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Distinctives Of Love

By Dan Trygg

"...the focal point of the instruction is love (*agapē*) 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

The word translated as "love" in this verse is the Greek word, *agapē*. It was one of several words in their language that could be used to more carefully delineate various kinds of "love". **In English, we have only one word, which we employ to cover a wide range of meanings.** The imprecision of our vocabulary leaves room for much misunderstanding and miscommunication when speaking about "love". There is a certain amount of vagueness that originates from this problem. For example, when I say, "I love chocolate", I mean that I really enjoy the flavor of it. When someone says, "I love my country", this definition no longer fits. Here, what is probably meant is more a kind of loyalty, combined with nostalgic affection. For a man to "love" a woman can mean very different things, depending on the context. It could be a deep friendship and appreciation for the person, or it could refer to a sexual encounter that is purely lust-driven and pleasure-seeking on only an emotional-physical level. The two could be complete strangers, and not even share their identity with each other, yet we still refer to that encounter as "love", or as "making love". Then, when you add to the blurriness of our term, the cultural propaganda which idealizes and promotes a certain kind of love, i.e., the romantic "in love" feeling of infatuation, the potential for confusion is huge.

In addition to the cultural myths and messages of our general population, various church groups have somewhat differing notions or models of love. The way "love for God" is talked about, sung about, and expressed creates an expectation, undefined and nebulous though it may be, of what it is we are looking to find in a "love relationship with God". The same can be said for the expectation created concerning "love for one another". Often, we "pick up" our notion of what Christian love for one another is supposed to look like by watching what is done by people in the Christian community with whom we "hang out", or identify. Why not? This chameleon-like tendency of attempting to discern and "fit in" with the surrounding context is what we do everywhere else in our society when we use the "L-word". Why would our approach be different here, if we are not prompted to be more discerning? **The slop of our terminology teaches us to supply meaning from what we perceive to be the surrounding context.**

We tend to read *our* cultural definitions into our study of the Bible, even though the Biblical world was very different. **Cultures tend to develop precise terminology to describe more clearly concepts that are of great importance to daily life, or are highly valued and discussed.** For example, the Inuit Eskimo culture near the Arctic circle have twenty-one specific words for snow. There is a great need to be able to communicate precisely what kind of snow conditions exist in their culture. There is snow that is good for building igloos, snow that is crusty and strong enough to walk on, snow that is powdery, snow that is wet, snow that is treacherous to walk upon due to hidden fissures in the sea ice, etc. Because these peoples' very survival depends upon accurately communicating the nature of snow conditions, they developed a very precise vocabulary of specific words to communicate the necessary nuances. We may be able to communicate these in English by using a phrase, or even an explanatory paragraph, but we do not have words that are capable of carrying the same meaning as their twenty-one different terms. In another example, our modern society is continually developing new terminology to specifically describe advances in technology. Because these technological advances are driving our economy, and have become so much a part of our everyday lives, we have created or redefined terms with specific meanings that communicate accurately these different nuances. This specific vocabulary becomes painfully evident when a novice attempts to go shopping for a computer, or seeks to upgrade his old system. Suddenly, he or she is propelled into a world of precise terminology which is unfamiliar. To use a more basic, generic vocabulary no longer is adequate. Entire phrases or sentences are required for this shopper to begin to communicate with the

salesman or technician, who translates it into a much more specific and precise lingo which is understandable to other "computer heads".

The Greek culture, having highly valued philosophical discourse and the discussion of ideas, developed a much more specific vocabulary in this area. The Greek language of the New Testament had been honed by centuries of philosophical debate and articulation. The language had been specifically adapted to communicate abstract thought, ideas, emotions, etc. in a precise manner. Due to this value on the human intellectual and emotional experience, they **had developed four words to delineate different aspects or nuances of "love"**:

1.) Eros -- a passionate love which desires someone (or something) for itself. **The essence of this type of love is self-fulfillment, self-gratification.** It desires the other for the intoxicating experience which seems to lift the self to a new level of awareness and pleasure. It could be sensual, emotional, or even religiously ecstatic.

