

# Love is a Three-Legged Stool

## Introduction

We talk a great deal about love. We sing about it, admire its wonder and extol its virtues. When we are asked the obvious question, “What is love?” we can point to Jesus, His life and His teaching, and give a perfectly accurate response: “That is love.”

But we still struggle with love. We struggle to live in a loving way: we are weak, distracted and sinful; all too often there is an obvious lack of love in the way we behave. And we don't only fail to love: in the confused messes we create and get drawn into, we often fail to agree on what love might look like.

There is no easy way to know exactly we ought to do in every situation, but I would like to offer a simple model as a starting point for exploring the questions and challenges we face. I would like to suggest that love, Biblical love, is like a three-legged stool.

## Love

God is love. If we want to understand God, we have to understand love; if we want to know God we have to know love. And God's love is universal: He loves all His children, and we are all His children.

- **Love is the only absolute.** True love has to be understood and it has to be lived. It must never be compromised, never set aside for some higher purpose because *there is no higher purpose*. You can only have one top priority, and this is it.
- **Love is a relationship,** not an abstract principle. True love is always incarnated: it is lived out in the messy reality of human life with all its hopes and fears, joy and sorrows, pleasure and pain.
- **Love is a commitment,** not a feeling, although it often comes with deep feelings. True love is an unconditional commitment to act in the other person's best interests. It is precious because it is costly.

But we cannot leave it there. True love is like a stool which stands on three legs: truth, justice and freedom. You cannot understand the nature of Biblical love without these three essential foundations. They enable us to live in a loving way, to be stable even when the ground under our feet is rough.

## Truth

Popular wisdom describes romantic love as blind – blind to the faults of the beloved, and blind to the consequences of pursuing love. But the love we see in Jesus is never blind: He does not love us because He refuses to see our faults; He sees all our faults perfectly clearly and loves us anyway because he loves us exactly as we are.

True love has to be clear-sighted, grounded in reality, because the only way to love someone is to love the person they are. Without this, you do not love the person, you love a fantasy. And a relationship based on fantasy is doomed, because in the long run, nobody can live up to the fantasy you create.

True love has to be grounded in honesty. If you know I am not being honest with you, what sort of relationship can we have? Of course, we never fully know another person. True love is not conditional upon me knowing everything about you, but it does require me to seek to know who you truly are, and to aim for you to know who I truly am, with all my weaknesses and failings. The Jesus sort of love has to be grounded in truth, reality and honesty.

## Justice

In books and films, love is sometimes presented as a form of madness which can drive people to do do dreadful things for the sake of love. In the classic love story, Romeo and Juliet each commit suicide rather than live apart. But the love we see in Jesus will only drive us to do good, never to do harm – to ourselves or to others.

Biblical love requires me to act in your best interests, to behave towards you in an ethical way. I want you to be happy and healthy, to be well fed and safe, to be content and fulfilled – but I also want the best for you in a moral sense. And because I am called to love not only you, but everyone else as well, then this morality must be lived out in community, and individual morality must be expressed in social justice.

The love we see in Jesus does not do good to one person at the expense of harming others, even if they are distant and unknown. God loves me, but He also loves the poor and excluded; if I love Him in return, I must do the same. Loving one person is not an excuse to be uncaring towards others.

## Freedom

One of the things we sometimes do in the name of love is to seek to control the loved one. It may be to keep them close; it may be to protect them from harm – we have many excuses. But God loves us so much He desires that we should be free.

True love does not seek to manipulate or control the beloved. If I love you, I can express my love towards you, but you have to be free to accept or reject my love. You cannot be forced or tricked into loving someone. If I really love you, then I want you to be free and strong and empowered. And if that means you have the freedom and power to walk away from me, then that is part of the price of love. It is the way God loves us, and it is the way we are called to love one another.

## A Three-Legged Stool

We tell people that ‘love is the answer’, but most of the love we see and hear about will not answer the problems and resolve the conflicts we see around us. Only one kind of love is capable of meeting the deep challenges we face, without and within.

In a relationship of Biblical love, we commit ourselves to an unconditional love towards each other and all people; this love is seen as we seek truth, justice and freedom for ourselves, for the beloved and for all people.

The only absolute is love. We seek truth, justice and freedom as far as we can: they are vital, but they are not absolute – we pursue them only so far as they are compatible with love. What is really in the best interests of the people concerned?

True love is not easy. Sometimes the truth hurts, morality is costly and freedom scares us; but love acts in our long-term best interests, even at the cost of our short-term comfort.

On the other hand, we must never use truth, justice or freedom as an excuse to act in an unloving way. Only love is absolute, so truth, justice and freedom must be judged against the standard of love when we seek to apply them.

The truth can hurt, and very often the loving thing to do is to speak the truth in love. But this healthy guidance can easily be abused: we say something hurtful, and justify our action because it’s the truth; we say something cruel and then add, “I’m telling you this in love, of course,” so that they can’t complain. But you don’t have to say it, just because it is true.

Because I love my children, and loved them as they were growing up, it was my desire that I should never lie to them, but I sought to tell them as much of the truth as they could understand and cope with. They were growing up in a world of war and genocide, political torture and governments murdering their own people, but when and how children are exposed to such realities is a question of judgement – and that judgement needs to be based on the key question: not ‘is it true?’ but ‘is it loving?’

Each one of us probably has issues of social justice we care about. But every now and then, as we campaign to battle poverty, sexism, racism, or whatever good cause it may be, we inevitably come across cases where implementing the principle we are campaigning for is wrong and unloving: maybe it will harm someone – maybe even someone the campaign is seeking to help. It takes real courage to say: the principle is right, the campaign is good, but in this particular situation something else is more important.

Freedom, too, can be used as a tool to justify selfishness. One partner walks out of a relationship, and explains, “I have to leave you: I have to be free; I have to be true to myself, and our relationship was limiting me.” But all relationships limit us in some ways, while maybe opening up possibilities in other ways – we may commit ourselves to relationships because we need to; but we are right to commit ourselves, because love and not freedom is the one absolute.

Where there is conflict, love is the answer. Not the fluffy, cotton-wool ‘be nice to people’ kind of love, but the uncomfortable love we see in Jesus, doing the right thing

whether people like it or hate it. A conflict is changed when one party in the conflict chooses to act, not in their own interests but in the interests of the other party; and a conflict is transformed when both parties choose to act in the best interests of the other, offering truth, justice and freedom.

Love really is the answer: Biblical love, the costly sort of love we see in Jesus; through Jesus, it is the love we recognise in the God Who made us. This is the love which commits us unconditionally to seek the best interests of the other person and all people, grounding our understanding of what constitutes their best interests in the difficult but vital pursuit of truth, justice and freedom.

### *Next steps*

This was written by Paul Hazelden as a contribution to the *Strong Foundations* exploration. You are welcome to use it and distribute it how you like, but feedback would be appreciated.

- Is it helpful?
- Would you change anything?
- Would you like to talk about how we can learn from each other about how best to follow Jesus where we are?

You can contact me through the web form at mad-bristol or join the conversation on the *Strong Foundations* site.

- Web form: <http://mad-bristol.org.uk/contact/>
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Last updated: 17:15 on 8 April 2019, revision: 0.28  
Location: /home/paul/C/SF/main/SF\_Love\_Three\_Legged\_Stool.odt