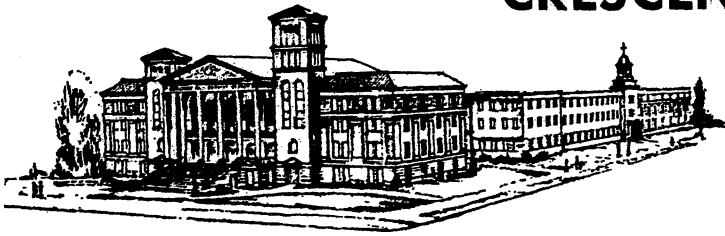


CRESCENT HILL BAPTIST CHURCH

SERMONS



"LOVE: HUMAN AND DIVINE"

Sunday Morning, October 1, 1961
Crescent Hill Baptist Church
Louisville, Kentucky
John R. Claypool

Not long ago I was driving down East Jefferson Street and passed the Central Baptist Mission. It is a drab old building jammed in among other tenements, and out in front hangs a little neon sign. On it are written these words: "God is love." Somehow that day the incongruity of it all hit me full in the face. These words would be appropriate in a great cathedral or out in a sunny meadow, but here - of all places! Everywhere I looked there was filth and noise and degradation at its worst. And I asked myself: "How on earth can one look at East Jefferson Street and still believe the words on that sign?" As I drove on and pondered this question, I realized that it stretched far beyond that particular time and place. This has always been a problem, whenever Christianity has made the daring assertion. Because it is so familiar to us, perhaps you do not realize how daring it is, but this is a fact. Before and apart from the Christian revelation the concept of God as love was literally "unheard-of." If you had said this to a primitive savage with his sacrifice, he would have stared at you unbelieving; Plato would have shaken his head in dismay, and even today, in non-Christian cultures the idea is unthinkable. God was and is thought of as "Power" or "Law" or "the Absolute" or "the All-In-All," but never as "Love." Yet these three words stand at the center of the Christian Gospel. This is part of our unique essence, that which we have which no other religion possesses. To deny it is to surrender up the very heart of our faith. Therefore, it is well that we shake off our unthinking familiarity, and examine anew this "daring assertion." In this kind of world, how can we say: "God is love?" What does this mean? Where did such an idea come from in the first place? God is love; is that true?

As we search for an answer about its meaning, we immediately encounter a problem that is peculiar to the language we speak. As you know, we have taken the English word "love" and made it a veritable "catch all." It would be hard to catalogue all of the different meanings that flow through these four letters. They range all the way from the gutter to God. Therefore our first task is to untangle the twisted skein and define the type of love about which we speak when we ascribe it to God.

Several years ago a Swedish scholar by the name of Anders Nygren published a monumental study in which he grouped all types of love under two headings. One he called eros, or human love; the other agape, or divine love. They operate in the same framework of subject and object, but they are fundamentally different. I have found this contrast most helpful. Let us look at these two types of love.

First of all, there is human love. It is controlled by the object. The subject sees in the object that which he desires but does not possess. There is value in the object that evokes love. There is something beautiful or attractive

or satisfying that calls forth this response. Notice also that human love is acquisitive. It not only recognizes values; it seeks to appropriate that value for itself. It could be described as a circular movement: it goes out for the explicit purpose of transferring the value from the object to the subject. Just as a vacuum is an emptiness that sucks everything unto itself, so human love seeks to replenish its lack by the will to possess. This is a movement which aims at completion and fulfillment. This kind of love provides an obvious explanation; it can always be understood in terms of the value of the object; I love because the object is worth loving.

Now lest you think this is too great a generalization, take the variety of human loves as we know them and see if this description is not accurate. It certainly holds true for the physical love between a man and a woman. Each sees in the other something that is very desirable. They satisfy each other's need; there is value in the other to be appropriated. This is also the case in our love for material things. A man sees a Cadillac and he is drawn to it. It is beautiful; it affords him transportation; it gives him status in the community; therefore he loves it. Or again the principle is operative in friendship. I am attracted to certain individuals because they appeal to me. They fill some need or serve some purpose, and this nourishes my love. On and on I could go, but I think the issue is clear. In every expression of human love - even the higher forms of parental love or love for truth or even the love of God, there is some value in the object that at least in part empowers the relationship. Elizabeth Barrett Browning characterizes it perfectly in these familiar lines: "I love you, not only for what you are, but for what you make of me when I am with you." Human love is controlled by the object and directed toward the subject.

On the basis of this definition of love, it is easy to see why Plato and others had such difficulty. How can God be said "to love" in this sense? Does He lack anything? Is not He the Self-Existent Source of all that is? Why should One desire for that which He already possesses? These are incisive questions, and explain why the Christian concept has been so difficult to explain. But the whole problem is one of definition. What if there is another kind of love absolutely distinct from what we have just described? Then the matter would be altogether different.

