



18th GENERAL CONVENTION OF SYNOD



WHERE LOVE COMES TO LIFE

Biblical and Theological Reflection

2015 General Convention Foundational Paper

Introduction

In June 2014 Bishop John Henderson produced a briefing paper for a proposed working group to attend to the LCA's tagline, *Where Love Comes to Life*.

The working group was convened in August 2014, under Rev Dr Noel Due, appointed by the bishop. Other members were Mrs Ruth Zimmermann, Dr Pauline Simonsen, Mrs Anne Dohnt, Rev Reid Matthias and Rev Joel Cramer. Rev Dr Greg Lockwood was not able to join the group, but offered his services to consult as needed.

This paper is the first of the tasks the bishop set the group: to 'investigate the theological origins of the theme, and prepare a background paper on its meaning and how it might inform the church ... [by providing] a clear, scriptural, gospel centred explanation, retaining [its] emphasis on sanctification'.

The paper was drafted by Dr Due and sent out to the working group for review and revision before being adopted as the foundational document for the rest of the group's work.

Where Love Comes to Life:

Biblical and Theological Reflections on the Theme

1. By nature of the case we can't say all there is to say about the biblical teaching on love. The main thrust, however, is clear: there is much more about the love of God for his people than theirs for him.
 - a. Our love for God is a gracious gift, imparted by his love for us.
 - i. One of the clearest Biblical statements is in 1 John 4:19, 'We love because he [God] first loved us'.
 - ii. Theologically, this is well summed up in the statement 'the love of God does not find, but creates, that which is pleasing to it.' (*Heidelberg Disputation*, 1518).
 - b. Accordingly, the vast weight of verses in the NT speak of God's love for us, specifically in sending his Son as an atoning sacrifice (eg Rom 5:8; Eph 2:4-5; 2 Thess 2:16; Gal 2:20; 1 John 2:10ff; etc.).
 - i. There are some references to our love for God (eg Rom 8:28; 1 Cor 2:9; 16:24 and a few others), but in the wider context of the each passage it is clear that our love is the reflexive response to his, ie love for God is initiated by his love for us.
 - ii. Love for God is not initiated by us. It never has and never will. We do not exist in a moral neutrality, as though we could choose good and evil freely. We are '*dead* in transgressions and sin' (Eph 2:1ff); as we say in the general confession of sin 'we are born in bondage to sin and *cannot* free ourselves'.
 1. This means we cannot free ourselves to love God. Grace means exactly this: life to the dead by the will and work of God alone
 - a. Luther's *On the Bondage of the Will* expounds these points clearly.
2. God alone *is* love (1 John 4:8, 16) and so love is 'of' [ie from] God (1 John 4:7)
 - a. 'Herein is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins' (1 John 4:10).
 - i. The love of which John speaks is not a humanly created thing. It is seen in the sending of Jesus to bear away wrath; to be our atoning sacrifice.
 - ii. The love of God, therefore, is continually counter-conditional. It does not find us as willing subjects, but rebels with weapons in our hands. His love is not earned by us. When God encounters us he counters our hostility by his loving grace.
 1. Thus, the love of God is for us as his *enemies* (Rom 5:10).
 2. Paul's parallel descriptions of us as 'weak' [ie helpless, without strength], 'ungodly', 'sinners' (Rom 5:6-10), 'haters of God' (Rom 1:30), 'dead in our sins' (Col 2:13);

Eph 2:1), and 'foolish, disobedient, deceived [and] enslaved' (Titus 3:3) all stress the fact that, apart from the love of God coming to us in Jesus, we do not and cannot love him.

