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The Love of God: An Interdisciplinary
Approach to Developing and
Measuring Spiritual Maturity Based
on a Johannine Love Ethic

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11

The Love of God

An Interdisciplinary Approach to Developing and Measuring Spiritual Maturity Based on a Johannine Love Ethic

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WHEN CONTACTED ABOUT OUR participation in this *Festschrift* written to honor the career of Ben Aker, it seemed natural for us to use this opportunity to report on a study that we had recently conducted which centered on measuring spiritual development. Professor Aker's career-long emphasis upon a Johannine model of love provides the perfect opportunity for us to honor him with this study. As a tribute to Dr. Aker's esteemed career, the following essay will seek to do three things. First, we will survey the love ethic presented in John's gospel and developed further in John's epistles.¹ Second, we will connect this love ethic to the spiritual development model established in Bernard of Clairvaux's work, *On Loving God*.² Third, we will describe an interdisciplinary approach to constructing a new measure of spiritual development and re-

1. It is the opinion of the authors that the Gospel and epistles of John represent a common stream of tradition and as such, arguments of authorship lie outside the scope of this study.

2. Bernard of Clairvaux, *Bernard of Clairvaux: Selected Works*, trans. G. R. Evans (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2005) 47–93.

port the empirical results of the instrument administered to college students, both theology and non-theology majors, based upon the Johannine model conceptualized through the lens of Clairvaux.

THE JOHANNINE LOVE ETHIC

The Gospel of John

Scholars have long debated whether or not John's gospel contains an actual moral ethic. In John's gospel, Jesus offers no real instruction to his disciples about the conduct of life until after he withdraws from his public ministry. Then, in John 13.34, he makes only one command to his disciples: "Love one another."³ Although this command at first blush seems to lack specificity, in 15.12 Jesus goes on to expand the command with the qualifier "love one another *just as I have loved you*" (καθώς—cf. 13.15; 15.9, 12; 17.11, 23). This addition to Jesus' earlier love command establishes a moral ethic where the perceived expected extent of love between Jesus' followers, as per his example, "is to be limitless in its self-giving."⁴ The degree of love that is to exist between the followers of Jesus is to be measured against the magnitude of the love Jesus has for them. Jesus states that this "greater love" is ultimately gauged by the willingness "to lay down one's life for one's friends" (15.13).⁵

While some scholars maintain that John offers no real moral ethic at all and Jesus' command to love is unduly vague and overtly sectarian,⁶ oth-

3. All Scripture translations are my own.

4. D. M. Smith, *Johannine Christianity: Essays on its Setting, Sources, and Theology* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1984) 178.

5. Jesus provides his disciples an example of self-denying love in the footwashing pericope which offers an emblematic sign of Jesus' self-sacrificing love ethic where the more powerful serve the weaker (John 13). Jesus states that the act is "an example that you should do as I have done for you" (John 13.15). That the episode points to a willingness to offer the ultimate self-sacrifice as expressed in the cross is found in Jesus' statement following the footwashing episode in 15.13: "Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends." In the same way that Jesus was willing to humbly offer his life for others, so believers are to demonstrate this same type of love toward others. Richard Hays writes: "Jesus' death is depicted by John . . . as an act of self-sacrificial love that establishes the cruciform life as the norm for discipleship" (*The Moral Vision of the New Testament* [San Francisco: Harper, 1996] 145).

6. See W. Meeks, "Ethics of the Fourth Evangelist," in *Exploring the Gospel of John: In Honor of D. Moody Smith*, eds. R. A. Culpepper and C. C. Black (Louisville, KY: WJKP, 1996) 317. Meeks goes on to argue that the "love one another" rule creates a sectarianism that is "limited solely to those who are firmly within the Johannine circle" (318). Yet, while the community's primary responsibility is to love one another, the idea of world mission is not absent from the tradition as some would argue. In fact, the whole

But These are Written . . .

ers like Andreas Köstenberger have done a good job refuting this argument by making the case that contained within Jesus' love command in John is a "deliberate focalization of all of Jesus' ethical demands" presented in the entirety of the canonical Gospels and squarely established in the OT commands to love God and one's neighbor (Matt 22.37–40; cf. Deut 6.5; Lev 19.18).⁷ This rationale acknowledges that, chronologically, the "new command" of love in John 13.34 is not new at all since in the heart of the Torah we find the commands to "love your neighbor as yourself" (Lev 19.18) and also to love the foreigner who resides among you (Lev 19.34). Further, the connection of the command to love one's neighbors (later extended to the love of enemies; Matt 5.43–48) with the command to love God formulates the center of Jesus' ethical teachings in the Synoptic Gospels (Mark 12.30–31). Yet, the Johannine love ethic, rather than betraying these traditions in order to create a reclusive and sectarian environment, actually builds upon these traditional aspects of moral conduct to provide a more intensive command centered upon the *new measure of love required* of the believer.⁸ It is no longer simply a command to love others "as yourself," but rather believers are commanded to love according to the self-sacrificial measure of the love that Jesus has for them.

