

Charity and Its Fruits

by Ian Hamilton

Three addresses on Jonathan Edwards' exposition of I Corinthians 13 given at the November **2003 Reformation and Revival Conference** by Ian Hamilton of Cambridge Presbyterian Church:

(1) Jonathan Edwards was a stratospheric Christian but he was pre-eminently a pastor and paramount in all his concerns for his congregation was to impress upon them that love was the greatest thing of all. All the virtues worth having are summed up in Christian love. Heresy of the heart is as destructive a force in the church as heresy of the head. With that conviction Edwards preached his 13 sermons on "Charity and its Fruits" (Banner of Truth). All the spiritual gifts, the permanent and the foundational, could not compensate one iota for the absence of love in the heart. Faith works by love. All our works come from love. Grasp love and you have everything. Without it you have nothing. The church desperately needs love. The Lord says to the church in Ephesus, "You have left the love you had at the first."

Edwards begins by telling us that love is the right Christian spirit. In Luke 9 we discover that the Samaritans rejected Jesus and the disciples wanted to destroy it with fire. Jesus tells them that they lack the spirit that characterises the Christian disposition and the nature of the kingdom of God. Love is the principal thing. Love is the light and glory around the throne on which God is seated. Do people make that deduction from us when they come into our own churches? As they sit in our churches and hear our ministries do they think, "What a spirit of love marks the life of these congregations!"

Edwards goes on to say that love tests our experiences. Christians do not rejoice in themselves but in God who is their exceeding joy. The presence of love in our hearts tests our experiences.

Love shows the amiableness of the Christian spirit - how winsome and kindly and good-tempered it is - sweet-tempered and kindly. Augustine tells us what first pierced his thought as he looked back was that kindness to him of the preacher Ambrose. Kindness has pierced and convicted more sinners than learning and eloquence.

Love shows the pleasantness of the Christian life - how sweet it is. It is easier to complain and criticise than to support. When a constant critic of a minister came to him with yet another grumble he replied to him, "Has it never struck you that I would listen to your complaints rather differently if it came out of a life that was more supportive and encouraging?" When the love of God is present in our souls then the Spirit of Christ creates love.

The absence of love promotes contentions. Surely there is little doubt that the reformed faith has as much to do with a Christ-like spirit as any of the five points. We cannot be humble enough to be grieving over our divisions and disruptions. We are often too proud about our dissensions. The absence of love provokes too many of them.

What a watch and guard should Christians take over bitterness and anything that hinders the love of men. An envious, malicious, cold and hard-hearted Christian is the greatest of all contradictions. It is like 'dark brightness' or 'false truth.' A loveless Christian is no Christian at all.

It is no wonder that Christianity requires us to love our enemies. In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus speaks of those who love those who love them. No! "Love your enemies," he exhorts them, for love is the sum of Christianity. We are required to do good to such people. We are to reflect the love of our Father in heaven. Our Saviour died for his enemies and experienced abandonment of God by for them.

We are to seek more and more of love. If your heart is full of love it will find vent. Are all your activities done in love to God and man? We are only resounding gongs and clanging cymbals without love. I could move mountains by my faith, and yet be without love. Then the mountain moving man is nothing. Do I really believe that? What would a church choose when confronted with mighty earth-moving faith or love? If I have not love then I'm nothing.

So without this love, or amiableness, or the outgoing of our souls to God, all the reformation and revival in the world is as nothing. How quickly all the awakenings in history run to seed. Within seven years of the Great Awakening Jonathan Edwards was dismissed by his congregation. That is not unusual. In all our pleadings we need to impress on the hearts of our own people that everything that does not result in palpable love to God is worthless. We exhibit so little love because we feel so little. Love will give vent, says Edwards.

Whenever God blesses a little then men will exaggerate, and even that is a deception, for what our father looks for is that we are growing in the grace of our Lord Jesus, and all else is empty. When we see the ruins of empty or converted church buildings we tend to say, "There lies the wreckage of liberalism," but shouldn't we be saying, "There is the absence of love"?

(2) I think my great need as a Christian is to grasp the basics of God's revelation. Failures come because we don't understand basics. If, for example, you don't understand the biblical meaning of justification your lives would be preserved from so much nonsense that surges through evangelical churches. Love is the sum and substance of Christianity. We know and believe this, and yet how little do we know the grace and power of love in our lives.

When Christ was addressing the church at Ephesus in the book of Revelation he was also speaking to the church in all ages. Ephesus was a spiritual church established under the ministry of Paul and Timothy, a congregation that had known great blessings. "I know your deeds and hard work and your hostility to evil men," said the Lord "You have persevered for my name and grown weary." So the church worked hard for God. Ephesus would be the talk of the Reformed churches today.

Nevertheless, said the Lord to them, "I hold this against you, you have forsaken the love you had at the first." It was not enough to believe the right things. Paul had warned them that amongst

themselves some people would arise, distort the truth and lead them astray. Purity of doctrine is not the great end in itself, but love from a pure heart and a sincere faith.

