



Writings of W. Burney Overton

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And God Said, "Be My Valentine"

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This Paper, the first of the 1988 series, is adapted from the manuscript of a sermon that I delivered at Shallowford Presbyterian Church on Sunday, February 14, 1988 – Valentine's Day.

AND GOD SAID, "BE MY VALENTINE."

"Be my valentine." I used to say and write that when I was a kid. In fact, I still do. I did just this morning. You'll have to guess to whom I said it.

Have you ever thought about the origin and meaning of Valentine's Day? I don't remember that I ever had until I began to prepare this sermon. It wasn't easy to get information – nobody is very interested – but I did find out that St. Valentine was a priest and martyr who was beaten and beheaded – for love of God, they said – on February 14, A.D. 269. He had been a Roman nobleman and pagan priest. When he became a Christian, he went every day to the dungeons in Rome to visit and to try to encourage the prisoners who were awaiting execution for their faith.

One day the guards stopped him and ordered him to worship statues of the Roman Gods. When he refused, they arrested him and, in accordance with the orders of Emperor Claudius II, put him to death.

That bit of history has little to do with Valentine's Day as we know it. However, centuries ago, in secular circles, February 14 was a special day when lovers sent gifts and greetings to one another. Secular and Christian got mixed together. St. Valentine became the protector of the day, and the custom of love gifts and greetings has continued to this day.

I got that information from a book entitled, A PARADE OF SAINTS, by Mark J. Towney.

Actually, neither when I was a kid, nor now, do I have much concern about the origin and meaning of Valentine's Day. But I remember how I felt.

Even before I was at the dating age – long before, in fact – I had feelings that I interpreted as love for some pretty little girl in my class at school – at least she was pretty in my eyes, and that's what counted.

I held and nurtured those feelings within me. They were my secret, for I couldn't risk being teased if I let them be known. And I certainly couldn't risk her laughing at me or rejecting me.

When there was a "certain somebody" in my life, Valentine's Day took on special importance. That Day I could let my secret be known – just a little bit. Or I could at least do things that said, "Be my valentine."

For a whole day I could acknowledge my feelings.

Looking back on those years, I am aware of some things I thought and felt about the object of my love – and, indeed, about me.

Acutally, I knew very little about her, and certainly I didn't know if she had done anything to earn being loved, or even to deserve it.

That didn't matter. I loved her and, that day at least, wanted her to know it. I hoped that she would respond – accept my love – maybe even love me. Whether she did or not, I knew my feelings.

I didn't offer my love in return for something she said or did. I didn't promise some goodies for the future in return for her complying with a set of requirements I had drawn up. I didn't threaten her with dire consequences if she failed to meet the requirements.

In fact, there was nothing for her to do – no way she was supposed to be – no rules for her to follow. There were no specifications for her to meet to deserve to be loved. I neither knew nor cared if she had done things to deserve to be loved. I didn't try to find out. I had no need to. None of that mattered.

I loved her just as I saw her to be. As far as I was concerned, she deserved to be loved, and I had no intention of withholding that love, nor of setting criteria that she must meet before I would love her.

I did want to know if she was willing to receive my love. On that Valentine's Day, I would hope for and watch for the signs. If they came, I was in seventh heaven. If they did not, I was of all people most miserable.

All that was many years ago. Maybe I was just a naive, innocent and unrealistic kid – not even aware of all the factors that needed to be taken into account for one person to love another.

But then, maybe I wasn't all that naive and unrealistic. Maybe – although I didn't know it then – maybe I was loving as God loves each of us.

Maybe I was.

Maybe God is saying, "Be my valentine," from exactly the same position and point of view that I said, "Be my valentine," to that little girl when I was a child.

Could it possibly be valid to interpret the words of the Bible as a plea from God, "Be my valentine"? Consider some of them.

John 3: 16 - "For God so loved the world that God gave God's only son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life."

Isn't this the measure of God's love – of God's longing for fulfilling relationship – of God's desire that every creature in God's own image should experience the fullest measure of satisfactions in life – and of God's willingness to take every possible step to enable that fullness of life – eternal life? "Be my valentine."

Jeremiah 31: 3b -"I have loved you with an everlasting love; therefore I have continued my faithfulness to you."

Is this God yearning for a true love relationship with the creation in God's own image – the assurance and reassurance of God's love no matter what the response of the creature – the repeated promise of God's faithfulness even though the creature rejects that true love relationship?

"I have loved you with an everlasting love; therefore I have continued my faithfulness to you." Is not this God saying, "Be my valentine"?

Or consider this from Isaiah 41: 9b-10 -"You are my servants (the ones whom I love), I have chosen you and not cast you off. Fear not, for I am with you. Be not dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you. I will help you. I will uphold you with my victorious right hand."

Is this not a statement of God's love, and of what God does to declare and demonstrate that love? Can it not be read as an indication that God wants us to know just how complete God's love is? "I have chosen you. I am with you. I will strengthen you. I will uphold you. I am your God." "Be my valentine."

At the risk of seeming to be repetitious, I summarize.

God is the lover. Because God is the lover, God makes certain commitments. God does not ask for commitments from the loved ones as pre-requisites before God will be the lover. Nothing is required of the loved one.

