



HOW WILL THEY KNOW?

They Will Know Us
by Our Love

From his vantage point in a corner of the bookstore coffee shop, John scans the people lined up to buy coffee or tea, muffins or bagels. He rests his hand on his Bible and silently wonders, Who's going to show up this time?

For the next seven weeks, John will lead a discussion about a basic human experience and need: love. Everybody is interested in love, John muses. I hope we get a wide variety of viewpoints, like we had before.

John smiles as he recalls the people he met in this same spot to discuss the writings of C. S. Lewis.¹ Now he sees one of them, Simon, turn away from the counter and look around. John waves. Simon can't wave back because he's holding a mug in one hand and a bagel in the other hand, but he nods and heads toward John's table. John can't help thinking, He looks so conservative for a person with such nonconformist ideas.

"Do I really need a nametag?" Simon asks as he surveys the sticky labels and marker. "You know me—Simon the atheist." Both John and Simon can now laugh at the designation. Simon had begun the previous study taut and defensive. Over the weeks, though, he let down his guard somewhat and became less absolute in his opinions. When John

last spoke to him, Simon at least seemed open to exploring the possibility of God. And he's shown up for this group, which should count for something.

John has barely explained, "We may have some new people this time," when a very familiar person appears. It's Julia, making her usual flamboyant entrance.

"Hel-lo, Simon. Hel-lo, John. So good to see you again!" She sets down her mug of steaming tea and starts to fill out a nametag. "I can't wait to get into this discussion about love. If we would just learn to walk in the way of love, it would solve so many problems in the world."

Simon asks, "So, are you still on your spiritual quest?"

Julia looks surprised. "Of course. The quest is never-ending. We never stop learning until we die, and then we just move into a higher plane of experience. Don't you agree? Oh, that's right, you don't believe in Spirit, do you?" Julia is deeply committed to her own brand of spirituality, an eclectic blend of Eastern religions and New Age beliefs. She finishes printing her name with a flourish and sticks the label on her brightly printed blouse.

Julia is just getting settled when an older man arrives. He nods at everyone. "This must be the place."

"Hi, Mike!" The others quickly shift their chairs to make room for the newcomer. John adds, "It's good to see you again." Mike was the oldest in the C. S. Lewis discussion group and the one closest to John's own Christian beliefs.

Mike sits down and peers at his thick, white coffee cup. "They're making these mugs smaller all the time."

Simon deadpans, "Maybe your hands are getting bigger." Everyone laughs. It's the sort of remark Mike himself usually makes.

John glances at his watch, and Julia looks around. "Is this all we're going to have?" Soon her question is answered. A very young woman

hurries into the coffee shop looking around in all directions. She spots the group and makes a beeline for them. “Is this the discussion group about love?” she asks. When everyone nods, she says, “Hi, I’m Annette. I saw the flyer, and I’m really interested in this topic.” She starts to sit down, then quickly stands up again. “Can you wait a sec? I’ve just got to get some coffee.” She hurries away toward the counter.

Julia asks, “How did she know we were the discussion group?”

“By our smiling faces?” John suggests.

Mike shakes his head and leans over the table confidentially. “By our nametags.”

Annette is back. John introduces everyone at the table, then he pulls his own coffee mug a little closer. “As you know, our purpose in these next seven weeks is to focus on the subject of love. In particular we’re going to look at Jesus Christ’s teaching about love and what makes it unique. Annette, I don’t want to put you on the spot, but you said you were especially interested in this subject. Would you mind saying why?”

Immediately Annette loses her rather harried look. Her face lights up. “My boyfriend, Richard, and I are ready to take our relationship to the next level. And we’ve started going to this church near where we live. We really like it—they’ve got a lot of things for people our age. I’ve done some reading in the Bible, and I like what it says about love.”

Julia looks directly at John. “Well, that raises my first question. All religions teach love. So why do we have to narrow this down to Jesus Christ?”

