

GROW IN THE LOVE OF GOD

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At age 14 Todd Conner had an interest that surpassed even his enthusiasm for his high school football team. It was his baby brother Allen, born Oct. 7, 1975. Todd loved Allen a great deal and their relationship grew, but it was shaken by tragedy.

In November Allen's body went limp in Todd's arms. "Mother!" shouted Todd. "Something's wrong!" Allen had suffered permanent kidney impairment. Two valves on the tubes leading from his bladder had malfunctioned, causing urine to back up into and damage Allen's kidneys.

Emergency surgery saved Allen's life. His recovery was slow but by Dec. 15, 1976, Allen weighed 16 pounds and was ready for valve reimplantation surgery, which was a success.

Allen's well-being lasted only until July, 1977, before his condition began deteriorating again. This was a painful period for Todd. He saw his brother lose what he had gained through surgery. No longer could Todd gallop around the house with Allen on his back shouting "Go, horsey!" Allen became so unsteady he could barely walk. Soon Todd's relationship with Allen was reduced to carrying him.

Doctors said Allen's only hope was a kidney transplant. Todd quickly volunteered one of his. Initially, his parents were against the surgery because they feared that something might happen to Todd. With only one kidney, for instance, he might never play football.

Tissue compatibility tests showed Todd to be the best choice as the donor. In counseling before the operation his feelings about football were discussed, but his love for Allen was still greater. "I don't care about that," said Todd.

On May 10, 1978, Todd was wheeled off to surgery. He heard Allen's familiar voice crying out "Todd!" as the baby, too, was taken to surgery. "After today," Todd reminded him, "you're not going to hurt anymore." But Allen's concern at that point was only for Todd. "When they give me part of you, will you hurt?" Allen asked. "Nope," said Todd. "It won't hurt me because you're my brother."

The day after the surgery Todd and Allen greeted each other with kisses and repeated each other's name. The surgery was successful, and Allen regained his strength. A year later Todd resumed football practice. The story of Todd and Allen proves Jesus Christ's words, "Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends" (John 15:13). Todd was willing to risk his goals—and his life—for Allen. Of course, we in God's Church know that God could have healed Allen, but the point of the story is the great amount of love Todd had for his brother.

The world lacks love

How many of us today openly exhibit the type of love Todd had for Allen? How much are we willing to give of ourselves—to sacrifice—for the benefit of others around us? Most human relationships do not exhibit this kind of love. They are damaged by the "get as much for me as I can" philosophy that has prevailed throughout history.

From the beginning we have been subject to these selfish pulls, authored by the fallen archangel Satan the devil. Cain murdered his brother Abel because he lacked brotherly love. His heart was filled with jealousy because he wanted to get rather than give to his brother.

The story of Sodom and Gomorrah also reveals a breakdown in human relationships. The angels visiting Lot in the form of men were not safe. They were threatened with homosexual acts by Lot's neighbors! Why did this situation exist? The citizens of Sodom and Gomorrah lacked love. Their problems went much further than homosexuality — the moral, social and spiritual fabric of the society was ripped beyond repair (Ezek. 16:49-50). There were not even 10 men of good character in Sodom (Gen. 18:32).

The end time—the time in which we now live—is compared to Sodom and Gomorrah (Luke 17:28-30). We see the same breakdown in human relationships. One in three U.S. marriages ends in divorce, and the surviving marriages are often unhappy. Homosexuality is increasing. Child abuse is a serious problem worldwide. Labor unrest abounds. Wars divide the nations of our planet.

All these conditions indicate a lack of love. They show that the world is going the way of the get philosophy rather than the give way of life. All these breakdowns in human relationships produce the same thing — unhappiness! Unhappiness for the person failing to show love, and misery for the person experiencing the lack of love.

Educators, sociologists, psychologists, philosophers and religious leaders vainly attempt to determine the underlying reasons for the present state of man. But

only one source strips away human reason and gives us the true answer: God's Holy Word. The Bible reveals the cause of breakdowns in human relationships: "From whence come wars and fightings among you? come they not hence, even of your lusts that war in your members?" (Jam. 4:1). The conditions in the world persist because man has rejected the way of God! People cut off from God are subject to the lusts of the flesh (Rom. 1:18-32).

