

Taking Love Seriously



by Dawn McDonald and James Wagner



Anglican Agenda Series ♦ J.I. Packer, editor

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Preface To The Series

The Anglican Agenda series of publications aims to open up current questions that call for thought, discussion, prayer and decision among members of the Anglican Church of Canada at this time. The series is sponsored by the Essentials movement, which seeks all-round renewal of life and strength in the Anglican Church, and its writers are Anglican Church personnel speaking out of their loyalty to the Church and their acute sense of its present needs. It is hoped that the series will spark deep personal reflection and group discussion within and between parishes, so that we all may be better prepared for the difficult and demanding era into which, as it seems, our Church is now entering.

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A Key Distinction

Taking love seriously requires us to think about it clearly, and that means distinguishing between love as a human hunger, an aspect of our natural makeup, and love as a Christian virtue, an aspect of discipleship to Jesus Christ. Without this distinction we can never disentangle modern muddles about love, nor see our own way forward with regard to it.

Look first at love as a human hunger. A pop ballad many moons ago began with the words, “Love is the sweetest thing,” and so it is. Love, says the *Canadian Oxford Dictionary*, is “an intense feeling of deep affection or fondness for a person or thing; great liking.” Love is a deep-seated emotional involvement that draws and drives us, dictating how we spend our time and our resources and doing more than anything else to shape our lives. Desire to love and be loved is always with us. We need to receive love, and we need to express love, or we simply cannot thrive. Deprived of love, we are soon overcome with loneliness and gloom. Unloved persons are likely to be crippled in their own ability to love, and to compensate for lack of love by unhealthy means. Without the give-and-take of wholesome love our humanity will shrivel. There is no well-being for us without love.

The deep-seatedness of love points to the fact that we are creatures whom God made in his own image. Our God is a Trinity, a fellowship of three Persons, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. As Jesus’s words and deeds revealed throughout his earthly life, love flows between the holy Three unendingly: from the Father to the Son, from the Son to the Father, from the Father and the Son to the Holy Spirit, and from the Holy Spirit to the Father and the Son. We were created to bear God’s image, of which love is one dimension; love-relationships with God and our neighbour is what we were made for, and that is what in reality we hunger for, and wither without.

The Christian virtue of love is an ongoing work of the Holy Spirit within us as we respond to God’s love in Christ and his

cross, whereby we sinners have been saved. It is a facet of the Christlikeness to which Jesus himself calls all who trust him as their Saviour and Lord and set themselves to live as his disciples. It is not natural, but supernatural in its origin; yet as the ongoing reality of loving in response to being loved, it is the supreme embodiment and enjoyment of the love-life for which we were made, and for which human hearts are always hungering, as we said above. Unhappily, however, the world around us knows nothing about it, and is constantly confused about love as a result.

A State of Confusion

At the heart of the mixed and aberrant messages about love and relationships with which the modern world bombards us is the equating of love with sexual behaviour as such (the passion, the craving, the climactic action). Sex, which was once regarded as the most sacred expression of love between men and women, belonging exclusively to married lovers, has now become a form of entertainment. With the advent of the sexual revolution, the pill, and access to abortion as a means of coping with the “consequences,” casual sex is nowadays almost a cultural norm in the West, especially among young people. The schools have in effect abandoned the upholding of abstinence till marriage, teaching students rather to explore their sexuality by experiment, taking care only to practise safe-sex when they do so. A fairly new term, “friends with benefits” is now popular among the young to describe partners or friends with whom one engages in casual sex without emotional commitment.

Among married couples, lack of sexual satisfaction within the relationship or strong sexual desire for someone outside it are seen as good reasons for divorce. The ideal of marriage as a lifelong bond is in abeyance, divorce is as culturally commonplace as it is statistically common, and the ‘divorce revolution’ has now created a third generation of families in which both parents and grandparents were divorced. Parental divorce inflicts long term psychological damage on children, whose emotional maturing is impeded, whose power to maintain their own marriages is diminished, and who may well steer clear of marriage in order to avoid the risk of future divorce, settling for common-law relationships instead.