Moreover, the OT command to love God is also echoed throughout the story-world of John's narrative since obedience to this command in Johannine thought means to love and accept the one sent from God (John 3.31–36; 6.32–33, 35; 8.27–29; 10.30).⁹ By loving and receiving Jesus, one is loving and receiving God, for "anyone who does not honor the Son does not honor the Father who sent him" (John 5.23). John claims that those who love God and are fathered by God will love and accept the Son of God sent

of the Gospel is centered upon God's love for the world (cf. John 1.29; 3.16; 8.12; 9.5; 12.46–47). Moreover, John 13.34 shows that it is the love within the community that serves as testimony to the world. It is to this world mission that the disciples have been commanded to embark (John 17.18; 20.21). So, while it does seem that ethics takes a back seat to Christology in John's gospel, John cannot be restricted merely to its didactic content, but rather requires a fuller reading of the story to grasp the implications for the life of the community, cf. Hays, *Moral Vision*, 140. See also A. Köstenberger, "The Moral Vision of John," *MidJT* 4/2 (Spring 2006) 3–23. See also H. Boersma, "A New Age Love Story: Worldview and Ethics in the Gospel of John," *CTJ* 38/1 (Apr 2003) 116–17.

7. A. Köstenberger, "The Johannine Love Ethic," in *A Theology of John's Gospel and Letters* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009) 511.

8. See J. Bolyki, "Ethics in the Gospel of John," *CV* 45/3(2003) 204.

9. John claims that whoever accepts the son accepts the Father who sent him (14.6–9) receives the light that God sent into the world (1.3–5; 8.12) abides in God (15.4–9) is fathered by God (1.11–12) and as a result will have eternal life (3.16). Yet, those who reject the Son of God are condemned because they love the darkness rather than the light (3.18–21) and as a result are condemned to blindness (John 9.39–41).

into the world (John 8.42). If one does not receive the one sent from God, then one's claim to know and love God is deficient (John 5.37, 42; 8.15-19, 38-44, 53-55; 10.25-26).

So, although the decrees to love God and to love one's neighbor are easily established in the OT and the Synoptic traditions, echoes of these same mandates are contained in the Johannine tradition as well. Captured within John's gospel is a strong moral ethic founded upon the Torah, enhanced by the entirety of the moral teachings of Jesus centered upon loving God and loving others, and brought to final completion by the measure of Jesus' own love for his followers and the reception of the light that God sent into the world. According to the Johannine tradition, although one can make the claim that he or she loves God and loves others, if one is not willing to accept the Son sent from God or willing to lay down one's life for a friend, then one's claims of loving God and loving others are defective. Thus, rather than being a text that subverts the commands of the Torah and the Synoptic moral ethic, Johannine tradition actually intensifies these moral directives.

In the Johannine Epistles

First John 3.23 goes on to conceptualize these foundational commands into two basic complementary trajectories: Believers are "to believe in the name of his Son Jesus Christ" (i.e., love for God as shown in one's acceptance of God's self-sacrificial love for the world in Christ; 1 John 3.16; 4.9; 5.1-5); and to "love one another" (cf. 1 John 3.11, 14, 18; 4.7-8, 19-21). Interestingly, in 1 John, as in John's gospel, one's love for God and one's love for others are inextricably tied together. First John 4.21 states that "the commandment we have from him is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also." The reason that the attribute of love is certain to be found in the children of God (who have expressed their love of God by their faith in Jesus Christ) is that doing so is consistent with the character of their father. That is, "God is love" (1 John 4.16b). In fact, the outgrowth of one's love for God as expressed in one's love for God's people is to serve as an assurance for believers that they are truly born of God: "We know that we have passed from death to life *because* we love one another" (1 John 3.14; emphasis mine). Conversely, John states that the opponents of 1 John who refuse to love their brothers and sisters do not love God (1 John 4.20-21) and "do not have eternal life abiding in them" (1 John 3.15). So, when believers "love one another," they exhibit their Father's character and have assurance that they have been "born of God and know God" (1 John 4.7).

But These are Written . . .

