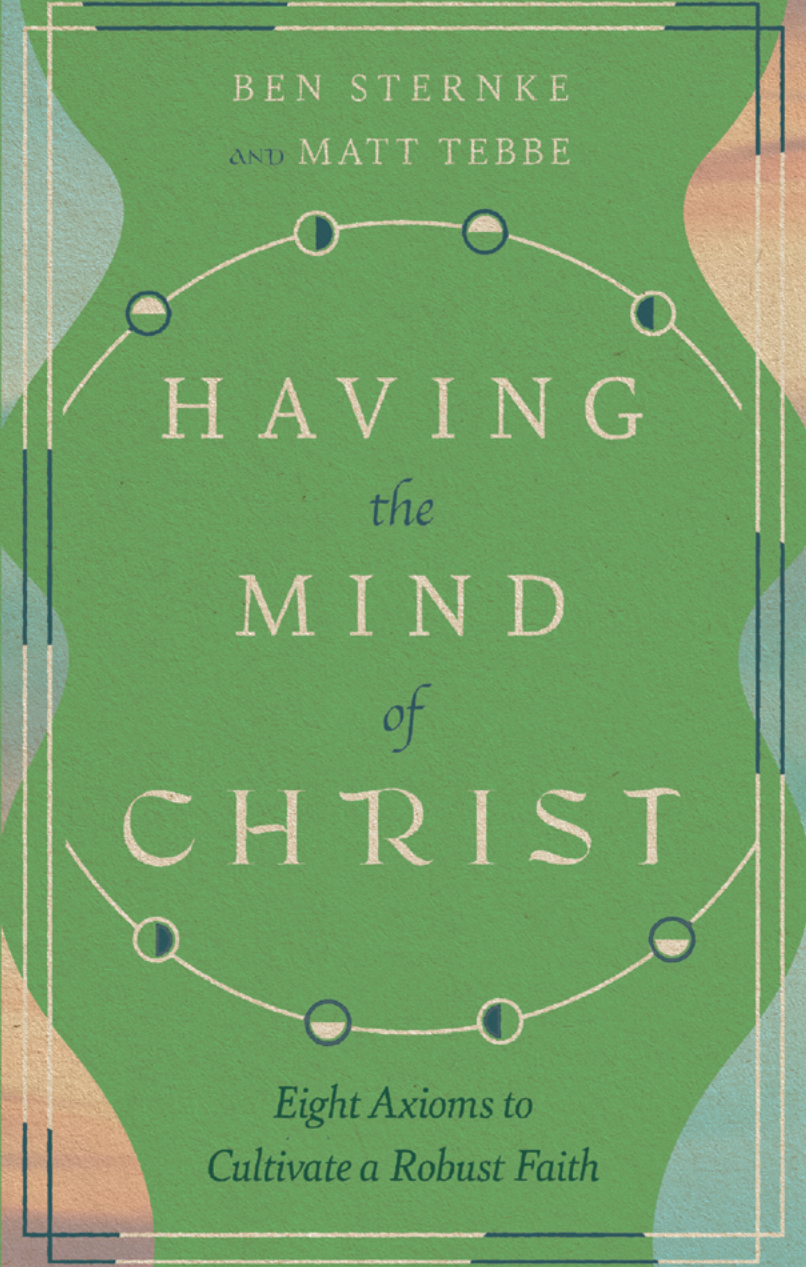


BEN STERNKE  
AND MATT TEBBE



HAVING  
*the*  
MIND  
*of*  
CHRIST

*Eight Axioms to  
Cultivate a Robust Faith*



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*Axiom 1*

GOD IS LOVE, SO IT'S  
ALL ABOUT LOVE

*If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. If I give away all my possessions, and if I hand over my body so that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing.*

1 CORINTHIANS 13:1-3

*I believe that unarmed truth and unconditional love will have the final word in reality. This is why right, temporarily defeated, is stronger than evil triumphant.*

DR. MARTIN LUTHER KING JR.

