

LOVE WINS?
GOD'S LOVE AND GOD'S WRATH IN ROMANS 5:6-10

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Introduction: Presenting the Problem

In the last year or so, much attention has been given to the question of hell in relation to God's nature. Two questions in particular have been asked. First, it has been asked whether belief in the eternal, conscious torment for the unsaved is consistent with God's love. Second, it has been asked whether it is possible that hell ultimately will be empty—that the grace of God in the saving work of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection will in the end cover all people, even those who have not believed in their lifetime. The question has been essentially whether or not love—*God's love, specifically*—wins. The notion that in the end love does win in a hell-will-be-empty kind of way does not sit well with many in the evangelical community. Attention is immediately focussed on God's wrath. *We must leave room for God's wrath*, many said in response to the idea of an empty hell. *Surely he will not let the evil in this world go unjudged and unpunished. Surely God's love would not embrace evil in this way.* In many respects, it has been a conversation not so much about the nature of hell or its inhabitants, but about the tension between God's love and God's wrath.

This tension is an issue that needs to be addressed: how *do* God's wrath and God's love relate? There is a unique and potent example of this in Paul's remarkable statement in Romans 5:6-10:

For while we were still weak, at the right time Christ died for the ungodly. Indeed, rarely will anyone die for a righteous person—though perhaps for a good person someone might actually dare to die. But God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us. Much more surely then, now that we have been justified by his blood, will we be saved through him from the wrath of God. For if while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of his Son, much more surely, having been reconciled, will we be saved by his life.¹

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, all scripture references are from the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV) of the Bible.

Several issues immediately arise: God proves his *love* for us through the sacrifice of Christ and, in turn, through Christ's sacrifice we are saved from the *wrath* of God. So are God's love and God's wrath in opposition to each other? Verse 9 in particular—"Much more surely then...will we be saved through [Christ] from the wrath of God"—seems to suggest a kind of opposition between God and Jesus. The loving Son appears to be working against an angry God, with Jesus standing between God and humanity, defending humanity bravely and victoriously against God's wrath. The image is of an angry God who needs appeasing, and this is done by Christ. However, this opposition between God and Christ—which would be a rather Marcionite reading of the New Testament—is inconsistent with Trinitarian theology. How could a house so divided stand? It could not.

These verses prompt additional, related questions: what is the meaning of God's wrath when it is God himself who sends his Son as a sacrifice to deal with this wrath? Does this mean that God's love does triumph in the end? That is, is God's wrath theoretically dangerous, but in fact trumped by his love? How do God's love and God's wrath relate, particularly in Paul's formulation in Romans 5:6-10?

In some respects, the tension we sense between God's love and God's wrath unique to us in the western world. Western culture and society has been prosperous and relatively peaceful, at least in recent years, so on the one hand we do not like the idea of God's wrath, which we tend to think of a sort of irrational and unjustified anger that grinds against the things we like to do. African Americans who have experienced marginalization and racism, however, probably sense less tension here than do white westerners; survivors of the Holocaust and the Rwandan genocide probably welcome the notion of God's wrath and judgement. North Americans may have had moments of "appreciation" of wrath and judgment, such as after the attack on the World Trade

Center in September, 2011, but generally only insofar as wanting it to be poured out on the perpetrators (even if we were the ones to pour it out). On the other hand, North American culture has sentimentalized love and even attached the term to what would biblically be considered lust—nothing more than a self-seeking, consumerist emotion. Therefore, part of the reason for the tension we feel between God’s love and God’s wrath, particularly as it is phrased in this passage in Romans, is that westerners simply do not have a proper understanding of the concepts of love and wrath. For us, love and wrath “abide in mutually exclusive compartments.”²

This paper, therefore, will be a conceptual project, aiming to clarify the main terminology—love, wrath, enemy, reconciliation—of Romans 5:6-10 in an effort to better understand how these concepts—love and wrath in particular—relate to each other, to God and humans. First, we will examine whether or not Paul is referring to *God’s* wrath in this passage. If he is not referring to God’s wrath, the tension disappears. Second, we will develop an understanding of the nature of God’s love. Third, arising out of this, God’s wrath will be examined in relation to his love. Finally, we will address the question of where animosity lies and where reconciliation needs to happen—who is an enemy of whom? Who needs to be reconciled to whom? Is God hostile to sinful humanity and does he need to be reconciled to us? In conclusion, we will gather these conceptual strands together in an attempt to reconcile these two apparently opposite concepts.