Moreover, this presence of love in the believer's life is to generate boldness even for the Day of Judgment (1 John 4.17). The assurance that comes from the Father's character in the earthly lives of believers is culminated in the declaration, "As he is, so are we in this world" (1 John 4.17). This assertion is explained in 4.16b (and earlier in 4.8) when the Apostle reveals that "God is love." If God is love in this world, then his children who harbor his character within them are also to be love to those around them in need. The epistle expounds upon Jesus' love ethic found in the gospel not only by reiterating the imperative that members of the community are to love one another, but also by providing a practical implication. That is, Christians prove their godly love by adhering to the example of Christ and sacrificing their own interests in service of others (1 John 3.16; John 15.12–15) especially those with fewer resources from whom Christians have nothing to gain (1 John 3.17–18).¹⁰ Moreover, John adds that this kind of self-denying love is to be the distinguishing mark of God's children (1 John 3.10). By fulfilling this love command, proof is given that a person is truly a disciple of Jesus (1 John 2.7–11; cf. 3.23; 4.19–21; 5.2–3). As believers emulate Jesus' love by putting others first, by denying self, and by enacting sacrificial service, the world will come to know God's love (John 13.34–35; 15.10–17; 17.20–25) because "through our acts of love, the invisible God is made visible—palpable—among us."¹¹

If the Johannine love ethic mandates that self-sacrificial love is a trait that God's children have inherited from God, then it is impossible for the sons and daughters of God to turn away and refuse to love, in that love is ontologically and divinely embedded within their very beings.¹² So, in John's

10. Sharing the world's goods is but one example of practicing one's love towards another. The pragmatic example of economic justice should invite the community to consider other possible ways they can show love towards others.

11. Hays, *Moral Vision*, 375. See also J. G. van der Watt, "Ethics and Ethos in the Gospel according to John," *ZNW* 97 (2006) 147–76.

12. This point is strengthened by the rhetorical argument found in 1 John 2.29–3.10 where John contends that the children of God will look like the father, who begat them. John notes in this section that whereas the children of the devil look like their father (3.8) the children of God will look like their father by displaying his characteristics as well (3.9–10). For further information on how the children of God cannot refuse to follow God's command of love, see my article entitled "The Litmus Test of God's Children: Solving a Johannine Contradiction by Rereading 1 John 3:9–10 in Light of an Epexegetical Rendering of KAI," *Pax Pneuma* (2012) 31–41. As I argued there, it is my belief that the key to understanding how believers cannot sin (a shocking inclusion by John in 3.9) is found in 1 John 3.10 if translated correctly. Not only does 3.10 provide the explanation to the "cannot sin" statement in 3.9, it also contains the solution to the apparent inconsistency about sin in the life of the believer that plagues 1 John as a whole (compare 1 John 1.8, 10 with 1 John 3.6, 8–9). When 1 John 3.9–10 is translated

epistles, the Johannine love ethic is reflected in one's love for God resulting in the acceptance of his provision "that we should believe in the name of his Son Jesus Christ" and one's love for each another (3.23). In the end, whereas the opponents in 1 John failed in both of these commands, the true church simply cannot fail in them and still be the church because love is the distinguishing characteristic of the one who has been born of God.

JOHN'S LOVE ETHIC, BERNARD OF CLAIRVAUX, AND THE STAIRCASE OF CHRISTIAN MATURITY

Given that John's writings indicate that love is the marker of those who are born of God, it logically follows that as one grows more mature in Christ, one's love for God and for others will also continue to increase. This point was developed by the twelfth-century abbot St. Bernard of Clairvaux (1090–1153) in his letter entitled *On Loving God*, written for the cardinal deacon and chancellor of the Roman church. Clairvaux articulated a spiritual development process consistent with the Johannine love ethic by describing the changes that take place in believers' hearts as they are transformed into the image of Christ. Interestingly, as with John's writings, Clairvaux does not separate love of God from love of others, but rather sees the love for others as a natural outgrowth of one's love for God. He writes "How can you love your neighbor with purity if you do not love him in God? But he who does not love God cannot love in God. You must first love God, so that in him you can love your neighbor too."¹³

Clairvaux based his conceptualization upon five biblical assumptions: 1) God is love; 2) God created people in his image; 3) God desires the love of people; 4) with God's help, people can progressively learn to reciprocate God's love; and 5) God rewards the love of his people. Thus, God created people out of his nature, which is love, and he desires their reciprocal affection. People, however, are not innately equipped to reciprocate God's love. Rather, they are innately equipped to *develop the ability* to reciprocate God's

by allowing the καὶ in v. 10 to function exegetically, the text ultimately and, in my opinion, correctly argues that children of God who have God's seed within them, cannot sin by refusing to love their brothers and sisters. Moreover, it is consistent with the author's arguments elsewhere since the specific sins that the opponents are accused of in the Johannine letters are essentially twofold: failing to love others (2.9; 3.11–12; 3.14–15; 3.17–18; 4.8; 4.20) and denying that Jesus is the Christ (2.22; 4.3; 2 John 7). Further, this reading also solves the apparent inconsistency between 1 John 3.6, 9 and 1.6–2.1 in that Christians do commit sin according to 1.6–2.9; yet, with regard to their confession of faith in Christ and their love for one another they cannot waiver.

