

# FOUNDERS JOURNAL

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## THE BEAUTY OF DUTY





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TOM NETTLES

# Introduction:

## The Beauty Of Duty

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Duty is defined as “that which one is morally or legally bound to do.” That defines duty in an absolute sense. Another definition is “action or conduct required by one’s profession or position.” That might, often does, involve absolutes, but the particular actions required are relative to the skill, qualification, interpersonal relations, and professional office of a person. My duties to my children are different from my duties to the children of others but are not on that account less than absolute.

On occasion, public speakers, including preachers of the gospel, will belittle “duty” as if it is an inferior motivation for action or compliance to standards. Delight is seen as a superior motivation while duty is—Well, if I have to do it, OK—synonymous with begrudging action. One brings his wife flowers because it is his delight to do so, for he is delighted with her. If he gives her flowers presenting them to her out of a sense of duty, this is connoted as a lackluster action deserving scorn. But this tendency to diminish the excellence of a sense of duty is misguided. It is a moral error. The husband’s duty is to love his wife as his own body, for he who loves his wife loves himself (Ephesians 5:28; Genesis 2:22, 23). To treat one’s wife tenderly, to look to her desires and happiness, to bring her flowers, to live with her according to knowledge is to love her, to delight in her, and at the same time to do one’s duty.

The bifurcation between duty and delight is one of the sinister results of the fall. That one can feel duty to be a burden is one evidence of how the flesh lusts against the Spirit. In Galatians 5, Paul investigates the relationship of the law to love and the operations of the Spirit. Through love, we

serve one another (13). By the flesh, we “bite and devour one another” (15). The whole law, that is, the whole duty of one person to another, is fulfilled in this, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” So how does one overcome the antipathy of the flesh to the law of love? “Walk by the Spirit, and you will not carry out the desire of the flesh” (16). The Spirit, law, and love unite in giving expression to human duty. When one walks by the Spirit and bears the fruit that the Spirit produces (5:22, 23), he does nothing contrary to law but walks aligned with the law. God’s law constitutes the duty of man and at the same time is the perfect expression of love.

I will not seek to investigate vigorously the relation between benevolent love and complacent love but only this. God loves sinners out of benevolent love as far as his knowledge of their sin and rebellion is concerned and their consequent worthiness of eternal wrath. There is nothing lovely in us that would give God pleasure in loving us. He does nurture, however, a complacency in his unmerited favor toward sinners, for he does this to the praise of his glorious grace and the demonstration of the “depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God” (Ephesians 1:6; Romans 11:33). His benevolence toward us, therefore, finds its foundation in true complacency toward himself. On our part, both benevolent love and complacent love is due to God, first, foremost, and unstinted and then to all other things on his account. He has the most of being and is in fact the only thing that has being in and of himself, the only self-existent entity, and infinitely so, in all of reality—so benevolence is due him above all things. In addition, his being not only is large and indestructible but is beautiful, the sum of all goodness. Jonathan Edwards argues, “For as God is infinitely the greatest Being, so he is allowed to be infinitely the most beautiful and excellent.” Real virtue then, the faithful expression of duty, “must necessarily have a supreme love to God both of benevolence and complacency” at its core. All is derived from him and is absolutely dependent on him and his “being and beauty are, as it were, the sum and comprehension of all existence and excellence” [Works, BOT 1:125]. God’s comprehensive and infinite excellence, therefore, establishes the consuming duty of all intelligent creatures to love him in seamless devotion of all our parts.

Resistance to duty is resistance to moral perfection and resistance to love—both for God and man, neighbor and family. Nurturing selfishness and personal pleasure at the cost of loving service equals lawlessness rather than obedience, flesh-following rather than Spirit-walking, irregularity rather than duty. In the unfallen state of man, obedience to the law written on the heart was the supreme delight of Adam and Eve. To expand their vision of God’s attributes and to be more maturely conformed to his beautiful perfection was the goal that drove their obedience. This moral propensity was used perversely by Satan to entice them to disobedience—“His mercy is greater than his law and this act is the very path to be like him.” Such reasoning deceived Eve to take an independent path to these goals and brought about the fall. As uncorrupted image-bearers, however, their duty was their delight and the prospect of unwavering obedience their true

happiness. Andrew Fuller stated in his confession of faith, “I believe if Adam or any holy being had had the making of a law for himself, he would have made just such an one as God’s law is; for it would be the greatest of hardships to a holy being not to be allowed to love God with all his heart.” In the unfallen state, they loved the duty that was theirs; the obligation that was perfectly commensurate with the righteousness set before them was no burden but their holy hope.

Presently, fallen creatures have no regard for God. Instead, they shut off from their contemplation the power and perfection that should be obvious from the witness of every created thing around them. Duty is reprehensible because the concept of divine beauty, power, and prerogative conflicts with the corrupt mind in its self-centered, rather than God-centered, goals. If any sinners are to be converted, each must come to grips with the distance between their affections and their duties.

The new birth involves a reconciliation of affections with duties. The faith that adheres to justifying righteousness approves God’s righteous law, righteous judgment, righteous atonement, and righteous reconciliation. Saving faith admits that our duty toward such righteous expressions of divine goodness infinitely transcends and is radically other than our pursuit. Sanctification progresses in proportion to the affections’ realignment with intrinsic duties. Again, Andrew Fuller presses this truth into a confessional article: “I believe that such is the excellence of this way of salvation, that every one who hears or has opportunity to hear it proclaimed in the gospel is bound [*italics mine*] to repent of his sin, believe, approve, and embrace it with all his heart; to consider himself, as he really is, a vile lost sinner; to reject all pretensions to life in any other way; and to cast himself upon Christ, that he may be saved in this way of God’s devising. This I think to be true faith, which whoever have, I believe will certainly be saved.” One’s being “bound” to these responses mean that every stage and trait of justifying faith arises from duty. Reconciliation with God necessarily involves reconciliation of our highest desire with our highest duty.

When one grasps accurately the moral loveliness that requires the devotion of all moral beings, it is impossible to dismiss duty as an inferior motivation for action; rather one sees duty as a moral disposition, an aesthetic judgment, a true perception of fitness, a consent to perfect being, and a joyful submission to expressions of order, law, love, moral symmetry, infallible purpose, transcendent wisdom, and divine revelation. Duty permeates the entire calling of the minister of the gospel and the message that he preaches. Again, listen to the confession of Andrew Fuller:

I believe it is the duty of every minister of Christ plainly and faithfully to preach the gospel to all who will hear it; and as I believe the inability of men to spiritual things to be wholly of the moral, and therefore of the criminal kind, and that it is their duty to love the Lord Jesus Christ and trust in him for salvation though they do not; I therefore believe free and solemn addresses, invitations, calls, and warning to them to be not only consistent, but directly

adapted, as means, in the hand of the Spirit of God, to bring them to Christ. I consider it as a part of my duty which I could not omit without being guilty of the blood of souls.

Why does Fuller say that it is the sinner's "duty to love the Lord Jesus Christ and trust in him for salvation." The first concerns the fullness of the law; before all things and with all the energy of the mind, the will, the understanding, and the affections the Lord Jesus, in whom the fullness of the Godhead dwells, is to be loved. Having fallen short of that in Adam and in personal transgression, sinners need a path to righteousness and thus life. In Jesus that righteousness has been perfected and the merit of eternal life is found in him alone. A complete resting of the soul on his work (trust) as alone worthy unites the soul to him. He is the Lord, and, also, he has loved the Lord his Father with all his heart, mind, soul, and strength. He is the goal of the law and he is the perfect doer of the law. The duty, therefore, to love him absolutely and to trust him for salvation is based on the same moral excellence involved in both.

Duty, in reality, as indicated above is prior to love. The focus of love is determined by the duty implied in the excellence of the object. The greater the excellence, the greater the duty; the greater the duty, the higher and more focused the love. The infinitely perfect being calls forth our devotion and admiration; the law of such a being establishes our duty. That all things exist by his will and serve his purpose gives us varying degrees of duty toward all that he made and sustains. "You are worthy, O Lord, to receive glory and honor and power; for you created all things, and by your will they exist and were created" (Revelation 4:11). Though varied in degree, all duty is absolute. We have a duty to our pets as well as our parents, but the latter is of a higher degree of duty than the former. How the glory of God is manifest in each thing and in each relationship determines the intensity of duty involved. Food and drink are good and are partaken with gratitude and to God's glory and with a fully-approving conscience, but may be omitted for the sake of the conscience of a brother (1 Corinthians 10:29-33). Fundamental to love, therefore, is the level of duty that defines each relation.