Wrath of God or of Something Else?

Before the relation of God’s wrath and God’s love in Romans 5:6-10 is examined, it needs to be asked whether there is a tension between the terms at all. Most modern English translations indicate that the wrath in this passage is *God’s* wrath, but in the original Greek verse

² Donald A. Carson, "God's Love and God's Wrath," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 156.624 (October 1, 1999): 389.

nine's reference to wrath only says "the wrath" (*tēs orgēs*), rather than "the wrath of God" (*tēs orgēs tou theou*).³ So is Paul speaking of God's wrath here or does he mean something else?

In his commentary on Romans, C. H. Dodd argues that the wrath mentioned in this verse is a natural sin-related principle at work in creation and distinct from God's own characteristics. Dodd notes that Paul infrequently uses the phrase "wrath of God." Most often Paul uses the term in an impersonal way (e.g. "the wrath") without direct reference to its relationship to God. He therefore concludes that the "wrath of God" is a human rationalization of the effects of sin in the world.⁴

[Wrath] stands for the process by which sin brings its own retribution, a process conceived as reaching its consummation at the Last Judgment. From this process the divine love, which has already acquitted us of our past sins, will surely save us. We may observe that if Wrath stood for an act and attitude of God, there would be no need for this 'much more'; for justification means that God is not in a wrathful attitude towards us. But, since Wrath is an objective principle and process in the moral order, we still need at points the help of Christ to overcome sin and destroy its baneful effects.⁵

In other words, wrath is something apart from God, rather than something *from* God or *in* God; it is something that happens as a result of sin, but it is not something God does or feels.⁶ Dodd finds it problematic to attribute to God what he sees as the "irrational passion of anger," which he understands the notion of "wrath" to classically mean.⁷ Wrath is, instead, the independent *effect* of sin. Mercy, by contrast, "is not the effect of human goodness, but is inherent in the character of God."⁸

³ The Holman Christian Standard Bible does not include "of God" and the New American Standard Bible indicates that "of God" is added by the translators.

⁴ C. H. Dodd, *The Epistle of Paul to the Romans* (London: Hodder and Stouton Limited, 1960), 21-24.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 77.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 23.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 23-24.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 23.

If Dodd is correct, if the wrath described in Romans 5:9 is not God's wrath but some sort of independent tendency existing in creation as a result of sin, then there is no tension in these verses. God is not saving us from his own wrath but, rather, from the wrath at work in the world independent of God. "The wrath" is not, therefore, "the wrath *of God*."

But is Dodd correct? Few scholars take his view. Part of Dodd's problem is that he has put too much stock in "wrath" or "anger" as an irrational human emotion that could not rightly be attributed to God. As true as it may be that God's wrath does not correspond to irrational human anger, Dodd's assumption is that when the Bible speaks of wrath of any sort it is in fact speaking about an irrational emotional reaction. He is attributing human emotional responses to the concept of wrath. Dodd may well be responding to the other extreme which sees God as "a temperamental being, who is given to fitful rages of anger and retaliation."⁹ In spite of the biblical (and human) tendency to ascribe human attributes to God ("anthropopathism") we should not take these instances as absolute equivalents to God's nature. That is, God's wrath is not the same as human anger, which *can* be "irrational, excessive, and unjust."¹⁰ Nor is God's wrath "an implacable blind rage," in the way human anger might be.¹¹ Christians are not instructed not to be angry, but that when they get angry, they should not sin.¹² The problem is that humans *do* sin in their anger, and so anger has become an evil in human eyes.¹³ God's anger, however, is not the same as ours.

⁹ J Benjamin Bedenbaugh, "Paul's Use of 'Wrath of God,'" *Lutheran Quarterly* 6.2 (May 1, 1954): 155.

¹⁰ Scott A. Ashmon, "The Wrath of God: a Biblical overview," *Concordia Journal* 31.4 (October 1, 2005): 350.

¹¹ Carson, "God's Love and God's Wrath," 389.

¹² Ephesians 4:26.

¹³ Cf. F. F. Bruce, *The Letter of Paul to the Romans: An Introduction and Commentary*, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Leicester, England: Inter-Varsity Press, 1985), 79.

