

Grace



Issue 2010 no. 1

Theme: Love

We love him, because he first loved us

The theme of this first issue is “Christian love”. The word “Christian” means “of Christ” or “related to Christ”. Therefore, if we are to know anything about Christian love, we have to begin with the love that has come to us from Christ. Every worker learns his trade by copying a master. The apprentice mechanic is taught by another mechanic. The learning fundi wa nguo watches a skilled tailor at work. Boys playing football learn new tricks by watching their heroes on the television. A Christian can only learn how to love from the Master – Jesus Christ.

Eternal love

This verse from John (1 John 4:19) is very short, but also very deep. If we dig down into it, we will find treasure! There are four things which we shall think about as we consider it. Firstly, we are reminded that the love of Christ is eternal. The verse reminds us that Jesus “first loved us”. When, then, did this love begin? Where can we trace it back to, we ask? The Bible's answer to this question is very clear. God loved us before we ever existed; before there ever was a world; before time itself had begun. When nothing else existed apart from God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit, we who believe were in God's heart. Paul writes, “he has chosen us in Christ, before the foundation of the world” (Ephesians 1:4), “that we should be holy and without blame before him in love.”

God's love does not come to us because we have earned it. It is not after much trouble and effort that the Father then says “I love you”. The Bible tells us very simply that God had already set his desires upon us before we had done anything at all. He drew us to himself in Christ because he had chosen us long before - “Yes, I have loved you with an everlasting love: therefore with lovingkindness have I drawn you” (Jeremiah 31:3). All our weakness and all our mistakes can never take away God's love from us. What God has decided in eternity, he will not allow the events of time to undo. He is not a God who makes a purpose, and later becomes wiser when events unfold.

This truth, of God's eternal love, should give great stability and strength to Christians. All your friends might reject you – but God's love will never change. Your family might turn against you for being a Christian, but God cannot. You could lose your job and be locked out of your home – but you will remain in God's heart. God's love is stronger, older and more permanent than the mountains of the Rift Valley. It had no beginning, and will have no end. God's love to us is eternal.

Crucified love

God's love has not remained in eternity alone. The apostle John especially wants us to remember how that love has been made known to us. There is a place where that love was particularly shown. There was a time when that love reached out to us in our sins, plucked us out of hell, and gave us a new place amongst God's people. That place is Calvary, and the cross on which Jesus died.

We ask John, "Where do we find God's love?" His answer is, *"Here is love, not that we loved God, but that he loved us, and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins"* (1 John 4:10). God did not only love us by speaking nice words. His love took action to save us from our terrible situation. His love saw that we would perish because of our sins, and so he sent his Son. A "propitiation" is a sacrifice which has been offered to God. In particular, it is a sacrifice which takes away anger and wrath. That anger is God's, who we have offended with our sins. Our sins have challenged the ruler of all the world, and left us exposed to his just punishment. In justice, we deserve hell forever, where the whole universe could look upon us and see what disobeying God deserves.

In his immense love, God has spared us this punishment by sending his own Son. If you saw a murderer being taken from court to be hung, would you step in? Would you ask if you could be punished instead, even though you had never killed anyone? Would you offer your one and only son, who you deeply loved, to take the place of the criminal, because you had decided to love that criminal? This is what God did, when he gave Jesus to the cross for us. The terrible anger of God's holy justice all fell on God's beloved – and all this because of God's love.

When we ask, "How do we know that God loves us?", the Bible has a consistent answer. It always takes us to the cross and asks us to look at Jesus. We are not meant to look at our problems of today. It is not your successful job, or your good health, or your many friends that prove that God will always love me. It is not because there have been good rains, or success in trading. It is what he did when he offered up Jesus. "But God commends his love toward us, in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us" (Romans 5:8). "In this we see the love of God, because he laid down his life for us" (1 John 3:16). In the same way, all the problems of this life cannot prove that God has forgotten us. The question "does God still love me?" can always be answered by the believer in the same way. You must look back to Jesus' death, and then say "Yes, he loves me – even to death. God's love is not uncertain or useless – it is there on the cross." God first loved us – not just by words, but by giving the greatest thing he had.

We love him

God's love, John says, is what causes our love. Firstly, that love must be there if our faith is genuine. A man fathers a son, and that son will look like him, or think like him, or behave like him. If God has loved us, then he will also make us to love him. Love to God, who has shown himself to us in Jesus, is the essential mark of a true Christian. It is the first and greatest commandment (Mark 12:28-30). Everything that is good or lovely is found perfectly in God. If we know anything about him at all, and if we have seen anything of him, and if there is any spiritual life in us, we have to love God. John does not tell us that because he loved us, therefore we go to church. He does not say that because of God's love, we give away all our money or become preachers, or some other great work. Some people may do these things, but there is something deeper and more basic. The first thing that God's love produces in us, is love to him. Do you love God? It is one thing to say that you want to be saved. It is quite easy to want to escape hell, or to join a church and put money in the offering. John, though, says that true Christians love God. Do you? Does the idea of not loving God seem terrible to you? When Paul says, "If any man does not love the Lord Jesus Christ, let him be accursed" (1 Corinthians 16:22), does your heart say, "Amen"?

Because he first loved us

If you do love God, then John tells us why. It is because he first loved us. All the praise goes to him. When you first came to Christ, you did not know what was drawing you to him. You did not realise that there was an invisible hand leading you on. You might not have known that he had sent his Spirit to change your heart. But now John tells us what was happening even though it was not seen. It was not because we were very clever that we believed the gospel. It is not because we were less sinful than other people that we came to Christ. It is because God had first loved us, and that love gave birth to our love for him.

