

**Last Words, Lasting Presence:
Jesus and the Disciples at the Last Supper
Part One: A Life of Love for Others
John 13.1-35, also 15.9-17**

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Last Supper Stained Glass Window



On the last night Jesus spent with the disciples before his execution, he gathered them together around a table, served them a meal, and spoke with them from the heart, sharing words that would linger in their souls for years, and echo through the church for all ages.

Chapters thirteen through seventeen in John's Gospel record that conversation for us. They are recognized to hold some of the richest and deepest portions of Jesus' teaching.

This morning we begin a new sermon series that will walk us through his final teaching.

In John 13.33, Jesus says, "I will be with you only a little longer." That fact sets the context for all that follows.

For three years Jesus has walked through life with the disciples, sharing every moment with them as they've traversed the country.

Now their relationship shifts.

Up to this point they have walked together. But after tonight, the disciples go forward from here on their own.

Jesus has been preparing them, laying a foundation, readying them for this moment.

Coach and Players Image



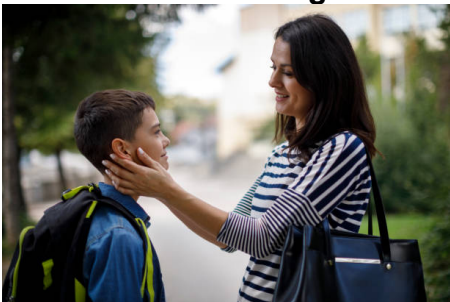
It's like the moment when the coach sends his team out onto the field.

Commander and Soldiers Image



Or when a General talks to his soldiers before the big battle.

Mother and Son Image



Or when a mom says goodbye to her kid on the first day of school.

This is the moment he has been preparing them for from the beginning. The moment when they will embark on the life he has for them, and embrace the mission to which he has called them, as his disciples.

In this final conversation with his followers, Jesus equips them (and the church along with them) for life without him.

These are not just parting thoughts. These words are nothing less than a *charter* for the church during the time between the time of his leaving them at the close of his earthly ministry and his return at the close of the age – the time in which we still find ourselves. For that reason, though they were spoken two thousand years ago, they are as relevant to us as if they were spoken yesterday.

His message? If you read through these five chapters in John, chapters 13 through 17, – which I encourage you to do several times during the next several weeks – you'll see that certain key themes keep resurfacing.

This is who you are. You are citizens of heaven. You belong to God.

Here is how you are called to live. You are called to a life that testifies to the reality of heaven: a life of love, obedience, witness, and service.

This is the opposition you can expect to face. You are in this world, but you belong to another. As the world rejected me, so you can expect it to reject you.

Here are the resources you can draw on. You will be given gifts from on high: my love, my joy, my peace, my word, my eternal life, and my presence.

And this is how you can expect to experience me. You will not be alone. The Spirit of God will take up residence in your hearts. He will make my presence real to you. He will empower you to live the distinctive life to which I call you. And He will equip you for your work of witness, as you put my presence on display in this unbelieving world.

* * *

This morning we'll be looking at the part of his conversation in which he focuses on the sort of life to which he calls us as his people.

If you look at the whole conversation, you see Jesus actually has quite a lot to say about the sort of life we're called to live.

I'd encourage you to read through the whole conversation at one sitting and make a list of the things he directs us to do. When I did that, these were the things I saw him calling us to:

Love God 14.15, 14.21

Obey God 14.15, 14.21-23, 15-10

Live according to the word of God 14.23-24, 17.7-8

Serve others 13.1-17

Love others 13.34-35, 15.12-17, 17.26

Abide in Christ 15.1-8

Bear fruit for Christ 15.1-8, 15.16

Testify to Christ 13.35, 15.27, 17.23

Be prayerful 14.13-14, 16.24-26

Be holy 17.17-19

Be one 17.11,20-23

We'll be looking at several of those over the next few weeks, but this morning I just want us to focus on chapter thirteen and the dimensions of his call on our lives which are found there.

Here is how the conversation begins. John chapter 13. As I read from the first part of the chapter, listen to the way Jesus weaves together descriptions of the relationship he has with his followers with descriptions of the life to which he calls his followers.

John 13.1

Jesus knew that the hour had come for him to leave this world and go to the Father. Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end.

John 13.3-5

Jesus knew that the Father had put all things under his power, and that he had come from God and was returning to God; so he got up from the meal, took off his outer clothing, and wrapped a towel around his waist. After that, he poured water into a basin and began to wash his disciples' feet, drying them with the towel that was wrapped around him.

John 13.12

When he had finished washing their feet, he put on his clothes and returned to his place. "Do you understand what I have done for you?" he asked them.

John 13.13-15

"You call me 'Teacher' and 'Lord,' and rightly so, for that is what I am. Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another's feet. I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you.

John 13.16-17

Very truly I tell you, no servant is greater than his master, nor is a messenger greater than the one who sent him. Now that you know these things, you will be blessed if you do them.

Jesus describes his relationship with his disciples using three complementary word pairs. Did you notice them?

The first word pair is teacher and student.

John 13.13-15

“You call me ‘Teacher’ and ‘Lord,’ and rightly so, for that is what I am. Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another’s feet. I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you.

“You call me teacher, and rightly so, for that is what I am.”

The teacher/student relationship probably seems very familiar to us. Most of us feel like we’ve spent half our lives going to school. We know exactly what this relationship is like.

