

## Surrender to Love - David G. Benner A Book Review by Dan Steinhart

“Surrender” is one of those tricky words. It carries emotional baggage associated with “giving up”, “waving the white flag”, “beaten and defeated”. Heroes in books and movies, facing overwhelming odds vow never to surrender! Losers surrender.

Of course, there is a positive side to the notion of “surrender”. It can carry the idea of “relax and give in”; to no longer resist a force more powerful than myself. But regardless of the positive or negative spin, surrender always means giving something up. And that is almost always a very difficult thing for any of us to do. After all, we never want to surrender our options!

Dr. David G. Benner (one of the most helpful of authors) has written Surrender to Love as the first book in a trilogy of books (including The Gift of Being Yourself and Desiring God’s Will). While deep, these books are not hard reading. Nor are they fast-reads! They require reflecting, consideration, introspection.

For example, I found myself reflecting on my own experience with God when I read this early sentence - ***“Many, even evangelicals, who talk the most about a personal relationship with God - will not have much to say about how they actually experience God in that relationship.”*** I did not want to agree with this thought, but after some thoughtful reflection, I realized he was correct!

As children, we are taught that God is love! Benner pushes us into that notion by suggesting that ***“If God is love, he cannot be truly known apart from love.”*** Again, as a good evangelical, I’ve always had a tendency to try to know God on the basis of His grace, His forgiveness, mercy and even His wrath. These things all have an object - namely, me/us. But Benner corrects that perception when he states that ***“the Father’s love reflects the Father’s character, not the children’s behavior.”***

To understand the fundamental nature of God as “love” means all the other aspects of his character are informed by love. God’s love is never compromised by anger. God is slow to anger and rich in mercy (Ex. 34:6). ***“Surrender involves relaxing, and you must feel safe before you can relax.”***

Many of us have grown up with an understanding of the Gospel that was inspired more by fear, then by love. My own story demonstrates this. As a young boy, I was in a service where the message was clearly about the penalty for sin being an eternity spent in hell. Wanting to escape that eventuality, I raised my hand, prayed a prayer, and began to try to live in a way that pleased God (not easy for a seven year old!). This was not out of love, but out of fear. Fear of displeasing God.

Benner helps us begin to identify the many sources of fear we carry with us, all the result of living in a broken world as broken people. **“Conditional and imperfect love from human beings makes the unconditional and perfect love of God seem unbelievable and untrustworthy.”** As we start to recognize the fear, we can begin to understand how it causes us to engage God with conditions and boundaries. **“...fear always interferes with the impulse toward love. Energy invested in maintaining safety and comfort always depletes energy available for love of others.”**

Another place of “required reflection” for me was in the chapter Surrender and Obedience. I was shocked at the following sentences - **“...we can and frequently do offer a substitute for surrender, we call it obedience. Those who surrender obey. But not all who obey surrender.”** Yes, I had to acknowledge that this was true (about me). And then these words - **“Christian obedience is more like what lovers give each other than what soldiers give their superiors. Lovers demonstrate their love by doing what each other wants. And so it should be with Christians and their God.”**

As he approaches the end of the book, Dr. Benner makes another startling observation - **“If we are not becoming more loving, something is seriously wrong.”** Why? Well, to be becoming more like God (Jesus) would undoubtedly mean to become more like Love himself. The problem, in Benner’s estimation is **“we want a spirituality of improvement, not a spirituality of transformation.”** And that caused another pause as I had to evaluate my own discipleship in terms of “better vs transformed”.

Ultimately, David Banner asserts that **“because God is love, and because human beings are made in God’s image, love is who we are. Love is not, first and foremost, something that we do. More basically, it is who we are. The point of being human is to learn love. Learning love is a journey back to the reality of the First Love of our lives, the love that was there before we experienced any rejection and that will remain after all rejections. Learning love is preparation for union with God.”**

In the years since I first read this wonderful book, I’ve learned that surrender is never a once-and-done event. Surrender is a daily re-orienting myself to the One who is Love. If you struggle with never feeling good enough, or unlovable, this book is for you. And if your vision of God is distant, mean or demanding, this book is also for you!