All true Christian love comes down from Christ. If one believer truly loves another person and does a good deed to help him, it is because Christ is working in that believer's life. We cannot take the credit. Naturally, we are selfish and hateful (Titus 3:3). It is only because God is pouring out his love into our hearts that the church can be a place of love. Nothing can come out of a man that is not inside him first. If true love is to come out of him, then he must first come to know the love of Christ. If we do anything in love, it is only a tiny reflection of what he has done for us. No love can ever be like his. If we truly want to love others as Christians, we must remember this. The only place to start is here. "*We love him, because he first loved us.*"

Msiipende dunia

“Msiipende dunia, wala mambo yaliyomo katika dunia. Mtu akiipenda dunia, kumpenda Baba hakumo ndani yake. Maana kila kilichomo duniani, yaani, tamaa ya mwili, na tamaa ya macho, na kiburi cha uzima, havitokani na Baba, bali vyatokana na dunia. Na dunia inapita, pamoja na tamaa zake, bali yeye afanyaye mapenzi ya Mungu adumu hata milele” (1 Yohana 2:15-17).

Mtume Yohana aliandika barua hii kwa kusudi fulani. Anasema kwamba, “Nimewaandikia ninyi mambo hayo, ili mjue ya kuwa mna uzima wa milele, ninyi mnaoliamini Jina la Mwana wa Mungu” (1 Yohana 5:13). Barua hii iliandikwa kwa wale “ambao wanaamini katika Jina la Mungu” Iliandikwa ili waweze kujua kwamba wako na uzima wa milele. Katika nchi yetu kuna wengi ambao wanadai kuwa wameokoka. Kila siku tunakutana na watu ambao wanasema mambo kama haya: “Bwana asifiwe, nimeokoka, Yesu ni Bwana wa maisha wangu.” Lakini Biblia inatuambia kwamba kuna watu ambao hudai wameokoka ilhali bado; wamejidanganya. Dhambi na shetani zimewadanganya kwa kujiwazia kwamba wameokoka ilhali bado. Hawa ni watu ambao Bwana Yesu Kristo alizungumzia akisema kwamba, “Si kila mtu aniambiaye, Bwana, Bwana, atakayeingia katika ufalme wa mbinguni; bali ni yeye afanyaye mapenzi ya Baba yangu aliye mbinguni. Wengi wataniambia siku ile, Bwana, Bwana, hatukufanya unabii kwa jina lako, na kwa jina lako kutoa pepo, na kwa jina lako kufanya miujiza mingi? Ndipo nitawaambia dhahiri, Sikuwajua ninyi kamwe, ondokeni kwangu, ninyi mtendao maovu” (Mathayo 7:21-23).

Kwa hivyo tunaona kwamba mtu akisema ameokoka, basi ni lazima ahakikishe kwamba hajidanganyi. Ni lazima ahakikishe kwamba kweli ameokoka na siyo tu maneno matupu. Je, atawezaje kufanya hivi? Je, atajichunguza aje ili aweze kujua kwamba ako katika imani? (2 Wakorintho 13:5). Jibu ni kwamba anahitaji kusoma barua hii ambayo Yohana aliandika na achunguze maisha yake kulingana na yale ambayo Yohana aliandika. Tunaposoma barua hii, tunaona kwamba Yohana anatupatia mthihani. Tunafaa kuchunguza imani yetu na maisha yetu kulingana na maneno yake ili tuone kabisa kama tumeokoka au la.

Katika mafundisho haya tutatazama 1 Yohana 2:15-17. Hapa tunapata maagizo ili tuweze kuona kabisa kama tumeokoka au la. Kuna mambo matatu katika mistari hii.

1. Yohana anatuambia kwamba tusiipende dunia

Mtu ambaye ameokolewa kwa ukweli haupendi ulimwengu na vitu vyake. Anaishi katika ulimwengu na anatumia vitu vya ulimwengu huu, lakini moyo

wake hauko katika vitu hivi. Akiwa na upendo wa vitu vya ulimwengu huu basi “upendo wa Baba haumo ndani mwake.”

Je, Yohana anamaanishi nini wakati anapozungumza kuhusu ulimwengu? Katika kifungu hiki Yohana anafafanua hivi kuhusu ulimwengu kwamba ulimwengu ni tamaa ya mwili, tamaa ya macho, majivuno ya mali. Mwili ndiyo kile Biblia inaita hali ya dhambi, hii ni hali ya kila mtu ambaye hajaokoka. Biblia inasema kwamba, “Kwa maana wale waufuatao mwili huyafikiri mambo ya mwili; bali wale waufuatao roho huyafikiri mambo ya roho. Kwa kuwa nia ya mwili ni mauti; bali nia ya roho ni uzima na amani. Kwa kuwa ile nia ya mwili ni uadui juu ya Mungu, kwa maana haitii sheria ya Mungu, wala haiwezi kuitii. Wale waufuatao mwili hawawezi kumpendeza Mungu” (Warumi 8:5-8).

Kile kwa hivyo Yohana anasema ni kwamba “dunia” ni vitu ambavyo viko katika dunia na vinatamanika na watu wa dunia na hao hujivuna kwa sababu ya vitu hivi. Wale ambao hawajaokoka wanapenda anasa na mali ya ulimwengu huu. Watu hawa hufanya kazi kwa bidii sana ili waweze kupata vitu hivi. Kwao mambo kumhusu Mungu si kitu. Labda unaweza kupata watu hawa huenda kanisani kila Jumapili, lakini mioyo yao haiko katika mambo ya Mungu, bali katika mambo ya ulimwengu huu. Watu hawa hupenda vyeo, mamlaka, heshima, pesa na mali. Haja yao ni kuwa na nyumba kubwa ya kifahari ili majirani na marafiki wao waweze kuwatamani. Haja yao pia ni kuwa na vyeo vya kuheshimika katika jamii ili watu waweze kuwaheshimu na kuwaomba usaidizi. Hivi ndivyo wale ambao hawajaokoka walivyo. Wanapenda vitu vya ulimwengu huu. Wanajiwekea hazina zao hapa ulimwenguni. Maisha yao yote inatawaliwa na vitu vya ulimwengu huu. Kuabudu Mungu si kitu kwao. Yesu alizungumza kuhusu watu hawa kwa kusema “Msijiwekee hazina duniani, nonda na kutu viharibupo, na wevi huvunja na kuiba; bali jiwekeeni hazina mbinguni, kusikiharibika kitu kwa nonda wala kutu, wala wevi hawavunji wala hawaibi; kwa kuwa hazina yako ilipo, ndipo utakapokuwapo na moyo wako” (Mathayo 6:19-21).

