

Beyond Instinct: Love Languages, Temperament, and Why We Love the Way We Do

Oheneba-Dornyo, S.

Abstract

Love is universal, yet people differ considerably in how they express, receive, interpret, and respond to it. Couples often enter relationships believing that sincere affection should naturally be recognised by the other person, only to discover that love genuinely offered may not always be experienced as love by the recipient. This conceptual article examines why individuals love differently by bringing Gary Chapman's Five Love Languages into conversation with temperament and personality research, adult attachment theory, emotional self-regulation, family-of-origin learning, culture, and Christian pastoral theology. Although the Five Love Languages—words of affirmation, quality time, receiving gifts, acts of service, and physical touch—remain widely used in marriage education and pastoral counselling, empirical research offers mixed support for the claim that each person possesses one dominant love language whose matching uniquely determines relationship satisfaction. Research suggests instead that healthy relationships depend more broadly on responsiveness, flexibility, emotional regulation, attachment security, personality, communication, and the capacity to express care in multiple meaningful ways. Temperament adds another dimension by helping explain differences in emotional reactivity, sociability, sensitivity, self-regulation, and interpersonal style. The article therefore proposes an integrative pastoral framework in which love languages are viewed not as fixed relational identities but as useful conversational tools for understanding preferred expressions of care. From a Christian pastoral perspective, mature love moves beyond instinctive preference toward intentional, adaptive, compassionate, and other-centred responsiveness. The article concludes that enduring love is not secured by compatibility alone but cultivated through self-awareness, relational flexibility, emotional maturity, spiritual formation, and the willingness to understand the inner world of one's partner.

Keywords: Love Languages; Temperament; Relationship Satisfaction; Attachment; Pastoral Counselling; Christian Marriage

1. Introduction

People do not love in exactly the same way.

One spouse may express affection by working hard, solving problems, providing financially, and attending to practical needs. Another may long for conversation, tenderness, reassurance, physical closeness, or uninterrupted companionship.

One may say, *"Everything I do is for you."*

The other responds, *"But I do not feel loved."*

Both may be speaking sincerely.

This apparent contradiction sits at the heart of many intimate relationships. Love can be genuinely given yet poorly received because people interpret affection through different emotional histories, personalities, expectations, attachment patterns, cultural backgrounds, and relational needs.

Gary Chapman's *The 5 Love Languages* popularised the idea that people differ in how they prefer to give and receive affection. He identifies five broad expressions: words of affirmation, quality time, receiving gifts, acts of service, and physical touch (Chapman, 2015).

The model has considerable pastoral appeal because it invites couples to ask a question deeper than, "*Do I love my spouse?*"

It asks:

"Does my spouse experience the way I express love as loving?"

That is an important shift.

A husband may discover that faithful financial provision does not fully substitute for emotional presence. A wife may realise that frequent verbal reassurance may not carry the same meaning for a spouse who experiences companionship through shared activities. In such cases, the problem is not necessarily the absence of love but a failure of relational translation.

Nevertheless, contemporary scholarship requires caution. Although Chapman's framework is accessible and useful as a conversation tool, empirical studies do not consistently support the stronger claim that everyone possesses one primary love language whose matching uniquely predicts relationship satisfaction (Bunt & Hazelwood, 2017; Flicker & Sancier-Barbosa, 2025; Mostova et al., 2022).

Love is more complex.

It is shaped by temperament, personality, attachment, emotional regulation, family history, culture, faith, relational experience, and the behaviour of both partners.

This article therefore moves beyond instinct. It argues that mature love is not simply the spontaneous expression of what comes naturally to us. It is the willingness to understand another person well enough to communicate care in ways that are meaningful, respectful, and life-giving.

2. Loving Sincerely but Missing Each Other

Many marital conflicts are not really arguments about whether love exists.

They are disagreements about how love is communicated and interpreted.

A spouse may regard faithfulness, financial provision, and responsibility as unmistakable expressions of devotion. The partner may value these greatly while still longing for emotional closeness.

Another may give gifts generously but rarely create time for conversation. One partner may seek frequent physical affection while overlooking the other's need for practical help, reassurance, or emotional safety.

