

What is love?

The answer to this question will depend very much on whose asking it and the circumstances under which they are asking it. No one of the answers will be wrong in itself, but if used as if it alone is the sole meaning, then it will prove to be far less than adequate.

The first form of love that most of us experience is the love of a parent. If we are lucky, this experience will be one of tenderness tempered with firmness. It is the love that arises directly out of the experience of responsibility and dependency. It is a love which we begin to experience from a totally passive vantage point but which develops into something that makes demands on us. For our parents, the love is a necessity arising from the relationship they have with us—as our parents, those who have begot and bourn us into this world, they have an obligation of love.

Normally this love is complicated. It is one that is never perfectly expressed, but includes emotional connection, affection and tenderness, along with a sense of obligation or duty. In the best expressions, this duty is not burdensome, though for some it is very challenging.

The love of siblings is a second form of love. In some cases it is like the love of our parents, but in this case there is stronger sense of mutuality. It is normally not sappy and romantic, but powerfully directed by the blood connection that binds us together. Because of the inevitability of the relationship, the love is obligatory. It flows out of the fact of being related. Of course some siblings like each other very much, and with the love that guides their relationship there is a strong friendship bond that makes the relationship enjoyable and desirable. In other cases, this is far from the case, and love is violated by acts of hatred and violence.

Friendship is a form love. As we consider this kind of love we might liken it to the love that siblings share, except that it is generally entered into freely and is built upon mutual interests of some kind. The bond of friendship can deepen into a very beautiful kind of love. In such cases the friendship really morphs into something much more than what we might typically mean when we use the word “friend” casually. Such friendships start off with little obligation, but become laden with all sorts of expectations and responsibilities. It is the sense of duty to the friendship that is properly called love, the affection and pleasure is the by-products of the friendship.

Some friendships take on a different kind form, I will call them romantic friendships. These are those friendships that are intimate and sexual in varying degrees. In western civilizations, these relationships often take place in our early years as a kind of experimental relationship called dating. Normally there is a balance in these relationships between the emotional, intellectual, spiritual and physical parts. In such cases, the depth of each of the connections will be in some measure of agreement. This is why sexual relationships are often delayed until the relationships mature.

Romantic friendships are also places where love is expressed. The maturity of the relationship increases the expectation and obligation of love. The longer the relationship and the greater the commitment to a relationship's permanence, greater is the obligation of love.

Marriage is the ultimate expression of love. This is because in marriage the commitment to the relationship is ultimate. There are a number of things associated with marriage that are often confused with love, but technically are not love. The sexual and romantic are two of these things. Having a sexual encounter or enjoying an emotional and affectionate desire for one another is not the essence of love, though we often speak of these things as love. They are good and important elements in a healthy marriage, but marriage and love can exist without them. They are so associated because when a marriage is governed by love these things are usually also present.

What, then, is love?

Love is the glue that holds a relationship together. In the Bible, formal relationships are called covenants. Covenants exist between nations, between kings and people, conquerors and conquered peoples and husbands and wives. The family relationship in the tribal context is a primary place where love is expressed. Husbands love their wives, parents their children, and children each other.

Love is what you do to keep the relationship alive. It is fidelity to the terms of the agreement. God's love for humanity is revealed in what he does to ensure that his relationship with humanity continues. It has its ultimate expression in the sending of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, to enter into the world and accomplish a salvific act on our behalf. John 3:16 tells us that God in this way loved the world: he sent his one and only Son that whoever believes on him, will have eternal life.

Eternal life is life in a relationship with God. Whatever else we might think it means, that is the basic, bottom line meaning of it. The sending of Jesus Christ, the incarnate Son of God was done for the very purpose of securing this relationship with all who believed that he is the Son sent by God. This act of sending the Son is the love of God. It is what God does to keep the relationship alive and viable.

Our love for God is revealed in our keeping his commandments. Jesus reminds us that the one who loves him will do what he says (John 14:15). What this means is that the way we keep our part of the relationship is through obedience. Just as God loves us, we must love him.

Love is the burden of a relationship. Where there is a relationship there must be love to sustain it. The kind of relationship will determine the form of love needed to keep it alive, and so nurturing, providing and protecting define the parent's love for a child even as patience, kindness, understanding, selflessness and not accounting wrongs suffered are hallmarks of love generally (1 Corinthians 13:4-7).

This way of understanding love is rooted in the very fabric of the Bible. That's because, as Frank Moore Cross, Hebrew and Other Oriental Languages Professor Emeritus at Harvard University, has well argued, love is primarily kinship language and describes the behaviour appropriate to such relationships. Covenant in this context, is simply a way of extending kinship. Marriage and adoption being the two primary forms of such covenant extend kinship rights and obligations to those who are not kin by bloodline. Kinship, Cross argues, is essentially a perspective in which the kindred conceives of itself as a single life. Thus the blood of a kin is the blood of all. (*From Epic to Canon*, 1998, pp. 3-5).

With this perspective on love in the front of mind, considering what God's love for us looks like and what our love for God ought to be like is made clear. Love cannot be merely reduced to an emotional response or to the psychological contentment one feels in the company of an attractive person. Rather love is a demanding power that effects relationship.

Furthermore, it helps to provide a concrete picture about what our relationship to God is like. In keeping with the primary metaphor of Israel as God's son and we also as children of God, it underscores that we have been brought into a kind of kinship relationship with God. Love imposes a particular kind of commitment from God on our behalf while requiring from us a particular kind of response. Paul underscores that with the coming of God in Christ to secure this relationship, the terms of the relationship from our vantage point is that of faith. Faith is another way of saying obedience. In this case, it is submission to the sovereignty of God as manifest in the person of Jesus of Nazareth, raised from the dead and ascended to heaven.

Love, then, is a way of behaving towards those we are connected to by relationship. If the relationship is casual and without much commitment the obligation of love will not be as great as that required in a relationship that is formal (legal) and characterized by significant commitment. Marriage is the highest form of human commitment and so it has the greatest obligation of love. A relationship with God is the ultimate relationship, and so the obligation of love is ultimate. It is also a relationship that draws people together and places them into a particular kind of relationship that must also be characterized by love. Jesus taught his disciples that the world would know that they were Christians by the love that they had one towards the other (John 13:35).

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