

# Endorsements

“*Experiencing God’s Love in the Church* presents an insightful, and often painful, analysis of the modern church fellowship, one that has too often ‘lost the battle for relevance and is no longer distinguishable from other nonprofit community organizations.’ Not content merely to identify a problem, Blackaby reveals the root cause as a lack of genuine love in the church and offers real examples of how lovelessness manifests itself in a church body. With the keen insight of an experienced pastor he offers specific guidance on reclaiming lost love. Only when this true love is manifest will the world be drawn to the God of love. This book should be read and applied by pastors and churches everywhere.”

—**Richard L. Blake**, *founder/president, Xtend Ministries International*

“‘When love is evident in a church, God lives there among His people.’ With this statement Tom Blackaby shows how to experience God through loving others. His prophetic assessment of the state of many churches today brought tears to my eyes as the truth convicted me, as it will our culture. Then, as a modern prophet, he calls me back to a loving God with practical suggestions for redemption. The book is a must for church leaders and all who desire to experience God in a more dynamic way.”

—**Cal Dunlap**, *executive director, Association for Christian Conferences, Teaching, and Service*

“There are few topics more pressing for the North American church today than how to experience and express the love of Christ. I believe this book provides practical insights coupled with relevant examples and application suggestions that can assist any church in evaluating its effectiveness in fulfilling Christ’s command to love each other. If God’s people are going to impact

their communities, cities, and nations as God intended us to do, I believe we must get a handle on what it means to showcase the inexplicable love of Christ in our midst. I am grateful that this book helps us do that.”

—**Dr. Robert D. Blackaby**, *president, Canadian Southern Baptist Seminary and College*

“Many Christians in America today question the vitality of the church. Tom Blackaby identifies what’s missing, but more importantly tells us how to fix it! This book is written to encourage Christians to love each other, and in so doing, impact the world around them. It is a simple message of the church letting its light shine and being used by God to accomplish His purposes. It’s right on target for where we are today and is a must-read for Christians who want to see revival in our land.”

—**Robert L. Mitchell**, *chairman, Fellowship of Companies for Christ International*

Experiencing  
God's  
Love  
*in the Church*







Experiencing  
God's  
Love  
*in the Church*

The Missing  
Ingredient in  
Today's Church  
and How to  
Bring It Back

**TOM BLACKABY**

 **NEW HOPE**  
PUBLISHERS  
Birmingham, Alabama

New Hope® Publishers  
P. O. Box 12065  
Birmingham, AL 35202-2065  
www.newhopepublishers.com  
New Hope Publishers is a division of WMU®.

© 2010 by Tom Blackaby  
All rights reserved. First printing 2010.  
Printed in the United States of America.

No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means—electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise—without the prior written permission of the publisher.

#### Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Blackaby, Tom, 1962-  
Experiencing God's love in the church : the missing ingredient in today's church and how to bring it back / Tom Blackaby.  
p. cm.  
ISBN 978-1-59669-296-1 (sc)  
1. Love--Religious aspects--Christianity. 2. Church. I. Title.  
BV4639.B52 2011  
241'.4--dc22

2010033535

All Scripture quotations, unless otherwise indicated, are taken from the New King James Version. Copyright © 1982 by Thomas Nelson, Inc. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Scripture quotations marked (CEV) are taken from the Contemporary English Version. Copyright © 1995 American Bible Society.

Scripture quotations marked (GNT) are from the Good News Translation—Second Edition © 1992 by American Bible Society. Used by Permission.

Scripture quotations marked (ISV) are taken from the Holy Bible: International Standard Version®. Copyright © 1996–2008 by The ISV Foundation. ALL RIGHTS RESERVED INTERNATIONALLY. Used by permission.

Scripture quotations marked (YLT) are taken from Young's Literal Translation. Public domain.

Scripture quotations marked (LITV) taken from the Literal Translation of the Holy Bible. Copyright © 1976–2000 by Jay P. Green, Sr. Used by permission of the copyright holder.

ISBN-10: 1-59669-296-0  
ISBN-13: 978-1-59669-296-1

N114133 • 1210 • 4M1







# Dedication

This book is written with love and admiration for the many fine Christians who have shown my family and me God's love over the years, and to two churches in particular who know what it means to love one another deeply: North Sea Baptist Church and Cornerstone Neighbourhood Church.

