

Costly Love

**The Way to True Unity
for All the Followers of Jesus**

John H. Armstrong

Foreword by
Cardinal Joseph W. Tobin



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“Love, to be real, must cost—it must hurt—it must empty us of self.”

Mother Teresa of Calcutta

DEDICATION

For the advancement of the missional mandate of Jesus Christ in the third millennium and the renewal of biblical ecumenism through the witness of Holy Scripture and the wisdom of the Christian tradition.

And for my late friend and pastor, and the former chairman of our ACT3 board, Reverend Gregory C. Moser. Greg was an incredible blessing to many and a profound joy to me.

And for the current board members of the ACT3 Network: George B. Koch, Thomas Masters, Richard Johnson, Susan Taylor, Robert Miller, Alice Sopala, Pat Gerber Bornholt, Richard McDaniel, Ian Simkins, and Scott Brill. Each of these servants of God has helped me to discern the Spirit's leading as we move ACT3 from being a mission toward being a covenant community centered on our call to missional-ecumenism.

CONTENTS

Dedication	xiii
Foreword	xvii
Acknowledgments.....	xxi
Introduction.....	1

*Part One
Who is God?*

1 The Steadfast Love of the Lord.....	13
2 The Meaning of Costly Love	25
3 Two Faces of God's Love	41

*Part Two
Why Should We Love?*

4 Falling in Love With God	57
5 To Whom Shall I Be a Neighbor?	73

*Part Three
How Can Love Become Our Goal?*

6 Can the Church Regain Love as Its Goal?.....	91
7 How Discipleship Is Rooted in Love	107
8 The Most Astounding Command Ever Uttered.....	123

Part Four

How Can We Recover the Commandment Jesus Gave?

9 The New Commandment.....	139
10 How the New Commandment Was Lost.....	151
11 The Way of the New Covenant.....	165

Part Five

What Makes Our Love So Costly?

12 Costly Love in a Hostile World.....	183
13 Followers of the Way.....	199
14 Finding Divine Life in Costly Love.....	213
15 This Is My Body, Broken by You.....	229
For Further Reading	243
Endnotes	247

FOREWORD

WHEN JOHN ARMSTRONG FIRST told me his personal story, I realized I'd heard something similar before.

While I was Superior General of the order, one of my fellow Redemptorists, Fr. Gerry Reynolds, was intimately involved in the Northern Ireland peace process. Our house, Clonard, was located just off the Falls Road fault line between Catholic and Protestant factions. One of Fr. Reynolds's principal collaborators was Rev. Ken Newell, of the Fitzroy Presbyterian Church. They participated in the Fitzroy-Clonard Fellowship, which was awarded the Pax Christi International Peace Award in 1999 for "its exemplary grass-roots peacemaking work in Belfast."* The process that led to the Good Friday Agreement of 1998 could not have happened without Ken's active participation. But that peace came at great personal cost. Rev. Newell, at one time chaplain for the Orange Order, was shunned by many members of his Fitzroy Church, even threatened for betraying his community. Indeed his love was costly, a kind of love I see reflected in John Armstrong's experience.

We first met one another at a Chicago meeting of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops' Committee on Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs. John had been invited to share the story of his ecumenical journey, which took him from the peak of a highly successful national ministry to the depths of rejection because he too sought to talk across fault lines—in his case, between Protestants and Catholics. In chapter 5 of this book, he describes his experience: "I only entered into the love I write about after thirteen years in my

* http://www.fitzroy.org.uk/Articles/125832/Fitzroy_Presbyterian_Church/About_Us/Ministries/Fitzroy_Clonard_Fellowship.aspx

Costly Love

‘ministry desert.’ In calling me to a unique life-changing experience God took away almost everything I treasured about my public ministry. He placed me in a quiet place where I learned just how much he loved me.”

John explains, “Unless we are prepared to get ‘outside the box’ of our common ways of thinking we will settle for conventional wisdom. But to experience costly love we must die. There is no other way to be raised to new life. The old ways of the world will never fulfill the desire for love God has planted in us.”

