

Notes for the Ekklēsia Meeting

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Loving One Another

by Dan Trygg

“A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another, even as I have loved you, that you also love one another.”³⁵ By this all men will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another.” John 13:34,35

“Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God; and everyone who loves is born of God and knows God.” I Jn. 4:7

“...may the Lord cause you to increase and overflow in love for one another, and for all people...” I Thess. 3:12

“Now as to the love of the brethren, you have no need for anyone to write to you, for you yourselves are taught-by-God to love one another...” I Thess. 4:9

“...if we love one another, God abides in us, and His love is perfected in us.” I Jn. 4:12

Loving others is to be the premier mark of what it means to be a Christian. Jesus said people will know we are His followers, if we have love for one another. Love is the greater heart fulfillment of what the OT Law attempted to guide us to observe by precept. “Love does no wrong to a neighbor, therefore love is the fulfillment of the Law” (Rom. 13:10). Love is the first listed aspect of the fruit of the Spirit’s activity in our lives (Gal. 5:22). Without love, religious activity and acts of service to others mean nothing, before God (I Cor. 13:1-3). Paul said that the goal, or end point, of his instruction was love (I Tim. 1:5). The apostle John taught that the expression of this love to one another is the completion of the activity of God’s love within our hearts (I Jn. 4:12).

English uses *one* word, “love”, to describe a *wide range* of feelings, emotions, preferences and choices. We “fall in love” when we become infatuated with another person. If we use the same word to describe feelings for our parents, or our children, or even toward God, we do not at all mean the same thing as the dreamy, almost obsessive attraction we felt toward that person we were “in love with”. Then, we may use the same word to describe other things we like, e.g., “I love peanut butter!” or “I love horses!” ...hopefully *not* the same way we love potential dates, or parents or children! We speak of “making love” for the act of sex, ...but people can have sexual relations with someone they don’t hardly know at all (e.g., with a casual acquaintance from a bar, or with a prostitute), and they still will use that phrase for the “love act”. We can also “love someone” for years, and never have a sexual thought or interaction with them, at all. In that case, we may be referring to a deep respect and friendship, but not a relationship that is of a selfish nature at all. We also use the word “love” to describe acts of service. We say someone has a love for his fellow human beings, because he chooses to serve them or help them. He may not have feelings of warmth toward them, at all, but the acts of service and charity are often described as “love”. **English is very imprecise and nebulous, at times. Someone trying to learn English would find the word “love” to be quite confusing.**

God chose to use the Greek language to communicate the story of Jesus to us, and what it means. Greek was especially suited for this, since it had developed in a culture that was very much interested in describing and clarifying abstract ideas. **When it comes to describing different nuances of “love”, ancient Greek had *four* different words.**

One word, *erōs*, was used to refer to a **lustful, self-seeking desire**. It was an “I want you for me” kind of attraction. The focus was on the feelings of attraction, sensual pleasure or experiential delight. This word was *never* used in the NT. It was a significant part of pagan worship, however. There, a key aspect of worship was not only to appease the gods through sacrifice, but to also have an uplifting or emotional experience through ritual and sensory experiences. **Being emotionally stirred**, ...either through the use of music, smell, food, repetitious and expressive movement, whole-body blood baths, and even sexual interaction and orgasm with other cult worshippers..., **was the goal and high point of many expressions of Greek worship**. The feelings of stimulation, emotional transport and even the emotional release that comes from expression and exhaustion were central to Greek cultic worship. **It was an *erōs* experience for the worshipper that was sought in these religious groups. By contrast, the Biblical words for “worship” mean simply to acknowledge God’s greatness and worth, and the willingness of the person to obey Him.** The Hebrew word meant to “bow down”, as before a king, and the NT Greek word meant to “kiss toward” referring to the act of kissing the hand of the overlord (a sign of deference). Neither of these were emotionally exciting expressions. In fact, if anything, they were emotionally quieting, as the person bowed down in humility and yielded allegiance to God. **The focus was upon God, and carrying out His will, ...not upon the emotional transport of the worshipper.** Yieldedness led to *action*, not *emotion*. **To love God, from a Biblical worldview, was about *obedience*, not about having an emotional experience.** *Erōs* was not a word used to describe a Christian’s relationship with God, or his or her relationships with other members of the Body. For a Christian, *erōs* would be a natural human attraction that we may *experience* (e.g., infatuation), but the healthy and appropriate pursuit and expression of erotic love was reserved only for the marriage relationship.

Another Greek word for love was *philia*. ***Philia* refers to a tender affection, a warmth and enjoyment of another person's company. It is the basis for friendship**, when the feeling is mutual. This is the "I like you" kind of love. God says He loved Jesus in this way (Jn. 5:20), and He also delights in and enjoys those of us who have come to acknowledge and trust in Christ (Jn. 16:27). Interestingly, **we are never commanded to love anyone with this kind of love. That is because it is an emotional affinity and enjoyment that is an *experience*, not a *choice*. We can nurture *philia*, but we can't simply turn it on and off at will** (e.g., Tit. 2:4).