Of course this is the essence of Christianity; it proclaims a unique love, the exact opposite of the human species. Here is a love that is controlled by the Subject. It does not begin with a value in the object; rather, it begins with a desire in the Subject. It is not acquisitive, seeking to get; it is generous, seeking to give. It does not go forth to appropriate value; it goes forth to create value. Instead of being a circle that transfers value from object to subject, it is an arch that transfers value from subject to object. It is not like a vacuum, sucking everything in; it is like a spring, gushing everything out. There is no emptiness it needs to fill up; only fullness that it wants to share. Here there is no obvious explanation; it is spontaneous, unmotivated, self-generated love. It gives itself because it is its nature to give; there is no accounting for it beyond itself.

Where did this idea come from in the first place? It is so unlike anything the world has ever known, how did it originate? Is this the wishful dream of insane people, or is this in fact an authentic type of love?

The Christian answers the question this way: It all began many centuries ago when a God called "Yahweh" made a covenant with a tribe of Semitic people. This selection was not based on their size or their desirability. God simply "set His love upon them" and made them His own (Deuteronomy 7:7). Through two millenniums of Hebrew vacillation and unfaithfulness God never waivered in His attitude. Here was the first glimpse of an unconditioned love. But just as an underground stream suddenly bursts to the surface, so "in the fulness of time" (Galatians 4:4) this unique love "became flesh and dwelt among us" (John 1:14). He was, in the words of the prophet, "a root out of dry ground" (Isaiah 53:2). He was utterly different from all who had gone before Him and lived with Him. Instead of assuming the pattern of "love according to value," He loved oblivious to value. All human gradations were swept aside, and He was to each as He was to all - invincible good will. The righteous and the unrighteous, the rich and the poor, the black and the white, the Roman and the Jew, the Pharisees and the prostitutes - all were the objects of His love. He was not drawn to man by what they were; He was drawn to them by what He was. Here was sovereign love; unmoved by human worth or value.

Just as He was unaffected by who men were, so He was undaunted by what they did to Him. He did not respond in kind to what men did to Him. He was no exterior reflector, loving those who loved Him and hating those who hated Him. Rather, He was an interior reflector, moved always by a love that no hostility could quench. Having borne all things, believed all things, hoped all things, endured all things, His love never failed. Men could reject Him, abuse Him, taunt Him as they would, but He never changed attitude. Even on the Cross, listen to His invincible love: "Father forgive them, for they know not what they do!" Here, lived out in our very world, was love of a different kind. Here was pure, spontaneous, unmotivated concern. Here was love, controlled not by the object, but by the subject; not by outward value, but by inward desire. And what is more, this love was identified with God. The very One who lived this way boldly confessed: "The Father and I are one" (John 17:21) and "He that hath seen Me hath seen the Father" (John 14:9). After all, this action on earth was perfectly consistent with the God who "maketh His sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sendeth His rain on the just and the unjust" (Matthew 5:45). This unmotivated love, this love that is oblivious to value, is set forth as the very nature of God Himself. Where did the idea come from? It came from the Biblical drama and most clearly from Jesus Christ. This is how God commends His love to us: while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us (Romans 5:8). Paul could never forget that it was while he was a persecutor that God "chose to reveal His Son"; it was while men were enemies of God that He reconciled them unto Himself. At the moment when men were furthest from deserving it, God manifested His love. Thus it can only be explained from within; it must proceed from the Godward side, for there is nothing in man to evoke it. God's love is Self-activating, in distinction to all human love; it springs up spontaneously. God is His own explanation; He loves because He loves because He loves.....; that is all you can say.

This is what it means and how we came to know it. God is love; it is His nature to give Himself, and this has been made known in Jesus Christ. But there is one further point: we are to be like Him. These words are more than a religious revelation; they are an ethical demand. Christ did not come simply to reveal the nature of God; He came that we might be transformed in His image. His purpose was to put us in contact with God; to open the way for us to participate in His essence so that His life could be lived through us. This is what Paul means when he says: "I am crucified with Christ; it is no longer I that live, but Christ liveth in me" (Galatians 2:20). The uniqueness of Christianity is not in a new creed or ritual

or set of activities; it is a new experience of God by which He takes possession of the whole being and empowers one to become "a new creature" (II Corinthians 5:17). The old pattern of loving on the basis of value is put aside; now, constrained by the love of Christ, one loves as God loves, oblivious to extrinsic value or worth.

This becomes the crucial test of Christian maturity: to what extent does the love of God possess you? Are you still down here on the level of inherent value, loving for a reason? Are you still an exterior reflector, loving those who love you and hating those who hate you? Or has God in Christ taken root in your soul, so by His power you can love your enemies, pray for your persecutors, do good to them that spitefully use you? This is more important than church attendance or material stewardship or anything else. What about your love? Is it human or divine? Is it controlled by value or controlled by Him?

In the twenty-fifth chapter of Matthew there is a familiar and foreboding parable about the last judgment. All humanity is gathered before the great white throne, and then divided into two groups - one on the right and the other on the left. Christ explains the criterion of separation as: "I was hungry and you gave me to eat, thirsty..." while the others failed to do these things. Does this reduce Christianity to humanitarian acts alone? No, the reality here is the different way each group loved. The ones on the left loved according to value: "When did we see These hunger?" They loved those for whom there was a reason, a possibility of gain. The ones on the right had learned to love God's way, and thus were not even aware of their act. Here is the sober reminder that the hinge of spiritual destiny is whether or not we become like God.

God is love. And you.....?