

# The Church: where we are being restored for love

(1 Jn. 4:7-16)

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**Introduction:** It's that time of year when everyone is thinking about LOVE again, but what kind of love? Our world is in love with a romantic notion of love that looks great, smells great, dresses cool, dreams big, lavishes gifts, and excels in outward shows of affection. But is that really the love that we need?

- There's no more important message than love in our world; everybody's hungry for it. Ask people what they really want out of life, and for most it boils down to this four-letter word – to give and receive **love!** It has the power to lift our spirits or send us into the depths of despair, and what an enormous impact on the life of a child!
- But its true meaning is often misunderstood. Maybe that's why the Greeks had four different words to describe what we in English lump together under the one term love:
  - **Eros** - Their word for sexual attraction or lust: the urge to merge, generally in a sensual way; the kind of "love" that can come on suddenly and leave just as quickly.
  - **Philia** - The kind of affection you feel for a close friend, dispassionate virtuous love, found also in the word *philadelphia* ("brotherly love").
  - **Storgé** - Affection that applied between family members, common or natural empathy like that of parents for offspring, but it could also be used of pets, love for country, or your favorite sports team.
  - **Agapao** - The verb used in classical Greek literature to describe actions that we might associate with "true love," genuine caring that transcends one's feelings, physical desires, or circumstances, thus more focused on the well-being of the other. The noun form of this word, *agape*, was used by NT writers to describe the love of God in Christ, the love intended to provoke our love for Him and to motivate a lifestyle of love toward others.
- So if we can define love so specifically, why do we have so much trouble experiencing it? Why doesn't it flow more naturally and freely if it's what we most want? What sin has damaged in us is our very capacity to love and be loved. The enemy of our souls didn't bother giving us a

superficial wound – he went for the jugular! Scripture makes clear that it's our heart that's been corrupted, the root of our sense of well-being and well-giving, so that we are damaged in the most sensitive area of life, and therefore, handicapped in the most serious way possible. It often creates a vicious cycle: I don't feel loved, so I don't give love, so I never feel worth loving or truly adequate for loving others. How do I break out of this awful trap? Or as Paul put it, "Who will deliver me from this body of death?" (Rom. 7:24).

- We know the theoretical answer is Christ, but we don't always know how to apply that answer when we're feeling unloved or faced with a situation where love is NOT our initial response. And there's where the church is intended to come to our aid – not the "church" in some abstract sense, but actually *being a vital part* of Christ's body! It's a kind of laboratory where we "practice" on each other! And when you practice something, you don't always get it right – you may make mistakes, you may have to ask forgiveness, you're learning. So it is when we "practice" loving each other in the church!
- Church is not supposed to be a "spectator sport" where we just sit on the sidelines and watch others perform, nor is it "spiritually themed entertainment," which we enjoy for a little while on the weekend to get our batteries recharged. Church is serious business – we're intended to get involved and vitally connected to others (in Spanish we say "*hay que mojarse*"). Being the Body of Christ in this world takes commitment and work, and that means it can get messy!

1) So speaking to the church, John begins his exhortation in today's passage with "let's love one another!" It's a first-person plural reciprocal command ("*amémonos*"), so we are called to do it to each other – if we know how, and if we can just overcome our egotism, pride, prejudices, and "busy-ness"!

- Since Christ became totally vulnerable on our behalf, so we need to "become *vulnerable*" with each other by loving one another. That means we participate in church in the hope of being **restored for love**, reconciled and retrained for love, renewed and redeemed for love, re-educated, recalibrated, and reprogrammed for love! When we try to do it in our own strength, we just get frustrated and decide it's no use, because it's too hard, because "people are not worth our efforts and sacrifice." They'll just be ungrateful and turn on you after you've made huge sacrifices for them. Of course, that *does* happen sometimes. But did we forget whom we're following? Did we forget what they did to Him? Yet no matter how they treated Jesus, He never became bitter, never decided we were not worth the price, never grew pessimistic. He knew the cost He would have to pay, willingly laid down His life, and let Himself be broken for us so we could experience **His Spirit of love** and learn to love each other from the Master who is Himself love!

