

Notes for the Ones Called-Out to Meet

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A Reputation of Love

By Dan Trygg

“This is why, since I heard about your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love for all the saints, ¹⁶ I never stop giving thanks for you...” Ephesians 1:15,16

“We always thank God, ...when we pray for you, ⁴ for we have heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love you have for all the saints... Epaphras... has told us of your love in the Spirit.” Colossians 1:3,4,8

“But now Timothy has come to us from you and brought us good news about your faith and love...” 1 Thessalonians 3:6

“I always thank my God when I mention you in my prayers, ⁵ because I hear of your love and faith toward the Lord Jesus and for all the saints. ⁶ I pray that your participation in the faith may become effective (in-working, powerful, operative) in the recognition (true-knowledge) of every good thing that is in us for Christ.” Philemon 1:4-6

“Beloved, you are doing your faith by whatever you do for the fellow-believers, and this for strangers! ⁶ They have testified to your love before the church. You will do well to send them on their journey in a manner worthy of God, ⁷ since they set out for the sake of the name, accepting nothing from pagans. ⁸ Therefore, we ought to support such people, so that we can be co-workers with the truth.” 3 John 1:5-8

Remember what passage we focused on when we initiated our study-series on *agapē*-love? It was 1 Timothy 1:5, “Now the goal of our instruction is *agapē*-love out-from a clean heart, a good conscience, and an unhypocritical faith.” **Why did Paul see *agapē*-love as the “goal” or “end-point”, the mark of maturity? Because Jesus Himself had identified this as *the premier sign or evidence that we are following Him.* He said, “By *this*, shall all people know that you are My disciples, if you have *agapē*-love for one another” (Jn. 13:35). **How gratifying it must have been to have reports coming to him from various places that confirmed that *the people he had led to Christ, and the faith-fellowships he initiated, were bearing the precious fruit of *agapē*-love!* It was the best evidence of the effectiveness of his ministry, that those who he had impacted for Christ had matured to the place where **they were not only walking in love, but walking in a quality and degree of *agapē*-love that was worth talking about!** The depth, extent and nature of their love was *striking*, ...so much so that visitors who had stopped in among them thought it noteworthy enough to bring it up in conversation, ...or in their reports to Paul. **As a result of these reports, Paul was moved to deep gratitude to God for the growth and health that was evident in these people, and he was driven to his knees in ongoing prayer for them.******

Notice that **in all five of these passages love is paired with faith.** In each church community not only *love* was evident, but so was their *faith*. The report that reached Paul’s (or, John’s) ears spoke of the noticeable faith that these believers had. **What does faith look like? How would you know that someone has faith? Faith only is made evident as it is *expressed* in words or deeds.** James says, “What use is it if a person *says* he has faith, but has no works?” He goes on to say that **he would *show* a person his faith by means of his actions** (James 2:18).

The example that James gives for showing the *reality of faith* is almost exactly the same as John used in 1 John 3:17 to demonstrate the *reality of *agapē*-love.* A person who *sees* someone in need, and does not *do* anything to help him, does not have genuine, healthy faith (James 2:15,16), ...or at least his faith produces nothing of practical benefit. Similarly, John says that “If a person has the world’s goods, and *sees* his brother in need, and closes his heart against him (and does not *do* anything to help him), how does the love of God abide in that person?” (1 Jn. 3:17) **Both faith and love are made visible by the *actions* of the person who claims to believe in Jesus. The relation of faith to love is expressed by Paul in Galatians 5:6, “For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision accomplishes anything; *what matters is faith working through love.*” **Religious rituals, practices or formalism are *not* what is important. What God is looking for from us is “faith working through love”, or, “faith operating through love”. When *that* happens, then **both faith and love become visible in the actions they produce.** Then, like the faith of Abraham (in James 2:22), “...faith works-together-with (co-works) his works, and out from the works the faith is completed.” The same could be said of the love. **Faith working through love *co-works*, resulting in actions, and thus both faith and love are given full expression.** The word for “completed” in this verse can also be “matured”. The completion or maturity of faith and love are made visible through *the actions* they produce.****

