

are and begin to practice these things yourself. While this might sound quite difficult, I believe it can be accomplished by following these simple steps.

Firstly, we must clearly understand that this love is not something which we can find within ourselves. It only comes from God. The scriptures are clear - "God is love." He has a deep, irreversible love for His people and for all mankind. When we come to Him and open our heart fully, He will fill us with the love that is necessary to fulfil His commands.

Next, it will be necessary to make a decision - a conscious, deliberate, firm decision - to commit yourself to others. Such love does not often come spontaneously. You will probably not be drawn into these relationships by your feelings. In fact your natural reactions to others will probably keep you from it. Therefore you must resolve from the very beginning not to let anything turn you from this way. Although such a commitment will no doubt have to be remade again and again and will deepen tremendously over time, it is the only place to begin.

While your commitment can and should apply to everyone, only reciprocated love is deeply satisfying. Therefore, secondly, it will eventually be important to find a few like-minded individuals who are willing to join with you in these things. As you ask Him in prayer, God will lead you to them. No doubt it will take some time to establish intimate relationships with others. It will also involve some sacrifice, patience and possibly tears. Nevertheless, nothing is quite so gratifying as fellowship with people who live in real unity with each other (Ps 133:1).

Lastly, once such relationships begin to be established don't keep it to yourself. Start reaching out to others with the love of God and teaching them these truths. This is a message that the world needs to hear! God will undoubtedly bless your efforts and you will begin to bring forth fruit abundantly.

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Love bespeaks commitment. If we say that we love someone but are unwilling to make any kind of commitment to them, what we say is false. What we actually mean when we say that we love someone without this commitment is merely that we desire them, that they appeal to us or that we want something from them. Love on the other hand - true love - involves a total commitment to another person.

This fact is well illustrated for us by the institution of marriage. In God's sight a marriage between a man and woman involves the making of a binding covenant (Mal 2:14). Without this covenant intimate relationships between men and women are forbidden and are considered to be sin. The only difference between fornication and the marriage act is that marriage includes a life commitment. It is God's plan that before two individuals take so much from each other and share themselves with each other intimately, they must make a commitment - a deep, lifelong, bottom-of-the-heart commitment - to one another. This means that they agree to love one another, to stick with one another through thick and thin and to serve one another in all situations. The marriage covenant is meant to be completely binding as long as both parties live. Without such a commitment what we have is not real love at all but simply selfish desire.

So we have clearly elucidated for us here the fact that when God through His holy word speaks to us about the subject of love, He is not simply speaking about warm, cozy feelings but about something which involves a commitment on our part to someone. Covenant is the underpinning of true love.

COMMANDMENT NUMBER ONE

With this understanding we will now examine a well-known verse. "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and all thy soul, and all thy mind, and all thy strength" (Mr 12:30). Here we find God's clear commandment. As we have been seeing, if we are to fulfil this directive, it will not be enough for us just to have warm feelings towards God. It will not be sufficient merely to have a desire for Him, to appreciate things about Him, or even to enjoy His presence occasionally. What God is demanding of us here is a total, unreserved commitment of all that we are, everything we have and all the energy we possess, to Himself. This verse speaks of a complete commitment to God. It means that we are going to love Him, serve Him, obey Him and in general do everything we can to please Him. It also means that we realize that this is a binding, lifelong commitment.

Now the conclusion of all the foregoing statements is this: If you do not have such a commitment of your entire life to God, if your relationship with Him is simply based upon feelings, if you are a part-time Christian and you only do God's will when the mood strikes you, then you are living in sin! Your life is not pleasing to God. Furthermore, you are in desperate need of a thorough, heartfelt repentance.

This evil condition of the heart can be exposed by a simple test. What are your other commitments which take precedence over your allegiance to God. Does your job take priority? How about your family, friends, recreational activities, hobbies or simply your own pleasure? When your commitment to other pursuits exceeds your covenant to God, you are living in spiritual adultery. You are sinning against God. If you drop Him to pursue other things you are in the same situation as an unfaithful wife who cheats on her husband. When your commitment to God falls short of the Biblical standard of "ALL" then you are living in sin and are in need of repentance.