I think of what it was like when I was a business major at Miami University. The teacher with whom I have no interaction outside of class stands up front and lectures, and we fill notebook after notebook with information he or she imparts to us. Then when the test comes, we pour it out, hoping we remember most of it.

But that is hardly anything like the relationship between a teacher and a student in the ancient Near East.

In Biblical times, the relationship between a teacher and a student was an intimate one. The students didn’t just attend a teacher’s class, they *lived life* with the teacher, spending the day together, sharing meals together, even living under the same roof.

And they didn’t just seek to acquire information from the teacher, they sought to *pattern their lives* after the life of the teacher.

You should be able to listen to the disciple and hear the speech of the teacher, to watch the disciple and see the actions of the teacher. One life translated into the life of another. They are not students, they are followers.

“You call me Teacher, and rightly so.”

“I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you.”

The second word pair is master and servant.

John 13.16-17

Very truly I tell you, no servant is greater than his master, nor is a messenger greater than the one who sent him. Now that you know these things, you will be blessed if you do them.

“No servant – the word actually means slave – is greater than his master.”

The master/slave relationship is not a relationship that is familiar to any of us in the modern world.

Especially here in the United States, where we so prize our freedoms, it can be a hard one to identify with.

The way we relate to authority in the United States is with our will very much intact. Tell me what to do and I'll do it . . . if you explain it to me and I understand it, and if I agree with it, and if I feel inclined to do it.

But the relationship of a slave to a master is completely different. The slave belongs to the master, so when the master issues a command, the slave does not have the prerogative to disagree or disobey. The slave's responsibility is to line up his or her will with the will of the master. When an order is given, there is no weighing. There is only obeying.

"No slave is greater than his master."

The third word pair is lord and messenger.

John 13.16-17

Very truly I tell you, no servant is greater than his master, nor is a messenger greater than the one who sent him. Now that you know these things, you will be blessed if you do them.

"Nor is a messenger greater than the one who sent him."

One summer during college I worked at Columbia Gas in Columbus, Ohio. I drove the mail route, delivering mail each day between the Dublin Road Office and the Goodale Office.

When I delivered the mail, I usually came up with a long rhymed way of saying "Goodale Mail," like "Hail, male and female, lift up an ale, you need not bewail, for this hale friend will never fail to wend the trail cross hill and dale and bring the bag of Goodale Mail." They would always look at me like they had no clue what planet I came from.

But I didn't know who wrote the messages I delivered, and I didn't know the people who received them. I just carried a canvas bag in and plunked it on the counter, and I picked up another bag and went back out to my truck and turned around and drove back.

But this word pair too is loaded with cultural meaning. The word translated "messenger" is the word "apostle." In the ancient world, an apostle was someone who was given a commission by a person in supreme authority, a king or lord.

And they didn't just deliver a message, they represented the official as his ambassador, standing in his place, acting on his behalf, re-presenting him.

"You call me 'Lord,' and rightly so."

"No one who is sent is greater than the one who sent him."

Let those word pairs sink in. This is where Jesus begins his last conversation with the disciples, by reminding them of the incredible breadth of his authority over their lives – and ours as well.

He says:

If I am your teacher, your life will resemble mine.

If I am your master, your will will conform to mine.

If I am your ruler, your mission will mirror mine.

Listen to those again.

If I am your teacher, your life will resemble mine.

Who or what sets the pattern for your life more than anything else?

To who or what does the arrow of your life point?

If I am your master, your will will conform to mine.

Who or what has the last word in your life?

To who or what do you say an unqualified yes every time?

If I am your ruler, your mission will mirror mine.

Who or what rules over you?

And what is the cause to which you have devoted your life?

I am your teacher, you are my follower.

I am your master, you are my slave.

I am your ruler, you are my ambassador.

That said – flip down to verse 34 . . .

John 13.34-35

A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.

Do you hear those words with a new power and urgency, hearing them in context?

Let's just walk through them.

A new command I give you: Love one another.

A new command

Love for God and neighbor have been clearly and repeatedly communicated by Jesus as the highest and most comprehensive commands in the Christian life. Love God with all your heart. Love your neighbor as yourself. The Christian life is a life of love.

But now he is about to send them off on their own, apart from him. Now the real Christian life begins.

So I give you a new command, he says. In my absence let love be ever present. Live a life of love.

The command comes the first time with the commanding weight of authority.

A command I give you

This is not a request I want to ask, or a suggestion I want to make, this is not an idea that I want to run past you.

This is *command* I am issuing to you as your teacher, your master, your ruler

Love one another.

This word for “love” is one of several in Greek. This is the one that is associated most closely with Christianity. That’s because, whenever it is used, it always implies sacrifice: putting the other person first, even when it is costly to do so.

Love one another.

Literally it says “each one love each other one.”

Not just the one who stands in front of you, but all those God places around you. Each one love each other one.

As I have loved you, so you must love one another.

The command to love is repeated a second time. This time it comes with the compelling weight of immediacy.

As I have loved you

What Jesus calls them to is not unfamiliar to them. They have been on the receiving end of this costly sacrificial love every day for the past three years as they have followed Jesus.

His very incarnation was an expression of profoundly sacrificial love. For thirty years he has been taking up the towel and serving those he loves.

And the next day, in love, Jesus will allow himself to be whipped and nailed to a cross and left to die.

As John reports at the start of the evening,

John 13.1

Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end.

And as Jesus will say in

John 15.12-13

My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends.

And as Paul echoes in

Ephesians 5.25

Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her.

As I have loved you, so you must love one another.