Beyond his tendency to anthropopathism, Dodd further ignores what seems obvious from the context. Romans 1:18 is indeed the only place in Romans—and one of the few places in the entire Pauline corpus—where “wrath” is modified by the genitive “of God”. However, “it is in general quite clear that from the context that the wrath is God’s.”¹⁴ It is difficult to read Romans with the reference to God’s wrath specifically at 1:18 and not understand the rest of Paul’s uses of wrath, even without the genitive modifier, as referring to *God’s* wrath. Paul’s readers would not have had another sort of wrath in mind.

God’s Love Defined

In order to understand God’s wrath we must first have an understanding of God’s love. First John 4:8 and 16 famously say “God is love.” Love is something most Christians assume to be basic to the character of God, but what does “God is love” mean? First, it means that love is an essential and eternal characteristic of the divine nature. C. H. Dodd highlights the difference between the statements “God is love” and “God loves”:

[“God loves”] might stand alongside other statements, such as ‘God creates,’ ‘God rules,’ ‘God judges’; that is to say, it means that love is *one* of His activities. But to say ‘God is love’ implies that *all* His activity is loving activity. If He creates, He creates in love; if He rules, He rules in love; if He judges, He judges in love. All that He does is the expression of his nature, which is—to love.¹⁵

God’s nature is love and everything he does flows out of that love. But what does “love” mean?

In fact, the passage in question itself provides a definition of love. The NRSV translates verse 8, “God proves his love for us in that while we were still sinners Christ died for us”; the New International Version (NIV) translates it, “God demonstrates...” The Greek word *suvisṑtēsīn*,

¹⁴ C. K. Barrett, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*, Harper’s New Testament Commentaries (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1957), 33.

¹⁵ C. H. Dodd, *The Johannine Epistles*, The Moffat New Testament Commentary (London: Hodder and Stoughton Limited, 1946), 110.

translated “proves” or “demonstrates,” has the sense of introduction to it: God *introduces* his love or perhaps *describes* his love in Christ’s death.¹⁶ What we see in Christ’s death for our sake is the definition of God’s love.

Paul’s words here are an echo of the words of John the evangelist. In John’s Gospel, Jesus himself said, “No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends” (John 15:13), and that is precisely what he demonstrated on the cross. In John’s Gospel we also find “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son...” (John 3:16). First John, where the phrase “God is love” is found repeatedly defines that love in connection with the cross: “This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us”(1 John 3:16, NIV); “God’s love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him” (1 John 4:9); and “This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins” (1 John 4:10, NIV). God’s love, therefore, is self-giving, it is for the other, it is sacrificial. Torrance describes God’s love as “his unconditional self-giving to humanity.”¹⁷ Similarly, Morris notes that “God’s love is not some vague, theoretical thing, a woolly benevolence. It took the hard way: it meant the cross...it is the cross—and nothing less—that shows us what God’s love is.”¹⁸

We have some notion, therefore, even if incomplete, of what God’s love is, because it is demonstrated to us in, and through, and by Christ. It is precisely because we have some understanding of the love of God that the question of God’s wrath, particularly as articulated in

¹⁶ W. Bauer, W. Arndt, F. W. Gingrich, and F. W. Danker, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 790.

¹⁷ Thomas F. Torrance, *Atonement: The Person and Work of Christ*, Robert T. Walker, ed. (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2009), 147.

¹⁸ Leon Morris, *Testaments of Love: A Study of Love in the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1981), 133-4.

Romans 5:6-8, is problematic for us. God's love extends even to sinners, the same people against whom God's wrath is set. His love is not limited to those who obey, but the eternal love of God goes out to *all* his creatures. God's love sought us even while we were enemies and while his wrath was against us.¹⁹ How does this make sense? If God's wrath seeks to destroy sin and evil, how is it that his love intercedes?

God's Wrath Defined

God's wrath is perhaps the most misunderstood element of all the conceptual problems in this passage and one of the main reasons for misunderstanding. If the wrath Paul is speaking of is indeed God's wrath, then what is meant by it? Barrett defines it succinctly: "Wrath is God's personal...reaction against sin."²⁰ In his description of God's love, Torrance relates what this love means for a holy God:

this self-giving of God to mankind was the giving to mankind of the holy and loving God, who as holy and loving is unalterably opposed to all that is not holy and not loving. God's self-giving is therefore God's judgement upon mankind, for it is the giving of a love that will not have what is against love, so that the very act of God's self-giving is an act of judgement upon the sin of mankind.²¹

