

KEY
WORDS
of the
CHRISTIAN
FAITH

REINDER BRUINSMA



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DEDICATED

TO ALL

my Adventist colleagues

in ministry

in the Netherlands

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PREFACE

The story is told that during a visit to the Theological Department of the University of Chicago Karl Barth, the famous German theologian, held a press conference. One journalist asked him, “If you were asked to summarize the essence of the Christian faith, what would you, after your long career of Bible study, say?” Students of theology have often been greatly dismayed at the density of much of Barth’s writings, but on this occasion there was nothing complicated about what he said. Without missing a beat, he replied: “What it all boils down to is this: Jesus loves me, this I know. For the Bible tells me so!”*

Maybe that is also all I should say. For any attempts at summarizing the essence of the Christian faith are, in a certain sense, doomed to fail. The Christian faith is so deep and rich that no book can do justice to it. Human minds must humbly admit that God and His plan of salvation are truths of an order that human reasoning and finite language cannot adequately deal with. Yet in His grace God has revealed enough to us to enable us to establish a meaningful relationship with Him, and He invites us to continue mining His Word for treasures so that we may steadily “grow in grace” (2 Peter 3:18, KJV). Therefore, trying to encapsulate some of the key elements of our faith may have a useful purpose. It may bring out some aspects that some of us have not thought about before and may help us to see some things just a bit clearer.

When I sat down to write the *Adult Sabbath School Bible Study Guide* lessons about key words of the Christian faith, I was, by the very fact that such a guide must consist of only 13 studies, limited in the number of key words that I could choose. I would have liked to include one or two other vital concepts. The final choices are, admittedly, rather subjective. As I prepared this companion book I

had to follow the pattern of the *Bible Study Guide*—with, again, the same limitations.

It might have been easier to write a little book about each of the 13 topics than to restrict myself to less than an average of 4,000 words for each concept. Each chapter could touch upon only a few aspects. Readers will notice that I tend to ask many questions. I hope some of these will inspire them toward further study. I hope, though, that I have succeeded also in showing that, in spite of all the questions that often baffle us, we do have some solid answers that give us a firm foundation for our faith.

Writing this book has, once again, forced me to do some intense and structured thinking about my faith as a Seventh-day Adventist Christian. I have considered it a privilege to work on this. I pray many will not only find themselves encouraged to ask questions but also find answers and experience the glorious assurance of salvation.

I have used the New Living Translation throughout this book. The reason is not that I have made a careful evaluation of all available Bible translations in the English language and have concluded that it is definitely better than any other. I have recently, however, discovered this translation as a version that I (whose native language is not English) find very clear and fresh. Listening to the way in which the translators have rendered the text, I often hear things and nuances that I have not noticed before. My hope and prayer is that this book will give—at least to some—fresh insights to those who read it and contemplate their faith.

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* I first read this story in Philip Yancey, *What's So Amazing About Grace?* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Pub. House), p. 97.



LOVE

1

“‘God is love’ is written upon every opening bud, upon every spire of springing grass. The lovely birds making the air vocal with their happy songs, the delicately tinted flowers in their perfection perfuming the air, the lofty trees of the forest with their rich foliage of living green—all testify to the tender, fatherly care of our God and to His desire to make His children happy.”

—ELLEN G. WHITE, *Steps to Christ*, p. 10

A*ll you need is love.*” More than 40 years have gone by since the four young men from the British city of Liverpool first sang this famous line. Even today’s postmodern generation knows the words, and whenever something reminds people of the Beatles, this lyric pops up. It has been played, sung, hummed, downloaded, and listened to on the radio by hundreds of millions of young and not-so-young men and women around the world. But how many have stopped to give some careful thought to the words? Are they actually true? Can love indeed take care of all our needs? Will we be able to meet whatever challenges might come our way as long as we have love in our lives? Is love the only essential element for a happy and satisfying existence?

If the frequency of its use determined its place on the ladder of meaning, the word “love” would have a good chance of coming out on top. Or maybe not quite. Possibly the word “sex” and related terms would score even higher. That would certainly apply if we were to include our unspoken thoughts with the words that actually pass our lips. Researchers suggest that the average male in our Western world thinks about sex in one form or another once every 52 seconds. Women apparently are not quite as sex-obsessed as men,

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but their minds also frequently turn to the subject of sex (on the average, in their fertile period, at least a few times a day). Maybe we cannot fully substantiate such claims, but for many the words “love” and “sex” are almost interchangeable, and when they repeat the words credited to John Lennon and Paul McCartney (“All you need is love”) they really mean “All you need (and want) is sex.”

An immense amount of confusion surrounds the topic of love and much of what has the love label so casually attached to it does not deserve that name. Often, what many call love is, indeed, no more than lust and an unrestrained craving for sex in endless variety. Often it has nothing, or very little, to do with genuine feeling and true attachment, and everything to do with the self-centered gratification of urges constantly reinforced by the media and popular culture. In many cases, love is just about *me*—*my* power, *my* possessions, *my* drives, *my* goals and ambitions—and about nothing else.

