

The Source, Course and Force of Love

Choosing To Love (part 1)

Summary: If we truly know we are loved by God, then we would not be surprised God expects us to love one another and that love should make us “shine like stars in the world” (Php 2:15), drawing others to seek out what animates us, being the love from and for our Saviour. May our integrity be based on receiving and giving agápē love.

Scripture: 1 Corinthians 1:1-9; 13:1-14:1a¹

Date: Sunday, 19 June 2022 (Narellan CCC)

Introduction

Further Fallout at The Meeting House

I have shared with you already the disturbing story of Bruxy Cavey, the founding and lead Pastor of The Meeting House megachurch in Ontario, Canada. While he confessed to a years-long affair, he has been charged with sexual assault and arrested.

Sadly, the story gets worse.

A third-party victims' advocate hired by The Meeting House elders in March of this year, heard 38 reports of sexual misconduct that had largely gone unreported to the congregation. Most happened years ago.²

The result is that four of its former pastors have now been credibly accused—and two convicted—of sexual abuse.

I am in no way condoning this behaviour, but I must wonder aloud why is this considered despicable to a world that normalises sexual deviance? Is it because we all understand this is shameful behaviour, even as our fallen world attempts to normalise it?

We know what is shameful behaviour because we all develop a level of understanding the difference between right and wrong, good and bad, even though we might buck against those distinctions. We know what is shameful behaviour and we find the perpetrators despicable who try to pretend otherwise or who won't admit what they have done.

I believe this is especially the case with The Meeting House Canadian megachurch. This church belongs to the Mennonite family of churches worldwide. They are not among the Old Order Mennonites, those who eschew technology, but are still within that theological family. They are known for promoting peacemaking and conflict resolution, and they are known for a spiritual sobermindedness that leads to an austere lifestyle.

Mennonite Christians are certainly the kind we would not expect to be prone to sexual assault and abuse. Thus, when it happens, this shameful behaviour becomes despicable because *they should not only know better but be known for better.*

What & Why?

In our completely messed up world, that does not accept the difference between right and wrong, and thus does not seem to know ‘which way is up’, it behooves us to be a community

of faith known for integrity. While some might question our beliefs and values, that we live a lifestyle consistent with our faith is absolutely paramount and desperately needed.

Let us be known as people and a community that chooses to love: to love God, love one another, and to love our neighbours as ourselves.

If we are going to choose to love, however, we had better make sure we understand what love is and what it is not.

To help us in this regard, today we begin a six part sermon series that will explore the famous Love chapter found in the writings of the apostle Paul. I am referring to chapter 13 of *The First Letter to the Corinthians*.

The Context

But, first, let us begin with some context.

Commentators tell us,

Some seventeen years after the death of Jesus Christ, Paul, a Jew who had become a believer about fourteen years earlier, preached the gospel to certain gentiles—and perhaps to a few Jews—in Corinth, and a church was formed.

*(J. Paul Sampley)*³

The city of Corinth was located about forty miles to the west of Athens on the shoulder of the isthmus linking the Peloponnese peninsula, at the southern most tip, to the rest of Greece.

In Paul's time, Corinth was a hub commercially and religiously. Corinth was perhaps best known for its artisans' products, such as bronzes, but it also did a thriving business in pottery and earthenware. Religious diversity was ensured by Corinth's location.

Politically, Corinth enjoyed the status of a colony, which was the greatest civic honour applied to cities in the Roman empire. This assured a special relationship with the empire, such that Roman laws were in effect and Latin was the official language of government, even though Greek was commonly spoken by the population and Paul's letters to Corinth are written in Greek. Additionally, the imperial cult of Rome was well established throughout the city.⁴

Corinth was said to have a “generally superficial cultural life”, having a reputation for wealth without culture and for the abuse of the poor by the wealthy. Also, with sailors enjoying city life and then moving along, this contributed to Corinth becoming known as “Sin City” in biblical times.

Paul likely arrived in Corinth in 50 A.D. and established a church there, living and working with them for a year and a half. Thus, this church and its members were quite dear to him and he to they.

In an earlier, now lost letter, Paul wrote to them with advice to not associate with immoral people who had become part of the community of faith (1 Cor 5:9-11). What we call the first letter is, therefore, actually his second letter. It deals with the confusion that resulted from his first letter and the questions the community's leaders then sent to the apostle.

Commentators tell us,

The congregation at Corinth reflected the socioeconomic and religious makeup of the city. In keeping with the “steep social pyramid” that was typical of that culture, very few believers were rich, and most were poor (1 Cor 1:26).⁵

Judging from the names listed in 1 Corinthians, this was a church that was well networked throughout the Christian world of the time.

It was, therefore, a relatively ‘successful’ church, yet the believers at Corinth still suffered from the sociocultural dynamics of their pre-conversion lives, dynamics between the rich and the poor, and whether or not to engage in cultural festivals, etc.

If money and status could not distinguish the people from each other, then it seems spirituality and spiritual gifts would have to do. Some were using their spiritual gifts to promote themselves and gain status.

