

The Future of Christian Love

In Search of Living Water

Exploration Companion

Kathlyn Tipton, Psy.D.

Table of Contents

Exploration Introduction....	1
Premise....	2
General Process....	2
Accompaniment....	4
Groups....	5
Evaluation....	6
Reflection Before Reading....	7
Introduction, Premise, and Musings....	9
Reflection to Open Christian Love as God's Love....	13
What is Christian Love?....	17
Living Adapting Love....	21
The Cornerstone of God's Temple....	25
Forgive and Embrace....	29
Vision....	33
What is the Future of Christian Love?....	39
Reflection to Open Diversity and Adversity....	47
What are Disability and Adversity?....	49
Ethnic Diversity....	53
Socioeconomic Level....	57
Divergent Gender Identity and Sexual Orientation....	63
Disability....	67

Mental Illness....73
What Can We Do?....79
Appendix I: Exploratory Planning....89
Appendix II: Dedicated Planning....91
Appendix III: Evaluation....93

Excerpts of Text from the Introduction

Introduction

The Future of Christian Love book and this exploration companion are about the love in each of us, in our relationships and lives, in our faith, and throughout our world. It is about the direction we need to take as people of faith in attaining fruitful lives and making sure love and faith not only survive, but also live, grow, and thrive in the embrace and vibrancy intended by God and of God – the love that is God.

I did not write this book from the perspective of a formally educated, professional minister or theologian. Instead, I wrote it as someone who has lived, struggled, rolled my sleeves up, and gotten my hands dirty in the rank and file, for better and for worse, with great joy and tremendous pain. I also wrote it as someone who has been educated in the upper echelon about human development, learning, and behavior, and our social systems, and then worked on the ground level with the full spectrum of our humanity – and I still love what I do and all those I serve.

In writing this book, I am speaking as one who is in the choir rather than the one preaching to the choir. I truly hope that you can find some light, enrichment, vision, and direction in this presentation and exploration of love and call for action; then turn to your family, friends, and community, and run with it.

Disagreement and conflict with content, ideas, and messages in this book are inevitable, expected, and at least on my part, sought and welcomed. If everyone were to agree with messages calling for action and change, there would be no reason to send the messages. Aiming for agreement would only support complacency. When both presented and received effectively, disagreement should spur thoughtful reflection, discussion, debate, and the drive for discovery and resolution. In this there can be catalyst for action, change, and progress.

Complacency can only foster passivity and stagnation. As such, when you encounter disagreement or controversy, delve into it with an open heart and mind, explore it, talk about it, work it through, and see where you can go with it. You might find insight and enlightenment where there had only been assumption or unquestioned compliance, even if your beliefs and actions do not change. At the least, your beliefs, decisions, and actions may become more informed.

Premise

The premise and direction for this book are embedded in what I consider the foundation and framework of our faith, clearly stated in 1 John 4:16 (NIV), “God is love. Those who live in love live in God and God in them.” In my spirit, heart, and mind’s eye, that is all we need, when we live in love fully, with integrity, and in truth.

General Process

This companion provides a guide for in-depth exploration of *The Future of Christian Love* using an open-ended question and activity structure. As is, this companion is formatted for individual use, although it is readily adapted to group use as well (further guidelines are below). With either application, the time and effort required is completely up to those participating – their specific needs, direction, and goals in engaging in the process and completing the exploration.

Each individual and group will approach and respond to the exploration from a different environment, background, and perspective, with a wide spectrum of possibilities for process and outcomes. With this in mind, the exploration companion is presented in a semi-structured format with the understanding that each question and each activity is a suggestion rather than a requirement, and the expectation that each individual and group will tailor the exploration to meet their own needs and purpose.

The exploration format includes several components for each chapter, then concludes with the closing song provided at the end of each chapter in the book itself:

- An opening reflection
- Questions or an activity to set the stage for reading and assimilating the chapter
- Questions to explore after reading the chapter
- Thoughts and suggestions for moving forward

Several chapter explorations, scattered through the companion, end with developmental activities. These are intended to provide structure for improved synthesis and cohesion, and to foster deeper connections and applications.

Sample Chapter Explorations

Introduction, Premise, and Musings

Opening Reflection

In our human experience, we all experience times of joy as well as pain, harmony as well as conflict, prosperity as well as loss, comfort as well as hardship, error as well as accomplishment. We are all on journeys, and God never said our journeys would be easy, even when we follow Him. Each of us is on our own unique spiritual journey that did not begin with this life, nor will it end with this life. Only God knows our destinations and how or when we will get there.

When there is no beginning and no end, no start line and no finish line, there is no reference point for comparison or competition. We can neither win nor lose, race ahead nor fall behind, claim superiority nor pronounce inferiority. Neither can any of us fully see or understand the journey of any other. When we cannot understand, we also cannot judge. We can only know that we are all siblings in God's family, each and every one of us loved by God unconditionally.