Articles in this edition of *The Founders Journal* treat those areas of duty that are of the highest order. The first is from the opening chapter of John L. Dagg's *Manual of Theology* and explores the duty to love God. On this duty hang the reality and peculiar relevance of all other duties.

Another article by Paul Taylor deals with the duties of church membership. Christ has died for the church, has called and gifted every member and united all these members in one common goal to achieve the "measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ" (Ephesians 4:13). There is a duty, therefore, that each part of this body do its work which "causes growth of the body for the edifying of itself in love" (Ephesians 4:16).

Another article, by Ryan Denton, concerns the ongoing witness of the church, corporately and individually, with a view to the conversion of sinners. This is to occur until the final elect one is called. Benjamin Keach stated that the “task and calling of the minister as an ambassador” is “to persuade sinners to receive and embrace the Lord Jesus.” The truths of Christ’s seeking and finding all of his people should stir up ministers “to do their utmost in order to the conversion of sinners.” They should not be weary, nor faint, nor be discouraged even when reproached by men and Satan for “God has appointed preaching as his great ordinance, for the ... conversion of lost sinners.” And though the minister has no power either of virtue or persuasion to change a heart and bring a sinner home, but only Christ alone by his Spirit can do that, nevertheless, ministers “are to do what they can, they are to invite them, press, them, entreat and persuade them to come.” A faithful ministry “will do what the Lord commands them to do” with the confidence that “in God’s heart is room enough for millions of souls; and in God’s house there is not only bread enough, and to spare, but room enough also.” A minister of Christ, in order “to accomplish his Embassy, and to bring the King’s Enemies to accept of Peace,” must pray, entreat, and “beseech Sinners to be reconciled to God.” In fact, like the apostle who cried tears over the lost, “Faithful Ministers art willing to spend their Lives to win Souls to Christ, yea, to die upon the spot to save one poor Sinner.” Ryan Denton reminds us, in Keach-like fashion, that this duty cannot be transcended in demonstrating love to God and man.

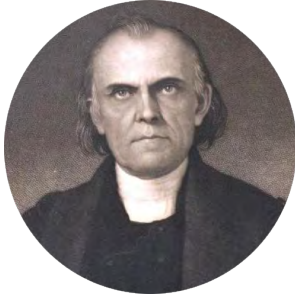
Concluding this edition of the Founders Journal is a brief resume of the Nature of True Virtue by Jonathan Edwards. This work is perhaps the most profound discussion on duty—its true beauty and its intrinsic ethical absoluteness—in American evangelical literature. We pray that each of these articles and the impact of the whole will give unction for holiness and faithful service.

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## **ABOUT THE AUTHOR:**

Tom has most recently served as the Professor of Historical Theology at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. He previously taught at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School where he was Professor of Church History and Chair of the Department of Church History. Prior to that, he taught at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary and Mid-America Baptist Theological Seminary. Along with numerous journal articles and scholarly papers, Dr. Nettles is the author and editor of fifteen books. Among his books are *By His Grace and For His Glory*; *Baptists and the Bible*, *James Petigru Boyce: A Southern Baptist Statesman*, and *Living by Revealed Truth: The Life and Pastoral Theology of Charles H. Spurgeon*.





JOHN L. DAGG

# The Duty of Love to God

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“Thou shalt love the Lord the God with all thine heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy might.” (Deut 6:5) In this manner the Bible commands the chief of all duties. No reasons are assigned for the requirement. No proof is adduced that God exists, or that he possesses such perfections as entitle him to the supreme love of his creatures. Jehovah steps forth before the subjects of his government, and issues his command. He waits for no formal introduction. He lifts us his voice with majesty. Without promise, and without threat, he proclaims his law, and leaves his subjects to their responsibility.

From the manner of this announcement, we may derive instruction. It is not necessary that we should enter into a formal demonstration that God exists, or a formal investigation of his attributes, before we begin the duty of loving him. We already know enough of him for this; and to postpone the performance of the duty until we have completed our investigation, is to commence them with unsanctified hearts, and in rebellion against God. From the dawn of our being we have had demonstrations of God’s existence and character, blazing around us like the light of noonday. The heavens and the earth have declared his glory; his minister and people have proclaimed his name; he is not to us an unknown God, except so far as our minds are willfully blind to the displays of his glory. If, therefore, we withhold the affections of our hearts, we can have no excuse in the plea that more evidence is needed. And with hearts so alienated from God at the outset, all our religious inquiries are likely to be unprofitable. What probability is there that further proof will produce its proper impression and effect on our minds, if that which is already in our possession is unheeded or abused? If, from what we already know of God, we admire and love him, we shall desire to know more of him, and shall prosecute the study with profit and delight; but, if we have already shut him out of our hearts, all our intellectual investigation

respecting him may be expected to leave us in spiritual blindness.

The duty required corresponds, in character, to the religion, of which it is an essential part. Heathen gods could not claim the supreme love of their worshippers; and heathen minds had no idea of a religion founded on supreme love to their deities. To some extent, they were objects of fear; and much that appertained to their supposed character and history, served for amusement, or to interest the imagination; but the conduct attributed to them was often such as even heathen virtue disapproved. Hence, they could not be objects of supreme love; and no one claimed it for them. The requirement of supreme love demonstrates the religion of the Bible to be from the true God; and when we begin our religious investigations with the admission of this obligation, and the full recognition of it in our hearts, we may be assured that we are proceeding in the right way.

The simplicity of the requirement is admirable. No explanation of the duty is needed. Forms of worship may be numerous and various, and questions may arise as to the forms which will be most acceptable. Many outward duties of morality are often determined with much difficulty. Perplexing questions arise as to the nature of repentance and faith, and the uninformed need instruction respecting them. But no one needs to be told what love is; the humblest mind can understand the requirement, and may feel pleasure in the consciousness of rendering obedience to it; and the learned philosopher stand in the presence of this precept as a little child, and feels its power binding every faculty that he possesses. This simple principle pervades all religion, and binds all intelligences, small and great, to God, the centre of the great system. Between it and the power of gravitation in the natural world, which binds atoms and masses, pebbles and vast planets, a beautiful analogy may be traced.

The comprehensiveness of the precept is not less admirable. From it rises the precept, love thy neighbor as thyself; and on these two all the law rests. We love our neighbors because they are God's creatures, and the subjects of his government, and because he has commanded us. We love God supremely, because he is the greatest and best of beings; and we love other beings, according to the importance of each in the universal system of being. One principle pervades both precepts, as one principle of gravitation binds the earth to the sun, and the parts of the earth to each other. This law binds angels to the throne of God, and to each other; and binds men and angels together, as fellow-subjects of the same sovereign. The decalogue is this law expanded, and adapted to the condition and relations of mankind. Love is not only the fulfilling of the law, but it is also the essence of gospel morality. All Christian obedience springs from it; and, without it, no form of obedience is acceptable to God. He who loves God supremely, cannot be guilty of that unbelief which makes God a liar, and he cannot reflect on the sins which he has committed against God, without sincere penitence.

We must not overlook the tendency of this precept to produce universal good. Every one knows how much the order and happiness found in human society, depend on love. If all kind affections were banished from the hearts of men, earth would be converted at once into a pandemonium. What love is left on earth renders it tolerable, and the love which reigns in heaven makes it a place of bliss. Perfect obedience to the great law of love is sufficient to render all creatures happy. It opens, within the breast, a perennial source of enjoyment; and it meets, from without, the smile and blessing of an approving God.

Though the religion of love is clearly taught in the book of God only, yet, when we have learned it there, we can discover its agreement with natural religion. It will be useful to observe how the moral tendencies of our nature accord, on this point, with the teachings of revelation.

The wickedness of man has been a subject of complaint in all ages. The ancient heathen complained of the degeneracy of their times, and talked of a golden age, long passed, in which virtue prevailed. In modern heathen nations, together with the depravity that prevails, some sense of that depravity exists; and everywhere the necessity or desirableness of a more virtuous state of society is admitted. In Christian lands, the very infidels, who scoff at all religion with one breath, will, with the next, satirize the wickedness of mankind. It is the united judgment of every nation, and every age, that the practice of men falls below their own standard of virtue. It is, therefore, necessary, in order to acquire the best notions of virtue that nature can give us, to turn away from the practice of men to those moral sentiments implanted in the human breast, which condemn this practice, and urge to higher virtue.

