

'Let love be genuine; [. . .] love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honour.' (vv. 9-10)

In 1999, rock 'n roll star Mick Jagger's marriage to Jerry Hall finally came to an end. It was an eight-year marriage for the 55 year old Mick, although the relationship went back some twenty years, and produced four children. What provoked Ms Hall, then 42, to call it quits? You may think it was the number of secret trysts in expensive hotels in exotic places around the world. The word 'adultery' reportedly appears on the affidavit, just as it does in a 1980 divorce writ submitted by his former wife, Bianca Perez. But the real answer in this case was 'humiliation'. Ms Hall told an interviewer 'There's nothing more humiliating than loving him so much that you forgive the infidelities.' She said that her husband seemed determined to grow old disgracefully.

In one way of thinking, rock 'n roll singers ought to have the most stable and fulfilling relationships. After all, they are the ones who write all those songs about love. They have the extraordinary insight to put into words and music what so many millions of couples feel when their heads are swimming in the bliss of each other's company. They have the power to evoke, the power to define moments, the power to express the inexpressible. How, then, could so many of them make such a botch of personal relationships? How could somebody croon, 'Everybody Needs Somebody to Love', and 'I Want to Be Loved' and yet be such an abuser of love? What goes on in the mind of a performer who is being unfaithful to his wife when he sings, 'That's How Strong My Love Is'? Unless, of course, the answer is to be

found in other tunes like 'Let's Spend the Night Together', 'You Can't Always Get What You Want', 'My Obsession' and 'Heart of Stone'.

Okay, Mick Jagger is an entertainer, and not a therapist. Still, it would seem that there might be something deficient in the love he sings about, and in the way he shows love. This was Jerry Hall's conclusion, and it does have a certain logic to it. It is hard to understand how the humiliation of another can be the result of a legitimate expression of love, even in these days of open and permissive marriage.

Now, this is not an attack on Mick Jagger, and neither is it a defence of Jerry Hall. It is just an acknowledgement that a lot of what passes for love in our culture (of which Mick and Jerry are fairly common examples — except, perhaps for the \$25 million settlement) seems to fall short of the promise. It fails to deliver. And you don't have to be a celebrity to agree.

The radiant couple present themselves at the altar, scarcely conscious of any but the other. 'Wilt thou [. . .] love, comfort, honour [. . .] so long as you both shall live?', the priest asks, and hears the couple touchingly affirm 'I will.' The toasts to the bride and groom are testimonies to the appropriateness of the match. They dance at the reception (perhaps to a Rolling Stones tune), and they imagine that the whole of their relationship will be like this dance: intimate, together through the rhythms of life, growing older and deeper in love.

But then a year, two, seven years later the same couple may come to the same priest and say: 'It's over. She treats me like dirt. He abuses me. We have grown apart. We do not

love each other any more. There is somebody else.’ At such moments, I wonder how love could be such a disappointment. How could it let such a nice couple down? Why can’t this love which led them to the altar see them through the ups and downs of marriage? If love is fickle as all that, then perhaps the word ought to be omitted from the marriage service.

Indeed, given the pain it has inflicted in the lives of individuals and families, and given the tremendous financial and social cost of divorce, perhaps it ought to be regarded as just another four-letter word — school children could call it the ‘I’ word.

Now, there is a little bearded man back in the corner of the church who is shaking his head in disbelief at my lunatic musings. It appears to be the Apostle Paul, and since he is used to having his way for part of the sermon, I will now yield to him. ‘My dear brothers and sisters’, he begins, ‘Please do not be deceived by this hopeless fellow. What he has been describing to you is not real love at all. It is a counterfeit. It is what I call ὑποκριτικός love (I believe you use the word “hypocritical”, do you not?). The love he has been describing is not genuine. For genuine love is not something human beings can manufacture within themselves; its source can only be found in God. As I have said elsewhere in my letter to the Romans, “God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit” (5.5). This is also why I said to the Romans “*Let love be genuine*” (the word is ἀνυπόκριτος), since it is far too easy for people to deceive themselves into thinking that they love somebody else, when they are really loving themselves. Why if this fellow knew half as much about the Bible as he knows about Mick Jagger . . .’

Uh, thank you, Paul. I get your point. Actually, now that I go back to the marriage service, I find that the Christian marriage

ceremony does embody Paul’s perspective: ‘Grant that [these thy servants. . .] may abide in thy love unto their lives’ end’, prays the minister, and ‘Look mercifully upon [them], that they may love, honour and cherish each other [. . .].’

At this juncture, I think that Paul would want to remind me that the instruction to ‘*Let love be genuine*’ is aimed at the whole Church, and not just to married couples. ‘*Love one another with mutual affection; outdo one another in showing honour*’, he writes, hoping to foster the same degree of devotion between church members as may be found in the family.

But let’s face it, the church can sometimes resemble a bad marriage or a fractured family. It can be an assembly of individuals, each insisting on their own demands, accusing and blaming one another, jockeying for positions of influence and control. The church is certainly no stranger to conflict and internal strife. Parishioners can get fed up and walk out too. And so perhaps Dr Paul’s advice to an ailing church would be relevant to an ailing marriage.

In each case, he would ask us about the quality of our love for one another, and help us to discover just how authentic or inauthentic our love really is. He would help us to evaluate our motives and expectations, because he knows that the state of the one who erroneously believes he or she is loving is even worse than the one who knowingly pretends to love (see Plato’s *Republic*, 382b,c). And in the end, he would point us back to God as the well-spring of all true love.

Is God in your marriage? Is God in our church? If so, then love is the evidence. One 2nd century observer of the ancient Christians wrote,

They love all people, and they are persecuted by all. [. . .] They are put to

death, and yet they are endued with life. They are in beggary, and yet they make many rich. [. . .] They are reviled, and they bless; they are insulted and they respect. Doing good, they are punished as evil-doers; being punished they rejoice, as if they were thereby quickened by life. [. . .] (Dost thou not see) them thrown to the wild beasts so that they may deny the Lord, and yet not overcome? Dost thou not see that the more of them are punished, just so many others abound? These things do not look like the works of man; they are the power of God; they are proofs of his presence. (*Ep. Diog.* v, vii)

‘The proofs of his presence.’ What are the proofs of his presence in your life and in mine? I am ashamed to admit for myself that it is often difficult to tell. But one thing I can say with confidence, and that is that where God has been admitted into a congregation, a marriage, or an individual life, a transformation begins to take place. He starts to fill up what is lacking, to mend what is broken, to redeem what has failed. He keeps churches together; he saves marriages; he invests life with meaning. He changes water into wine.

Maybe this is hard to believe for some. Maybe there is somebody who will not dare even to hope for salvation, unless they can hold the miracle in their hands. My friends, this is just what we are about to do. For in a few moments, I will invite you to come forward, as loveless and unlovable as you may be, to receive the tokens of divine love. To all appearances, what you will cradle in your hands and take to your lips are ordinary bread and wine. But do not be deceived. They are more — much more. They are a miracle. They are the signs of the body and blood of Christ. They are the supreme expressions of God’s love for us all. In accepting

the gifts of love in the body and blood of Love himself, our hearts respond in love, and we find ourselves nourished and strengthened for a life of love. And this love endures. As Shakespeare (and, alas, not Mick Jagger) said, ‘Love alters not with [Time’s] brief hours and weeks, but bears it out even to the edge of doom.’ (Sonnet 116).

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