In the same self-sacrificial way, to the same costly depth, that I loved you.

By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.

He repeats the command to love a third time in as many lines. This time the command comes with the convicting weight of urgency.

Making disciples is the call of everyone who is already a disciple.

What is the single greatest evangelism tool we have? Our love.

What will have the greatest effect in persuading nonChristians of the truth of the gospel? Our love.

What will be the most compelling part of our defense of the Christian faith? Our love.

By this everyone will know that you are my disciples

What will make it clear to the world that you belong to me? If you live a life of love.

No one will have to wonder. It will be clear to everyone who looks in on your life.

That you are my disciples, my slaves, my ambassadors.

By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another, if your lives are marked by the same love as your teacher, your master, your lord.

Love is the quality that sets the Christian faith apart. It is its single most distinctive quality, because it is the quality that most sets Jesus apart from all others who claim to have spiritual authority.

Think about what Jesus is getting at here. Love is the thing that joins our lives to meaningfully to the life of Jesus in the eyes of others.

You can go to Topkapi Palace in Istanbul, Turkey, and see eight of Mohammed's swords. His was a life of militancy and forceful conquest – he personally led eight

battles and eighteen raids. If you interact with his followers, you will expect to encounter the same stern militancy that marked him.

You can go to Bihar, India, and sit under a descendant of the Bodhi tree where Buddha sat. His was a life of disengagement from the world, a life of relinquishment, of denying need and desire. When you encounter one of his followers, you are not surprised to see simple robes, begging bowls, and lives of detached self-denial and disengagement.

And you can go to Jerusalem, in Israel, and see the hill where the cross likely stood, the cross to which Jesus allowed himself to be nailed as an act of sacrificial love, as he gave his life in exchange for ours. When you encounter his followers, what you expect most is to encounter in them that same quality of self-sacrificial love.

When that is absent, it is confusing. Mahatma Gandhi said, "I like your Christ, I do not like your Christians. Your Christians are so unlike your Christ."

When that is present, it is compelling. Mahatma Gandhi said, "If all Christians acted like Christ, the whole world would be Christian."

We are meant to be living interpretations of the faith, living re-presentations of the head of our faith.

That's why Anne Rice, after her conversion to Christianity, said, "We have to become saints. We have to become like Christ. Anything less is simply not enough."

Sometimes people tell me that illustrations taken from my own life don't really count. They're not "real people" stories from the lives of people who are out there in the world trying hard to live out their faith.

The truth is, when it comes to trying to love my neighbors, I don't really know what I'm doing. Sharon and I are just making it up as we go along. I've shared with you stuff we are trying: a neighborhood directory, a neighborhood gathering in our front yard, cookies on people's doors at Christmas, contests when the Super Bowl comes around, asking for donations for the Afghanistan families we're trying to welcome, stopping and chatting on our way in and out of the neighborhood, trying to be there when we hear a neighbor has a need – things like that.

We really are just making it up as we go along, and sometimes we wonder if it's making much of a difference. Which is what made it so moving to us when, just a couple of weeks ago, a neighbor that I really don't know at all sent this email in response to one of our neighborhood contests.

Hey David,

I'm not much of a participant a group activities, but I wanted to thank you for the nice gift of the almond cookies. My son and partner and I all enjoyed them.

No matter our backgrounds or affiliations, these are days where we need lots reminders of how much we have in common as human beings, and how our essential needs are the same.

Choosing to be in this world, but not of this world, isn't as easy as it used to be for many of us. But I believe strongly that the way through any of our struggles is transparency, empathy, acceptance, and service. I of course fail at this every day, but that is the nature of being human. For this long-standing agnostic (raised Roman Catholic), that is what I believe is the essence of leading a Christ-like life.

I believe your efforts in the neighborhood are a good example of that kind of work.

Thank you.

Before he said goodbye, as he lined us up to send us out onto the field, or onto the field of battle, or into the classroom, Jesus gave us a simple command.

Live a life of love.

Love because I did.

Love like I did.

Love in a way that points to what I did.

Two years ago, just before covid hit, we shared that we believe God is calling us to become a church that is known more for our love than for anything else.

By that I don't mean we're softening our stance on biblical truth – not at all. When people become part of the Covenant family they will quickly learn that we are Christ centered and biblically grounded and committed to advancing the gospel.

But out there, in the world, where people are making quick judgments based on the way we interact with them as they sit next to us in the arena or stand next to us in line or wait on our table or live next door to us or watch us respond to the person in need. That's where we want to be known more for our love than for anything else.

And we are. I hear tales. Out in the community I hear our reputation.

When people come into our midst, I hear reports.

We really are becoming a church known for our love.

I think of the examples of so many of you who are seeking to be intentional to love your neighbors.

Martha Riley. Marion Vrugink. Franki Kung. Sharon Baker. Bob and Patti Truitt. Javan and Denae Greeson. Steve and Joyce Roosz, Neil and Erin Rutan, Jess and Donna Vandergraf, Philip and Radonna Fiorini, Wes and Naomi Cook. And so many others whose stories I haven't heard yet. But I hope you'll tell me!

John 13.34-35

A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.

Closing Song - How He Loves

And we are His portion and He is our prize,
 Drawn to redemption by the grace in His eyes.
 If His grace is an ocean, we're all sinking.

And Heaven meets earth like an unforeseen kiss.
 And my heart turns violently inside of my chest.
 I don't have time to maintain these regrets,
 When I think about the way...

That He loves us.
 Oh, how He loves us.
 Oh, how He loves us.
 Oh, how He loves.

