

## Community of God's Love

Countless books and poems have been written, songs sung and sermons preached about the love of God. Sadly, millions have never experienced that love because their "God" is not the one we know and worship. God's family in community are capable of manifesting His love in action, rendering it visible to people who are searching. If we want to bring the Gospel into peoples' lives and make a difference for good, against a background of despair, we need to be motivated by the love of Christ. God's care in community will say more about the relevance of the Gospel in today's world than all our rhetoric.

*People reflect their notions of God*

Let's start with your vision of God. That will largely determine the nature and functionality of your faith and community.

If the God you worship is harsh and judgmental, you will be harsh in turn. No one will measure up to your standards. Everyone will be guilty of breaking the rules you set and by which you claim to live. Belief in this God is one-directional; it calls down fire from heaven on those who take a contrary view and ostracizes forever those who fall into sin or who disagree with His followers (Luke 9:54).

If your God is angry, you will live as an angry person. Muslim extremists serve the cause of an unreachable, unknowable, angry God and leave a trail of blood. Their God is capricious; His primary emphasis is sending people to hell. So they reflect their theology and become angry at the world. When the time is apt, they destroy themselves and others, in order to convince God not to be angry with them and to give them instead a free entry pass to the earthly pleasures of Paradise. I have often tried to reason with Shi'ite friends about knowing God, but their anger on His behalf has clouded their judgment and closed their minds. Even the Psalmist occasionally described God as angry (Psalm 7:11) and ended up calling for divine judgment. (By the way, Hell is real, but Jesus' came to save us from it, if we will believe in Him; the default in the New Testament is grace, not fury. See Matthew 9:13.)

If your God is retributive, you will always be geared to seeking retribution. There will be no room for redemption, for turning the other cheek or going the second mile. Retribution will be swift. People whose God is retributive are usually mean-spirited. If a homosexual dies of AIDS they assume, "He got what he deserved", rather than regretting the eternal loss of someone God loves. When someone is sick the assumption is that he or she is being punished for some sin (cf John 9:1-3). When misery and national disasters such as famine, hurricanes or earthquakes occur, we are told it is an "Act of God". There is no question that God's laws, when violated, bring harm to offenders and innocents alike and that the physical world is experiencing the effects of the Fall of Adam and Eve (Romans 8 22). However, I'm thankful we usually don't get what we "deserve". Otherwise we would all be in trouble. Jesus called people to repent and to experience God's mercy. He took our sins and punishment on himself. The God of the Bible gives us inexhaustible love and asks that we share it with men and women around us.

If your God is legalistic, you will end up in chains. I have been bruised by legalists over the years. Legalism makes things other than God absolute. It emphasizes external appearances and becomes preoccupied with trivia. The legalist becomes agitated when those around him fail to match their expectations. The religious leaders of Jesus day were legalists; they subscribed to a code of over six hundred rules. They stood on the sidelines, condemning those who didn't measure up. As a result, they failed to recognize Jesus as the embodiment of truth when he appeared among them. That's right, they missed Him completely. Because Jesus didn't share their narrow view of the world, they accused him of being "a sinner". Legalists are still exclusive. They take pleasure in identifying everyone else's failings. Those who don't fit the formula are excommunicated or regarded as non-Christians. Legalism is too "religious". It is opposed to liberty. Did you know that the word "religion" was derived from an expression meaning "to bind" or "to limit"? Religion proclaims ideas and beliefs that bind and control people. The New Testament idea of salvation, however, was expressed in Greek words that mean, "to set free, liberate, rescue". The two are mutually exclusive (Romans 10:4).

If your God is shaped by the architecture of naves and language of liturgy, you will end up becoming an ecclesiastical hedonist, believing that He only dwells in hallowed temples made by human hands (cf Acts 17:24). Each week you will repair to your "God box" and say you are going to the "house" of God. The building will become a substitute for faith.

If your God is a heavenly Santa Claus, you will expect (or demand) to be showered with presents and be a "prosperous" Christian. In so doing you will alienate millions of godly men and women in large tracts of the world who live in relative poverty, dictatorships, hunger and want, but who nevertheless love Jesus and try to serve him in their daily lives.

If your God is steeped in myth, you will end up living superstitiously. Your personal rules will be rigid and you will be fearful of breaking the least of them "just in case" God stops loving or blesses you. Your faith will be reward-based.

### *The correct perspective*

If, on the other hand, your God is a loving Creator and Father, you will expect to experience His love profoundly. This is the God who humbled Himself and came into the human race, who understands our needs, who brings the lonely into families, who bridges the distances between people with divergent perspectives and who has built a world-wide fellowship of believers. (Muslims talk about a worldwide "Umma", or community, but the relationship is based primarily on external formalities and laws.) Serving this God brings satisfaction, joy and generosity of spirit. Your life will be marked by acts of love like His. God so loved the world that He gave His Son (John 3:16). In the same way, as a child of God, you will be motivated to lay down your life for others (1 John 3:16).