Kwa hivyo katika kifungu hiki Yohana anasema kwamba wale wote ambao wameokoka hawafuati vitu vya ulimwengu huu: “Msiupende ulimwengu na vitu vyake.” Ikiwa mtu anapenda ulimwengu huu na vitu vyake, basi ni ishara tosha kwamba mtu huyo hajaokoka. Anaweza kujidai kwamba ameokoka, lakini jinsi anavyoishi maisha yake ni ishara tosha kwamba hajaokoka.

2. Yohana anatuambia sababu kwa nini tusiipende dunia

Anasema kwamba “Maana kila kilichomo duniani, yaani, tamaa ya mwili, na tamaa ya macho, na kiburi cha uzima, havitokani na Baba, bali vyatokana na

dunia .” Kuna sababu mbili katika mistari hii kwa nini hatufai kuupenda ulimwengu.

(i) Kwa sababu yale yote ambayo yako katika ulimwengu huu hayatoki kwa Baba. Mungu ni mtakatifu na ndani mwake hamna dhambi. Kwa upande mwingine ulimwengu umejawa na dhambi. Ulimwengu uko katika upinzani na Mungu, umemwasi Mungu, unamchukia Mungu na neno lake na pia uko vitani na Mungu. “Maana kila kilichomo duniani, yaani, tamaa ya mwili, na tamaa ya macho, na kiburi cha uzima, havitokani na Baba.” Watu wale ambao hawajaokoka, hawajali kabisa mambo ya Mungu. Hawajali ufalme wa Mungu na kueneza injili yake ulimwenguni kote. Wanajali tu starehe zao na kutafuta starehe zao tu na anasa za ulimwengu huu. Hii ndiyo sababu Yakobo anasema kwamba “Kuwa rafiki wa dunia ni kuwa adui wa Mungu” (Yakobo 4:4).

(ii) Kwa sababu “Ulimwengu unapita na vitu vyake vyote.” Ulimwengu jinsi ulivyo hautakuwepo milele. Ulimwengu uko chini ya laana na siku moja utaharibiwa, na ulimwengu upya utaumbwa. Hii ni sababu hatufai kuupenda ulimwengu na vitu vyake vyote; kwa sababu siyo wa milele bali unapita.

3. Yohana anatuambia jambo kuhusu watu ambao wanapenda ulimwengu huu

Anasema kwamba, “Ikiwa mtu anapenda ulimwengu, upendo wa Baba hauko ndani mwake.” Katika msatari huu Yohana anasema kwamba ikiwa mtu anaupenda ulimwengu na kutafuta anasa za ulimwengu huu kwa sababu anatamani vitu vya ulimwengu kwa kupata furaha, basi upendo wa Baba hauko ndani mwake. Hii inamaanisha kwamba mtu huyo hajapokea upendo wa wokovu wa Baba moyoni mwake na pia kwamba hana upendo kwa Baba moyoni mwake. Biblia ianfunza kwamba tunaweza tu kupenda Mungu au vitu vya ulimwengu huu; hatuwezi kupenda Mungu na vitu vya ulimwengu huu pamoja. Yesu alisema kwamba, “Hakuna mtu awezaye kutumikia mabwana wawili; kwa maana atamchukia huyu na kumpenda huyu; ama atashikamana na huyu, na kumdharau huyu. Hamwezi kumtumikia Mungu na mali” (Mathayo 6:24).

Katika nchi yetu leo kuna watu wengi husema kwamba wameokoka. Lakini unapotazama maisha yao utapata kwamba wanapenda ulimwengu. Mara mingi mtu anaweza kusema kwamba, “Mtu huyo ameokoka, lakini amerudi nyuma katika wokovu wake; alikuwa akija kanisani kila Jumapili lakini sasa anapenda ulimwengu sana. Lakini ukweli ni kwamba tunajua ameokoka kwa sababu alimpokea Yesu.” Lakini Biblia haifundishi hivi. Biblia inasema kwamba ikiwa mtu ameokoka, ataishi maisha ya wokovu. Ikiwa mtu haishi maisha ya wokovu, basi ni ishara kwamba hajaokoka. Kwa hivyo katika kifungu hiki Yohana

anasema kwamba, “Ikiwa mtu anapenda ulimwengu, upendo wa Baba hauko ndani mwake.” Kwa sababu anapenda ulimwengu na kutafuta vitu vya ulimwengu huu, ni ishara kwamba mtu huyo hajaokoka. Ikiwa mtu huyo angekuwa ameokoka, hangetafuta anasa na mali za ulimwengu huu. Badala yake atautafuta ufalme wa Mungu na utakatifu wake (Mathayo. 6:33).

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Announcements

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Encouraging love in the local church

One of God's central purposes in the local church is love. In 1 Timothy 1:5, Paul wrote, “Now the goal of the commandment is love from a pure heart.” Different churches may have more or less gifts in different areas. In the area of love, though, every church is commanded to strive for the highest standard – and there are no excuses we can give to the Lord Jesus Christ if we fail here.

Why does love matter?

As we think about this topic, we must firstly be very sure of its importance. We must first remember one of God's reasons for having churches in the world. In Ephesians chapter 3, Paul writes about his service amongst the Gentiles (the nations). He writes about God's eternal purpose to make them his heirs, and then writes that God was working “with the purpose that now unto the principalities and powers in heavenly places might be known by the church the manifold wisdom of God” (verse 10). This verse tells us that angels and all the unseen spiritual powers that God has made are watching the church. Through it, God wishes to display to them something of his greatness. Though angels are much greater beings than we are (2 Peter 2:11), they learn something from the church. The church, therefore, is immensely important. And the Bible clearly teaches that love is one of the first things that a church should be known for.