---

# Table of Contents

<b>Preface</b>	13
<b>1 Love Desired</b>	17
We see hard work, sacrifice, busy programs, and work projects in many churches, but little evidence of genuine love. Love can be revived when we embrace what God intended from the start.	
<b>2 Love Demonstrated</b>	39
We have a perfect model for what love looks like. Jesus lived a life of radical, genuine love. It's time to take a closer look.	
<b>3 Love as God Intended</b>	57
What does the Lord expect of us? He's made it pretty clear: love God and love your neighbor.	
<b>4 Love Gone Wrong</b>	77
When love is evident in a church, God lives there among His people. When there is no demonstrable evidence of love in a church, it means that Jesus has been pushed outside and replaced with something else.	
<b>5 Love Denied</b>	99
Sadly, love is lacking in the body life of many congregations. If love is to have its rightful place among the brothers and sisters, we must get back to the basics of prayer, spending time in His Word, valuing people more than programs, treating each other as family, and extending grace.	

**6 Love Mistaken** 119

There are a lot of counterfeits to love out there. But the church needs to get it right. Where else can anyone find genuine love, if not in God's church and among His people? If love cannot be found there, then there is no hope for a lost world. No hope at all.

**7 Love You Can See** 137

If nothing else, love must be practical. Love does more than merely see a need, love seeks to address that need in tangible ways. Love does more than make plans of action, it actually takes action.

**8 Love Reclaimed** 159

One of the most valuable steps a church can take on its journey back to love is to listen to those who are in desperate need of love: the ill, the needy, the lonely, the hurting.

**9 Love Restored** 187

May love reign in our churches today so that the world may know that God sent His Son and that He loves them with a great and unmatched love!





# Preface

**A**t this point in my life I have now served God's people in ministry for more than 25 years. I have been a youth pastor, minister of music, religious education pastor, associate pastor, senior pastor, and a national consultant to churches for worship and religious education. I have lived in three countries and traveled in about 27 others, often speaking to churches, seminaries, and Christian organizations. I say, as my father once said to me, God's people are the best people in the world!

Over the years my best friends have always come from churches that I have attended, as have innumerable fond and blessed memories. As I write this, the oldest of my three children has just begun her first year of college. I can honestly say that I never once have had to cajole, threaten, or bribe my three children to go to church—because they love going. And that is how it should be. The joy on the faces of believers I have worshipped with in remote African villages, crowded cities in India, international churches in the Middle East, and right across Europe and the Americas affirms to me that Jesus is alive and

well in the hearts of His people. It has been a great privilege to walk with godly and inspiring Christians around the world.

On the other hand, I have also had many painful and challenging times working with God's people in churches. Some of God's people have tremendously blessed me and my family, greatly encouraging me at very important times. Others have caused me to question why I ever entered the ministry in the first place! As one brother in Christ once said to me, "Sheep can bite." I have learned that to be true. Yet still God chooses to use His people to bring hope and truth and grace and peace in desperate times. And although there are some people who profess to be "Christian" without any clue to what that really means, far more are quietly showing God's love wherever they go and lives are being transformed around them because of it.

Really, though, it is not my opinion that matters; it is only Christ's opinion that truly counts. We are His people, the sheep of His pasture. We are His body, His church, and His chosen method for sharing the good news of salvation with those who are perishing. May we represent Him well in all that we do and say, and embody the fact that God loves the world and that God sent His Son as a demonstration of that love.

—TWB





Ah, to wake up Sunday morning anticipating  
a glorious meeting with God joined by your brothers  
and sisters in Christ!



# Love Desired

**A**h, to wake up Sunday morning anticipating a glorious meeting with God joined by your brothers and sisters in Christ!

Your spouse and children get in the car early because they don't want to miss anything, and you know if you don't arrive a bit early you won't get seats together in the auditorium. You park a block away from church because so many people are coming to see what God is up to this week. It is a challenge getting to the auditorium because so many people want to shake your hand and ask how your week has been. A woman from the prayer team hands you a card with a Bible verse printed on it and a handwritten note below: "We've been praying for you and your father in the hospital." You wonder how she found out! Open seats are few and far between, but you find a new family to sit with and you introduce yourself to them. They are new to the community and heard about your church from friends, so you offer to buy them lunch after the service. Throughout the service people sense the Spirit working in their hearts, leading

them and guiding them in areas of their lives where they need direction. You're certain the pastor's message is from the Lord as your questions about taking that job in a different town are answered. You decide you'd rather take a pay cut than leave this church where God is so obviously at work, the staff are so godly and inspiring, and the people are so loving and caring towards one another. By the time the pastor finishes, the front of the auditorium is packed with people who have come to quietly kneel before God in prayer. The music softly plays as people continue to pray. Some are quietly weeping, others just kneeling, and a few have friends who came to support them with a hand on their shoulder. You have no doubt that the coming week is going to be great, and you even begin to wonder what God has in store for you the next Sunday!