A third word is *storgē*. This is a **fondness or loyalty based upon familiarity, usually experienced as a bond between family members, or by members of a group** or community brought together by other circumstances. This love is illustrated by the "blood is thicker than water" observation. You may not *like* all your family members, or team members, or be close friends with them, but when they are threatened or unfairly treated, *storgē* motivates us to be protective. *Storgē* motivates us to "circle the wagons" to protect those within our group.

The fourth Greek word for love is *agapē*. This word was little used by the ancient Greeks, referring to a general love or affection, but it came to be **used by NT writers to describe the unique love that comes from God**. The apostle John indicates that **only those who have been born of God and who are presently experiencing Him can express this kind of love** (I Jn. 4:7). This kind of love is *not* primarily an emotion. It is a mindset that results in a benevolent choosing, a willing-to-act on behalf of the one being valued in this way. **It is the consistent inclination and application of your self-will to benefit another person**. Unlike other loves, which can fade, die out or be cut off due to human frailties, ***agapē* persists in the face of all failings** (I Cor. 13:8), **...because it is not about the performance of the person being loved, but about the great Lover within the person doing the loving**. That is what is so amazing about *agapē*. It is self-sacrificial, sometimes extremely radical. It often goes beyond what is reasonable in order to reach or serve someone else. **God demonstrated His love to us, in that while we were yet sinners, hostile in mind and heart against Him, He *still* chose to come as a human being and lay down His life for us** (Rom. 5:8,10). By this radical act, God revealed to us what this *agapē* love looks like, and calls us to radically love one another in the same way. In fact, **the Bible says that we are obligated or indebted to lay our lives down for one another as He did for us** (I Jn. 3:16). It is this radical, outrageous giving-of-self-for-others that powerfully fertilizes the seedbed for evangelism in peoples' hearts. When people see this dramatic, selfless service repeatedly, consistently, freely given, it *gets their attention*. They realize *this is something different* than what humans normally do. They don't quite understand it, but *they can see the good it causes*, and *they find it difficult to criticize*, ...except to say it is crazy! ***Agapē* gives great credibility to the claims of Christ and the message of the good news**. When you meet *an individual* like this, you may think they are an unusual person. **When you meet an *entire community* of people who are joyfully giving and serving in this radical, outrageous manner, it is hard to dismiss. How was this *agapē* made visible?** Here again, it is important to remember that *agapē* is not an emotion, but a benevolent-choosing, a willingness-to-act on behalf of another. How is it, then, made visible? **By the positive *choices* and sacrificial *actions* made by those who are genuinely infused with the heart and mind of God**. Early Christians cared for the poor, the sick, those in prison, helped the homeless, took care of the widows and orphans, and buried the dead. **This exuberant caring and sharing by Christians was *unique* in antiquity**. Tertullian wrote in 200 A.D. that **the Christians' deeds of love were so amazing that the pagans exclaimed, "See how they love one another!"**

Sixteen times in the NT we are exhorted to love one another. This was a significant emphasis of early church teaching. **How can we learn to love one another? First, we must recognize that it is the Spirit of God within us that motivates this *agapē* love**. It is the heart of God to love in this way. He has put His Spirit within those who have become His followers (Rom. 5:5). If we learn to tune in to the Spirit, He will prompt us toward love. It is a natural outworking of His life within us (Gal. 5:22). **Secondly, we can learn from meditating on God's example, Christ's example, and the examples of other Christians what kinds of radical things God's *agapē* may prompt us to do**. This helps to *renew our minds*, ...to identify and put *off* selfish ways of thinking, and to *prepare us to recognize the prompting of the Spirit* when He may choose to initiate some act of love. **Third, be asking and expecting God to teach you how to love**. This was Paul's observation regarding the Thessalonian Christians – They were taught by God (literally, "God-taught") to love one another. **Fourth, allow other Christians to love you**. The Body-life ministry is designed to go back and forth. Sometimes, we will be the initiator, and at other times the recipient. As we receive grace from others, it may cause a response of joy and thanksgiving that will overflow to others. The Greek word for "one another" is a reciprocal pronoun, meaning that the action is received, and then given back. If we isolate, or if we avoid receiving the life-flow of God through others, because of pride or false humility, we may be unwittingly consigning ourselves to a powerless, joyless existence, ...when all along God was reaching out to fill and empower us *through others*! **Finally, allow the love of God to grow in you**. It is the *fulfillment* of the love of God in us that motivates and enables us to reach out past self-centeredness to actively give of self to help another.