If your God is forgiving and your faith relationship-based, you will overlook the shortfalls of others and reach out to restore them unconditionally and work with the Holy Spirit to bring about change so that they don't keep falling into the same hole (Psalm 85:10).

“Like father, like son.” Jesus was like His Heavenly Father (John 14:9-11). We are also called to imitate, or “mimic” him (Ephesians 5:1; 3 John 11). God’s love for humanity has been the basis for Christian mission from apostolic days. Which makes me wonder, how can it remain invisible in our world that is hungry for authentic love? How can people who know Christians *not* be touched by it?

### *Loving like God – a community at work*

Love is the most written about, most sung about and, ironically, the most fought over commodity in the world. Politicians in the West talk about a “compassionate society”. Love is misunderstood, invoked as the basis for building relations, then tearing them apart.

God has made us for community. The early church spent a lot of time in community. When I was growing up, Christian communities were common. Meals became “Agape” (Love) feasts, based on a New Testament model. Then we all re-discovered privacy and community became passé. All cultures are “alive” and all change over time and their words change meaning. Only God does not change (Malachi 3:6).

The “Children of God” cult, under the leadership of “David Moses” promoted “free love” among its members. Others, such as the group Jim Jones led to a collective in the jungle of Guyana had an almost hypnotic impact on its members, that eroded reason and resulted in mass suicides in the name of religion, but not before hundreds were hoodwinked into believing they had found real love.

God’s love is supernatural. If we do not love supernaturally, it shows that we do not know Him (1 John 4:8). A recent secular survey asked people to re-write the Ten Commandments. While most of the Biblical Commandments (Exodus 20) were eliminated, the single feature common to responses was that those who participated wanted to be treated by others in the same manner in which they were treated. Sounds very much like Jesus so-called Golden Rule (Matthew 7:12). Non-Christians want believers to demonstrate God’s love in action.

What does Godly love look like?

Whereas human love is self-centred and grasping, God’s love gives. It never stops (1 Corinthians 13:8). Human love boasts conquest. Divine love practices service. Human love is pitched at achieving the highest dividend for the apparent giver. Godly love stresses the good of the “other”. Romantic love looks like roses and chocolates, with expectations of reciprocity thrown in. Godly love is shaped like a cross. Commands like “love one another”, “forebear one another”, “forgive one another”, “edify one another” and “prefer one another pepper the New Testament.

In the West, people often find it hard to get close to others. I once visited a community where the leader insisted we all commence with “a time of openness and brokenness”. The reverse ended up being the case, as people felt threatened and clammed up.

In some so-called “Third World” cultures, I have seen Christian communities as sources of emotional strength, acceptance, networking, teaching for marriage and family, mentoring by more experienced people, practical help for those in need, counsel, affirmation and encouragement in times of self-doubt, stress or bereavement and physical security. All of these are Biblical norms, and they work (cf. Luke 4:13-14).

God’s love avoids exaggerations and poses. Not like Craig, a friend who drifted away from simple Christian faith, joined the Children of God and went to India to scrub toilets to show he could “serve” others better than mainstream Christians. Jesus said that such actions already have their rewards (Matthew 6:5, 16). Christians are called to be selfless, hospitable and sacrificial because they belong to Him. They don’t have to advertise their services and good works, because their focus is on Jesus and eternal rewards, not human approval.

We are called to be like God. “Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love. We love because he first loved us. If anyone says, ‘I love God,’ yet hates his brother, he is a liar. For anyone who does not love his brother, whom he has seen, cannot love God, whom he has not seen. And he has given us this command: Whoever loves God must also love his brother.” (1 John 4:7-8, 19-21). The litmus test of Christian faith isn’t how well we know our Bible or creed, but how well we love God and people. I have met agnostics who read the Bible as literature, but were not interested in Jesus. Love isn’t knowledge. Nor is it a feeling, attachment, loyalty or obligation that traps people in pointless relationships. It is a life.

With growing divorce rates among committed Christians and schisms and schists in churches (try checking out “church” in the yellow pages where you live), there is little wonder people are giving up on pretence in organised Christianity. (I wonder how long Jesus would have hung around.) You and I can be different.

### *Does community work?*

Over the years I have witnessed numerous attempts to form functioning communities. When I was growing up we had the hippies, followed by the yuppies. Young people disillusioned with the Vietnam War and double standards on the part of politicians and other leaders turned conventions on their heads and set out to build a better society. Their efforts generated one of the shortest-lived social movements in history. Around the same time, Christians in the West experienced a counter to the “counter-culture” in the Jesus Revolution. Some of my friends called themselves “Jesus freaks” and went to live in communities. They were lauded as more authentic than “free love” experiments or ashrams subsequently established by Hare Krishna devotees and people disillusioned by the church. They tried to model community as an alternative to urban living.

The secular community is not a pretty place. Commenting on the Australian political environment a Cabinet Minister described it as a “feral public culture”. He went on to say that, “Politicians give no quarter; the media is merciless; the public are unforgiving and highly judgmental. No one is given the benefit of the doubt. The worst is always assumed”.

