

WHAT IS LOVE?

If someone who had had a pretty mixed up life started to come along to church for the first time and they asked you the question "What is Love?" how would answer them? How would you convey the meaning of probably the most important fruit of God's spirit to him or her in a way that they could easily understand?

When I first started receiving literature from the church as a teenager I had a very foggy idea of what love was. The two things which answered this question best to me at the time, was first of all, an explanation of the three Greek words that are translated into the English word love - which most of you know are eros(romantic or erotic love), philia(brotherly love) and agape(the totally committed love of God).

The second thing that helped me to understand what love was was a definition that Mr Herbert Armstrong used to use for the word love. To this day, it is still the best definition that I have run across for the word love. He defined love as **AN UNSELFISH, OUTGOING CONCERN FOR OTHERS**. Now today, I'd like to break down that definition and have a look at the three aspects of it so we can gain a deeper understanding of this most important fruit of God's spirit.

The first point is that LOVE IS UNSELFISH. It must have unselfish motives. Some people pursue friendships out of selfish motives and take rather than give. Some psychologists maintain that no one ever acts from purely altruistic motives, because we rarely give to a relationship without receiving something in return. We do, however, have control in consciously establishing our motives for friendship.

Love doesn't give in order to get back. It gives purely out of concern to serve the other person. We can put ourselves to the test. Analyse your motives when you give to others your time in friendship, conversation, service and physical things. You may be surprised if you are honest, as I still am at times, just how much we're motivated to do things out of our own interests whether it's being with the people we want to be with or getting physical rewards, friendship or whatever in return back.

Do we give in order to get back favours, friendship, popularity or anything MORE than wanting to give to the other person? If we are, then it's not unselfish. It's what psychologists call need-love as opposed to unconditional love where there are no strings attached. As soon as the need is no longer there, then neither is the person who only gives need-love.

In the love chapter, 1 Corinthians 13 we read in verse 4 that love does not seek its own. Selfishness is the root of perhaps all improper motives. When we look after our own needs in a friendship, we become selfish and self-centred, focusing on what we alone derive from the relationship. The question we can all ask ourselves is "Am I a giver or am I a taker?"

The second point of Mr Armstrong's definition is that LOVE IS OUTGOING. It must manifest itself in a pattern of good works and not just be good intentions.

If you'd turn over to Proverbs 27:5 we see that God says "Open love is better than love carefully concealed." It's better to actually rebuke someone in a proper spirit when it's needed than to have love and concern that is merely in your heart. Our love can't merely be good intentions. Love can't just be inside our hearts – it has to be outgoing!

If you turn over to 1 Timothy 6:18 we read the following. Breaking into Paul's commands to Timothy for the physically rich he says "Let them do good, that they may be RICH in good works, ready to give, willing to share." Now what about us? Are we RICH in good works? If I were to ask you to write a list down of all the good works that you had done in the last couple of

weeks how many things could you come up with? Could you come up with more than a couple of items?

Now if you'd like to turn over now to Luke 6 and beginning in verse 32 Jesus Christ in the Sermon on the Mount tells us the following, "But if you love those that love you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them. And if you do good to those who do good to you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners do the same."

Here is a real litmus test for a christian. We can ask ourselves some hard questions – Is our love merely limited to our own small circle of friends? Is it limited to giving only when it is convenient to us? If it is, then Christ quite bluntly says here that our conversion really is no better than that of the pagans and sinners of the world.

If we have true outgoing love we'll extend ourself beyond our own personal comfort zone and give to those we wouldn't naturally associate with, as well as those who are closest to us.

A friend of mine down south has bemoaned to me a few times that singles down his way never get asked out to Friday night dinners or weekend activities in his church area. As a single, I can relate to that but there are other people who can easily be left out unwittingly like widows, widowers, single parents and so on. Many of us have limitations on what we can do to give to others but what we can do to help create a sense of belonging we should do by welcoming visitors, the elderly, children, new members and looking after anyone else who might be lonely and in need in our midst.

It's perfectly natural for people to associate in smaller groups with people who have similar interests to us. Such smaller groups are needed to get to know others on a more personal level. It's only when these groups become exclusive cliques does it become wrong.

I've heard a lot of people talking about how friendly or cliquy various church areas are over the years and I have made a couple of observations about the friendliness of people and church areas. The first is that friendliness is not a black and white issue. There are varying degrees of friendliness or how deep is your love to paraphrase the Bee Gees. The second observation that I have made is that there are two distinct components to friendliness.