For my part, brothers and sisters, I was not able to speak to you as spiritual people but as people of the flesh, as babies in Christ. (1 Corinthians 3:1)

The people had “gifts” and it was a busy church, yet the possession of “gifts” did not make them spiritually mature. The apostle had to inform them they were “worldly” (1 Cor 3:1). They were prone to error and excusing sinful behaviour of the worst kind: a man was sleeping with his father’s wife/stepmother (1 Cor 5:1).

As a result, the church at Corinth was lacking in love for one another.

For Paul, the Christian faith is lived in community. Genuine unity is the goal, rather than mere uniformity. And we learn from this community’s experience it is often easier to be busy than to extend love.

“God is love” (1 Jn 4:16) the Bible reminds us and Jesus wants His followers to demonstrate love (Jn 13:35).

Sadly, this church had become known for divisions amongst themselves, egregious sexual immorality, and spiritual arrogance, rather than for their love for one another.

The Source of Christian Love

While the word is not really used until chapter 13, the whole of *The First Letter to the Corinthians* is an extended reflection on love for one another, love among a community of faith. Yet this is no ordinary love.

The word translated as “love” in our English New Testament is the Greek word *agápē*. The word *agápē* was seldom used in Greek writings but is used often in the NT.

Agápē does not refer to sexual love, romantic love, friendship or sentiment. It is a love whose source is God for, as it is written,

This hope will not disappoint us, because God’s love has been poured out in our hearts through the Holy Spirit who was given to us. (Romans 5:5)

This is the love God has for us and it is a love from God. The source of Christian love then is God himself.

“As the Father has loved me, I have also loved you. Remain in my love.
(John 15:9)

Above all, put on love, which is the perfect bond of unity. (Colossians 3:14)

And may the Lord cause you to increase and overflow with love for one another and for everyone, just as we do for you. (1 Thessalonians 3:12)

And let us consider one another in order to provoke love and good works
(Hebrews 10:24)

This love *from God* is enabled in us *by God* and should characterise our community *through God*.

Chapter 13 gives us an extended definition of *agápē* love and this definition forms the basis for this sermon series.

The Course of Christian Love

We love because he first loved us. (1 John 4:19)

Since *agápē* is first *from God* and then enabled in us *by God* and *through God*, we can understand its course as being from God, to us, to others, and to our neighbours. The course of Christian love then is that it must be received by an individual believer then practised in a community before it can impact a neighbourhood.

If we do not love, then it is a fair question whether we have, in fact, been loved. The gift must be shared, in other words. That is God's intention and Purpose.

The Force of Christian Love

Not only is love God's intention, it is the very essence of his nature:

Dear friends, let us love one another, because love is from God, and everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. The one who does not love does not know God, because God is love. God's love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his one and only Son into the world so that we might live through him. Love consists in this: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins. Dear friends, if God loved us in this way, we also must love one another.

(1 John 4:7-11)

There is a force to *agápē* love. God is love, so he loves his creation. We receive his love and love one another. For the individual believer and the community then, faith and hope are important, but when we love one another, we show the nature of God:

By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.
(John 13:35)

The force of Christian love then is that it leads others to the Saviour:

Love consists in this: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins. (1 John 4:10)

In the presence of such love, we cannot help but be impacted by it and attracted to it.

Application

Since this *agápē* love is so precious and important, this preliminary reflection on it raises some questions regarding how to apply it.

What distinguishes us in this community from each other? For the believers at Corinth it was wealth and education and spiritual maturity. They handled those distinctions so very poorly. How do we handle those things that distinguish us from each other?

If our distinctions become badges of honour, reserving privileges to some and not available to others, then just maybe we are not showing love to one another, “for there is no favouritism with God” (Rom 2:11; cf. Jas 2:1-9).

Do we reflect integrity to our neighbours, being a consistency in our faith and lifestyle? What does our lifestyle say about our faith? Is our faith and lifestyle consistent at church, at home, in our school or workplace, in our third places?

If we truly know we are loved by God, then we would not be surprised God expects us to love one another and that love should make us “shine like stars in the world” (Php 2:15), drawing others to seek out what animates us, being the love from and for our Saviour. May our integrity be based on receiving and giving *agápē* love.

Conclusion

Besides this preliminary consideration of the source, course and force of love described in *The First Letter to the Corinthians*, there are four things in its most famous chapter 13 that bear close attention: The greatness, governing, glories and gifts of love.

We will turn to these in the coming weeks.

Endnotes

- 1 Unless otherwise noted, all scripture quotations are taken from *The Christian Standard Bible* (Nashville, TN, USA: Holman Bible Publishers, 2017).
- 2 Yonat Shimron, “Canadian Megachurch Discloses 38 Reports of Sexual Misconduct by 4 Pastors”, *ChurchLeaders.com*, 14-Jun-2022, <https://bit.ly/3O2Ur0u> (accessed 17-Jun-2022).
- 3 J. Paul Sampley, “The First Letter to the Corinthians”, *New Interpreter’s Bible*, ed. Leander E. Keck, vol. 10 (Nashville, TN, USA: Abingdon Press, 1994–2004), pg 773.
- 4 Ibid, pg 774–5.
- 5 Ibid, pg 777.