13. Clairvaux, *On Loving God*, 75.

But These are Written . . .

love. God subsequently meets each person at his or her present point of development and nurtures the developing capacity to love. As people begin to reciprocate God's love, they are consequently rewarded with the person of God (i.e., the object of their love).¹⁴

The Staircase of Christian Maturity Defined

Clarvau's process through which people learn to experience and reciprocate God's love can be conceptualized as a staircase of Christian maturity. The staircase contains four steps:

Step One: The Love of Self for Self's Sake: On this step, egocentric individuals enjoy God's love without being aware of God as the source of this love.

Step Two: The Love of God for Self's Sake: On this step, individuals become aware that God is the source of love and thus begin to value God for the sake of that love, which they enjoy.

Step Three: The Love of God for God's Sake: On this step, individuals begin to love God as their appreciation for him grows and they recognize God as an entity worthy of love even apart from the love that he provides for the individuals.

Step Four: The Love of Self for God's Sake: On step four, individuals have grown to love God so completely that they take on God's love for his creation and love self for God's sake (with the self being redefined as the community of creation). On this step, individuals' appreciation for God has grown to the extent that they identify with God's own love for the whole of creation, even loving the redefined self for God's sake.

All people originate on the lowest step of this staircase and progressively move upward with God's help. Consistent with Object Relations Development Theory, however, each successive step would be theoretically based upon the growth that occurred on the preceding step(s).¹⁵ Just as a child who grows up to share a mutually loving relationship with a par-

14. Ibid., 72-73.

15. For more on Object Relations Development Theory and potential spiritual applications, see T. Hall and K. Edwards, "The Spiritual Assessment Inventory: A Theistic Model and Measure for Assessing Spiritual Development," *JSSR* 41/2 (2002) 341-57. Also, see C. A. Meier, "Projection, Transference, and the Subject-Object Relation in Psychology," *JAP* 4 (1959) 21-34.

ent presumably developed into a reciprocating partner from a position of gratified dependence, so a Christian grows to reciprocate God's love after first moving through an immature focus upon the gratification of being in relationship with God. Thus, a person's development on the staircase reflects the natural maturation process, not a superior or inferior position in Christ. That is, Clairvaux's model presupposes that love for God derives from grace.

The Process of Growth Between the Steps

The individual initially meets God upon the first, foundational step. Clairvaux posits that non-Christians perceive that God, the creator, is responsible for their existence and the world in which they live (e.g., Rom 1.18–25). Consequently, even people who do not know him are able to respond to the God who created them with an immature kind of love. With reference to the first commandment to love God, Clairvaux explains that “because nature has become rather frail and weak, man is driven by necessity to serve nature first.”¹⁶ This attention to nature results in one's love for the body, given that the person “does not yet know anything but himself, as it is written, ‘first came what is animal, then what is spiritual’ (1 Cor. 15:46) and ‘No man ever yet hated his own flesh’ (Eph. 5:29).”¹⁷ Axiomatically, according to Clairvaux, this human love for itself leads to love for God, from whom not only people but also the created things that gratify them have been derived.

Along a similar line of reasoning, together with created humankind's love for God, the creator, there exists a complementary human love one for another, the objects of creation. Clairvaux maintains that this love for others is inherent in the created person as a regulatory safeguard against humanity's self-love to grow “headstrong, as often happens, and it ceases to be satisfied to run in the narrow channel of its needs, but floods out on all sides into the fields of pleasure.”¹⁸ The second commandment, then, stops the overflow at once: “Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself.” Clairvaux states: “This is wholly right that he who is your fellow in nature should not be cut off from you in grace, especially in the grace that is innate in nature.”¹⁹ Clairvaux surmises that Christ's two greatest commandments can be obeyed on the first step of spiritual maturity through the pro-social expression of our selfish love when it “is shared, when it is extended to the community.”²⁰

16. Clairvaux, *On Loving God*, 73.

17. *Ibid.*, 73.

18. *Ibid.*, 74.

19. *Ibid.*

20. *Ibid.*

But These are Written . . .

As people grow more self-aware at this stage of development, they begin to perceive that they need God to facilitate their love for one another, in that it is God who provides them both love for themselves as well as the capacity to love others. Clairvaux compares this person to a wise man, “who is a bodily animal and does not know how to love anything” but who realizes that an alliance with God can lead to “everything that is good” and that, independent of God, he or she “can do nothing.”²¹ Loving self for self’s sake is defined here as loving self because that is the natural response of the created person. People instinctively nurture themselves to ensure their survival. Moreover, they are able to recognize that this survival is further enhanced by relationships with other people. A person at this stage might be motivated by the thought, “*I want to be happy.*” Another salient motivation at this stage might be, “*I want relationships with others that make me happy.*” Hence, the focus at this stage is upon the drive to satisfy the individual’s needs.

