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BOOK REVIEW

Nijay K. Gupta, *The Affections of Christ Jesus: Love at the Heart of Paul's Theology*. Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 2025. Pbk. 259 pp. ISBN 9780802877161. \$51.99.

Few concepts in Christian theology are as familiar, comprehensive, and compelling as that of love. If love has indeed been consistently emphasized within both academic theology and ecclesial praxis, such emphasis is undoubtedly encouraging. However, when particular aspects of love—such as its emotional dimension that offers comfort and satisfaction, or its inclusivity within moral and religious frameworks—are disproportionately emphasized, whether in the life of the church or in scholarly discourse, the result is a theologically skewed focus that calls for critical correction. In light of the pressing need for such theological recalibration, *The Affections of Christ Jesus* by Nijay K. Gupta offers a timely and integrative account of biblical love.

In the Introduction, Gupta engages Augustine's ontological conception of love and highlights the prominence of Paul's love discourse within a Greco-Roman religious context that, for the most part, lacked a conceptual framework comparable to the scriptural vision of love. He also surveys how modern theologians attempt to distill the essence of the gospel and, to his surprise, observes how often love is absent from their summaries of Paul's central message. This leads to his guiding claim: "Love belongs in the conversation about the center of Paul's theology" (11).

Chapter 1 elaborates this thesis. Inheriting Augustine's conviction that human beings are, at their core, creatures who live by loving, Gupta places this insight at the very heart of Pauline theology. He contends that love constitutes the essence of the gospel—both as a theological affirmation and as a practical im-

perative—evident in the way God loves humanity and in the corresponding summons placed upon the beloved to love both the world and the church. From this opening chapter to the book's conclusion, Gupta consistently emphasizes the conceptual multivalence of love, weaving together scriptural fidelity and lived faith into a single, coherent vision.

In chapter 2, Gupta turns to the Old Testament and Jewish tradition, examining the Shema's call to obedience and holistic devotion, the concept of *hesed*, the primacy of action, the continuity of relational commitment, and the ethic oriented toward the other. He not only investigates God's love but also highlights Israel's love for God as expressed through the lexical item *'ahavah*, thereby revealing a dynamic reciprocity embedded in the biblical tradition. Gupta further identifies two dimensions in the enactment of love: outward obedience and loyalty and inward emotional affectivity. Although the latter is more difficult to capture through critical or empirical methods, he persistently incorporates it, reframing love not as a static idea but as embodied expression and performative realization.

From this diachronic exploration of Israel's covenantal idiom, Gupta transitions in chapter 3 to a synchronic analysis of Greek love terminology. He maps the semantic distinctions among a range of Greek terms for love, ultimately arguing that *agapē* with its connotations of devotion and self-sacrifice most aptly captures the Pauline conception. Remaining alert to the danger of lexical reductionism, he cautions against rigid labeling and single-word focus, urging instead an attentiveness to the full semantic cluster. He thereby tightens the interpretive net, incorporating a broad spectrum of love-related vocabulary as well as the actions and conceptual frameworks that presuppose love, expanding both the scope and the depth of his theological argument.

Building on this foundation of Old Testament imagery and lexical inquiry, the study next turns to the Jesus tradition, tracing the trajectory of love from the Synoptic Gospels and the Gospel of John into Paul's distinctive theological synthesis. Chapter 4 foregrounds the double love command in the Synoptics and then turns to John, where love emerges both as the hallmark of disci-

pleshship and as the defining feature of the Father-Son relationship. This exposition sets the stage for Gupta's treatment of the primacy of love in Pauline theology.

Chapter 5 advances a pivotal insight: Paul's dominant metaphor for love is that of the family. Gupta contends that Paul frames the divine-human relationship in familial terms, a mode of expression that was strikingly uncommon in the Greco-Roman world. This convergence of Gospel tradition and Pauline metaphor prepares the way for the book's fulcrum, chapter 6, where Gupta offers a text-centered exposition of love as the animating force of the gospel itself. He argues that Paul's good news originates in the love of God, reaches its climactic manifestation in the death of Christ and is subjectively experienced and confirmed through the indwelling presence of the Spirit whom Gupta identifies as the very presence of divine love. Love, moreover, is shown to be organically interconnected with key theological concepts such as righteousness, sin, grace, and victory. For Gupta, the personal and redemptive culmination of Paul's gospel is articulated in Gal 2:20, a verse that functions both as theological summit and shared confession.

