



INTRODUCTION

Author Anne Rice (Called Out of Darkness: A Spiritual Confession) has a powerful personal story. about her relationship with Jesus. She grew up in the church, but left it as a young adult. In her fifties, she rejected her decades-long atheism and returned to church...for ten years. And then she made this announcement on her Facebook page:

Today I quit being a Christian. I'm out. I remain committed to Christ as always but not to being "Christian" or to being part of Christianity. It's simply impossible for me to "belong" to this quarrelsome, hostile, disputatious, and deservedly infamous group.

Rice's statement stirred controversy, but let's be honest: the idea that Christians can be quarrelsome, hostile, and disputatious isn't exactly surprising. How is it that people like Anne Rice—people devoted to Jesus—sometimes feel driven from Christianity? Why are there Christians on all sides of cultural and political issues, arguing with non-believers and fellow Christians alike? Is this really what Jesus intended for his disciples?

WEEKLY READING

In fact, Jesus tells us how his disciples should behave and he makes no mention of hostility or disputation. He says, "By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another" (John 13:35). Jesus isn't talking about a weak or emotionally driven kind of love. He means a devotion to the welfare of others that can't be shaken by life's inevitable ups and downs.

By the end of the first century, the apostle John was last of Jesus' original twelve disciples still alive. He was an old man who'd witnessed

WEEKLY READING (Continued)

great tragedy. Many of his friends had been killed for their faith. He'd seen fellow Christians persecuted and martyred by the Emperor Nero. He'd spent many years living in the city of Ephesus, taking care of Jesus' mother until her death.

In the last years of his life, John wrote the following in a letter to young followers of Jesus. It's his final reminder to them of what it means to be a disciple of Jesus:

Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love. This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him. This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sin. Dear friends, since God loved us, we also ought to love one another.

1 John 4:7-11

He could have given these young Christians all sorts of advice, but he focused on love. It was the thing he most wanted them to remember. The love that God demonstrated to us through the sacrifice of his only Son on our behalf obligates us to love others.

We owe it to God to love one another.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What is your reaction to Anne Rice's "quitting" Christianity? Can you relate to what she wrote about her decision? Does it offend you in any way? Explain.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS (Continued)

2. Think about the stories of tragedy and suffering we see in the media each day. Is it difficult to believe that love can make a difference in the face of great hardship? Why or why not?
3. Read **1 John 4:8**. What does “God is love” mean? Talk about the connection between loving others and knowing God. How does it challenge your own assumptions about what it means to be a Christian?
4. Have you ever tried to demonstrate love to someone with whom you disagreed? How did you manage the tension between loving and defending your opinion? What happened?
5. Last week we challenged you to love someone in your sphere of influence who is difficult to love. What did you do? How did the person respond?

MOVING FORWARD

Jesus would say we give up our leverage in culture when we focus on anything but love. If we loved like he calls us to love, people wouldn't feel condemned by Christians or coerced to join the faith. In fact, they'd feel drawn to the church.

What does love look like in the marketplace? In our families? In our marriages? In our friendships? If we don't love well, it doesn't really matter what else we do. So try it. Focus on it. Meditate on it. This week, practice loving the people around you. Remember: *we owe it to God to love others.*

CHANGING YOUR MIND

This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins.

1 John 4:10