Wrath is God's reaction against sin precisely because he is holy and *because he loves his creation*. His holiness and love mean a rejection of all that is sinful and unloving. What this means is that "the presence of sin transforms the experience of the divine love from the bliss

¹⁹ Does God hate the sinner or just sin? Carson comments on the evangelical cliché which claims that "God hates the sin but loves the sinner": "There is a small element of truth in these words: God has nothing but hate for the sin, but this cannot be said with respect to how God sees the sinner. Nevertheless the cliché is false on the face of it, and should be abandoned. Fourteen times in the first fifty Psalms alone, the psalmists state that God hates the sinner, that His wrath is on the liar, and so forth. In the Bible the wrath of God rests on both the sin (Romans 1:18-23) and the sinner (1:24-32; 2:5; John 3:36)" (Carson, "God's Love and God's Wrath," 389).

²⁰ Barrett, *The Epistle to the Romans*, 33.

²¹ Torrance, *Atonement*, 147.

intended by God into wrath.”²² Wrath is, in effect, the “dark side” of God’s love as perceived by those not in Christ:

As the eternal lover, God never withdraws his love from humankind, not even from those who spurn him. Beyond the judgment, the unrighteous remain the recipients of God’s love. Yet in their alienation from the lover they experience it in the form of wrath, because they have destroyed the covenantal love relationship God desires to share with all his creatures. Hence, those who reject God’s reconciling love in this life must know that love as wrath in eternity. This is hell.²³

Is wrath an attribute of God?

This leads to the issue of whether wrath is an eternal attribute of God alongside love. According to Torrance and Grenz’ understandings of it, wrath cannot be a permanent attribute, because God’s wrath cannot ultimately be distinguished from God’s love. Is this the proper understanding of God’s wrath?

Douglas Moo argues that wrath is an “aspect of God’s person...necessary to the biblical conception of God.”²⁴ However, it is not clear if Moo means what he seems to be saying—namely, that wrath is an essential attribute of the divine nature—because he follows his comments with a quote from Nygren, who says, ““As long as God is God, He cannot behold with indifference that His creation is destroyed and His holy will trodden underfoot. Therefore He meets sin with His mighty and annihilating action.””²⁵ It is not clear that God’s inability to be indifferent to sin is an outworking of his wrath as Moo (via Nygren) implies. Instead, it seems

²² Stanley J. Grenz, *Theology for the Community of God* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1994), 73.

²³ Grenz, *Theology*, 644.

²⁴ Douglas J. Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans*, The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1996), 99.

²⁵ Anders Nygren, *Commentary on Romans* (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1949), 98.

that the reverse is true: that God's wrath is an outworking of his inability to be indifferent to sin. This lack of indifference to sin is itself an outworking of some other divine attribute, namely, love. God is love and God is righteous, therefore, he cannot bear to see unrighteousness in what he loves; his wrath works out of this.

Along these lines, Carson notes that "wrath, unlike love, is not one of the intrinsic perfections of God. Rather, it is a function of God's holiness against sin. Where there is no sin, there is no wrath, but there will always be love in God."²⁶ This is consistent with the biblical witness. God said to Israel through the prophet Isaiah, for instance, "In overflowing wrath for a moment I hid my face from you, but with everlasting love I will have compassion on you" (Isaiah 54:8). So also in 2 Chronicles: "if my people who are called by my name humble themselves, pray, seek my face, and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin and heal their land" (7:14). God's wrath is a *response* to human sin; God's love is part of who he *is*. God's wrath disappears when his people turn back to him; his love always remains, even as it did "while we were still sinners". Similarly, Hultgren argues that the New Testament view of the wrath of God is continuous with the Old Testament view that "wrath is not a divine attribute but is always provoked."²⁷ Instead, wrath is "that activity of *divine love*, for which there is no exact counterpart in human personality, which stands in radical and dynamic opposition to sin."²⁸

²⁶ Carson, "God's Love and God's Wrath," 388. Travis uses almost the identical wording: "Wrath is not a permanent attribute of God. For whereas love and holiness are part of his essential nature, wrath is contingent upon human sin: if there were no sin, there would be no wrath" (Stephen H. Travis, "Wrath of God (NT)," in David Noel Freedman, ed., *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, volume 6 [New York: Doubleday, 1992], 997.)

²⁷ Arland J. Hultgren, *Paul's Letter to the Romans: A Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2011), 90. Emphasis mine.