Chapter 7 addresses the relationship between love and faith. Although Paul typically describes human devotion to God using the term *pistis* rather than *agapē*, Gupta claims that the two concepts are deeply interrelated; in this context, *pistis* denotes "faithful love" directed toward God. Paul's lexical preference, Gupta suggests, reflects both the political nuance of *pistis* in the Greco-Roman world—where it signified loyalty to a sovereign—and the centrality of faith within the Jesus tradition.

Gupta then expands the discussion to examine how love animates the communal life of the early churches, portraying the lived expression of covenant fidelity. The communal dimension of love, initially introduced in chapter 5, receives sustained attention in chapter 8. For Paul, love shapes the ethos of the Christian community: it builds up, restores, and safeguards the bonds and order of corporate existence. This principle also governs Paul's own ministry which he insists is rooted in a love that flows from Christ. Chapter 9 shifts the focus outward, considering love extended to *idiōtai*, those regarded as outsiders

within the early Christian community. Just as Christ loved the world, Paul embraces a vocation of love, carrying out an apostolic ministry characterized by compassion and service, as portrayed in the Acts of the Apostles.

In chapter 10, Gupta turns to Eph 1–6, highlighting the epistle’s rich portrayal of love as a dominant Pauline motif and arguing that it offers the most comprehensive expression of Paul’s theology of love. Finally, in chapter 11, Gupta concludes the volume with a definition marked by humility and reverence: “*Love is a human dynamic of wrapping one’s self around another person or thing and deeply investing in it with the core of one’s being*. It is, at bottom, an attachment, sometimes chosen, sometimes instinctual, sometimes warm with affection, sometimes deeply passionate, but love is the human propensity toward bonding” (207 [italics original]).

A distinctive strength of this volume lies in its placement of love at the very center of Pauline theology without collapsing the topic into sentimental rhetoric. Gupta examines love across three interrelated strata—tradition, language, and theology—and weaves these threads into a coherent and sustained argument. Drawing extensively from the Old Testament and the Jesus tradition, he situates Paul’s discourse on love within the broader history of Christian theology. In doing so, he illuminates both the synchronic and diachronic nuances of love language, offering a balanced and integrated account of its theological significance.

A second strength is Gupta’s careful navigation between emotional subjectivity and theological objectivity. Rather than privileging one over the other, he maintains an ongoing dialogue between the two, transforming the space between affect and practice into fertile ground for theological reflection. For instance, chapter 1 references affect theory, while chapter 2 attends to both the behavioral-social and intrapersonal-emotional dimensions of love in the Old Testament. This emphasis opens the possibility for readers to engage love through affect theory and biblical-critical approaches that foreground performativity and affective dynamics, although it would have been even more persuasive had Gupta himself offered concrete theoretical demonstrations of how affect theory clarifies Paul’s reception

and articulation of Christ's affection as conveyed through his discourse of love.

A third strength lies in Gupta's attentiveness to both the individual and communal dimensions of love, along with his incorporation of Greco-Roman conceptions of love at several points in the discussion. His treatment of Paul's familial metaphor in chapter 5 and his recognition of the radical nature of biblical love within its historical and social context are especially insightful. Yet this insight could have been extended further. The book might have more fully explored how institutional, communal, and personal dimensions of love mutually inform one another, and how recent concerns in biblical studies—such as, gender, race, postcolonial critique, ecological theology, bodily vulnerability, and disability studies—might reshape the understanding of love and offer a critical lens for contemporary ethical reflection.

On lexical matters, Gupta is careful not to impose rigid one-to-one correlations between word and meaning, acknowledging the porous semantic boundaries of love terminology—an appropriate and commendable stance for lexical-semantic inquiry. Even so, his analysis does not fully dismantle the context dependence of the vocabulary he surveys. While a comprehensive accounting of every nuance is understandably beyond the scope of a thematic study of this scale, the argument could have been further enriched by incorporating corpus-based frequency data, statistical correlation analysis, or discourse-level examination, rendering his lexical claims more empirical and persuasive.

While methodological limitations are not entirely absent, the book nevertheless makes a significant theological contribution, particularly in its integration of scriptural insight and pastoral sensibility, offering a compelling vision that bridges scholarship and spiritual formation. As the subtitle affirms, Gupta successfully illuminates the centrality of love in Paul's theology, and, true to the main title, he also draws attention to the affections of Christ Jesus himself—and, perhaps implicitly, to the author's own affection for Christ. This underlying love permeates the volume and ultimately invites readers not merely to study the grammar of love but to reexamine the very affection that orients their hearts toward Christ Jesus.

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