God says, "In these ways I manifest my love. I have chosen you. I am with you. I will help you. I will uphold you. I want you to have eternal life – the wholeness and fullness of life. I have done the things I can do to make it possible."

Or pick up the passage from Jeremiah 31: 33-34 where, in yet other words, we have the same message – "This is the covenant which I will make with the house of Israel after those days,' says the Lord. 'I will put my law within them, and I will write it upon their hearts, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. And no longer shall each man teach his neighbor and each his brother saying. "Know the Lord," for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest,' says the Lord. 'For I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more.'"

"Be my valentine," God says. "I am the lover. You are the loved ones. To let you know what my loving you means, I describe the nature of the relationship between us to which I am committed. I promise you how it will be."

When I was wishing that little girl would be my valentine, I dreamed of the nature of the relationship. I could even describe to myself how I thought it would be. Even then I told myself that I could love her totally, no matter what her response, and I could envision how it would be between us if she chose to be my valentine. But I knew that the actual relationship depended upon her and how she chose to be in it. I would not – I could not – force nor require her to respond in any way. I didn't want to.

So it is, I expect, between God and those whom God loves. God says, "Be my valentine," and tells me how it will be from God's point of view. I decide what to do with the invitation. God does not. God has already decided.

Before I can decide, I must ask myself some very searching questions. If I accept and believe that I am God's loved one, what difference does it make to me? How does it affect how I live my life? Even though God doesn't require anything of me for God to love me, what do I require of me? What is to be my response? Do I exploit and use God's love? Do I take advantage of it? Does it have no effect on my outlook on life? Does it make no difference in my attitudes? Do I feel no responsibility?

Maybe the little girl didn't ask herself any such questions when she was deciding how to respond to me. Maybe she saw no need to. Maybe you don't either, even though you believe God loves you in all the ways we have been describing. Maybe it is enough for you that God loves you and takes you just as you are without specifying any changes. Maybe you like that freedom from requirements and demands, and don't want any responsibilities.

I do have the need to ask the questions. I must ask them and try to answer them.

Actually, there is one question that incorporates all the others.

What happens to me when I believe I am loved like this – when I believe that I am God's valentine and am willing to be? What happens?

I feel incredible awe. As I think about it, my breath comes more quickly. My heart pounds. I am astounded. How can it be? Even though I believe it, I don't really understand it. Can it be true? Yes, it is true. I am overwhelmed, and I rejoice. What amazing good news it is!

I pause. Good news? I wonder.

There must be a price that goes with it. No, there is no price. There must be. Such love can't be freely given. But it is.

So what do I do? How do I respond?

The sense that there is a price to pay creeps back in. It is so ingrained. I am grateful that I am so loved, but I don't feel worthy. I need to do something to prove that I am worthy of such love.

No, I don't. Whether or not I am worthy isn't the issue. When God says, "Be my valentine," God has already declared my worthiness to be loved. In fact, I can't do anything to prove that I am worthy – or unworthy for that matter.

What can I do? How do I respond? I still must answer my question.

I can love as I am loved.

I can love God as God loves me. I can love myself as God loves me. I can love my neighbor as I love myself. I can be the lover in all my relationships.

But I don't know how to love as I am loved. I am weak. I am selfish. I am afraid. I am often insensitive. Loving seems to require more than I want to give.

Besides, if God loves me anyway – no matter what – why bother? I won't lose God's love.

That's right. I won't. I can't. And I am free not to try to love as I am loved.

I don't want to do that, but I really don't know how to love as I am loved.

Do you think these kinds of thoughts?

I did – and do? Where do I find answers?

I am reminded of Jesus. He went about doing good, which is another way of saying that he was sensitive to the needs of people and responded to those needs according to his ability. He used the resources he had to feed the hungry and heal the sick. He was with people in their distress. He freed them from their captivity. He visited them in their homes. He was concerned. He cared. He loved as he was loved.

I find some answers by looking at and listening to Jesus.

I also find some answers by looking at and listening to myself. Who am I? What do I believe? What are my resources and abilities? What opportunities do I have to make use of them in response to need?

This line of thought is beginning to feel heavy. I'm beginning to feel burdened and obligated again. Let's back off that line of thought.

How do I respond?

I stop worrying about what to do. I steep myself in the knowledge that I am loved, and nothing – nothing – is required of me in response.

Do you hear that? I stop worrying about what to do and saturate myself with the knowledge that I am loved.

God so loved the world that God gave him/her self.

God said, "I have loved you with an everlasting love. I am faithful."

God said, "I have chosen you. I am with you."

God made a covenant, "I am your God and you are my people. I put my law within you, and write it upon your hearts. I know you, and you know me."

I saturate myself with that knowledge until I believe it with my whole being. Then I don't worry about what to do, for what I do is governed by what I believe.

AND GOD SAID, "BE MY VALENTINE."

AND I REPLY, "GOD, I AM YOUR VALENTINE."

The prayer at the end of the sermon:

Be my valentine. Be my beloved.

I am your beloved, O God. I accept that fact. I saturate my life – my very spirit – with that fact. How can I do otherwise? Amen.