For many Christians, this is their normal experience at church. But for other believers who coast from Sunday to Sunday and from church to church, this experience is quite foreign to them.

Perhaps a different scenario is more familiar to you. A situation more like Kelly's. Kelly wakes up on Sunday morning, looks at the alarm clock and gauges how much time she will need to get her family up and dressed, fed, and in the car to get to church on time. With only minor resistance, her family piles into the car—all with matching socks and combed hair! As she drives into the church parking lot searching for a space not too far from the building, she waves, nods, and smiles at the people she recognizes. Two of her children forgot their Bibles, but as they are only occasionally used anyway, that won't be a big problem. The kids run off to be with their friends, compare action figures, and chat about the weekend activities. She and her husband do the familiar "meet and greet" routine as they walk through the foyer towards the auditorium.

Kelly wonders if today will be any different than the past weeks or months. Perhaps the choir or praise team will do something unexpected today. Maybe there will be a video presentation she hasn't seen before. As Kelly enters the worship center

she scans for seats that will accommodate her family—not a problem, as there are many open spots. She wishes there were some sense of anticipation or building expectation in her heart for worship today, but no luck. She glances at the people around her and notices a few faces she doesn't recognize. She wonders if they are new or if she just hasn't noticed them before. No matter, her life is too busy to add any new friends to it, and they may not come back to the church again anyway, so there's no point getting to know them yet.

During the morning announcements she hears something about a church picnic next Saturday, but as she doesn't really have any close friends in the church it's always a bit awkward going to such events. She remembers last year when the only people who spoke to her were the church's paid staff. She reasons that this is probably typical of most churches—that's just the way church is in these busy times. Of course there are the usual mentions of fund-raising events for building projects and a prayer request for the ethnic mission church that meets in the afternoons. She appreciates the effort that the pastor puts in his sermons, but somehow they just don't seem to hit home, and her mind wanders to the coming week's events, schedules, and responsibilities. The service runs like clockwork through the singing, the offering, the announcements, the message, and the closing songs. Her family gets out right on time, as usual.

Back in the car Kelly realizes that she did not have any personal conversations with anyone beyond the usual "How are you?" No one asked how well her dad is recovering in the hospital. No one knows about the financial strain her family is facing and her growing anxiety about the future of her business. No one knows how much she would love to have someone pray with her about the possibility of relocating her family to a friendlier economic environment, but she doesn't know who to ask or who to trust. She is not even really sure she wants to expose her personal life to others who may only gossip about her later. But, of course, Kelly acknowledges she is just as unaware of what is going on in the lives of all the other smartly dressed people she saw at the church.

Variations of Kelly’s routine happen every week in many churches across the country and around the world. In our hearts we know that church is important and that God should be a priority in our family’s life, but there is this nagging feeling that there should be something more to it than the regular Sunday routine, more than simply smiling back at smiling people you see once a week, more than singing songs, standing, sitting, bowing heads, taking Communion, and giving an offering. Many people sit in their seats asking, “Why did I come to church today?” but the answer remains elusive.

Over the years, I have served churches in many different locations, and in many different job descriptions. I have been on staff as the youth pastor, the minister of religious education, the worship pastor, and the senior pastor. And in every church in which I have served, I have looked for the one ingredient that seems to bring it all together—love.

## Let Us Love One Another

*Dear friends, let us continually love one another, because love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born from God and knows God. The person who does not love does not know God, because God is love.*

—1 John 4:7–8 (ISV)

Perhaps you have this verse engraved on a plaque on your wall or written on some furniture in your church. Some of us have studied this passage, reflected over its meaning, and even taught it to our children. But there is a vast difference between knowing the Bible and living it out in our daily life. Understanding the far-reaching implications of this verse is part of what this book is about, but that is only half of it. The goal of this book is not simply to provide more knowledge, but to help us live out what Christ expects of us in our daily lives. 1 John 4:7–8 clearly states that whether or not a person loves is the evidence for whether he or she actually knows God. And, if a person is not known for

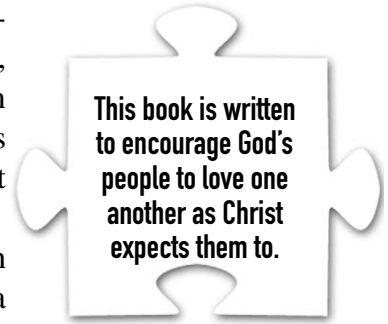
his or her love, then it is impossible for them to truly know God, regardless of what they say.

