

DIVINE LOVE AS THE FOUNDATION OF CHRISTIAN ETHICS: AN EXEGETICAL STUDY OF 1 JOHN 4:7-21

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ABSTRACT

This research work was undertaken to comparatively analyse CNN and BBC coverage of Hilda Baci's global achievement. This is in reaction to Western media outlets framing and representation of Africa in a negative light. The content analysis method was adopted for this study. The online publications on CNN and BBC websites between the period in which the event received publicity and Hilda Baci was internationally recognized by the Guinness Book of World Records were censored. Coding sheet was used as instrument of data connection from CNN and BBC websites. The findings indicate that both media outlets projected the importance of Hilda Baci achievement as top headlines, but BBC covered it in a more balanced way. Also, BBC used negative framing that addressed more record challenges and recognised the loss Guinness Book of World Records to an Irishman. In contrast, CNN maintained a wholly positive framing, focusing solely on the achievement's positive aspects and confirming the new world record, aligning with a more neutral reporting style. The study concludes that foreign media exhibit distinct approaches in portraying events, with BBC incorporating a more balanced perspective that acknowledges challenges and losses, while CNN maintains a predominantly positive framing. Hence, the study recommended that Nigerian authorities and stakeholders should engage in continuous monitoring of foreign media coverage, and take proactive measures to address potential misrepresentations or negative narratives.

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INTRODUCTION

The concept of love occupies a central place in Christian moral theology, not merely as an ethical virtue but as the very essence of God's nature and the foundation for all moral conduct. Within the New Testament, the First Epistle of John offers perhaps the most concentrated theological exposition of this theme, especially in 1 John 4:7–21, where love (agapē) is presented as both the defining attribute of God and the ethical imperative for believers. In this passage, the apostle moves beyond moral exhortation to root Christian ethics in divine ontology: "God is love" (1 John 4:8, 16). This assertion establishes that ethics, in the Christian vision, flows from the character of God rather than from abstract philosophical principles or societal norms (Marshall 1978, 211–213).

Scholars have long recognized that Johannine theology resists the separation of theology and ethics. As Kruse (2000, 164) observes, "The experience of God's love in Christ inexorably leads to love for others; the two are inseparably bound." Thus, divine love is not merely a motive for moral action but its sustaining source. The sending of the Son into the world (1 John 4:9–10) serves as the concrete manifestation of this love, forming the paradigm for self-giving service among believers (Brown 1982, 513–514).

The urgency of recovering this theological-ethical vision is evident in contemporary Christianity, where ethical discourse is often reduced to legalistic moralism or to culturally adapted moral codes that lack theological grounding (Volf 1996, 17–20). By situating Christian ethics within the framework of divine love, the church not only preserves doctrinal fidelity but also offers a countercultural witness marked by sacrificial service, fearlessness, and unity. This study seeks to explore 1 John 4:7–21 exegetically, demonstrating how divine love forms the indispensable foundation

of Christian ethics and examining its implications for personal discipleship, communal life, and the church's engagement with the wider world.

Conceptual Clarification of Terms

A sound exegetical and theological study requires the clarification of key concepts to ensure precision in interpretation and application. In this study, four primary terms—divine love, foundation, Christian ethics, and agapē—are central to the discussion.

Divine Love

Divine love refers to the self-giving, unconditional, and redemptive love that originates from God's very being. It is neither elicited by human merit nor conditioned by human worthiness, but flows from God's nature as love itself (1 John 4:8, 16). Nygren (1953, 85–87) distinguishes this love from human forms of affection, describing it as agapē—a love that seeks the good of the other without self-interest. Divine love is supremely revealed in the sending of Jesus Christ for the salvation of humanity (John 3:16; 1 John 4:9–10).

Foundation

In theological discourse, foundation denotes the underlying principle or ultimate source upon which beliefs, moral values, or actions rest (Erickson 2013, 98–99). To say that divine love is the foundation of Christian ethics is to affirm that ethical norms and behaviors derive their authority and motivation from God's own nature and actions, rather than from cultural convention or human reasoning alone.