What about the Church?

But can God's Church lack love? God calls this Church age the Philadelphian era (Rev. 3:7). The word Philadelphia means "brotherly love." However, Christ warned that because of the sinful environment around us, the love of many in the Church would wax cold in the end time (Matt. 24:12). We as Christians live in a modern Sodom and Gomorrah. This environment weakens our ability to love one another.

The environment of ancient Corinth was extremely corrupt as well. It was notorious for sexual looseness. Christians in that city were adversely affected.

Paul wrote that the Corinthian church was full of envy, strife and division (I Cor. 3:1-3). One man committed incest with his stepmother; this was not a hidden sin but one that was freely accepted by other members (I Cor. 5:1-2). Church members were unable to resolve their problems among themselves, and foolishly went to the judges of the world (I Cor. 6:1).

What love produces

These problems reveal a church lacking proper love. In response, Paul showed them how love should work in the Church—what it should produce among Church members.

The Church is one spiritual Body made up of many members, each of them important—just as a physical body is made up of different but equally important parts. With this established, Paul showed the need for appreciating one another. In fact, those who appear the least deserving of appreciation are to be shown the most! The purpose for this attitude among Christians is to produce unity and empathy for each other (I Cor. 12:13-26).

How wonderful it is when the children of God respect and appreciate one another. It breeds a far different atmosphere than does a corrupt world that hinders people from showing love. Furthermore, this atmosphere of brotherly love stimulates the love of God.

What, then, is love? Love begins with the keeping of God's law. Many people today think God's law is done away. But the Bible reveals that it is only through the knowledge of God's law that we know what sin is (Rom. 3:20, I John 3:4). We enjoy the fruits of God's love by putting His law to work in our lives (Rom. 2:13, Jam. 1:22). God's law doesn't harm your neighbor — it helps him. Keeping God's law shows him love (Rom. 13:8-10).

More than that, God's love is a product of God's Spirit working in us (Rom. 5:5). By utilizing His Spirit and the tools of prayer, Bible study, meditation and fasting we produce obedience to Him and develop right attitudes and approaches to life. Then those around us are affected by the godly love that flows through us.

These character traits of godly love are beautifully described in 1 Corinthians 13, where love is broken down into the attributes it produces in Christians and the benefits it offers people around them. Each part is worthy of careful consideration. For our purposes we will substitute the word love for the King James term charity.

Love suffereth long (1 Cor. 13:4). Patience is needed when things go wrong, so we will suffer without anger or discouragement. It comes from understanding the other person's weaknesses, just as God understands our weaknesses and exhibits great patience toward us. How much happier we all are if this trait is practiced, because it produces a more relaxed feeling within ourselves and others. God expects us to have the same mercy for others as He does for us (Rom. 2:1-5).

Is kind (1 Cor. 13:4). Kindness is responding to the needs of others. Much of Christ's life was spent meeting the needs of others through healings and other miraculous events. He performed miracles out of compassion (Matt. 9:36, 14:14, 15:32), which is a combination of sympathy for someone in distress and a desire to alleviate his or her problem. Jesus acted out of deep sympathy and sorrow for the plight of those around Him (Isa. 53:3-4). So ought we.

Envieth not (1 Cor. 13:4). Envy prevents us from rejoicing at the successes of others. It cripples personal relationships (Prov. 27:4). It led to Christ's death at the hands of the Jews (Matt. 27:18). How much better it is to be grateful for the accomplishments of others! It builds much warmer and more secure relationships. It helps others reach their full potential without fear of hurt. Aren't you happier when your successes are appreciated? When envy is removed, appreciation is possible.

Vaunteth not itself, is not puffed up (1 Cor. 13:4). Love eliminates pride, which separates us from others because we feel superior. Feelings of self-superiority should warn us that love is missing in our lives; this separates us from God and

men (Prov. 16:18, 29:23). When pride is eliminated, love replaces it and draws us together, because we hold other people in higher esteem than ourselves. We see our own weaknesses more clearly and focus on the strengths of others. We can share our fears and failures with others (Jam. 5:16). Humility is an important ingredient in producing godly love.