Benediction

Live a life of love.

Love Jesus.

Love his people.

And show his love to this world.

And pour out his love on this world.

Go to the world in love.

Love your neighbor.

Love the people God places around you.

Jude 1.2 Mercy, peace, and love be yours in abundance.

Notes

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Have any of you ever had the experience of someone dying for you?

There are two times in my life I can think of when I may have saved someone's life. One time I did the Heimlich maneuver for a coworker at Procter and Gamble, and one time I caught a woman who was sliding down the side of Angel's Landing in Zion.

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- First reminds them of his relationship with them

Master teacher ruler

Authority is not just where you turn for answers

It is the one you give permission to write the story of your life

What shaping influence explains the shape of your life more than anything else?

Parents, culture, your own independent will, your desires, your brokenness,

A disciple integrates/imitates the life and teaching of the teacher

A slave obeys the instruction/command of the master

An agent fulfills the commission of the ruler

A number of things in this conversation about this:

Encourage you to take some time to read this through

Now let's look at the life Jesus calls us to as our teacher, master, and ruler.

Three key words Jesus uses to describe himself

Word pairs

Teacher and disciple *didaskalos mathetes*

We have a very different model of this

Content accumulation based rather than life integration based

Not a relationship between the teacher and the student

A notebook from seminary

For them, a life patterned after that of the rabbi

Eat with, live with, learn from

The word disciple means learner. People who call Jesus teacher.

mathete

Learner, student, disciple, pupil, the complementary word to teacher

Jesus makes it clear that he doesn't want his disciples are not supposed to be *students*, in the sense of being people who amass interesting and valuable information about the one they believe in.

When I attended Miami I was a business major. I was a student. I crammed information into my head before the tests and promptly forgot it after the test was done.

I didn't know the professor. I just put the information in my notebook and went on.

Western versus Middle Eastern teaching

Sitting at a desk writing information into a notebook

There may or may not be a relationship

There may or may not be a transfer of knowledge into action

versus disciples following the teacher around, living life together, and walking, talking, acting, just as he does

They are supposed to be *followers*, their lives patterned after his, their lives lived in submission to him,

An apprentice to a life, not an accumulator of information

Then he goes further. You call me teacher.

= imitate, pattern after

Master and servant/slave *kurios doulos*

We don't have this point of reference at all

We are free people and we have abolished slavery

We prize our freedoms and instinctively resist anyone who would want to take a freedom from us

It is the American way to give full obedience to any command . . . if we understand, and if we agree, and if we are inclined, and then if we can fit it alongside the other things we've already committed to

For them

Belongs to the master, lays his or her will down, is obligated to do the will of the master

The essential difference – when two free people interact, they both have a say; when a master and a slave interact, only one has a say

Doesn't have the prerogative to decide for himself or herself

= obey, do what he commands

ruler and agent/messenger *pempsantos apostolos*

Used nine times in John – the one who sent me

For us

X: one summer when I was in college I worked at Columbia Gas
 Drove a mail truck between different branches of the company, Goodale Mail
 I delivered mail, but I didn't know who it was from and I didn't care who it was too
 I just dropped the bag on the counter and left
 Impersonal, not vested in it personally, a messenger

For them

We think of a business model, but this is a king directing his representative
 You represent me, re-present me, serve as my agent and representative,
 commissioned/charged, doing my bidding, standing in my stead, not just doing a task
 but representing a person

Deputized to carry out some important business on behalf of another

X: Harry Hopkins sent from Roosevelt to Churchill during WWII

A special commission to represent another and carry out his work

An official envoy or ambassador commissioned by a high ranking official

= represent, do the bidding of

In all three cases, the idea is that it translates into a life the shape of which can be
 traced back directly to another teacher/master/commissioner

What is my teacher/master/ruler like? My life, my words and actions, are the answer,
 not my explanations.

You also call me Lord. Master.

Implication? I have the last word in the shape of your life. You do what I tell you. I am
 over you. You don't have the luxury to step out from under my rule and determine your
 own path, your own way, your own standards.

You don't live a life of love because you feel like it. Or because the other person
 deserves it. You live a life of love because I have loved you, and you follow my
 example, and you live a life of love because I have commanded it, and you obey my
 commands.

What if Jesus stood before you and said, "Love your neighbor."

Oh, I know, that is a lovely sentiment. I can really affirm that.

Pause.

You – you, you mean, you actually want me to. I mean, actually.

That's right.

A life in imitation of and submission to Jesus our master 13.12-17

Specifically, the kind of life we're called to

Serve others 13.1-17

Love others 13.34-35, 15.12-17, 17.26

Love God 14.15, 14.21

Obey God 14.15, 14.21-23, 15-10

Live according to the word of God 14.23-24, 17.7-8

Abide in Christ 15.1-8

Bear fruit for Christ 15.1-8, 15.16

Testify to Christ through your love, your words, and your unity

Love 13.35

Testimony 15.27

Unity 17.23

Be prayerful 14.13-14, 16.24-26

Be holy 17.17-19

Be one 17.11,20-23

For the rest of the message, we'll zero in on the commandment at the heart of this list.

At the heart, love

Walk through verse

When Jesus is our master, we don't only follow him, we imitate him. His life of love and service becomes the pattern and invitation for our own. As a result, our love is the things for which we should most be known.

Verse

We are led. We are loved. So we should love.

Echoed in chapter 15 three more times

John 15.9

As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Now remain in my love.