Children are suffering also for another reason. The materialism of our consumer society leads otherwise affectionate parents to feel

they must maintain a standard of living that requires two incomes. So latchkey children, who return to empty homes after school and live a life of minimal interaction with their parents because the parents are home so little, are nowadays very numerous. Lacking home life and constant influence from their parents as role models, they grow up to become fathers and mothers biologically without knowing how to fulfil these roles relationally, and so moral decay, irresponsibility, and social instability continue and increase. Surely it is clear that real love is at a discount in all of this.

A broken, messed-up generation such as ours can only beget yet another broken, messed-up generation. We are incapable of rising above the confusion and disorder we have created. We are unable to order and maintain wholesome relationships with healthy boundaries on our own. Technological know-how and material affluence cannot generate the selfless wisdom, patience, care and steadiness that are the marks of real love.

It is a good thing for us all that God has set the standards and boundaries for love. For example, the biblical boundary for sex is heterosexual marriage. The secular view, by contrast is that everyone has a right to determine with whom, where, when and how he/she is going to engage in sexual intimacy. So far from expressing love, however, this recreational approach to sex makes self-absorbed lovelessness a settled part of one's character, as experience abundantly shows.

To find hope for this broken and love-starved world we live in, we must turn to God and revisit the principles he teaches in Scripture. As in any recovery program, we must begin by frankly acknowledging our current state of need: that we have tried to run things our way and have only made a mess of our world and our relationships. We thought love would grow automatically within the social pattern we were building, and we were entirely wrong.

Canada's 1962 *Book of Common Prayer* gives us the words we need. They come from the General Confession, in which we say, "we have erred and strayed from thy ways like lost sheep. We have followed too much the devices and desires of our own hearts. We have offended against thy holy laws. We have left undone those things which we ought to have done, and we have done those things which we ought not to have done; *and there is no health in us.*"

Like little children who have insisted on having their own way

only to discover they cannot get along without parental help, we too must learn to acknowledge our limits and admit that we need God's help to order our love and make sense of our relationships. We need pardon for the past and re-formation for the future. Can this be? Yes; for God is love.

The God of Holy Love

When the New Testament speaks of God's love for us and the love for others that Christians are called to practise, it uses the Greek word *agape*. This is in effect a technical term, defined by reference to the unconditional, self-sacrificing goodwill to the guilty that was shown us in Christ and is now to be reproduced in us by the Holy Spirit in imitation of Christ. Other Greek words for love, primarily *philia* (affectionate friendship) and *eros* (erotic love), express at best attachment based on attraction. But *agape* is love to the unlovely and seemingly unlovable, love that sets no limit to the price it will pay to benefit the loved ones, love that is unshakeable in its wise and kindly purpose. No such love was dreamed of in the ancient world till the news broke that the Father had sent the Son to the cross in order to save sinners.

In 1 John 4:6 and 8 the apostle, contemplating this, declares that God is love. Previously in the same letter he had stated that God is light (1:5) — in other words, God is holy. The God who loves sinners hates sin. As J.I.Packer has written: “God who is love is first and foremost light, and sentimental ideas of his love as an indulgent, benevolent softness, divorced from moral standards and concerns, must therefore be ruled out from the start. God's love is holy love. The God whom Jesus made known is not a God who is indifferent to moral distinctions, but a God who loves righteousness and hates iniquity, a God whose ideal for his children is that they should be ‘perfect ... as your heavenly Father is perfect’ (Matthew 5:48)” — pure, upright, flawless, blameless, in other words holy, as God is holy. “As he who called you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct, since it is written, ‘You shall be holy, for I am holy’” (1 Peter 1:15-16, citing Leviticus 11:44).

God offers the world a love whose measure is the cross. “God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish, but have eternal life” (John. 3:16). “God is love. In this the love of God was made manifest among us, that

God sent his only Son into the world that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we have loved God” — we haven’t — “but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins” (1 John. 4:8-10). “God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners Christ died for us” (Romans 5:8). God’s holiness required this atonement for our sins, and now it requires the re-formation of our personal lives. This demanding divine holiness is the frame within which the love of God appears and must be understood. Forget the frame, and misunderstanding will result.