3. Love springs to life in God's people as they are filled with his life. Love, therefore, becomes the mark of his own people ie those united to Jesus in whom his Spirit dwells.
 - a. 1 John 3:14 states the matter clearly: 'We know that we have been transferred from death to life, because we love the brothers and sisters. The person who does not love remains in death' (CEB)
 - i. Love, therefore, is the mark of a resurrected humanity. We do not (indeed cannot) generate love in order to bring life; love is the fruit God's life in us.
 - ii. Many passages testify to this, but these are some of the clearest: 1 John 3:11-17; 4:7:21; Rom 5:5; John 13:35.
 - b. The whole law is summed up in love (eg Rom 13:8-10; Gal 5:13-15)
 - i. This is not given to God's people in Christ as a legal command, but as the fulfilment of God's promise to write his law on our hearts (eg Deut 30:6; Jer. 31:33; Eze 11:19; 36:25; Hebs 8:10; 10:16)
 - ii. As a result we actually delight in the law of God in our innermost being (eg Rom 7:7), even if we don't have the power of ourselves to fulfil it.
4. We should fear, love and trust in God above all things, but we don't. In fact, we do the opposite. Since God is not pleasing to us in our natural state, we do not love him spontaneously. In fact we despise him, reject his law, spurn his love and ultimately crucify him in the person of his Son.
 - a. The 'law and prophets' hinge on the matter of love (Matt 22:34-39); the story is a sorry one.
 - i. Despite the good gift of the law, the holy prophets, the temple worship and the covenant faithfulness of God, OT history only demonstrates that no one ever kept the commandments.
 - ii. None has ever loved the Lord with his or her whole heart or mind, or his or her neighbour as himself. Indeed, the sorry history of the human race is that we have exchanged love for selfishness (Luther: we are curved in upon ourselves ... *incurvatus in se*). Paul speaks of the basis of this in Romans 1:18-32—we exchanged the truth of God for a lie, turning to idols instead of God. We sought out other gods to replace the intimacy of the Father, the joy of the Spirit and the redemption found in Jesus.
 1. In this passage, we see how the idolatry of our hearts leads to every manner of social, relational and personal discord.

2. By contrast, Romans 12 and following chapters show what flows from the renewed heart and mind, freed from idolatry, settled in the true worship of God.
 3. Romans 12 is the reversal of everything described in Romans 1, and it's a beautiful picture of what Paul found the early church to be.
- iii. Salvation—in a very real sense—is salvation from our misplaced love: loving idols instead of God, and ourselves instead of others.
 1. Salvation is therefore liberating love: the love of God liberates us firstly to love him and thence one another.
 2. Being made in the image of God, such love is our true freedom.
5. Jesus is the only man who has ever kept the commandments of God. He alone has loved God with his whole heart and us as himself. He has counted us as more worthy than himself, and given his life in exchange for ours. He sees our deadness, and loves us still, so that we might truly have the love of God come to life in us.
 - a. His whole life and ministry were firstly for God, and thence for us.
 - i. And he still loves and lives forever for us, as our High Priest leading us in worship (the message of Hebrews and the meaning of the Ascension).
 - ii. In him God's love for us is guaranteed; and by union with him we experience the miracle of loving God because he has loved us. We never need to wonder whether God is for us, or whether we are truly reconciled to him. He has reconciled us to himself in Jesus. Paul extols the depth of this assurance Paul in Ephesians 1:3-14, for example, and he prays that his readers may *truly* know it in Ephesians 1:18ff and 3:14ff. Thus, the church is continually to be built up in the love of God and in mature love for one another (see, for example, Eph 4:11-16).
 - b. The good news is this: the commandments kept only *in Jesus*. Fulfilling the commandments is not ours to do by imitation, but by the power of *participation*, in Christ, by the Spirit (eg Rom 8:4). It is 'Christ in us, the hope of glory' (Col1:27).
 - i. We do not keep the commandments by following Jesus' example (that way is death!), but by living in his grace, being immersed with him in the Father's love; and being filled with his Spirit.
 - ii. The means of grace (eg the hearing of the gospel, the sacraments, worship, fellowship and prayer) are gifts to keep us mindful of our union with Christ; to keep our minds from being conformed to this world's patterns; and to continually revive us in the love of God and one another.