¹⁰ If you keep my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commands and remain in his love. ¹¹ I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete.

John 15.12-14

My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you. ¹³ Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends. ¹⁴ You are my friends if you do what I command.

¹⁵ I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master's business. Instead, I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you.

John 15.16-17

You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you so that you might go and bear fruit—fruit that will last—and so that whatever you ask in my name the Father will give you. This is my command: Love each other.

Relevance/application today

Our calling – be known for our love

A church known for its love.

James 2.8

NCV This royal law is found in the Scriptures: “Love your neighbor as you love yourself.” If you obey this law, you are doing right.

NIV If you really keep the royal law found in Scripture, “Love your neighbor as yourself,” you are doing right.

Voice live by the royal law found in Scripture: love others as you love yourself.

The line from Cosette in Les Miserables: I grew up in my Father's love. His love was my home.”

Jude 1.2 Mercy, peace, and love be yours in abundance.

God's Call to Live a Life of Love

In January of last year, just before the virus hit, I shared with you the result of a year-long process of discernment that culminated when our lead team was away on a retreat and we began to have a conversation over lunch.

That was when God really began to bring some things together.

First, Andrew asked, “What is the thing we want to be known for most in the community?” When people encounter us in the grocery store, at the gym, at the lunch cafeteria, what would we want them to experience from us? Wouldn't it be our love? Not first our moral convictions or our political affiliation, but our warm welcome, our kind regard, our thoughtful questions, our acts of compassion – the Love of God pouring through us to them

And then Travis asked, “If Covenant were suddenly removed from the community, would we be missed? If so, what would we be missed for? And what is the thing we would *want* most to be missed for?” Again, wouldn’t it be our love?

That got me thinking about my experience when Sharon and I were in England for my sabbatical three years ago. I’m convinced that, in terms of spiritual climate and secularization, the UK today is the US in about 30 years.

Here’s what struck me during our time there. In England there is a sense in which the church has become completely irrelevant to the society. Despite efforts on the part of the church to be faddy and relevant, with miniature golf courses and laser light shows in 800 year old sanctuaries in an effort to draw crowds, none of those are really capturing the attention of the culture around them.

At the same time, though the church has lost its stature, it hasn’t lost its real relevance at all. In fact, the relevance of what it offers in a broken and isolated world has only grown.

What is the one thing the church uniquely has to offer? Not trendy programs. Not political power. Not cultural change. The love of God, fleshed out in Jesus, lived out within a loving family called the church, and poured out into the lives of those around us through love of neighbor.

That’s something you can’t find anywhere but in the church. And that’s what we experienced in England: small vibrant churches with the deepest sort of relevance because they were simply communities of love – and in them the love of God was met.

So it all came together, and the session affirmed that this was a focused area of God’s call to us for this season: to become a community known for its love.

I Corinthians 14.1 says, “Follow the way of love.” We believe that is God’s focused call to us at this point in our life: to become a church known for its love.

In the first three hundred years of its existence, the church was a small minority community within the larger Roman world, and it was just one option among a whole mish mash of faiths and philosophies from the familiar Roman pantheon of gods to the Emperor Cult, the mystery religions, and the self-help advice of the Stoic philosophers.

How did the early church make its message stand out? In his book called, *The Rise of Christianity*, Rodney Stark points to what he believes was a decisive factor in the acceptance of the Christian message when it was still a small minority voice in the culture. Its love.

Ironically, given the divisive and acrimonious response of some Christians during the past 18 months, it was during two pandemics – one in 165, the other in 251, both of

which killed as many as a third of the population – that the church’s love in a pre-Christian world really shone.

Listen to how it was described.

Dionysius, the bishop of Alexandria, described in a sermon the Christian value of love and the Christian norm of serving neighbors in need, and how that contrasted with those who had pagan beliefs. Christians stayed and “nursed the sick and dying” while “the heathen behaved in the opposite way. At the first sight of the disease, they pushed the sufferers away and fled.”

The pagan Emperor Julian complained to one of his pagan priests about the growth of the Christian church, which he said was caused by their “moral character” and by their “benevolence toward strangers.” And to another he lamented, “Everyone can see that our people lack aid from us.” But “the Galileans support not only their own poor, but ours as well.”

Tertullian, a Christian writer in Northern Africa, summed up perfectly what the ancient world experienced whenever they bumped into the small band of Christian believers. “It is our care of the helpless, our practice of loving kindness, that brands us in the eyes of many of our opponents. “Only look,” they say, “look how they love one another!”

What if that was what our opponents said of us? What if it was our loving kindness that branded us in the eyes of those who viewed us negatively?

In **John 13.34-35** Jesus said

A new command I give you: love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples: if you love one another.

That is exactly how we believe God wants us to be known as well. By our love. I **Corinthians 16.14 says, “Do everything in love.”**

Over the past two thousand years, speaking in broad terms, the church in the Western world has walked through a pre-Christian era and then a Christendom era. Now we find ourselves more and more in a post-Christian era.

Which means in many ways we find ourselves back where we were in the pre-Christian era, as a minority community in a world swirling with religious options. But with this difference: today, for a variety of reasons, many in our world already have an opinion about the church, and they don’t want to have anything to do with it. According to a new Barna poll, only one in three Americans have a positive view of evangelicals.

How do we gain a hearing in a world that is not only cluttered with a panoply of religious options, but is disenchanted with, put off by, even offended by what they perceive as the narrowness and arrogance and judgment of the church?