One such misunderstanding is to treat the truth that God is love as if it meant its converse, namely that love is God. In *The Four Loves* (1960) C.S.Lewis spoke to this, writing as follows: “St. John’s saying that God is love has long been balanced in my mind against the remark of a [then] modern author (M. Denis de Rougemont) that ‘love ceases to be a demon only when he ceases to be god’. This balance seems to us an indispensable safeguard. If we ignore it, the truth that God is love may slyly come to mean for us the converse, that love is God.” (Yes! Don’t we know it! It is one of the devil’s best tricks.) Lewis continues: “I suppose that everyone who has thought about the matter will see what M. de Rougemont meant. Every human love, at its height, has a tendency to claim for itself a divine authority. Its voice tends to sound as if it were the will of God himself. It tells us not to count the cost, it demands of us a total commitment, it attempts to override all other claims and insinuates that any action that is sincerely done ‘for love’s sake’ is thereby lawful and even meritorious.” Exactly. Absolutely. Enough said.

We do well to heed Lewis’s observation, and watch ourselves to make sure we are keeping love in its rightful place. When in practice we elevate love to a status equal or superior to God and allow it to be the ‘be all and end all’ in our lives, no matter how admirable our intentions, this is, quite simply, idolatry.

God Orders Love by Law

Love, as we said at the outset, is in the first place a human hunger, a quality of our created nature which, like other natural qualities, must be schooled in its expression, or it will become inordinate, unruly, impure and sinful. Particularly is this true of sexual expression. In its proper context (marriage), as we have said, sexual desire,

rightly ordered within the relationship, will be virtuous, a noble and ennobling expression of honour to one's partner but in other contexts, where love is misplaced and unruly passions are given their head, sexual desire becomes ugly lust, regularly abusing and exploiting other people for personal gratification. Not to see the difference between these two things is moral blindness of a kind that we today know all too well.

The apostle Paul, like us, lived in a society in which love had gone astray, and in the first chapter of Romans he speaks of this as God's response in displeasure to the world's idolatry, in which an idolizing of sexual powers had its prominent place. In wrath, Paul says, God "gave (people) over in the sinful desires of their hearts to sexual impurity for the degrading of their bodies with one another" in ways that included licensed homosexuality. It was ironical and tragic then, as it is now, that this lapsing into lusts that God in wrath has now ceased to restrain should be welcomed as an enriching lifestyle. But that was, and remains, the way of the world, and we should not be surprised when Christians, caught up in the culture, conclude that whatever is, is right, and that public approval of paths of lust among consenting adults must be a sign of God's blessing on human progress.

In the depth of our confusion about all this, we shall benefit by learning the lessons taught in the collect for the Fourth Sunday after Easter which we are given in the 1962 *Book of Common Prayer*.

O Almighty God, who alone canst order the unruly wills and affections of sinful men: Grant unto thy people, that they may love the thing which thou commandest, and desire that which thou dost promise; that so, among the sundry and manifold changes of the world, our hearts may surely there be fixed, where true joys are to be found; through Jesus Christ our Lord. **Amen.**

What are the lessons for us here?

First, we are sinful creatures, whose wills and wishes and ways are all out of true in God's sight. This is our heritage of original sin, the fallenness that marks us all in consequence of the Fall, the corruption and breakage of the image of God in which we were meant to live, the naturally twisted and flawed condition that is now ours. The stubborn fact is that we have all sinned, and we all fall short of

the glory of God every moment (see Romans 3:23). We sin because we are sinners; to love and serve God with all our heart and mind and soul and strength, as Jesus did and as we should, is beyond us. Jesus Christ our Lord, who paid the price for the guilt of our sins and now lives to enable us to break their power over us, is our only hope.

Second, God shapes our lives by giving us commands and promises: commands that tell us what our purposes and priorities should be, and what boundaries and limits we are to observe, and promises that hold out specific hopes, here and hereafter, to obedient believers who are travelling the path that God has set before them in his commands. The Hebrew word for “law,” *torah*, means family instruction as from a father rather than public legislation as from a ruler, but within his family God our father, who is our ruler too, gives clear and definite rules — rules of righteousness to keep us from the sin and immorality that he hates; rules of wisdom to keep us from the folly that brings grief both to us and to him; rules of fidelity to keep us from broken promises and abandonment or compromise of truth; and rules of fellowship to keep us from the chilling, killing, self-absorbed unlove that ruins relationships at every level. God’s standard-setting commands cover the whole of life, and woe betide us if we forget that.