John smiles. “Because that’s what the brochure says. But it’s actually a good question,” he adds as Julia opens her mouth to protest. “When we take a look at love from a Christian viewpoint, I think we’ll find an interesting contrast between Jesus’ teachings and other systems of belief.”

Julia frowns and muses. “Other systems of belief. There must be thousands. No—billions. Every person has his or her own belief system.”

Annette protests, “How long is this going to last? I thought it was only for seven weeks. I can’t commit to longer than seven weeks.”

John says, “Julia’s right. There’s no way to consider every possible idea about love—which is why I’ve chosen to use one as a basis for comparison with others. I think Jesus is an interesting place to start because he made an extreme statement about how his followers can be recognized. He said people will know they are Christians by their love for each other.”

“And we all believe that.”

John lets Simon’s sarcastic statement sink in for a moment. The group members glance around nervously, but no one says anything, so John continues. “We’ll consider love from the viewpoint of atheism, which says that everything is matter, and from the viewpoint of pantheism, which says that everything is spirit.” He shifts a little in his chair. He knows his next statement will stir people up. “I’m going to maintain that atheists and pantheists find it difficult, if not impossible, to discover an adequate basis for love.”

Simon sits up straighter. “So you’re saying I can’t be loving if I don’t believe in God?”

John responds quickly. “I’m not saying you personally are unloving or even that atheists in general are unloving.” Don’t get defensive, he reminds himself. “I’m just saying there’s nothing in the atheist view of life that requires or sustains love for other people.”

Simon looks like he’s about to answer, but Julia speaks up again. “You’re talking like all Christians are full of love. But that’s just not true. I mean, just look at history. Christians have shown a lot of hatred, especially for people of other religions.”

“Yeah, like the Crusades,” Annette adds. “And the way some Christians think all Muslims are terrorists.”

John admits, “Good point. G. K. Chesterton said the best argument against Christianity is Christians. But he also said the best argument

for Christianity is Christians. I believe we can find a lot of examples of believers through the centuries demonstrating Christ's love, even to people of other religions."

"And great examples of the opposite," Simon insists.

"That's right. But at least there's a good explanation for why some Christians don't live up to their beliefs. Christians don't claim that the good people are in church and the bad people are outside of it. They say we are all sinners who need a Savior."

"You said something about—what was it?—pantheism?" Mike puts in. "I'm not even sure what that is."

John explains, "A pantheist believes that all is one, that everything is God."

Julia nods vigorously. "That's what I believe!"

John goes on. "The popular form that pantheism takes in our culture is New Age spirituality, drawing from Eastern religions. Julia, I think that's where you'd done most of your spiritual searching." He smiles. "That is, until you came here."

"You said something about sinners," Julia returns, and John wonders if she is dodging his last comment. "I hate that whole Christian idea of sin. You know—this person's good, this other person's bad. I think we are all already perfect if we just realize it."

"So where does love fit into all that?" Simon asks. "We're talking about love here, aren't we?"

"Well, if we're all part of the whole, then everything is already together in love and harmony," Julia explains. "I believe in love toward all Being—toward the One."

There's a brief silence before Mike comments, "Sounds to me like you love 'Being' in general, but you don't love anybody in particular."

John jumps in. "Let's hold off on any more discussion until we take a look at the Bible passage for this week."

ATHEIST ON A TRAIN

Like some members of the study group, many people have the impression that all worldviews and religions equally encourage love. It may come as a surprise that they do not. The idea for this book started when I was speaking in Eastern Europe and Russia on cults and world religions. On a train ride from Vienna, Austria, to Budapest, Hungary, my wife and I sat in a car with four other people. Two of them were atheists, and the other two had at least some church background. As we talked, we discovered that one of our traveling companions was a believer who was the nephew of a prominent leader in the Christian community. The uncle had faced many difficult relational struggles in his ministry. We talked about the difficulty of relationships and the unique way Christ calls us to forgive and to love.

One of the atheists, a young man, shared his desire for a loving marriage and family. He asked, “Can’t atheists love and forgive?”

