Stupid Joke Time: “A man with a receding hair line is a ‘thinker.’ A man balding on the pate of his head is a ‘lover.’ A man balding in both places simultaneously ‘thinks he is a lover.’”

I’m at the stage that, while balding all over, I ask myself what does it mean for Christians to “love.”

The word itself has been nibbled down by secular society by those who apply it casually to everything from a Zha Zha Gabor milky “I love you, dahling,” to “I luv cookies” (maybe we ought to create a new word “luv” for inferior definitions of “love”), to the ugly devouring of the word as crude sexual act. Sadly, even in Christianity, “love” has been diminished and deconstructed until even the world is suspicious by our use of it.

It was Os Guinness in one of his early works who helped me reconstruct “love.” Admittedly, there is much material out there defining the Greek language’s rich variety of terms for love, including agape love, the spontaneous self-giving, disinterested love that emits from the nature of God himself. I understand somewhat what these terms mean. But it was Guinness who put character and content to “Godly love.”

He says that there are three components to love. They are: true understanding, outrage, and identification.

True Understanding: “Jesus did not trust himself to them because he knew all men and needed no one to bear witness of man; for he himself knew what was in man” (John. 2:24-25). He (along with perhaps dogs and children) understood human nature—that is, in theological jargon, “anthropology”—and so could realistically deal with people on their own terms.

Our modern humanistic world vacillates between two wrong anthropologies. According to one, we are indoctrinated that humans are basically good and that if something goes wrong, either the institutions around have corrupted the process or ignorance has set in because the institutions that should have informed or corrected have failed in their duty. This position Guinness calls “naiveté” and the world is intoxicated by this view. Ironically, it seems to me that the U.S. political parties have similarly been seduced. The one party fears the corrupting influence of institutions, especially the government. The other wishes to engage institutions and government to correct the “learning curve deficiency.” Yet both assume the inherent “good” nature of humans, to pick themselves up by their bootstraps, or to flower where fertilized.

Sadly, a lot of idealists in the practice of life eventually slide into the second alternative, “cynicism,” where everybody is corrupt except, perhaps, “me”: distrust is rampant and anybody who has different thoughts or ways of acting is evil. How often I have seen the idealism of young teachers and social workers dissipate under the realities of the profession until the professional opts out “to make some real money” or joins the bureaucracy to avoid hands-on involvement.

But Jesus’ alternative saw humans as they really were, made in the holy image of God, morally marred in Eden and carrying the legacy of their own corruption. But the image is not entirely transfixed by evil. It can be restored, purified, made new by the restorative powers of the cross and resurrection. The most evil of human beings can discover grace and become a saint. The most religious of people can ignore grace and slip into hell. This knowledge, known as the “realistic” perspective, gives hope where humanism burns out and gives caution where human adulation stretches too far.

John Wesley is quoted as saying that a Christian has “poise” with all people. I think that one finds no surprises in human nature. Each person is distinct. Each person is neither worm nor God but find his or her wholeness to the degree that he or she accepts or fends off grace. Love therefore starts with a correct view of human nature.

Outrage: Perhaps this is the most misunderstood and ignored part of Guinness’ trilogy. Christians are called to be angry. Yes, not angry for self-serving causes, but outraged at the same things that distress God himself—at the abuse and neglect of those less privileged than ourselves, at unjust and oppressive systems that set up calamity for millions of people before they ever get started in life.

God has bestowed on us the emotion of anger, so that it could be used under appropriate disciplined circumstances. We are angry at Satan who took the beautiful world that God had made and subverted it into death, disease, and despair. We are angry at those who voluntarily choose to be agents of the same, those intent on exploiting the minds and hearts of gullible, impressionable children to divert them into the horrors of life. We are angry at war, at drug trafficking, at media influence, at corporate evil, at self-serving politicians, and at those who abuse power. Yet we know that they themselves are victims of the great deceiver, Satan, who has ensnared them under his spell. We are also angry at a listless gospel
and a casual church that holds in its hand the pearl of great price with power and commission to liberate the world, but we
have exchanged it for the trinkets of comfort, accommodation, and convenience.

When Jesus stood before the tomb of Lazarus, he anguished not out of sentimentality, but out of anger that the world he
had created had been so subverted that grief and death seemed to be its end result. When he whipped out the
moneychangers in the temple, he was furious that the existing “church” had conveniently created marketing hoops through
which penitent seekers necessarily had to jump to find salvation.

We need a “divine love” that has a component of outrage to it to ensure that we follow through on our insights.

Identification: God made the greatest cross-cultural leap of history to identify with humans. The spotlessness of heaven
was exchanged for the grubbiness of earth. Love demanded an inside operation rather than an outside rescue. He puts on
his garb of servant, takes on human nature, walks in our streets, shares our pain, and dies in our place. That is
identification to the nth degree.

It is identification that protects us from rash behavior. Moses, for instance, had good insight into the nature of the
murdered Egyptian who killed the Israelite. His subsequent anger exploded in a gesture to right the wrong. But, his act
was counter-productive, resulting in harsher treatment of the Israelites.

It was not until he returned after a forty year “time-out” in the desert that he identified with the children of Israel rather than
with Pharaoh’s court, securing the legitimacy to lead God’s people to freedom. As he suffered with them, his message
took on vibrant credibility.

This kind of love has character, has continuity, and has creativity. It is holistic. It captures our mind, impassions our heart,
and instigates our feet into action and involvement. It is a love not only modeled by God himself—“love divine, all loves
excelling, joy of heaven to earth come down”—it is a love imparted to us by the operations of the Holy Spirit into our very
natures—“fix in us thy humble dwelling.”

William Barclay, the Scottish Presbyterian Bible commentator, lamented that all the confessions and creeds, even while
talking about the sovereignty, the omniscience, omnipotence of God, failed to identify as central the love of God. It was the
Wesleys of the 18th century that recast the gospel, identifying the “central rotunda” of God’s being as “love.” Love is the
essence of his nature out of which all the other attributes are halls of access that spike outward.

Hence, as Christians, we have optimal opportunity and obligation to discover God’s heart of love in its ventricular
components—true understanding, outrage, and identification to a hurting world that desperately needs all three.