²⁸ Bedenbaugh, "Paul's Use of 'The Wrath of God,'" 156. Emphasis mine.

Torrance unpacks the notion of the wrath of God as an outworking of God's love, saying wrath is "a sign of hope, not of utter destruction – for if God chastises us then we are sons and daughters, and not bastards, as the scripture puts it...God's wrath tells us that we are children of God."²⁹ As mentioned earlier, generally we must resist anthropomorphism. However, this is the language of scripture—God as father, humans as children. This family imagery reflects how God relates to us and perhaps it best helps us understand, even if in a limited way, how wrath is possible only through love.³⁰ It is because parents love their children and want them to become all that they can be as human beings that parents become angry at disobedience and misbehaviour and discipline their children. If they did not love their children, they would not get angry at waywardness or discipline their children for it. Human parents, of course, are tainted by sin, so parental discipline can easily turn into punishment when anger is aroused by inconvenience or irritation or self-interest, rather than for the good of the child. Human parents are not, therefore, a perfect parallel to the wrath-because-of-love action of God. Neither is human anger a true representation of what it means for God to be angry, but this is language is nevertheless used by God to describe his relationship with sinful humanity in terms humans can understand in order to give us some sense of things.³¹

Torrance goes on to say that "if...God did not resist [human] rebellion God would not be God, and there would be no such thing as a distinction between God's will and the sinner's will,

²⁹ Thomas F. Torrance, *Incarnation: The Person and Life of Christ*, Robert T. Walker, ed. (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2008), 249, 250.

³⁰ Cf. Carson, "God's Love and God's Wrath," 389: "We come closest to bringing [love and wrath] together, perhaps, in our responses to a wayward act by one of our children."

³¹ William C. Placher, *Jesus the Savior: The Meaning of Jesus Christ for Christian Faith* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 140.

or between good and evil.”³² God would not be God if he did not resist sin, because sin is the attempt by humans to be gods themselves and is therefore “an attack upon the very Godness of God,” but “there can be only one God who asserts himself as supreme.”³³ For God to resist sin is therefore for him to stand against what humans have been trying to do since Adam and Eve ate of the forbidden tree after hearing the serpent say that in doing so, “You will be like God” (Genesis 3:5).

However, God’s wrath is not simply jealousy (in the perfect, divine sense) of his Lordship. Torrance continues: “The amazing fact revealed about God over against the sinner is that God does not will that relation of existence between himself and man to cease. It is his amazing love that maintains his relation to the creature even when the creature sins and when God resists sin. He will not let the sinner go.”³⁴ God’s resistance to sin—his wrath—is a representation of his love. Because of his love, God does not will that humans continue in rebellion against him. It is his love for humans that brings out his wrath against that rebellion in order to return human beings to him. Wrath, which takes shape in judgement, is ultimately meant not simply as punishment, but to *restore relationship* between God and humanity.

In this way, God’s love has bound up with it another sort of jealousy: protective jealousy. Grenz puts it in terms of human relationships: “Genuine love is...positively jealous. It is protective, for the true lover seeks to maintain, even defend, the love relationship whenever it is threatened by disruption, destruction, or outside intrusion.”³⁵ Sin is precisely all three of these—an outside intrusion that disrupts and ultimately destroys human relationship with God. Grenz

³² Torrance, *Incarnation*, 251.

³³ *Ibid.*, 249.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 255.

³⁵ Grenz, *Theology*, 73.

goes on: “Whenever another seeks to injure or undermine the love relationship, he or she experiences love’s jealousy, which we call ‘wrath.’ When this dimension is lacking, love degenerates into mere sentimentality.”³⁶ Again we must be careful not to project human passion onto God, for in human terms the wrath of passion is often irrational and destructive, which God’s wrath is not. The analogy is simply made to illustrate that love without the potential for jealous wrath is not really love.