As noted, progression to the second step is precipitated by the development that takes place on the first step. Clairvaux expounds that while those on the first step are taught to attribute to God the gratification of their needs, on the second step their hearts become “softened toward the generosity of the redeemer.”²² They perceive through their own experience that the creator is a good God (Ps 34.8). At this stage of development, people realize that the God they met on the first step as the source of their fulfillment is unfailingly faithful and unselfish, consequently deserving of love in his own right. At this second step, obedience to love one another becomes even more natural as this developing individual “truly loves God, and therefore he loves what is God’s.”²³

Loving God for self’s sake is defined here as loving God as a result of what God has done on behalf of people. The origin of this embryonic, reciprocal love is described in the Johannine explanation that people love God because he loved them first (1 John 4.19). A person at this stage of development might be motivated by the thought, “*Everything good in my life comes from God. Nothing good in my life has been given to me apart from God.*” Another motivating thought at this stage might be, “*God has shown me how to love. I would not be able to love others except that God has taught me how.*” Hence, the developmental focus is the broadening perception of the multifaceted ways in which God is able to improve the individual’s life. This increasing appreciation for the person of God results in a growing

21. Ibid., 76.

22. Ibid.

23. Ibid., 77.

recognition that God, as the source of these meaningful and important contributions, also deserves to be loved.

Again, progression to the third step was necessarily preceded by growth on the second step. Similarly, the development that occurred on the second step was engendered by the development that took place on the first. Thus, progression to the third step does not render the development that occurred on the preceding steps unimportant. Rather, the development of the third step should theoretically reorient the relevance of growth that took place at lower levels within a broadening perspective. This reorientation should occur naturally as a result of the individual's developing ability to appreciate and return God's love.

Individuals at the third developmental step have known the goodness of God in their lives. They have discerned God's worthy character. Moreover, they have grown to realize that the gracious and infallible nature of God entitles him to adoration regardless of the benefits the individual has derived from his or her relationship with God. According to Clairvaux, "He who trusts in the Lord not because he is good to him but simply because he is good truly loves God for God's sake and not for his own."²⁴

Loving God for God's sake is defined here as loving God because of who God is. Clairvaux points to the psalmist as someone on this step when he proclaimed, "We trust in the Lord, for he is good' (Ps. 118.1)."²⁵ A person at this stage of development might be motivated by the thought, "*I love God because of his essential goodness.*" Another motivating thought on this step might be, "*God alone is worthy of adoration.*" Hence, the focus at this stage is the celebration of God's irresistible and praiseworthy character.

Clairvaux asserts that the fourth step is probably not realized in this life, given that people appear unable to firmly grasp more than a momentary hold on the insight required to sustain one's position at this level. At the fourth step, even the love for self is filtered through one's identity in God.²⁶ Clairvaux posits that people are not really capable of perfect obedience to the first command in this incarnation because of the constant need to attend to the needs of the created body.²⁷ Subsequently, "as long as the care of the weak and miserable body demands one's attention"²⁸ people are incapable of fully abandoning themselves to love God, regardless of their sincere desire to do so.

24. Ibid.

25. Ibid.

26. Ibid., 78.

27. Ibid., 80.

28. Ibid.

But These are Written . . .

Clairvaux allows, however, that a person would be truly “blessed and holy” if, while still in this body of flesh, he or she gained “even for a single instant something that is rare indeed in this life. To lose yourself as though you did not exist and to have no sense of yourself, to be emptied out of yourself and almost annihilated,” wholly integrated as one whose identity was only in God.²⁹ Clairvaux argues that because everything has been created for God’s glory (Isa 43.7) everything in creation should rightly conform to God’s will. The complete abdication of self-service to utterly submit to God’s interests would result in a transcendent ecstasy in which the individual were set free from weights that otherwise distract him or her from this glorious obedience. Clairvaux explains: “If indeed any mortal is rapt for a moment or is, so to speak admitted for a moment to this union, at once the world presses itself on him, the day’s wickedness troubles him, the mortal body weighs him down, bodily needs distract him, he fails because of the weakness of his corruption, and—more powerfully than these—brotherly love calls him back.”³⁰

This internal conflict is reminiscent of the apostle Paul’s struggle between leaving this life to be present with Christ versus remaining for the benefit to his fellow Christians (Phil 1.21–24). Clairvaux speculates that until the eschaton when people are given new celestial bodies, one’s position at this step cannot be sustained. Nevertheless, he encourages his readers. Recalling Rom 8.28, Clairvaux expounds that the, “weak body helps the soul to love God; it helps it when it is dead; it helps it when it is resurrected, first in producing fruits of patience, second in bringing peace, third in bringing completeness. Truly the soul does not want to be perfected without what it feels has served it well in every condition. It is clear that the flesh is a good and faithful companion to the good spirit.”³¹

Loving self for God’s sake is defined here as loving the self as a member of God’s beloved creation, reflective of God’s glory, a unique expression of God’s will. Clairvaux postulates, “The fourth degree of love is attained for ever [*sic*] when we love God only and supremely, when we do not even love ourselves except for God’s sake.”³² A person at this stage of development might be motivated by the thought, “*My purpose is to live in perfect and uninterrupted union with God.*” Another motivating thought might be, “*God is now in all and nothing merely human remains in his people.*” Hence, the focus on this step is upon the complete integration of one’s identity with God, in