The pastoral counsellor must therefore listen carefully when a client says:

“My spouse does not love me.”

Sometimes that painful statement may need to be explored more deeply:

“I am not experiencing love in the ways that communicate care most clearly to me.”

This reframing does not dismiss the pain. It opens the relationship to understanding.

What is being offered?

What is being expected?

What is being missed?

What did each partner learn about love growing up?

What emotions are activated when affection is not received in the expected way?

Does insecurity influence the interpretation?

Such questions move counselling away from accusation and toward understanding.

3. The Five Love Languages: Pastoral Value and Scholarly Caution

3.1 The Five Expressions of Love

Chapman (2015) proposes five common ways people communicate and experience affection.

Words of Affirmation include appreciation, encouragement, reassurance, praise, and verbal expressions of affection.

Quality Time involves focused attention, shared experiences, meaningful conversation, and intentional presence.

Receiving Gifts refers to tangible expressions that communicate remembrance, thoughtfulness, and care.

Acts of Service are practical actions undertaken for the benefit of another person.

Physical Touch includes affectionate physical contact, ranging from holding hands and embracing to appropriate sexual intimacy.

The pastoral strength of the model is its simplicity.

It helps couples recognise that affection must be communicated, not merely intended. It offers vocabulary to partners who may have struggled for years to explain why certain gestures matter deeply to them.

3.2 What the Research Suggests

The difficulty arises when love languages are treated as fixed psychological types.

Research findings are mixed.

Mostova et al. (2022), studying 100 heterosexual couples, found that greater alignment between desired and received love-language behaviours was associated with higher relationship satisfaction.

Bunt and Hazelwood (2017), however, found limited evidence that love-language matching alone accounted strongly for relationship satisfaction. Their findings suggested that self-regulation was a more substantial contributor.

More recently, Flicker and Sancier-Barbosa (2025) found that satisfaction with a partner's behaviour in one's supposed "primary" love language did not predict relationship satisfaction better than satisfaction with other expressions of care.

Taken together, these findings suggest that the pastoral usefulness of love languages should not be confused with scientific proof of rigid relational categories.

The responsible pastoral question is therefore not:

“What is your permanent love-language type?”

but rather:

“What forms of affection are meaningful to you, and what might help your partner understand and respond to those needs?”

Love languages are best used as conversation starters, not diagnostic labels.

4. Temperament and the Way We Approach Love

Love languages describe preferred expressions of affection.

Temperament helps us understand something deeper: why people may naturally approach relationships differently.

Rothbart (2011) understands temperament as constitutionally based differences in emotional reactivity and self-regulation that develop through interaction with experience.

Some people are naturally expressive.

Others are reserved.

Some recover quickly after disagreement.

Others remain emotionally affected long after the conversation ends.

Some seek frequent interaction and closeness.

Others need solitude to regulate themselves.

Some express distress immediately.

Others internalise it.

These differences influence intimacy.

An expressive spouse may experience silence as emotional rejection. A quieter partner may experience repeated questioning as pressure. One person may want conflict resolved immediately, while another needs time to settle emotionally before continuing the conversation.

Neither response is automatically wrong.

The pastoral task is to help the couple understand what is happening between them.

4.1 Temperament Is Not Destiny

Temperament can explain tendencies, but it should never become an excuse.

“That is just how I am” is not sufficient justification for behaviour that repeatedly wounds another person.

Nor should counsellors reduce people to fixed labels such as:

“You are Choleric, so naturally you are controlling.”

Temperament may influence style, but it does not abolish responsibility.

A forceful person can learn gentleness.

A reserved person can learn to communicate emotion.

A highly sensitive person can develop stronger self-regulation.

An independent person can grow in healthy interdependence.

Christian maturity does not erase temperament. It calls the individual to steward it.

5. Personality and Relationship Satisfaction

Personality research adds another important dimension.

Malouff et al. (2010), in a meta-analysis of 19 samples involving 3,848 participants, found associations between relationship satisfaction and several Big Five personality characteristics, particularly lower neuroticism and higher agreeableness, conscientiousness, and extraversion.

These findings remind pastoral counsellors that relational preferences do not arise in isolation.