I (MATT) LIVED THE FIRST FIFTEEN YEARS of my Christian life without taking love seriously. I mean, of course I thought love was great, as far as it goes, but when it came down to it I was much more interested in angelic tongues and gifts of prophesy and understanding mysteries and powerful displays of faith and pious sacrifices of valor than I was in love. Knowledge and power are impressive, get things done, make people money, and gather a crowd; entire economies run on the allure and accumulation of knowledge and power. Paul writes his first letter to the Corinthian church in response to

conflict and division caused by prioritizing knowledge and power at the expense of love. It seems like this has always been a temptation for Christians: to privilege knowledge and power at the expense of love.

Ben and I once confronted a prominent ministry leader about the lack of love in his organization. He had created a tool to analyze spiritual maturity in a person's life, which was measured by one's "wisdom" and "power." In a discussion about this tool I asked, "If Paul says that all wisdom and all power without love are worthless (1 Corinthians 13), how does love factor into this tool that only measures wisdom and power?" His response was to assert that love is "assumed" in both wisdom and power. We had worked with this organization for a few years by this time; it imploded shortly after this conversation. We experienced the painful cost of an organizational culture that didn't prioritize love as a nonnegotiable core value: people paid for it in hurt and trauma. A culture built on knowledge and power that takes love for granted—just assuming love exists in the pursuit of knowledge and power—will become impatient and caustic, a breeding ground of competition for acclaim and authority. It will keep a record of achievements so as to accrue honor and position. It will reward loyalty and competency, using relationships for their utility, and eliminate weak or unimportant people. It took experiencing the dire relational, emotional, and spiritual harm caused by noisy gongs and clanging cymbals for us to get clear on what's at stake if love is absent in the Christian life:

Without love, knowledge and power use and hurt people.

Without love, knowledge and power are weaponized to divide and conquer.

Without love, knowledge and power are unhinged from the cross of Christ.

It's time to reclaim love as the necessary, nonnegotiable foundation of our Christian faith.

## **KNOWN BY LOVE?**

This experience crystalized for us what the Scriptures state over and over: it's all about love. During the last meal with his disciples, Jesus gives a final command that sums up his teaching. After washing their feet, embodying how they are to live out this command with one another, Jesus says, "I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another" (John 13:34-35). Jesus demonstrates what love looks like, taking the place of the lowest servant, washing their feet—a sacrifice in preparation for his sacrifice on the cross—commands them to live in this love with one another, and tells them that their love will be a sign to everyone that they are disciples of Jesus.

The rest of the New Testament bears witness to the centrality of love for those who follow Jesus:

- Love is the principle on which all the law and prophets hang (Matthew 22:34-40).
- Love summarizes the entire law (Galatians 5:14).
- Love fulfills the entire law (Romans 13:8-10).
- Love is the goal of all instruction and training (1 Timothy 1:5).
- Love is how faith works itself out, and the only thing that counts (Galatians 5:6).
- Love is the way we know we've passed from death to life (1 John 3:14).
- Love is the way we are filled with all the fullness of God (Ephesians 3:19).
- Love is who God is (!), and our love is evidence we are becoming more like God (1 John 4:8).
- And again, love is the way that everyone will know we are disciples of Jesus (John 13:35).

The essential quality by which a follower of Jesus is known is love. Scriptures are clear about this and our experience testifies to why this matters: without love, nothing else really matters.