In I Corinthians 13 Paul exults in Christian love. The NT church lived uniquely at a time of miraculous gifts. They knew what Paul was referring to when he spoke of tongues of men and angels, yet the ordinary influence of the Spirit of God working love in the heart was of more importance to the apostle than all the spiritual gifts. Salvation is promised to those who have the graces of the Spirit not the gifts. The great privileges God bestowed upon the apostle Paul or the virgin Mary are as nothing compared with the privilege of having Christ in your heart and a loving disposition. There are times when people say kind things about our public ministry - 'great performances!' - but without love in the heart those performances are nothing. Men can also manifest great sufferings for their religious convictions, but without love in the heart those men are also nothings.

Deductions.

1. It is not the accomplishment of external works which in themselves are worth anything in the sight of God. The Lord is in need of nothing. But the Lord is the lover of our souls, and Love looks for love.

2. We can elevate ourselves and think of ourselves as better than others on a host of issues. But it is absurd to think anything can make up for the absence of love. We are simply building up another debt.

3. If we have a great show of respect, then that is hypocrisy in the absence of love. All this preaching on love by Edwards searches our hearts. A cup of cold water given in the name of love is worth more in God's sight than a kingdom given away without love. Edwards is not emphasising sincerity as being supreme. "All these years I have slaved for you," said the older brother to the father of the prodigal. But where was the integrity, and the purity? The true part which love had in our sincerity will be acknowledged.

So as love is absolutely necessary let it be the one great thing that you aim for, though we are not to rest in any evidences of love. We end where we began in Revelation 2, that the Lord has something against us, that we have left our first love. I fear that sometimes we have lost the plot - if a church like Ephesus lost the plot then surely we can. Because love is the rule which governs our actions God will approve of nothing that lacks love, no matter how magnificent men judge the gifts or the faith to be.

(3) It was said of Richard Sibbes that heaven was in him before he was in heaven. What was said of him could equally be said of Jonathan Edwards. His natural environment was to declare the excellencies of the love of God in Jesus Christ. Edwards took no delight in the death of sinners but in their conversion. The natural air he breathed was of God's free love in Jesus Christ. The climax of his exposition on I Corinthians 13 is on the eternal state being in a world of love, and Edwards produces a certain doctrine from the text with application and uses. Heaven is a world of love, he says. What Edwards seeks to impress upon us is that if this is the eternal ordained state of the church, to be in a world of love, then what else should we aspire to now?

Are our churches sufficiently preparing ourselves for that world of love? The more heavenly minded we are the more useful we are on earth. We may not speak with the tongues of men and angels and have great gifts, but if we exhibit the family likeness God can use those lives for his glory. The cause and fountain of love in heaven is Jesus Christ. The Spirit is the Spirit of divine love and by his influence all holy love is shed abroad on our hearts. Each member of the Trinity contributes to that love in heaven. Their love to one another overflows to all the inhabitants of heaven, and so all in heaven are lovely.

The ultimate trajectory of regeneration is to consume us in the glory of the divine love, absolute conformity to the image of God. The world is to know that God has sent his Son by our love for one another. Can there be a credible Christian profession if there is no love? How do we look at our own congregations? Is it that love is their heart beat? Love will give them an evangelistic power. You love and so you go on, and you serve, and you speak. Love does not make you self-indulgent, simpering at one another, but rather it sends you into the world. That love will lay down your life for the brethren. In heaven there will be no envy, nor malice, nor selfishness.

When we've read the last sermon of Jonathan Edwards we turn to the words of Paul in Philippians 2 and the call to let the mind that was in the incarnate Servant King to also be in us. Christ's mind bent and stooped and became nothing that we might have all things.

Edwards is not simply whetting our appetite for heaven. He is saying that if this is our goal - if heaven be such a world as we describe - then strife in a church darkens our evidence for that glorious destination being ours. What a challenge that is to all of us. How do we judge ourselves as Christians? We should deplore sectarianism, and divisiveness. We are not saved by believing in great doctrines but believing in the Saviour, his blood and righteousness. It is natural for a wolf to worry a lamb, but when a lamb worries another lamb then it is a monstrous business. We treat the Father's children as his very children, and Christ's brothers and sisters as his very brothers and sisters. The fundamental marks have to be gospel distinctives.

Unmortified self is the biggest hindrance to blessing in God's churches. The Holy Spirit brings the holy grace of love, and puts to death what is sinful in us. The Spirit helps us to mortify sin. He does not come and say that he is the one who is going to do it for us, but rather who says, "Let us do it together."

Edwards also applies this truth to unbelievers with solemn warnings and exhortations. Edwards concludes with a couple of applications:

1] If heaven is such a world of love as has been described then we who are least of love we are least of heaven and are furthest from it.

2] Let the consideration of heaven stir us all up to seek it:

i] Let not your heart go off after the things of the earth as your chief good.

ii] You must talk with the Godhead and heavenly objects and the God of love who dwells there

iii] Be content to pass through all difficulties as you go there.

iv] In all your way let your eye be fixed on Jesus. That is the Christian life.

v] If you would be in the way to the world of love see to it that you live a life of love, that you have in union with Christ, that Servant spirit which he displayed.

Revivals are often followed by spiritual declensions. Within a few years Edwards was dismissed. He bore it remarkably well. The grace of the Lord was in him. Love is the greatest thing, the sum of Christian virtues. We know we have passed from death to life because we love the brethren. Please God may it be said of us, See how they love one another.

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