It is well known that men judge the actions of others with more severity than their own. Our appetites and passions interfere with the decisions of conscience, when our own conduct is the subject of examination. Hence, the general moral sense of mankind is a better standard of virtue than the individual conscience. In looking to the judgment of others, with a view to determine the morality of our actions, the judgment of those is especially to be regarded who are to be benefited or injured by our deeds. Hence, natural religion approves the rule—Do unto others as you would, in like circumstance, that they should do unto you.

When the vice of others interferes with our happiness, we are then most keenly sensible of its existence and atrocity. However vague our notions of virtue may be, we always conceive of it as tending to promote the happiness of others. Yet it is not every tendency to promote happiness which we conceive to be virtuous. The good that we eat, and the couch on which we lie, tend to promote our happiness; yet we do not ascribe virtue to these inanimate things. Virtue belongs only to rational and moral agents; and the promotion of happiness must be intentional to be accounted virtuous. There is still another limitation. Men sometimes confer benefits on others,

with the expectation of receiving greater benefits in return. Where the motive for the action is merely the benefit expected in return, the common judgment of mankind refuses to characterize the deed as virtuous. To constitute virtue, there must be an intentional promotion of happiness in others; and this intention must be disinterested. Natural religion does not deny that a higher standard of morality may exist; but it holds that disinterested benevolence in virtue, and it determines the morality of actions by the disinterested benevolence which they exhibit.

Some have maintained that self-love is the first principle of virtue, its central affection, which, spreading first to those most nearly related to us, extends gradually to others more remote, and widens at length into universal benevolence. This system of morality is self-contradictory. While it claims to aim at universal happiness, it makes it the duty of each individual to aim, not at this public good, but at his own private benefit. Whenever the interest of another comes in conflict with his own, it is made his duty to aim at the latter, and to promote that of his neighbor only so far as it may conduce to his own. It is true, that the advocates of this system being in reason as a restraining influence, and suppose that it will so regulate the exercise of self-love as to result in the general good. According to this system, if we, in aiming at our own happiness, practice fraud and falsehood with a view to promote it, and find ourselves defeated in the attainment of our object, we may charge our failure, not on the virtuous principle by which it is assumed that we have been moved, but on the failure of our reason to restrain and regulate it so as to attain its end. If it be said, that conscience will not permit us to be happy in the practice of fraud and falsehood, and that self-love, aware of this, avoids those practices so inconsistent with our internal peace, it is clearly admitted that conscience is a higher principle of our nature, to the decisions of which our self-love is compelled to yield.

As virtue aims at the general good, it must favour the means necessary for the attainment of this end. Civil government and laws, enacted and executed in wisdom and justice, are highly conducive to the general welfare, and these receive the approbation and support of the virtuous. Were an individual of our race, by a happy exception to the general rule, born with a virtuous bias and were this virtuous bias fostered and developed in his education, he would be found seeking the good of all. His first benefits conferred, would be on those nearest to him; but his disinterested benevolence would not stop here. As his acquaintance extended into the ramifications of society, his desire and labour for the general good would extend with it, and civil government, wholesome law, and every institution tending to public benefit would receive his cordial approbation and support; and every wise and righteous governor, and every subordinate individual, aiming at the public good, would be an object of his favour. If we suppose the knowledge of his individual to increase, and his virtuous principles to expand, widening the exercise of universal benevolence; and if, at length, the idea of a God, a being of every possible moral excellence, the wise and righteous governor of the universe, should be presented; how

would his heart be affected? Here his virtuous principles would find occasion for their highest exercise, and would grow into religious devotion. This glorious being would have the highest place in his admiration and love; and the discovery of his universal dominion would produce ineffable joy. Such are the affections of heart which even natural religion teaches, that the knowledge of God's existence and perfections ought to produce.

In God's written word, we learn our duty in a reverse method. We are not left to trace it out by a slow process, beginning with the first exercise of moral principle in the heart, and rising at length to the infinite God; but the existence and character of God are immediately presented, and the first and chief of all duties is at once announced: "Thou shalt love he Lord thy God with all thy heart." How sublime! How appropriate! The virtuous mind is open to receive such a revelation; and its perfect accordance with the best teachings of natural religion, recommends it to our understandings and our hearts. The second commandment, "Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself," is introduced, not as leading to the first, but as subordinate to it. It takes the place which properly belongs to it in a revelation from the supreme authority.

Love has been divided into benevolence, beneficence, and complacence. This division may at first appear inconsistent with the simplicity which has been ascribed to love. Benevolence is the disposition to do good to an object, and beneficence is the conferring of that good. The latter is not properly love, but the effect or manifestation of it. On the other hand, complacence includes the cause of the love together with the affection itself. Love may be exercise toward an unworthy object, as when God loves those who are dead in trespasses and sins. But it may be exercised toward those whose moral character renders them fit objects. In this case, the love being connected with approbation of the character beloved, is called complacence. When love has an inanimate thing for its object, as when Isaac love savory meat, the term refers to the deriving of enjoyment; but when the object of love is a sentient being, the term always implies the conferring of enjoyment, even when some pleasure has been received, or some enjoyment in return is expected.

Love to God implies cordial approbation of his moral character. His natural attributed, eternity, immensity, omnipotence, &c, may fill us with admiration; but these are not the proper objects of love. If we worship him in the beauty of holiness, the beauty of his holiness must excite the love of our hearts. As our knowledge of these moral perfections increases, our delight in them must increase; and this delight will stimulate to further study of them; and to a more diligent observation of the various methods in which they are manifested. The display of them, even in the most terrible exhibitions of his justice, will be contemplated with reverent, but approving awe; and their united glory, as seen in the great scheme of redemption by Christ, will be viewed with



unmixed and never-ceasing delight.

Love to God includes joy in his happiness. He is not only perfectly holy, but perfectly happy; and it is our duty to rejoice in his happiness. In loving our neighbor, we rejoice in his present happiness, and desire to increase it. We cannot increase the already perfect happiness of God, but we can rejoice in that which he possesses. If we delight in the happiness of God, we shall labor to please him in all things, to do whatever he commands, and to advance all the plans, the accomplishment of which he has so much at heart. Love, therefore, includes obedience to his commands, and resignation and submission to his will.

Love to God will render it a pleasing task to examine the proofs of his existence, and to study those glorious attributes which render him the worthy object of supreme affection. Let us enter n this study, prompted by holy love, and a strong desire that our love may be increased.

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## **ABOUT THE AUTHOR:**

John Leadley Dagg (1794–1884) born in Loudoun County, Virginia, lived to be over 90 years old. He died in June of 1884, as one of the most respected men in American Baptist life and remains one of the most profound thinkers produced by his denomination. Dagg overcame extraordinary problems – a limited education, near-blindness, and being crippled – to become a great pastor in Philadelphia and elsewhere and then an educator both in Alabama and as president at Mercer University in Georgia. He was a convinced Calvinist of an evangelical kind who wrote a winsome English prose.

As an educator and theologian, Dagg is best known for his work in Georgia between 1844 and 1870. From 1844 to 1856 he was on the faculty of Mercer University, then located in Penfield, as professor of theology and later president of the college.

His greatest contribution to Baptist life came after his retirement in 1856. He prepared *A Manual of Theology* (1857), the first systematic theology by a Baptist in America, *A Treatise on Church Order* (1858), *The Elements of Moral Science* (1859), and *The Evidences of Christianity* (1869). His reputation as a theologian and ethicist rests on these four works. The first two are still in print.



RYAN DENTON

# The Duty of Evangelism

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Duty is a loaded word with many implications. It implies an obligation of action despite obstacles or trials that stand in the way. Duty assumes resistance. It assumes doing something regardless how I may feel on any given day.

In a way, duty is the antidote to pragmatism or a superficial happiness. It is the attitude that says no matter what the outcome, I will do this or that, because it is my duty. No matter how I feel, no matter what the results are, I will do it anyways because it is my duty to do so.

Now, assuming our specific duty is biblical, we have no reason to fear this word. On the contrary, we have every reason to lean into it. It is a good word. No—it is a necessary word. There is a reason why the writings of the Reformers and Puritans are saturated with the word. They realized that regardless of all odds, obstacles, or feelings, they had a responsibility before God to carry out the tasks and behavior which He had assigned to them: whether in the sphere of family, work, church, finances, or even diet and recreation. There is not a realm that exists in which God has not laid before us certain duties. Not so that we can be saved, but because in Christ we have already been saved and there are now expectations of us as His people when it comes to living our lives as “new creations.” An obvious and helpful example of one of these Christian duties comes in the form of evangelism.