In this life and world, we all journey side-by-side, and the greatest light, hope, strength, and peace of God's love is found when we all journey hand-in-hand. In that we truly become the body of Christ, and God's love is fulfilled. In my heart, this is all that matters. As stated in Romans 13:8-10, love fulfills all God's laws.

Exploration

Read the Bible verse at the head of this introductory section. Consider what this verse means to you.

- How do you feel as you absorb and reflect on this verse?
- What ideas and experiences come to mind?
- How can you relate it to your life, your relationships, and your community?
- What prayer comes to your heart as you reflect on this verse?

Start this section by just reading the first paragraph of the book's introduction.

- What is your reaction?
- When else have you encountered a message such as this?
- How did you react at the time?

Before reading the rest of the introduction

Consider the following:

- What do the concepts of "Christian love" and God's love mean to you?
- How do these two concepts compare or contrast in your experience of faith, family, church, and community?
- Where and when do you experience and witness shared love?
- How does your faith transform and guide your thinking, behavior, and life?
- How has your faith supported you and those you love in times of hardship, loss, or other struggles?
- Have your spiritual or religious beliefs and practices created conflict or confusion in your experiences of diversity or adversity, your own or others?

Read the introduction, writing down your reactions, thoughts, questions, concerns, or any emotions triggered by the discussion.

After reading the introduction:

Reflect upon and respond to the following:

- How do you believe God and spirit manifest in yourself, your relationships, life, and the world?
- What is the difference between love among family and friends, or between spouses or partners, and God's love?
- In your experience, how does love extend beyond close relationships and into your community and world?
- How does your real-life experience of love in your community and world compare to that which you believe God intends for His creation?
- How has the love you share with close family and friends, or in community with others, contributed to your wellbeing and life?
- When and under what circumstances have you felt love was lacking in your experience of self, relationship, or life?
- What role has the Bible played in your understanding of God, faith, love, and religion?
- How does your faith or religious teachings you have received influence your perceptions of and interactions with people who struggle with hardship, lifestyle problems, disabilities, maladaptive behavior or aggression, or disabilities?
- Have you ever been left confused or hurt by the religion-derived assertions, attitudes, or behavior toward you or loved ones?
- Has guilt arising from religious beliefs, your own or those of others, substantially influenced how you feel about yourself or perceive and interpret the behavior of others?
- What have been both the positive and negative influences and effects of religion-derived teachings, assertions, attitudes, or interactions you have witnessed among members of family, among your friends, or within your community?

Moving forward:

- Envision how your life, relationships, and community would change if all Christendom were to dispel factions, set aside rigid imposition of religious legalism, and join hands in mutual support and solidarity. How would your

church and community experience change if church became a fully inclusive oasis and bastion of overarching love?

- If the call and teachings from Jesus of unconditional love, inclusion, and embrace over dogmatic legalism, judgment, and exclusion became the standard for our self-concept, our relationships, and our participation in community, what would our world be like?
- If these do not form the framework for our vision and goals as Christians, does this mean our religion or faith is only for ourselves and those who conform to our expectations - those we deem compliant, acceptable, or worthy?
- Do such unity, unconditional love, inclusion, and embrace seem to be fanciful or impossible ideals, with active pursuit a waste of time, resources, and effort in their hopelessness?
- If we think these are fanciful and unattainable, yet they were the visions, call, and goals to which the ministry, life, and death of Jesus were dedicated, why do claim to have accepted His call and assert ourselves as His followers?
- What would it take to make such visions our reality? Write some ideas for taking action toward fulfilling this vision.

Development Activity

Carefully consider these experiences and reflections. Create visual imagery in your mind that represents your understanding of how the revitalizing and spread of overarching love in faith and in community would influence you, those you love, your neighbors and community, and your nation and world. Use a blank page, and write any words or phrases that accompany this imagery or come to mind, placing them randomly and spontaneously all over the page, without regard for order, lines, or orientation. Use colored pens or pencils if you like. Write your negative as well as positive thoughts, without mental editing. Once no more words or phrases come to mind, look at and take in the page as a whole. Pay attention to how you feel.

Read the lyrics, listen to, or sing, *Let There be Peace on Earth*. Contemplate on the message of this song however you are inspired by the words.

Chapter Seven

What are Diversity and Adversity?

Opening Reflection

There are three different concepts of freedom I hear proclaimed in our culture:

1. Popular definition – freedom to say whatever we want, do whatever we want, and have whatever we want. I think this was sadly echoed in a friend's statement that she does not like religion, especially Christianity, because it tries to take away her freedom.

I had to consider how misguided and distorted such an understanding of freedom really is, and how oppressive, crushing, dark, and despairing replacing God, spirit, and faith with materialism and hedonism as the driving forces in life becomes for all who are affected.