A highly agreeable person may seek harmony and avoid confrontation.

A conscientious spouse may communicate love through reliability, planning, responsibility, and service.

A more extraverted person may experience conversation and shared activity as especially meaningful.

A person high in neuroticism may be more emotionally sensitive to perceived rejection, uncertainty, or inconsistency.

Thus, when someone says, “*My love language is words of affirmation,*” the counsellor may need to explore what lies beneath the preference.

Is reassurance simply enjoyable?

Or does its absence activate fear?

Has the client experienced rejection?

Does the current relationship feel secure?

What role does personality play?

Pastoral counselling must learn to look beneath the label.

6. Attachment: The Emotional Story Beneath Love

Adult attachment theory provides one of the strongest psychological frameworks for understanding intimate relationships.

Attachment experiences contribute to expectations about closeness, dependence, security, and whether others can be trusted to remain emotionally available.

Two commonly studied attachment dimensions are **anxiety** and **avoidance**.

Individuals higher in attachment anxiety may fear abandonment, seek reassurance, and become highly sensitive to relational distance.

Those higher in attachment avoidance may experience dependence, vulnerability, or emotional intimacy as uncomfortable.

Meta-analytic research has consistently associated attachment anxiety and avoidance with lower relationship satisfaction (Candel & Turliuc, 2019; Li & Chan, 2012).

This has important implications for love-language conversations.

A person who constantly requests reassurance may not simply prefer words of affirmation.

The deeper fear may be:

“Please keep telling me you love me because I am afraid you will leave.”

Similarly, a highly independent spouse may not simply prefer practical service.

The deeper belief may be:

“Depending on people has never felt safe.”

Sometimes a love-language preference is simply a preference.

Sometimes it provides a doorway into an attachment wound.

A wise counsellor learns to distinguish between the two.

7. The Family That Taught Us How to Love

Long before people read books about relationships, they learn about love by watching family.

One child grows up hearing:

“I love you.”

“I am proud of you.”

Another rarely hears these words but sees parents work sacrificially to provide education, food, and security.

Some families are physically affectionate.

Others are restrained.

Some celebrate through gifts.

Others communicate love through service and responsibility.

Some families discuss disagreements openly.

Others avoid conflict until the tension appears to pass.

These experiences become part of a person's relational vocabulary.

A husband may say:

“My father hardly ever told us he loved us, but he paid every school fee. That was how he loved us.”

His wife may respond:

“When I was hurting, my mother would sit beside me and listen. That was love to me.”

Neither person enters marriage empty-handed.

They bring different emotional dictionaries into the same home.

Pastoral counselling helps them translate.

8. Ghanaian Culture and the Meaning of Love

Love is never expressed outside culture.

What people consider affectionate, respectful, intimate, faithful, or responsible develops within a social world.

In Ghanaian relational life, love may be strongly connected with financial provision, respect, family responsibility, hospitality, religious faithfulness, parenthood, loyalty, extended-family obligations, and practical support.

Osei-Tutu et al. (2020) found that premarital counselling among Christian and Muslim lay counsellors in Ghana commonly addresses communication, conflict, financial management, sexuality, parenthood, marital roles, expectations, and values.

These findings demonstrate that relationships are understood within a broader social and moral context.

For some Ghanaian spouses, the question:

“Do you love me?”

may contain several other questions:

Do you respect me?

Can I trust you?

Will you stand with me when life becomes difficult?

Will you remain faithful?

Will you contribute responsibly to our home?

Will you protect our relationship from unhealthy interference?

Will you listen when I am hurting?

Will our faith matter in the decisions we make together?

The pastoral counsellor must therefore ask what love means within the couple’s own cultural and relational world.

9. Christian Love Beyond Preference

Christian theology brings an important corrective to purely preference-centred understandings of love.

Biblical love cannot be reduced to:

“Give me what makes me feel loved.”

Christian love also asks:

“How can I seek your good faithfully and responsibly?”

First Corinthians 13 describes love through patience, kindness, humility, truth, endurance, and perseverance.

Philippians 2:4 calls believers to look not only to their own interests but also to the interests of others.

