its foundation. But it doesn't. This book sheds some light on how and why. Various theologies miss this central reality by minimizing, qualifying, and diminishing the bedrock truth that God is love. In part, that's because this cannot be apprehended simply through the mind, intellectually. It's known in ways beyond knowing, relationally, and in communion. It comes true amid clouds of unknowing, in images where vines and branches are one, and within indisputable visions of 14<sup>th</sup> century women in isolated anchor-holds.

All this can be theologically inconvenient. Rational systems attempting to comprehensively explain all the truth about faith seem to falter. Embracing God and Love as one indissoluble identity leaves too many unanswered questions. Theologies which provide rationalizations for perplexing contradictions feel more comfortable. More than that, as Armstrong points out, our ideas about God's nature are often our own projections born from childhood experiences, cultural assumptions, and legal, moralistic systems.

Yet, the theological task is essential. John Armstrong shares the theological and spiritual journey of a lifetime to demonstrate why it is so crucial, and so clearly within our grasp, to retrieve the full, powerful, embracing truth that God is Love. He does so with deep theological grounding supported by convincing biblical insight. This may be the book's most important contribution to the wider church.

Affirming the essential unity, in being and doing, of God and Love illuminates our understanding of who we are as those created in God's image. God's nature has consequences that are directly derivative for human nature. This overturns various theological mindsets. For instance, theologies that begin with an assumption of human wretchedness and God's wrath are facing a long overdue reckoning. Armstrong helps provide this. He writes: "*We are beloved persons created for divine love.*" And that's not where we are supposed to end up. That's where we start.

We need to recover this starting point, desperately, for the sake of Christianity's future within Western culture, and for the sake of this world's future, so loved by God. This book serves as a guide for such a recovery

process. And that journey is not circumscribed by the binary categories of conservative vs. liberal theology. The fifteen chapters of this book reveal the trajectory, the obstacles, the discoveries, and the joy of this journey. The book's subtitle, "My Long, Slow Journey into the Love of God," alerts us to how these pages are not simply a theological exploration, but also a personal recapitulation of John's abiding Christian faith. While not a memoir, the book reveals how the earnest search to grasp God's Love emerges from and is woven into Armstrong's pilgrimage as a follower of Jesus Christ.

John Armstrong has a deeply rooted evangelical faith which has grown branches that reach widely into ecumenical spaces. His broad theological wisdom doesn't hesitate to dissect the restrictive, limiting blinders of his earlier views, and harvests essential gleanings from a broad diversity of theological traditions. He turns our attention to Catholic theological voices which have creatively explored the depth of God's love, and draws from early mystics and contemplatives whose spiritual experiences who have shared not only their knowledge but their participation in this mystery of love.

Wisdom from the Orthodox tradition, so often overlooked or unknown in the evangelical and then Reformed world that provide a home base for Armstrong, are explicated with rich, appreciative inquiry. That becomes crucial for describing what God's nature as Love, outpoured for humanity, means for the possibility of one to participate in this Love, belonging as sons and daughters to God's life. Ancient wisdom for Church "Fathers" is blended with insights from contemporary Orthodox theologians as new windows into God's nature, and our own, are opened.

The book notes how voices like Desmond Tutu approached grasping God as Love within their fraught contexts, and the place of process theologians and other historic Protestant voices. All this provides a wide ecumenical breadth to the focused exploration of what it means to know that God is Love. This provides an approach that is evangelical but ecumenical, Reformed but always reforming, Catholic but not dogmatic, Orthodox but spiritually inquisitive, and Christocentric but Trinitarian. That theological framework also describes John Armstrong's life and witness. What he writes he lives.

Frederick Buechner has written, *"To say that God is love is either the last straw or the ultimate truth."* The *Fire of Transforming Love* asks you to make that choice. But in the end, this is not an intellectual decision but a relational invitation. Ilia Delio, the Franciscan theologian and scientist provides this explanation: *"When I speak about love as core reality to colleagues in theology (or science) I often get a look of annoyance or the raised eyebrows that signify dismissal...I want to shout out...but often I remain silent because love cannot be defended by analytical arguments: love has its own internal logic...I went in search of truth and found love at the heart of all things."*

The first chapter of this book explores the biblical connection between fire and divine love, reflected in the book's title. In addition to the examples Armstrong provides, that draws me to the passage from Malachi 3:2, "He is like a refiner's fire." It's a bass aria in Handel's *Messiah*. But the background is illuminating. In ancient times gold embedded in rocks was crushed, washed and then subjected to high temperature in furnaces which removed impurities, or the "dross", to reveal its true essence. In this process, the goldsmith would know that its essence has been revealed when the image of his face is reflected back in the emerging gold material.

The protective layers of our dross hide the truth of our essence, held in God's Love, and holding God's image. The refiner's fire liberates us, inviting us into those moments where the gaze of God's Love is reflected back. Then the circuit is complete as Love returns Love. This is the Love which then shines as the liberating Light of the world.

*The Transforming Fire of Divine Love* beckons you to participate in this mystery.

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