I am often astonished at the fanciful mental gymnastics some people employ to explain why they feel it is impossible to implement Scripture in their daily lives. They seek to relegate Scripture to some ultimate ideal or unachievable virtue that Christ alone can conquer. I am of the persuasion that if God gives a command, we either obey or we don't. He isn't interested in 43 reasons why we think His commands are unreasonable, impractical, or impossible; He is interested only in our obedience. When God says, "Let us love one another," He actually means it in real and practical terms.

There is no question that the church (universal and local) is struggling in a fallen world today. In many cases the church has lost the battle for relevance and is no longer distinguishable from other nonprofit community organizations. The farther we get chronologically from the original New Testament churches, the less we seem to look like them. A disconnect has occurred between what we read of Christ's expectations for His body (the church) and what actually happens in the buildings where His people meet week after week.

This book seeks to go back to the beginning, to look once again at the biblical narrative, at the commands of Christ, at the instructions of the apostles—to use them as a plumb line against which we can place our own church. What adjustments need to be made in our thinking and actions in order to comply with our Lord's expectations for us? This book is in no way an exhaustive look at love. Rather it is a primer to help us examine where we are and discover where we need to be.

There are many significant books written on the importance of loving God, and rightfully so. There are also many must-read books exhorting God's people to creatively love and reach out to those who are not yet Christians. This book is written to



encourage God's people to love one another as Christ expects them to, so that He can accomplish His will and purposes through them and touch a watching world around them.

## **Do We Really Understand What Love Is?**

*For the whole law is summarized in a single statement:*

*“You must love your neighbor as yourself.”*

—Galatians 5:14 (ISV)

This is an incredible verse. I have preached it, taught it, discussed it, and pondered it over the years, as many of you have. And it grieves me to see how little it is practiced in churches today. We work together on projects, we run summer children's programs together, provide community outreach events, even study the Bible and worship side by side, but when we look at the person across the aisle from us at church, can we honestly say that we truly love that person or that family? I hope so.

- I wonder if everyone in our churches would feel perfectly comfortable calling up any other church member at a moment's notice to ask for help or urgent prayer for a situation they are facing.
- I wonder if each person in the church feels that they are an important and integral part of their church family and knows they are loved unconditionally by the other members.
- I wonder if people know they will be fervently prayed for and not gossiped about, carefully listened to rather than criticized behind their backs, purposefully sought out rather than run off, or diligently pursued rather than quietly let go.

There are many wonderful churches that demonstrate what it means both to love the Lord God with all their heart, soul, strength, and mind and to love one another genuinely as Christ has loved them. They understand how to care for and nurture the sheep in their community of faith. But other churches really struggle with both of the great commandments (Matthew 22:37–39). The fact is, if you have trouble loving one another, then you also have trouble loving God (1 John 4:20–21).

I have traveled in 13 countries in the past two years and I have yet to see the two great commandments posted in any church to remind God’s people of their foremost priorities. Maybe it is just easier not to be reminded of our high calling. The church is the one place where, more than any other, a man or woman, boy or girl, should be able to walk through the doors and find love—guaranteed. The one immediate and obvious difference between a church and every other organization, club, society, or company ought to be sacrificial, undying, genuine love. Why? Since God lives in and among His people, we ought to reflect His love for those for whom He sent His Son to die. It is tragic when this is not the case.

### **The Good, the Bad, and the Model**

As I grew up, my family rarely lived near any close relatives, so the churches we attended supplied our friends, our playmates, our co-workers, our brothers and sisters in Christ, our “grandparents,” and, for two of us, our wives! As children and teenagers, we loved our church family, and they loved us. My earliest memories of what church is all about centered on the two greatest commandments of loving God and loving one another. So, ever since, I have been on a journey seeking to find or establish the same kind of loving relationships in every church in which I have served or attended.

Over the years I have seen love demonstrated in some amazing ways, both love for God and love for people. I watched a

church wrap its arms around a man whose wife was dying from cancer and hold prayer vigils for his family right through to the end. I know a church that bought and installed a wood-burning stove in a widow's home to keep her from freezing in the winter and had wood regularly delivered to her house at no cost to her. I was a part of a church that provided a wedding and reception for a poor couple with no family. People even volunteered to serve as the "father" of the bride and the groom's best man!

But sadly, I could tell you horror stories that defy logic, grace, common sense, and any semblance of love. I witnessed a chairman of deacons taunt a Sunday School director and demand they "go outside to settle this once and for all." I know about sexual abuse by youth pastors, marital affairs among church leadership, unjustified staff firings, pastors abusing their authority, embezzlement by church treasurers, intimidation from church leaders, swindlers cheating church members, unrestrained pride, unmitigated arrogance, power-tripping, political maneuvering, manipulation, and much more.