We believe the answer is so simple that it seems ordinary rather than revolutionary. Love. Go back to the original blueprints, follow the example of the early church, and love. **Ephesians 5.1 says, "Live a life of love."**

How have we done in the past two years?

Covid has highlighted that our unity as a church is thinner than we thought, and sometimes based more on shared ideology than a vibrant faith.

The church at large has not come out looking good during this whole covid and mask and vaccine thing.

Covenant has struggled in some places and flourished in others.

Sad that some have left without a word. A few others have left with harsh words. A rare few met with us to talk about their struggles.

Exposed a need for us to find our common ground in his sacrifice for us, his word to us, his mission for us, and not in our having identical views about societal and political issues

I think we've also fallen into believing that speaking the truth as love is the same thing as speaking the truth in love. It isn't, as we'll be exploring more in a month.

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In a couple of weeks we'll be picking up the theme of being in the world but not belonging to the world, and on that Sunday we'll explore in practical terms what it means to love our neighbor when we don't agree with what our neighbor stands for or does.

-

Newboys

official music video "Love One Another"

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VAFMGRMhFsM>

Love

Love

Love

Yeah, we don't always live what we believe

Yeah, we don't always share a common source

Here we are, now shoutin' 'til we're hoarse

Jesus taught us a different kind of discourse

Don't talk about it, talk about it

Just do it

Love one another
 Sister and brother
 Don't hurt each other, yeah
 Lines drawn in the sand
 Complicate our new command
 Love one another, yeah

-

-

Two years ago
 Become a church known more for its love than for anything else

In the ensuing months, some things to clarify

Known more for this than for anything else

Love and Being a Citizen of Heaven

Define love

Love is love.

Doesn't mean uncritical acceptance.

Means, at least in part, desiring/seeking God's best for you even when it costs me

Also means honoring your dignity by accepting you as a person

How love when disagree within the body?

Begin in the unity that is ours because we share all the most important things in common: allegiance to Jesus, commitment to the word of God, desire to share the gospel

Then explore together how the scriptures can stretch both of your thinking.

Don't love once you've agreed. Love whether or not you agree. Have a heart of humility

How love when disagree outside the body?

Sudden permission to act like people are demons

Not speaking the truth as love, but speaking the truth in love.

Why do we feel permission to be mean or attacking when we disagree?

X: letter to councilmen

Thank you, find common ground, openly declare your view, graciously express your concerns, urge them not to pass it

Why do we need to be mean? Why do we need to withhold our love?

Love and strong disagreement are not mutually exclusive. I can hate those who rope teenage girls in sex trafficking and want them to experience God's justice and still want them to experience the love of God.

See *A Gentle Answer* by Scott Sauls

If you haven't read it, I don't know a better place to start

What you are known for isn't everything there is to say about you. It's the thing that stands out in your interactions with others.

It's our public reputation.

Among Christians I would hope that we'd be known as having a biblically anchored Christ-centered ministry, but out there, in the world, those aren't meaningful concepts. I would hope we'd be known as that church that loves each other and loves the people around them.

X: Steve Viars article

Ethic that elevates OT to a place of equal influence with the NT in shaping our practice in society

But the OT captures a unique circumstance in which a nation is the people of God

That is no longer the situation today

But the Father, after introducing Moses and Elijah, removes them, and then says, "This is my son. Listen to him."

Moses had a sword (in a sense – Exodus 32). Jesus didn't.

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Benediction

Live a life of love.

Love Jesus.

Love his people.

And pour out his love on this world.

Go to the world in love.

Love your neighbor.

Love the people God places around you.

Jude 1.2 Mercy, peace, and love be yours in abundance.

Presbytery Message
Live a Life of Love
David Henderson

September 17, 2021

The early church faced a profound challenge: how does this tiny band of unexceptional men and women carry a message of redemption out to the world?

The world around them was a mish mash of faiths and philosophies. There was the Emperor cult, which blurred the lines between God and Country. There were the Stoics and Epicureans, popular traveling philosophers offering an abundance of self-help tips. There were the classical Roman religions, based on giving the gods what they want in order to get from the gods what you want. The cult of Isis and the cult of Mithras were popular mystery religions and secret societies, appealing to many. Asclepius was the popular health and wealth religion. And there among them was this small minority religion called Christianity with its outlandish claims of a god who visited earth from on high to bring us into relationship with Himself. .

How to gain a hearing in a world already cluttered with a cacophony of competing claims?

Their response was counterintuitive. Rather than conspiring how to gain influence and power, finding a place among the powerful, or strategizing how to become trendy and relevant, finding a place among the popular, they waited on God and prayed. They studied scripture and worshiped God and opened their hearts to him. They used their gifts to strengthen and serve one another. And they waited for the power and presence of the Spirit to fill them not just with the power of God but with the love of God.

Romans 5.5

God has poured his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom he has given us.

And then they moved out into their communities . . . and loved.

Some of you are familiar with the book called *The Rise of Christianity*, Rodney Stark's award-winning study of the growth of the early church.

He describes the growth of the church in its earliest years, and points to what he believes was a decisive factor in the acceptance of the Christian message when it was still a small minority voice in the culture. Love.

Ironically, given the divisive and acrimonious response of some in the church during the past 18 months, it was during two pandemics – one in 165, the other in 251, both of which killed as many as a third of the population – that the church’s love in a pre-Christian world really shone.