## **Duty as a Compelling Motive**

“Duty” as a motive for evangelism may come across as coarse or even legalistic. We typically like to think of other motives when it comes to evangelism, such as seeing people saved or growing

our churches. These are noble and biblical motives, sure enough, but they aren't the only motives. They aren't even the best motives. There are times when such motives won't be enough.

For instance, some days we are not euphorically bursting with love for the lost, especially when they have rejected our efforts in hostile or demeaning ways. Our love for the lost is important, but love is a feeling that is prone to fade in and out depending on our circumstances. Also, because we are people who still struggle with sin, including selfishness, evangelizing merely because we love the lost would be a flimsy and even irresponsible foundation upon which to build. We need something else. Likewise, when it comes to the motive of seeing our churches grow through our evangelism. This is something we all desire. But to what ends? What if plain and simple gospel proclamation isn't "working"? What if our churches aren't growing despite our consistent evangelism efforts? The temptation will be to either throw in the towel and quit, or to water things down to make the gospel more palatable to the masses. This is where the word "duty" comes in as a protective measure against such temptations.

### **Duty as an Emboldening Motive**

The very nature of evangelism requires such a word as duty. This is because in several respects, evangelism is different from any other Christian practice. It entails intentionally speaking to a lost person about Jesus and sin, even though at present, as far as we can tell, the person has no love for Christ or hatred for sin. And despite our modern assumptions about man, biblically speaking, unless they are being drawn by God, we are sharing Jesus with someone who doesn't want to hear about Jesus. Evangelism is sharing the good news of Christ with a lost person, and then calling that person to repent and believe the message—not exactly the most pleasant circumstance, at least from the world's perspective. What other Christian duty is like this? Evangelism is confrontational, uncomfortable, and a catalyst for awkward tension, regardless of how respectfully and gently we do it.

The uniqueness of evangelism can be seen when we compare it to worship services, another Christian duty. If the government were to tell us we can no longer maintain corporate worship of the Lord, that does not terminate our duty of corporate worship. So it is with evangelism. Even if it were illegal, we would still be obligated to do it. In both scenarios, the way we worship or the way we evangelize may be different from how we would ordinarily do things, but we would still do it, hopefully. But there is one remarkable difference about evangelism that can't be said about regular worship with the saints. I point this out in my book, *10 Modern Evangelism Myths* (RHB, 2021):

How would Christians in the West respond if it suddenly became illegal to meet together for church or study the Scriptures or attend prayer meetings? Would we do it anyway? Yes! This scenario is not exactly hypothetical. Such an attempt is likely on the horizon in the West, as demonstrated during the COVID-19 pandemic. But when it comes to evangelism, things are much different. It is possible to meet in secret when it comes to worship and Bible studies, without society knowing it. But evangelism necessarily involves the unbelieving community knowing what we believe, including the offensive parts, since it is the unbelieving persons of society we are called to evangelize.

Even when evangelism is seen as offensive, distasteful, politically incorrect or illegal, we are still called to do it. This will expose us to harassment and danger, which is why the word “duty” is so essential. It implies doing something despite the difficulty which that thing will cause. And isn’t that what makes evangelism so difficult? It necessarily brings about conflict. This is not to say we must intentionally seek conflict when evangelizing. We shouldn’t be rude or obnoxious. On the contrary, we should be respectful and aware of the contexts in which we are evangelizing. But even if the person we evangelize gets converted, there will be conflict between the new believer and his old way of life, including his relationships. And if he doesn’t get converted, there will now be conflict between himself and us, whether it is open hostility or something more subdued. When it comes to the gospel, there is no neutrality. And hence, when it comes to sharing the gospel, it will cause a response, whether unto salvation or further condemnation, and all because we opened our mouths about Jesus.

Isn’t this why we get nervous before we evangelize? Perhaps nervous is too soft of a word. This is why we get downright terrified. This is why we all have difficulty evangelizing. The flesh doesn’t want the conflict. We recoil from pushback or looking foolish. We’re afraid we won’t have answers to their possible objections. And yet, despite our flesh or the conflict of evangelism, we must do it anyways. Why? Because we are commanded to do so by our Lord. It is His method for saving souls. “Faith comes by hearing.”

Not only do we see this example of obedient evangelism in the Acts of the Apostles, but throughout the early church as well. They too likely withered at the thought of conflict, especially knowing it would likely result in their death, torment, or loss of property. But time and again, in spite of intense and present threats, we see them evangelizing. What was their secret? Yes, the Holy Spirit. Yes, prayer. Yes, a supernatural devotion to Christ. All of these things are critical. But it was also their sense of duty. Speaking of the early church’s evangelism, one historian comments, “The conflict was inevitable, the direct result of the genius of Christianity. A Christianity which had ceased to be aggressive would speedily have ceased to exist. Christ came not to send peace on earth but a sword; against the restless and resistless force of the new religion the gates of hell

should not prevail. But polytheism could not be dethroned without a struggle; nor mankind regenerated without a baptism of blood. Persecution, in fact, is the other side of aggression, the inevitable outcome of a truly missionary spirit; the two are linked together as action and reaction.”<sup>1</sup>

What was the result of such evangelism? Yes, scores of martyred Christians. Yes, many tense and awkward conversations. But also scores of new converts. The growth of the early church came mostly through ordinary Christians sharing the gospel in their everyday environments, despite the conflict it would bring: “Where, then, could believers make contact with unbelievers to win them over? Surely the answer must somehow lie where the Christians themselves direct our attention...in quiet obscure settings of every day.”<sup>2</sup> Or again, “Being excluded from the normal social gatherings, their points of contact with non-Christians lay quite inevitably at street corners or at places of employment, or in the working quarters of dwellings.”<sup>3</sup> “Evangelizing in private settings” was one of the most influential contexts for bringing about conversions to the Christian religion “en masse.”<sup>4</sup> Kenneth S. Latourette confirms that “the chief agents in the expansion of Christianity appear not to have been those who made it a profession...but men and women who carried on their livelihood in some purely secular manner and spoke of their faith to those they met in this natural fashion.”<sup>5</sup>

### **Duty as a Universal Motive**

Hence, we see that the duty to evangelize is not only for ministers, but it is for all who name the name of Christ. We also see how important every Christian is to the work of evangelism, whether they are ordained ministers or not, and how God uses His people in every walk of life to add to His church. Believers are called to profess the name of Christ to the lost. Backlash against such a message has always been the norm, but so are conversions. We must not be silent about our Lord. We may lose friends or look silly because of it. But we must not be ashamed of the gospel. This is one way to understand Christ’s promise that “everyone who acknowledges me before men I also will acknowledge before my Father who is in heaven, but whoever denies me before men, I also will deny before my Father who is in heaven” (Matt. 10:32-33). Christ is here speaking of people who deny their Lord as an attempt to protect themselves from harm. Even in a climate where we are not actively being killed for our faith, we are still persecuted through societal isolation, loss of job, friends, or even family whenever we take seriously the command to evangelize the lost. The next verse promises that Jesus did not come to bring peace to the earth, but a sword (Matt. 10:34).

To know that every Christian should be evangelizing can cause disturbance and shame for many Christians. Most of us feel inadequate when it comes sharing the gospel. But consider the



demoniac, who was told right after his conversion to go and tell all about what Jesus had done for him (Mark 5:19). He knew enough of the gospel to share it with others. His sense of duty to Christ drove him on to do it. His feelings or emotions wanted to go with Christ across the lake. His allegiance to Christ's command helped him overcome such feelings and catapulted him into what must have been an awkward and challenging mission field. These people had just demanded Christ leave their region. They had seen this man naked and crazed. They had lost property on account of his demons being exorcised. This was no easy task that Jesus put him up to. Yet there he goes, telling everyone what great things Jesus had done for him. Why? Because Christ had told him to do it. It was his duty to do it. So, he does it.

### **Duty as Pure Motive**

Evangelizing without a sense of duty can also lead to pragmatism. When we are governed more by emotions or even "success," we make the cross less offensive, our churches more worldly, and our evangelism less gospel-centered. In the West today, Christians often have the mindset that if we are going to be relevant in the culture, we must keep quiet outside our homes and churches about the gospel, or at the very least, come up with ways and methods that will allow evangelism to be inoffensive. Christians today are often so plagued by the fear of what outsiders think of us that we assume evangelism is not done properly if it creates any kind of scandal or outrage from the unbelieving world. This would be a mark of woeful ineffectiveness. Again, this is not to say we should be rude or intentionally brash or scandalous. Not at all. Rather, it is assuming that the truth is offensive in a culture that despises truth. It assumes that the perishing still thinks the cross is foolish. But in attempting to accommodate our evangelism to the culture, we have lost the appeal of being a savor of death to the dying (2 Cor. 2:16).