I responded, “Yes, of course atheists can love and forgive, but not because of their atheism.”

A lengthy discussion ensued along these lines. In the atheist perspective, all is matter. There is no God, no solid basis for moral values other than individual and community preference, and no source for the other-centered agape love that Christ embodies and teaches his followers to practice.

Atheism leads inevitably to a grim and meaningless universe. It encourages autonomy rather than love. Atheist philosopher Bertrand Russell held that since God does not exist, we need to build our lives on the basis of “unyielding despair.” Fellow atheist and existential philosopher Albert Camus said that the only really serious question is whether or not to commit suicide. Fyodor Dostoyevsky had a character in one of his novels argue that if there is

no God, everything is permitted. Another atheist, Jean Paul Sartre, said that no finite point has meaning without an infinite reference point; and since life has no infinite reference point, life is therefore meaningless. Sartre said that it does not matter whether you choose to help an old lady across the street or beat her over the head; in either case, just be authentic.

Where in atheism is there any basis or motive for love and forgiveness? If anything, atheism undermines love and forgiveness. Certainly atheists often love their spouses, their children and other people, but not because atheism encourages love or because love is a necessary consequence of atheism.

Throughout the conversation on the train, our young atheist companion followed each point and admitted that he had never thought about this before.

I went on to point out that love is at the core of Jesus' message. We live in a universe where personality is valued over impersonal matter. God is personal; in fact God is *tripersonal*—Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Personality is at the core of the cosmos. The Persons of the Trinity are in an eternal relationship of love. So love and relationship are at the center of reality. God has made humanity in his image. We are given worth, value and dignity that can never be taken away from us. Furthermore, we are made in the likeness of God to express our God-given personalities, engage in relationships, and love God and other people.

Jesus placed love at the center in his summation of the Old Testament law. When asked which is the greatest commandment, Jesus replied, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind" (Matthew 22:37). Then he added, "And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbor as yourself'" (Matthew 22:39).

On the night before he was crucified, Jesus gave an additional exhortation: “A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another” (John 13:34). He went on to make this kind of love the mark of discipleship. Love is the evidence and confirmation by which people can know that these are Jesus’ followers: “By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another” (John 13:35 NRSV). Jesus went so far as to say, “Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you” (Matthew 5:44).

Besides his commands to love others, Jesus also called his followers to radical forgiveness, to forgive “seventy-seven times” (Matthew 18:22). Forgiveness was so important to Jesus that after he gave his disciples what we call the Lord’s Prayer, he laid down these extreme conditions: “If you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you; but if you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses” (Matthew 6:14-15 NRSV).

I gave the young atheist on the train a summary of the above ideas. Then I put this question to him: “Which view do you think gives an adequate basis for love and forgiveness—atheism or faith in Christ?” He readily admitted that it wasn’t atheism, and he seemed fascinated by these new insights. At that moment we arrived at the border of Hungary, where this man found out that as a Canadian he did not have the visa necessary to enter the country, and border guards escorted him off the train. We made plans to meet him in Budapest the next day, but he didn’t make it. I have often wondered what happened to this honest, open young atheist.

ATHEISTIC HUMANISM

Some atheists hold to a form of humanism. Although they main-

tain that humanity originated out of matter, time and chance, and although our destiny is oblivion with no life after death, they believe that somehow human beings are significant.

Some atheists say that our origin is insignificant, that our destiny is “full of sound and fury signifying nothing” and that people are merely a “useless passion.” In fact, Sartre wrote in his play *No Exit*, “Hell is other people.” For an atheist, human origin, existence and destiny are nothing but big zeros.

Humanistic atheists concede that humanity emerged spontaneously out of the cosmic slime and that even the noblest person eventually rots in the grave. Yet somehow, in spite of the fact that humans came from nothing and are going nowhere, these atheists still believe that humans are a great big plus. It is a noble-sounding affirmation, but humanists have no basis for ascribing dignity to human beings. Perhaps they know in their consciences that human beings are valuable, because God’s law is “written on their hearts” (Romans 2:15). Psychologist Erik Erickson once made the comment that he could think of no other reason to assign humans dignity than that they are made in the image of God. From an atheistic standpoint, there is no sufficient reason why we ought to treat humans with such value. There appears to be no intrinsic basis for an atheist to encourage love and forgiveness.