6. The love of which the Church speaks (as it proclaims the gospel) is not human love magnified to a divine level. It is wholly different from our love (just as God's righteousness is wholly different from our self-righteousness, and his wrath is wholly different from our anger).
 - a. The New Testament communities needed to develop a different vocabulary to speak of the love they encountered in the hearing of the Word (Jesus) and the ministry of the Spirit.
 - b. The distinctive New Testament word is *agape*, which stands in contrast to the more common words for love (plenty of which were available in the Greek). *Agape* was an extant word which dwelt— so to speak—on the fringes of the lexicon, to be captured by Jesus and the apostles, filled with a new meaning, and used as a piece of significant Christian vocabulary.
7. It must be stressed that this love is not an abstract principle, but living and active presence of God himself, who *is agape*. The love of God [ie not our love for God, but the love from and of God himself] is shed abroad in the hearts of God's people by the Spirit (Rom 5:5).
 - a. The Spirit thus brings his fruit to bear in the relationships of believers (Gal 5:22,23).
 - i. The NT communities are described in terms never before seen (eg Gal 3:28,29; 5:6; 1 Cor 12:13; Col 3:11; etc). We cannot underestimate what this meant, and the power of Christ which brought it about. Any threat to this love spurred the apostles into action (eg Paul writing Galatians and Corinthians, John writing his letters), because these communities transcended prevailing cultural norms. Their life and relationships were revolutionary.
 - ii. The crucial and central element to their new life was '...faith working through love' (Gal 5:6). Faith is the fountainhead of all good things. It is active and dynamically creative. By faith old barriers were broken down so that the circumcised and non-circumcised (for example) could both be released from their legalist imprisonment to serve one another in love. 'The Christian is the most free lord of all, subject to none; and the most dutiful servant of all, subject to all.' *The Liberty of the Christian*
 1. The New Testament Christians (indeed, as all Christians are, eternally) were the very household of God (or Temple, or body of Christ and similar phrases) where the character and culture of the Triune God became evident.
 - b. The life of the New Testament communities is also seen in the use of the phrase 'one another'. Love for one another is mentioned around 35 times; but also many other related ideas such as serving one another, waiting for one another, forgiving one another, bearing with one

another, not lying to one another, edifying one another, etc. Each of these, in their own way, was culturally radical.

- c. In all this, we see Jesus' promise fulfilled: '...by this shall all know that you are my disciples' (John 13:35), because only he could produce this sort of love in their relationships. They trusted him (faith) and love was the fruit. Where true faith shrivels, love dries up.
 - i. *Hearing* with faith is therefore critical to love coming to life.
 - 1. Luther's concern was not just that the gospel be preached, but that it be *heard*. Hearing is the most important function in the Christian life. Where true hearing takes place, love truly springs up.
 - d. As the gospel was preached and heard, God's *agape* produced communities hitherto unimaginable.
 - i. We read of their *koinonia* [ie fellowship, but far removed from the way we often use the word], expressed in radical actions of love and self-giving (eg Acts 2:43-47; 4:32-37; 7:60; etc.)
 - ii. Thus, passages such as 1 Corinthians 13 stand as a rebuke, since the Corinthian congregation had drifted away from what ought to have been the norm into factionalism, greed, selfishness and competitiveness.
8. One of the consequences of all this is that we should not equate the love of God with the common concept of 'unconditional acceptance'.
- a. In one sense God's love is unconditional in that it is not conditioned by anything in us, but in actuality it is counter-conditional, in that he doesn't leave us where he finds us. Anne Lamott writes: 'God loves us exactly the way we are, and God loves us too much to let us stay exactly the way we are.'
 - i. His love transforms us, that we may bear the full image of his Son (eg Rom 8:29; 1 Cor 15:49; 2 Cor 3:18; Phil 3:21; 1 John 3:2; etc)
 - ii. This means that the love of God continually moves us away from sin towards his mercy. We no longer live in the benighted state we were born to; as children of the Light we are to walk in the Light.
 - iii. This is why the God's love also disciplines his church, examples of which abound in both Testaments. Such discipline is with a view to renewal and revival—that the chastened Church may more fully know his love and seek his face instead of the fellowship of the idols to which we so readily become captive.
9. Love, therefore is not something that lies in our hands to create. The Church is the community created by the love of God and continually re-created by that love, as we hear the gospel proclaimed to us and receive it with faith.