While there are many wonderful things that I'm sure Christ would be proud to see in His churches, there are also many things going on that sadden and even disgust Him. What has happened to His churches? Why are so many churches so far away from what He desires them to be? Where did it all go so wrong?

Many years ago, I was introduced to a church in which members fervently and systematically studied the Word of God together, cherished their times of fellowship with one another, regularly shared meals with one another, and promoted and protected their time of corporate prayer. Not surprisingly, in this same church the presence and power of the Holy Spirit was so evident that miraculous things were regularly reported in answer to their constant prayers. I also heard that in this congregation no member ever went without because those who had more than enough quickly shared what they had with those who were in need. The welfare and wellbeing of each member had the highest priority among the membership. They

also had an incredible sense of unity and often visited in one another's homes to encourage one another.

What is more, this church was known for its meaningful, personal, and exhilarating worship and for exuberant singing of heartfelt praises to God whenever they got together, whether it was in their homes or in their church. I heard they always displayed such joy and were so grateful to God that visitors could not help but be inspired when they were around them. It is not that they had a life of ease, for in fact their members were often confronted by hostile business leaders and even suffered outright persecution in their communities. Yet they remained steadfast in their love for God and for one another.

It is not surprising to know that this church grew by leaps and bounds as God richly blessed them and helped them reach their community with the gospel. Apparently they faced some potentially divisive issues, but they valued their unity so much that they quickly met to resolve the problems so they would not be distracted or diverted from accomplishing God's purposes. I hope this sounds a *lot* like your church! It sure sounds to me like a great church for my family to attend!

It had all the things we are looking for in a church: Bible-based teaching, a strong fellowship, practical ministry, and deep love for one another. A place where people are the priority, where there is intimacy with God and openness with one another, and where they are making a real difference in their community and around the world. I wonder how they were able to achieve all this with the pressures of society, the demands on people's time, and the many things that competed for their attention. This church sounds like the ideal place for families to go and for Christians young and old to be nurtured and disciplined.

The church I'm describing is (as you likely guessed) the first church in Jerusalem, which formed following Christ's ascension and is described in Acts 2. And in the more than 30 countries I've visited, I've found, sadly, that this kind of church is pretty rare.

## **My Current Journey**

Let me give you some background. After serving 15 years on staff in three churches, I served for seven years as pastor of an international congregation in Norway that looked a lot like the Jerusalem church to me. It was filled with people from all over the world who came together to worship the Lord and serve God together. Though we all spoke English as a common language, our cultures, denominational backgrounds, nationalities, and church histories were all different. What was fascinating to me was how we were able to put aside petty differences and personal agendas or preferences in order to worship and serve our Lord together and become family to one another.

But coming “home” from overseas after nearly a decade of being away was definitely a shock to our spiritual lives. For the first time in our married life, my wife and I had to search for a church home. Previously I had always served on staff in each of the churches we attended. We began searching for a place where we could become a part of a spiritual family, a church where the members would care for us and give us opportunities to use our gifts in service and ministry. However, the search for a church home in our new community was frustrating, disappointing, and at times agonizing. I still remember the quizzical look on our children’s faces each Sunday morning (and occasionally Saturday evening) when they would ask, “So which church are we going to today?”

In several churches we attended no one but the official “greeters” welcomed us or introduced themselves to us in the service. We deliberately lingered in the lobby for a while after each service and waited in vain for someone who would talk to us or make us feel welcome or wanted. We decided to visit one church over a longer period of time, but week after week we went home wishing someone would invite our family over to their home or even to join them for lunch after church. No one ever did. So we began attending a home group and getting involved in

the praise team ministry. Still no one invited our family into their home, out for coffee, or even to join them at a restaurant after church. We then volunteered to lead study groups in our home, and my wife became integrally involved in various church ministries. But even after 18 months, we did not feel welcomed into the church family. We realized this church had looked great on the outside but lacked love on the inside. So we continued in our search for a church that knew how to “love one another.”

In our pursuit of a loving congregation, our search included both small mission churches and larger, more established churches in several different denominations. There didn’t seem to be a lot of difference between them, despite their various names, denominational affiliations, catchy mission statements, and designs to reach out in the community. I often wondered to myself why some of these smaller struggling churches even existed, until I learned many of them were comprised almost completely of people who were dissatisfied or disgruntled with the larger established churches!