However, evidence suggests that most Christians today are not known by love. When people outside the church are asked what Christians are “all about,” love is not at the top of the list. According to a 2019 study by Barna Research Group, almost half of the non-Christians interviewed had a “somewhat negative” or “very negative” opinion of evangelical Christians. Only 9 percent had a positive opinion, and fewer than 10 percent associated words like “caring,” “hopeful,” “friendly,” “encouraging,” “generous,” and “good-humored” with evangelicals. The words most often associated with evangelicals by non-Christians were “religiously conservative,” “politically conservative,” “narrow-minded,” “homophobic,” “misogynistic,” “puritanical,” “uptight,” and “racist.”<sup>1</sup> When non-Christians were asked the reason for their negative perceptions of Christians, 67 percent said, “They are too pushy with their beliefs,” and 61 percent said, “They are hypocritical.”<sup>2</sup> The study concludes with this: “Should evangelicals care about their reputation among non-Christians? The preponderance of evidence from Barna Group’s work suggests that most Christians think they should, and that younger Christians are even more concerned about this gap in perception.”<sup>3</sup>

## CONFUSED ABOUT LOVE

Here’s where we are at today: Christians are known for a lot of things, but love doesn’t even make the top ten. The attribute Jesus said would be the defining mark of his disciples is not recognizable to a large segment of the population. How did we get here, so far off the mark that Jesus set for the church? One of the issues is that we’ve relegated love to the realm of the sentimental or romantic. Love is important for intimate relationships, dating, romance, and marriage, but for every other aspect of our lives, love isn’t given much consideration. We tend to think of love as a warm feeling of coziness, which is nice to have but doesn’t really do anything important when it comes down to it. We don’t think

of love as powerful. We don't trust love to get the job done. The quiet, pervasive assumption is that you're going to need more than love to accomplish good things in the world, or grow in your faith, or lead others well.

You can hear this downgrading of love in the way that some people talk about the need to balance love and truth. *We can't just be loving*, this way of thinking goes, *we also must be truthful*. We need love, yes, but we also need something else, something that will do some work that love can't do. This reveals another problem we have with love: not only do we not trust it to get the job done, we also don't even really know what it is! What kind of "love" do we imagine that wouldn't tell the truth? Even those outside the mainstream Christian tradition who write about love acknowledge that love must include telling the truth.<sup>4</sup> To claim that we must balance love with truth reveals that our vision of love is anemic; we think of love as a kind of niceness that's willing to deceive others to placate them and make them feel better. A "love" that must be balanced with truth is a love that can't tell the truth. Do we really think this is what Jesus commanded us to do? The fact that phrases like "balancing love and truth" usually sound wise to us and go unchallenged indicates how far we've strayed from the New Testament's love-saturated vision for the Christian life.

*To claim that we must balance love with truth reveals that our vision of love is anemic.*

## THE MOST POWERFUL FORCE IN THE UNIVERSE

In contrast to this paltry view of love that we carry around, the love of God revealed in Jesus is the most significant, fundamental power in the universe. Love is central to the way the New Testament envisions what it means to live as a disciple of Jesus. Jesus shows us what God's love looks like and empowers us to love one another as he loved us. If we are going to be known by our love as disciples of Jesus, we must recover a robust, tangible, Jesus-shaped vision of love, and take love seriously

as the goal and grounding of our faith. We must learn to believe that if we don't have love, we don't have anything. If we're not growing in love—even if we are growing in our knowledge of God and moral behavior—we're not gaining anything. The invitation here is to learn that love never fails, that love is the competency that counts, that our life of discipleship to Jesus is rooted in love, and that all of this flows from the God who *is* love. So the first axiom is this: *God is love, so it's all about love.*

### **THE TEMPTATION OF RELIGIOUS PEOPLE: MORALISM AND CERTITUDE**

As a young man, I (Matt) found a great deal of satisfaction in reading and thinking about Christian doctrine. I plumbed the depths of Christian thought, devouring the words of theologians and pastors who thought deeply about the ins and outs of Christian theology. In addition to this, the early years of my walk with Jesus involved a slow, steady conviction of how ungodly and unholy my behavior was. I was in college and had twenty years of living mostly like a pagan to reckon with! Impure thoughts, crude jokes, rivalries, selfishness, slander, malice, hypocrisy, greed—you name it, and I was probably pretty good at it. Conviction of specific sins came fast for me; I developed a moral conscience in community with other Christians, and the behaviors I once considered permissible began to offend me. This was a natural and good part of my growth in Christ; the Spirit was at work in my life, teaching me the difference between right and wrong.