Third, our hearts — that is, the core and centre of our personal being, the man or woman within, the real you and us, the essence of our own selves — should be fixed — permanently anchored, firmly focused — on God and the blessings of eternity that he has promised; and by the grace of God’s Holy Spirit they can be thus fixed, so that godly vision and motivation and desire hold steady however the world around us may buffet them, ridicule them and marginalize them.

Fourth, the secret of steady progress in ordered living is to love what God commands, as being wisdom, and to desire what he promises, including quite specifically power to resist sin’s downdrag and to practise the comprehensive Christlikeness to which we are called.

The ordering of love and relationships for which this collect teaches us to pray and work is not a foreign concept in Anglicanism today. At Lambeth 1998, in a resolution dealing with homosexuals (resolution 1.10(c)), the bishops said: “Many of these are members

of the Church and are seeking the pastoral care, moral direction of the Church, and God's transforming power for the living of their lives and the *ordering of relationships*" (emphasis added). Should the world's way of ordering (or rather, perhaps, disordering) sexual relationships collide with the biblical way, the Prayer Book collect and the Lambeth bishops are evidently at one as to which side Christians should be on.

God's love for us.

Taking love seriously in Christian terms must begin, as surely is now clear, with as full an appreciation of God's love for us as we can achieve. We have spoken of God's love already at many points in our argument, but now let us focus on it directly and expound it to ourselves as fully as we can. It is love displayed in creation, in providence and in grace.

The General Thanksgiving that the *Prayer Book* prescribes for use at Morning Prayer sets us on our way here. It begins as follows:

Almighty God, Father of all mercies, we thine unworthy servants do give thee most humble and hearty thanks for all thy goodness and loving-kindness to us and to all men. We bless thee for our creation, preservation, and all the blessings of this life; but above all for thine inestimable love in the redemption of the world by our Lord Jesus Christ, for the means of grace, and for the hope of glory. And we beseech thee, give us that due sense of all thy mercies, that our hearts may be unfeignedly thankful...

Creation-providence-grace is the logical sequence for thinking through the theme of God's love, and we follow now where the *Prayer Book* leads.

Creation is basic. All creation expresses God's love, which spilled out into everything as God spoke one thing after another into being. As human craftsmen rejoice in their own good work and feel a measure of real affection for particular things they have made, so it was with God as he contemplated everything he had made and saw it all as very good. And his special affection for humans, the climax and crown of creation, who were made with a vocation that no other being could share, is evident from his words in the story:

And God said, "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness, and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth." So God created man in his own image, in the image of God created he him, male and female created he them (Genesis 1:16-27).

To be made in God's image, with powers of mind, emotional capacities, relational potential and regal privileges as God's deputy, stewarding the entire planet, was the ultimate and the highest blessing that could be bestowed on a creature. No other being on earth was created with such high honour. And God did not stop there. The manner in which we see him creating Adam and Eve speaks of a special love and intention in the matter of personal relationships.

First, we watch God forming Adam with his own hands and breathing into him the breath of his own life (Genesis 2:7). Intimate dependence on God and constant communion with God through two-way communication was evidently the intended pattern that Adam was to fulfil, and all human beings after him.

Then, when God took Adam's rib to form Eve, it is apparent that he was designing her, anatomically and psychologically too, for a husband-wife intimacy and union that would match his own intimacy and union with both of them as individuals. Humans are the only creatures that have been made to express love face to face, and to mate in that position. The thought being given to us through these details is of humans as uniquely fitted for a personal, intimate giving and receiving of love, God and each human to each other, man and woman to each other, in a way that sets humans apart as creatures of special privilege. Such is the love of God to us in our creation.