Love in the divine scheme of things

I do not know how much the Beatles knew of the Bible or about religion when they sang “All You Need Is Love” and whether they realized that their words voiced a religious truth of crucial importance. For these few words oddly echo what one of the great founders of Christendom, the apostle Paul, wrote to the believers in the Greek city of Corinth. He short-listed the basic ingredients of true Christian life: faith, hope, and love. In many of his writings he emphasizes the importance of having *faith*. Faith in Christ Jesus is a condition for being saved (Rom. 1:17). He also wants there to be no misunderstanding about the vital role of *hope* in the experience of the Christian (2 Tim. 1:12). But, when all is said and done, there is nothing more important than *love* (1 Cor. 13:13). Yes, Paul says, “All you need is love.” Everything else is, in fact, wrapped up in the package of true Christian love.

Even though Paul speaks about love in the famous thirteenth chapter of his First Epistle to the Corinthians in words that have inspired millions of Christ’s disciples through the centuries, the substance of what he wrote was not something totally new. His Lord

stated the same principle when He told His followers: “You must love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, all your mind, and all your strength” (Mark 12:30). And even Christ was not totally original in what He said. He was, in fact, simply quoting some ancient wording from the Old Testament (Deut. 6:5).

Many people who have very little knowledge of the Bible, are nonetheless able to quote the famous love text from the third chapter of the Gospel of John. It is probably the best known and most cited Bible verse: “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him will not perish but have eternal life” (verse 16). And many will also remember the final words of another oft-quoted Bible text: “*God is love*” (1 John 4:8). Nothing rates higher on the divine scale of values than love.

God’s love comes first

Without any doubt love is the absolute key word in the Christian’s vocabulary. But let’s be sure to get things in the correct order. Scripture tells us that to be a true follower of Christ, we must love God with all our heart, soul, and intellect (Mark 12:30). In other words, we must love with our entire being. How do we do that? Is this something that comes *naturally* to the Christian? Or can we *learn* how to love God? Do we somehow “catch” it by going to church, by watching religious broadcasts or listening to religious music as we drive our car to work? Or can the children who sing “Oh, how I love Jesus!” teach us a thing or two about this love?

From the outset we must keep one thing in mind: it is not the way in which humans love each other that informs us about what our love for God might be like. It is precisely the other way around. The way in which God loves us informs us about the manner in which we may respond to God’s love. It gives all our human love a dimension it would not have if we were ignorant of divine love. Whatever love we may be able to generate, it is ultimately “a result of his first loving us” (1 John 4:19).

God’s love differs from our love in that He loves infinitely, indiscriminately, unconditionally, and unselfishly. The Lord does not begin to love on the premise that there must be a response if He is

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going to continue loving. He does not operate on the basis that He will love some of His creatures more than others, simply because some happen to be more lovable. Neither is His love subject to any sudden mood changes. “Long ago the Lord said to Israel: ‘I have loved you, my people, with an everlasting love. With unfailing love I have drawn you to myself’” (Jer. 31:3). That’s pretty strong language. And reassuring!

God loves in ways that we find impossible to understand. It is not a negotiated love. God does not say, “Listen, if you are nice to Me, I will love you.” God loved us already when we were not yet around, but were present only in His unlimited divine database as creatures He knew that He would one day give the breath of life. He now loves us while we live our short life on earth, whether we seek Him or reject Him. And He continues loving us when we sleep the slumber of death and are safe in His memory. It is the kind of love reflected in Jesus’ love for His disciples. Christ showed His disciples “the full extent of his love” (John 13:1). That included also the one that He knew would soon betray Him. Jesus continued to love Judas. I wonder whether we might say that, in a way, God continues to love even the devil!

God’s love is pure *gift love*. He gave His only son. His “unfailing love . . . came through Jesus Christ” (John 1:17). He so loved us that He gave . . . His gifts keep coming, unlimited and unrestricted. The Lord loves the universe and all those worlds that we know nothing about. He loves our world, Planet Earth. And even though He will eventually judge the world and will have to say “Sorry” to those who have said their final no to Him, His love does not stop. Even His judgment is not detached from His love, nor is it a reversal of it. And if, at times, He needs to be tough with us, it is only because He does not give up on us. For “the Lord disciplines those he loves” (Heb. 12:6). All his actions are wrapped in eternal love.

Human love with a divine edge

Whatever true love we are able to give, it “comes from God” (1 John 4:7). Thank God (literally) that we *can* love. God is love, and He made us in His image. God has designed and constructed us with

the capacity to love as He does. This does not mean that our love can ever *equal* that of God. But it means that we can love in a way that *resembles* divine love. Our love is and remains finite, partial, temporal, imperfect. It cannot be compared with God's love. We should not even say that God's love is much greater than our love, because there is absolutely no comparison whatsoever between finite human beings and the love they are capable of and the one almighty, omniscient, omnipresent, holy, perfect God and His love. Nonetheless, our love, however imperfect, can acquire a divine edge.