29. Ibid., 78.

30. Ibid., 78–79.

31. Ibid., 82.

32. Ibid., 84.

perfect uninterrupted communion and without worldly distractions. As a result of this divine union, the sense of self is redefined and the individual is perceived as part of the created community, made one with its creator. It is interesting to note that, according to Scripture, people appear to be capable of attaining this level of development for only short periods of time before they are returned to the work left to do at the third step (Rom 8.22–23; 2 Cor 5.1–5). Preoccupation with the fourth step, then, may actually be indicative of a developmental problem. That is, the striving to achieve union with God should not express itself in a desire to avoid the hard work of development by escaping into a projection of God. This immature urge would not lead to the authentic attainment of the fourth level of development, but instead would distract the individual from developing authentic love for God and others.³³

MEASURING SPIRITUAL MATURITY BASED ON A JOHANNINE LOVE ETHIC

Clairvaux's staircase of Christian maturity builds upon the Johannine love ethic by revealing that as believers mature in their love for God (for God's sake) those believers will also mature in their love for others. To this end, one of the authors has developed a measure of spiritual maturity based on the writings of St. Bernard of Clairvaux utilizing the Johannine love ethic as a guide.³⁴ The purpose of our study was to conceptualize and operationalize a model of spiritual development that accurately approximates Christian spiritual maturity as expressed through the ability to love as God loves, according to a Johannine framework. Our study conceptualized spiritual maturity in terms of epigenetic stage development defined by an individual's faith and love for God and the individual's love for humanity (1 John 3.23; cf. Matt 22.37–39; Mark 12.30–31) that is consistent with current developmental theories. In other words, development is expected to progress along a generally linear continuum but would also be expected to include fluctuations. That is, authentic movement forward would occasionally necessitate revisiting earlier points of development to reframe prior understandings and beliefs in light of increasingly mature insight into the self and relationships with others.

33. See Hall and Edwards, "The Spiritual Assessment Inventory," 341–57. Also, see C. A. Meier, "Projection, Transference," 21–34.

34. See A. Watson, *A Developmental Approach to Measuring Spiritual Maturity from a Christian Perspective* (Ann Arbor, MI: UMI Dissertation Publishing, 2011).

But These are Written . . .

The new measure of Christian spiritual maturity consists of two subscales that have been designed to differentiate between stages two and three of Clairvaux's stages of Christian maturity. While loving self for self's sake is a step that does not require a Christian understanding of God and loving self for God's sake is a step that few if any Christians are able to realize, loving God for self's sake and loving God for God's sake are experiences familiar to many Christians. Thus, these two middle steps are the focus of this study.

Differences between loving God for self's sake and loving God for God's sake are focused upon two distinct kinds of reasons motivating love. One identifies with loving God for self's sake when recognizing the personal benefits derived from God. Conversely, one identifies with loving God for God's sake when recognizing that God deserves devotion regardless of any blessings derived from sharing a relationship with him. From an object relations developmental perspective, a healthy relationship should include both of these motivations. Just as wholesome relationships with other people should include elements of both personal gratification and a more selfless appreciation, one's relationship with God should also make room for both kinds of motivation. On the other hand, it seems tenable to propose that depending upon one's current point of development, one individual might be more motivated to love God out of gratification for the blessings derived from him while another individual might be more motivated to love God out of devotion for the inherently worthy nature of God's person. Scripture teaches that Christians imitate God in learning how to love as God loves. They love God because he first loved them (1 John 4.19). Moreover, Christians believe that as they grow in their relationship with God, they are transformed to be more like Christ, taking on his loving nature and expressing love toward the whole of creation (2 Cor 3.18).³⁵

Although there is an abundance of biblical support for constructing a model of Christian spiritual maturity, this study employed a Johannine perspective of love to simplify our developmental framework. This conceptualization presumes first of all that people who share healthy relationships with God have been spiritually changed and thus partake of the nature of Christ (1 John 3.1-2; 4.17). Therefore, they have assistance from God to realize this new and developing nature as it is unfolding in their day-to-day

35. Jesus frequently complained about the disingenuous quality of devotion belied by external religious acts purported to honor God (e.g., John 5.8-18; 9.1-41; see also Matt 23.23-39). Therefore, this study follows the logic of P. Benson, M. Donahue, and J. Erickson that true faith maturity should find expression in Christian values that are manifested through attitudes and behaviors in agreement with the teachings of Christ ("The Faith Maturity Scale: Conceptualization, Measurement, and Empirical Validation," in *Research in the Social Scientific Study of Religion*, eds. M. L. Lynn and D. O. Moberg, 23 vols. [Greenwich, CT: JAI, 1993] 5:1-26).

lives (1 John 1.8–9). Consequently, Christians experience confidence in the presence of God, assured that their relationship with him is secure, easing concerns that they have fallen short of Christ's perfection (1 John 3.18–22).