Of course, that “new life” is the fulfillment of what Jesus prayed for: “That they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me” (Jn 17:21). Armstrong explains, “His prayer is that our becoming one will be the catalyst for people to come to know God’s love. . . . Christian unity in relationships is clearly the divine design for showing the world that God loves them.”

Pope Francis proposes that Christians work for unity by building up a “culture of encounter” in which they work as Jesus did—“not just hearing, but listening; not just passing people by, but stopping with them; not just saying ‘what a shame, poor people!’, but allowing yourself to be moved with compassion; and then to draw near, to touch and to say, ‘Do not weep’ and to give at least a drop of life.”^{*} Such gestures come at a cost, but if we do not touch, if we do not speak, we cannot help create a culture of encounter, a culture of profound relationships among all of us, who need Jesus’ words, Jesus’ caress.

John Armstrong describes this call as “missional-ecumenism,” which means building up Christian unity by loving deeply, a love that is, as he puts it, “both relational and inclusive.” But, he notes, “I could not pursue unity until I learned to pursue and live God-Love.” He uses Chiara Lubich’s words to unpack that dense term: “God-Love [re-

* https://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/cotidie/2016/documents/papa-francesco-cotidie_20160913_for-a-culture-of-encounter.html

Foreword

veals to us] not a God who is distant, immovable and inaccessible to people. God-Love...meet[s] every person in thousands of ways. ... [God is] love in himself, love for all his creation.” When we work for missional-ecumenism, when we work for unity as Pope Francis urges us through building up a culture of encounter and dialogue, we work as Jesus did. The crucified and forsaken Jesus, in whose total sacrifice we see love totally revealed, has to be our center. “If we learn how much Jesus really loves us, we can love God—and one another—with a love that will never be cheap or diluted.”

Few of us will have to pay a price like Ken Newell or John Armstrong did, but every Christian is called to expend what is necessary to build unity by establishing a culture of encounter wherever we find ourselves—in our families, in our churches, in our neighborhoods, in our nation. In a world that has become accustomed to what Pope Francis calls “a culture of indifference,” we can offer our own small reflection of God’s costly love, confident that our actions can return to each person their dignity as children of a God who is love.

Cardinal Joseph W. Tobin, C.S.S.R.
Archbishop of Newark, New Jersey

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I HAVE ALWAYS FOUND AUTHORIZING books to be a profound burden and an incredible joy. The burden is known by most authors. There are restless moments, those times when you give up because of the sheer inner turmoil in your mind and heart. Then there is the hard work of trying to make your words carefully serve your purpose. These struggles are common to serious authors. But joy eventually comes when you have finished the book and feel as if you completed what you hoped you might accomplish. In fact, in this case the end result is far more than I could have imagined when I began. I now realize I had to live sixty-eight years, struggle through many years of study and writing (including my full recovery from open heart surgery in 2016), and then pray more than I ever have before so this book would become a reality.

I began forming my ideas for this book many years ago. Back in 2013 I expected I could finish a book within eighteen months. So much for plans. The wise writer expresses what I learned day-after-day: “The human mind plans the way, but the Lord directs the steps” (Proverbs 16:9). Never have I felt this to be more true than now. I undertook a task I soon realized I was woefully unable to complete. I wanted to write a serious book, yet one readable to non-specialists. *Yet my topic may be the most overworked subject in the English language.* I hoped and prayed, through this painfully long process, that I could explore love in a way that all Christians could agree with my central thesis, namely that costly love is God’s will for us. Such love is the very core of what God has revealed about his character and our life’s purpose. If this is true how then could I avoid being trite, on the one hand, and overly obtuse on the other? I found this to be no easy task.

Costly Love

I owe more to my wife Anita than I can express. She read many early drafts, saw me in agony as I struggled to finish, and offered profound support at every turn. I am especially grateful to Sue Taylor, a professional editor with incredible skill and deep love for me as her brother in Christ. She read the “first” finished draft and made amazing suggestions. Thanks to George August Koch, who edited my “second” finished draft late in the process and made it feel far more polished and clear. Tom Masters then went beyond the bounds of any editor I have ever worked with to complete this book. For all of you, including those who read the text and endorsed the book, and for the input you gave that helped me better share my message, thank you. I had a “dream team” standing with me all the way!

