

Love

John 3:16, “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.”

Question: What makes Christianity unique?

Key Passages: 1 John 3:16-17; Rom 5:8; 8:37-39.

If Christianity was reduced to a single word, it would be “love.” That sounds cliché. After all, doesn’t everyone talk about the importance of love? Isn’t that the message of every religion? Isn’t it a universal human impulse? In a word, “NO”! Yes, love is a common conversation, even in pop-culture, movies, music, and political rhetoric. However, love is romanticized, even sexualized, so that our conversation must be clarified to recognize just how unique and rare is the Biblical definition and experience of true love.

Two things need clearer focus to recognize God’s love. First, we need to know what kind of love we are talking about. The English language has some very confused notions about love because we lump all kinds of emotions under one word. The Greek language of the New Testament was far more specific. It used four different words for love. *Philia* was the most common which incorporated what we call “friendship.” *Storgē* encompassed familial affection—fathers, mothers, siblings, etc. *Éros*, from which we get the English word *erotic*, described all forms of lust. Finally, there was this unique word *agápe* (this is the Greek word used in every verse cited in this essay). *Agápe* described unconditional and unmerited love. It is the love that sacrifices one’s life for another. It is the love that never gives up. It is the love offered freely regardless of the recipient’s value, merit, or ability to repay. This Greek word, however, did not have this definition until John used it in his Gospel to describe God’s sacrificial love by giving his Son, Jesus Christ. The nature of love as undeserved, unmerited, unchangeable, and sacrificial comes from the description of the Gospel message of Jesus Christ. In this sense, Christianity created *agape* kind of love.

Second, love in our language describes a feeling—it is a noun. In Christianity, however, it is first and foremost a verb. It describes one’s actions not one’s emotions. Love is not how we feel. Love is what we do. Furthermore, the command to love is predicated on what God did for us in Christ rather than what we initially do to earn or achieve God’s love. This is an extraordinary difference between the Christian message and all other religions. To understand love, we start with God’s love for us. Every other expression of love stems from that origin.

God Loves Us

The most famous quote from the Bible is, without question, John 3:16: “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.” It is the core of Christianity. But why does God love us? It is certainly not

because we are so lovable. It is because God cannot help himself. God is Love, “Anyone who does not love does not know God, because God is love,” (1 John 4:8). Fish swim, birds fly, little girls giggle due to genetic predisposition. For this same reason God loves. He created us in love and loves us out of his own nature.

God’s divine propensity to love is not passive. It is an aggressive, impassioned disposition. This extraordinary truth inflamed the Apostle Paul to pen one of the most heartening poems of humanity. “No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Rom 8:37-39).

According to John 3:16, God’s love is well beyond raw emotion. It is an act of extraordinary self-sacrifice. He gave his own son as a sacrifice for the sins of the world. How such substitutionary atonement “works” is a divine mystery. The consequence, however, is clear enough. Because God loved us with such sacrifice, those who call themselves children of God are morally obligated to behave similarly with their fellows. The Bible calls that “love your neighbor.” To that end, the clearest commentary of John 3:16 is 1 John 3:16, “By this we know love, that he laid down his life for us, and we ought to lay down our lives for the brothers. But if anyone has the world’s goods and sees his brother in need, yet closes his heart against him, how does God’s love abide in him?” (1 John 3:16-17). Notice, *agápe* is not how you feel but pragmatically how you meet the physical and financial needs of a fellow human being.

It simply will not pass muster to claim to love God without sacrificially serving our fellows. John didn’t come up with this idea on his own. It comes straight from Jesus and from the upper room the night before he gave his life no less. “Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends,” (John 15:13). For Jesus true love has no limit on sacrifice. Love means giving whatever it takes even and up to one’s own life.

We Love God

Because God loved us, we are commanded above all else, to love him. It is what the Bible calls the greatest command, coming from Deuteronomy 6:5, “You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might.” This verse is as famous among the Jews as John 3:16 is among Christians. According to Jesus, this command cannot stand alone. It is paired with Leviticus 19:18, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” In a previous essay we looked at these two greatest commands of all the Bible. “Jesus answered, ‘The most important is, “Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.” The second is this: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no other commandment greater than these” (Mark 12:29-31).