We love in different ways. The original language of the New Testament (Greek) uses four different words to express human love. *Agapē* is the highest kind of love. Scripture employs it for God's supreme love for us, and also uses it to express unselfish (or as unselfish as is humanly possible) human love toward God and toward a higher ideal. Other words express the love for our spouse—including sexual love—and our love for parents and children, for a friend, and for things. That in itself already indicates that we love in different ways and at different levels. But whatever love we are able to give, it must be touched by God's love if it is to be the kind of love that befits a follower of Christ. Let's look in a little more detail at the various forms of human love.

1. *Loving your spouse.* Of all relationships, the bond between (one) husband and (one) wife is the most wonderful. It originated in Paradise. The Creator embedded it in the fundamental social pattern that He imprinted on His creation. And it remains so precious that Scripture uses the relationship as a metaphor for the relation between Christ and His church. That in itself should warn us against the contemporary fashion in today's Western world of debunking marriage, or of regarding heterosexual marriage as just one option among a number of just-as-acceptable social models.

Finding a love partner for life—falling in love and staying in love “till death do us part”—is, apparently, far from easy. For the percentage of relationships that fail miserably and/or end in divorce is abysmally high. In the United States at least one third of all marriages end in divorce, and Europe is rapidly catching up. Even inside the church, divorce rates are nowadays not very much lower.

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Why do so many marriages fail? One reason is that many enter marriage unprepared. Lots of people who tie the knot simply are not ready to assume the responsibilities that are part and parcel of marriage. Often they have not really asked themselves—or each other—the fundamental question of whether they are sufficiently compatible to live happily ever after. Tying the knot when you have very little in common is courting failure from the very beginning.

One of the most common reasons so many of our marriages do not last is that we base them on false expectations. We want our spouse to be near-perfect. The media bombard us with images of what the perfect partner should physically look like. And it is important that they do not just conform to the standards of what nowadays is considered beautiful or sexy on the wedding day. We also expect our spouse to remain attractive for many years to come—with or without Botox, face-lifts, and other surgical interventions. Our spouses should have prestigious, well-paying jobs, but also should be efficient in the work that needs to be done in and around the home. They must be innovative and untiring sexual partners. And, of course, our spouses need to be our friends and buddies, and, when the time has come to have children, perfect parents.

Not all of this is bad. Who would want to go back to the times that marriages were mostly business deals and people primarily sought and found romance in extramarital relationships? And what Western person wants to shift to a culture in which heads of the family still arrange marriages, or in which one may express the value of a prospective bride in a quantity of goats or cows? And in which the inability to produce offspring reduces the chances of marital success to virtually zilch.

By now do you see a pattern? People around us may refer to their relationships as *love* relationships, but what kind of love is it? In many cases it is not *gift love* but *take love* or *get love*. For many, their own needs come first. A failure to meet those needs leads to frustration and a lack of fulfillment. What is the use of continuing with a relationship, many will say, when you remain unfulfilled and your expectations do not get met? Why plod on, when the thought *Is this all there is to it?* keeps milling around in your head? Better quit and try again, before your chances are over!

Do you also see that in this type of relationship the divine edge is sadly missing? Unless the love for the spouse is primarily gift love, and unless both partners are intent on the happiness and fulfillment of the other, are looking for the true values that are more than skin-deep, and are not depending on what happens to be trendy, the chances that the relationship will survive is slim. The odds dramatically improve, however, when the love that God bestows upon us is reflected in the mutual love that we have discovered in our partner and in ourselves. Love with a divine edge is the ever-deepening love between me and the one person I intend to make happy, and who will, in turn, do everything to make me happy.

That kind of love will not be as everlasting as God's love, but it stands a good chance of enduring—especially when we are no longer in the prime of our life and we no longer emanate quite the same energy as we did on our wedding day. Whether or not Paul had any experience with married life, his words in Ephesians 5 still provide excellent counsel. “You wives will submit to your husbands as you do to the Lord” (verse 22). Read superficially, this hardly sounds like a directive one would like to repeat in the twenty-first century. But notice that we are not just talking about blind submission, as if we were still living two or three generations ago. Notice the way in which Paul qualifies such submission. We are discussing a relationship that is modeled after the relationship we enjoy with Christ. That is also expressed in the next piece of advice: “And you husbands must love your wives with the same love Christ showed the church” (verse 25). Both statements are basically saying the same thing: Bring God into your relationship (and keep Him in it). Faithfulness, forgiveness, and patience then become key factors in staying happy and overcoming the inevitable obstacles. You immediately and dramatically improve the chances that your relationship will be happy and enduring, as your love has taken on a divine edge.

2. *Loving your children and family/parents.* The state of the family in the Western world is not what it used to be. That is true even when we take into account the widespread tendency to believe that in the past most things, almost by definition, were better than they are today. During the twentieth century the average family became