Correct thinking and correct behavior were (and still are) vital for my maturity in Christ. But by the time I went to seminary I noticed an emerging pattern in my life: I used my knowledge about God to divide, separate, and justify myself over and against other people. I cared more about being *right* with others than I did about being *righteous* with them, meaning that I cared more about being correct in my thinking and behavior in front of others than I did about being connected in



loving relationship with God and others. I used my (ostensibly) correct thinking to separate myself from others and think of myself more highly than I ought. I graded my spirituality by how successfully I abstained from certain sins or how often I engaged in acts of devotion and godliness.

These realizations hit me hard during my third year of seminary, and I found myself spiritually dry, emotionally numb, and increasingly apathetic about my walk

with Christ. A few key friends helped me see that my problem wasn't seminary itself or any of the other things I tried to blame for my spiritual lethargy. My problem was one that I now know is exceedingly common among "serious religious folks" like me: I had exchanged a vibrant, loving connectedness with God for an overly cerebral certitude and a rigidly uptight moralism. Correct doctrine and conscientious deeds had replaced love as the center of my faith.

This is a common pitfall: when we want to get serious about our faith and become more intentional disciples of Jesus, oftentimes our implicit goals are *increasing knowledge* and *modifying behavior*. We assume that we'll grow by learning more theology, becoming more certain in our beliefs, and growing in our ability to "defend the faith." Or we assume that if we can just change our behavior in some way, if we can find a solution to that besetting sin, if we can just conquer this one area of our lives where we keep getting tripped up, then we'll have "arrived" as disciples of Jesus, truly living out our faith.

There's nothing wrong with knowing more and sinning less, but ultimately these are sub-Christian goals for the Christian life. Falling into the trap of moralism and certitude in our pursuit of God is not new. In fact, it's ancient. In every chapter of the Gospels we see Jesus engage and challenge people who had succumbed to this dynamic. Much of

*I cared more about being correct in my thinking and behavior in front of others than I did about being connected in loving relationship with God and others.*

the work Jesus did with serious religious people like me was confronting moralism, certitude, or both. For example:

- “You search the scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that testify on my behalf. Yet you refuse to come to me to have life” (John 5:39-40).
- Religious people completely rejected Jesus because he didn’t square with their interpretation of doctrine (see, for instance, John 7:45-52).
- The certainty with which the religious leaders insisted they could see truth clearly, all the while (ironically) rejecting God’s truth in Christ so they could justify themselves (John 9:35-41).
- The repeated focus on external behavior, morality per se, and having a good reputation as the center of faithfulness, such as the rich young ruler (Matthew 19:16-22), the legal expert (Luke 10:25-37), the elder brother in the prodigal son parable (Luke 15:1-2, 11-32), and the Pharisee and tax collector (Luke 18:9-14).

At the end of the day, my certitude and moralism left me no closer to love, but they did prime me to receive it. Jesus came to reveal God to people like me and call me into the true goal of faith: love for God, others, and all creation, rooted in the God who is love.

## WHAT IS LOVE? LOVE IS COMMUNION

The New Testament affirms, over and over, that our life in Christ is all about love, and love is all about being relationally and organically connected to God and others in mutual self-giving and holistic flourishing. Love isn’t merely nice actions we do for God and each other, nor is it merely warm feelings we feel toward God and each other. Love is deep communion with God and each other. The love Jesus commands us to have for each other is the same love that the Father has for the Son, which is the love that we “abide” in as Jesus abides in us (John 15:1-17). This love is more than just something we see in Jesus and try to imitate in our own strength; it’s a deep sharing in the life of the God whose name is Love (1 John 3:18). In other words, love is communion, which

is the sharing of presence and fullness of life, the commingling of souls. Much like a plant thrives physically through its participation in the life of the soil and the energy of the sun, we thrive spiritually through our participation in the very life of God, shared with us through the incarnation of the Son and the pouring out of the Spirit. This is what it means to become “participants of the divine nature” (2 Peter 1:4), and it’s what the Eastern Church calls *theosis*: union with God brought about by the cooperation of human activity and God’s uncreated energies.<sup>5</sup>

