

What Love (*Agape*) Does In a Believing Heart

— *Ephesians 4:1-16* —

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Before we go further we need to see why Paul was so engrossed with the idea of *agape*. There is in it a “width and length and depth and height ... that [we] may be filled with all the fullness of God” (Eph. 3:18, 19). That would be nothing short of a preparation for translation at the second coming of Jesus! Ephesians is side-by-side “present truth” with Revelation.

Agape was the apostles’ one word that encapsulated the idea of the gospel. John said that “God is *agape*” (1 John 4:8). That word in their hearts “turned the world upside down” in the time of the apostles (cf. Acts 17:6). A Greek word, it meant little until the event of the cross of Christ imbued into it meaning that had never been known before, and distinguished it from the other words the Greeks had for “love.” There was a mysterious explosive in this spiritual bomb undreamed of by the world’s then-philosophers.

What shocked the world was the sudden realization that what they had been calling “love” was in reality veneered selfishness. The human psyche was stripped naked by this revelation. If you welcomed the new idea, you became clothed with *agape* yourself; if you rejected it, you became its bitter opponent and persecutor. There was nothing the Enemy of Christ hated more than the proclamation of this truth. When the young church

was established, the infiltration of ideas from paganism attacked *agape* and brought about the great “falling away” from the gospel that has characterized history the last two millennia (cf. 2 Thess. 2:3-7).

Here are a few of the contrasts between *agape* and the popular idea of love:

1. Our human love depends for its existence on the beauty or goodness of its object.

In contrast, *agape* loves bad people, even our enemies.

2. Our human love rests on a sense of need, an emptiness within that longs to be filled.

Agape knows no need, loves out of its infinite wealth. God doesn’t love us because He needs us or is empty without us; He just loves us.

3. Our human love depends on the value of its object. We can be nicer to the mayor than we are to the garbage man.

Agape doesn’t depend on the value of its object, it creates value in its object.

4. Our human love believes it must go in search of God. Every pagan religion is built on this premise, and many Christians have the same idea.

Agape is the opposite: it is God searching for lost man. There is no parable in the Bible of a lost sheep that must search for its shepherd, but there is one of a Good Shepherd searching for His lost sheep.

5. Our human love is always seeking to climb higher.

Agape dares to step down lower. In Philippians 2:5-8 Jesus takes seven steps in condescension

until He could go no lower—“even the death of the cross.”

6. In summary, human love is based on egocentric concern—a fear of hell or a hope for reward in heaven. It cannot discern or appreciate the love revealed on Christ’s cross.

Agape “casts out fear” (1 John 4:18). It is willing to relinquish its reward. It dares to die our second death. Hell holds no fear for one whose heart is filled with *agape*. Jesus is its one great Example. “God is *agape*.”

7. The cross of Christ is its only adequate revelation.

This alone can explain Paul’s constant presentations of *agape* in Ephesians.

Ephesians 4:1-3: “I, therefore, the prisoner of the Lord, beseech you to have a walk worthy of the calling with which you were called, with all lowliness and gentleness, with longsuffering, bearing with one another in love [*agape*], endeavoring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.”

This is the point where Paul’s presentation of the objective gospel in these first three chapters of the book changes to the subjective. From here on he is encouraging the people not only to believe the gospel intellectually, but he is teaching them how to live it in their daily lives.

But even so, constantly he is saying beneath the surface that it’s their understanding and faith in that objective truth of what happened on Christ’s cross, before they were born, that motivates them to practical godliness. He will never get away from that

basic premise of Christian living: “the *agape* of Christ constrains us.”

“A walk worthy of [our] calling” is simply a heart-response to the love that “constrains” us. The “calling” imbues us with that healthy sense of self-respect (not proud self-esteem!) that enables us to hold our heads high as appointed “ambassadors for Christ as though God were pleading through us: we implore you on Christ’s behalf, be reconciled to God” (2 Cor. 5:20). The ambassadors from a great nation believe they are living for an honorable purpose; they are important; how infinitely more so are we who are called of God for an eternal ministry. No matter who it is that the Lord sends you to, a child in the home, a neighbor, a fellow-worker at the office or at the shop, or a student at school, you are the King’s ambassador! You feel unworthy? Amen! That’s good. Remember that, and then the Lord can use you. If you ever feel proud and self-sufficient, He can’t use you. (Satan uses proud people!).