On the night that Jesus was betrayed, he did one of his most staggering actions. It was not a miracle – we could say it was greater than a miracle. The apostle John writes about it, saying that at that time “Jesus knew that his hour was come that he should depart out of this world unto the Father” (John 13:1). More than that, he knew “that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he was come from God, and went to God” (John 13:3). What great thing did he do with this knowledge? John says that he rose from the supper, put aside his outer garments, took a towel, poured water into a bowl, and washed the disciples' feet. In other words, he showed them his love to them, by serving them in a very humble and very practical way. When he had done so, he then explained to them that he had done so for an example, so that they should do the same to each other (v12-17). Later on in his speech, he gave his famous “new commandment” - “A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; as I have loved you, that you also should love one another” (v34). “By this shall all men know,” he said, “that you are my disciples, if you have love one to another.”

Love is the mark of true Christianity

There is nothing surprising when a man loves his wife. That is how it should be. If someone takes care of his brother, or his son, that is what we expect. Jesus reminded us also that even the worst people in society look after each other. Even drunkards buy one another drinks and look out for one another (Matthew 5:46-47). In the same way, in Kenyan politics, politicians often try to look out for people from their own tribe or region. Nobody is surprised by this. The local church, however, is meant to be different. In the church, Christ wants us to love every other believer, whoever they are, whether rich or poor. It does not matter if they are from the tribe which our tribe hates, or if they are illiterate and we are educated. In the world, only people who have something in common normally come together. Christ desires that in the church we should love one another when we have nothing at all in common – except our relationship to him.

This is how the world will know that we are truly Jesus' disciples. This is how the watching angels will sing praises to God – when they see this love. In the church, we are called to love people simply because they belong to Jesus – not for any other reason. It is when we love people for Jesus' sake – and for Jesus' sake alone – that Jesus is truly glorified. In Matthew 25:34-40, at the last judgment, Christ praises his people for serving him by giving themselves in service to the least of his people: clothing the naked, feeding the hungry, and so on. Unconverted people will never show their love to Christ by serving his people (v41-45) – that is the privilege of believers in the local church.

Encouraging love

If this love is so important, how then can it be encouraged? The very first principle is that which Christ gave us. He did not simply teach about its significance. He himself got up, took the towel, filled the bowl, and started washing smelly feet. In other words, he gave a personal example to his disciples of what he meant. This means that love, in a local church, must be personally modelled to the people by the pastors. They must not behave like kings, lording it over the people and expecting to be served by them. That is what happens outside the church, and Christ tells us to avoid it (Matthew 20:25-27). The pastor should instead be like Christ, who gave up all his rights in order to do good to us. It will be useless to preach love to the people without this example. Nobody will think the pastor is serious unless he also acts. Nobody can be expected to perform better than the example and standard he sees. The pastor must not spend his time expecting honour from others, but instead humble himself like the Saviour. He must try to get rid of every kind of behaviour which says “the pastor is a special person”. Only then can he truly be a true servant of Christ.

Going on from here, the Biblical duty of hospitality is very important. True love involves true sharing. Christians together in a local church are meant to be living shared lives. Church is more than sitting together on Sunday and then separating. Hospitality is one of the ways that the Bible gives us to get to know each other better and grow together. When one believer opens his home to another and they have a meal together, it is an important act. It is a way of showing that he truly accepts his brother or sister – that we have welcome them into our hearts. This is why the Bible teaches that hospitality is not an option. It is a duty for everyone. The apostle Peter, immediately after mentioning the importance of love, then wrote, “Use hospitality to each other without grudging.” (1 Peter 4:8-9). Paul wrote the same and said that nobody should be allowed into church leadership unless they regularly practice it (1 Timothy 3:2, Titus 1:8). Therefore, churches that want to encourage love must encourage the duty of hospitality.

Sharing lives

Another important area for showing love is in involvement in one another's problems. The Bible recognises that problems and difficulties are normal in the Christian life. Even Paul's fellow-workers (or Paul himself!) were sick and had their plans defeated sometimes (2 Tim. 4:20), or had painful problems whilst in the work (1 Tim. 5:23, Gal. 4:13-15). There are thus always lots of opportunities. The Bible tells us to “mourn with those who mourn” (Romans 12:15), to visit the sick and imprisoned, to clothe the naked and feed the hungry (Matt. 25:35-36). There is a saying, “a friend in need is a friend indeed”. Real, practical love has a great opportunity to show itself at such times. Leaders must teach believers to take interest in each other's lives, to ask about problems, to pray about them, and to remember to ask again and see if anything can be done. This is what happened in the early church (Acts 4:34-35) and is a sign that the Holy Spirit is at work.

As well as these beginnings for encouraging love, we must also know some of the dangers to love in a local church. It can take a long time and much patience before we can see this tender plant growing. There are weeds which can quickly grow and kill it before it bears any fruit. One set of sins that can destroy love very quickly are sins of ungodly speech. Gossip, rumour-spreading and unkind words can ruin relationships very rapidly. “A gossip separates close friends” (Proverbs 16:28). “Whoever guards his mouth and his tongue keeps his soul from trouble” (Proverbs 21:23). Bad talk can only spread when it is listened to, so it is also important to instantly forget whatever rumours we hear, and interpret what we hear in the most generous way possible. “Love does not imagine any evil ... but bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.” A culture of suspicion and distrust is one in which love cannot survive.

The rewards of love

The rewards of a loving local church are very great. People come to hear the gospel and feel welcomed there. The preaching is believed much more easily because its power is being seen. The love of Christ will not just be an idea on the pages of the Bible, but seen to be real and true. Members will be at meetings because they know it is a very special place. In an atmosphere of self-giving, believers will offer themselves more willingly for service. In many ways, love is the engine of the gospel. We live in a world of hatred (Titus 3:3). Christ came for us because of God's love (John 3:16). The goal was that we too should learn to love. We need to look hard at our churches and our own lives, and test to see if this goal of God's has been ours too.

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More wives than one?

Polygamy (more wives than one) is a problem in Kenya. But some preachers say that it is not a sin. Did not many Old Testament figures have more than one wife? Does not polygamy help us to “multiply and fill the earth” faster? If a wife has no children, how can a man's family name continue without another wife?