	Origin	Humanity	Destiny
Atheism	○	○	○
Humanism	○	+	○
Christianity	+	+	+

An article in the *Wall Street Journal* titled “In Europe God Is (Not) Dead” notes a prominent thinker’s observation:

Jürgen Habermas, influential German intellectual, member of the originally Marxist Frankfurt School of philosophy and self-described “methodical atheist,” has revised his view that modernization inevitably leads to secularization. In a 2004 book, *Time of Transitions*, he hailed Christianity as the bedrock of Western values: “Christianity, and nothing else, is the ultimate foundation of liberty, conscience, human rights, and democracy, the benchmarks of Western civilization. To this day, we have no other options [than Christianity]. We continue to nourish ourselves from this source. Everything else is postmodern chatter.”²

In contrast to atheism, Christianity argues that God is the origin of life and that human beings are made in his image. Therefore, we have intrinsic worth and dignity based not on what we do but on who we are. Because of a loving Creator, we have value, our lives matter and our destiny is eternal, either for salvation or for judgment.

ALL IS ONE?

If atheists find no solid basis for love in a universe where “all is matter,” followers of New Age spirituality find no firmer foundation for love in a universe where “all is spirit.”

There are many forms of Hinduism and Buddhism. I will focus on what might be called *absolute pantheism*, as exemplified by the Hindu philosopher Shankara and others who hold similar views. This perspective, as it has come through to the New Age movement in the West, holds that “all is One.” Marilyn Ferguson, in her classic book *The Aquarian Conspiracy*, points out that the negative way to express this positive principle is *nondistinction*.³ There are

no real distinctions anywhere. Matter, time, space, cause and effect are all illusory.

A second related principle is that humans are divine. Since we are part of the One, we are in a sense *gods* or *divine*. Note that the One is not a personal being but an impersonal force—an it rather than a he or she. We may be part of it, but it cannot value us, love us or forgive us.

A third implication of New Age beliefs is that the purpose of our existence is to alter our consciousness so we come to see that there are no real distinctions in this world. We need to transcend this illusory world and realize that all is One. Only then will we be able to achieve unlimited power to create our own reality. The only limit to what we can do is our own imagination.

Other advocates affirm the all-is-One, nondistinct philosophy. For example, Deepak Chopra writes in his bestseller *The Seven Spiritual Laws of Success*, “The physical universe is nothing other than the Self curving back within Itself to experience Itself.”⁴ In the same context, he writes that there are “seeds of divinity within us” and that we are “divinity in disguise.”⁵ In Chopra’s book *Ageless Body, Timeless Mind*, he agrees with an Indian teacher who said the following:

As is the microcosm, so is the macrocosm.

As is the atom, so is the universe.

As is the human body, so is the cosmic body.

As is the human mind, so is the cosmic mind.⁶

Andrew Weil has emerged as a popular personality in the alternative medicine field and, after years of obscurity, appeared on the cover of *Time* magazine in 1997. He also echoes the all-is-One perspective. In his book *Natural Health, Natural Medicine* Weil writes,

“All religions and spiritual traditions stress the importance of overcoming the illusion of separateness and experiencing unity.”⁷ Weil, like Chopra, was educated in medicine and applies his philosophy to issues of health.

Gary Zukav, who received extensive national publicity by appearing on Oprah Winfrey’s television show (also like Chopra), is another who holds the belief that all is One. In his popular book *The Seat of the Soul* he writes, “Physical reality and the organisms and the forms within physical reality are systems of Light within systems of Light, and this Light is the same Light as the Light of your soul.”⁸ The ancient Hindu way of saying the same thing is “Atman is Brahman”; the individual is one with the divine.

