

The Challenge of “Agape” Love

By [Wayne Jackson](#)

The New Testament was written in Koine Greek. The word *Koine* denotes “common,” because this style of Greek was the language of the common man-on-the-street during the time of Christ.

Koine Greek came into vogue about 300 years before the birth of Jesus, and it became an obsolete language about three centuries after the Lord’s death. It was the most precise instrument for the conveyance of human thought that the world has ever known.

Without doubt, this language was providentially employed by God in giving the world the New Testament revelation of his Son.

The “Love” Vocabulary

Koine Greek had several words representing different aspects of love. *Eros* generally had to do with **sexual love**. From this term derives the English “erotic.” This word, however, is **never** found in the New Testament.

Then there was the noun *storge*. This term was primarily employed of **family affection**. Paul used a negative form of it in describing the base traits of certain pagans of his day. He spoke of those who were “without natural affection” (*astorgous* — Romans 1:31).

A very common word for love during the apostolic age was *philia*. It is the word of genuine affection — heartfelt love. It is seen in the name, Philadelphia (brotherly love). Jesus had this kind of love for his closest disciple, John (John 20:2), and for Lazarus (John 11:3).

The noblest form of love, however, was *agape*. William Barclay, in his superb discussion of this word, noted:

Agape has to do with the mind: it is not simply an emotion which rises unbidden in our hearts; it is a principle by which we **deliberately** live (1974, 21, emphasis added).

It is the kind of love that we must have for all men — even our enemies (Matthew 5:44). The Christian must always act out of love, i.e., in the best interest of his fellow human beings.

1 Corinthians 13 — The “Love” Chapter

Unquestionably, the most exhaustive treatment of what this kind of love involves is found in 1 Corinthians 13. Within this context, the inspired apostle gives more than a dozen descriptives which regulate the operation of *agape* love.

And what a challenge they are. To study them carefully is to come to the rude awakening of how far we fall short of measuring up to the divine ideal of concern for others. The following is the sacred text as it appears in the English Standard Version.

Love is patient and kind; love does not envy or boast; it is not arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends (1 Cor. 13:4-8a).

The Context

A word must be said regarding the context in which *agape* is employed in this epistle. By the imposition of apostolic hands (cf. Acts 8:18; 2 Corinthians 9:2), some members of the Corinthian church had been granted certain supernatural gifts (e.g., the gift of healing, speaking in a foreign language, translating a foreign tongue, etc.; cf. 1 Corinthians 12:8-11).

Some of these Corinthian gift-holders, however, were **abusing** their spiritual privileges — exercising the signs as an end within themselves, and not out of regard for their family in the Lord.

For example, sometimes there would be multiple verbal presentations simultaneously, creating a climate of confusion (cf. 1 Corinthians 14:29-33). That was hardly conducive to learning.

In addition, the apostle noted that the time was coming when these gifts would be **removed** from the church's possession. When the revelatory process was completed (with the finished product of the New Testament), **miraculous gifts would cease** (1 Corinthians 13:8ff — see [What Does the Bible Say About Miracles?](#)).

The discussion of “love” thus serves a twofold function in 1 Corinthians 13. First, it seeks to regulate selfish abuses of spiritual gifts; second, love's abiding nature is contrasted with the temporal character of miraculous gifts.

In the balance of this discussion, we will reflect upon the quality of **agape** love as described in this context.

The Character of Love

Long-suffering

The word **makrothumei** literally hints of taking a long time to get angry! In the New Testament, it has to do with how one should respond to abuse. Love patiently waits and attempts to win over one's adversary.

William Barclay tells the following enlightening story. Edwin Stanton was the bitter opponent of Abraham Lincoln in the early days of their political careers. Stanton characterized the awkward-looking Lincoln as a clown, a gorilla, etc.

When Lincoln became president, however, he appointed Stanton as his secretary of war, because he felt that he was the best man for the job.

