

# 25

## LOVE

### Background: the different kinds of 'love'

'Love' is a term that is often encountered in Christian theology and ethics. However, we must note at the outset that as a word in the English language it is very ambiguous, covering disparate meanings. It is used to translate a number of different words from the Greek New Testament, each of which has a different meaning in the original language there. So there is scope for a great deal of confusion and misunderstanding.

In biblical usage there is a strongly moral sense to this word – something often forgotten by those who sentimentalise biblical references to the love of God (of which there are fewer than many Christians imagine). Of the Greek words that are now loosely translated as 'love', *eros* (sexual attraction/love) does not appear in the New Testament. The Greek *phileo*, signifying natural affection (with more feeling than reason) occurs twenty-five times, with *philadelphia* (brotherly love) five times, and *philia* (friendship) occurring in James 4:4, but also, very importantly (from the same *phileo* root) in the last two of Jesus' three questions addressed to Peter in John 21. By far the most frequent Greek biblical word translated into English as 'love' is *agape*, generally taken to signify a moral good rather than attraction. *Agape* includes doing good to the undeserving and the unattractive person. It can involve meeting a need. The difference between *agape* and *phileo* may be difficult to comprehend in all passages.<sup>1</sup>

True love does not come naturally to fallen man (e.g. the love that causes a man to pray for his enemies; Matthew 5:44). Love in its highest 'agape' form has been revealed in the Lord Jesus Christ.

John writes that 'God is [agape] love' (1 John 4:8, 16) but he is not thereby saying that love is all that God is. Rather, this statement is a message addressed to believers (as, of course, epistles are); the context is relational – the relationship between the believer and God – and has to do with believing, and confessing Jesus, and abiding in him. It is made clear that the love of which God is the perfect source is to be reflected in the lives of his people.

The way each of the persons of the Holy Trinity relates to the other two persons is love, so love is in the godhead. We take from this great truth that it was not loneliness that prompted God to create human beings in his image, rather it was his will to share his perfect love with others. This helps us to define the nature of love in its purest form. It is 'my best for another's best'. *Agape* love which should exist amongst believers towards each other, instead of being self-centred, is focused on the welfare of another person. This kind of loving is truly godly for it reflects something of the very nature of God himself. It also follows that failure to love like this is to fall short of the glory of God: it is sin (Romans 3:23). At the Fall, Adam and Eve put themselves at the centre instead of God and became tainted with sin (disobedience to God). The devil tempted them to sin; that sinfulness has been passed on to all of us (Romans 3:10–18). Thus there was a gulf between man and God to deal with, and only God could provide what we need. When Jesus Christ came into the world and gave his life as the sacrifice for our sin, that was *agape* love. Jesus, true God and true man, opened up the only way for man to have the righteousness without which it is impossible to relate to a perfectly holy God. God shows his love for us in that: 'While we were still sinners, Christ died for us' (see Romans 5:8). Jesus always put his Father first, and could say: "Whoever has seen me has seen the Father" (in John 14:8–11). Perfect love shows the character of Christ (see Ephesians 3:19). Love includes: praying for enemies, as we have seen, and putting the Lord first (see Matthew 10:37). It is patient, kind, and not envious, boastful, arrogant, rude, self-seeking, irritable, resentful (bearing grudges), and it is not glad when there is wrongdoing. Love is long-suffering, eager to believe the best, hopes in all circumstances, endures no matter what happens, and never comes to an end. (See 1 Corinthians 13:4–8). Love banishes fear (1 John 4:18), and does no wrong to a neighbour (Romans 13:10). Love delights in serving (Galatians 5:13). It is not worldly (see 1 John 2:15–17).

We cannot do all this in our *own* strength, for in our natural, fallen state we all tend to put ourselves and our interests before the good of others. Our own efforts are inadequate. Spiritual giftedness is no substitute for it (1 Corinthians 12:31–13:3); good works are no substitute for it (1 Corinthians 13:3; Titus 3:5); even a martyr's death is no substitute for it (1 Corinthians 13:3).

Godly love is of God and must be God's own doing in us through the Holy Spirit (Galatians 5:22–23). All need to be 'born again' of water and Spirit. We can then be aware of Christ in [us], 'the hope of glory' (see Colossians 1:27). The way of life and love is made available to sinners who repent and believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, who are baptised in Holy Spirit and go on being filled with the Holy Spirit. It is the calling of those who belong to Christ to live their lives in step with the Holy Spirit. As fruit grows unconsciously upon the branches of a tree, so *agape* love will grow and appear unconsciously in the personality of believers, as the Spirit works in their lives and they co-operate in that life. Fruit could not survive if it were only tied onto branches! In the same way, this really Christlike life of true love springs from regeneration – though, after regeneration, much sanctification and reforming of thinking has still to occur as we let our minds be renewed by God's word!

