

Notes for the Ones Called-Out to Meet

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The Practical Nature of Agapē

by Dan Trygg

“Agapē does not easily blow up with anger, agapē is concerned for the welfare and comfort of others, does not selfishly want what others have, agapē does not excessively praise itself, is not conceited, does not behave inappropriately, does not seek its own things, is not irritable, does not place to one's account the evil. It does not rejoice upon the unjust act (i.e., another's misfortune or mistreatment), but rejoices with others at the truth (i.e., their vindication); covers all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures (remains-under) all things. The agapē never falls down...”

I Corinthians 13:4-8a

“We know agapē by this, that He laid down His life for us; and we are obligated to also to lay down our lives for the brothers and sisters. But whoever has the world's goods, and beholds his brother or sister in need and closes his heart against them, how does the agapē of God abide in that person? Little children, let us not agapē with word or with tongue, but in deed and truth.”

I John 3:16-18

As we have seen, agapē is not an emotion, a warm feeling, or an abstract concept. It is the expressed intention of the will, ...a decisive commitment of self to benefit another, ...the sustained choice to value, esteem and prefer someone else out of the magnanimous fullness of your own heart in Christ.

We first come to clearly see agapē in the commitment of God's heart expressed in salvation history, most clearly seen in the decisive commitment of the Eternal Word to lay aside privilege, power, and prestige to become a human being in order to free us from the bondage of sin and death (Phil. 2:5-11). God loved (agapē) the world (i.e., He chose to value and esteem us) in such a way that propelled Him into action on our behalf. Jesus, the Word having become flesh, continued to carry out that commitment, leading Him to lay down His life on our behalf. Even now, His sustained choice to value us is apparent in that we remain at the forefront of His attention. He continues to invest Himself for our benefit, "since He ever lives to make intercession for us" (Heb 7:25), and He has gone to "prepare a place for us" (Jn. 14:2,3). He is making preparations for His return to bring us to Himself, so that we might be with Him in glory. Ever mindful of our needs, He has sent the Holy Spirit to be our Helper during this time, devoting His energies to our protection and maturation (Jn. 14:16,17). He has also assigned His angels to serve us and protect us (Heb. 1:14). In fact He has allocated to us everything of His Divine power that pertains to life and godliness, so that we might become sharers in His own nature (II Pet. 1:3,4). His commitment of agapē is without reservation. **He is unremittingly on our side. Having given us His greatest gift, He assures us that there is nothing that He would withhold from us, if it were beneficial to our growth in Him** (Rom. 8:31,32; Psa. 84:11). The Lord's unrestrained commitment of Himself and His resources to us is total, and without grudgingness or limit. Agapē is as agapē does.

Let us stop and reflect for a moment on what Jesus did when it says that He "laid down His life for us". As His followers, **we have been called to agapē one another even as Jesus has shown His agapē for us.** "This is My commandment in order that you might love one another, just as I have loved you. Greater agapē has no one than this, that one lay down His life for his friends" (Jn. 15:12,13). The most obvious, and dramatic, application of this would be to willingly sacrifice our own lives to enable others to live. While this is true, by drawing out the most extreme scenario we often miss the practical everyday applications of this verse. The language of the verse is much more practical for seeing the connection to the relationships and challenges we face everyday. The word translated as "life" here in this verse is the Greek word, psuchē, which means "natural life, soul, or self". The word translated as "lay down" simply means to "place or put". The form of this verb, furthermore, indicates that the action occurs at a point in time, i.e., it is episodic, not continual. The "no greater love" of this verse is given "in order that someone might place his or her self on behalf of their friends". The application is much broader than the extreme, melodramatic scenario of dying in someone else's place. The focus of the word for "self, or natural life" refers to our personal identity, our self with all our resources here in this world. **To "place our self on behalf of the other person" means that we invest our selves to meet their needs.** It means that instead of being preoccupied with a natural self-fulfillment, or self-gratification, we are willing to delay, defer, or put off immediate gratification in order to invest in another (cf. Jn. 12:24-25). We put ourselves (our attention, our interest, our abilities, our resources) at the disposal of another, dedicating ourselves to meet their need. We choose to value and esteem them important enough to stop our natural, self-interested agenda and apply our energy and resources to lift up another in some form or fashion.