No Christian should have doubts about this question. The Lord Jesus Christ spoke very clearly and directly about marriage. In Matthew 19:3 the Pharisees came to him with a question about divorce. When Jesus answered it, he did not only explain that divorce was wrong. He also laid down essential principles about marriage. Our rule for marriage is not to look at what was tolerated under the Old Covenant, or another time. Our rule is to look at what God did at the very beginning in Eden. Jesus asked, “Have you not read, that he which made them at the beginning...?” He reminds the Pharisees that God made Adam and Eve to come together in a permanent union, which man should never separate. He tells us that Genesis 2:24 is the key verse for understanding God's purpose for marriage.

If what God did at the beginning is a pattern for everyone else afterwards, then this means polygamy is wrong. God did not make two or more wives for Adam – only one. The Bible says that the *two* shall become one flesh. More than this, it tells us directly that if a woman marries a second husband, she has committed adultery (Romans 7:3), and the same is true when a man marries two wives. Marriage is a picture of the relationship between Christ and his church (Ephesians 5:22-30) – Christ has only one bride. Paul forbade any saved polygamists in the churches from becoming leaders (1 Timothy 3:2, 12).

Failure to produce children is not a valid reason for taking another wife. The

account “at the beginning” in Genesis 2:24 does not make children the number one reason for marriage. Genesis 2:24 speaks about companionship – two lives joined together. It does not even mention children at all. Therefore (lack of) children cannot be made a reason to begin another marriage. Abraham went many years without a child by his wife Sarah, but when he took Hagar and had a son (Ishmael) God ignored that son in his plans. It was a sin for the kings of Israel to take many wives, because God had explicitly forbidden them to do so (Deuteronomy 17:17). Solomon's many wives were not a source of blessing to him – instead, they led him into the worship of idols (1 Kings 11:4). God's tolerating of these sins during the Old Covenant is no excuse for us today.

* * *

Christian books on the subject of “Love”

All of these books are available through Africa Christian Textbooks (ACTS) – details on the “Announcements” page.

For the Love of God – D A Carson: When you love somebody you want to find out all you can about them. If we love God then we will want to find out all we can about Him, we will want to know Him. We study God in the Bible. This is a useful set of daily reading notes.

The Difficult Doctrine of the Love of God – D A Carson: Carson “wants us to get a new perspective – one that sees God as awesome and glorious as well as loving. He wants us to take seriously the need for justice to be done and for God to be Lord. But most of all, he wants us to understand that these things are included in God's love, not opposed to it, and so to reach an even greater, richer, more truth full picture of the wonderful love of God.”

There are many books that will help you reflect upon the love of God. You could try **Knowing God by J.I. Packer**, or **Behold Your God by Donald Macleod**. Both of these books have helpful chapters on the love of God.

In **Rediscovering God's Love by Frank Allred** you can explore more of the amazing love of God. But in the second part of his book “he draws out what loving God means in practice for Christians who seek to follow the teaching of Scripture in every aspect of their lives.” The book considers our love for God, love for your Christian brother and love for your neighbour.

Read **The Religious Affections by Jonathan Edwards** in order to review and test your own Christian life. The book examines love in the believer. Edwards writes, “For love is not only one of the affections, but it is the first and chief of the affections, and the fountain of all the affections.”

Love and law

How does love relate to God's law? Which is more important? In churches today is it true that love matters, but the law has nothing to do with us any more? How can we know what love is? Is it just a feeling, or something more?

All Christians know that “God is love” (1 John 4:8), and that Jesus' great commandment is that we should “love one another” (John 13:34). But many of them are confused about what this really means. They are especially confused if you ask them about God's law. The purpose of this article is to help get rid of some of this confusion. There are three basic things we need to say.

One – God's law describes love

Imagine that a man begins cheating on his wife, by sleeping with his friend's wife. What excuses might he make? He might say, “But I really love her – it feels so right”. What does the Bible say about this? What it says is very simple. It tells us that the man's feelings are wrong, and not to be trusted. Love is not defined by a feeling. Adultery is not an act of love, but of selfishness. The man has treated his own wife badly, by not keeping his promises to her. He has treated his friend badly, by taking his wife. He has treated his lover badly, by leading her away from her own husband. How, though, could the man have known this? Where should he have looked to know whether his actions were truly loving?

The answer is that God's law tells us what love is. Its commandments are not something different to love, but the same thing in a different form. Paul tells us this in Romans chapter 13, verses 8 to 10. He says “he that loves another has fulfilled the law”. He is not saying that we can love *instead* of fulfilling the law, because in the next verse he explains what “fulfilling the law” really means. It means to obey the written commandments. Paul says, “For this, 'you shall not commit adultery', 'you shall not kill', 'you shall not steal', 'you shall not bear false witness', 'you shall not covet'; and if there be any other commandment, it is briefly summed up in this saying, namely, 'You shall love your neighbour as yourself.’”

What Paul is telling us is that love and law are like the two sides of a coin. They must always exist together. You can look at one side instead of the other – but the other side is always there! We may choose to emphasise love, but this does not mean law has gone away. If love becomes lawless, it is not truly love any more. “Love does no harm to its neighbour: therefore love is the fulfilling of the law.”

Many Christians think that when Jesus came, he abolished the law. In fact, Jesus explained that he had not come to do this. He said, “Do not think that I have come

to destroy the law or the prophets. I have not come to destroy them, but to fulfil.” (Matthew 5:17). He continued, and explained that this means that all of the ten commandments apply to us fully today. He gave a serious warning, which we would do well to hear: “Whosoever therefore shall break one of these least commandments, and shall teach men so, he shall be called the least in the kingdom of heaven: but whosoever shall do and teach them, the same shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven.” (Matthew 5:19). There is no true love if we are not obeying God's commandments. Jesus said, “If you love me, keep my commandments” (John 14:15).