Christians who want to accommodate evangelism to the culture disregard the fact that this was never Christ's approach, nor was it the way of the early Christians. George Whitefield, John Wesley, David Brainerd, Jonathan Edwards and even William Carey were all considered scandalous renegades by the church their community for their refusal to compromise with current evangelism practices. They were seen as "zealots." They were seen as radicals. But they were men compelled to evangelize by a sense of duty. They were willing to be fools for Christ's sake, even when the church was embarrassed by them. Consider John Ryland's response to the criticism of William Carey by other clergymen in their day: "I am almost worn out with grief at these foolish cavils against some of the best of my brethren, men of God, who are only hated because of their zeal."<sup>6</sup> Michael A.G. Haykin notes that one of the hurdles William Carey had to overcome was "the lack of support by fellow Christians in England."<sup>7</sup>

Reproach and scoffing are the responses we should expect when it comes to biblical evangelism.

In some contexts, so are arrests, confiscation of property, or loss of life. In fact, why would we assume any other response? The world's eyes are veiled to the gospel (2 Cor. 4:3). There are none who seek God (Rom. 3:11). But a church culture that sees salvific success as the most important reason to evangelize will also claim that any approach that brings conflict or polarization must necessarily be jettisoned—especially if there is no “one” who is saved. The underlying motive behind such an approach, whether or not it is acknowledged, is a fear of man and fear of conflict. Such fear is normal, but it doesn't mean it is correct. What must drive us onward to evangelize is our duty to Christ, even when afraid of man or conflict.

It is one thing for the world to hate the Christian, especially for his bold evangelism. Christ Himself told us we should expect it. But why do Christians shy away from confrontation? The answer is easy. We are still in the flesh. We are prone to want to protect ourselves from looking dumb or losing friends, even if this means to not evangelize. The flesh is still very powerful. Therefore, duty is essential. Consider examples from the Scriptures. R. C. Sproul notes that “Jesus' life was a storm of controversy. The apostles, like the prophets before them, could hardly go a day without controversy. Paul said that he debated daily in the marketplace. To avoid controversy is to avoid Christ.”<sup>8</sup> Do we think that Paul, the prophets, or even Christ delighted in being harassed, maligned, and eventually killed for what they believed? Surely it wasn't an enjoyable situation to be in much of the time, if ever. So what drove them to keep pressing on, regardless of ill health, prison or loss of life? Duty. What must drive us on to evangelize, even when we don't feel like it? Duty. Even when it might cause outrage or social inconveniences? You got it. Duty.

### **Duty as a Transcendent Motive**

There are many biblical motives for doing evangelism: our love of Christ, our love for our neighbors, our desire to see our churches grow, our passion to see God's kingdom advance on earth. But notice these all have to do with some type of emotion: love, desire, passion, etc. Emotion is not a bad thing. God has wired us to be creatures who experience and are influenced by emotions. But emotions can be fickle and unreliable. Other times, especially when it comes to evangelism, emotions such as fear can drive out more proper emotions such as love for our neighbor. Fear is a powerful force that can utterly quench any drive to do evangelism. And in such moments, it is duty which must carry the day. We evangelize because our Master tells us to do so, regardless of our feelings about it or the pushback it may lead to. Even if we feel unequipped or inadequate—and we always are—we must evangelize because it's our duty to do so, trusting God will use our weak and fallible attempts to do great things for His name.

The power of Christianity has always been its bold, uncompromising gospel proclamation. It has proclaimed the gospel directly into the teeth of the fiercest, most ruthless societies ever

known to man. And despite the persecutions such action brings upon the church, Christians have always dug in and preached even harder. The early Christians were considered aggressive and imprudent by the surrounding culture, even while other religions were taking steps to avoid persecution. There has always been a relentless zeal for gospel proclamation among God's people. Some periods of church history demonstrate this more brightly than others, but it has been there, somewhere, even in the darkest ages. But it wasn't boldness for the sake of being bold that drove them on. It wasn't recklessness for the sake of recklessness. It was because the Master had told them to do it, regardless of how they felt or what would be the outcome. We must have the same mindset.

Evangelism is a duty we have to Christ. As society in the West becomes more and more like ancient Rome, it is important we are equipped with not only a passion for evangelism, a love for the lost, and a desire to see God's kingdom advance on earth—it is also necessary we are equipped with the time-honored weapon of remembering that evangelism is a duty, no matter the consequences, and no matter how we feel.

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## NOTES:

[1] Herbert B. Workman, *Persecution in the Early Church* (Bloomington, IL: Clearnote Press, 2014), 39.

[2] Ramsay MacMullen, *Christianizing the Roman Empire* (New Haven, CT: Yale University, 1984), 37.

[3] MacMullen, *Christianizing the Roman Empire*, 40.

[4] MacMullen, *Christianizing the Roman Empire*, 29.

[5] Kenneth S. Latourette, *A History of the Expansion of Christianity* (New York: Harper, 1944), 1:230.

[6] Cited in A. de M. Chesterman, "The Journals of Daniel Brainerd and of William Carey," *The Baptist Quarterly* 19 (1961-62): 151-52.

[7] Michael H.G. Haykin, *The Missionary Fellowship of William Carey* (Sanford, FL: Reformation Trust Publishing, 2018), 5.

[8] R. C. Sproul, *Essential Truths of the Christian Faith* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 1992), xv.

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PAUL TAYLOR

# ‘Blest Be The Ties That Bind’: The Duty of Church Membership

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Many Christians see great value in reading the Bible and learning theological truths and in individual benevolences and good works. Many of the same, however, pause when the subject of church membership is brought up. There are duties, right responses to the Gospel Jesus has given, surely, but has Christ required believers to be covenanted to a single, local gathering of believers? The Covid-19 pandemic (and more importantly the secular culture, the state, and even the churches’ responses to it) has only highlighted the relevance of this question. Does God really expect believers to be involved in a local church? With all the advances in audio-visual technology, is it really necessary? Scripture has much to say on the importance of church membership; it is one of the responsibilities that God expects His people humbly to obey. And it involves commitments beyond those given a few hours on a Sunday. In this brief survey, we will consider first, the reality of church membership as a Christian duty; and secondly, what duties church membership entails.<sup>1</sup>

## **The Necessity of Church Membership**

Church membership is a duty that comes with being chosen as a people for God’s possession and being adopted as sons by Him (1 Pet. 2:9; Gal. 4:5; Eph. 1:5). Jesus bears all authority in



heaven and on earth, and He sent out His apostles to make disciples and appoint elders in every city (Matt. 28:19-20; 1 Tim. 1:5). Those disciples are to gather themselves together to worship the Triune God, to serve one another, and to observe the commandments of Christ. The Puritan minister Thomas Boston observed, “There is a certain connection between privilege bestowed on a man, and duty required of him. If one be admitted to the privilege of any society, he must with the honour receive the burden of duty belonging to it...if we are members of a holy society whereof Christ is the head, we must be holy as he is.”<sup>2</sup>

This is consistent with Jesus’ teaching His followers to prepare themselves for His return in glory, in the parables of both the wise and foolish virgins of the bridegroom, and the slave awaiting the master’s return. In the former, per Matthew 25:1-13, since they are to participate in a great marriage feast (cf. Rev. 19:9), the virgins must prepare themselves for the bridegroom’s arrival. Those virgins who are negligent about their work are barred from entering the wedding feast (25:11-12); Jesus’ conclusion, therefore, is “Be on alert” (v. 13). This is not a suggestion but rather a warning against false hope and self-delusion that sometimes accompanies superficial expressions of faith. The same is articulated in comparing the Church to servants of the master entrusted with responsibilities. “And the slave that knew His master’s will and did not get ready or act in accord with his will [Gk. *mē poiēsas pros to thelēma autou*] will receive many lashes” (Lk. 12:47). Those who profess faith in Christ but refuse to be about His business on earth will be unfit for conducting it in the life to come.