Do you know how to tame a wild horse? A wild mustang that could kill you in its violent resistance?

Monty Roberts as a boy watched his father capture and tame them by using violent methods; Monty has developed a method that uses gentleness, and what he says is horse language. In other words, he has put himself in the place of the wild horse, thinking as the horse thinks, and understanding the feelings and perceptions of the wild horse, by gentle means he can tame the wildest mustang in a very short time. I watched him do it on a video.

I thought: the wild mustangs are like us wild sinners. We are alienated from God, afraid of Him, we want to get as far as we can away from Him. Paganism, and also apostate Christianity, uses the methods of violence in order to “win” or “tame” wild sinners, using threats of eternal torture in everlasting hell fire, or threats of execution by God in order to secure compliance with the will of God. Monty Roberts says if you “tame” a wild mustang by violence he will do what you want him to do because he is afraid not to; but if you use the right methods he will do what you want him to because he wants to. In other words, if you could say that the horse has a heart, the heart is won.

God wins us by learning our language, like Monty Roberts has learned the language of the wild mustang. God became Immanuel, which being interpreted is, God with us. In Christ, God became man, one of us; came close to us; reconciles us to Himself, wins our heart, not with terrifying threats, but as Psalm 18:35 says, “Thy gentleness hath made me great.” Paul says to the Thessalonians, “We were gentle among you” (1 Thess 2:7). The church on earth is to represent Christ to the world; if we were to understand wild sinners, we could win more of them. The Good News is that it's our privilege to share the joy of the Lord in winning them!

“Lowliness and gentleness” are rare character traits, even in some church work. But the ministry of the humble ones is far-reaching and lasting. These are Christlike character traits, and therefore we must expect that Satan opposes those who have

them and will even persecute them. But those who are close to Christ will constantly strive to bring people into harmony with each other.

Ephesians 4:4-6: “There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called in one hope of your calling; one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is above all, and through all, and in you all.”

Out of the welter of confusion which is modern organized religion, is it possible that there is somewhere one true church? Revelation pinpoints such a people as a symbolic “woman clothed with the sun, ... and on her head a garland of twelve stars,” who in the end of time is designated as a remnant (KJV) of “her offspring, who keep the commandments of God and have the testimony of Jesus” (12:1, 17). They are obviously the same as that “one body” of “one faith, one baptism.” Since there is one Holy Spirit, it follows that His leading will produce a church that is united, a refuge from the turmoil and confusion that fills the world. There is something miraculous about the very existence of a worldwide church that is truly united as one.

The worldwide unity of this “body” is not produced by force of any kind, but by a common heart conviction of truth held by people of all languages and cultures. The true church is one because God's truth is one. Bible teaching is clear; one of the greatest evidences of the inspiration of the Bible is its harmony in its 66 books and 40 writers, writing hundreds of years apart yet in perfect unity. Now the church which the Bible raises up is likewise united as one.

Take “baptism,” for example. Various congregations differ in how they understand it; but since Ephesians says “there is one ... baptism” should we not be encouraged to study together to find what that one method is and what it means?

So with all the doctrines taught by any church; they are all subject to be corrected by Bible teaching.

Ephesians 4:7-10: “But to each one of us grace was given according to the measure of Christ’s gift. Therefore He says: ‘When He ascended on high, He led captivity captive, and gave gifts to men’ [Psalm 68:18]. (Now this, ‘He ascended’—what does it mean but that He also first descended into the lower parts of the earth? He who descended is also the One who ascended far above all the heavens, that He might fill all things.)”

The message of Ephesians is constantly recurring good news:

1. Each of us has been given a special gift of grace. We say of someone who is an acclaimed musician or artist, “he is gifted.” So are you. There is something you are equipped to do that no one else is your equal, in that exact respect. Instead of wasting valuable resources of time and energy bemoaning your supposed ineptitudes, expend some energy thanking God for the abilities He has given you.

2. “The measure of Christ’s gift” is rendered in Today’s English Version as “a particular share in the bounty of Christ,” and in *The Message* as, “out of the generosity of Christ, each of us is given his own gift.” However small you may think your gift”

may be, don’t forget you can cultivate it to make it grow.