Those two components are the breadth of a person's friendliness(How widely they mix) and the second is the depth of one's friendliness(How deeply you build your friendships as opposed to only taking a rather superficial interest in others). I would encourage all of us, if we want greater unity in the church here, to be aware of what we can do to help create a sense of belonging for everyone and do what we can. We read in Acts 2:44 about the early New Testament church that "all who believed were together and had all things in common". We see that they had a burning desire to spend as much time together as possible and look out for one another's needs. Is that true of us?

I have met a lot of wonderful people in the church who were givers and have learned the lesson that true christians extend their giving beyond their own personal comfort zone. On the other hand, in my personal contact with people in the church over the years and from what we've seen with the breakup and scattering of God's people, I would say that the majority of people haven't understood this lesson and the reason why they haven't goes back to point one – the love and friendship that they gave was based only on what they could get out of it. It gets back to motive. They gave only when it was convenient to them. We have to be careful that we don't fall into the same trap.

We all have a certain emptiness in our hearts that longs to be filled. So many have fallen into the trap of pursuing every doctrinal novelty and self-interest under the sun in order to fill that void when it is only the love of God APPLIED in our lives that will fill that emptiness. In fact, there is great pleasure in planning and acting on doing good things and being kind to others.

In a sermon on the subject of doing random acts of kindness many years ago the minister mentioned an act of kindness that sort of doubles as a practical joke which I've always wanted to try out. I remember the first time I tried it out. I was coming back from Redcliffe and I got to the toll gate of the Gateway Bridge, pulled out \$4 and said to the toll attendant that I'm paying for me and the guy behind me. I drove off with my eyes glued to the rear view mirror just waiting to see the reaction. Talk about confusion! It took ages before the driver behind me finally accepted it and drove off.

Paul tells us in Ephesians 5:2 that we are to walk in love. Someone I know recently made the comment that the word walk here could be better translated "lifestyle". Our lifestyle should be that of outgoing acts of love.

Now, the third and final part of Mr Armstrong's definition is that LOVE IS ALSO BEING CONCERNED. What do we mean concern? Our concerns or cares are those things we think about. Are our minds focused just on our daily pursuits and having fun or do we think a lot about others?

I remember fondly the times when I was a teenager when I used to visit Mr Clune's sister, Isabel Weight, while she was still alive. I was just new to the church and looking for anyone who liked to talk about the things of God and she was a real friend at the time. Even though she suffered terribly from emphysema I would be absolutely amazed me by how she'd be constantly be thinking about others and how they were doing compared to the carnal teenager that I was at the time.

We read in Matthew 15 and verses 19 and 20 about how what comes out of the heart defiles a man referring to all sorts of wrong attitudes which lead to sinful actions. The process works for good also. If we think about giving to others a lot more then we are more likely to act on those thoughts. As I said before, planning good things to brighten up people's day or helping out others can give great pleasure and be a lot of fun at times.

Mr Armstrong used to describe the two broad ways of life in the Bible very simply as the way of give and the way of get. How do we move from the way of get to the way of give?

One answer can be found in Isaiah 32 and verse 8. If you'd like to turn there we read , "The generous devises generous things and by generosity he shall stand."

The generous person devises or plans his giving. That is, he or she, sits down and makes an active plan for giving. Think of opportunities, occasions and situations where you intend to live the way of give.

Plan regular opportunities to give hospitality. They're giving experiences that we need. Maybe once a month or more often as we are able. Plan things in your prayer time, especially plenty of intercessory prayer for others. When you ask God to bless someone who is sick, who is weak, who is depressed you have given them time. It's a reflection of the way of give.

Plan to see those who are sick or elderly. Plan to talk to new members, visitors or those who need someone to talk to or someone who you haven't talked to for a while. Plan to use your resources - your money or whatever to give to others and, finally, plan to increase your offerings as time goes by.

Are we just living for ourselves or is giving to God and to others a big part of what drives us in our life?

In conclusion, I'd like to share with you a beautiful quote from an article that was written under the name of the former pastor general of the WCG, Joseph Tkach, during the days in which he pushed the concept that we are one family in the church. The article had these words to say about what love is,

“From a kind word, an encouraging note, a thoughtful gesture, an ear to listen, or an expression of appreciation, to a sacrifice of time, energy or convenience, love is a way of life. And it is a way of life that is not out for recognition. It does what it does because it feels it. And it feels it because it believes in it, and is led by God's spirit that comes from the God who is love.”