Stop for a moment and analyse your life. Be completely honest with yourself. What other things infringe upon your duty towards God? What is it that keeps you away from so many church meetings? Why don't you spend more time in Bible reading and prayer? Why is it that the needs of those around you go unnoticed? Why does the salvation of the unbelieving world command so little of your attention? The answer no doubt lies in the fact that you, either consciously or unconsciously, have commitments to other things which are taking first place in your life. If you are in this situation, you are a sinner in need of repentance.

God's admonition to love Him with all of our being is not simply a helpful suggestion. He did not speak this to us with the intention that we could take it or leave it. When God uttered these words, He was issuing a serious, unalterable commandment. Therefore if we ignore it we will suffer the consequences. While God is tremendously long-suffering and will never break His covenant of love with us, He is also extremely jealous (Ex 34:14). Very often He will allow us to have trouble with the very things which we love more than Him. Family problems, financial pressures and many other such items just might be the hand of God upon your life. As long as you refuse to let go of your self-love

in Christianity today is a shame to the Lord. It is a disgrace to His name and a blot upon His precious testimony. If we could be brought by God to repentance concerning this sin of not loving one another, the Church would truly be revolutionized. Love is an unconquerable force that should bind believers together in these last days. May we seek God until we have it!

A TESTIMONY TO UNBELIEVERS

Not only would love revolutionize the church, but it would also have a tremendous impact on unbelievers. The testimony of Christianity would be sent forth with such power that it would be irresistible. Jesus said: "By this shall all men know that ye are my disciples, if ye have love one to another" (Jn 13:35). It is our love that will convince the world. It is the fact that we have been so delivered from self and sin - the things which separate us today - which will persuade unbelievers that Jesus Christ is real. Love is the evidence of true salvation (I Jn 3:14).

If our hearts are right with God and with one another we will also love unbelievers. God certainly does. As is clearly seen from the parable of the good Samaritan, the word "neighbour" includes everyone. Jesus instructed us to go "into all the world, and preach the gospel to every creature" (Mr 16:15). But what gospel do we have to preach if we don't have love? We may have doctrine to teach or a form of religion to propagate. We may be trying to straighten out others' thinking. But unless the love of God is truly "shed abroad in our hearts" (Rm 5:5), unless it has wrought an eternal change within us which is seeable, we have no real chance to reach the unsaved millions for Christ.

Brothers and sisters, please take heed to this message. This is not an inconsequential consideration. This is not a side issue. This is perhaps the most crucial problem facing the church today! Do we love as He loved? Do we have the kind of life commitment to Him and to others which the scriptures so clearly exhort us to have? Are we willing to lay down our lives for each other or for Him - literally (I Jn 3:16)? Do we have more than good feelings for, or an appreciation of, other Christians and the world around us? In short, do we really have the love that God has commanded us to have?

If we do not have this sort of love in our Christianity, then what we are doing is hollow, empty and a sham. If this variety of love is lacking, we have only a superficial religion and are involved in obvious hypocrisy. May God have mercy upon us! May He shine His light into us, exposing our hearts concerning these things, so that He could bring us to a thorough, heartrending, ground-clearing repentance that would open the way for the love of God to be perfected in us.

SOME SIMPLE STEPS

Naturally after reading this message many people will ask such questions as: "How can all this come about?" or "Where can we go to find a group which is practicing these things?" The answer is that it must begin with YOU. Don't wait for others to do it first. Don't delay until you find a church or "fellowship" which "has it right." Start where you

unfortunately outward and artificial. While these involve a devotion to “things,” God’s way is commitment to people. Only that which results from a total love covenant one with another is either real or scriptural. Furthermore, it is only this kind of commitment that God commands.

A further difficulty which these extra biblical commitments raise is that of divisiveness. This sin occurs when people’s love for each other is affected by their group allegiances. How common this problem is today, yet nothing could be more destructive and contrary to real love. Understandably, the scriptures soundly condemn such activity (1 Cor 3:3ff). When we are in a proper covenant relationship with other people, the fulfillment of secondary responsibilities related to particular meetings, ministries or scriptural truths will follow in due course. These things should be taken care of quite naturally when our primary love relationships with God and others are in order. I believe the desperate need of the hour is to bring God’s people into a realization of what the Bible says their commitment really ought to be. All other things including commitments to church meetings, leaders or doctrines must be secondary or we sin.