When I looked over their Sunday bulletins, I wondered what God must think about all their busy programs and ministries designed to attract newcomers while existing members were slipping out the back door family by family. One church saw more than 200 of its members leave because of the drastic changes their new pastor unapologetically made. Two hundred people! This pastor had lost his shepherd’s heart, and people were seen as a means to build his kingdom. “Get on board or get off the train” was his mantra. No joke! Where had “Love your neighbor as yourself” gone? Where was Christ’s command that those who want to be first must become the servant of all (Mark 9:35)? What about Christ’s command to Peter, “*Do you love Me? . . . Feed My lambs . . . Feed My sheep*” (John 21:15–17)? In the busyness of “doing for” God, somewhere along the way they had lost their love for one another.

It took us nearly two years to find a church where we felt like we were accepted and loved. It was a quaint little congregation meeting in a community hall down the street from our

house. Though we had driven by their little sandwich sign on the sidewalk several times, we had never thought to stop in. When we finally visited their worship service, we were drawn in by their warmth and genuine Christianity. My son was asked to play drums for the worship band (even though they had six drummers already!), and my wife was asked to lead a women's Bible study and help lead their very first women's retreat. Others picked my children up for weekly youth and children's activities, and I was hired by the church to assist with administration and plan their grand opening as a new church in the community. When I think of how this church has accepted our family into their congregation and been such a tremendous blessing to us, tears well up in my eyes even as I write this. It was like going from being orphans with no one to love us to being adopted by a loving, caring family. It would truly break my heart to ever have to leave this church family.

### **What's Our Witness?**

I want to hold a mirror up to see how visitors, whether Christians or not, (and sometimes even those within the church) see us. When God draws someone to a church for the first time, it can be a very daunting experience for them. Sometimes we, God's people, are so focused on our own church culture, traditions, and inside jokes that we unknowingly put up invisible walls that outsiders must somehow leap over in order to become a part of our "spiritual club." We have pampered our sacred cows for so long that we have forgotten there is a whole array of other creatures out there to care for.

My mother spoke of a church she attended where my father was the guest speaker. Often my father is required to sit with the staff before the service begins, leaving my mother to find a seat on her own. She made herself comfortable near the front where Dad could not possibly miss her if he looked for her while preaching. Suddenly a woman came up to her quite agitated and chided my mother for sitting in her favorite place. Now my

mother is not a woman to be trifled with. So rather than moving, my mother replied, “Well, thank you for letting me sit in your place today.” The woman was obviously not happy, but reluctantly found another place to sit, complaining as she did. After my mother was later introduced as the wife of their internationally renowned guest speaker, this woman hurried over and said to her, “Oh, it’s OK that you are sitting in my place today.”

What if it were a distraught mother whose daughter was missing, instead of my mother, who was confronted by this woman? What if it were a young couple who had just miscarried their first child? What if it were a teenager who had been abused the night before and was there searching for God? Would they have left feeling that church was a place where arrogant, proud, and irritating people dress up to gather each week and sing ancient songs?

We expect newcomers to decipher archaic religious language, find secret passages in an unfamiliar Bible, sing strangely written songs from a hymnal without any instructions of what “stanzas” are, and put money in an offering plate that goes who knows where. Then we offer those oh-so-helpful hints that they might want to wear a tie or a dress the next time they come to church. Or perhaps we suggest they put their children in the care of complete strangers so they don’t disturb the sleeping people around them next time. Church was never, ever meant to be a private club, or a secret fraternity of religious converts. It was meant to be a family for those needing care, comfort, guidance, encouragement, support, and love.

One of the major premises of my father’s book *Experiencing God: Knowing and Doing the Will of God* is that “God is always at work around you.” This means that God Himself causes people to come to your church. It means He is working in their hearts to want to serve Him using their spiritual gifts. It means He is



constantly preparing His people for opportunities of ministry and service all around them and around the world. He never stops drawing people to Himself, and what better place to bring them than to Christ's body, the church? For here they will find love, hope, purpose, and a spiritual family of brothers and sisters.

Sadly, many Christians are completely oblivious to what their heavenly Father is doing all around them. They are so caught up in their own plans and activities that they have developed spiritual blinders on their eyes. Their hearts are barricaded to what the Spirit may want to do through them. Their minds are closed to any new or creative opportunities to reach the community or minister to Christ's body, the church.

What am I talking about?