Second, Christlike love is this framework's primary evidence to indicate Christian spiritual maturity. That is, given that God is love and Christ is love incarnate, people who claim to follow God must necessarily evidence godly love (1 John 4.7–8; 4.16). Christians have been admonished that it is impossible to love God, whom they cannot see, if this love is not also accompanied by love for the people whom God has brought into their lives (1 John 4.20–21). Moreover, genuine godly love is proven "not in word or speech, but in truth and action" (1 John 3.18). Christ demonstrated his godly love when he took on the form of lowly humanity and made their concerns his own rather than remaining in a divine form above human suffering (John 1.14; 3.16–17). In the same way, Christians who manifest genuine godly love cannot separate themselves and their interests from the interests of God and other people. Like Christ, they must demonstrate their love to others in measurable ways (1 John 3.17)

Constructing the Measure

The new scales of Christian maturity were used to measure spiritual development according to the scriptural tenet that believers should be identifiable by their love for God and humanity (e.g. John 13.35). Borrowing from the conceptual framework outlined by St. Barnard of Clairvaux's staircase of Christian love, sample statements were written to reflect each of the four levels of love development. Next, the authors discussed Clairvaux's theory with subject matter experts including five graduate theology students and two professors with graduate degrees in theology. These experts were then provided with brief descriptions of Clairvaux's four steps along with the sample items and asked to help construct additional items appropriate to the proposed developmental framework. The authors then examined these statements and revised them to improve clarity. A second panel of subject matter experts was recruited to further refine the new items. These experts included a professor with a PhD degree in Biblical Literature, a professor with a doctorate in Missiology, and a professor with a graduate degree in Christian Education. The subject matter experts evaluated the developing statements that reflected the second and third steps of Christian love by examining the revised items in light of brief statements describing the second and third steps of maturing Christian love. The experts then identified each statement by indicating whether or not it most accurately reflected either

But These are Written . . .

the second step, loving God for self's sake, or the third step, loving God for God's sake. Only the forty-two statements that were correctly identified by each expert were retained for further analysis.

Testing the Model: Summary of Findings

Although generating a logical theory of Christian spiritual maturity with exegetical support is important, empirically testing that model of Christian maturity in a sample of actual participants is equally important for validating the developing theory. Thus, the authors surveyed 541 students enrolled in a private Christian Midwestern university to learn more about their self-reported perceptions of spiritual and behavioral health. Both sexes were equally represented in this study. The majority of the students queried were between the ages of eighteen to twenty-five (87 percent). Moreover, most of the participants identified themselves as being Assembly of God, non-denominational, or Pentecostal (74 percent) having parents who were married (69 percent) being enrolled in their first or second year of university study (66 percent) being White (61 percent) and having been converted for eight years or longer (61 percent).

Consistent with Clairvaux's model, the less mature developmental stage, loving God for self's sake, was associated with poorer psychological and spiritual health. For example, this step was related to lower levels of object relations development with God, suggesting these participants suffered more instability in their relationships with God. This step was also associated with depression and with an identity status known as foreclosure, in which individuals make strong commitments to beliefs without actually exploring these beliefs and the personal reasons that motivate their convictions.

Also in keeping with Clairvaux's developmental framework, the more mature developmental stage, loving God for God's sake, was associated with psychological and spiritual health. An example was this step's relationship with a sense of awareness of God's presence in one's daily affairs. Similarly, this step was correlated with mature Christian beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors, including a desire to grow in one's relationship with God and to serve others in order to make the world a better place for everyone. This step was also associated with life satisfaction and a fulfilling sense of meaning and purpose.

An interesting finding revealed, however, that despite our hypothesis that development toward a more mature step would grow from foundational understandings built upon lower steps, the second and third steps were not correlated. That is to say, we postulated that either high scores on one step would indicate low scores on the other or that participants scoring either

high (i.e., loved God) or low (i.e., did not love God) would yield similar patterns on both steps. What we found instead was that scores on one step were not associated with scores on the other in any substantive way. This lack of relationship suggested that the steps measured two very different and unrelated aspects of godly love. Further, while arguably more mature people tended to be less likely to identify with loving God for self's sake, all of the people surveyed both identified equally with loving God for God's sake and identified more with loving God for God's sake than with loving God for self's sake. That is, regardless of one's status on indicators such as choice of theology as a major, everyone was more likely to report mature reasons for their love of God, although theology majors reported substantially less agreement with immature reasons motivating their love for God than did their non-major counterparts. That scores on the two different steps were virtually unrelated suggested that loving God for self's sake and loving God for God's sake represent two different and discrete aspects of Christian spiritual development that are not affected by one another. This result could be interpreted in more than one way.