INWARD, UPWARD, BUT NOT OUTWARD

During a long dinner conversation I had with a senior researcher from a large New Age think tank, we discussed the idea of this impersonal force. For fifteen years this man had been deeply immersed in Eastern philosophy. He had been researching, writing and advising on radio and television specials about New Age topics. He had been brought up in a Christian church, and he came to me because he was considering returning to his roots. One reason he gave for his desire was that he couldn’t find a home in any of the Eastern philosophies. He had tried them all and found that they didn’t fit what he had discovered about the universe. Above all, he had met the top Eastern gurus and New Age advocates and was profoundly disappointed. He described them as narcissistic.

I explained to him that the thrust of New Age philosophy is *inward* (to the divine that is within) or *upward* (to merge your identity with that of the One), but definitely not *outward* (to a distinct world that is illusory). I asked why he would be motivated to care

deeply about distinct people and things when his philosophy regards them as illusory. He quickly agreed that if he was true to his philosophy, he would not care at all.

For this book I did extensive interviews with a woman I'll call Susan, a college professor who for many years was a strong advocate of the New Age perspective. I asked her what she would have said about love from her former viewpoint. She said she would have believed that we need to love "being" in general. This would be an abstract loving of all creation. When I asked her if this love applied to particular, distinct though illusory things, she admitted that she wouldn't have had an answer for that question. She told me that the disconnect between her idea of love and the inability to practice it even on a small level never occurred to her.

KNOWN BY THEIR LOVE

Tal Brooke, president of the Spiritual Counterfeits Project based in Berkeley, California, spent years in India being groomed as a Western spokesman for Sai Baba, the guru of gurus in India. Sai Baba is the guru most respected by adherents to New Age spirituality. He is the one whom many other gurus visit to be blessed. Thousands go to catch even a distant glimpse of him, for there are many stories of his miracle-working powers. Tal Brooke had numerous private audiences with Sai Baba.

During his time in India, Tal also met a Christian missionary couple. He tried to use his brilliant mind and his skills in logic to convert them to Hinduism, but they put some dents in his arguments. What he noticed about them over time was that they seemed to care more for him than they did for themselves. Later he described their attitude as other-centered, or agape love. Though other Hindu disciples were gentle, Tal noticed that they lacked the

quality of genuine other-centered love. Above all, after numerous private audiences with Sai Baba, Tal realized that the guru himself utterly lacked this other-centered love. Tal Brooke began to understand what Jesus meant when he said, “By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another” (John 13:35 NRSV).

Jesus also said, “A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another” (John 13:34). This is a command that believers in Jesus are to obey, which of course implies that it is also possible to disobey. Believers in Jesus are not automatically loving. They can be disobedient to what Jesus asks of them.

The radical nature of the love required to love as Jesus loved is stunning. Jesus gave his life for those who were in rebellion against God. Such self-sacrificial agape love is the indicator that someone is a follower of Jesus. The way other people know that believers are disciples is *by their love, if and only if they love one another*.⁹

When those who bear the name of Christ fail to demonstrate God’s love, other people are often hurt in the process and feel justified in their unbelief. Emotional pain caused by Christians becomes an obstacle to being able to even consider who Jesus is.

At a retreat with top New Age and evangelical leaders, I had the opportunity to engage in discussions about how these unbelievers might have been hurt by Christians and how they viewed Jesus in light of their experiences. After a few days, the final person to share was the wife of one of the most prominent New Age advocates. Because of what some Christians had done to her fifteen years earlier, she had not been able to say the name of Jesus Christ. Whenever she said that name, she would break down and weep uncontrollably. She thanked me and others present for freeing her to be able to

consider who Jesus is and, for the first time in fifteen years, to say his name.

PASSION, A MENTOR AND A PERSPECTIVE

As I travel around the United States and overseas interacting with believers and nonbelievers, certain common themes emerge. First, many people desire *passion*; they want to have a passionate commitment to something or someone. Second, many also desire a *mentor* who exemplifies love and shows them a good way to live. Third, many people crave a *perspective* that is comprehensive enough to make sense of both their personal and public lives.