Later, when President Lincoln lay dead from Booth's bullet, at the bedside Stanton tearfully said: “There lies the greatest ruler of men the world has ever seen.” *Patience had conquered* (1956, 133).

Kind

A wise man declared: “That which makes a man to be desired is his kindness” (Proverbs 19:22). Kindness includes attributes like friendliness, compassion, generosity, and tenderness. To be kind is to be God-like (Luke 6:35).

In a world that is saturated with harshness, a kind disposition is a refreshing breeze. There are many a woman who would trade a handsome husband for a kind one. Kindness would stifle the plague of child abuse.

More kindness among brothers in the Lord would alleviate so much church trouble. The Scriptures demand that we be kind to one another (Ephesians 4:32).

Not Envious

The consuming flames of jealousy are as cruel as hell (Song of Solomon 8:6).

What is jealousy? Jealousy is a feeling of displeasure caused by the prosperity of another, coupled with a desire to wrest the advantage from the person who is the object of one's envy.

The loving person will rejoice at the success of others. Jealousy has destroyed many a home and church. Envy was one of the sins responsible for the death of Christ (Matthew 27:18; cf. Acts 7:9; 17:5).

Not Boastful

“Let another man praise you, and not your own mouth” (Proverbs 27:2).

Is there anyone more of a bore than a braggart?

Genuine love is selfless. It seeks to extol the virtues of others. Love has words of encouragement for the lonely, the downtrodden, and others who deserve and need uplifting.

But some are ever tooting their own horns. When a windbag preacher boasts that were it not for his efforts the whole brotherhood of Christ would be immersed in apostasy, one cannot but be reminded of this descriptive.

Not Arrogant

The original language here denotes one who is inflated with a sense of personal pride. Pride is unreasonable self-esteem, generally accompanied by insolence and rude treatment of others. It deceives the heart (Jeremiah 49:16), hardens the mind (Daniel 5:20), and results in destruction (Proverbs 16:18).

Love is characterized by genuine humility.

Not Rude

The Greek expression here literally suggests the notion of being “without form.” It encompasses all sorts of evil activity, bad manners, and brutal rudeness. Love doesn’t deliberately seek to be offensive.

Have you known anyone who took pride in his ability to bludgeon others? The Christian’s vocabulary should be characterized by such expressions as, “No, you first,” “Please,” “Thank you,” “How may I help you?” etc.

Love operates with determined politeness. The terms “gentleman” and “lady” should reach their zenith in the context of Christianity.

Not Egocentric

The meaning is: love does not pursue its own interests. Love is not selfish.

It has been said that there are two kinds of people: those who are always thinking of their rights, and those who concentrate on their responsibilities. Ours is an age of woeful selfishness.

Everyone is protective of their own rights, but in far too many instances the disposition evolves into an attitude that says: “Let others fend for themselves; I’m looking after ‘Number One.’” After all, it’s a jungle out there—a dog-eat-dog world.

Whence came the origin of this fang-and-claw philosophy?

Satan adopted it first, and he was followed by a long line of henchmen, e.g., Darwin, Nietzsche, Lenin, Hitler, et al.

By way of stark contrast was the sacrificial example of the Son of God (Philippians 2:5-8), the apostle Paul (2 Corinthians 12:15), Timothy (Philippians 2:20), and numerous souls since those ancient times. Love thinks of others and seeks to serve.

Not Quickly Provoked

Love does not have a short fuse; it does not stroll about with a chip on its shoulder.

Some folks are cocked, just ready to explode. Their day is ruined if someone does not provide the opportunity for them to give a piece of their mind.

Genuine love does everything possible to avoid combat. If conflict for truth has to come, so be it; but one should not live in the “objective case and kickative mood!”

Not a “Record-Keeper” of Mistakes

This descriptive does not mean that love ignores evil. That view would contradict numerous other passages of Scripture. There are times when evil must be exposed, rebuked, and disciplined.

The Greek word for “account” is from *logizomai*, a commercial expression which suggests writing a transaction in the record so as not to forget it.