THE CHURCH REVOLUTIONIZED

Truly this is the great lack in the Christian Church today - brotherly love. If all believers had this deep commitment to one another, a love which involves a life covenant to serve all other Christians, regardless of their opinions, backgrounds or creeds, present-day Christianity would be revolutionized. Many people today speak about unity among the churches in the body of Jesus Christ. But with such efforts the big question always is: How is such a thing going to come about? Should we just shake hands over our doctrinal fences? Should we produce some kind of world-wide organization in which we can exhibit an appearance of oneness while still maintaining our separations? Or should we get off in still another corner, rally around still another doctrinal position which will “guarantee” unity and insist that all others come and join us? I think not. I believe the only hope we have for real unity is brotherly love. The only chance believers have to arrive at the place where God manifestly wants us to be, is to have a thorough repentance concerning these things and to begin to “love one another with a pure heart fervently” (1 Pet 1:22).

This love about which we are speaking must transcend denominational barriers and boundaries. It has to be a love which is heartfelt for everyone regardless of their disposition or affiliation. It cannot be selective but must be based upon the same criterion upon which God has received others. We should love other believers for only one reason: the Father has loved them and chosen them to be His. There are no other options. Once God has saved someone by giving them His life, we are commanded to love that person. It is our Christian responsibility.

As we come before God and allow Him to fill our hearts with this kind of love for ALL of His people, we will no longer recognize any separations in the body of Christ. We will be “discerning the Lord’s body” (1 Cor 11:29). If by some mighty act of God, all Christians could be given this viewpoint, the denominations and divisions which are so familiar to us today, would cease to exist. Love is the opposite of division. The sectarian situation

in these areas and put God first, you will no doubt continue to have difficulties. It would not be loving of God to let you continue going your own way.

If all this makes you uncomfortable it is probably because it is striking close to home. How we, God’s people, need to be told the truth! This is His commandment: “Thou shalt love the Lord thy God” with every fiber of your being (Deut 6:5). We are to put Him absolutely first in everything. He is to be first in our desires, first in our minds, first in every aspect of our lives. If we are to be Christians having any kind of credible walk with the Lord, this instruction must be thoroughly obeyed. There is no provision made in the scriptures for any other kind of believer. All of us are to hear this commandment and practice it.

THE SECOND COMMANDMENT

As you probably already realize, the second commandment is similar to the first. “Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself” (Mr 12:31). In this matter also, if we are to be real Christians, we have no option but to obey. This commandment too involves a commitment - not a partial concern or passing interest - but a total, unreserved commitment of ourselves to our neighbour.

This verse, although it certainly does apply to everyone, has a very special application in our relationship with other Christians. If we are to be right with God we must have a heartfelt, complete, lifelong commitment to other men and women who are believers in Jesus Christ. We are members of the same body. We have all been bought with the same precious blood. We have been brought by God into a relationship with others which we are commanded to cultivate. Every part of a human body has an integral life commitment and life relationship with the others. Without this the body could not function properly. The same is true of the body of Christ on the earth today. We are instructed to have a commitment to other Christians in which we have determined that we will serve them unconditionally.

If we have this genuine love for the other members of the Christ’s body, our relationship with them will be as follows: We will seek their good above our own (both financially and spiritually), we will spend time praying for their needs, we will diligently search for ways in which we can help them (both practically and spiritually), we will spend time with them (this means seeing them more than once or twice a week in church meetings), we will make every attempt to encourage them and look for opportunities to build them up - in short we will cultivate a body relationship with them which will allow God the opportunity to minister to them through us. Additionally this infers that we will say nothing - absolutely nothing - about them which would cause anyone else to think less of them or in any way diminish their love for them.

As it is with the first commandment, so it is with the second. If you do not have this kind of commitment to other members of the body of Christ, you are living in sin. You have missed God’s purposes and you are disobeying the word of God. If you find that there are other things in your life that crowd out this commitment to one another, this is living proof that your Christianity is not what it should be. If your commitment to other things (again jobs, entertainment, family, friends, etc. all could be suspect) is greater

than your commitment to other believers, then your love relationships are wrong. You are loving yourself more than your neighbour.

Each one of us must come to grips with these considerations and allow God to effect a thorough repentance in our hearts so that we can get our priorities straight according to the scriptures. Our love for God and then our love for one another should be first and foremost in our lives. If it is not then we are living in sin and we desperately need repentance. Nothing could be as plain and simple. When we break God's commandments, we are sinning and sin requires repentance. Our response to this should not just be tears and feelings of remorse but a determination to seek God until our lives are changed and we are conformed to His will.