Often people do not find what they desire in the church. Many desire passion but find in their churches coldness or lack of emotion. They desire a mentor who embodies truth and love, but they are disillusioned by hypocrisy and lovelessness. Despite their desire for a perspective that makes sense of things, sometimes what they encounter in church is narrow and ineffectual to answer the questions they are asking. They desire passionate commitment, modeling of character and an educated conscience, but they are unable to satisfy their hunger for these things in the church.

Of course, there are plenty of exceptions to the pattern of disappointment with church. Many believers are passionately committed to Jesus, have found a mentor and have gained solid answers to the big questions. What has made the difference? *Love*. All these transformed believers have been pulled, sometimes kicking and screaming, out of self-centeredness and have been overwhelmed by God's love for them. They respond by passionately desiring to love God with their whole being. They find God's love demonstrated in what Jesus said and did for us and are motivated by his example to reach out and love others. They seek to grow in love by

finding a mentor who can teach in theory and in practice this life of trust in God. They eventually desire to love God more with their minds and, whether in personal or public life, to “take captive every thought to make it obedient to Christ” (2 Corinthians 10:5).

The whole message of the gospel is saturated with love. By contrast, atheism (all is matter) and New Age spirituality (all is spirit) have no adequate basis to stimulate or sustain love at all.

A CLEAR PATH

Practically speaking, love does not grow automatically. It requires following a path that is clearly marked. Love requires *commitment, character, conscience, community* and *courage*. We can summarize how love is related to each of these qualities in this way:

Love is never sure apart from commitment.

Love is never sane apart from conscience.

Love is never safe apart from character.

Love is never stimulated apart from community.

Love is never seized apart from courage.¹⁰

These topics will be the subject of our study in the next five chapters. In the final chapter we will stand back and review what we have discovered. With each topic, I will contrast the biblical approach with atheistic and New Age perspectives and show how only Jesus leads down the path to love.

I do not mean any disrespect for the character of atheists, New Age devotees or followers of any other religious view. I know many kind and loving people of other religions or no religion at all. Some nonbelievers are more loving than some believers. But when atheists and New Agers are pushed to the logical conclusions of their assumptions, love is undermined. There is no ultimate reality or

adequate motive to create or sustain love. My concern is to say these things in a loving way as an expression of the God I love, who himself is love (1 John 4:8, 16). I also want to point out the path of love to others even as I struggle to follow it myself. A desperate person once cried out to Jesus, “I do believe; help me overcome my unbelief!” (Mark 9:24). I would say, “I do love; help me overcome my lack of love!”

While others have stressed love’s practical value in attracting people to consider Jesus, they have not sufficiently contrasted how Christianity, atheism and pantheism differ in their ability to give a real foundation for agape love. Although we could also make the case that agape love is more central and pervasive in Christianity than in any other religious perspective, including Judaism and Islam, we can only take time here to focus on materialism and pantheism.

Another unique contribution of faith in Christ is that the path to love involves the five areas outlined above: *commitment, conscience, character, community* and *courage*. Faith in Christ supports and sustains all five, while atheism and pantheism in the end undermine them all. Not only is the concept of love subverted, but the necessary components of motivating and upholding love over time are compromised.

My purpose is also to inspire those who bear the name of Christ to be truer examples of Christ’s love. I heard a story about Alexander the Great that illustrates this point. One day the great Greek conqueror was holding court when a young man who was guilty of cowardice in battle—something Alexander despised—was brought to him. From high on his throne Alexander asked, “What is your name?” The young man, knowing that Alexander held the power of life and death, was shaking and could barely speak. He

answered in a trembling voice, “Alexander.” Alexander the Great stood up from his throne and asked again, “What is your name?” The young man responded in an even shakier voice, “Alexander.” Alexander the Great stepped down from his throne and shouted, “*What is your name?*” By this time the man could hardly speak and responded in a barely audible voice, “Alexander.” Alexander the Great shouted, “Change your conduct or change your name!” We, too, must take the name of Christ with courage and care.¹¹

