

# Notes for the Ekklesia Meeting

Sundays @ 10:00 a.m. Info: (651) 283-0568 Discipleship Training Ministries, Inc www.dtminc.org Today's Date: June 15, 2008

## The Goal is Agapē

by Dan Trygg

"...the focal point of the instruction is love out from a clean heart, and a good conscience, and 'unphony' faith, ...concerning which some people, having lost this aim, have turned off toward empty talk..." I Timothy 1:5,6

If you were a Greek-speaking Gentile in the New Testament era, or immediately thereafter, and you were to listen in on the teachings of the early church as they were being carried throughout the Roman Empire, you would be somewhat puzzled by the heavy dependence upon a little-used, weakly-defined Greek term, the word agapē. In Greek culture and literary tradition, it was a term that had no real strong or clear flavor. It was a word that was conveniently used alongside of other words for love (e.g., erōs, or phileō) as a poetic or stylistic device because, since it had no strong meaning of its own, it would kind of "pick up" the flavor of the context from the other, stronger words for love that accompanied it. It was virtually non-descriptive. **Much had been written about the nature of erōs and phileō, describing their characteristics**, and fawning over the delights of these very self-centered, commonly experienced forms of love. **No one had written any major treatises on agapē, however.** It was not idolized, or particularly sought after. Basically, it meant to "prefer", i.e., to set one good over another. It comes from a root word, agamai, which means "to esteem, think highly of, to have good will toward (expressed in action)". Instead of an impulse, or a spontaneous experience, it described a free act, a love which makes distinctions to choose and keep loyal to its object. While the other loves celebrated the satisfaction to be gained, agapē simply described choosing to elevate a person above others, especially through kind and practical actions, to show your regard for them. **Its focus was on giving, instead of getting.** Since Hellenism was focused on maximizing human experience, living life to the full, the Greeks had little use for such a term in most of their conversations or philosophical dialogues. **Why is it, then, that these followers of Christ talk of this so much? What do they mean by the use of this word?**

Such observations of an initiate into the Christian community would not at all be uncommon. **The conversation and teachings of the group seemed to revolve around this agapē.** Even their meetings, in which they shared a meal together and observed the symbolic ingestion of their Savior's life into their bodies, were called "**the agapē**" (e.g., Jude 12, "feasts" was added later in some English versions to clear up confusion). The writings of the New Testament especially bear out this fixation on agapē.

**For a word that was little employed in Greek literature at all, it was noticeably significant in Biblical writings.** It was used in related forms some 243 times in the Greek Septuagint translation (LXX) of the OT. (The OT writings were originally composed in Hebrew and Aramaic, but in 250 B.C. they were translated into Greek, to meet the needs of Jews scattered throughout the nations, who no longer could read the original languages. This became the Bible of the early church, especially in those early days before the apostles began to write their gospels and epistles.) **The preference for agapē in even the Greek translation of the OT would have really stood out to Greek speaking readers of that time.** By comparison, however, the NT uses forms of agapē 321 times in an assemblage of writings that is less than 40% the size of the earlier Testament. **The NT speakers and writers used this word over 3.3 times more often than even the OT speakers and writers!** (The most common word for "sin", in all its related forms in the NT, occurs only 268 times!) Put these two statistics together and the word, agapē, or its related forms, occurs some 564 times in the Bible!

**Not only is this word mentioned frequently and consistently in Biblical writings, but this concept of love is highly honored and idealized, ...even presented as the central virtue of a Christian's character.** More than any other subject, agapē seems to get center stage as the focal point of what being a Christian is supposed to produce. **Jesus Himself had boiled our whole duty to God down to love for Him and love for our neighbor** (Mt. 22:36-40). (The apostles said the same thing, on more than one occasion [Rom. 13:8-10; Gal. 5:13,14; James 2:8].) In Jn. 13:34,35, **the Lord said that agapē would be the mark of His followers, ...something so dramatically clear that the unbelieving world will notice and will recognize as a result that we are His followers.** "By this, will all people know you are My disciples, if you have agapē for one another."

**The apostle Paul maintained this focus on agapē as central to the mission of the Church.** In Rom. 12:9-13, he directs this community in Rome to love without hypocrisy. All of the phrases following this imperative are further clarifications to keep love pure and practical. Agapē, is the focus. In I Cor. 12:31-14:1, he refers to agapē as a "more excellent way", and then devotes 13 verses defining and clarifying what agapē will look like in action. In 16:14, Paul goes so far as to say, "**Let all that you do be done in agapē.**" It is the first characteristic of the "fruit of the

**Spirit"** in Gal. 5:22. In Ephesians, it is interesting to note that healthy Body-life is carried on within the tension of paradox, ...between needing to forbear in love, and also "truthing" in love (4:2,15,16). **Agapē provides the motive for forgiveness and forbearance, as well as that necessary for risk-taking, i.e., to possibly confront and/or to speak and act so as to build up one another.** Again, in 5:1,2, we are admonished to imitate God's agapē for us, by walking in agapē with one another. Three times, in the section on marital relationships, **husbands are exhorted to agapē their wives.** (Remember, to a Gentile this would have been a *curious* thing to say. Relationships with wives and lovers would be idealized by references to passionate "in-love" feelings [*erōs*], or the delight and enjoyment of deep friendship [*phileō*]. What is this agapē stuff?)