Ephesians 5:21 places Christian relationships within a broader call to mutual submission.

The movement is therefore from self-reference toward other-awareness.

This is where the language metaphor remains pastorally powerful.

Sometimes love requires learning a form of communication that does not come naturally.

The quiet husband learns to affirm.

The highly verbal wife learns that listening may communicate more love than advice.

The busy provider learns that presence matters.

The emotionally expressive spouse learns that practical reliability also speaks.

The person who values gifts learns that affection cannot be purchased.

The partner who values physical touch learns that intimacy must always respect consent, emotional safety, and the dignity of the other.

Love matures when preference becomes service.

10. From Instinctive Love to Intentional Love

People often begin by loving instinctively.

They give what they themselves would want to receive.

That is understandable. We naturally use our own emotional experience as the first reference point for understanding another person.

Mature love, however, requires differentiation.

The question changes from:

“How would I like to be loved?”

to:

“Who is the person before me, and what genuinely communicates care to them?”

This is intentional love.

Intentionality does not make love artificial.

It makes love responsive.

A spouse who is not naturally verbal can learn to express appreciation.

Someone who does not personally value gifts may learn to understand the symbolic meaning of a thoughtful gift to the other person.

Learning another person's relational world is not pretending.

It is empathy.

11. Self-Regulation: An Often-Overlooked Language of Love

One of the most important insights from relationship research is that satisfaction depends on more than preference matching.

Bunt and Hazelwood (2017) found that self-regulation contributed more substantially to relationship satisfaction than simple love-language alignment.

This deserves strong pastoral attention.

Knowing that your spouse values words of affirmation will not heal a marriage if you cannot regulate anger.

Quality time cannot overcome contempt.

Gifts cannot repair repeated betrayal.

Physical touch cannot replace emotional safety.

Acts of service do not excuse verbal abuse.

Healthy love requires the ability to pause, listen, regulate emotion, apologise, repair injury, keep promises, and accept responsibility.

In that sense, one of the deepest languages of love may not appear in Chapman's five:

self-control.

A spouse who refuses to weaponise anger communicates love.

The partner who learns to listen communicates love.

A person who admits wrongdoing without excuses communicates love.

Someone who becomes trustworthy over time communicates love.

These behaviours may carry more relational weight than correctly identifying a preferred category.

12. The Beyond-Instinct Model of Relational Love

This article proposes a six-dimensional framework for pastoral counselling.

12.1 Preference: How Do I Experience Affection?

The counsellor asks what behaviours most readily communicate care.

These may include words, presence, touch, gifts, practical service, encouragement, shared faith, sexual intimacy, humour, loyalty, protection, or emotional availability.

The five love languages may provide useful vocabulary, but they need not exhaust the possibilities.

12.2 Temperament: How Do I Naturally Respond?

The counsellor explores emotional intensity, sensitivity, sociability, conflict responses, independence, and the pace at which the individual processes emotional experiences.

Temperament helps explain the style through which love is expressed and received.

12.3 Attachment: What Am I Afraid of Losing?

Does the person fear abandonment?

Does closeness feel threatening?

Is reassurance repeatedly needed?

Does dependence feel unsafe?

Attachment helps reveal the emotional security or insecurity beneath relational behaviour.

12.4 History: What Did Love Look Like in My Family?

How did parents express affection?

How were disagreements handled?

Was love conditional?

Was vulnerability welcomed?

Was affection verbal, physical, practical, or largely absent?

Family history gives context to present expectations.

12.5 Culture and Faith: What Does Love Mean in My World?

Marriage does not exist outside beliefs about family, gender, responsibility, sexuality, respect, faith, community, provision, and commitment.

These meanings must be explored rather than assumed.

12.6 Formation: Who Am I Becoming Through Love?

Christian pastoral counselling eventually asks a deeper question:

“What kind of person is this relationship calling me to become?”

More patient?

More truthful?

More compassionate?

More secure?

Less controlling?

More responsible?

Better able to establish boundaries?

More willing to forgive?

Love is not only something one receives.

It is also a context in which character is formed.

13. Application in Pastoral Counselling

The Beyond-Instinct Model can guide counselling through several simple but revealing questions.