Doth not behave itself unseemly (1 Cor. 13:5). Good manners are an expression of love. They show our concern for others when we act out of humility. We should question our actions to see if they are done in good taste. God tells us to show honor and follow the rules of custom (Rom. 13:7). Our society has faltered in this trait and discarded etiquette and proper behavior.

Seeketh not her own (1 Cor. 13:5). God's love acting in us will make us more generous; we will have the give attitude that motivates God Himself. We will think as much or more of others as we do of ourselves. The way of selfishness and get has caused all this world's evils, but a Christian will not demand to have his own way at the expense of others.

Is not easily provoked (1 Cor. 13:5). Love eliminates wrong anger. When God gave us His Spirit at baptism, He intended that we conduct ourselves according to His character and that we be of the same mind as Christ (I Tim. 1:7, Phil. 2:5); Christ was compassionate, sympathetic, slow to anger (Neh. 9:17). Should not we be so in dealing with the unconverted and even our brethren? There is a time for righteous indignation (Eph. 4:26). Christ Himself was angry on occasion, but He channeled His aggression perfectly. Wrong anger results from our lack of patience, kindness, generosity, courtesy and unselfishness. One who controls his anger is better than the mighty (Prov. 16:32). Remember that a soft answer eases the tension of an angry confrontation (Prov. 15:1).

Thinketh no evil (1 Cor. 13:5). God's way is one of forgiving and forgetting the evil deeds of others, when repented of. It replaces unnecessary suspicion with trust. This approach builds friendship. Stop and analyse how much this world suffers because of evil thought.

Rejoiceth not in iniquity, but rejoiceth in the truth (1 Cor. 13:6). A person filled with love doesn't like to see others sin and suffer the consequences. Instead he enjoys the truth that frees a person from sin and unhappiness. As Jesus said, "The truth shall make you free" (John 8:32).

Beareth all things (1 Cor: 13:7). Love doesn't avoid obligations. It is willing to take on responsibilities. Bearing one another's burdens fulfills the law of Christ (Gal. 6:2). Jesus gladly took upon Himself the burden of being our Savior (John 10:17-18). It required a tremendous sacrifice, but His love for us made it possible. We need the same love for others.

Believeth all things (1 Cor. 13:7). Believing all things doesn't remove us from reality. It makes more real to us that God is about to usher in His perfect government to replace today's pitiful societies. History has shown that we cannot believe in man's ways, but we will soon all believe God. We are frequently too negative — we doubt instead of believe. Consider God's optimism. He said that, for a rich man, entering the Kingdom of God was harder than a camel passing through the eye of a needle. True, with men this is impossible. But, Christ said, with God all things are possible (Matt. 19:23-26). When you are burdened with trials and troubles ask yourself, "Do I believe God?"

Hopeth all things (1 Cor. 13:7). Christian love is filled with hope for the future. There is the hope generated by God's presence in our lives and in the lives of others. There is the ultimate hope of God's Kingdom being established and having a part in it. We are to lay hold of this hope (Heb. 6:18) —when we are filled with it we will radiate happiness.

Endureth all things (1 Cor. 13:7). Love endures hardship. It helps us have the right attitude when things are difficult. True Christianity causes all things to work for good (Rom. 8:28). Endurance is essential for salvation (Matt. 24:13). We must have it to face the frightening events to precede Christ's return to earth.

God is love

Relationships work well when love is present in them. When it isn't, unhappy relationships exist. This is true among marital partners, family members, friends, casual acquaintances, fellow employees and members of God's Church. We all need love to make our relationships work. God is love (4 John 4:8)! Love literally emanates from Him. Everything God has created for us and is doing through us is done in love. What greater example of love is there than the fantastic plan God has designed to change humans into literal members of the God Family?

By following Christ's example and obeying God's laws, we can have the right relationships among ourselves. By submitting ourselves to God we can be prepared to enter His Kingdom. The Kingdom of God will be based on love—and we must grow in God's love to be there! "And this I pray, that your love may abound yet more and more in knowledge and in all judgment" (Phil. 1:9).