This communion-in-love is what the apostle Paul is getting at in the middle of his letter to the Ephesian church, where he prays that they would be “rooted and grounded in love,” Christ dwelling in their hearts through faith. Paul prays that they would have power to “know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God” (Ephesians 3:16-19). Notice that Paul assumes that the church will grow in their life in Christ by being organically connected to the love of Christ. According to Paul, the goal of the Christian life isn’t a transaction whereby, apart from God’s presence, I secure a pardon for my wrongdoing. No, the goal is to be filled with all the fullness of God, to become one with God (and each other) in Christ, to be in communion-in-love with God and one another. This, of course, includes pardon for sin, but it’s much bigger than that. Love isn’t transactional but is God’s very life given to us as medicine for our sickness, healing for our brokenness, communion for our isolation and separateness, and forgiveness for our sin. To say it’s all about love, then, is to say that what we are learning to do as disciples of Jesus is to derive “the life of our life” from the very life of God, and then allowing this life to expand outward, cultivating loving communion with all creation.

The term “beloved community,” often employed by Martin Luther King Jr., offers a practical vision of what communion-in-love looks like in human relationships. For King, “the beloved community was a wholistic vision that included humanity’s relationship with God, the created order, and one another. It was a collectivist vision that emphasized individual well-being and self-actualization as well as harmonious

and just social relationships.”<sup>6</sup> This vision necessarily includes social and racial justice and reconciliation, because, as Cornel West has famously said, “Justice is what love looks like in public.” To cultivate communion-in-love in our relationships, we must reckon with the way that power has distorted our relationships and defaced the image of God, creating marginalized and oppressed people, a topic we will discuss in more detail in Axiom 7.

### WHY NAMING LOVE AS THE GOAL IS SO IMPORTANT

We’ve found it important to name this as an axiom because, especially in discussions of the Christian life, it’s very easy to focus on secondary pursuits, and when we do this, the true goal of our Christian life (learning to live in loving communion with God and all things) gets eclipsed and forgotten. Many of us have engaged in programs of discipleship that were all about “working on my sin” to please God, employing intense “accountability groups” where unwanted behaviors were routinely confessed together. Others were part of groups that sought to articulate and teach a kind of “watertight” theology, getting every question sorted out, all the theological i’s dotted and t’s crossed, every debate settled with no remainder. Still others of us, in our desire to modify behavior and “do the right things,” have pursued some form of activism, like evangelism training, mission work, operating in spiritual gifts, or protesting injustice. While love is indeed embodied, social, and missional, and does indeed protest injustice, we’ll cover these themes more fully under Axioms 7 and 8. For now we’re re-centering these forms of activism as an embodiment of communion-in-love. “Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me” (Matthew 25:40).

As we said above, there is nothing inherently wrong with these kinds of activities and pursuits (often there is a lot right with them!), but none of them are the ultimate goal of our life in Christ. These secondary goals are easy to focus on because they’re more observable and measurable than love, which can feel a bit more nebulous. “Did I do that sin this

week?” or “Did I share my faith?” or “Can I teach on the hypostatic union?” are much easier questions to answer than “Am I living in loving communion with God and others?” It’s much easier to count Scripture verses memorized and cans collected for the soup kitchen than to count “communion-in-love with God and others,” which is why so many of our discipleship efforts end up focused on the secondary pursuits.

