

August 25, 2024
1 John 4:7-12
Conviction and Love
Michael Stanfield

Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love. God's love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins. Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us.



There have been a number of people in my family who, on again and off again, have been interested in genealogy. There are even several books that have been written that tell the stories of some of my ancestors. One of those concerns my grandfather's grandfather on my mother's side. That would make him my great-great grandfather.

As it turns out, he was not only a farmer, but he was also a church planter. How that came to be is rather unusual to say the least. As the story goes, one day he was out plowing a field far from home when his mule got rambunctious. While attempting to get it under control, the mule kicked him in the head, knocking him out cold and there he lay for almost two full days. He came close to death and, as a result, had some rather spectacular visions of the afterlife. He also heard a voice that commanded him to build a "primitive" church on the spot where he lay. So, for a while, he put farming aside and built a small one-room Primitive Baptist Church. It grew by word of mouth. In its hay day it boasted over a hundred members: not bad for a church planted out in the middle of nowhere.

As a result of that calling, all of my great-great grandfather's children along with his grandchildren, many of his great grandchildren (including my mother) and even great-great grandchildren (which includes a few of my cousins) began their faith journey as Primitive Baptists.

Primitive Baptists don't believe in formal education of any kind, and therefore have untrained, uneducated clergy, and no Sunday School. They are extremely fundamentalist. Taking a dim view of instrumental music, they sing a cappella in worship using hymnals with shaped notes. Although they believe in God's salvation by grace, they also believe in double-predestination – that is that damnation and salvation were meted out to all humans before they were born. There is therefore no real surety as to whether one lives under God's grace or God's damnation. It is a harsh, exacting religion that left my grandfather to sit out on his porch well into his 80's fretting

over the eternal state of his soul. But his convictions on the matter were absolute and non-negotiable.

It is ironic that, although he had no more than a third-grade education himself, my grandfather acted as the gatekeeper of religious orthodoxy in the family – even among those with much more education than he – which was pretty much everyone in the family.

Now, my own call into ministry, like my great-great grandfather's, involved a dream, the beginning of which had my *grandfather* handing me something very important on my journey towards God. I therefore felt it my duty, upon hearing the call to go into ministry at the tender of 21, knowing that story about my grandfather's grandfather, to do something that was completely out of character for me: speak to him about my call and seek his blessing.

Now you have to understand that I experienced my grandfather as a rather harsh and often angry man. As a child, I did not enjoy being around him all that much – especially not alone. He did mellowed somewhat with advanced age. But still, the prospect of a conversation with him alone at 21 was daunting at best.

I won't go into the full content of the dream I took as my call into ministry but in it, what my grandfather handed me represented a faith that had been handed down to me going back to my great-great grandfather and beyond. My guess is that if I had simply told my grandfather I felt the call into a denomination with a formally educated clergy, without any explanation of how that call came to be, he would have dismissed me.

But dreams and visions were taken seriously by him and having a powerful dream that involved him, I guessed, would make things different. I was right. It gave him pause. Rather than dismiss me, he engaged me in a lesson on the five main points of Calvinism. We talked at length for about an hour.



Now all during this time, my *grandmother* was also present. Here you see a photo of the two of them fishing on a farm pond. My grandmother was the polar opposite of my grandfather. I never saw her get angry. She was a woman whose whole life was lived in sacrificial love. Just staying married to my grandfather must have been a lesson in sacrifice all by itself. But it didn't stop there. She lived in complete service to others. On more than one occasion, I witnessed her practically giving the shirt off her back as she gave away clothing and other things she had barely used herself because she came into contact with someone she recognized as needing it more.