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Tertullian, a Christian writer in Northern Africa, captured what the ancient world experienced when they bumped into the small band of Christian believers. “It is our care of the helpless, our practice of loving kindness, that brands us in the eyes of many of our opponents. “Only look,” they say, “look how they love one another!”

What if that was what our opponents said of us? What if it was our loving kindness that branded us in the eyes of those who viewed us negatively?

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* * *

About two and half years ago we here at Covenant began a discernment process, inviting God to help us put our finger on what was standing in the way of our struggles to be faithful and effective as a church. There were several threads in this effort.

Our leaders began by reading Todd Bolsinger’s book on adaptive leadership, called *Canoeing the Mountains*, and then spent a fair amount of time discussing it. I highly recommend the book.

We prayed for insight and clarity about what were some of the issues that needed our attention, and began to identify a variety of ministry areas that we felt weren’t flourishing.

During that time we also had Doug Pollock back to do some teaching. He's the author of the awesome evangelism book called *God Space*, and during his visit we had to face the fact that while we said evangelism was important to us, we didn't see much fruit in terms of people actually coming to Christ through the witness of our church.

Alongside our conversation and prayer we gathered some focus groups and asked what they thought, and learned that there was a pretty consistent longing for a deeper experience of community.

We did some experiments two summers ago to try to structure our worship times to include some structured fellowship time as well. But we realized we were bumping up against our culture's failure to equip us to relate effectively, how to extend welcome, communicate value, show interest, ask questions, listen well, ask follow up questions,

So over time we identified several different ministry areas that needed work, but we couldn't see the common thread.

We weren't clear what the heart of the issue was. What's the thing beneath the thing?

Community, connection, evangelism, mentoring, relevance: we felt like we could try to tackle each of these as problems to be solved or ministries to be managed. But we continued to feel there was something behind all this that we hadn't put our finger on.

For months we wrestled in discussion and in prayer. Then our lead team was away on a retreat and we began to have a conversation.

Over lunch one day, as we were talking about where God had us as a church and where we sensed he was leading us, it felt to all of us as though God just began to bring some things together.

It began with two of the guys on our staff asking key questions.

First, Andrew asked, "What is the thing we want to be known for most in the community?"

When people encounter us in the grocery store, at the gym, at the lunch cafeteria, what would we want them to experience from us? Wouldn't it be our love?

Not first our political affiliation or our moral convictions, but our warm welcome, our kind regard, our thoughtful questions, our acts of compassion – that is, the Love of God pouring through us to them

And then Travis asked, "If Covenant were suddenly removed from the community, would we be missed? If so, what would we be missed for? And what is the thing we would *want* most to be missed for?"

Again, wouldn't it be our love?

That got me thinking about my experience when Sharon and I were in England for my sabbatical three years ago.

In terms of church and spiritual climate and secularization, I'm convinced the UK today is the US in about 30 years.

Here's what struck me during our time there. On the one hand, in England there is a sense in which the church has become completely irrelevant to the society

Despite efforts on the part of the church to be faddy and relevant, with miniature golf course and laser light shows and concerts and plays in 800 year old sanctuaries in an effort to draw crowds, none of those are really capturing the attention of the culture around them. It's clear the church has largely lost its stature.

On the other hand, though the church has lost its stature, it hasn't lost its real relevance at all. In fact, the relevance of what it offers in a broken and isolated world has only grown.

What is the one thing the church uniquely has to offer? Not trendy programs. Not political influence. The love of God, lived out within a loving family called the church, and poured out into the lives of those around them through love of neighbor.

That's something you can't find at the local pub or fitness center or work place. And that's what we experienced in England: small vibrant churches that were communities of love – with the deepest sort of relevance, because what they hold forth meets the deepest felt needs of the people who come in contact with the church, by encountering Jesus in those they meet .

So it all came together, and we heard God's call to us for this season: to become a community known for its love.

It took you a year to come up with that? Well, yes, actually, it did.

So we're embarking on the adventure of becoming a church known more for our love than for anything else. And I think we're talking about a seven year long project.

Here are some of the things we've been trying:

- Added a deck to encourage us to grow as a community of affection

- Invited our neighbors to use it any time

- Encouraged everyone to memorize the Ephesians 3 love prayer and pray it for a year for our church

- Nametags for everyone every Sunday

- Did several sermon series on love:

Had a summer focus of lingering longer
 Held a once a month outside gathering
 Shared testimonies every Sunday this summer of how people have shown love
 to their neighbors

I think we're just getting started, and we're bumbling and tripping along the way . . . but it's coming. And we'd love to learn what you are trying and what's working where God has placed you.

* * *

In his book *Take and Read*, our fellow Presbyterian Eugene Peterson provides an annotated list of suggested spiritual readings, some of which draw from the best of what can be found outside of our Reformed family. His book led me to the work of a theologian and philosopher named Hans Urs von Balthasar.

As Protestant evangelicals there are aspects of his theology we will not be able to agree with, but I believe he is absolutely right when in his book called *Engagement with God* he says that Christianity is unique among world religions and philosophies in its call for its followers to love their fellow human beings. He says nowhere else "will we find [that] kind of respect for the person of one's neighbor."

And then listen to this:

Because ... the most significant thing in life that can happen to our neighbor is his being laid claim to and taken seriously as a person, an event that leaves on him the most lasting impression, a state that constitutes for him the source of the greatest happiness he can know on earth, in this above all lies the credibility of the Church, and the success of the mission of Christianity. (55)

It ought therefore to be possible to recognize the Christian by the fact that he opens the very depths of his heart to his [fellow human beings]. . . demonstrating to [them] that his [own] heart . . . has already had its secret places plundered and indwelt.