In saying that the goal of the Christian life is not correct cognition and conduct, we aren’t saying that those things are wrong or bad, rather, we are saying that they are insufficient in and of themselves to lead us into life in God. Our faith must include behaviors and beliefs, of course, but they can never become the goal. They are penultimate pursuits, and (ironically) can become idolatrous obstacles to love if they aren’t situated within communion-in-love with the triune God and others. It’s a bit like a church that focuses on numerical growth as an ultimate goal because it’s easy to measure. Sometimes numerical church growth can be a good thing, because (hopefully) it means that more people are discovering new life in Christ. But when churches simply assume that new life in Christ will automatically track with church attendance, the true goal (new life in Christ) becomes quickly obscured by the easy-to-measure metric of church attendance. Churches will then pursue tactics that increase church attendance but do very little to help people into living a new life in Christ, and tragically they don’t even notice this, because all they’re measuring is church attendance. Even worse, sometimes the church growth tactics can actually hinder the true goal of people encountering new life in Christ because these churches function by a logic contrary to communion-in-love.

Whatever we position at the center of our faith determines the shape our Christian life takes. We contend that our faith is centered on a person (the God revealed in Jesus Christ by the Holy Spirit), and the relationships of love, with God and each other, this God enables through the incarnation of Christ and the sending of the Holy Spirit. Beliefs and behaviors, knowledge and morality, cognition and conduct are not at the center of our faith but are rather oriented around and

contextualized within the true center: a covenantal relationship of loving communion with the triune God.

### COMMUNION-IN-LOVE IS WHAT IT'S ALL ABOUT

Rediscovering communion-in-love as the true center and goal of faith saved me (Matt) from a cynical, caustic Christian existence. After I realized I had centered on the wrong things, with the help of some good friends, I plunged again into the Scriptures and started reading voices outside my cultural and theological heritage who had caught what I had missed: God's desire is to share God's very life with us, to make us partakers of the divine life (2 Peter 1:3-4), to become one with us as we become one with each other (John 17), to share God's life so fully and completely with us so as to unite humans and God together permanently (Ephesians 2).

This oneness we experience in Jesus Christ mirrors the created reality that exists all around us. The apostle Paul seems to have a deep appreciation for how all of us already exist on some level in Christ (Colossians 1:17). God's created design is that we would "live and move and have our being" in God (Acts 17:28). The Scriptures testify that God creates and sustains all people—really—in Christ (Ephesians 2:15). Sin, then, is our resistance to this created oneness. Sin is opposition to God's desire, and it's what keeps us from experiencing (or realizing) communion-in-love with God and others. Communion-in-love is not

*Communion-in-love is not something we achieve, as if it doesn't exist until we work at it. Rather, we consent to communion-in-love; we wake up to the reality of communion-in-love.*

something we achieve, as if it doesn't exist until we work at it. Rather, we consent to communion-in-love; we wake up to the reality of communion-in-love. "Union with God," Martin Laird says, "is not something that needs to be acquired but realized."<sup>7</sup>

These are deep mysteries, difficult to articulate. Those who have sought to write about our union

with God, both ancient and modern, often admit to grasping for words to describe the realities they seek to illuminate. It's more than a mere feeling, and it's nothing we can manufacture, achieve, or control.

Communion-in-love with God and each other is a foundational reality, true whether we know it or not; and the journey of a disciple of Jesus can be described as slowly waking up to this reality and learning to trust it. Communion-in-love with God and others means that we are more than what we produce or how much we earn. It leads us to rebel against the forces of commodification that seek to turn everything and everyone into an object for purchase and consumption. Ever more steadily, we learn to consent to the reality that we are created for loving communion with God, our sin interferes with that, and Jesus comes to redeem and restore what God intended from the beginning.

Even more, the incarnation of Jesus is the fulfillment of God's desire for communion-in-love: God becomes human so we can partake in the divine nature. Jesus, being fully God and fully human, and dwelling now and forever as a human in God's presence, is the embodied fulfillment of the union between God and humanity. The goal of communion-in-love has already been achieved in the flesh of Jesus, and our growth as disciples is learning to realize and consent to it. This is why Jesus prays that we would know the union that he shares with God in his longest prayer (John 17), and it is Paul's constant prayer for the churches he oversees (Ephesians 1:15-23; 3:14-21; Colossians 1:9-14).