We today for the most part overlook the love of God that appears in our daily experience of his providence. We do not think of the regularities of our ongoing personal world as so many personal gifts, coming to us from the hand of the God who made us and who thus expresses kindness and goodwill and generosity toward us. We are very much at fault here. Our scientific legacy of thinking about the world as a closed system, and our cultural com-

petence in developing and harnessing its potential, has the effect of blinding us to the fact that everything we receive and enjoy is ultimately God-given. Our less technologically accomplished but more consciously dependent forbears did much better than we do at this point. We enjoy such things as sunshine, the round of the year, a fair measure of health, our homes with all their amenities and comforts, fruits and vegetables growing in our own plot or on display in the supermarket, gadgets galore, our cars and all the provisions made for us by the transport industry, manifold tidbits offered us by the entertainment industry, pleasures of the senses and of friendships and of hobbies and arts and crafts, and much more, but we take it all for granted and have lost the awareness that, as the old harvest song put it: “All good gifts around us / Are sent from heaven above; / So thank the Lord, O thank the Lord, for all his love.”

Too often our story is that we never think of God save when something seems to be going wrong, and then we lapse into the self-pity mode and wonder, both privately and out loud, why God has let this happen to us — as if God’s real and only business is like that of Jeeves in the P.G. Wodehouse stories. Jeeves is there to keep his young master and others out of scrapes if possible, and to help them if they get into trouble, and always to ensure that nothing finally disastrous happens to any of them. If this was the right view, any coming of trouble would indicate that God is not doing his job properly. Our heavenly Father, however, is not our servant in the Jeeves manner, and it is Jesus, not Jeeves, who is the image of the God with whom we have to do, and Scripture teaches that in the context of life’s many delights troubles will come from time to time.

The Psalms would tune us into gratitude to God for his goodness in daily life if we read them — but we don’t! Perhaps we should — start right now! Certainly, gratitude for our preservation on a day-to-day basis, and for all the blessings of this life as they unfold in our experience, is a habit of mind which we badly need to recover.

It belongs to the glory of God’s love to be relentless. In the Old Testament a special, redemptive divine love for a chosen people soon takes centre stage. God rescued Abraham’s family from Egyptian slavery, gave them his covenant and law, brought them into the promised land and undertook to be with them to bless

them if they would be loyal to him. In the event, they were disloyal and disobedient much of the time; yet God's love continued. Hosea's unyielding love for his unfaithful wife becomes a parable of God's enduring, everlasting, unrelenting love for his own people.

The coming of Jesus Christ, the divine-human Mediator, the Saviour and Lord of Christians and the life-giving Head of the church which is his body, began a new covenant era in which faith-union with Christ himself is the means of covenant membership, and the Holy Spirit comes with power into every Christian's life to implement conscious communion in love between him or her and the Father and the Son together. In these new arrangements, whereby all Old Testament types and patterns find their triumphant fulfilment, the glory of God's love shines even brighter, for "God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us" (Romans 5:8). God has held nothing back in loving us. Jesus is his love made visible and incarnate, and that love is revealed and communicated supremely through Jesus's voluntary acceptance of the penalty due to us for our sins in his suffering and death on the cross.

For Christians, the focal point of God's love in action is the cross, and once one appreciates, with Paul, that "the Son of God ... loved me and gave himself for me" (Galatians 2:20) it becomes impossible ever to doubt the reality of God's love again. The cross will always be central in the Christian understanding of God's love.

Two Great Commandments.

It is with the same self-sacrificing love that we see in his cross that Jesus calls on us his disciples to love God with all our being (heart, soul and mind) and our neighbours as ourselves (Matthew 22:30-51). These, he said, are the two great commandments on which the entire substance of the Law and the Prophets (viewing the latter as enforcers and applicers of the Law) depends. In relation to the Decalogue, the first great commandment covers the first three of the Ten (or the first four, if you see Sabbath-keeping as a worshipful honouring of God, in the way Anglican Christians have seen it in the past), and the second covers the rest.

Love to God, says the first great commandment, must be the first thing, the foremost concern, throughout our lives. No other gods, nor any quasi-god such as money, work, fame, power, pleas-

ure, self-importance, a good cause, a close relationship, or whatever, must be allowed to occupy the throne of our lives. Love to God, which the Holy Spirit works in us as the natural expression of our new life in Christ, will make us want to please him and live for him, and we shall approach all our problems from the standpoint of this purpose.