The bearing of the question of wrath in relation to God’s attributes is obvious: if wrath is intrinsic to the nature and character of God in the same way that love is, then we have conflicting attributes in a perfect deity. On the one hand is the God who always loves us, even while we were enemies and in a state of rebellion against him; on the other, is the God who seeks to pour out his wrath upon the sinner in judgement. This conflict is inconsistent with the redemptive narrative of scripture. But Morris notes that “the opposite of love is not wrath, but hate.”³⁷ If instead God’s wrath is a *manifestation* of his love—that is, it is a reaction against sin and rebellion *precisely because he loves us and is not indifferent to our relationship to himself and to each other*—then we do not have a conflict between attributes but a natural outworking of one central attribute. Because God loves, he “is not passive in the face of sin.”³⁸ If he were, he would be “logically incapable of love and functionally amoral.”³⁹

³⁶ Grenz, *Theology*, 73. See also Placher, *Jesus the Savior*, 140: “In human terms, we know that passionate reaction to betrayal is part of what it means to love. If betrayal left me unaffected, I would not have loved. We know that God loves us, and that our sins betray God.”

³⁷ Leon Morris, *The Epistle to the Romans* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1988), 76.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 75.

³⁹ Ashmon, “The Wrath of God,” 352.

Who is Hostile and Who is Reconciled?

Another conceptual problem in which our pre-conceived notions make understanding this passage and the relationship between God's love and God's wrath difficult is found in Romans 5:10: "For if while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of his Son, much more surely, having been reconciled, will we be saved by his life." Two related questions arise out of this verse. First, who is an enemy to whom? That is, who is the "we" that were "enemies"? Are humans and God mutual enemies? Is God the enemy of humans because of his rejection of sin? Or are humans enemies of God because of our persistent rebellion against him? Secondly, who is being reconciled? Does the reconciliation go both ways—God reconciled to humans and humans reconciled to God—or does it only go in one of those directions? In short, the question is one of relationship: in which direction does enmity flow? Answers to these questions are important to understand the relationship between God's wrath and God's love, because how we answer them determines how we understand wrath. If God is hostile towards us and if God is *our* enemy, then God appears to be the angry deity that needs appeasing, and Christ is our defense against him.⁴⁰ On the other hand, if the hostility is only from humans to God, then it is possible to see Christ not in opposition to God in order to appease his anger but, rather, as God's own solution to our rebellion.

Scholars seem to be divided over this issue. Moo argues that *echthroi* ("enemies") here includes both God and humans. Based on suggestions of God's hostility towards humans earlier in Romans (e.g. 1:18), he argues that the word *echthroi* "includes God's hostility towards human beings as well as human 'enmity' with God."⁴¹ Morris makes a similar claim, noting that the

⁴⁰ Placher, *Jesus the Savior*, 139.

⁴¹ Moo, *Romans*, 312.

same word is used in 11:28 in opposition to “beloved”, suggesting that God is an enemy to humans as well.⁴² In addition, Morris thinks the reference to God’s wrath in verse 9 “surely shows that God’s hostility to evil is in view. The wrath and enmity go together.”⁴³ Dunn takes a similar middle ground. He notes that both readings—hostility to God and hostility to humans—are possible, but argues that “we should probably avoid an ‘either-or’ exegesis and let the translation ‘enemies’ carry the implication of a mutual hostility.”⁴⁴ Schreiner goes so far as to say, “*there is no reason* it should not be understood as mutual hostility between God and sinners.”⁴⁵

Hultgren and Jewett, however, *do* see reason to understand it otherwise. Hultgren argues that “enemies” means “persons who are hostile to God, not persons to whom God is hostile,” which he says the wording and context of the passage make clear.⁴⁶ Similarly, Jewett argues that while it is possible to understand *echthroi* as mutual hostility, “the theme of God’s hatred is alien to this passage, which has repeatedly stressed divine grace, love, sacrifice, and salvation from wrath.”⁴⁷ Indeed, these verses are built on the premise of God acting to reconcile us in spite of ourselves—in spite of our weakness, in spite of our ungodliness, in spite of our sinfulness, in

⁴² It is not clear, however, that Paul is saying that the people of Israel are enemies of God. The NRSV translates it as “enemies” of God, but “of God” does not appear in the Greek text. It may well mean enemies of the Gospel, which the verse refers to, in the sense of them as a nation having rejected it. Hultgren says, “The people of Israel remain ‘enemies’ *in reference to the gospel*” (*Romans*, 423, emphasis mine). The distinction may be subtle, but it is significant enough to take the force out of Morris’ argument.

⁴³ Morris, *Romans*, 225. Again, however, hostility to evil is not the same thing as being an enemy to human beings.

⁴⁴ James D. G. Dunn, *Romans 1-8*, Word Biblical Commentary, v. 38a (Dallas, TX: Word Books, 1988), 258. See also Joseph A. Fitzmeyer, *Romans: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, The Anchor Bible (New York: Doubleday, 1993), 401.