Jesus is right, of course. These are not two separate commands. You cannot love God except by loving your neighbor. Oh, if love were a feeling, you could. One could worship at church, pray praises in private, or any number of others expressions of adoration. However, Christian love is an outward orientation of action not an internal emotion of affection. So how, pray tell, could one treat God with sacrificial love. He doesn't pragmatically need anything from us. You can hardly feed him, clothe him, or provide medical assistance. How can we express our love for God practically? Every parent knows the answer: Love his children. When we treat someone's children with kindness it is the highest expression of love for them. To that end, we are to love three broad categories of people.

We love neighbors. The single most powerful description of love is 1 Corinthians 13. The whole chapter is worth a read but this snippet will suffice. "Love is patient and kind; love does not envy or boast; it is not arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful it does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things" (1 Corinthians 13:4-7). Most of us have heard that passage read at weddings where it is almost completely unnecessary. It's easy to feel love at the altar. It is far more difficult to enact love at the divorce court. This passage was not written to newlyweds. It was written to a robust body of believers in Corinth whose diverse ethnic, economic, and cultural backgrounds made potluck dinners tense. This is practical advice for neighbors who just can't seem to understand each other. Loving neighbors in practical application requires grit, humility, and patience. That's why Paul adds the following virtues to make love at all possible: "Walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love," (Eph 4:1-2).

We love family. Every family relationship is God's training ground for loving him and loving neighbors. Yes, marriage is for our enjoyment and protection. It is, however, far more. It is a theological laboratory where we learn how to behave as we believe. This is never more true than with the topic of love. Paul commands, "Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her" (Eph 5:25). That is John 3:16 enacted at the kitchen table and the bedroom. As a practical primer Paul adds, "Husbands should love their wives as their own bodies," (Eph 5:28). If you feed yourself, feed your wife. If you provide clothes, shelter, protection for yourself, do the same for your wife. Similar advice is given throughout Scripture to children, siblings, and aging parents. If we are to love God and love our neighbors that begins at home, emanates out to our local community, and ultimately extends to the ends of the earth.

We Love Enemies. Probably the most offensive thing Jesus ever said was "Love your enemies" (Matt 5:44). At that time, it was a novel theoretical idea based on God's love for all humanity. Two years later, however, Jesus would embody that command from the cross. Remember the first thing he said from the cross, "Father, forgive them for they know not what

they do.” One who forgives his enemies in the middle of a crucifixion has the moral authority to order us to do the same. As difficult as that was for Jesus, it paled in comparison to the sacrifice of the Father to offer his own son to the disobedient and rebellious. That’s *all of us* not just the Jewish leaders and Roman soldiers at Golgotha. We are all undeserving beneficiaries.

Paul reminds us, “God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us” (Rom 5:8). While we were enemies, God loved us enough to send his own son. Because of that love, we found hope and help. Because of that love, we have been transformed from sinner to saint. Surely that’s part of the secret in 1 Peter 4:8, “Above all, keep loving one another earnestly, since *love covers a multitude of sins.*” God’s love for his enemies birthed Christianity. Our love for our enemies expands the boundaries of his Kingdom.

Love birthed the church. Love will inaugurate eternity. Come judgment day, because of God’s love for us and our love for others, we will stand boldly, head high, chest out. “There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear. For fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not been perfected in love. We love because he first loved us. If anyone says, ‘I love God,’ and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen cannot love God whom he has not seen,” (1 John 4:18-20).

Key Points:

- Sacrificial love is the core of Christianity and actually “invented” by Christianity.
- Sacrificial love is what we do, not what we feel, and it originated with God.
- God’s example of love in Jesus empowers us to love our neighbors, family, and enemies.

Action Step: Clean out a closet, garage, or storage unit and find a place to donate those items.

Further Resources: Francis Chan, *Crazy Love: Overwhelmed by a Relentless God*, (2013).