First, counsellors can ask each partner:

“When do you most readily feel cared for?”

This invites preferred expressions of affection without forcing the person into a category.

Second:

“When you want to show love, what do you normally do?”

The gap between what one naturally gives and what the other readily receives can be illuminating.

Third:

“What happens inside you when your partner does not respond in the way you hoped?”

Strong emotional reactions may reveal attachment concerns, earlier wounds, or unmet expectations.

Fourth:

“How did people in your childhood home show love?”

Many expectations that seem irrational in adulthood begin to make sense when their history is understood.

Finally, couples should be encouraged to become flexible.

Healthy partners learn several ways of communicating affection.

They become, in a sense, **multilingual in love**.

14. When Love-Language Language Becomes Harmful

Helpful frameworks can become unhelpful when used rigidly.

A preference for physical touch does not create entitlement to another person’s body. Consent remains essential.

A person who says, *“If you loved me, you would buy this for me,”* has turned preference into manipulation.

A spouse cannot avoid communication by saying, *“You already know my love language.”* Needs still require honest conversation.

Most importantly, love-language terminology must never hide abuse.

No amount of gifts, touch, affirmation, service, or quality time compensates for violence, coercive control, exploitation, chronic humiliation, or danger.

Pastoral counsellors must distinguish ordinary relational misunderstanding from harmful or unsafe patterns.

Preferences may also change.

A grieving spouse may temporarily need presence and reassurance.

A new parent may value practical assistance more than before.

Someone recovering from betrayal may need consistency and transparency.

Love must remain responsive to seasons.

15. Implications for Christian Marriage Counselling

Christian counsellors should treat love languages as a **relational conversation tool rather than a diagnostic instrument**.

Temperament should similarly encourage understanding rather than deterministic categorisation.

Attachment, personality, emotional regulation, communication, relational history, and broader relationship processes provide important additional perspectives.

The counsellor's work is not merely to identify categories.

It is to restore curiosity.

Many relationships begin healing when partners move from:

“You should already know.”

to:

“Let me help you understand what this means to me.”

And from:

“That makes no sense.”

to:

“Help me understand why this matters so much to you.”

Curiosity is one of intimacy's quietest expressions of love.

16. Implications for Premarital Counselling

Premarital counselling should move beyond the question of compatibility.

Couples need opportunities to explore their preferred forms of affection, family histories, attachment patterns, emotional regulation, personality differences, conflict styles, sexuality, finances, faith, extended-family boundaries, expectations, and communication.

Ghanaian research already demonstrates that premarital counselling frequently addresses many of these practical concerns (Osei-Tutu et al., 2020).

The deeper pastoral question is therefore not simply:

“Are you in love?”

but:

“Do you understand how each of you gives, receives, protects, fears, and interprets love?”

That question prepares couples for the work of marriage rather than merely the excitement of the wedding.

17. Discussion

Why people love the way they do cannot be explained by one theory.

We love partly through temperament.

We love through personality.

Through attachment.

Through memory.

Through culture.

Through family history.

Through wounds.

Through faith.

Through habits we may never have examined.

This complexity explains the appeal of simple relational models. They provide language where couples previously had none.

The enduring pastoral value of the Five Love Languages lies in one important insight:

the giver’s intention and the receiver’s experience are not always the same.

Research, however, cautions against organising relationships around one presumed dominant channel of affection. Healthy relationships appear to depend more broadly on responsiveness, flexibility, attachment security, self-regulation, communication, and a range of caring behaviours (Bunt & Hazelwood, 2017; Flicker & Sancier-Barbosa, 2025; Mostova et al., 2022).

Attachment research similarly demonstrates that security matters greatly in intimate relationships (Candel & Turluc, 2019; Li & Chan, 2012).

Personality research shows that enduring individual characteristics affect relational satisfaction (Malouff et al., 2010).

Temperament research reminds us that people differ naturally in emotional reactivity and self-regulation (Rothbart, 2011).

Together, these perspectives lead to a more balanced conclusion.

Love involves preference, but mature love requires **responsiveness**.

18. Limitations and Directions for Future Research

This article is conceptual and does not present new empirical data.