Two – God's law has always been the standard of love

In fact, the Bible has *always* explained that the law given by Moses was all about love. Many Kenyans think that the Old Testament is about a failed plan in which God tried to save people through their obedience. But this proved too hard, and instead he had to save people freely by grace instead. They then see the Old Testament times as a harsh time of law and failure, and the New Testament as being a time of love and forgiveness. This is a terrible misunderstanding of the flow of Biblical history. In this article it is not our task to look at how to understand the Testaments rightly. But we do need to understand that God's law has *always* been the law of love.

When Jesus Christ was asked to summarise the law of Moses, his answer was about love. He said that all the teachings of the law and the prophets were based on two great commandments. The first was to “love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind” (Matthew 22:37). The second is to “love your neighbour as yourself” (Matthew 22:39). What we must notice is where these two commandments come from. They were not new ideas that Jesus had invented. They were both written in the law of Moses. The command to love God is in Deuteronomy 6:4-5. In fact, they were part of the central Jewish confession of faith, called the “Shemah”. Just as today every Muslim repeats the words “There is no God but Allah”, so every Jew has always repeated the command to love God as part of his creed.

The command to love our neighbour is also found in the books written by Moses. It is found in Leviticus 19:18, “You shall love your neighbour as yourself; I am the Lord.” The problem that Jesus corrected when he was on earth was not in the law of Moses itself. It was in the twisted, wrong traditions and corruptions of the scribes and the Pharisees. Christ took the people back from these errors to the law's original meaning.

The law describes love, because the law describes God. Every law is a description

of the person giving the law. Corrupt laws and harsh rules come down from corrupt and harsh rulers. Helpful and useful laws come from rulers who genuinely want to serve their people. Because God is love, God's law describes what love looks like in action. It shows us what pleases him and what he desires. He is a God who loves faithfulness and commitment, and so he forbids adultery. He loves truth, and so he forbids lying. He is the one, true, living God who is worthy of our worship, and so he commands it from us. This is why King David, in describing God's law in Psalm 119, delights in it. He does not think of it as harsh, oppressive, or something that we should desire to be free from. This Psalm teaches us that our “freedom from the law” is not about taking away the commandments.

Three – The law is now written on our hearts

There is a great difference and blessing that has come to us as Christians now, under the New Covenant. We have seen that the difference is not that the law is taken away from us. Rather, the New Testament teaches us that the law is now written on our hearts – not simply on pieces of stone. It becomes part of us in a much deeper way. This is what the prophets before Christ's coming had promised. Jeremiah spoke of the New Covenant and said, “But this shall be the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel; after those days, says the LORD, I will put my law in their inward parts, and write it in their hearts; and will be their God, and they shall be my people.” (Jeremiah 31:33). Comparing these verses with Hebrews chapter 8 shows that when Jeremiah spoke these words, he was not speaking about the earthly nation of Israel in a future millennium, but about Christians today.

Paul taught the same thing in Romans chapter 8. In chapter 7 he shows us that the law on its own can never bring about godliness. The sinful nature is too strong for it. But Christians do not have the law on its own. They have the Holy Spirit living within them. In verses 3-4 he says that now that Christ has died and paid for our sins, the righteousness which the law requires can now be fulfilled in our lives, by the Spirit. In verse 7 he explains that the “carnal” (i.e. unconverted) mind cannot submit to God's law. Because in that verse he is comparing the unconverted mind with the mind of the Christian who has the Spirit, this implies that Christians can and do submit to God's law in their minds (also see verse 9).

If we remember Romans 13:8-10 (which we began with), some things now become clear. The ten commandments are the same outwardly at all times – both before and after the coming of Christ. But with the coming of Christ and the sending of the Spirit, the law is not taught in the same way. Now that the Spirit has come, all of God's true people are converted. There are no “half-Christians” -

nobody like the Israelites who were born into the nation, but who were not true believers. All of God's people today have the law written on their hearts. It lives inside them. Now, that law is to be fulfilled not only outwardly, but in every possible way. With the help of the Holy Spirit a living, continual obedience to God's law is a real possibility (though of course we all still fall into sin, 1 John 1:8-10 – this does not mean we become perfect). As we live this out, our lives become lives of love. The New Testament teaching emphasises love. But this is not because love is different to the law. It is because of the much greater power and reality that is now at work after Christ has risen from the dead. That reality is described most fully by love, and so Christian lives must be characterised by love in all of its fullness – not simply good outward behaviour.

This is a powerful challenge to us and to our churches. Are we known supremely as people of love, where that love is the love described throughout the Bible? It is not a lawless love, just a collection of good feelings and happy smiles – but real, principled, continual, sincere, warm-hearted obedience. It is not a loveless law-keeping, good behaviour that keeps the rules outwardly but with no true compassion and care between believers. It is a life like the Lord Jesus Christ – who fully kept all the commandments, and gave up his own life at the cross for us.

For further study, the letter 1 John and the words of Jesus in John's Gospel chapter 15 should be carefully read.

* * *

Love in the family: husbands and fathers

The family is the place where the reality – or not – of a Christian profession is shown. Whatever a man or woman is in their family; that is what they are. No bad father and bad husband was ever a good Christian. A man who has unruly children in his home is never called by God to be a pastor. The most gifted preacher who is also a tyrant in his own home is nothing more than a gifted hypocrite.

These sound like strong words! But in saying this, we are not simply giving a human opinion. This is the Word of God (e.g. 1 Timothy 3:1-5, Titus 1:5-7). In modern Kenya, family life (by which we mean households where a man and wife live together, with children if they have them) often suffers deep neglect. If we take the Bible seriously, we will see that the need for change here is enormous. What, then, does the Bible have to say about love within a family? We will look at this subject beginning first of all with husbands and fathers. God-willing, in a

future issue we will look at wives and mothers, and then with children.

Loving husbands

Paul teaches clearly that the first duty of a man in his family is not to be the “bread-winner”. Certainly, that is one of his duties – but only one of them, and not the most important. The first duty of a man is to love his wife. Paul writes in Ephesians 5:25, “Husbands, love your wives”. What does this mean? Many Kenyan men today will say “Of course I love my wife – I live with her!” or “You can tell I love her – there is always food on the table!” But there is a great difference between these things and the Biblical standard.

