

What is meant by “Loving God”?

Introduction

I have decided to write this short paper because I am troubled by the weak sentimentality that current evangelical thinking has attached to the experience of loving God. We live in an age and culture where love has been reduced to mere sexual desire and the romanticism of which novels and magazines are made. Sadly, this, I believe has become the norm in our age and the evangelical Church is in grave danger of losing hold of the Biblical meaning of “love”.

I note that many of present days songs sung in Church today are becoming saturated in our culture’s sentimental, sexual language. Worship songs are beginning to reflect increasingly the sloppy and gushy contents of many modern pop songs. It seems as if, in this post-modern culture, the Church has to find ways of relating to twenty-first century people through the use of songs that imitate Radio one and many other stations on radio and television that project the pop image.

I refer to phrases like, “*I am falling in love with Jesus*”. Where does such language come in the New Testament? Did Paul and any of the other writers speak of “*falling in love with Jesus*”? Before anyone hastens to remind me of the *Song of Solomon*, let me ask what justification there is in either this Old Testament book or the New Testament for suggesting that it speaks of the relationship between Jesus and the Church (or Christian)? I cannot find any. The fundamentals of biblical hermeneutics (process of biblical interpretation) call us to look at scripture within its own historical context to find the meaning and significance of a book or passage of scripture. The *Song of Solomon* is really an idealistic portrayal of genuine love between a man and women and the proper use of sex within that context. It was written in an age of sexual promiscuity, where the worship of Baal insisted on all kinds of perverted sex as a means of promoting the growth of crops. The writer is trying to show the true meaning of physical and emotional love in marriage. The NT counterpart to this OT book is 1 Corinthians 13. Both books seek to portray the essential, God-given meaning of love.

But, what does it mean to love God? Is it sufficient to continually sing love songs to God in an attempt to demonstrate to Him our emotional attachment? Is this what the Bible means when it speaks of us loving Jesus? I suggest that the significance of loving God is much deeper and more meaningful than anything that is expressed in a sloppy, sentimental, and slushy song.

In other words, I suggest that it is difficult to love God; that it has more to do with the will and mind than just the emotions and that it cannot merely be expressed in song.

1. Loving God is obedience to a command

“Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength”. Deuteronomy 6:5.

This is a good place to begin. God does not leave us to spontaneously articulate our love to Him either as an expression of gratitude or part of worship. This may be included, but essentially, we are commanded; ordered; directed; required to love God. It is demanded of us. Loving God is not optional.

This, of course, cuts right across all that we have learned and been told about love. For us, in our culture, love is a feeling, an emotion that either exists or it does not.

When we speak of falling in love it is almost portrayed as something over which we have no control. We hear people say, “*I could not help myself – I just fell hook line and sinker for her....*”. Falling in love is like some kind of disease – you cannot control an illness – it comes upon you involuntarily. One can picture a young man pouring out his heart-felt love for the object of his affections whilst the woman has to respond by saying, “*I am so sorry, I do not feel like you do; I have no such feelings for you*”. This kind of love is all built on feelings.

Of course, someone will say that love can also grow. I agree. But once again love is grounded in spontaneous development and is outside of one’s personal control. You either love the person or you do not. You can, quite naturally, do loving things for that person without emotionally loving. Love is either there or it is not.

However, this is not the case with God. He does not leave it to us to love Him when, and if, we happen to “*fall in love*” with Him. This is something completely different. Here, love is something that we can control. It is not like a disease or illness that comes upon us suddenly without invitation. It is not an impulse. It is not mere feelings. Although I agree that our love for God does contain feelings and emotions this is not where it is based or grounded.

The question, of course, is this. How can anyone be commanded to love another? This, to us, is a complete contradiction. But, we have to face the fact that in this passage in Deuteronomy and other passages, we are ordered, directed, and required to love God.

2. Loving God involves the mind and will

“Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength”. Deuteronomy 6:5.

Before we begin to explore the meanings of these words, it is interesting to note that the Bible seems to go out of its way to define the meaning of love. We are not left to impose our own meaning or interpretation on the word. It is as if the Bible is saying that in our fallen state we do not really know what love is; especially when we try to apply it to God. Hence this passage in the Old Testament. Of course, 1 Corinthians 13 defines the horizontal significance of this term for us.

Three words are use in this text in Deuteronomy to describe how we are meant to love God, but actually, there are only two that we need to define in detail whilst the third is a kind of intensification of the preceding two. Let me explain.