Soli Deo Gloria.

INTRODUCTION

It is the shortcoming of Protestantism that it never has sufficiently described the place of love in the whole of Christianity.

Paul Tillich,
The Protestant Era

THEOLOGIAN J. I. PACKER called the thesis of my earlier book *Your Church Is Too Small* a “corrective vision.” That book identified a serious defect in our Christian practice—a defect that has led us to embrace countless new divisions within Christianity. We value our personal views and opinions above all else, including the fellowship of our brothers and sisters, whom God the Father loves and whom Christ redeemed. In America we have clothed democratic individualism in “God words” and embraced an agenda of perpetual separation. We have chosen ideology over the Carpenter of Nazareth. We seem to have forgotten the inheritance Jesus left us: our God-given oneness (John 17:20–24).

The breakdown of unity has undermined modern life, especially our communities: marriages, families, local churches, neighborhoods, workplaces. Borrowing the words of a friend, I call this relational breakdown an “unholy separation.” The causes of this separation are too numerous to elaborate but I believe we are living through a culture-wide breakdown of virtue that has resulted in *profound indifference*. This *indifference* results in a lack of love toward those who differ from us. This “unholy separation” has caused a persistent, painful wound in the Christian church, especially since the sixteenth century. It now threatens to keep us from

Costly Love

making a true difference in our broken and divided world (John 17:21). Recall Jesus' warning in Matthew 5:13: "You are the salt of the earth; but if the salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything, but is thrown out and trampled under foot."

At a similar time in human history, during the first two decades of the thirteenth century, God raised up an Italian reformer named Giovanni de Pietro di Bernardone. We know Giovanni today as Francis of Assisi (1182–1226). Perhaps no one (at least since the early centuries of the church) has sought more *intentionally to imitate the life and love of Christ* as did Francis. Bishop Robert Barron recently said, "Francis represents a back to basics evangelicalism, a return to the radicality of the gospel."¹ In this book I propose the same "return to the radicality of the gospel." Although hundreds of modern Christian authors have sought the same goal, we still have not achieved "a back to basics evangelicalism."

Globalization has shrunk distance within the human family, yet our bonds with those closest to us are being weakened. Our children hope for a better tomorrow, yet multitudes of young adults are leaving the church. The next generation dreams of making a positive difference in a world marked by so much negativity. They aim high, creating courageous projects and embracing a vision of partnership that promotes love and community. But the church doesn't heed the young. We focus on our ritual and church-based internal programs, rather than engage in the hands-on love of Jesus with one another and our neighbors. In truth, our biggest problems are not doctrinal but relational. To address the breakdown of unity we must bridge this "unholy separation" by naming it and then repenting of it.

Many of us in Western culture sense a fresh call to co-create with the mystery of the universe. After all, even though we have rejected many traditional ideas about God, we remain an inherently religious people. We recognize the rampant breakdown of common sense. We long to heal the many families wounded by divorce. We hunger for better earthly cities modeled on transcendence. We grasp for some-

Introduction

thing—or Someone—more. We wonder: What can sustain us politically, ethically, economically, and socially?

Religious leader Chiara Lubich (1920–2008), founder of a Catholic movement that seeks the recovery of spiritual oneness, gave her life to pursuing loving relational unity. “A world immersed in secularism, materialism and indifference,” she once observed, “has brought us so many sharp divisions, to such poverty and crises! [But] things go backwards, [initially] in order to advance. The world returns to the unity of the human family as God intended it to be.”² I have written *Costly Love* because I believe our need for “advance” is far more evident now than at any time since World War II. I also wrote it because I am convinced God is already leading us toward greater unity. There is growing evidence of this unity around the world developing through many diverse movements of faithful people.