- So the Apostle John goes on in this passage to clarify the love he's talking about: the love that comes from God is not a human invention. That means this love we are to have for each other can never be reduced to a mere feeling or emotion, but it has a specific content and definition. John doesn't leave it to our criteria to decide what it looks like or how it's to be expressed. In fact, he defines it over and over in this first letter: "**This is how we know what love is:** Jesus Christ laid down His life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers and sisters" (3:16). "**This is how God's love was manifested** among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him. **This is love:** not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also *ought* to love one another" (4:9-11). Our love must flow out of His.

- This means that "**church**" is really about learning how to lay down our lives for each other. Had you ever thought of it that way? Is that why you're here today? Are you not sure

“these people” are worth it? We must get beyond our prejudices. We must get Christ’s vision of the people around us and of His Body. We urgently need *His* definition of love and *His* power for love. Our problem is that we always prefer to set our own parameters, don’t we?

**2)** For example, Rob Bell told talk-show host Oprah Winfrey that he believes the Church is moments away from embracing same-sex marriage. Bell appeared on the broadcast with his wife Kristen to discuss their book *The Zimzum of Love: A New Way of Understanding Marriage* (2014).

<http://www.truthrevolt.org/news/former-pastor-rob-bell-christianity-evolving-gay-marriage>

- Bell is the one who bashed biblical teaching on hell in the *NY Times* bestseller *Love Wins*. So now he seeks to transform how we understand and practice marriage in this latest book. (“Zimzum,” by the way, is from a Hebrew word indicating the space that God supposedly left vacant when He drew back to make room for creation, according to a 16<sup>th</sup>-century Jewish rabbi. Bell uses the analogy to explain how marriage can work better.

<http://resources.thegospelcoalition.org/library/the-zimzum-of-love>

- In the interview, Kristen read a selection from their book claiming that same-sex nuptials are a gift to the world. Oprah: “I think it’s great that you all made a conscious choice to include gay marriage in [the book]. Why [did you do that]?” Rob Bell: “One of the oldest aches in the bones of humanity is loneliness. Loneliness is not good for the world. Whoever you are, gay or straight, it is totally normal, natural and healthy to want someone to go thru life with. It’s central to our humanity.” Oprah: “When is the Church going to get that?” Bell: “We’re close.” Bell’s wife: “I think it’s evolving.” Bell: “Lots of people are already there. We think it’s inevitable and we’re moments away from the Church accepting it.”

- Next Bell asserted that **the Church will “continue to be even more irrelevant”** if it persists in citing the Bible’s prohibitions on homosexual behavior. Did Bell mean that as a warning? Like, “You’re headed for irrelevance if you keep on believing the Bible”? Maybe he never read Jesus’ words about heaven and earth passing away, though Jesus’ words would never pass away! Bell continues: “I think we’re witnessing the death of a particular subculture that doesn’t work.... You sort of die or you adapt.”

<http://www.christianpost.com/news/former-megachurch-pastor-rob-bell>

- This sounds exactly like a false prophet: this former pastor who gained notoriety by teaching the Bible has developed an entire marriage philosophy from an obscure word used by a Jewish rabbi. The results are not new insights but the same problem ascribed to the people of Athens: “Now all the Athenians and the foreigners who lived there would spend their time in nothing except telling or hearing something new” (Ac. 17:21). Eric Ludy (Colorado pastor) says the Bells are in fact forging “a new golden calf, a god of our culture’s making, certainly not the God of the Bible.”

**3)** So back to our main question: **Is learning to love a matter of adapting to our culture?** Can our culture actually teach us what we desperately need to know about love? John is saying, “Not on your life, because love, real love, is of God.” You won’t find *this* love “growing wild” out in the world – it’s a supernatural gift, and it comes to us through Jesus Christ.