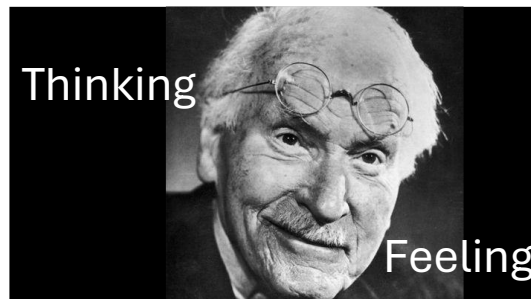
At any rate, when it felt like the conversation between my grandfather and I had gone about as far as it could, he turned to my grandmother and asked. "What do you think Lula?" What he

really meant was that he was feeling satisfied that indeed, I had received the call and was looking for confirmation from his wife. But my grandmother replied simply, “I think God is love and that it’s really all just about loving people like God loves people.”

I will never forget the lesson of that day. I left my grand-parent’s house having received a double blessing – confirmed in my call by the great patriarch of the family and given the best advice that could ever be given to a young minister of the gospel – that is, to remember that, in the end, it is really all about love.

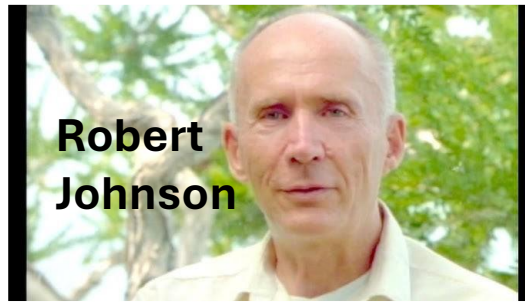


To this day, I am of the surest certainty that that call to love, as my grandmother had said, is indeed at the very center of the gospel. However, since that day so long ago, I have witnessed that when it comes to genuine expressions of faith, more Christians generally are like my *grandfather* than are like my *grandmother* – that is we generally have a much easier time sharing our theological convictions *about* Christ than we do our genuine love *for* Christ and for others – me included.



The great psychoanalyst, Carl Jung, discovered that all humans have access to two basic ways of making sense of the world: Feeling and Thinking – which are polar opposites. Thinking is represented by my grandfather’s approach. It attempts to use some objective means to arrive at a single “right” conclusion that is based on some absolute impersonal criteria.

Feeling is represented by my grandmother. It attempts to use subjective values to harmonize disparities in order to create more opportunities for more personal human connections – better environments for love to blossom. Both are important.



However, as Jungian writer Robert Johnson reminds us, here in the West, as in my grandparent's marriage, thinking is considered next to godliness whereas feeling is considered something that mostly just gets in the way. Writes Johnson:

“Of all the Western languages, English may be the most lacking when it comes to feeling. Imagine what richness would be expressed if one had a specific vocabulary for the love of father, another for the love of one's mother, yet another for one's camel (the Persians actually have this luxury!), still another for one's lover, another for the sunset! Our world would expand and gain clarity immeasurably if we had such tools.

“It is always the inferior function, whether in an individual or a culture, that suffers this poverty. One's greatest treasures are won by the superior function but always at the cost of the inferior function. One's greatest triumphs are accompanied by one's greatest weaknesses. Because thinking is our superior function in the English-speaking world (that is, the generally prevailing value or ideal, even if many individuals do not conform to this pattern), it follows automatically that feeling is our inferior function. These two faculties tend to exist at the expense of each other.

If one is strong in feeling, one is likely to be inferior in thinking – and vice versa. Our superior function (in the West) has given us our science and the highest standard of living the world had ever known – the envy of the third world – but at the cost of impoverishing the feeling function. This is demonstrated by our meager vocabulary for feeling words. If we had the expanded and exact vocabulary for feeling that we have for science and technology, we would be well on our way to warmth of relatedness and generosity of feeling.” Johnson, Robert, A., *The Fisher King and the Handless Maiden*, Harper Collins, pp 6-8.

... Warmth of relatedness and generosity of feeling...



Think about that for a moment. Why did you join Trinity Presbyterian church or why is it that you consistently worship here? I know what attracted me to this church: its warmth of relatedness and generosity of feeling. My last church was one whose theological convictions seemed *always* to trump warmth of relatedness and generosity of feeling. I was tired of all the energy that went into debating scripture while people both in that congregation and outside of it suffered. Here, feeling was, is, valued as much as thinking.