Those who seek to be influential in the secular community run the risk of being exposed to the flames of rejection, disappointment and disillusionment. Are the people of God any better? (Community living can bring out the worst in people who are selfish, immature, ruled by their passion, when living at close range.)

I am the first to admit that the Christian community is less than perfect. That's partly because I am a member. When we think we are "making it", growing as Christians, we stumble into a pit, pride enters, bad attitudes emerge and we are reminded that we have a long way to go in our quest to be like Jesus (even with the Holy Spirit's help). But there is something about Christian community that is "different" from any other human organization. It is the heart of Jesus. Sometimes it requires extra time and effort. It can be more confrontational than we are used to. It is up to you and me to have an impact in our communities.

An anthropologist friend studied in Malaysia. "Every night, as I tried to read, the other students would come into my dormitory and sit with me, in case I was feeling lonely". He told me about a colleague who observed an Inuit community in Canada. "When she wanted to be alone, other members of the community would sit in a circle around her, watching her being by herself." Clearly, not everyone has the same social needs or expectations. However, members of communities need time and opportunities to get to know and support one another.

I am a great believer in Christians meeting as community. An experienced pastor friend once described the value of this to me over a campfire. Using his tongs, he took out a red-hot coal from the centre of the fire; he put it aside and we watched it, to see what would happen. Slowly the orange faded. Before long the fire died and the wood went black. Only by remaining in touch with the other embers did it initially have a chance of remaining on fire. He explained to me that the Christian life is like that. Those who withdraw from community (fellowship) are the first to feel faith extinguish and commitment grow cold.

Ziad and Elias are friends of mine. Ziad grew up as a Palestinian Shi'ite Muslim, suspicious of Christians and bitter about the West's apparent double standards over conflict in the Middle East. Elias was raised in the formality of the Maronite fold. In one sense, they could not have been more different. Searching for God they came together in an Alpha course in an Anglican church. As they worked through the issues presented by the course they came to the realization that what they needed was a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. In the natural, they should have emerged as bitter enemies in an ancient feud. Now they are the best of friends. Christ transformed their differences. These days they fellowship in Christian community and show those around them that there is an alternative. Bridging the gap between people like Ziad and Elias has changed nations.

Jesus' disciples had similar differences. Take the examples of Simon the Zealot and Matthew. A bit of background will help. The zealots were political Jews in Jesus' time. They hated the Roman overlords with a passion and were well known (and feared) for targeted assassinations. They only people they denounced more violently than the oppressors and singled out for attack were Jewish tax collectors, who work as stooges for the Romans and whom the Zealots believed had betrayed their people.

Matthew, on the other hand, was a certified tax collector. He belonged to a group who believed collaboration was better than annihilation and bitterly despised the zealots because they destabilized the system and brought reprisals against innocent civilians. The two groups were implacable foes. Then along came Jesus. Calling Simon and Matthew to follow Him, he transformed their learned hatred into a community of love.

Only God's love can do that. In New Testament times, slaves and masters who became Christians discovered a love that transcended their social conditions, leading to the collapse of slavery and the political system that perpetrated it.

When I lived in South America, missionary friends in Peru took me to meet tribes along the Ucayali River who formerly made war against one another, but had given up rivalries to worship God together in grass huts without walls that served as churches. During an outreach with Youth With A Mission I lived with Jews and Arabs whose love for Jesus enabled them to pray together and witness to their friends about the absolutely transforming power of the Gospel. God's community is above history. It is uniquely cross-cultural and cross-class. It emphasizes the person of Jesus instead of reasons for community. When the love God breaks through, He creates positive synergy and potential to grow.

#### *Time for action*

So, here's the game plan? We need to take our faith seriously, break out of nondescript and homogeneous Christianity, value our relationships and reach out in His care and compassion to those who are hurting.

Human relationships don't easily squeeze into fixed models or structures. However, when we have experienced the love of God and discovered men and women just like us who have also been touched by Him, we can be channels of His love in our world. God's love is the most powerful force on earth. People give up on religion because they can't see it has any meaning for their lives. Your life may be the only evidence someone has of the love of God.

God never stops loving us. The Holy Spirit pours love into our hearts (Romans 5:5). Nothing can separate us from His love (Romans 8:35-39). The Bible encourages us to keep ourselves in God's love (Jude 21). His love on earth is present in His people. It is able to fill the empty, set people free and remove guilt, anger, loneliness, hurts, bitterness and betrayal. If you want your life to beat in time with God's heartbeat and to experience more of His love, recapture the love of Jesus by spending more time with the Holy Spirit and genuine Christians.

We often fail, or feel we have not "got it all together". The Christian community should be a "place" where we can be real and share our joys, hang-ups and heartaches in safety. It should (and can) be an environment filled with Christ's love, motivated by that love to reach out to the world and a locus for true "companionship" (the word is derived from the concept of breaking "bread with" someone), based on shared faith and convictions.

Will you accept the challenge? Such a community of love really does exist.