This, he says, is "the living proof of the reality of the Holy Trinity." (55)

Our love for our neighbor. By this all men will know that you are my disciples.

* * *

Years ago, in the providence of God, when I was still in seminary, I met Leighton Ford, Billy Graham's brother-in-law. Maybe because of his loss of a son who was about my age, and my loss of my parents who were about his age, we formed a friendship. I've been blessed to have him as a friend and mentor ever since.

If you recognize the name, you know that Leighton has been one of the foremost voices for evangelism over the past fifty years. He partnered with Billy for years, then he had his own worldwide evangelism ministry, and he wrote a bestselling book on evangelism called *Good News is For Sharing*.

Not too long ago I sat with Leighton on his porch in Charlotte. We were talking about the decline of the church's witness these days and what seems to be its loss of a voice in our culture today.

At one point, I said, "Leighton, I just increasingly have the sense that evangelism . . ." I paused and shook my head.

He finished the sentence. "- isn't working anymore."

"Yes!" I said. "Not as a way of bringing about real and lasting life change in a culture that has such a negative view of the church, and just leave people targeted, as our project. More and more I'm beginning to think that the only thing that will really reach people for Christ . . ."

Again he finished the sentence. "- is love."

"Yes! Exactly. Not evangelism as a short-term project, but loving a person for the long haul."

He told me that is exactly what he has been concluding . . . and experiencing with his neighbors across the street. Leighton described them as lapsed Catholics who were clearer about what they didn't believe than what they did. But during the early months of Covid they felt lonely and isolated, and Leighton and Jeanie had been warm and welcoming, so once a week for a year this couple had been coming over to spend the evening in conversation. And Leighton and Jeanie were just loving them.

I can point to a similar relationship Sharon and I have had with our neighbor across the street. We've known Chris and her husband for years. Over that time we've sought to reach out to them and build a relationship with them, but we made no spiritual headway that I could see.

Chris's husband described himself as an anti-Theist, and Chris holds to an odd mix of positive thinking and earth-based Native American spirituality plus plain old stubborn self-reliance. But when during the worst of covid her husband started dying, and she began to admit to herself how selfish and self-centered he had been during their whole married life, and she was fighting down her anger and resentment in order to care for him, she was ready to talk to us.

So we talked, standing in the street twenty feet apart, standing there in the dark. Each time we talked I told her that we'd been praying for her and her husband, and she said, "Keep it up. I really need it."

There was a point when we were talking and as we wrapped up I told her again I would pray for her and I turned for home. Then I felt prompted to turn back around. “Hey Chris,” I said, “I keep telling you that I’m praying for you. Can I tell you what I’m praying?”

She said sure, so I told her that I’d been praying for her husband that before he died he would be brought to a place where he saw the utter inadequacy of a life lived for self, and no longer live for himself but for God, and for her that she would experience the power of God equipping her to do what she couldn’t do herself – to love her unlovable husband as he lay dying. She was moved to tears, and said that was exactly what she had been experiencing. “I get to the end of myself and I don’t have anything left, and then I just feel this surge, this power, and I’m able to keep going. And you’ve been praying that. Wow.”

* * *

Over the past two thousand years, speaking in broad terms, the church in the Western world has walked through a pre-Christian era and then a Christendom era. Now we find ourselves more and more in a post-Christian era.

Which means in many ways we find ourselves back where we were in the pre-Christian era, as a minority community in a world swirling with religious options, wrestling with the same question the early church asked.

But with this difference: today, for a variety of reasons, many have decidedly negative views of the church. According to a new Barna poll, only one in three Americans have a positive view of evangelicals.

How does this shrinking and splintered and disregarded and disliked collection of unexceptional men and women carry a message of redemption out to the world?

We are fast becoming a minority voice among a panoply of spiritual options: self-transformation gurus, religious extremists, God and Country enthusiasts, plus a dozen different religious varieties imported from every corner of the world, alongside all sorts of versions of being spiritual without being religious.

How to gain a hearing in a world not only cluttered with a cacophony of competing claims, but a world that is disenchanted with, put off by, even offended by what they perceive as the narrowness and arrogance and judgment of the church?

I believe the answer is so simple that it seems ordinary rather than revolutionary. Love. Go back to the original blueprints, follow the example of the early church, and love.

And that means two things: For us to rediscover the church as a community of affection, to learn how to lay down our rights and our preferences and our divisions, and to learn how to love one another.

John 17.23-26

May they be brought to complete unity to let the world know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me. . . . I have made you known to them and will continue to make you known in order that the love you have for me may be in them, and that I myself may be in them.

. . . and then for us to go out as one, “standing firm in one spirit, contending as one for the faith of the gospel” as Paul says in Philippians 1.27, determined to be known more for our love than for anything else.

Matthew 22.37-40

“Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.” This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: “Love your neighbor as yourself.”

We as evangelicals like to pride ourselves on our faith and our faithfulness, to hold ourselves up as examples of those who teach the Bible most faithfully, and believe most deeply, and give most generously. But . . .

I Corinthians 13.2-3 (Message)

If we speak God’s Word with power, revealing all its mysteries and making everything plain as day, and if we have faith that says to a mountain, “Jump,” and it jumps, and if we give everything we own to the poor, but we don’t love, we’ve done nothing and we’ve gotten nowhere.

John 13.35

By this all men will know that you are my disciples: if you love one another.

May God make it so.