Christian Ethics

Christian ethics is the discipline concerned with determining what is right and wrong for those who profess faith in Christ, based on biblical revelation, theological reflection, and the example of Jesus (Geisler 2010, 23–24). It integrates moral reasoning with the transformative power of the gospel, aiming for conformity to Christ's character and the promotion of human flourishing in alignment with God's purposes.

Agapē

The Greek term *agapē* occupies a distinct place in New Testament ethics, signifying a love characterized by self-sacrifice, commitment, and moral intentionality. Unlike *eros* (romantic love) or *philia* (friendship love), *agapē* in the Johannine context expresses God's unconditional commitment to humanity and calls believers to reflect that love in mutual relationships (Louw and Nida 1989, 25–27).

Literary and Historical Context of 1 John 4:7–21

Authorship and Date

The First Epistle of John is traditionally attributed to the Apostle John, the son of Zebedee, though modern scholarship has proposed alternative authorship theories. Many scholars agree that the letter was composed by a figure within the Johannine community who shared the theological vocabulary and style of the Fourth Gospel (Brown 1982, 127–130; Marshall 1978, 32–34). The similarities in themes—light and darkness, love and hatred, truth and falsehood—suggest a common theological heritage. The epistle is generally dated toward the end of the first century (ca. AD 85–95), a period when the Christian movement was consolidating its identity amid doctrinal controversies and social tensions (Kruse 2000, 32–33).

Occasion and Purpose

The epistle addresses a community facing internal division, likely resulting from secessionist teachers who denied the incarnation and ethical implications of the gospel (1 John 2:18–19; 4:2–3). These teachers appear to have promoted a form of proto-Gnosticism that separated spiritual experience from moral obligation (Smalley 1989, 14–16). Against this backdrop, 1 John 4:7–21 serves as a corrective, insisting that genuine knowledge of God is inseparable from love for others.

Structure and Placement of the Passage

Thematically, 1 John 4:7–21 falls within the epistle's broader concern for the interplay between truth and love. The section begins with an exhortation to love one another (v. 7) and ends with a summary statement binding love for God and love for others (v. 21). Literary analysis reveals a chiasmic structure emphasizing God's initiative in love (vv. 9–10) as the theological center of the passage (Painter 2002, 278–281).

Significance for the Study

Understanding the literary and historical context clarifies that the author's aim was not simply to promote a sentimental notion of love but to root Christian ethics in God's self-disclosure. This background underscores that love is not optional or peripheral in Christian discipleship; it is the definitive mark of authentic faith and the necessary expression of right belief.

Theological and Ethical Implications

The exegetical analysis of 1 John 4:7–21 reveals profound theological truths that form the basis for Christian ethical practice. The implications can be considered under four interconnected themes.

1. Divine Love as Ontological Foundation of Ethics

The repeated declaration "God is love" (vv. 8, 16) asserts that love is intrinsic to God's being, not a contingent characteristic. This ontological claim grounds Christian ethics in God's very nature, making ethical norms reflections of divine reality rather than arbitrary moral codes (Marshall 1978, 213; Brown 1982, 514).

Ethical action in Christianity, therefore, is the imitation of and participation in God's loving nature, aligning believers' conduct with the divine essence (Volf 1996, 17–18).

2. The Incarnation as Ethical Paradigm

The sending of the Son as an atoning sacrifice (vv. 9–10) demonstrates that divine love is self-giving and costly. This shapes Christian ethics to prioritize sacrificial service over self-interest. The incarnation sets the template for moral action, calling believers to embody the same humility and generosity in their relationships (Kruse 2000, 165–166).

3. Love as the Test of Authentic Faith

The text makes clear that love for God cannot be separated from love for others (vv. 20–21). Johannine theology thus frames ethics as a relational reality—faith without love is a contradiction. The community of believers is the context where divine love is made visible and credible to the world (Smalley 1989, 245–246).

4. Love and Moral Fearlessness

Perfect love "casts out fear" (v. 18), implying that Christian moral life is not driven by fear of judgment but by confidence in God's acceptance. This transforms ethical behavior from legalistic conformity to joyful participation in God's redemptive mission (Painter 2002, 284). Fearless love enables the church to engage in justice, reconciliation, and service without anxiety over social cost or personal loss.