But at this point someone might remark, “Is church membership part of this ‘preparedness’; is it a necessary responsibility for a Christian? After all, Scripture gives no direct command for Christians to join a church.” While that might be true, per se, Hebrews 10:24-25 provides a clear exhortation: “And let us consider how to stimulate one another to love and good deeds, not forsaking our own assembling together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another.” The writer assumes that the holding fast of our confession (v. 23) and the stimulation and encouraging of one another to righteousness is done within the context of assembling ourselves together regularly. Additionally, the necessity of church membership comes implicitly through the various expectations, commands, and illustrations given by the apostles in Scripture.

### **The Duty of Church Members Toward God**

Our duty as the body of Christ toward God comes from Paul’s urging of believers to present their bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable, to God (Rom. 12:1). Paul does not see this command as too great a thing to ask for; rather, he defines it as “your spiritual service of worship,” something appropriate to the reality of a believer’s being created anew according to the likeness of Christ (cf. 2 Cor. 5:17). But this new creation in Christ is not left to his own devices; he is

bonded with others who have received the same grace. Church membership follows from our being living stones, built up together as the temple of the living God. The Apostle Peter stresses this in 1 Peter 2:5: “you also, as living stones, are being built up as a spiritual house for a holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.” The Apostle Paul maintains the same idea in the letters to the Corinthian and Ephesian churches. The local church is the “temple of the living God” (2 Cor. 6:16; 1 Cor. 3:16), being grown into a dwelling place for God in the Spirit (Eph. 2:22). This dwelling place of God is a temple in which spiritual worship is to be conducted (Rom. 12:1; 1 Pet. 2:5). Influenced by these letters, the Apostolic Father, Ignatius of Antioch concurs, “[since you are stones of a temple] you are all participants together in a shared worship.”<sup>3</sup>

Man is created in the image of God, and this *imago dei* implies that man must worship the God whose glory and image he reflects. It is a truism that all men are by nature religious, ascribing worship to something, whether the one true God or a menagerie of false gods. The Apostle Paul observes this in Romans 1:21-23, that even those who do not acknowledge God nevertheless substitute [Gk. *allassō*] the glory of God with that of either man himself or created things, worshipping them in the process (v. 25). As a result, worship is not something optional; it is not a matter of whether we will worship, but of what (or Who) we will worship.<sup>4</sup>

Consequently, what Christians as a church owe to God based on His commandment (Ex. 20:8-11; Heb. 4:9-11) is the gathering of the local assembly at regular intervals to worship corporately together. Conducted within that worship are the things instructed by Christ and His apostles: observance of the ordinances (baptism and the Lord’s Supper), the proclamation of the Word of God in preaching, corporate prayer and confession of sin, and the public reading of the Word.<sup>5</sup> These means of grace are given for our sanctification and Christlike growth; many of the means, especially the ordinances, cannot properly be done apart from the gathering of a local church. In all this, Christians ought to be circumspect in their faithfulness to the doctrines God has taught in Scripture. Thus, Scripture must be our “final word” in evaluating all teaching and instruction.<sup>6</sup>

### **The Duty of Church Members to Their Pastor(s)**

In considering the duties of a church toward their pastors, the question may be asked whether there are duties unique toward pastors that do not apply to every believer. In answer, John L. Dagg observes, “The ministers of Christ [are] separate from ordinary Christians” because these men “have been called to special service in the Lord’s cause.”<sup>7</sup> This office comes with necessary spiritual gifts. Dagg writes further, “[ministerial gifts] are not given to confer a privilege merely, but they are a solemn call to duty – a call demanding the service of the whole life.”<sup>8</sup> Incumbent upon that duty of pastors is to care for their people. When the Apostle Paul instructs the

Ephesian elders, he commands, “Be on guard for yourselves and for all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood” (Acts 20:28). This instruction, when combined with that of the apostles to appoint deacons to administer the physical needs of the church, thereby freeing the elders to the Word and to prayer (Acts 6:1-7), necessarily implies a local gathering of known people to be governed and cared for.

Since pastors have this responsibility, church members therefore have responsibilities toward them in turn. Chief among these is the duty of submitting to and obeying the elders’ rule. This obedience is not primarily for the exalting of pastors (since they are their bondservants for the sake of Christ, 2 Cor. 4:5), but for the good of church members. Without such submission, it “would be unprofitable for you” (Heb. 13:17). This submission includes counseling and, in extreme cases, biblical church discipline by the elders and the church. A believer may be redeemed from a backslidden way through a Christlike love that refuses to allow him to continue in unrepentant sin with impunity.<sup>9</sup> Incidentally, church discipline – part of the duty of the church to the pastors as well as to one another – outlined in these passages is another proof of the necessity of church membership, for how can a “majority” (2 Cor. 2:6) discipline and restore a delinquent member if there is not a faithful, active body of believers “on the rolls”?

Just as profitable, for pastor and congregant alike, is the need for persistent prayer and encouragement on the pastor’s behalf. The Puritan John Owen remarks, “the great need of the pastor for prayer is not for his own good, but for the saints’ good...help the one who carries the burden, Eph. 6:18-20; Phil. 2:17; Col. 1:24.”<sup>10</sup> Owen’s observation reinforces the organic relationship between the pastors and laypeople as the body of Christ (1 Cor. 12:12 ff.).

Furthermore, pastors should be sustained in their earthly needs by the church. This is something, of course, that must be left “to voluntary contribution, and the dictates of individual liberty,”<sup>11</sup> but it remains a duty nevertheless. Financially supporting a pastor and his family is not a charitable donation<sup>12</sup> – it is what he is owed as a worker of Christ and His kingdom. Paul, appealing to the Old Testament civic law, applies its general moral character in reference to supporting elders: “You shall not muzzle the ox while he is threshing,” and “The laborer is worthy of his wages” (1 Tim. 5:18). What a poor example of submission to Christ by believers who purposely neglect the minister who pours out his life in service for our good (Phil. 2:17).

### **The Duty of Church Members toward Each Other**

Christians have a duty toward members of the same congregation. The New Testament consists primarily of letters addressed to individual churches whether in cities or in regions of the Roman

Empire, or to the church generically. These individual Christians, as established on the pattern of the first church in Jerusalem, possessed a “fellowship” (Gk. *koinōnia*) with each other just as they had with God through Christ and the Holy Spirit (cf. Acts 2:42, 1 John 1:3, and 2 Cor. 13:14). Within those epistles are numerous references to “one another,” and from these we can discern many of the responsibilities expected of believers corporately. All of the duties are summed up under Peter’s instruction<sup>13</sup> in 1 Peter 1:22-23,

“Since you *in obedience to the truth* purified your souls for a sincere love of the brethren, *fervently love one another* from the heart, for you have been born again, not of seed which is perishable but imperishable, that is through the living and enduring word of God” (emphasis added).

It is because believers are born again of God that they are to behave this way toward each other. Believers are woven together into a new people, one new man (Eph. 2:15b), and their attitudes to each other are a manifestation of that newness of life wrought in them by Christ through the Spirit; “we share our mutual woes, our mutual burdens bear.”<sup>14</sup> Love is the sum of all Christian duty (Matt 7:12; James 2:8), and from this broad category of love, we can discern in the Scriptures that believers must:

- Serve one another with humility and submit to each other (1 Pet. 4:10; 5:5; Eph. 5:21; Phil. 2:3).
- Encourage each other with the truths of the Gospel (Heb. 3:13; 1 Thess. 5:11).
- Strive to be of one mind, through teaching and admonishment, as well as forgiveness of sins (Rom. 12:16; Col. 3:16; Rom. 15:14; Eph. 4:32).
- Support widows and orphans in the church’s care (1 Tim. 5:3-16; James 1:27).
- Bear one another’s burdens (Gal. 6:2; Rom. 15:1).<sup>15</sup>

Even harsher measures, such as admonishment and church discipline, are exercised under the rubric of love and concern. John Calvin comments, “We must not indulge or overlook the sins by which our brethren are pressed down, but relieve them, – which can only be done by mild and friendly correction.”<sup>16</sup>

This list is not exhaustive, of course, for every duty given in Scripture has application to circumstances that must be considered. But the New Testament clearly emphasizes the corporate participation of individual Christians in a local church. It is through living out and applying the principles of these “one another” passages that we comfort and build one another up (1

Thess. 5:11).<sup>17</sup> Many of the duties even toward God and pastors described earlier – doctrinal fidelity, financial support, attendance – are intertwined with responsibilities toward fellow church members. If believers do not teach, encourage, correct, and rebuke one another, how shall doctrinal purity be maintained? If I do not attend church regularly,<sup>18</sup> how will I be blessed through the gifts of others, or bless them with my own gifts? If a church member does not faithfully give, how will Gospel work be supported, or the widows and orphans, or the ministers?