As we look at the verses above, we note **two general areas of application: the relational and the physical**. The I Corinthians passage deals more with the relational side, while the I John passage deals with the physical side. Both areas present a challenge to agapē. In both scenarios, to choose to value the other person means to set aside, defer, put off, or expend a bit of my natural self. If I am going to agapē, I must stop focusing on me, and direct my attention and concern toward what is beneficial to the other person. Make no mistake, to choose to agapē someone will cost you something. However, in this very act of self-deferment we are exercising our own courage, strength, and self-discipline, and we are becoming more like our Master. If our alignment is right, if this is truly something that originated from God-in-us, instead of a desire to gratify self by impressing others, then we become a channel of blessing and service to our friend, and in so doing we share in the Divine nature, experiencing His energy, power, vitality, and joy-in-giving.

Back to the application, to "place one's self on behalf of one's friends" becomes very down to earth and pragmatic, as we go through these passages. For example, on **the relational** front, reading through the verses in I Cor. 13, I am impressed at how much **agapē is concerned for the well being and comfort of the other person**. It means that instead of seeking my own comfort, I will be willing to choose what is comfortable for the other person. To "place my soul" at a point in time means that I will restrain myself from expressing anger and irritation, because those things that might offend my natural self are insignificant in comparison with the importance of edifying and serving the needs of my friend. Because my interest is in the welfare of the other person, I am not concerned about comparing myself with them. My resources, meager though they may be, are at the ready to serve my brother or sister, for their good. Because I am interested in building them up, and making them feel important and valuable, I invest myself in listening to them. I have no need to pump up myself. My adequacy, my identity, and my resources come from God, who has given me the opportunity to use them to serve this person, not compete with him or her. Because I desire to express that, I choose to give preference to this other person. I adjust myself to what is comfortable and edifying to them. I will not embarrass them, or "walk on them" in any way, though it may require that I set aside my normal way of speaking and acting. My choice to value them is made evident by my adjustment to their limitations or preferences in areas that not morally wrong. Since I am there to serve them, to seek their good before God, I will not be easily provoked to anger, nor vengeful or judgmental. I will want what brings them good, and sorrow with them in their pain. Out of respect for them I will cover their faults from those who have no need to know them, and will relentlessly trust and expect growth and change in their lives. Through every challenge to love, ...every expense, offense, or self-sacrificial act, I will remain constantly ready to give forgiveness, support, encouragement and assistance, ...because I choose to value this person. Because I look to God as *my* source of affirmation, strength and provision, I can volunteer to continue to give of myself. He will meet my needs.

Regarding **caring for people's physical needs**, how can we say we value someone, and allow them to continue to live without food or shelter? How can we say we love someone, and not care for their comfort and well-being? How can we say we choose to prefer someone, to lift them up, but leave them stuck in a problem that we might easily resolve, or that together we can alleviate? Giving of our time, energy, or financial resources are verification that what we *say* is true, ...namely that we care enough to stand behind people when they have needs. To do this, we must give out of our "natural life". There is only so much of ourselves to go around, ...so many hours in a day, so many dollars in the checkbook. If we are going to value people enough to help them when they have needs, we will probably have to put off, defer, or put aside some of our own immediate interests. It is amazing, however, with God as our Provider and Source, how He is able to care for us, and give us contentment along with what we need.

As we read the record of the book of Acts, we clearly see that **both of these areas of application of agapē were in evidence in the early church**. As they valued and cared for one another, an environment was created where people found it safe to share openly from their hearts. They were respected and esteemed, no matter the background or social standing. As needs became known, those who had resources made them available to their brothers and sisters. Thus, "they were taking their meals together in gladness and sincerity of heart, praising God, and having favor with all the people. And the Lord was adding to their number day by day those who were being saved" (Acts 2:46,47). Agapē is an attractive thing, something we all desire. To see it lived out consistently in a tangible, practical ways is a powerful testimony that we are for real, and that Jesus is who He claimed to be (Jn. 13:34,35; 17:22,23).

The health, vitality and growth of the early church was the result of agapē in action in these areas.