⁴⁵ Thomas R. Schreiner, *Romans*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1998), 264. Emphasis mine.

⁴⁶ Hultgren, *Romans*, 212.

⁴⁷ Robert Jewett, *Romans: A Commentary*, Hermeneia (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2007), 364.

spite of our rebellion and hostility towards God. God’s love and grace are hard at work in Paul’s words in this passage. Therefore

[i]t is much more logical to accept the active sense of human hostility against God... To view ‘enemies’ as both objective and subjective is to confuse modern interpretive options with Paul’s intention and to bend his wording into an abstract discourse that satisfies contemporary theological needs.⁴⁸

The one potential problem with Jewett’s assertion about the “alien” nature of the theme of hate to this passage is the presence of God’s wrath in verse 9. As noted above, wrath and hate are not the same thing, but wrath nevertheless seems to signal some level of hostility towards something. Yet even as God’s wrath is present and active, it is, as we have seen, an outworking of his love. His wrath seeks to save, not destroy. He is “hostile” to our sinful state, but only because he loves us. In some sense, God’s conception of “enemy” is radically different from the way humans understand it. In God’s action in and through Christ, the concept of “enemy” is redefined. “Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you,” Jesus taught in the sermon on the mount, “so that you may be children of your Father in heaven” (Matthew 5:44-45a). Loving enemies, rather than showing hostility and hatred, is the nature of God, which is quite consistent with the notion of wrath being a result of God’s love for humanity.

Furthermore, Hultgren ties the question of who is an enemy to whom to the question of reconciliation that immediately follows: “if while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God...” (v. 10). He notes that Paul never says “that God must be reconciled to humanity... for it is humanity that is estranged from God—not the other way around—and in need of reconciliation.”⁴⁹ If there is mutual hostility—if we are God’s enemies and God is our enemy—

⁴⁸ Jewett, *Romans*, 364.

⁴⁹ Hultgren, *Romans*, 213. So also Placher, *Jesus the Savior*, 139-40: “Just as with Old Testament patterns of sacrificial ritual, the New Testament never speaks of *God* needing to be reconciled to *us*. God always loves; it is our sin that has broken down the relationship between us, and therefore *we* who need to be reconciled to *God*. The image of the angry God who needs to be won over is therefore wrong from the start” (emphasis his).

then God would need to be reconciled to us as well. But, since it humans who have transgressed, not God, it is humans who need to be reconciled to him.

Commentators note the parallels between verse 9 and verse 10:

5:9	5:10
Much more	Much more
having been justified	having been reconciled
by his blood	through the death of his Son
we shall be saved	we shall be saved
through him	by his life ⁵⁰

Justification and reconciliation are in parallel here. While Moo sees these parallels, he nevertheless understands “enemies” to refer to mutual hostility and “reconciliation” to mean God and humanity being reconciled to each other.⁵¹ However, if justification and reconciliation are parallels, and justification is not something which applies to God (i.e. God does not need to be justified), then it is reasonable to understand reconciliation here as something which applies only to humans and not to God.

“Reconciliation” is of course relational language, so in some sense God is implicated in reconciliation, but in the context of this passage, it is not clear that God needs to be reconciled *to us*. As argued above, God’s relationship *with* (rather than *to*) humanity is strained only because of our rebellion. Recall that in the garden God still came looking for Adam and Eve, even after they had disobeyed God’s command and eaten the forbidden fruit, whereas Adam and Eve hid themselves from God.⁵² God’s relationship *to* them was not changed—he still loved Adam and Eve—but his relationship *with* them was, but only because *their* relationship *to* God was broken. In this way, God is implicated in reconciliation without having to be reconciled to humans.

⁵⁰ Modified from Hultgren, *Romans*, 213. See also Moo, *Romans*, 309.

⁵¹ Moo, *Romans*, 312.

⁵² Genesis 3:8-10.