Since the publication of *Your Church Is Too Small*, I’ve been stunned by the way ideas about unity have caught fire (my book being only a small spark, I am sure). In remarkable ways the Holy Spirit seems to be bringing more and more of us into unity, calling people, churches, and movements into a *kairos* moment.³ In our broken and divided world, God is calling people into circles (little communities) of love where spiritual relationships bridge division. Almost all forms of Christian spirituality agree that all of nature feels itself in accord because all life has a divine unity rooted in the life of our Creator. Martin Luther King, Jr. said, “All men are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality.” I am convinced that this “network of mutuality” is central to God’s design at the dawning of a new age of social media. Will our individualistic expressions of Christianity further divide the world and the church, or will we advance this “network of mutuality” for Christian unity?

I now believe the growing movement of unity I have witnessed among followers of Jesus from all our Christian traditions will change our world as this new century unfolds. In the foreword to my earlier book, J. I. Packer wrote:

Costly Love

Embracing this vision will mean that our ongoing inter- and intra-church debates will look, and feel, less like trench warfare, in which both sides are firmly dug in to defend the territory that each sees as its heritage, and more like emigrants' discussions on shipboard that are colored by the awareness that soon they will be confronted by new tasks in an environment not identical with what they knew before.⁴

“This vision,” which I call *missional-ecumenism*, is *directly* rooted in the nature of God. *Your Church Is Too Small* anticipated the central question I address in this book: “What does it mean to believe that God is love and, more particularly, what does it mean for the church of Jesus Christ to live out this divine love?”

Pursuing unity as an end in itself will *not* heal our divisions. We must reconsider our view of God's divine nature. We must return to the central truth that God is a merciful Father revealed in the person of Jesus Christ, who incarnates holy love (1 John 4:8, 16). For Christians, there is no separation between God's holiness and God's love. But this does not mean we try to *balance* God's holiness and wrath with his divine love and grace in order to form a *composite view of God's nature*. In his epistles, John clearly says love *is* God's character, while holiness and wrath are what one modern theologian calls his “dispositions.” Such dispositions become active on particular occasions but love *alone* is eternal.⁵ Love constitutes God's essence in a way that wrath does not because love alone is *adequately Christocentric*. If our experience and understanding of God are merely philosophical, then our love for one another will be philosophical too, which means it may become rigid and cautious. Unless we *experience* the depths of divine love, no effort for unity will ever become a deep work of the Spirit. The true knowledge of God is expressed in communion with others where mutuality and love are perfected in us at great cost.

Jesus' words in John 13:34–35 demonstrate my point:

I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one

Introduction

another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.

Jesus gives us a “new commandment.” But what is “new” about this command? The command to “love” is not “new.” What then is “new”? Jesus answers, “*Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another.*” The centrality of love’s pattern is now the life and actions of Jesus, a life which becomes the *basis* of our love. We are to love *as* Jesus loved!

In his new commandment Jesus expresses clearly his will for *all his people throughout this present age*. Yet by the late second century the church began to lose sight of the centrality of this commandment to faith and practice. The church did not move so far from Christ that she lost the new commandment entirely, but something slowly developed that was not healthy. We cannot restore this truth of love in the present by tearing down the past. But I *do* believe that theological debates *within* the church have distracted the faithful from the centrality of the new commandment. These debates are often essential to the teaching of the church, at least on one level. Yet because of *how* such battles have been waged the new commandment has often been lost. How did this happen? The church lost sight of the Jewishness of the Messiah and embraced a Greek and Latin paradigm, especially after the first-century Jewish community rejected the early church in large numbers after AD 70.⁶ This non- or anti-Jewish paradigm has never served the church well. Cut off from its central story, a story clearly rooted in Israel’s history, the church was left with serious problems for both theology and practice. Large elements of this unfortunate split continue still in church history. As a result, the church is sometimes defined by agreement with doctrinal conclusions rather than by our obedience to Jesus’ expressed will in the new commandment.