Love does not keep score, as in, “Three times this month he has neglected to speak to me.” The one who says, “I must forgive you, but I will never forget what you did,” has miserably failed the test of agape.

Love does not harbor bitterness nor does it plot revenge.

No Pleasure in Wrong, Only in Truth

Since love always seeks the good of others, it can never rejoice when evil prevails.

When a brother falls — even an obnoxious one — we should never entertain secret thoughts of satisfaction. Rejoicing in moral wickedness is at variance with biblical love and does not have humanity’s welfare at heart.

For example, those who exult in parades for “gay rights,” or who gleefully celebrate the liberalization of abortion laws, have utterly no perception of what real love is.

Divine love cannot be divorced from objective truth.

Supportive

The verb *stego* conveys the picture of one object on top of another, thus hinting of either support (by the lower object) or concealment (by the upper object) (Vine 1951, 132). The ideas are not mutually exclusive — especially in this context.

Love supports, uplifts those who are in need of such.

Jesus was constantly in trouble with his Jewish critics because of his encouragement of the downtrodden (cf. Luke 15:1ff).

Moreover, one who operates out of love will cover (i.e., be slow to expose) the mistakes of another.

Love “would far rather set about quietly mending things than publicly displaying and rebuking them” (Barclay 1956, 137). It is unfortunate that some are militant to expose and rebuke, but so stubbornly resistant to forgiving.

Of course there may be a time for the open exposure of wrong (cf. 1 Corinthians 5:1ff; 1 Timothy 5:20), but this is certainly not the initial procedure. The loving soul does not froth at the bit at the prospect of such an adventure!

Trusts

This does not mean that love is gullible. Believing error is both wrong and dangerous (cf. 2 Thessalonians 2:11-12). Rather, the apostle has something else in mind.

The sense of the verb *pisteuo* (believes) here is probably that of trusting (J. B. Phillips, *The New Testament in Modern English*). The word can surely have that meaning (cf. John 2:24), and that seems to be indicated here.

Love will give the benefit of the doubt.

When you hear a distasteful report concerning a fellow Christian, do you hesitate to believe it until the evidence is overwhelming

In these times when error is so rampant in the church, we must resist the temptation to be quickly and recklessly suspicious. It is never proper to shoot first and ask questions later. We should strive to be more trusting of our loved ones in Christ.

Hopes

Love is optimistic; it entertains the highest expectations.

Sometimes we see a struggling brother and perhaps think: “He will never make it.” Whereas we ought to say, “I believe that with God’s assistance — and mine — he will make it!”

If we must err on the pessimism/optimism scale, let us err in the direction of hope.

Endures

Even when adversity challenges again and again, love continues to operate. **Agape** is tough. It is not easily discouraged. It may, on occasion, have a bloody head; nonetheless, it keeps its face in the wind and forges ahead.

True love does not give up — on God, or on others.

Never Ends

The apostle concludes by affirming that **agape** “never ends.”

Conclusion

Again we must emphasize: no one can see his reflection in these words without embarrassment.

The divine dictionary of love will be a lifetime challenge, but the demonstration of this virtue will evince that we are truly the Lord’s disciples (John 13:35).

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Works Cited

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- Barclay, William. 1974. *New Testament Words*. Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Press.
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Scripture References

Romans 1:31; John 20:2; John 11:3; Matthew 5:44; 1 Corinthians 13; 1 Corinthians 13:4-8; Acts 8:18; 2 Corinthians 9:2; 1 Corinthians 12:8-11; 1 Corinthians 14:29-33; 1 Corinthians 13:8; Proverbs 19:22; Luke 6:35; Ephesians 4:32; Matthew 27:18; Acts 7:9, 17:5; Proverbs 27:2; Jeremiah 49:16; Daniel 5:20; Proverbs 16:18; Philippians 2:5-8; 2 Corinthians 12:15; Philippians 2:20; Luke 15:1; 1 Corinthians 5:1; 1 Timothy 5:20; 1 Thessalonians 2:11-12; John 2:24; John 13:35

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