Feeling: It carries one towards a sense of embodied relatedness or intimacy with others.

**There is
objective
truth out there
and it is our
duty to find it.**

Thinking: It carries one towards an objective “truth” and rational interpretation of the faith;

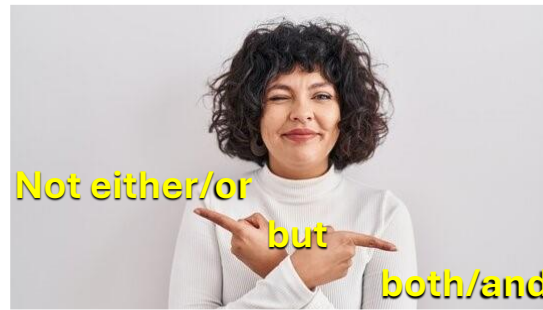
Thinking: objectively
delineates, creating
boundaries and limits.
Feeling: subjectively
harmonizes blurring
distinctions.

The thinking function uses what is assumed to be an *objective* ultimate theological principle to define the limits and boundaries of human activity.

The feeling function uses a *subjective* experience of God to try and demonstrate what is assumed to be the underlying harmony, *in Christ*, among all God’s children.

To simplify it, the thinking function *defines* as it moves toward meaning while the feeling function *blurs* distinctions as it moves towards the experience of heartfelt connections.

And it appears from Paul’s letters that the early church was having trouble finding a balance between these two functions. They either tended to err on the side of inferior thinking, thus becoming judgmental and callous towards one another, or they erred on the side of inferior feeling, tending toward sentimentality, licentiousness and conflict avoidance.



But Paul's point is that since God has revealed himself in Christ, something fantastic has happened; at once, we are shown the way humans were intended to live – not as either/or but as both/and – both holding on to our convictions *and* loving others with all we've got.

Jesus, in his life, death and resurrection showed us this way; and then when his Spirit was unleashed on the church, the book of Acts, in the 4th chapter, gives testimony as to what this way can look like:

“Now the whole group of all who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one claimed private ownership of any possessions, but

“Now the whole group of all who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one claimed private ownership of any possessions, but

everything they owned was held in common...
There was not a needy person among them, for as many as owned lands...

everything they owned was held in common. With great power the apostles gave their testimony to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and great grace was upon them all. There was not a needy person among them, for as many as owned lands or houses sold them

...and brought the proceeds of what was sold. They laid it at the apostle's feet and it was distributed to each as any had need.”(Acts 4:32-35)

and brought the proceeds of what was sold. They laid it at the apostle's feet, and it was distributed to each as any had need." (Acts 4:32-35).

I point this out because – *our* cultural context – Western and English speaking – has moved away from living out of a oneness in Christ.



At some point, about three or four hundred years ago, we decided to move inexorably towards either/or thinking. Either feeling or thinking, either unity or purity, either justice or mercy, either orthodoxy or inclusion.

Rather than accepting a God who is *both/and*, we have generally chosen to stress our either/or conclusions *about* God.



The result, which should be no surprise, is one that is, well, either/or. Either we lift up being right about the truth of God over our experience *of* God's love – often to the exclusion of real love shared and lived out in the world among the loveless, making Christ's words about love of neighbor and love of God hollow, **OR**

We allow a metastasized *ideal* of compassion ostensibly based in "inclusion of all" lead us to second-rate thinking – thinking that actually ends up excluding genuinely compassionate people who don't sufficiently tow the latest politically correct, compassionately correct, "inclusive" party line.

And it doesn't matter whether one is on the far liberal end of the church or the far conservative. The result can be the same – a whole lotta conviction based on "arrived at" meaning without a whole lotta genuine love, person to person.