- Did you notice the protesters at Berkeley and NY University last week? These students supposedly were demanding free speech, love, equality and tolerance for all people. Yet they

physically beat those who disagreed with them, they chanted expletives at guests on their campus and vandalized local shops when they didn't get their way. What do they really understand about love? We live in a culture that encourages unrestrained hedonism and loves the shiny surface of things, the glossy superficial and shallow. Secular journalists and sociologists are calling today's youth an "artificial" and "fragile" generation, living in a "soft" society. Is technology at the root of this? Sometimes I look around on the train and see big hulking guys (who should be out moving mountains) reduced to playing soldier on their video games with two thumbs! And I ask myself, "why do these guys not have a real-life mission?!"

- So if we claim to know God, then we "ought" to love ... but the truth is that sometimes we don't. And we're afraid to admit it, because the text says "whoever does not love does not know God!" (4:8). Oh no! So if I have some unloving thoughts or feelings, I'd better hide them or pretend they don't exist? Is that the way to maturity?!

- Rebecca Pippert (author of *Out of the Salt Shaker and into the World*) tells the story of when she was a university student in an undergraduate psychology class at Harvard. She took note of how honest her peers were in class, puzzled about life, debating the choices they were making, wrestling with big questions. It was the earnest debate typical of college students searching for answers. Then one evening on her way home from class, she dropped in on her church Bible study. The differences she noted were stark: no one was talking honestly, no one was wrestling with how to live well. The psychology students had good questions, but no pat answers. The Bible study members had good answers, but no deep questions. They wrestled with sentence structure, varying interpretations, cross-references, but they weren't wrestling with life because they were afraid to be fully open with each other about their shortcomings and failures. I'm not saying this is a picture of our Bible studies at IBC, but just reminding us of Jesus' stern warning to the Pharisees who studied the Scriptures diligently, but never let them expose their own neediness so that they would be drawn to Jesus! Sometimes we don't love! And if we don't admit it, but only try to hide it and cover it up, then we never go humbly to the Source of love to confess our need!

- The love that we're to share in the Body of Christ is the very same love that God manifested by sending His Son into the world as one of us: total solidarity, perfect identification, the original model for humanity enfleshed among us. We don't need to look any further for the definition of love – **this is it!** So don't be deceived into trusting some other source for experiencing the truth and grace of love! Only by knowing and depending on Jesus can we become like Him, learn to love like He does, grow into His magnanimous image (that's maturity!), so that together we can become what God intended.

**Conclusion:** Church is about corporate living driven by common belief (a worldview that says Jesus is our Resource for love), fueled by the Word of God (that's our vision for life and the reprogramming we need at every level), and highly dependent on connectedness (with the Holy Spirit and fellow members, just like a human body). Real, deep transformation happens in the context of community (we don't learn to love in isolation), and it requires connection beyond Sunday mornings, because it's more about depth of relationships than about an event we attend (last night's Valentine banquet was so special, but it could only whet our appetites for going deeper in relationships!).

- We all long for a **Hero-King** who will conquer our hearts and show us how strong He is – to protect us, save us, make us great, and give us a share in the glory. We all want glory! That's why we pursue it so hard in a thousand different ways – from trying to preserve our good looks,

to other materialistic pursuits, or climbing the career ladder, or conquering the next level in your video game. We're after the glory that will make us feel strong and invincible and worthy. We were made for glory, but not our own! When we work for our glory or the glory of this world, our lives are delivered over to vanity. When we learn to **love the glory of our Hero-King**, we connect with what's eternal, our "hope of glory," the One who showed us true love by humbling Himself, true strength by laying down His life in weakness, true honor by bearing our sins and shame, and true victory by overcoming death.

- John calls Him,
  - the One sent into the world **that we might live through Him** (4:9)
  - the **one and only Son** sent as an **atonement sacrifice** for our sins (4:10)
  - the One who gives us of **His Spirit** and comes to live in us (4:13)
  - the **Savior of the world** who shows us real love (4:14).
  
- As we call on Him, He saves us from a Narcissistic focus in life, from being stuck on ourselves, from dishonestly covering up our lack of love. He's the One who restores our capacity to give and receive love, who teaches us to love even the unlovely in His name – beginning in the privacy of our most intimate space, then rippling out from there in concentric circles to all our spheres of influence. Call on Him today! Bask in His love! He longs to be *your* Hero-King!