“Love the Lord your God with all your heart....” We must begin by asking, “*What is the heart?*” It certainly has nothing to do with the physical organ that beats away in our chest pumping blood around the body – this wonderful thing that keeps us alive. If we are going to understand these words we have to think Hebrew.

The Hebrew word for heart is לֵבָב (lebab). It did not represent the seat of emotions as it does in our culture. We often speak of the heart as the source of our deepest feelings, “*In my heart of hearts....I love you with all my heart....my heart goes out to you in your troubles...*”. In Hebrew thinking the heart was the seat of the intellect, will and intention. You would think with your heart, and your heart would shape your character, choices, and decisions. There was nothing sentimental about the heart; it was the place where you considered issues; pondered your condition, thought about your future and so on. Indeed, the Septuagint (LXX) uses the Greek word, διανοιας

(*dianoias*) meaning, "*mind*". This word was carried over into the NT rendering of Mark 12:29.

When we realise the meaning and significance of this word many statements in Proverbs take on a new meaning. For example consider the following references; Proverbs 16:23 "*A wise man's heart guides his mouth*"; Proverbs 16:21 "*The wise in heart are called discerning*"; Proverbs 16:9 "*In his heart a man plans his course, but the LORD determines his steps*".

We must draw the conclusion, therefore, that loving God is something that is done with the mind and with the intellect. But how can this be true when love emerges from the emotions? This is where we make the mistake. God is not calling for an emotional response; something that is fickle, frail, and liable to change with our moods. He wants something that is meaningful; lasting; enduring and significant.

How then, can we love God with the mind, the will and our choices? In the first place I suggest that it signifies loving God in our thoughts. Someone once said, "*God is worth thinking about*". We can further and add, "*God is worth learning about*". I suggest that our love for God is shown when we want to learn about Him.

On the television some years ago an entertainment programme appeared under the title, "*Mr and Mrs*". The presenter would interview the husband about the wife, asking all manner of personal questions to test out his awareness of his spouse. All this time the wife was withdrawn from the show and then brought in later to give her own answers. It was always a surprise how little the husband actually knew about his wife and the other way around.

We say that we belong to God – how much do you really know about Him? If we were to be questioned about Him what kind of answers would be able to give? It is disappointing to find so many Christians who have so little understanding of the biblical knowledge of God. For some reason there is a reluctance to use the mind and intelligence that God has given us in order to study Him. We think it is too "*unspiritual*". Of course, we can, and do, use our minds and wills within the secular world for our hobbies, employment, and politics. But why is there such a lack of enthusiasm for us to learn more about God?

One answer might be that we have replaced "*knowing about God*", for "*knowing God*". The latter is thought to be more spiritual and biblical. Consequently, experience and anecdotal material is considered a priority above the written Word of God. In some circles the desire for the mystical, the spectacular, and the extraordinary seem to eclipse the need to read and study the Word of God. It is of course, much more thrilling to witness the mystical and entertaining than sitting at a desk surrounded with books.

This, however, misses the point. I am not disregarding the extraordinary manifestations of the Holy Spirit or the visible "*demonstrations*" of His power. The two must go together – the Word and the experience. Furthermore, a knowledge of the Word is so essential as a means of discerning the true from the false in terms of subjective experiences. Moreover, knowing about God – from His Word – is essential to know God – we cannot know a person without something about them. It is not a case of "*either/or*" but "*and/also*".

My point, therefore, is that all our study, thinking, reading, learning, and discussion about God is a demonstration of our love for God. This is what this passage in Deuteronomy means; "*Love the LORD your God with all your heart*".

3. Loving God involves the soul and strength

“Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength”. Deuteronomy 6:5.

What is meant by the term “soul”? The actual translation of the Hebrew נִפְשׁוֹ (nephesh) as “soul” is not very accurate. The נִפְשׁוֹ (nephesh) represents the “life” of each individual and applies to the animals as much as it does to humans. Genesis 1:20 says that God made “living creatures” (NIV), “creatures that hath life” (AV). The Hebrew text uses נִפְשׁוֹ (nephesh) in this verse describing the creation of the animal. Then in Genesis 2:7, when describing the creation of man, it says, “man became a living being” (NIV), “man became a living soul” (AV). Once again the familiar Hebrew word נִפְשׁוֹ (nephesh) is used.