### **The Duties of Church Members to the World**

The last duty we will highlight is the one that believers in a church have to the world. Since the church is the light of the world (Matt. 5:16), believers must display their brightness for all men to see. The duties involved in this are comparatively simple. The foremost duty of believers as a church is to cooperate in the evangelization of the world around them. As inheritors of the commission of Christ to His Apostles (Matt. 28:19-20), we are to go and make disciples for Jesus. Therefore, churches should encourage an evangelistic and apologetic spirit and cultivate habits to the same, so that the members may always be ready to give an account or defense for the hope within them (1 Pet. 3:15).

Moreover, churches should be Christlike in their deportment, serving as good examples of their Lord. This is in keeping with the teaching of Christ that believers are salt and light, and that those characteristics should be manifested to all. Connected with this purpose of being ambassadors for Christ, Christians must live as good subjects and citizens of earthly authorities and dominions, striving to be at peace with all men. They do this, not because such earthly authorities have ultimate authority, but out of obedience to Christ as King of kings (Rom. 13:1, 14). Through these duties, God utilizes his representatives to be instruments of salvation and judgment to the world (1 Pet. 2:11; Matt. 5:16).

It is in this missional living in the world, where the Gospel is hated and those following the Christ are hated for His sake (John 15:18-19), that the imperative of church membership is clearly seen. The temptations of sin and the cares of the world pull at the heart of the Christian believer, and the remedy is the encouragement and staying hand of those brothers and sisters who strive along the same pilgrim path. Our united worship of God, our remembering the work of the Savior for us that was completed, our bearing with each other, is what “ignites our hearts” anew week by week when the burdens of the world would have otherwise “cooled our hearts to stone.”<sup>19</sup> The hope of Christian fellowship “revives our courage by the way”!

The duties of church membership, far from being extreme or unimportant, are in truth nothing less than the substance of our reasonable service to God. It is how we manifest the grace of God



wrought in us; it is how we live properly amid like-minded believers and in the world hostile to the lordship of Christ. No high-quality recording or flawlessly edited video can replace interaction with people who know our needs and even our weaknesses and can apply the means of grace to us. Rather than striving to pursue Christlikeness apart from the church, we should relish in the truth that God has united us in Christ the Savior and seek out persistently the comfort and grace of Christian fellowship. We should delight in the ties that “bind our hearts in Christian love.”

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## NOTES:

[1] Two excellent resources on the duty of church membership can be found in John Angell James’ *The Church Member’s Guide* (reprint, Solid Ground Christian Books, 2003), and Earl Blackburn’s *Jesus Loves the Church and So Should You* (Solid Ground Christian Books, 2010). Both have been immensely helpful in the process of writing this article.

[2] Thomas Boston, *Complete Works*, Vol. 3 (Richard Owen Roberts, 1980), 612-613.

[3] Ignatius, Letter to the Ephesians, 9:2 in *The Apostolic Fathers* (ed. Michael W. Holmes, Baker, 2007), 191.

[4] Consequently, the Second London Confession (chapter 22, paragraph 1) declares: “The light of nature shows that there is a God who has dominion and sovereignty over all...He is therefore to be feared, loved, praised, invoked, trusted, and served by men with all their heart and soul and strength.” *A Faith to Confess: The Baptist Confession of Faith of 1689 Rewritten in Modern English* (Carey Publications, 2010), 50.

[5] Details concerning the rationale and content of public worship can be observed in chapter 22 of the Second London Confession (“Of Religious Worship and the Sabbath Day”); a helpful discussion of the public and private means of grace can be found in Blackburn’s *Jesus Loves the Church*, 89-100.

[6] The validity of the “regulative principle of worship” is relevant to mention at this point; God alone determines what is acceptable worship offered to Him. For sound resources on worship and the regulative principle specifically, see Thomas J. Nettles, *Praise Is His Gracious Choice* (Founders Press, 2021), and Ernie Reisinger and D. Matthew Allen, *Worship: The Regulative Principle and the Biblical Principle of Accommodation*, revised ed. (Founders Press, 2022).

[7] John L. Dagg, *Manual of Theology* (reprint, Gano Books, 1982), 241.

[8] *Ibid.*, 243.

[9] Compare 1 Cor. 5:1-5, 12-13 with 2 Cor. 2:6-11.

[10] John Owen, *Duties of Christian Fellowship* (reprint, Banner of Truth, 2020), 21. This modernized version of his treatise, *Eshcol: A Cluster of the Fruit of Canaan*, can be read in its original form in the *Works of John Owen*, Vol. 13 (Banner of Truth, 1983), 51-87.

[11] James, *Church Member's Guide*, 65.

[12] *Ibid*, 66.

[13] This can also be observed in Paul and John's letters, specifically Rom. 12:10, Gal. 5:13, 1 Thess. 4:9, 2 Thess. 1:3; 1 John 3:11, 4:7, 12; 2 John 5.

[14] The Second London Confession (chapter 27, paragraph 2) observes: "Saints by profession are obligated to maintain a holy fellowship and communion in worshipping God and in performing spiritual services that promote their mutual edification...[and] aid each other in material things according to their various abilities and needs." *Confessing the Faith: The 1689 Baptist Confession for the 21st Century* (Founders Press, 2013), 54.

[15] A helpful tool for the duties of church members toward each other is found in John Flavel's *A Two-Column Table of the Sin and Duties Attaching to Church Membership*, in volume 6 of his *Works* (Banner of Truth, 1986), pgs. 586-89. Another helpful description is in James' *Church Member's Guide*, pgs 67-98.

[16] *Commentary on Galatians 6:1*, Calvin's Commentaries, Vol. 21 (Baker Books, 1981), 173.

[17] From these verses the Second London Confession states: "Since [saints] are united to one another in love, they have communion in each other's gifts and graces and are obligated to carry out these duties, both public and private, in an orderly way to promote their mutual good, both in the inner and outer aspects of their lives." *Confessing the Faith*, 53-4.

[18] This is assuming, of course, that a church member carries no physical limitations that would prevent him from regular attendance.

[19] I first heard this illustration as a young man from Dr. Cary Kimbrell, currently Pastor of Bethlehem Baptist Church in Laurel, Mississippi, at a Regional Founders Conference in Shreveport, Louisiana in the early 2000s, and from it I have always been impressed with the necessity of church membership and attendance for soul prosperity.

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Paul M. Taylor is a member and Pastoral Intern at Grace Baptist Church in Cape Coral, FL. He earned a Bachelor of Arts in English Literature from Lamar University in Beaumont, Texas, and a Master of Divinity from The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. Paul is currently a Th.M. student at SBTS. He and his wife Michaela have been married since December 2022.



JONATHAN EDWARDS

# A Dissertation Concerning the Nature of True Virtue

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Summarized by Tom J. Nettles

In his opening section Edwards demonstrates that true virtue consists most essentially in benevolence to being in general. Though this could include all things that have existence, Edwards is concerned mainly with rational being. Virtue concerns the “beauty of the qualities and exercises of the heart, or those actions which proceed from them.” Simple virtue does not ask for gratification from the object seen but arises from within as an absolute will for good toward all other beings, being in general.

The second object of a “virtuous propensity of heart” is benevolent being, that is, another being which shares the same benevolence toward being in general. Such an object as has benevolence toward being in general is pleasing for one knows that benevolence toward being in general is multiplied by another being that manifests that virtue. This necessarily arises from pure benevolence to being in general and is the primary constituent of true moral or spiritual beauty. Those flowings of benevolence toward benevolent being imply a multiplication of consent and union with being in general.

This spiritual beauty is the primary ground, the objective foundation, of complacency, love to a being for its pleasing impact on oneself, that is, when the pleasure is first grounded in benevolence. Such a benevolent being is amiable and pleasing in and of itself and is attractive to

another benevolent being. The degree of amiableness is compounded by quantity of being and benevolence. None can relish this beauty that does not have that temper himself.

The second section demonstrates that true virtue consists, therefore, of love to God with all one's being. If virtue is benevolence toward being in general, and finds expansion in benevolence toward benevolent being, and then finds complacency as necessarily manifest toward a benevolent being, then God—the triune God is infinitely the appropriate object of both benevolence and complacency. Our benevolence cannot add to his happiness, but we can rejoice in his immutable and infinite happiness. We may promote his glory. If God—infinite, eternal and unchangeable—is to be considered at all in one's understanding of virtue, then he must be the chief consideration.