In Romans 5:6-10 God is understood to act first in reconciliation. Indeed, this is the reality of the entire biblical narrative. God is working on the relationship with those he loves, whereas rebellious humans are not. This is what makes God’s work so remarkable: he acts first even when he has not transgressed anyone. He acts first, even though the transgressor is normally expected to make things right, to reconcile. This is the point that Paul is making in this passage—“reconciliation involves a risk... It requires that one of the parties, usually the one who has caused offense, take the initiative to restore the relationship, and the initiative can be rejected by the other party. But Paul declares here that the offended party, God, is the one who has taken the initiative.”⁵³

There is an additional, conceptual parallel or repetition that occurs through these verses that is not often noted. Paul describes the nature or state of humans: “weak” or “helpless” (v. 6), “ungodly” (v. 6), “sinners” (v. 8), and “enemies” (v. 10). They are not *direct* parallels: the first two are adjectives, while the second two are nouns.⁵⁴ “Weak/helpless” and “sinners” both appear with *eti* (“while”), the participle *ontōn* (“being”), and the personal pronoun *ēmōn* (“us/we”); “enemies” does not have *eti* or the personal pronoun, but does appear with the participle *ontes* (“being”); “ungodly” appears with none of these. Nevertheless, the context suggests that Paul is setting up a pattern through repetition and the first three words at least—“weak/helpless,” “ungodly,” “sinners”—do not refer to God, but only to humans. It is reasonable, therefore, to understand a similar function for the word “enemies”—namely, that it is in reference to humans only.

⁵³ Hultgren, *Romans*, 214.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 208.

Conclusion

What does all this mean, then, in terms of the relationship between God’s wrath and God’s love, when in Christ’s death—the very definition of God’s love—we are saved from God’s wrath? In his commentary on Romans, Moo says, “Outside of Christ, people are in a situation of ‘enmity’ with God; and in reconciliation, it is that status, or relationship, that changes: we go from being God’s ‘enemies’ to being his ‘children’.”⁵⁵ The context in which Moo’s image is presented, however, is of mutual hostility that exists between God and humans, but this is inconsistent with God as primary actor in reconciliation. While the imagery of moving from being “enemies” to being “children” may well be true, it is not necessarily mutual hostility that Paul is talking about here. As has been shown, God’s love is jealous—it does not wish to lose the beloved to sin and death—and for this reason it reveals itself in wrath in an effort to restore the beloved to himself. *It is the wrath of love*. This love is self-giving and works itself out in sacrifice not for the good of God himself, but for the good of those he loves.

Therefore, a better image for this—and in keeping with the family/children imagery—is the parable of the Prodigal Son.⁵⁶ The son is hostile to the father, effectively telling him to “drop dead” when he asks for his inheritance while his father is still alive. The son takes his inheritance and squanders it. He is in rebellion against his father, but the father is never in rebellion against the son. In some respects, the son has rejected his familial relationships; from his perspective, he may as well no longer be the child of his father—in the terms of Romans 5:6-10, the father is his enemy. But the father waits for his return. In the father’s view, the son is lost, but he is still his son. The father’s relationship *to* his son remains the same; the son’s relationship to his father is

⁵⁵ Moo, *Romans*, 312.

⁵⁶ Luke 15:11-32.

broken and as a result the relationship *between* them (or *with* each other) is marred. When the son finally returns, reconciliation happens.

The difference in the workings of God's love and grace is that the Father has not waited for us (the prodigals) to return and be reconciled. Instead, the Father has gone out of his way to make that reconciliation happen even though he is not the one who has transgressed the relationship. Rather than waiting for the return of sinful human beings, the Father goes out into the world to bring us back. Quite literally, in fact, he becomes flesh and enters the world in order to draw the weak, ungodly, sinful enemies that humans are back to himself. God's love for us compels him to do something about the situation we are in and this loving concern works itself out in wrath. The mystery of the cross is a discussion beyond the scope of this paper, but it is there that God's love and God's wrath are finally displayed. If God did not love, there would be no wrath and there would be no cross.

But the cross cannot be seen as a loving Christ standing between a wrathful God and hostile humanity. We cannot pit wrath against love in this way, because there is no battle between love and wrath. Instead, the cross must be seen as God's giving of *himself*, in the mysterious activity of the Trinity, in order to deal with what is keeping the beloved from the Lover. In the wrath of his love, God sought to make a final move against sin and rebellion in such a way that we, the beloved, would not be destroyed but, rather, be brought back to life and relationship to him. We are saved from God's wrath through the cross, not because it stands between us and an angry God, but because God's love for us is so deep it compels him to take up that wrath himself, so that we would not have to face it ourselves and be destroyed. God's love is the first and final motivating factor in his redemptive action in the world, including its expression in wrath, which will not allow evil to prevail. Love really does win.

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