John 3:6–21; 13:35; 15:1–5; Romans 5:5; 8:35–39; Ephesians 2:4–6, 5:2; Philippians 2:12–13; 2 Timothy 1:13; 2 Peter 1:3–11; 3:18; 1 John 4:7–8, 16.

### **Love in the fellowship: a truly New Testament perspective**

We have said a good deal about the life of agape love that must mark the life of believers – and an extremely important point to note is that this is *corporate* as well as personal. Many commands of Jesus in the Gospels as well as the teachings of the apostles in the epistles, are *addressed to believers about relating to each other*. These instructions are to shape the life of churches (fellowships of Christians) teaching them about how brothers and sisters in Christ are to behave with one another. This is a salutary message, and often a dimension of New Testament teaching rather unfamiliar to believers today, who may be less aware of the corporate aspect of the fellowship of disciples in an individualistic age and culture. The New Testament teaching about love applies to every disciple of Jesus today personally, and to every group of Christians who meet together too.

### **Our agape love toward God: an essential that is easy to miss!**

We have considered *God's agape love* expressed in the single act in which he once gave his only-begotten Son as the perfect sacrifice for our sin so that we might not perish but instead have eternal life. We have also considered the agape love that believers in the fellowship are to have for each other. But there is another vital kind of agape love that disciples are to have: **the agape love of the believer toward Jesus Christ**. Again, this is a dimension which is often missed, yet it is essential in the Christian Way. What exactly is *this* kind of agape love? It is obviously somewhat different from God's love toward us, for as we have seen he has provided for our greatest need in the person of his Son Jesus Christ. God himself has no 'need' that we could meet as he is perfect and he owns everything anyway! Now there is a popular misconception about what our love toward God is (or should be) like. There is what has been termed a 'sentimental' view of the matter which says it is like being 'in love' with Jesus. However, that way of putting it is a usage in English which does not express the key that Jesus provided. Happily, Jesus did speak of the kind of love that every disciple is to have *toward God* and it is extremely simple – straightforward enough for even the most uneducated believer to understand and live out. Jesus said: "If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my [agape] love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love" (John 14:10); and, "If you love [agape] me, keep my commandments" (John 14:15). The message is clear: obedience is central. Moreover, it is a message directed to those who are already believers, so that they will continue, persevere, *abide* in (agape) love. They are not to fall into disobedience to God; they are not to wander away into a position of unbelief or to adopt immoral ways of behaving.

**It is recommended that the Bible student should study chapters 14–17 of John's Gospel with these three questions in mind: What did see Jesus say concerning the love God has towards the disciples, and about the love we are to have toward himself (Jesus), and about the love believers are to have toward each other?** Such study will reveal that the love of God is very far from being 'unconditional', a word that does not appear in scripture but which is often heard nowadays! Jesus often says "If...." Note carefully the points at which he does so, in order to understand and minister the word of truth faithfully to others.

So what of John 3:16, a verse considered by many to be the most important in the whole Bible, which includes the words '... for God so loved the world ...'? Once again, a problem arises in translation. The word often rendered 'so' means 'thus' and refers back to something else – the event referred to in John 3:14 in fact! From v. 14 we learn that God gave his Son *thus* – *in the same way* as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert. The snake on the pole in that context was used by God to provide a way sinners could avoid the death sentence for the sin of grumbling, for which they were being punished in the desert. That was why they were being killed by the snakes, as a punishment for their sin. 'Thus' or 'so' indicates how Jesus being lifted up (on the cross) is the only means by which humans may have their sins forgiven and so be freed from the sentence of death that sin deserves.

People tend to think that verse means God *loves* (in a continuous sense) the world so much that he gave his Son. But it really means that God acted once in the sacrifice of Jesus (in agape love), and the past aorist Greek tense is used, signifying a one-time act of love (meeting a need in unworthy sinners whose sins deserve death). The one sacrifice was sufficient to meet anyone's need for forgiveness if they would go on believing in Jesus. It is a verse which, when properly understood, encourages the believer to go on believing and so to go on having eternal life.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>For a full treatment of this vital subject, refer to a good Bible encyclopedia. The Baker Encyclopedia of the Bible is highly recommended. Some of the comments above are indebted to that publication, but have been adapted.

<sup>2</sup> See David Pawson, *Is John 3:16 the Gospel?* (Terra Nova Publications, 2007).