



# 18<sup>th</sup> GENERAL CONVENTION OF SYNOD



## Bible Study 1 WHERE LOVES COMES ...

Take love out of Hollywood and you're left with not much. Take it out of Bollywood and you're left with even less. Take the quest for love out of social media or the daily dance of interpersonal interactions and the relational cupboard's pretty bare.

Love truly is central. A loveless life is painful beyond words. A life built on hate is really demonic.

'All you need is love (all together now) all you need is love.'

So sang the Beatles, and the world sang along. And still does in a way.

We naturally believe we can make love happen, as if it's in our hands to create love out of nothing. If only we could have the right atmosphere, or mental attitude. If only we set our wills to it.

If only ...

But no matter how much we sing about love or ratchet ourselves up to the task, we're not able to love, not simply, truly or fully. Not of ourselves, by ourselves.

Does that sound surprising? It might, because it contradicts all our natural thinking.

This series of Bible studies explores some big questions.

Perhaps they'll be pretty uncomfortable. Or maybe they'll revive and refresh us in the grace and truth we already know. Either way, sometimes big questions are the best ones to ask.

Unsurprisingly enough, we think we know what love is. We think we can find love, or that we can initiate it.

But what if we're actually in the dark about it, or at best in the shadows? What if we don't really know the first thing about love? Or what if our view of love is not even close to what true love is really like? Or if we've imagined God's love to be just like our love, except on a bigger scale?

What if God's love **isn't** like ours?

What if God's love has no earthly comparison? What if the love of God is so different, and so transformative, we need a new language to speak about it? What if God's plan for you were to be far greater than you imagined? What if his love was far deeper than you could dream?

This series of studies has been written to help you explore God's love. What could be simpler? What could be more dangerous?

More detailed reading can be found here ([link to Graham Harms' original paper](#)) and here ([link to the paper produced by the working group](#)). If you want to dig deeper feel free to explore these resources as you're doing this series.

## ACTIVITY 1

### Is there anything in this introduction that you find new or troubling?

- Are there areas in your life where the quest for love has ended in disappointment?
- Is it possible that you've become cynical about love, or even its possibility?
- Have you ever wondered why there is not more love to be found in the church? Why?

## ACTIVITY 2

Many Bible passages speak about the love of God, but this study will focus on **1 John 4:7-21**.

Read this passage around the group, preferably in two or three different translations. Or, if you're doing this study by yourself, read it aloud to yourself. Take time to listen carefully.

We **should** know a lot about love. 'God is love', John tells us (1 John 4:8,16) and, after all, we've been made in his image (Genesis 1:26–28), so it's no surprise that love figures prominently in the whole human race. But the Bible also tells us that the image we were created in has been horribly twisted and distorted. We love the wrong things in the wrong way for the wrong reasons.

This may come as a surprise, but the opposite of love is not hate. It's selfishness. And selfishness marks our natural state. Self-centred thinking, living and acting: these are the expressions of human sinfulness. Martin Luther spoke about us as being 'curved in upon ourselves'. Like a supermassive black hole, we take all things into ourselves and let nothing out.

Self-centredness even hides itself as religion—just ask the Apostle Paul whose life as a Pharisee was consumed by zealous love for God and his Law (see Philippians 3:5). It conceals itself as true commitment—just ask Peter who really, truly believed that his love for Jesus was so great he would never forsake him even if the rest of disciples did (Matthew 26:34). It hides in the folds of sexual attraction—just ask David whose adultery led to bloodshed and death (2 Samuel 11:7-12).

Human sin hasn't left any part of life untouched. Not even love.

### ACTIVITY 3

How might our natural selfishness express itself at home?

- At work?
- In the church?

Look at the selfish love in **Luke 6:32–36; 14:12**. How does this compare to the love of God described in **1 John 4**?

Can you share in your own words what your experience has been of these two different kinds of love?—both love that is selfish and love that is described in 1 John.

And yet ...

Read again over that list of characters above: Paul, Peter, David. (We'll return to a couple of these in a later study.)

Their failure in love, their wrongheaded expressions of love, didn't stop the love of God coming to them.

Our thinking about love is most naturally conditional: 'If you ... then I ...', or 'If I ... then you ought...'. We expect that our love will be rewarded, or at least returned. We can even transfer that sort of thinking onto our relationship with God:

'I've given so much ... therefore God ought to...'

'I've been a faithful member of the church for years ...that should be worth something ...'

And, conversely, we judge others according to our own standards:

'They haven't loved and cared for me ...they shouldn't be loved or honoured.'

In reality this sort of thinking is simply idolatry. It's the way all idol worshippers think their gods operate. The more you put in, the more you should get out. The greater devotion you show, the more your god should approve of you. The bigger the offering, the greater the blessing.

It's simply human self-centred love on a spiritual plane.

#### ACTIVITY 4

- What particular parts of **1 John 4:7-21** counter this kind of thinking?
- What other passages in the Bible can you think of that reinforce this difference?
- Read the story of the workers in the vineyard in **Matthew 20:1-16**.
- Why does this story grate with our sense of fairness?
- Do we really want to get what we deserve in life? Why/why not?
- Why do you think Jesus told this story to the disciples?

It's sometime said that the love of God is "unconditional". In using that term we've imported a psychological concept (it came originally from a particular school of humanistic psychotherapy) into the way we talk about God.

In fact, God's love is "counter conditional". He doesn't love us and let us be. His love, against all our selfish hatred of him, transforms us. He finds us, not as helpless victims nor as innocently lost sheep, but as rebels with weapons in our hands (see Colossians 1:22; Romans 5:10; 8:7-8; Ephesians 2:1-2).

But finding us in that state he loves us still, acting in his powerful and love to redeem us from our own rebellion.

In Jesus, God overcomes his own holy wrath, 'counter conditionally' loving us at the expense even of his only begotten Son.

#### ACTIVITY 5

What does **1 John 4:7-21** tell us about the nature of the love of God?

In **Luke 15:11–32** read the story of the Father's amazing love.

- What does this story tell us about our love?
- What does this story tell us about God's love?
- Where and how have you seen the love of God?
- Could a person love God without knowing the forgiveness of their sins?  
Why/Why not?

Try to express 1 John 4:7-21 in your own words. Or think about how you might explain this to someone who doesn't know the Bible.

Close the study with a prayer, thanking God for his amazing, powerful and unselfish love, and asking him to teach you more about it.