



# Love

“What the world needs now is love, sweet love.” —Dionne Warwick

“All you need is love.” —The Beatles

“What’s love got to do with it?” —Tina Turner

The scene is quite common. A bunch of dressed-up young people, excited, nervous, sweating, and most probably intoxicated by more than just the moment—a wedding, of course. In the middle of the actual service, to which almost no one is paying much attention, there are the usual Bible readings: Ruth, 1 Corinthians 13, and, of course, 1 John 4—all passages selected because they speak of love, which of course is the reason for everything. But honestly, almost no one in this scene really understands the mechanisms and implications of love.

Modern Western culture is enthralled with the concept of love—even love intoxicated—but this same culture has no understanding of what love really is. The word *love* can come to mean so many different things in our language: liking something, envy, friendship, commitment, attachment, desire, and lust are just a few of the many ways the word is used. But when something comes to mean almost anything, then does it really mean anything at all?

Popular culture, especially pop music, chronicles the journeys of our human love—from giddy enthrallment to bitter disappointment; repeat as necessary until, in the end, you sour on the idea and just give up on the whole thing. People attract us, and people disappoint us, and love then comes to be seen as, at best, a game we play with them to get as much of our own way as possible. Perhaps this is too cynical of a view, but it is the narrative of our culture. And yet we continue to love, despite the costs, ever hopeful.

If people know anything at all about the Johannine Epistles, it is of these several very famous verses about love in 1 John 4:7–21. Here, the word *love* is used

twenty-five times, and you could say that the writer of 1 John is intoxicated by that word. But what is missing in most people's reading of these verses is another frequently used word, *God*, which is used in the same passage at least twenty-two times (more if you count the pronouns). When the word *love* is used, it is almost always in connection with the word *God*; the two are inseparable, as they should be. You cannot have love—real love, lasting love—without God. This fact is what modern culture is truly missing, and why it is so confused about what love truly means.

In his classic book *Confessions*, Augustine of Hippo deftly puts his finger on the cause of the matter: that humans, on their own, simply cannot love—at least not in any meaningful and lasting way. Augustine talks about natural persons as beings “turned in on themselves,” and says the only love we can attain on our own is love of self. What most people actually mean by *love* is something transactional: “I will love you if you love me. And we will love as long as love lasts, and when it is over, we will go our separate ways. When I no longer get my needs met, I am so outta here!” In our modern culture, it seems, serial monogamy is the highest calling we can attain.

But, of course, 1 John 4 shows us the fallacy of all this, because we can only truly love if our love comes from God and through God. God is the key to love, and we cannot even begin to love if we do not know that God has loved us first. As verse 7b puts it directly, “Everyone who loves is born of God and knows God.” In the middle of these fifteen verses, the writer of 1 John throws in an odd section about Christ's incarnation and atoning death, precisely because these two actions are the most real, powerful, and effective ways that God has indeed shown us love: selfless, self-giving love. The rest of the passage, the book, and indeed the whole of the Bible is useless without this fact. Most succinctly, as verse 19 puts it, “We love because [God] first loved us.”

Now human beings are, at times, able to love in powerful, unselfish, and altruistic ways—there is no doubt about this. We are complicated persons and can do great good as well as not. But these loves cannot long endure, because the old Adam or old Eve in each one of us is capable of turning true love into self-centeredness. Our love, our true love, can only be sustained by the presence of God's creating and forgiving love, which keeps us centered and whole. Only God's love can last, and we can abide in that love.

And that, dear Tina Turner, is what love has to do with it.

Editor's note: Some of you may have been surprised or concerned by the mailing envelope in which your last issue of *Word & World* came, especially as it probably arrived at your address but with the name of a different person. No, we are not trying to arbitrarily change your name. There was a software mistake at our printer, and the address names got scrambled. We hope you received the last issue on “Holiness and Discipleship,” but if you did not, please let us know and we will see that you get your issue. Our apologies!

Mark Granquist