This communion-in-love is not merely individual reality ("just me and God"). It's also a communal reality, one that we share with others in Christ. In fact, our loving communion with God (if it truly is communion with the God that Jesus reveals) draws us into, and is most fully realized in, loving communion with others. In the West, we have difficulty thinking in these categories. Many of us were raised to think of identity and personhood through an individualist lens. We think of ourselves as self-contained, standalone entities who sometimes choose to relate to other self-contained, standalone entities in relationships of exchange, if it suits us. But the Scriptures understand identity and

personhood primarily through a communal lens, which, while valuing the unique personhood of each individual, ultimately transcends the individual (see Ephesians 2:11-22; 3:14–4:16; Philippians 2:1-11). We are truly connected to each other in deep ways that we are mostly unaware of. This brings a new level of meaning to the “body of Christ” metaphor Paul uses to describe the church; we are, in the depths of reality, more than “me” and “my.” Our primary identity is now one who exists in communion-in-love, by communion-in-love, for communion-in-love, with God and others. “Communion with God and communion with others are realizations of the same Center,” Martin Laird affirms, “and this Center, according to the ancient definition, is everywhere.”<sup>8</sup>

### SALVATION AS COMMUNION

This first axiom also fundamentally changes the way we think about salvation. Many of us inherited a view of salvation that describes it essentially as a transaction between us and God. In this view of salvation, sin is primarily seen as “bad actions” whereby we accrue offense to God and guilt for wrongdoing, and to rectify the situation a penalty must be paid for this offense and wrongdoing (death and separation from God). So Jesus pays the penalty for us, we are forgiven for our guilt, and we get in to heaven when we die. While this is admittedly a caricature, it is the popular story of salvation that many people assume. In this view, salvation is essentially transactional, an exchange of goods between parties.

But in a transactional relationship, there is no need for people to interact with each other in any way after the transaction is over. In a transactional view of salvation, God is only needed to secure the transaction (forgiveness of sins, which usually means escaping punishment), after which we can simply enjoy the benefits of the transaction (a ticket to heaven) without any further need to interact with God at all.

However, remember that sin is not merely offending God by breaking God’s rules. Sin is our estrangement from God. The disruption of communion that sin brings about is not a penalty imposed by God, but rather



inherent to the nature of sin itself. When we turn away from God's presence, we disrupt our communion with God, and this is its own punishment. Our problem is inherently relational; we have disconnected ourselves from Life itself! God's solution to our sin cannot be a transaction whereby God gives us some *thing*. Salvation must be the restoration of communion-in-love, the joining of God and humans together in love.<sup>9</sup> If sin is idolatry that leads to isolation from ourselves, creation, each other, and God, then salvation is the undoing of our estrangement and aloneness. (We'll say more about this in the next chapter.)

Salvation is the glorious restoration of the original purpose of the world: God's people living in loving communion with God, each other, and all creation. Communion-in-love with God and each other *is* salvation. We are (re)united to ourselves, creation, God, and one another. Forgiveness of sins isn't merely a "get out of jail free" card to deal with our guilt problem, it is a liberation and healing that enables communion with God. We are set free from bondage to death, decay, and destruction, to be connected in loving communion with God and each other. Every epistle in the New Testament was written to address breakdowns in communion-in-love, calling believers back to living out their salvation by realizing and consenting to this union with each other and God.