Further, I want to stress the uniqueness of Christ’s love in both theory and practice. Sometimes his love is expressed in words, as in the example of the missionary couple who befriended Tal Brooke. Sometimes it is a silent love. I recently heard of a tribe in Nigeria that approached a missionary who didn’t know them. The chief said, “We all want to believe in Jesus. What do we do?” The missionary was confused and asked if someone had preached to them. They said no but again stated that the whole tribe wanted to follow Jesus. When the missionary asked why, the chief explained. Apparently some Christian believers had been coming to their village regularly over a number of years and had built a school, some wells, a hospital and other things to help them. The villagers said that no one else had done anything for them. They were attracted to the loving attitudes and actions of these believers. There is spoken love and silent love. One or the other may be needed at different times.¹²

DOES OUR WORLDVIEW FIT THE WORLD?

As John winds down his remarks, Annette says, “Isn’t that what we were talking about before? People who aren’t Christians often show more love than so-called Christians.”

“That’s true sometimes,” John admits, “but if Christians fail to love,

it isn't because they're Christians. It's because they have not lived up to their own view of life. And non-Christians who act lovingly actually have not lived down to their view of life."

Simon has been fidgeting in his chair for several minutes. Now he says, "Okay, you've made your case that love is somehow logically inconsistent with atheism. So what? Does love have to be tied to logic? I can choose to love other people anyway, can't I?"

Mike says, "Sure you can, but at least you acknowledge that you're inconsistent."

For a moment John struggles with how to respond. Then he says, "All I'm saying is that there's a basis for love in Jesus Christ and the message of the gospel that you won't find anywhere else."

"Which would be great," Simon replies, "if any of it were true."

For a while the group appears to retreat into their own thoughts. Then Julia says, "John, what you're saying about Christians and love—it's beautiful. But Christians aren't the only ones who believe in love. I mean, I'm not a Christian, but love is very important to me. It's like _____ says. (She names a well-known New Age author.) We talk about individuals and personalities and all, but that's just an illusion. It's really all energy anyway. All love. We're all part of the whole, part of each other. So we're all part of God, and we generate our own love."

Simon asks, "If everybody distinct from you is an illusion, who is there to love?"

Mike suggests, "Maybe you don't believe other people are distinct entities, but you have to act like it."

Annette, who has been quiet for a while, says, "Well, you can't go around ignoring everybody like they aren't really there."

John says, "One of the marks of truth is that it fits what we believe about the real world. What if we believe love is important, but our

worldview has no basis for love? Then we have to either question our view of the world or question the importance of love.”

Simon becomes more intense. “Maybe we need to be brave enough to face the fact that there is no real basis for love. Maybe love gives you a purpose in life, but somebody else finds purpose some other way.”

“Love does give you purpose,” Annette says with great intensity. “Love is the purpose.”

John checks the time and says with some regret, “We have to wrap it up for tonight, but I hope to see everybody back here next week. Let me give you a preview of what we’ll be considering in the rest of our studies. We’ll look at how followers of Christ see love and learn to practice it—if they’re being consistent, that is,” he adds, looking at Julia. “And we’ll explore the ways some other belief systems try to answer some basic questions about love.”

Mike quips, “Like how to find it?”

They all laugh. John nods. “Well, that one’s pretty basic. But I was thinking of some other questions. Maybe you’d like to jot them down now so you can be thinking about them during the week.” He reads aloud from his notes:

“How do you place a high value on the personal if the universe is impersonal?”

“How can you be committed to justice or human rights if there is no objective good or evil?”

“How can you inform character and conscience if everything is relative?”

“How can you forge lasting community if there is no necessity to forgive and no sin to be forgiven?”

“How can you be courageous if there are no adequate reasons to do so and no basis for hope in the future?”