- Have you ever seen the director of an Easter musical intimidate and alienate everyone he was working with in order to make the program perfect for the visitors? I have.
- Have you ever worked with a praise team leader who was so arrogant and demanding that she made her musicians cry during rehearsals? I have.
- Have you ever seen the decorations director return to the church after the volunteers had left and "fix" all the things that were not done as well as she could have done them? I have.
- Have you ever seen the food coordinator set someone's pumpkin pie aside at the Thanksgiving dinner because it did not look as pretty as the other pies on the dessert table? I have.
- Do you know a family that was left off the email invitation for the home group party because they didn't quite "fit in" with the other couples? I do.

It is too easy to be so caught up in programs, ministries, projects, and productions that we forget about the very people God called us to serve. No wonder there are so many disgruntled and dissatisfied Christians wandering from church to church to church looking for a spiritual family who will simply love them. Some churches seem to have every conceivable program and ministry—they look so exciting and purposeful on the outside—but lack the one main ingredient that should permeate everything they do: love.

Let me share what happened to an acquaintance of mine, which poignantly sums up what I'm saying. During the worship service my friend felt overwhelmed because of the life issues he was facing and he began to sob where he sat. He needed someone to care, to encourage Him that God would help him through his situation. Many people, including one of the pastors, noticed him weeping. Yet not one person came beside him to pray with him or gently put an arm on his shoulder. He left that day feeling embarrassed and humiliated and since that day has not gone back to his church. Had one person put an arm around him, cried with him, prayed with him, spoke words of support to him, or simply quietly stood next to him, he would have been encouraged and strengthened in his faith and felt loved by his church. But no one did.

## **Building Barriers to Love**

Before I go on, I'd like to address some excuses I've heard to justify what I consider unloving behavior in the church.

- “*We demand excellence in all we do,*” church leaders cry as if it were a Scripture verse. The problem is that “excellence” is often defined by the standards of those demanding it, not by God. God requires holiness and perfection, but not excellence in this sense. “Excellence” leaves the 99 percent of the people who cannot match up in the dust, while those setting the

standard for what excellence is are the only ones who can attain it. Wouldn't you rather be known for your overwhelming and unflinching love for one another than for excellence? The truth is, this kind of excellence does not impress God, but seeks to impress the people who come to church, most of whom can never meet the criterion themselves.

- *“Out with the old and in with the new”* is the war cry of many worship leaders today. I watch as older members struggle to keep up with the words and learn the new rhythms, wondering if they will ever hear a familiar song again. Don't get me wrong; I am the first one to jump in and play the drum set if the drummer doesn't show up, but there has to be a way to honor every person in the family, not simply discard those who can't keep up. Gearing worship services to attract outsiders while the insiders feel abandoned is unloving. Love won't allow people to be left behind.
- *“Youth need separate buildings, separate discipling, separate worship,”* say the youth pastors, while homes are disintegrating and families are breaking up all over the church. Some families are out every night of the week, and in some cases it's the church that's to blame! Designing programs that divide and separate rather than unify and integrate is unproductive in the long run. Love makes every effort to bring people together rather than isolating them or pulling them apart from one another. There are plenty of ways to make teenagers and children feel special, but always isolating them from the body is unwise.
- *“Evangelism, missions, outreach are the top priority,”* some say. We can set great goals for starting

new congregations and missions ventures, but we better be sure the existing ones are not quietly dying due to neglect and lack of nurturing. While evangelism and outreach are certainly incredibly important to the life and future of a church, I have to wonder where we are going to bring the lost once they are saved? I hope we are bringing them back to a loving church family who will nurture, disciple, and minister to them as brothers and sisters in Christ. If not, they won't stay long despite our best efforts. They will eventually be attracted to a more loving, caring congregation where they can thrive and serve and grow.

## Where We're Headed

*Above all, continue to love each other deeply, because love covers a multitude of sins. Show hospitality to one another without complaining. As good managers of God's grace in its various forms, serve one another with the gift each of you has received.*

—1 Peter 4:8–10 (ISV)

I don't want to dwell on the negative, but we seriously have to face the truth. And I know that there's hope for us as the people of God. I have seen a church member buy and repair a used car at his own expense and give it to a family in need with no strings attached. I know a church family that gave their Christmas money to missions rather than spending it on one another. There are thousands of churches who organize missions trips each year at their own expense to share the gospel with strangers in other countries or to do work projects for churches in impoverished areas locally or overseas. My father used to say quite often, "God's people are the best people in the



world!” and I know why. I have spent time with God’s people in many countries and found them caring, loving, generous, kind, and servant-hearted.