In graduate school, one of my mentors, Dr. H. Wilbert Norton, began each class with meditations on John 13–17. His insights into these last words of Jesus shaped me. Reflecting on this period in my life, I now realize how Dr. Norton’s teaching prepared me for what has become my lifelong

Costly Love

passion—promoting the unity of the whole church in the mission of Christ by *rooting all that we do in the triune love of God in Jesus Christ*. In my early twenties my passion was the Great Commission (Matthew 28:18–20). It was also Dr. Norton's. He helped launch the famous Urbana Missionary Conference, served as a missionary in Africa, and started a number of mission teaching institutions in the U.S. and Africa. He desired to take the gospel to all the nations. But Dr. Norton showed me that the Great Commission *without* the Great Commandment would amount to a form of activism that uses people as a means to a religious end *without* the love of Christ. As a zealous young evangelical minister I learned the hard way that pragmatism *without* love was a formula for catastrophe.

My first full-time pastoral ministry was a new church plant in a fast-growing suburb of Chicago. My youthful activism expressed itself in reaching and baptizing new Christians. “Church-growth” thinking shaped my ministry, but something was missing. I began to seek a better understanding of God and the gospel. By my late twenties and early thirties, I had become a more precise doctrinal preacher, which is not a bad thing at all. But in the process, I had “lost my first love” (Revelation 2:4). By my late thirties I was *starving* for the love of Christ I had known in my childhood and college years. I had lost my burning fire of intense love for Christ and his kingdom.

In 1981 I began a regular gathering for Protestant ministers in Wheaton, Illinois. Those meetings focused upon reformation and revival. After leading these meetings for more than a decade, I was thrust into a wider ministry that I have served since 1991, ACT3 (Advancing the Christian Tradition in the Third Millennium). Its vision is clear: “ACT3 seeks to empower leaders and churches for unity in Christ's mission.” But initially this interdenominational ministry was shaped by the angular theological perspective I embraced in my reaction to decision-based evangelism. As my ministry grew wider, I discovered that certain tendencies in my own theological perspective were undermining what God

Introduction

was doing in my soul. I hungered for love and relational oneness. I longed to *experience* the eternal love of God and then to share this love through deep friendship. I now see this longing reflected in Paul's affirmation: "God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us" (Romans 5:5).

After writing *Your Church Is Too Small*, I realized well-intentioned Christians settle for divisions and schism because they have not experienced the fullness of God's love. (It is also rooted in the busy rituals, programs and activities that can fill church life.) Settling for theological concepts—and not pursuing the *experience* of a loving and gracious God revealed in Jesus Christ—surely makes love die. Thus this book was birthed through my active work for the unity of the entire church.

I continue to treasure my academic work and read widely. I love to teach and write. I also love theology, philosophy, and discussing the big issues of our day. I joyfully embrace the intellectual ability God gave me; Jesus said to love God "with all your mind." *But the mind can be divorced from the spirit.* The famous French thinker René Descartes (1596–1650), called the father of modern philosophy, believed we should clear our minds of everything we know and start fresh. Accordingly, he concluded then our most basic certainty is of our own existence, thus his famous dictum: "I think; therefore I am." But it is not thinking that lies at the core of our human existence. What most shapes our identity, who we really are, is love. *What we ultimately love gives us our sense of purpose and fills our life with meaning.* That is, *We think because we are loved.* To be fully human, our deep thinking must prompt deeper love. If we continue to pursue thinking as our primary purpose in life we will lose our way (Philippians 1:9–11).⁷

The vocabulary and resources of *formal* theology can lead into abstractions if theology settles for thinking as its *ultimate* goal. These abstractions chill the soul. When we cease to grow in divine love, we miss the central truth of Jesus' life and mission. Few of us realize this—those driven

Costly Love

by thinking about great ideas rather than by great love. I didn't come to this realization during my first twenty years in ministry. I often spoke in large churches and conferences all across North America and overseas, yet I was missing one of the clearest truths in all of Scripture: "*Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action*" (1 John 3:18). God had gifted me to teach and preach, but I was failing to love deeply. Slowly, I grew to understand the intimate relationship between the mind and the heart. I learned to build bridges between them; true wisdom lies on these bridges.