The proposed Beyond-Instinct Model therefore requires systematic evaluation.

Future studies should examine how preferred expressions of affection interact with adult attachment, personality, emotion regulation, family-of-origin experiences, religiosity, relationship duration, culture, and marital satisfaction.

Research within Ghana and other African contexts is particularly important.

Much of the literature on love languages has emerged outside African settings. Future scholarship should therefore examine whether the five commonly proposed categories adequately capture Ghanaian understandings of love or whether culturally significant dimensions such as provision, respect, extended-family responsibility, loyalty, shared spirituality, community support, and relational duty require a broader framework.

Dyadic research involving both partners would also strengthen understanding beyond individual self-report.

19. Conclusion

People often begin by loving instinctively.

They give what comes naturally.

They love according to temperament, history, preference, and what they themselves would want to receive.

But mature love moves beyond instinct.

It learns.

It listens.

It adapts.

It regulates itself.

It respects boundaries.

It becomes curious about the emotional world of another person.

The enduring value of love-language thinking is therefore not that every person can be permanently placed into one of five categories. Its value is the reminder that love must be communicated in ways another person can meaningfully recognise.

Temperament helps us understand why some expressions come more naturally than others.

Attachment helps explain why certain behaviours carry profound emotional weight.

Family history gives love its earliest vocabulary.

Culture gives it social meaning.

Spiritual formation asks what kind of person we are becoming through the way we love.

Christian love ultimately calls us beyond the question:

“How do I naturally love?”

toward:

“How can I learn to love this particular person wisely, faithfully, compassionately, and responsibly?”

That is where relational maturity begins.

Love is not demonstrated merely by the intensity of what we feel. It is revealed through our willingness to understand another person deeply enough to communicate care, dignity, safety, faithfulness, and grace.

To move beyond instinct is therefore to say:

I will not love you only in the way that comes naturally to me. I will learn who you are, listen to what matters to you, and grow in the ways I communicate love so that my care is not merely intended, but genuinely experienced.

References

- Bunt, S., & Hazelwood, Z. J. (2017). Walking the walk, talking the talk: Love languages, self-regulation, and relationship satisfaction. *Personal Relationships*, 24(2), 280–290. <https://doi.org/10.1111/per.12182>
- Candel, O.-S., & Turliuc, M. N. (2019). Insecure attachment and relationship satisfaction: A meta-analysis of actor and partner associations. *Personality and Individual Differences*, 147, 190–199. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.paid.2019.04.037>
- Chapman, G. D. (2015). *The 5 love languages: The secret to love that lasts*. Northfield Publishing.
- Flicker, S. M., & Sancier-Barbosa, F. (2025). Testing the predictions of Chapman’s five love languages theory: Does speaking a partner’s primary love language predict relationship quality? *Journal of Marital and Family Therapy*, 51(1), e12747. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jmft.12747>
- Li, T., & Chan, D. K.-S. (2012). How anxious and avoidant attachment affect romantic relationship quality differently: A meta-analytic review. *European Journal of Social Psychology*, 42(4), 406–419. <https://doi.org/10.1002/ejsp.1842>
- Malouff, J. M., Thorsteinsson, E. B., Schutte, N. S., Bhullar, N., & Rooke, S. E. (2010). The Five-Factor Model of personality and relationship satisfaction of intimate partners: A meta-analysis. *Journal of Research in Personality*, 44(1), 124–127. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jrp.2009.09.004>
- Mostova, O., Stolarski, M., & Matthews, G. (2022). I love the way you love me: Responding to partner’s love language preferences boosts satisfaction in romantic heterosexual couples. *PLoS ONE*, 17(6), e0269429. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0269429>
- Osei-Tutu, A., Oti-Boadi, M., Affram, A. A., Dzokoto, V. A., Asante, P. Y., Agyei, F., & Kenin, A. (2020). Premarital counseling practices among Christian and Muslim lay counselors in Ghana. *Journal of Pastoral Care & Counseling*, 74(3), 203–211. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1542305020916721>
- Rothbart, M. K. (2011). *Becoming who we are: Temperament and personality in development*. Guilford Press.