Benevolence directed primarily toward any other being is nothing short of self-love, for, in spite of all appearances to the contrary in some expansive manifestations of benevolence, it establishes a private sphere as its ultimate good. It contradicts, therefore, true benevolence and is itself an opposition to true virtue. God has the most of being and manifests the greatest of benevolence toward being in general. In fact, he alone as self-existent has all being in himself either as his proper personal existence or as a manifestation of his volitional power in creation and sustenance.

God's virtue consists primarily of Love to Himself, because mutual love and friendship subsists eternally and necessarily between the several persons in the Godhead. All other beings are loved in a way subordinate to and derived from love to himself. Because God is the absolute epitome of virtue, and that virtue consists of love to himself in his infinite perfections, even so, virtuous love of one created thing to another consists in seeking the proper end of everything, that is, the manifestation of the glory of God. Any ethical system, or philosophy of virtue, that does not submit to the glory of God as its chief end is a defective system.

In his third section, Edwards discussed secondary and inferior kinds of beauty. This absolute reality of true virtue underlies all that is truly pleasing within the created order in material things, relationships, and attempts at spirituality. All of these secondary beauties, apart from true virtue, are erroneously confounded with real virtue. This secondary beauty consists in a mutual consent and agreement of different things, in form, manner, quantity, and visible end or design. Material things that possess symmetry, proportion, harmony, regularity, uniformity are pleasing both to eyes and minds. Relationships and attitudes that reflect these qualities, at least as we perceive them, appear beautiful as an analogy of "benevolent agreement of heart." The beauty of true virtue is "cordial," but the appeal of secondary beauty is "natural."

Secondary beauty appeals to men as a law of nature, as an instinct, not that wherein the beauty fundamentally lies. Music can be appealing simply as a reflex of the human mind; one does not

necessarily grasp the physics of music in its proportion of sound waves, the physical reasons behind dissonance and harmony and why resolution can be satisfying and failure of resolution agitating. This secondary beauty is enjoyed more in greater and more important things than in lesser and trivial things, particularly when one sees “some relation or connexion of the things thus agreeing one with another.” Thus, immaterial things such as social order, wisdom, and justice are approved of and largely sought to maximize personal benefit in the larger picture. This approval of such secondary beauty, considered simply and by itself, has nothing of the nature of true virtue.

Self-love, therefore, can give rise to things that mimic true virtue. It can generate love to others or lead one to despise others. Self-love may be seen as a person’s “love of his own happiness.” Without investigating why some things become his happiness, love to oneself involves promotion of his private interest. A person loves to be loved and hates to be hated. Sometimes the disapproval of men is hated more than death itself. What would we feel if “universally hated and despised.” Thus we may find self-love as a kind of respect toward and gratitude to those who comply with the inclinations of our self-love. Both anger at evil and gratitude for good can manifest a species of self-love. Love for near relations concerns their esteem of us and our vested interest in them. Those we love or judge from afar can arise from approval or disapproval of their characters to which our self-love inclines us. Benevolence may be approved from self-love and malevolence disliked. Virtues and vices may find approval or disapproval from self-love. Self-love may generate very wide spheres of benevolence that still are private spheres for they fall short of benevolence to being in general and consequent complacency in the glory and character of God.

Manifestations of conscience and a moral sense, apart from true virtue, still may function out of a variety of manifestations of self-love. Edwards notes, “A disposition in man to be uneasy in a consciousness or being inconsistent with himself, and as it were against himself in his own actions” may cause an uneasy conscience. Conscience may approve or disapprove of actions based on how we would feel if such and such things were done to us. To dislike, or like, a thing because it is either a contradiction or a union with ourselves is quite another thing than to like or dislike because we are “united with being in general.” Appearance of virtue in expanded private spheres can develop quite apart from primary beauty of true virtue and the consequent odiousness of sin. Such social and personal virtue may express a strictly natural principle instead of a divine principle.

The functioning of natural conscience provides a strong example in two areas of apparent virtue that is not of the nature of true virtue. One, the approval or disapproval of moral action prompted by uneasiness with ourselves when we see that we expect less selfishness of others than we expect of ourselves. Edwards call this that “disposition to approve or disapprove the moral treatment which passes between us and others, from a determination of the mind to be easy or uneasy, in

a consciousness of our being consistent or inconsistent with ourselves.” As Paul says in effect in Romans 2:1, “The thing wherein we condemn another, we condemn ourselves” A second function of natural conscience that can mimic true virtue is the approval of true virtue in others. Seeing the character generated by “benevolence toward being in general” and God in particular might win our approval even when we do not “taste its primary and essential beauty.” God’s righteous judgment that stops every mouth (Romans 2:5; 3:19), however, will not be relativized in such a way but will accept only that which is true virtue and thus absolute righteousness.

There are some implanted instincts of nature that resemble true virtue. Natural affection (e.g self-sacrificial love for one’s children) and pity, a sense of identification and care for those suffering. The reason why these things have been mistaken for true virtue is that the driving instinct belongs to the general nature of virtue. They are sentiments that reach out toward others and do not blatantly and offensively betray self-love. Sometimes these instincts resemble virtue in both the primary ground (benevolence) and the secondary ground (approbation of and complacency in virtue itself). They display a negative moral goodness, that is these are never mistaken for true moral evil. Protection of family is morally superior to betrayal of family and giving aid to the hurting and downcast is morally superior to trouncing on the poverty-stricken. Also, these instincts in action have much the same effect in human relations as true virtue in accomplishing social good and restraining vice. These affections are of the same denomination as those that are truly virtuous.

Edwards discusses two views of why mock virtue that is in reality self-love looks like true virtue in the intention of its perpetrator. The first is “sentiment,” an internal sense of the beautiful that is intuitively approved. These operate as a denomination of virtue because they are indeed real, a reflection of the image of God in man, and not mere labels contrived by social observers. First, God gives what is agreement with being in general. We find something in humanity as a whole and in the entire created order that calls for our admiration and care. Second, God gives what is in accord with his own temper and nature. As image-bearers we are “gods” over those things within our sphere of influence. Third, only in this way can creatures agree with each other. Only if there is a sense of virtue in us that has its origin in an absolute sphere outside of us can we find common values in accord with which we cooperate. Fourth, only in this way can people love their own happiness and use it as a source for apparent good for others.

The second reason is that virtue not only is implanted in the sentiment of each individual, but that is of the nature and fitness of things—the spiritual and ethical world is a reality and operates more or less efficiently and appropriately when actions match the ethical parameters around which the world was created. Thus, when our moral sense and actions agree with the nature of things, when the exercise of virtue is consistent with the uniformity and natural agreement

of things, thus helping establish order, justice, compassion, and productivity in a community, we recognize that the sense of morality, good, evil, right, wrong are not altogether unfixed and arbitrary. God has made the world to operate with greatest good for all people when it copies true virtue.

With this understanding of the nature of true virtue, we see that duty assumes perfection of holiness, beauty, virtue, harmony, proportion, symmetry, order, and justice. Love is the first duty arising from this infinitely compelling perfection. This is why it is harmonious both with rationality and with divine revelation that love can be embraced within a commandment: “You shall love the Lord your God, ..and your neighbor as yourself.” The highest of virtues and the foundation of all true virtue begins with a divinely mandated duty.

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## **ABOUT THE AUTHOR:**

Jonathan Edwards (October 5, 1703 – March 22, 1758) was an American revivalist preacher, philosopher, and Congregationalist theologian. Edwards is widely regarded as one of America’s most important and original philosophical theologians. Edwards’ theological work is broad in scope but rooted in the paedobaptist (baptism of infants) Puritan heritage as exemplified in the Westminster and Savoy Confessions of Faith. Recent studies have emphasized how thoroughly Edwards grounded his life’s work on conceptions of beauty, harmony, and ethical fittingness, and how central the Age of Enlightenment was to his mindset. Edwards played a critical role in shaping the First Great Awakening and oversaw some of the first revivals in 1733–35 at his church in Northampton, Massachusetts. His theological work gave rise to a distinct school of theology known as New England theology.

Edwards delivered the sermon “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God”, a classic of early American literature, during another revival in 1741, following George Whitefield’s tour of the Thirteen Colonies. Edwards is well known for his many books, such as *The End for Which God Created the World* and *The Life of David Brainerd*, which inspired thousands of missionaries throughout the 19th century, and *Religious Affections* which many Calvinist Evangelicals still read today.