The rest of the New Testament repeatedly tells us that loving communion with God and each other is the goal and center of a genuine Christian spirituality. It is described in many ways:

- Partaking of God (Hebrews 3:14; 6:4; 2 Peter 1:4)
- Being in Christ (1 Corinthians 1:30; 2 Corinthians 5:17; 1 John 2:5)
- Christ indwelling us (2 Corinthians 13:5; Galatians 2:20; Colossians 1:24, 27; Ephesians 3:16)
- New creation (2 Corinthians 5:17; Galatians 6:15)
- Life *is* Christ (Philippians 1:21; Colossians 3:1; 4; 1 John 5:12)
- Oneness with God *is* oneness with the church (Ephesians 4:1-6, 15-16; John 17; Acts 9:4; 22:7; Galatians 3:27-29)

- Eternal life (John 20:30-31; 1 John 5:13)
- Vine and branches (John 15:1-18)
- God living in us by the Spirit (Romans 8:9)

Australian theologian Ben Myers notes:

That phrase “in Christ” just keeps tolling like a bell through all the Pauline letters. It’s not that Christ was an instrument that God used to fix things up. Rather, for St. Paul, Christ is himself our salvation. Christ is humanity made new, he is the place where human nature now resides, he is the new Adam who includes all human beings within himself, he is the oldest brother of many adopted siblings, all of whom now share in his status.

Christ is God’s child by nature, and we are God’s children by grace. We get to share by grace everything that belongs to Christ by nature. We are adopted, but God treats us with all the privileges of natural sons and daughters. We eat at the same table with Christ. We exercise the same freedoms that we see in Christ. We address God with the same words, “Abba, Father.” We know God as Christ knows God—from the inside.<sup>10</sup>

To say that it’s all about love is to affirm that:

- Our goal and center is *righteousness* (covenantal fidelity as communion-in-love with God), not mere rightness (having correct ideas about God).
- Our goal and center is *connectedness* (to one another and God in communion-in-love), not mere correctness (about each other and God).
- Our goal and center is *mutual indwelling* (partaking of the divine nature of the incarnate God in communion-in-love), not mere moral perfection (correct morality).

This is the foundational paradigm shift that undergirds all the others, which is why it’s the first axiom: *God is love, so it’s all about love.* Because

God is love, life is all about communion-in-love. This, then, is the fountain from which all wisdom and power flow.

### **EXPERIMENT OF TRUST: SETTING OUR MINDS ON “THINGS THAT ARE ABOVE”**

In Acts 17:27-28, Paul tells a group of pagans in Athens, “[God] is not far from each one of us. For ‘In him we live and move and have our being.’” Let’s engage our imaginations to explore this truth.

Find a quiet space free from distraction. We are going to set our minds on “things that are above” (Colossians 3:1) for a few moments, to allow the reality of our communion with God and each other to seep a little more deeply into our self-understanding and self-conception. Take a few deep breaths, get in a comfortable seated posture, and close your eyes.

You may want to keep these questions close by. Spend as much time as you like on each one before moving on to the next one:

1. Imagine your life existing “in” God: As you close your eyes and ponder this reality, what comes to mind? What pictures, Scriptures, events, relationships flash in your mind? Allow everything that comes to mind, and be patiently curious about it all in the presence of Christ. Talk to God openly about what you perceive.
2. Imagine the people you’re closest to (friends, family, and so on). Hold them in your mind and allow your perception of them to reflect the truth that you are one with them as Jesus and the Father are one. Be curious about this: what does that mean? How does that change the way you see them? What, if anything, do you perceive differently about your feelings or your body as you contemplate this reality?
3. Consider your body as a home for the Holy Spirit: put one hand on your belly, one hand on your chest, and breathe deeply. Each breath is a witness to God-in-you. As you breathe, imagine God in, God out. Like a child who lies on their back and gazes at the night

sky, breathe in wonder and awe at this reality that God chooses to live in your very body. Try thanking your lungs for nourishing and sustaining you. Imagine the very air itself—as it comes in and out—crackling with God’s energy and life. Where are you aware of God’s presence on your body? Where in your body do you want to welcome God into? Maybe you have pain or discomfort or numbness or tingling: consent to the Spirit filling every part of your being as you breathe. Imagine your breath not just filling your lungs with God’s Spirit but flooding even the places of pain or discomfort in your body with God’s communion-in-love presence.

Repeat this experiment as often as you like.

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