- a. So what if the Church doesn't exhibit the fruit of the Spirit, or if there is not true, radical *koinonia*? Has God's promise failed? No, he seeks continually to bring his love to life in us again, and through that to lead us in true love for one another.
 - i. We may grieve the Spirit in our relationships ie finding that he fights against us in our anger, resentment and unforgiveness (eg Eph 4:30); we may depart from the calling we've been given and return to factionalism and splinter groups (as in Corinthians); we may even be tempted to go the way of Cain (as in 1 John 3). But one thing is clear: only the gospel brought home in the power of the Spirit can revive our love. The law cannot do it (any more than the law can justify or sanctify us). The Church needs more gospel, more fully preached and believed, not less!
- b. For this reason the New Testament injunctions to continue in love, and the commands about how the members of the church are to live with and for one another (eg Ephs 4-6; Col 3-4) are all built on a powerful re-presentation of the gospel. Paul and the others proclaimed the good news afresh their letters to re-awaken faith from which good works flow. Justification is the powerhouse for our sanctification. G Forde: 'sanctification is the art of getting used to our justification'.
 - i. The consistent New Testament pattern is that the imperatives follow the indicatives. We cannot be *what* we are, until we know *who* we are, and by what grace we are held.
- c. It goes without saying that the apostles looked for, and expected, each Christian community to be continually filled with the Spirit (eg Eph 5:18; cf. Acts 2:4; 4:8, 31; 9:17; 13:9; 52). Where this is the case, the Spirit bears *his* fruit: love, joy, peace, etc.
 - i. But where the Spirit is quenched or grieved, the gospel not heard, or perhaps not fully proclaimed, the Law takes over. Legal religion can only ever produce the deeds of the Flesh. The Spirit's fullness lies in 'hearing with faith' (as in Galatians 3:2).

10. So, back to the tagline: *Where love comes to life*. These issues are central.

- a. What love do we speak of?
 - i. We speak of the love of God, as described and discussed above, centred in the person of Jesus and God's work in him on our behalf.
 - ii. This is not human love on a higher level, but the love of God himself ie the love which flows from him into our dead hearts.
- b. What does it mean for that love to come to life?
 - i. The love of which we speak is a converting love. It changes us, causing us to turn from our idols and other expressions of false love. It breaks down any confidence in our own ability. The

experience of this love is nothing short of a resurrection to new life.

- ii. This love transforms relationships and whole communities. It sweeps aside old barriers to true, self-giving *koinonia*; it erases the hostility built up through suspicion, unforgiveness, pride, etc. When we read that there is no longer 'Jew and Greek, slave and free ...': one cannot do justice to what this new community must have looked like. But it is not an item of antiquarian curiosity. Wherever the gospel awakens true faith such communities are born.
- c. Where does it come to life?
- i. God's love comes to life where the gospel is truly heard by the power of the Spirit. It is created by the Word, sustained by him through the Spirit and flows from the one God and Father of us all.
 - ii. Therefore, love comes to life not only among Lutherans, but wherever God's people live in the fullness of the Triune life.
 - iii. But it *does* come to life among us. We may frequently make the mistake of thinking of the Church primarily in institutional terms, in fact it is an organism (the body of Christ), and a holy dwelling of God (his temple). It is the Bride of Christ and the family of the Father. These and similar terms emphasise the relational nature of life and worship. Where we regard the church first and foremost institutionally we tend to fall back on institutional solutions to what are fundamentally relational problems.
- d. What does that look like?
- i. Where love comes to life relationships are transformed, healing takes place, reconciliation is effected, forgiveness flows, people serve and give freely, each honours the other above himself or herself.
 - ii. The community where love comes to life is marked by the fruit of the Spirit.
 - iii. Each member is united to each other through Christ; the community where love comes to life makes much of him above all else.

11. May we not seek, therefore, to encourage the Convention in these ways?

- a. By re-gospelising ourselves so that faith may arise more fully?
- b. By teaching on the love of God, from which our love flows and by which ours is brought to life?
- c. By glorifying Jesus in our midst, so that our eyes may be drawn to him, rather than one another ... and one another's shortcomings?
- d. By calling for repentant faith, where we have imagined that love is something we can create, use or handle to grow the church?
- e. And by worshipping the Father who has loved us without measure or reserve, in the full freedom and power of the Spirit.