2. Patriotic definition – freedom from the chains of oppression; freedom from corrupt or self-serving governance that strips citizens of their human dignity or rights.
3. Spiritual definition (my interpretation) – freedom from the blinded confines of darkness through the light and vision of Christ as He fought to replace overbearing law with overarching love; freedom from the chains of despair through the hope and peace granted us by the love of God; freedom to grow and flourish in community, in spirit, and in God's love through personal, relational, and spiritual integrity, discipline, and communion.

According to my limited knowledge of world history, United States and Canada are the only nations in history that fought for independence to include a guiding principle of cultural and religious freedom as opposed to religious dominance. In building this nation our founding fathers set as cornerstones the value and standard of welcoming and embracing diverse cultures and ideologies in freedom, equality, and peace. This is something that has strengthened our country and enriched our society and culture tremendously, even though we still struggle with entrenched patterns of marginalization, discrimination, and oppression.

In establishing these values and expectations for ourselves and our communities we recognize, seek to embrace, and work to demonstrate and share the love, hope, and peace of Christ, setting aside all divisions, barriers, and hostility. We are to join hands with all those among and around us in community, justice, freedom, and peace.

As a republic, all people of this nation together own voice and power in driving public interests and forming governing policies, so it becomes all people's responsibility to speak out and demand true freedom and peace as a nation and in our influential presence in this world. It is also our responsibility to actively demonstrate, speak out, and demand what is right and needed for the true freedom and peace of any among us living with the chains of discrimination. It is especially imperative that we fulfill these responsibilities in support of people and groups who have been disparaged and stripped of their voices by those who then turn around and tout claims of freedom, justice, and equality.

Exploration

Read and contemplate upon the Bible verse that opens this chapter with care. There are assorted interpretations floating around Christendom. What does this mean to you in mind, life, heart, and spirit? What does God's grace mean in this verse? Carefully consider the concepts "strength," "perfect," and "in weakness," in this context.

The word "perfect" had a different meaning in Biblical times. It was not about perfection as we think of it. Linguistic research is associating this word with the concept of being functional, appropriate for use, useful, and other such terms that refer to achieving an standard of quality and function that allows it to fulfill its purpose. What was God saying to Paul? What does this mean for our lives in today's world?

Before reading the chapter:

Think back to your childhood and adolescence, or think of your own children as they grew. Maybe you lived in a large urban center, on the outskirts in a suburb, or in a small town. Maybe you lived in out a rural or agricultural region, and you had to drive or take the bus a good distance to get to a community or city center

for school, shopping, other services, and even church. You may have been a member of the majority culture or class in either a homogenous or diverse region, one of a minority group in a diverse community, or living in a homogenous enclave of an ethnic or social subculture. These and other variations in environments all come with highly variable social and lifestyle experiences.

- What types of diversity or forms of adversity did you experience among your friends, or those of your children?
- How did you (or your children) perceive, respond, and relate to diversity and adversity in your peer groups as you progressed through development and into adulthood?
- How were you different from your peers or the majority group in your community as you grew up, and how are you different from the majority now?
- Did others perceive or engage with you selectively or negatively because of your differences?
- If your experience of diversity among peers or within your community was limited or negligible, what were your perceptions and responses later in life when encountering higher levels of diversity?

After reading this chapter:

Think about:

- How have your own differences and diverse groups in your social experience impacted your social engagement, relationships, and lifestyle through your lifespan?
- Did your personal responses, the responses and engagement of your peers, your sense of openness and acceptance, or your experience of integration change over time?
- In any social experience and progression, what do you believe were the primary influences on your developing perceptions and social relatedness with diversity and adversity?
- How have those influences, through your developmental years and continuing, shaped your current perceptions, attitudes, responses, and sense of integration with diverse members of your community and those living with adversity?
- What from this reading resonates with you and your life?

- What is a conflict or struggle for you to understand, to recognize in your social experience or life, or to accept?
- What do you need for personal learning and growth in progressing toward embrace, value, and inclusion of people who are different or who struggle with adverse life conditions?
- What do you see as critical needs among your family and friends, in your church, and in your community to develop increased recognition, value, and inclusion of the diverse?

Moving forward:

Write down your ideas about what you can do to learn more about conditions and needs in your church and community, and to progress with the needs you consider most important.

Development Activity

Again, do not think you need to do anything with this letter or share it with anyone once you write it if you do not want to. Write a letter to your congregation, your colleagues or coworkers, a government representative or committee, or your child's school staff, for distribution in your community, or to any other relevant and meaningful public audience. Speak to a social situation, condition, or concern related to diversity or adversity that is meaningful to you, an important community or system need, and impactful in the lives of those affected. Write about your understanding of the situation and why it is occurring, why it is an important concern, and how you believe it might be addressed. Incorporate statements about how this situation affects you and those you love; how such diversity, disability, or disadvantage has been a part of your life or the lives of any loved ones; and any personal experiences or observations related to rejection or discrimination.

Sing, listen to, or read the lyrics for the traditional hymn, *Just as I Am*. Be sure to find a complete recording or set of lyrics (many of the recordings available online do not include all six stanzas).