The Way Ahead

Costly Love is divided into five parts. Part one (chapters 1 through 3) considers the nature, or character, of God. By understanding that "God is love" we come to see who God is and how his costly love can mark our daily life. Part two (chapters 4 and 5) asks: "Why should we love with God's love?" Can we actually "fall in love" with God? Can we really enter into God *as* love within the hard reality of living among broken people and communities? How does this love show us the way to treat others, even our enemies? Part three (chapters 6 through 8) develops how the church can make love its goal and why love is at the heart of Christian discipleship. In my reading on discipleship (within my evangelical Protestant background), I have almost never seen love rightly connected with discipleship. I seek to make that connection. Part four (chapters 9 through 11) considers Jesus' "new commandment." The majority of Christians today are not *astounded* by this commandment. Finally, part five (chapters 12 through 15) unfolds what makes love *costly* in the fullest sense of the word. By rediscovering "God-Love" we can experience fully the grace and mercy God has poured out upon the whole world. And the world around us will see this love when we truly love one another, just as Jesus prayed in John 17. What we shall see throughout this book, in many different ways, is that we must enter into the gift of unity in the Spirit by being filled with God's gift of costly love.

Introduction

My goal is simple: to explain what I call “God-Love,” a compound word that I believe will help us adopt a vision of unity that is immensely empowering and genuinely transforming. I wish to do this in such a way that you will *truly* love God and your neighbor. Then I shall lead you into a discovery of the power of the new commandment (John 13:34–35) so that with your heart and soul you can learn how to love your brothers and sisters as Jesus commanded. By this way you can learn to practice the love of Jesus as a daily pattern of life. Through the lens of this divine love, this *costly love*, you can see how unity then becomes a shared reality that transcends our divisions.

A Fresh Interpretation of Love

The quotation that begins this introduction says, “It is the shortcoming of Protestantism that it never has sufficiently described the place of love in the whole of Christianity.” Both Catholicism and Orthodoxy have a rich theology of divine love, especially because of their deeply Trinitarian understanding of God. In seeking a more-robust place for *faith* the Protestant Reformation tended to create a theology that distanced itself from *experiential love*. For this reason theologian Paul Tillich concluded, “A fresh interpretation of love is needed in all sections of Protestantism, an interpretation that shows that love is basically not an emotional but an ontological power, that it is the essence of life itself, namely, the dynamic reunion of that which is separated.”⁸ *Costly Love* attempts to offer a “fresh interpretation of love” that will, I humbly pray, appeal to all Christians everywhere.

Behind Tillich’s thought lies the sad reality that millions of Christians (and not just Protestants) have *replaced* love with faith, or church doctrine. Moreover, multitudes have replaced love with religion and ended up teaching Christianity *as* doctrine and theology. Active faith is reduced to knowing dogma or propositions. People are urged to pursue a better understanding of sound teaching, as if this itself is *living* faith. In the end, faith and knowledge are celebrated as if these were Christianity’s highest ideals! A century ago

Costly Love

a new kind of Protestant “theological warfare” divided liberals and conservatives. (Catholics would come to experience the consequences of these battles decades later in different ways.) Sadly, this division continues. Many conservative Protestants have divided the church even further, separating from their fellow conservative Protestants *over how to define and explain the faith in precise ways*. Now more conservative Protestants are dividing yet again, this time over moral and political issues that weren’t even on the table when I was a young pastor.

Yet Paul, the apostle of faith, says the love of Christ must *become* “the very spring of our actions” (2 Corinthians 5:14, *J. B. Phillips New Testament*). This great apostle of the Christian faith also said, “In Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything; *the only thing that counts is faith working through love*” (Galatians 5:6, italics added). If this is God’s truth, then how does faith *working through love* shape who I am *and* what I do? How does this faith working through love empower the church? Ultimately, my central premise is rooted in these words: “For right now, until that completeness, we have three things to do to lead us toward that consummation: Trust steadily in God, hope, love. And the best of the three is love” (1 Corinthians 13:13, *The Message*). *I hope extravagant love describes what you desire for your life and church*. I understand *extravagant* love as the kind of love that goes beyond reason, beyond what we call common sense. This leads me to my title: *Costly Love*. God’s extravagant love was ultimately poured out at a great price: Christ’s total sacrifice. Such love is extravagant because it cost God everything. Such love has value beyond words.