Paul goes on to explain what he means, by saying that husbands are to love “even as Christ also loved the church”. The great standard for authentic love from a husband is the love of Christ – the love which Christ had towards the church. Paul continues, “Christ also loved the church, and gave himself for it”. What did Christ do in his love for the church? Did he simply provide us with some food or shelter we need? It is much more than this; he did not give some gift or present from outside himself. He gave his actual self, when he offered himself up on the cross. He laid down everything that he had for the church – even life itself. He paid the highest possible price; all that he had. This is how Christ has loved us.

Paul then shows us (verses 26-27) what Christ's goal was in this - “That he might sanctify and cleanse it with the washing of water by the word, that he might present it to himself as a glorious church, without any spot, or wrinkle, or any such thing; but that it should be holy and without blemish.” Christ gave all that he had, to make us all that we could possibly be: to lift us up and to glorify us. He wanted to bring us the greatest benefit possible, and was willing to pay the greatest price to achieve it.

A command, not an ideal

This is the standard for all Christian husbands. Notice that Paul does not simply say that this is an ideal to aim for. He actually commands it of every married Christian man, with no exceptions. We have no excuse, because Christ does not allow any excuses. He is holy, and we are sinners – and yet he did all this for us. Nothing our wives ever do can be an excuse for failing to love them. Christ forgives us and treats us kindly again and again, after every failure. It is impossible for our wives to do any wrong to us that is even remotely comparable to how we have treated Christ. If we refuse to accept this Biblical standard, then our Christian profession is empty and worthless.

Christian men, then, are commanded to put the needs of their wives first in every situation. They have a ministry to their wives, to see them grow and mature, going forward as women of God. This is the man's responsibility. This cannot be done by staying late at work every evening. This cannot be done simply by providing money to look after the house. It is a work which needs a lot of time spent. It needs self-sacrifice. It needs a man to spend less time with his friends, and more with his wife. It needs self-discipline and continuing faithfulness. It means opening the Bible together and reading it. It means spending time listening to his wife's thoughts and concerns – before then praying about them and doing what he can about them. It means helping her with the endlessly many duties involved in running the house and looking after the children, especially when she is tired. Notice that Paul does not hand over this responsibility to a woman's mother, or sisters, or home-help. We might be grateful for help from these people, but the responsibility to see that our wives are helped is the man's.

Marriages are meant to be living demonstrations of the gospel. As a man sacrifices himself for his wife's benefit, a message is being preached. The man tells the world how much Christ loves the church. He shows the world that no price is too big to pay, for his wife's sake! We cannot say that we know the love of Christ, and be mean, self-centred leaders in our families. If we believe the truth, this is how God commands us to respond.

Loving fathers

God has blessed many husbands with children. In doing this, he has given them an extra responsibility to answer for. As well as being loving husbands, they must also be loving fathers! Being a loving husband is actually the way to start in being a loving father. As a man honours and brings blessing to his wife, he is teaching his children. The best earthly gift a child can have as it grows up is parents who are committed to loving each other. This gives a strong foundation to every home. What else, though, must a father do?

Paul very briefly summarises what a father must do in Ephesians 6:4. In just one sentence, he says “And, you fathers, do not provoke your children to anger: but bring them up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord.” It is a short command, but very full! The father is here given the ultimate responsibility for the bringing up of his child. Mothers, grand-parents, school-teachers, churches and many other people may be involved; but the responsibility is all on the shoulders of the father.

The word which Paul uses first to describe this bringing up is “nurture”. The Greek word used means literally “tutorage”, or “training”. It refers to a course of instruction, in preparation for the rest of life. A father must love his children by

taking total responsibility for the whole course of their upbringing, with a view to preparing them for their adult lives. From before the day they are born, until they are ready to make their own way in the world, he is to be providing leadership. This teaching is also contained in the word “admonition”, which means to give a rebuke or correction. What kind of training, though, is it? What things are to be corrected? The answer is again very easy; it is the nurture and admonition “of the Lord”. A father's chief responsibility is to see that the child is learning how to please God. They must, like Timothy (2 Timothy 3:15-17), be taught from the Scriptures about how to be saved, and how to become fruitful believers. They must be warned against false teachings and wrong behaviour. At all times they are to be guarded and guided by the Father's loving oversight. Like a shepherd, he must care for his flock – his children – feeding them, protecting them, leading them into green pastures. No absent father, who neglects his children or refuses to monitor what they are being taught and experiencing when away from him, is loving his children in a Biblical way.

A great danger

As he does this, Paul wants him to be aware. There is a particular danger he must avoid! Paul says, “do not provoke your children to anger”. Children are like tender plants. They are young, and need to be handled delicately. Men spend a lot of time out in the world. They deal mostly with other men, and sometimes this dealing is tough. In a world full of sin, this toughness sadly often is seen as a permanent part of a man's way of life. He has no tenderness, no sympathy, no gentleness or kindness. When this happens, his children suffer. Children do not respond well to the hard, “man ways” from out in the world. Men who are unyielding, harsh or unfeeling will have frustrated, angry children.

This anger can also be provoked in other ways. He might rule the household with an iron rod – ruling by fear. He might ignore problems in his children's behaviour when he is feeling happy, but punish them very harshly when he is tired or angry. The standards might change between one day and the next day. None of these things are the way of the Lord, and they will lead to frustrated children. If, then, we want to be loving fathers, we must carefully watch how we behave towards our children. What responses does our behaviour provoke in them? How do they see us? What do they think of us? Are they always relaxed, and happy to be with us? Do they really know us in a close way, as a child should know his or her father? Or is there a distance, that has been caused by our failure to fulfil this Biblical duty?

* * *

Paul's letter to the Ephesians: An overview

1. Why this letter was written

When we are seeking to understand a book of the Bible, our first question must be, “Why was this particular book written?” Once we have a good idea as to why the book was written we can begin to interpret it. The reason we use this method is that the purpose of the writer must control the interpretation of the reader. We cannot interpret any verse in the Bible in a way that the writer never intended.