Paul prays for the Philippians that their agapē might abound (overflow) still more and more with perception and all discernment in order that they might discover by experimentation the things of greater value. From this, there seems to be a depth to this agapē that goes far beyond merely feeling emotions. **There seems to be a need to mature and develop one's skill at agapē.** In Col. 2:2,3, Paul describes a process of "being knitted together in agapē and all the wealth of the full assurance of understanding, unto a recognition of the mystery of God, Christ, in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge." Again, **there seems to be a process of agapē growing in one's life, and mixed together with understanding and insight, whereby a person will grasp truths otherwise incapable of being known.** To the Greek mind, so highly focused on the power of the intellect, this would have sounded ridiculous! Why is agapē a part of this formula? Why does *this* need to be involved in a pursuit of understanding and assurance? Yet, there it is, an apparently necessary key to grasping the kinds of wisdom and knowledge stored up in Christ. In I Thess. 3:12, the apostle again prays for God to "make you increase (multiply) and abound (overflow) in agapē for one another and for all..." In the next chapter, he commends them for their progress in this area, commenting that they "have been taught by God to love one another" (lit., "you are God-taught unto the to-agapē one another"). This would appear to be an allusion to some kind of mystical/relational/practical insights that they have garnered from their relationship with God. It implies also a learning process, a maturation of skills, in developing agapē. (Again, to talk this way of agapē would have been very strange and unusual to any unbelieving eavesdropper from outside the believing community. The emphasis on agapē, and the descriptions of it would have been *very* noticeable.) In the pastoral epistles, Paul emphasizes agapē quite clearly. **Agapē is the endpoint of the charge and instruction passed down to Timothy** (I Tim. 1:5). He was to pursue agapē, and show himself as an example of it to the other believers (I Tim. 4:12; 6:11; II Tim. 2:22). It was a characteristic of the Spirit God had given to His people (II Tim. 1:7). **Timothy was to maintain the pattern of sound teaching that he had received from Paul by faith and by agapē,** the kind found in Christ Jesus (II Tim. 1:13).

**\*\*\*It was not enough to keep the mere content of the teaching the same. It would only be possible to faithfully transmit the full health of the gospel message if it was communicated by a life of faith and agapē.\*\*\***

The writer to the Hebrews encourages us to "think about one another unto a sharpening of agapē and of good works" (10:24). **Peter mentions several times that it is important for us to maintain a fervent agapē** unto one another (I Pet. 1:22; 2:17; 4:8). Agapē seems to be the endpoint of the growth process in his mind, as well (II Pet. 1:5-8). The apostle **John indicates that obedience to God is the end result, or fruit, of the agapē of God in a person's life** (I Jn. 2:5). Walking in agapē is the same as walking in truth, or "the light", as John puts it (2:10). The message of the good news *is to produce in us* a heart to agapē one another (3:11). **This kind of love is an evidence that our faith is genuine,** that we truly have "passed out from death into life" (3:14). The agapē of God is identified as "laying down one's life for another" (3:16). This kind of love is to "abide" in us, and to have practical results (3:17,18). In a more in-depth section, John writes more concerning the place of agapē in our lives (4:7-5:2). Some of what he says includes that **agapē is from God, and anyone who truly loves in this way must be born of God and experientially knows God** (4:7). Anyone not loving in this way does not experientially know God, because God is agapē (4:8). **If we agapē one another, God's agapē lives in us and is fulfilled in us** (4:11). Those remaining, or living, in the agapē, abide in God, and God abides in them (4:16). **Fully-grown agapē casts out all fear of punishment from God** (4:17,18). Those who agapē God, *will* also agapē His children (5:1,2). **Finally, the admonition of Jude, the half-brother of the Lord Jesus, "keep yourselves in the agapē of God"** (Jude 21). This watchword is to keep us healthy in heart and faith.

**The focal point of agapē screams at us from the testimony of Scripture.** It is there repeatedly, consistently, and with specific attention. Our salvation has sprung from God's heart of agapē, and since He wants to make us like Him in our character, it is His desire to establish that quality in our lives by His indwelling presence (Rom. 5:5). **There really was no word in the Greek language, or any human language, adequate to express the love of God, so He prompted His people to use a minor, little-used, indefinite word, agapē, and begin to communicate by infusing it with new meaning.** We learn what He meant, by seeing how the word is employed in the various contexts it is found in, observing the word-pictures associated with it, and by experiencing it ourselves, both through our own relationship with Him, and through the expressions of agapē which come to us through others.