One possible explanation might be that Clairvaux's model is not best conceptualized by a staircase upon which development occurs by moving up toward a Christlike love (on the higher steps) while simultaneously moving away from a more egocentric love (on the lower steps). Development occurring on a symbolic staircase would presumably require an inverse relationship between steps in that the positive position on one step would presuppose a correspondingly negative position on the other step (i.e., a high score on step two would indicate a low score on step three or vice versa). Instead, Clairvaux's framework might suggest an orientation, or point of view, that could cause one to identify more strongly with one set of motivators for love of God than with another set, even if the sets of motivators themselves were not related to one another in an obviously hierarchical manner. In other words, even though all participants scored the same on the higher developmental step, indicating agreement with selfless reasons motivating godly love, theology majors indicated less agreement than did their counterparts in also identifying with self-serving reasons motivating love for God. It would be interesting to know how these same people might have scored on a measure assessing Clairvaux's fourth step, loving self for God's sake. Would more mature people have identified more reasons for loving self for God's sake than their less mature counterparts? Would the fourth step have also been unrelated to the second and third steps?

An alternative interpretation of the finding that the steps were not related might suggest support for the epigenetic nature of Christian spiritual development. Epigenetic development would allow for fluctuations difficult

But These are Written . . .

to capture in one cross-sectional test administration. In other words, if Clairvaux's stage development is epigenetic in nature then individuals might identify more strongly with one step at one point in time than they might at another point in time, depending upon how they perceived themselves and God at the time of the different test administrations. In this case, a lower score at a later time would not necessarily indicate regression; rather, linear development forward might be accompanied by periodic movement backward to revisit earlier perceptions and understandings in need of re-negotiation before authentic growth could be realized.

A common example of this kind of epigenetic development might be the questioning of young adolescents when, for the first time, they confront doubts about the religious commitments that their families and faith communities have taught them to honor. For many such adolescents, authentic spiritual development would require them to question these commitments and to explore their convictions in terms of their true beliefs as opposed to merely accepting the beliefs of others because they have been instructed to do so. Thus, these adolescents might appear to be more mature in their spiritual maturity at one point in time, only to appear to have regressed in maturity at a later time, although a test administration that occurred later still might reflect that the intermediate appearance of regression actually yielded more maturity in the long term, if the testing of faith were successfully negotiated.

A test-retest study lends some credibility to the possibility of this latter interpretation. Given that theology majors identified substantially fewer selfish reasons motivating their love for God than did their counterparts, fifty theology majors who shared similar demographic characteristics with the first sample described were surveyed six weeks apart to determine whether or not their motivating reasons for loving God remained stable over time. These first year theology students had declared their majors but had not yet been exposed to critical study within their field. At the time of the test and retest administrations, these first semester students were enrolled in an introductory theology course designed to introduce them to a myriad of theological debates. Despite the first study's high internal consistency coefficients ($N=541$; $\geq .86$) the test-retest coefficients were much lower (Step 2=.77 and Step 3=.56). Taken together, these statistics suggest that Clairvaux's spiritual development was reliably measured, and that the variable being measured—presumably godly love—was somewhat unstable. Just as psychological states such as depression and anxiety change according to changing situations, reasons motivating love for God appeared to change as well. That the lower developmental step, loving God for self's sake, was more stable than the higher developmental step, loving God for

God's sake, gives further credence to this epigenetic notion of development. That is, a higher developmental level would presumably be less stable than would a lower developmental level. A longer period of time between test administrations might yield an interesting finding: Would godly love appear to be more or less stable over a longer period of time and, perhaps more importantly, do people report more selfless reasons motivating love for God at later test administrations? Are people developing godly love as they grow in their relationships with God?

CONCLUSIONS

The Johannine moral directive established upon an intensified love command evidenced in believers' acceptance of the one sent from above and their willingness to self-sacrificially lay their lives down for others has been connected by the authors to Bernard of Clairvaux's framework of spiritual maturity postulating that as Christians mature, their ability to love God and others continues to develop as well. The new measure of Christian maturity designed by one of the authors to empirically test the validity of Clairvaux's model of spiritual development, has revealed some interesting results. For example, Clairvaux's second and third steps appear to reflect two very distinct motivations for love of God. While the instrument demonstrated internal consistency, variability in test-retest scores suggested this sample of young Christian adults was still exploring their commitments motivating godly love. Even so, theology students did demonstrate substantially less agreement with loving God for self's sake.

Future studies sampling Christians who are older and have been converted longer could shed light on whether or not reasons motivating godly love remain stable over time. Additionally, a wider range in maturity as well as denominational affiliation could prove useful in investigating whether or not Clairvaux's second and third steps are more related than was evidenced in this young sample. While the theoretical model has good biblical and theological support, continued testing of the developing theory with human participants should reveal more about the way that actual Christian spiritual maturity unfolds.