Now there are books of the Bible where the writer tells us why the book was written. For example, John says in John 20:31, “These are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.” John in this verse tells us why he wrote his gospel. With other books, the writer does not tell us why he wrote the book. We have to read the book itself and then deduce the purpose of the writer in writing it. This is the case with Ephesians. Nowhere in this letter does Paul tell us explicitly why he wrote it. However, when we read the letter, his reasons for writing it become clear. There are four main reasons why Paul wrote this letter:

1. He wanted the church at Ephesus to understand that our salvation is something that God planned from eternity and that he planned it in such a way that it would show the glory of his grace.
2. He wanted to teach them that as the saved people of God they were greatly blessed and he wanted to remind them of some of these great blessings they received when they came to salvation in Christ.
3. He wanted to remind them that in Christ the middle wall of partition between the Jews and the Gentiles had been brought down, so that now in Christ there are no racial or tribal distinctions.
4. He wanted to encourage them to live their lives worthy of the calling they had received. He wanted to show them that those who are saved must now begin to live distinctive lives here on earth. In this letter, therefore, Paul gives very specific teaching on how we are to live our lives in the local church, in the world and in the home.

2. A broad outline of its contents

The letter to the Ephesians is divided into two sections. Chapters 1-3 consist primarily of doctrinal teaching on how God planned our salvation from before the foundation of the world and what are some of the consequences of this plan.

Then in chapters 4-6 Paul applies this doctrinal teaching by giving very detailed and specific applications on how we are to live as the people of God. This is a broad outline of its contents.

Part I, Doctrinal

1. A description of the grand plan of salvation (1:3-14). We often think of salvation from our own point of view: how we came to Christ in repentance and faith and how we received forgiveness for our sins and were adopted into the family of God as his beloved children. Ephesians, however, looks at our salvation from God's point of view and not from ours. Paul begins by teaching us that our salvation did not begin with us, it began when God elected us and planned our salvation. These verses in chapter 1 follow a Trinitarian pattern: election and predestination by God the Father (vs. 3-6), redemption and forgiveness through God the Son (vs. 7-12) and sealing by the Holy Spirit (vs. 13-14). At the end of each section (i.e. in vs. 6, 12 and 14) we have the words “to the praise of his glorious grace” or “to the praise of his glory” which reminds us that the primary purpose in our salvation is the glory of God and of his grace.

2. Paul's first prayer for the Ephesians (1:15-23). A correct understanding of theology will do three things: it will move us to pray, it will inspire us to live a godly life and it will encourage us to reach the lost. Paul wrote great theology in vs. 1-14 and this immediately moved him to pray for the church at Ephesus. This is a model prayer that all pastors need to study carefully and to pray for their members. Paul knows Christians will only understand great spiritual truths when the Spirit of God himself enlightens them; these things are not discerned naturally but spiritually. And so his first prayer for his readers is that God would give them the Spirit of wisdom and revelation so that they may know him better.

3. Paul illustrates that the work of salvation is the work of a gracious and loving God (chapter 2). He uses the example of the Ephesians themselves to show the sheer power and beauty of the gospel. Here was a city which was full of idolatry and sin because her people were dead in transgressions and sins. There was no way they could save themselves since they were spiritually dead and full of sin. But when Paul came to the city to preach, the power of God came upon the Ephesians and they were made alive and created in Christ Jesus for good works. The Ephesians themselves knew well enough that their salvation could only be ascribed to the grace, mercy and power of God. Having been saved, they were reconciled to God and were brought into his kingdom where there are no racial or tribal walls: all such walls have been destroyed by Christ through the gospel.

4. Paul the preacher of the mystery of God (3:1-13). In this passage Paul explains

to the Ephesians the ministry that he has been given by Christ. He says that he was called to preach the mystery of God to the Gentiles, that they, the Gentiles, are heirs together with Israel and are members together of one body (3:6).

5. Paul's second prayer for the Ephesians (3:14-21). Having reminded his readers of God's wonderful wisdom in the plan of salvation, Paul prays that his readers would be strengthened, that Christ would dwell in their hearts through faith and that they would grasp the great love of God.

Part II, Practical

Having explained to the Ephesians the great plan of God in salvation, Paul now gives them practical instructions on how they are to live a life worthy of the calling they have received. Broadly speaking, this part of the letter falls into four parts:

1. Living the Christian life in the local church (4:1-16).
2. Living the Christian life in the world (4:17-5:21).
3. Living the Christian life in the home (5:22-6:9).
4. Putting on the full armour of God (6:10-20).

3. Preaching Ephesians

The letter to the Ephesians is one of the most encouraging, instructive and inspiring books in the Bible. The passages which describe God's great plan of salvation reach to the highest places in heaven, and the passages which instruct us on how we are to live godly lives here on earth address in great detail our lives here on earth. Where Christians have a man-centred doctrine of salvation, this letter will bring correction, where there are tribal or class divisions among Christians, this letter will bring unity, and where there is confusion with regard to day to day holy living, this letter will bring light and hope. The pastor who studies it carefully will find great benefit for his own soul, and when he preaches it he will feed his people rich food from God's word.

4. Helpful commentaries on Ephesians

The three commentaries I have found the most useful are:

Charles Hodge, *Ephesians*, Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1964.

Walter Liefeld, *Ephesians*, Leicester: IVP, 1997.

Sinclair Ferguson, *Let's Study Ephesians*, Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 2005.

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Editor's notes

This is the first issue of “Grace”. We pray that God will greatly bless you through it. We believe that God's Son, the Lord Jesus Christ, is what Kenya truly needs. The Lord Jesus is revealed to us in the Bible, and so our aim is to spread the Bible's teaching – everywhere!

Our first issue is about love. Without love, the Bible says we are nothing (1 Corinthians 13:1-3). If we can get more true, Biblical love in Kenyan churches then that will be a massive step forward. May God bless you as you read!

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