

Maintaining Spiritual Passion

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BIBLE STUDY II COR. 5:11-15

THE LOVE OF CHRIST THE SOURCE OF SPIRITUAL PASSION, II COR. 5:14.

Assuming that love is the source of our passion, we may think that our passion comes from our love of our work or our love of Christ. Indeed to have no love for Christ is a serious state to be in (I Cor. 16:22). Should we have drifted into a barren state of doing ministry then it will show in our parroting the gospel and from finding our treasure in another source.

However, all love is of God and we will love because we trust the God who first loved us, (I John 4:7; 19).

Paul's passion was maintained by the conviction of Christ's love for him in the midst of demanding work, persecutions, shipwreck, rejection by people in congregations whom he founded and the mounting awareness of his mortality, (II Cor. 1:8-9; 4:13).

I do not think that Christian ministry has ever been one of extended peace. In other words, I don't think we can talk of the good old day. Nevertheless, at the present time we seem to be living in an era where we are reaping a harvest sown by the shame and unbelief of the Church, and living in a culture that is disillusioned and closed to our minimal advances. How will we persevere with the setbacks we face? Will we find retirement more and more attractive? Alternatively, will we simply fall off the precipice on which we all work?

Pietism has a history of whipping up believers to be more dedicated, emptying our lives of self, and engaging in the practices of making gains in perfection and progress. As good as this may seem be in practice the endeavours are thrown back upon ourselves, which can lead to religious ambition, adrenaline addiction and subsequent depression.

It is possible to react to the suffocation of pietism by a reductionism that reduces the principles of faith, human behaviour and church management into a pragmatic form of religious industry. My point is not to obscure the practical demands of the gospel but if we put the ministry of the Church in the place of Christ, we are again thrown back upon ourselves in a form of humanism, which becomes a form of the Latin Heresy of the 16th century. Jacques Ellul has said that technical advancement does solve some difficulties and problems, but a widespread conviction has developed that everything is ultimately a technical problem. However, the problems that techniques raise are much bigger and harder at every stage than those they solve, (J. Ellul *The Technological Bluff*, Eerdmans, 1990, pp. 48f).

“The love of Christ urges us on”, says Paul. The language means that Christ's love interrupts us, constraining us to come out of ourselves in order to come to ourselves. In an elementary way, we can become a new and different person who will love God and other persons for their own sake. Unlike the powers of a totalitarian being, love arrests us to serve freely with joy. This is the source of our passion and hilarious giving.

THE MYSTERY OF LOVE

Eberhard Jüngel says that in love God and a man or a woman share a mystery, (E. Jüngel *What Does It Mean To Say God Is Love? Christ in Our Place*, Paternoster, 1989, pp. 294-312). This is sharing in the one and the same mystery. Only in this mystery will we know what the love of Christ is. We must speak of a *mystery* when we begin to speak of God and of love. Love is one of the most abused and polluted words in our language therefore only Godself can communicate the love that God is.

We always have to speak of mystery when a person opens himself or herself up from the inside out. To penetrate into a mystery from the outside with force would be a form of abuse and will prevent us knowing the other.

There is a difference between a mystery and a riddle. Once we have the solution to a riddle we have de-riddled it and can master it. When a mystery is opened to us, it not only becomes an experience but also a knowing that continues to remain a mystery. Whoever understands a mystery will discover that there is always more to know. We know from human relationships that the more two lovers understand each other the more mysterious and interesting they find each other. When the lovers do not find each other mysterious any longer, then there is no longer any love between them.

The mystery of God's love is opened to us for us to enter. To enter we must surrender to the mystery of God's love. God receives human beings into communion with himself. This is eternal life, (John 17:3). This love arrests and grips the apostle leaving him no alternative but to speak of Christ. Here is passion indeed.

WHAT LOVE IS THIS?

The message of the New Testament is the good news of Jesus making known to us the mystery of God's love, (Matt. 11:25-30; John 1:14-18 etc.). The conviction of Christ's love is bound to the manner and purpose of his dying, II Cor. 5:15. All the NT writers, for their diversity, are one in saying that Christ's love is focussed and concentrated in his death. For them the inconceivably great thing is that Christ's death is for us and for our advantage.

In God's loving action, God identified with us, by becoming one of us in our humanity, a great humanity but a flawed, sick humanity, which is alienated from God and itself. In his oneness with the race, Jesus was not ashamed to call us his brothers and sisters, (Matt. 3:13-17; Heb. 2:10-18). In solidarity with us, Jesus put our interests before his own and counted us as better than himself, thus revealing the self giving of God, (Phil. 2:3-8). Jesus gives himself to us and for us, holding nothing back or in reserve. It is total love, (Rom. 8:32). Jesus becomes what we are in order that we might become what he is in his death. By the love of Christ we are reconciled to God, (II Cor. 5:15, 19, 21).

Our passion is maintained as we return to the love of God, which urges us on. Because we live in Christ's love, we will choose to come out of our carcinogenic lifestyle and practice living for Christ, counting others better than ourselves. To maintain our passion we will order our lives to keep ourselves in the love of God. We will listen to God in scripture, by the witness of others and in the leading of the Spirit. Love gives us energy to prepare for service, not being afraid to fail, we will engage in new enterprises.