It is probably better to think of the “soul” as, “person, an individual, someone” or as, “a life”. Thus the term refers to the personality, the real person separate, in a sense, from the body. When we meet someone we say we, “get to know them”. This does not mean that we study their body; rather it means we get to know their individual personality; it is the person that we want to know, their characteristics.

The Hebrew נִפְשׁוֹ (nephesh) goes even further and involves the emotions, desires and personal characteristics of an individual. When the Psalmist says, “Bless the Lord O my soul” (Psalm 103:1), he is incorporating his whole personality, his whole being which includes his life, person, desires, and aspirations.

I suggest that whereas the “heart” signifies the mind, intellect and will, the “soul” represents the emotions, feelings and all the qualities of our personalities. Our love towards God is not supposed to be clinical, academic, and mechanical or detached from our feelings. Love emerges from our whole being; our entire personality, the “real us”. Love must not be in “word only”, but be expressed in our character and being. Expressions of love towards God must not come only from our mouths, our words, but from the depth of our beings.

We can take this issue even further. Our love for God is to be expressed with our whole self which includes our rationality, mental capacity, moral choices, inner feelings, desires, and the deepest roots of our being. There is a kind of psychological element here in which God has captivated our inner most being.

The final word in our text is an interesting one, “with all your strength”. Once again the Hebrew requires a different rendering. The Hebrew does not contain the word “strength”, this comes from the LXX (Septuagint) which has, “all your power”. What the Hebrew uses is, וְבְכָל-מְאֹדֶךָ (wvchol m^ood) which, literally rendered says, “with all your very”. Now, at first sight it is meaningless and does require some juggling to make sense for us western folk.

The Hebrew מְאֹדֶךָ (m^ood) means, “much, very, abundance, exceeding, a great degree”. Thus, we can render it like this, “with all your much-ness” or “with all your greatness”. Rather than being treated as a third component to this statement about loving God along with “heart” and “soul”, it should be treated as a kind of adjective describing the degree of “heart” and “soul” love that should be given to God. The word expresses “totality; completeness; wholeness”. It is an intensifying term to be applied to the “heart” and “soul”.

As a consequence, we have an expression that is saying “*heart*” and “*soul*” love towards God should be “*over the top*”; or, “*to excess*”; or “*extravagant*”. There is to be nothing ritualistic or mechanical about our love to God – it must be with the full force of our personalities and characters, even to the point of being “*excessive; extreme; and intense*”.

4. Loving God involves obedience

John 14:15 *“If you love me, you will obey what I command”*.

We come now the NT and the words of Jesus. It is my view that the teaching of Jesus was not entirely new. In fact it seems as if the OT book of Deuteronomy was never far from his mind. This comment made in the Upper Room during the Last Supper, was really a repeat of Deuteronomy 7:9 “*Know therefore that the LORD your God is God; he is the faithful God, keeping his covenant of love to a thousand generations of those who love him and keep his commands*”. It is the last section of this statement that is repeated by Jesus. Loving God and obedience go together – they cannot be separated.

In order to impress this truth upon us Jesus repeats this statement two more times in the same chapter. In vs 21 he puts it in a slightly different form, “*Whoever has my commands and obeys them, he is the one who loves me*”. Then in vs 23 he says the same thing again, “*If anyone loves me, he will obey my teaching*”.

Once again we are faced with a definition of love that is removed from all manner of sentimental romanticism. We are not in the realm of Mills and Boon, or today’s magazine love stories. This is different.

Love for God cannot be separated from active, practical obedience of his Word. We are reminded of John’s later teaching when he said, “*Dear children, let us not love with words or tongue but with actions and in truth*”. (1 John 3:18). Words are easy; words can be cheap and superficial. It is action that tell the truth. We man easily say that we “*love God*”, but it is our conduct within our daily lives that we truly express our love for him.

When Jesus said “*keep my commandments*” he is not suggesting that if at anytime we break his commandments it is tantamount to saying that we do not love him. This is not teaching perfectionism. We do sin even though we still love him – this is due to our fallen nature. However, the sin does not become our habit; our enjoyment or pleasure. Falling into sin is part of our humanness; but striving to be holy as he is holy is part of our spiritual renewal. If we truly love God we will make it our aim to please him, and pleasing him is through obedience. Obedience will be our ultimate aim; we will pursue holiness especially as this is how to portray our love for God.

Here is the significance and relevance of sanctification. Holiness is the way we tell God that we love him. We may do it in song in a Sunday service, but it is on a Monday morning that we really give expression to our love for God.

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