Yet we are called to do both:

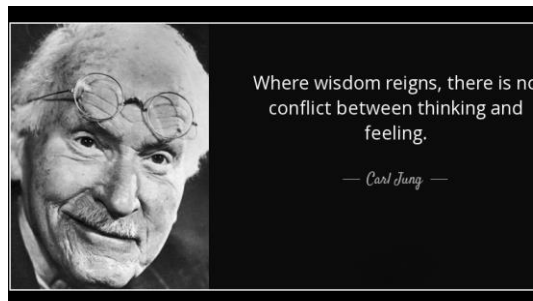
**Maintain our convictions
While
Remaining connected**

Maintain our convictions that are part of who we are, while choosing to Remain connected with a stance of loving presence – with an accent on the loving part. And what is a sure sign that we are acting out of love?

**How do we know we
are acting out of Love?
Use Paul’s words to
the church in Corinth
as our guide.**

Well Paul says that we are patient; we are kind; we are not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. Most of all, we do not insist on our own way; we are not irritable or resentful; we don’t rejoice in wrongdoing that proves us to be right. No, we rejoice only in the truth. When we are moving out of love, we are willing to bear all things, believe all things, hope all things, endure all things.

So, what are we to do – give up our arrived at convictions for the sake of love? By no means. A true test of genuine love is the ability to hold to one’s convictions while at the same time acting only out of what promotes love – love of God and love of neighbor.



In fact, Jung says, “Where *wisdom* reigns, there is no conflict between thinking and feeling.”



And what does this look like? It looks a lot like Martin Luther King Jr., Nelson Mandela, and Archbishop Desmond Tutu.

All three of these men had deep theological convictions that were non-negotiable. They were, thus, able courageously to speak truth to powers in society and the church, both of which were capable of wiping them out. As a result, all three were on again and off again vilified, and even imprisoned – Mandela for over 25 years. Yet these men never demonized their enemies even when they were also their oppressors or their captors. In fact, all of them ended up befriending and transforming many who at one time had been arch-enemies. How? They worked hard to marry their deep theological convictions with the genuine love of Christ and humanity.

They all held to their convictions – even under threat of death. Yet when it came to others, they chose to act out of their love for our Lord. In reality, I think that is what Paul finally decided to do with those insufferable former pagan Greeks to whom he was called as an Apostle. And I think it is what we are called as a church to do today.

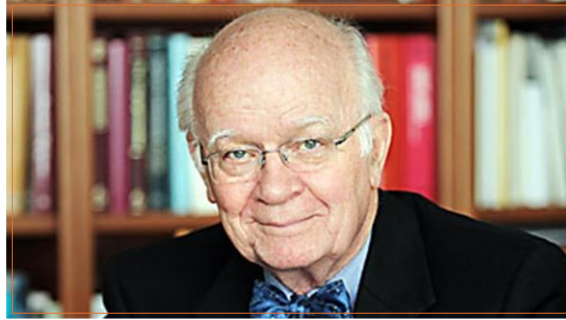
As we shine a light on the culture of which we are a part, everywhere we look, we see people who are full of convictions.



What we don't see near as much of is personal sacrifice, in the name of love, in order to remain connected to those who don't share those convictions.

In fact, what I see more and more is how small the disagreement actually has to be before it erupts, not just in mass rudeness, but in deathly violence. The world out there has become cynical and shrill and completely divided over their interpretations of what constitutes real human-beingness.

But as God's people, guess what? We are called to heal that. And it doesn't mean that we have to leave our convictions at the door.



Martin Marty is an American religious scholar who has written extensively on religion in the United States. He says that, “One of the real problems in our society is that people who are good at being kind often lack strong convictions; while people who have strong convictions often have trouble being kind.” Richard Mouw, *Uncommon Decency: Christian Civility in an Uncivil World*, (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1992), 12.

Holding on to both means sacrifice. When our convictions are strong, hanging in there with one whose convictions are very different is incredibly hard. But remember this: People do not care what you know until they really know that you care.



In other words, maybe the only conviction that really matters ultimately is what the apostle John and my grandmother taught me: God is love and to love as God loves, as she loved, is to sacrifice, at least a little bit, if not a lot, of your own life.

Let us pray: Gracious God, we thank you that you give us boldness to speak from our convictions. Give us also the humility to act out of your love for all your people. Amen.