In the coming chapters we will look at the character of God as He expressed Himself through love to His people. Then we’ll learn how He commands us to do the same. We will see the difference between churches that understand the necessity of loving one another and those churches that have allowed other things to replace love in their midst. We are also going to look at what Christ expects of His people if they truly want to follow Him as His church. And we want to look at some prescriptions for what to do in a church that has lost its love. My ultimate goal in this book is to encourage God’s people to look at love in a fresh way, as Christ intended us to view it, so that the world around us will be able to truly see the real meaning of love and be drawn to Christ through us.

*Therefore if there is any consolation in Christ, if any comfort of love, if any fellowship of the Spirit, if any affection and mercy, fulfill my joy by being like-minded, having the same love, being of one accord, of one mind. Let nothing be done through selfish ambition or conceit, but in lowliness of mind let each esteem others better than himself. Let each of you look out not only for his own interests, but also for the interests of others.*

—Philippians 2:1–4

To frame my perspective, I would like to propose the following recommendations to bring love back into our churches. You will find these elements incorporated throughout the book.

---

## Simple Steps to Revive Love in the Church

**STUDY CHRIST.** If you want to know how to act as a person and as a church, go back and study the life of Christ and notice how He treated those whom God put in His pathway. Let Christ be your example of what practical and sacrificial love looks like and commit to imitating Him. Notice how he cared for the rich, the adulterer, the widows, the children, the religious leaders, and even those who crucified Him, and then do the same.

**STUDY THE FIRST CHURCHES.** The first churches were great examples of what love can look like among God's people. Unfortunately, we are more likely to compare ourselves to the church down the street than to the churches in the New Testament. Take time to notice Paul's exhortations to the churches he planted, and the way the church in Jerusalem began with prayer, fellowship, taking care of each other's needs, and true worship.

**RESIST BLAMING AND JUDGING PEOPLE.** Blaming and judging are passive behaviors that ask nothing of you except your opinion. Struggling people need more than your opinion, they need your involvement. Rather than expecting people to "just get more involved," or encouraging them to "just try to fit in," ask yourself what *you* should be doing personally to show other people the love of God whether they "deserve" it or not.

**LOVE AS YOU WANT TO BE LOVED.** Christ said we are to love others as we love ourselves. Would you like someone to drop off a meal to your home for your family when you are sick? Do that for others. Would you like someone to pray with you when you lose a loved one? Do that with someone else. Would you like someone to

stop by your home to encourage you when you are lonely or depressed? Then do that for someone else. If you ever wonder if you should do something or get involved, the answer is a resounding yes! Better to do something, even if it may not seem needed, than to do nothing and miss a chance to be a tremendous blessing to someone in need. If you decide *not* to get involved because you “don’t want to impose,” then you have chosen to be unloving towards that person.

**PRAY.** Ask God what is on His heart for His people to do to show love to others. When you pray and seek the Lord, He will open your eyes and guide you with His Spirit to move you to action. Do not pray this prayer if you are not planning to be obedient to what He shows you. This would be grieving the Holy Spirit, and that is unwise. Pray also for others in need, especially if you are not personally able to do anything else to help them. That is an act of love.

**JUST ASK.** The only way you are ever going to know how to love people you don’t know is to get to know them! Interview, or maybe even take to lunch, people in your church or community when you are unclear as to how to love them or help them in practical ways. Ask them what they need most. Make plans to help in the best ways you are able.

**SURVEY YOUR CONGREGATION.** Find out just how many people are present who are divorced, single parents, who have mental illnesses, who are fatherless, etc., and let God guide you to begin taking positive steps to help you love them in a practical and meaningful way.

**LOOK OVER THE FENCE.** See what other churches do to show love to various groups within their congregations.

Many churches are doing great things to minister and care for various groups of people in their community. There are great ministries to special-needs children, single moms, the divorced, the homeless, etc., that can be modified and incorporated into your own church ministry portfolio.

**EQUIP PEOPLE TO LOVE.** Many people use the excuse that they just don't know what to do. You can overcome this excuse by finding an individual or organization to offer training that sensitizes those in your church to the needs of others and equips them to do something about it. When you start to look for people to love, you will find them everywhere! Training opens people's eyes and gives them the skills and confidence to do something practical for those in need.

**REPENT.** If you realize after reading this book that your church has been withholding love from those God has been sending you, ask Him for forgiveness. Ask forgiveness from those who left your church because they felt unloved.

**SHOW HOSPITALITY.** Let your own home be a place where people experience the love of God without any pretensions, expectations, or strings attached. This will have a tremendous impact on your family and inspire them to notice those around them more often.

**DO SOMETHING PRACTICAL.** Doing something, anything, is *always* better than doing nothing at all! Anything you can do to show kindness and love to others is well worth doing.

---