What we are talking about here is a love for other people - a commitment to others - that is going to change your life. It is going to alter your priorities. It is going to necessitate putting others first and "self" last. It is going to put demands upon your time and energies that will interfere with your own plans and pleasures. It is going to make you uncomfortable. It is probably going to seem both scary and confining. However, these difficulties will only last until you realize through experience that God's blessing is upon this way. You are going to find God while you serve others - as you gird on the towel and minister to their needs - in a way that you have never experienced Him before. You are going to discover what the word "blessing" really means.

A PROPER CHURCH EXPERIENCE

Such love is the substance of the true church. It is an essential ingredient. Without it genuine "church" ceases to exist. It is all too possible to have a religious organization which is full of "good" Christians, wonderful programs and crowded meetings - something which everyone would call a "church" - that is almost completely devoid of the real thing. How commonly believers relate to each other only superficially and sporadically. As we have been seeing, when a body is functioning normally, its members are intimately associated with each other. If this commitment breaks down, the life drains away. This same rule also applies to the church. To the extent that believers have a life covenant with one another, they actually express the body of Christ. Conversely, to the degree that Christians fail in this area, they cease to be the church in any practical way. While it is true that all God's children are part of the Church, if our experience of that fact is missing, we are living in spiritual poverty. What a tragedy it is that so much of what passes for Christianity has strayed so far from God's priorities!

The true expression of Christ's church which we have been describing is the only proper environment for spiritual growth. While believers can and should grow individually, it is when all the members of the body are functioning in a love relationship with each other that the most spiritual progress can be made. In this situation all the needs of everyone, especially new converts, can be met satisfactorily. Just as a family which is full of love is the best place to raise a child, so the church which practices commitment to one another is the ideal environment in which believers can grow to maturity. Imagine for a moment the effect this sort of thing would have upon your walk

with the Lord and also upon those with whom you are acquainted. It could not take long before real progress became evident.

This is not a "pie-in-the-sky" suggestion. It is God's revealed intention for His church to function in precisely this way! These things are stated plainly throughout the whole New Testament. If our experience is anything less than this, we should fall on our faces before God and plead with Him to change us and those around us so that we can fulfil His will. There is no doubt that this is God's plan. There can be no mistaking the fact that this is exactly what Christ desires. How then can we proceed on without experiencing it? How can we continue to claim to be real Christians, imagine that we have an intimate relationship with the Lord or suppose that we are having any meaningful church experience while breaking this commandment? The answer must be that we cannot.

I am not suggesting that we can practically enjoy this kind of relationship with every other Christian in the world. However there should be some, those whom God has pointed out to you, with whom and to whom He wants you to have a total commitment. Just as bricks in the wall of a building are most intimately associated with the ones immediately around them, so it is in the Christian life. Our commitment to a few should be complete and experienced practically. Our commitment to those whose lives are more distant from ours will of necessity be somewhat less experiential. Nevertheless, it should still exist and should manifest itself whenever the opportunity arises. This fact is clearly demonstrated by the New Testament's teaching on showing hospitality to strangers (Rm 12:13, Heb 13:2).

OTHER COMMITMENTS

Please notice here that I am not speaking about commitment to a church, religious organization or group. The Bible nowhere teaches this sort of commitment. In fact, it protests against it (I Cor 1:12,13)! I am also not speaking here about commitment to leaders, to those "over you," or to some kind of hierarchical arrangement which some Christians advocate. Neither am I urging a slavish allegiance to some doctrinal position. Such commitments, either to organizations, leaders or teachings are powerless to produce the result that God desires. It is all too easy for Christians to be "good church members," to be loyal to some ministry or to be faithful to a particular revelation and still possess very little of this kind of love. A cursory examination of the situation in present-day Christendom should serve to graphically illustrate this point.

The great danger of these other commitments is that they are often substituted for the true love covenant about which we have been speaking. An example of this occurs when people think that because they have made a commitment to a certain church group, perhaps by "joining" or signing a membership agreement, that this is the extent of their obligation. In reality, their responsibility to God and to other believers is not even touched by this kind of activity. The commitment which we are discussing here is much, much deeper than this. The results which can be achieved with "group," leadership or doctrinal commitments and the "unity" which is brought about in this way is