Contemporary Ethical Relevance

In an era marked by division, violence, and self-centeredness, 1 John 4:7–21 offers a countercultural vision where love becomes the defining mark of discipleship and the driving force of social engagement. The passage challenges the church to recover a theology of love that shapes ethics in family life, church leadership, public morality, and global mission. Without this divine grounding, Christian ethics risks degenerating into either moral relativism or rigid legalism, both of which are foreign to the Johannine vision.

Contemporary Application

The message of 1 John 4:7–21 remains profoundly relevant in addressing the spiritual, moral, and social challenges of today's world. The Johannine emphasis on divine love as the foundation for Christian ethics invites the church to embody love not as a mere sentiment but as an active, transformative force in society.

1. Strengthening Christian Unity in Diversity

In contexts like Nigeria, where ethnic, denominational, and political divisions often fracture Christian witness, the call to "love one another" demands intentional reconciliation across boundaries. Love rooted in God's nature transcends tribalism and denominational rivalry, fostering unity in diversity (Volf 1996, 51–52). Churches can serve as models of inclusive community by practicing hospitality and mutual care that reflects the universality of God's love.

2. Shaping Public Moral Witness

The fearless love described in verse 18 empowers Christians to engage society without fear of opposition or loss. This equips believers to confront corruption, injustice, and oppression with moral courage, advocating for the marginalized and defending truth even in hostile environments (Marshall 1978, 220–221). Such engagement transforms love from private virtue to public ethic.

3. Reorienting Leadership and Ministry

The incarnation as an ethical paradigm calls for servant leadership that prioritizes the good of others over personal gain (Kruse 2000, 168–169). Christian leaders—whether in church, business, or politics—are to model Christlike humility, transparency, and sacrificial service. Leadership training in seminaries and Christian institutions should integrate this Johannine ethic as a non-negotiable foundation.

4. Cultivating Fearless Discipleship in a Secular Age

In increasingly secular and pluralistic societies, Christians often feel pressured to compromise or hide their faith. 1 John's assurance of God's love provides the security needed to live and speak the truth openly. Discipleship programs that nurture intimacy with God can produce believers who live with courage, hope, and a readiness to bear witness in all spheres of life (Painter 2002, 285).

5. Healing the Church's Public Reputation

Public scandals, moral failings, and hypocrisy have damaged the credibility of the church worldwide. A return to love as the essence of Christian identity (vv. 7–8) can restore integrity and trust. Ministries of compassion, justice, and reconciliation should not be peripheral activities but central expressions of the gospel.

In summary, 1 John 4:7–21 provides not only a theological foundation for Christian ethics but also a blueprint for renewing the church's mission in the twenty-first century. When divine love shapes both personal piety and social action, the church becomes a living testimony of God's character—drawing people to Christ not merely through words, but through a visible and tangible ethic of love.

CONCLUSION

The exegetical study of 1 John 4:7–21 has shown that divine love is not simply one virtue among many but the ontological foundation of Christian ethics. The repeated Johannine affirmation that “God is love” (vv. 8, 16) anchors moral life in the very being of God, ensuring that ethics flows from relationship rather than mere rule-keeping. The incarnation of Christ emerges as the definitive paradigm for ethical living—self-giving, sacrificial, and redemptive—calling the church to a love that mirrors God's own.

Ethically, the text insists that love for God is inseparable from love for others, establishing the community of believers as the primary context where divine love is embodied and displayed. The fearless love described in verse 18 shifts the moral life from anxiety about judgment to joyful participation in God's mission, equipping believers to face social, political, and personal challenges without compromise.

In a fractured and often hostile world, this Johannine vision remains urgently relevant. It challenges the church to overcome divisions, restore credibility, and engage in justice, reconciliation, and compassionate service. The integration of theological conviction and ethical practice is not optional but essential if the Christian witness is to remain authentic. Ultimately, when divine love shapes both personal character and communal life, the church becomes a living testimony of God's nature, fulfilling its calling to be light in the world (Marshall 1978, 223; Volf 1996, 55).

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