This form of love is named after the Greek god, Eros. **Eros was the Greek god of love, passion and fertility**, whose Roman counterpart was Cupid. The power of Eros lay in his ability to compel a person to become struck with desire for another, ...a passion so overwhelming and compulsive that reason, reflection, and prudence are often cast aside in the driven, fixated need to obtain the object of one's desire. In a culture that exalted reflection as one of the highest gifts given to humankind, *eros*-love was at once both a fearsome and horrific loss of all reason, but also an incredibly blissful experience to be desired by all men. **The heart of Eros worship was to burst through the restraint of rationality to an intoxication beyond reason or senses**, ...a feeling of transcendent union beyond one's own life. This ecstatic experience that transported the worshiper beyond himself is at the heart of much of ancient Greek religion. Eros worship, along with many of the so-called "mystery religions", employed fertility rites and temple prostitutes (male *and* female) as a method to not only honor Eros, but also to propel the followers into this state of ecstasy. **The experience of intoxication, or ecstasy, was the purpose and goal of pagan Greek religion.** A god, or goddess, was served for what he or she could *give* to the worshipers, ...in their present experience, or in terms of future prosperity..., as a promised subsequent result of the service offered to the god or goddess. **The term, eros, is never used in the Bible.** This kind of love is studiously avoided, any reference to it shunned. This was a conscious decision, since this was *the prevalent term* for religious love in the Greek culture.

2.) Phileos -- a tender affection, i.e., to like, enjoy, be fond of, or to delight in someone, or something. In a relationship, it is **a love characterized by mutuality, interaction, and enjoyment of the other person.** It is not an intoxication which overcomes a person, but a warmth that grows with positive experiences from the other person. It is **devotion based upon emotional affinity.** Since it is an emotion, it is never commanded of us in the NT.

3.) Storgē -- a love of kindred, **a family bond**, characterized by both a natural affection for, and a loyal, protective concern on behalf of, those in a person's family circle. The maxim, "**blood is thicker than water**", roughly identifies the same kind of love. Though you may not "like" (*phileō*) a brother or sister, there is still a place of concern and protectiveness which one has *because* they are family. The source of affinity is based a common place of identity, not out of self-desire, or relational enjoyment.

4.) Agapē -- **a devotion to another person based upon choice; a commitment to value, esteem, to lift up and give preference to this person above others.** It can be defined as the consistent direction of your own self-will toward another's well-being. It is a love, devotedness, kindly concern or loyalty to a person's interest that is *not* based upon an emotional feeling, or even a group affinity. **The essence of the word itself is that it makes a distinctive choice to value and to serve.** Love is *seen* by what love *does*. **Agapē is a love that acts.**

To better understand the nature of this concept of love, it is helpful to distinguish it from *eros*, with which we are more familiar. The contrasts help to clarify and set apart *agapē* from our other ideas of what love is. These comparisons are from the article on *agapē* by E. Stauffer found in the *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, edited by Gerhard Kittel (Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company: Grand Rapids, MI 1964), *Vol. I*, pp. 36-39.

Comparison of Eros and Agapē Love

EROS

A general love seeking satisfaction wherever it can find it.

Determined by a more or less indefinite impulsion towards its object.

Seeks in others the fulfillment of its own life hungers.

Eros is a universal love, generous, unbound by commitment, and non-selective.

In its highest, religious sense, it is used of the upward impulsion of man, of his love for the divine, especially of the seeking to be fulfilled in union with God.

Consciously used to describe an upsoaring love, a desire to transcend oneself in an emotional, orgasmic experience.

An experience which transports a person beyond rationality into blissful self-fulfillment.

The original form of erotic religion is sensual intoxication, and the supreme form is ecstasy.

AGAPĒ

A love which makes distinctions, choosing and keeping to its object.

A free and decisive act determined by the subject, i.e., the chooser.

Must often be translated "to show love"; it is a giving, active love on the other's behalf.

The essence of agapē is that it selects, commits, and remains faithful to the person.

Agapē is God's love within, a love of the higher lifting up the lower, a desire to elevate others above oneself.

Consciously used to describe a condescending, serving love; a reaching beyond one's self-comfort to extend help to others.

A free choice by which a person lowers him/herself into practical, wise, well-thought acts of service to fulfill another.

The original expression of faith working through agapē is the choice to value another person, ultimately being willing to "lay down your life for your friend" in self-sacrifice.