The second great commandment, said Jesus, is “like the first.” This means that nothing must be allowed to get in the way of serving God by serving and helping others. The question, how do we do this, will be answered differently in different circumstances, depending on what we see to be our neighbour’s immediate and long-term need. We shall in any case have to cultivate an alert imagination and to soak our minds constantly in Scripture, so as to have the wisdom we need to serve and help in the best way open to us.

Love to both God and man is *agape*, modelled on God’s trinitarian *agape* towards us. A definition of *agape* that fits all cases is this: a kindly purpose of making the loved one great, in whatever is the appropriate sense. God’s *agape* to us is a purpose of saving us from sin and spiritual death, and raising us by grace to eternal glory. That this is God in kindness making us great is obvious. This is love. Our *agape* to God is a purpose of exalting him in our own hearts and before others by praising, honouring, thanking and glorifying him, and pleasing him in all that we do. To celebrate and adore God in this way is to acknowledge his kindly greatness and keep it vividly before our minds. This, too, is love. Our *agape* to our neighbours is meeting their needs and supplying what they lack, both materially and spiritually, as far as we are able to do that, and affirming them by acting as a friend throughout the doing of it. By seeking their benefit and welfare in this way we show how we value them and want the best for them. This also is love.

Love that thus demands everything of us can only flow from a surrendered heart. In recent years “committed” has replaced “surrendered” in the Christian vocabulary, but the older word was stronger, for it expresses a complete and absolute renouncing of any right, or claim, or expectation, of ever being in control of one’s life any more. Commitments are ordinarily limited, but surrenders are total. We choose to adhere to the older word.

The two great commandments hang together; keeping one necessitates keeping the other. On the cross, Jesus was obeying his

Father out of love, and serving his disciples and other sinners out of love. If we take love seriously, obedience to the Father and the Son will be the fruit of our love for both, and obedience to the Son will involve a response to his word, “A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another” (John 13:34). And although love for his disciples led him to lay down his life for them (John 15:13), it was loving obedience to his Father that ultimately dictated his action, as we see in his “Your will be done” in Gethsemane (Matthew 26:42).

Taking Love Seriously

Taking love seriously, then, starts with surrendering our unruly wills and affections to God out of love for him as our heavenly Father, who gave his Son to save us. We must face the fact that he who made us for an intimate fellowship with himself is a holy God whose standards we must adhere to. This is what it means to live a life worthy of our calling (see Ephesians 4:1). “And this is love: that we walk in obedience to his commands. As you have heard from the beginning, his command is that you walk in love” (2 John 6).

Love to the Father, to Christ and to Christians will lead us to love the church — in our case, the Anglican Church of Canada. As we survey its present state, we must refuse to be discouraged. The problems in the Church that we now face took years to reach the point where they are today, and reformation — re-formation, renovation, renewal — will take time. But love will lead us to work and pray that there will be a better tomorrow in the Church for those who come after us. Meantime, we who believe, designated by Jesus as the salt of the earth (Matthew 5:13), must labour to do what salt was used to do in Jesus’s day — prevent decay; and where decay exists already, we must tackle it head on, seeking to get rid of it.

So our lives must be surrendered to God, and must express *agape* love. We must be ready and willing to act as agents of change and ambassadors for Christ in this world, and obedience to God must accompany our confession of the gospel of Christ. God intends this to be our lifestyle, and we must say “yes” to him with regard to it.

Therefore I urge you, brothers, in view of God’s mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing

to God — this is your spiritual act of worship. Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is — his good, pleasing and perfect will (Romans 12:1-2).

Love is the fulfilling of the law (Romans 13:10).

Questions For Study And Discussion

1. In what ways do you think that the love of God is the most powerful influence in our lives?
2. What has caused the breakdown of relational boundaries in the world around us?
3. What examples can you give of people appealing to God's love at the expense of his holiness?
4. In what ways do you think that love and order should go together?
5. How is the cross central in your understanding of God's love?
6. How is your love for your neighbour being affected by your love for God? Do you need to change any aspect of your attitude to other people?
7. In what ways can ordered love today give hope for the next generation?