Thus, in each of these faith communities, *the love of God was made visible in the actions of the believers.* Note that **the focus of these passages is on *agapē*-love expressed toward one another within the Christian community.** That is not to say that some of them may have also shown such love to outsiders, but ***the focus, ...the nexus for love to grow, flourish and become most evident..., is within and among the people of God.* Doesn’t this**

statement bring us right back to Jesus' words from John 13:34,35, "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." Clearly, **Jesus is directing our attention toward loving each other as fellow-disciples. It is through the love made visible in our relationships with each other that people will see something that is supernatural, ...something that is truly of God.**

The community dimension of this is important. If you met one or two *individuals* who were exceptionally loving and kind, that is one thing, ...but **when you meet an entire community, where this kind of love is coming from virtually everyone, the power of that kind of corporate witness is compelling!** Jesus knew that, and thus directed the first and primary focus for our love and service toward valuing and helping *one another* in Him.

As Timothy, or Epaphras, or others visited these gatherings of Christians, spent time with them, they could see the evidence of agapē-love expressed in actions of care and upbuilding toward one another. It stood out as quite noticeable.

It was evident in the patient, kind interaction between people,

...the lack of competitiveness or self-promotion,

...the gracious consideration for one another and respectful interaction,

...the inoffensive and forgiving relationships that kept people united together,

...the positive delight in what is right and honest in dealings with each other,

...the ability to tolerate and overlook failures and faults in the hope and expectation of a deepening Christlikeness.

It was apparent that these people were committed to each other,

...through thick and thin,

...and were willing to persevere in helping each other grow in Christ.

...and face the challenges and struggles of life *together*.

In a world of impatient self-seeking, harsh and vulgar exchanges between people, ...where offense is easily taken, bitterness is nursed, and unforgiveness divides relationships of every kind, ...where people commonly cheat and lie to one another, ...and where people are quick to cut people off and cast them aside for minor offenses, **agapē-love in a community or network of relationships would stand out like a cool, fresh breeze on a sweltering day, ...like light in the midst of darkness, ...like a cup of cold water to a thirsty soul.**

People develop a reputation for some quality when it characterizes their behavior repetitively and consistently. In the case of these Christian networks of relationships that Timothy or Epaphras visited, **they saw the characteristics of agapē-love lived-out and expressed over and over again.** These church families had succeeded in developing a level of spiritual depth and consistency that had fostered a *culture of agapē-love* in their midst. **As people learned to walk in the Spirit, and express love to one another, it became the norm. People expected others to operate in love, and they helped each other learn to do that.** Isn't that what Paul had *said* would happen, when people learned to build up and serve one another in the Body? – "...trusting in love, we are to grow up in all aspects into Him, who is the head, even Christ, from whom **the whole body**, being fitted and held together by that which every joint supplies, according to the proper working of each individual part, **causes the growth of the body for the building up of itself in love**" (Eph. 4:15-16). As people deeply developed their personal interactions with Jesus, and learned to respond to and express the leading of the Spirit toward one another, *agapē-love* became a notable outcome. **As visitors came into the midst of these people who were living by the Spirit of God, they saw and experienced the grace and love of God expressed toward one another, and toward THEM, even though they were outsiders and strangers.** They saw it over and over again, as they observed and experienced the interactions with these believers. **The unusual depth of the quality and the consistent nature of the agapē they experienced was notable, and they couldn't help but talk about it to others,** when they left.

That is the final component of developing a reputation: Not only does there need to be a notable and consistent quality in the lives of those who will receive a reputation, but this experience must be impressive enough that those who visit will be compelled to talk about their experience there. They must identify what was impressive, and they must communicate to others.

What do you want to be the impressive identifying characteristic of your faith community? **Faith will be seen by what we do. As we put our faith into action by choosing to value, esteem, care for and invest in each other, ...helping one another grow toward Christ and assisting one another through the struggles of life..., may the agapē-love of God become the impressive, consistent characteristic of our lives, and our reputation, ...for the glory of God!**