3. To support his point, Paul quotes Psalm 68:18 which describes Christ’s ascension to heaven after His resurrection. It was a cosmic triumph. The “captivity” which He led “captive” was the host of saints resurrected with Him (cf. Matt. 27:52, 53). *The Message* renders it, “He climbed the high mountain, He captured the enemy and seized the bounty, He handed it all out in gifts to the people.” He took a little band of Galilean peasants and made them the down payment on a multitude of people who through the ages since have been the “gifted” leaders of His church. Having risen from the tomb, Christ has seized the universe and redistributed its wealth! There is nothing about His coming as King of kings and Lord of lords that is modest or wimpy!

4. Paul seizes the opportunity to emphasize how Christ “descended” to the lowest point in the universe—the point of the second death of all the inhabitants of this planet (cf. Heb. 2:9), a willing surrender of Himself to die that death from which no resurrection could ever be hoped for. “Christ died for our sins,” says Paul (1 Cor. 15:3)! It takes your breath away ... forever, as it were. That is love (*agape*), says Paul! How can you ever hold back an ounce of devotion from Him?

Ephesians 4:11-16: “And He Himself gave some to be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, and some pastors and teachers, for the equipping of the saints, for the work of ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ, till we all come to the unity of the faith and the knowledge of the Son of God, to a

perfect man, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ; that we should no longer be children, tossed to and fro, and carried about with every wind of doctrine by the trickery of men, in the cunning craftiness by which they lie in wait to deceive, but, speaking the truth in love [*agape*], may grow up in all things unto Him who is the head—Christ—from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by what every joint supplies, according to the effective working by which every part does its share, causes growth of the body for the edifying of itself in love [*agape*].”

Whatever gift anyone has received from the Giver of gifts, it builds up the church. When you're perplexed about whether a message you hear or read comes from God or is a counterfeit from the Enemy, just watch and see: does it build up the church?

It is commonly said that theological harmony is impossible in the church until after the second coming of Christ. Theologians just must squabble, we think; teachers must disagree; pastors must preach against each other; you're not smart unless you demonstrate where you differ with everyone else. Paul says no; this “one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one Spirit” means what it says. We are to “grow up” out of our pitiful childishness into “the unity of the faith.” Christ is not divided.

“Apostasy with its dividing and blighting influence marred the beauty of the fair [early] church and clothed her in sackcloth. Division and disorder have been the result. Never was there so great a diversity of faith in Christendom as at the present

day. If the gifts were necessary to preserve the unity of the primitive church, how much more so to restore unity now! And that it is the purpose of God to restore the unity of the church in the last days, is abundantly evident from the prophecies. We are assured that the watchmen shall see eye to eye, when the Lord shall bring again Zion. Also, that in the time of the end the wise shall understand. When this is fulfilled there will be unity of faith with all whom God accounts wise; for those who do in reality understand aright, must necessarily understand alike. What is to effect this unity but the gifts that were given for this very purpose?” *Early Writings*, p. 140.

“In 1844, when anything came to our attention that we did not understand, we kneeled down and asked God to help us take the right position; and then we were able to come to a right understanding and see eye to eye.” *Gospel Workers*, p. 302.

Finally, there is this encouraging promise: “Although possessing different temperaments and dispositions, they [God's people] will see eye to eye in all matters of religious belief. They will speak the same things; they will have the same judgment; they will be one in Christ Jesus.” *Historical Sketches*, p. 124.

That means a development of character that brings God's people unto the enormously high standard of the Son of God Himself—“a perfect man, ... the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ.”

Someone may ask, “Is that the heresy of perfectionism?” No. “Perfectionism” is indeed a

heresy, but this is not it; the heresy part is the idea of perfection of the flesh. The flesh never becomes perfect until Jesus comes. But this is Christlike perfection of character. The Bible does not even claim perfection of Christ's flesh. As a Carpenter, He was a careful workman, and faithful; but must we say that He never bent a nail or hit His thumb? Hebrews says He learned "perfection" by the "things which He suffered" (5:8, 9).

But let us beware of ridiculing the idea of overcoming sin, because it's what Christ died to accomplish in His people! It's the final fruit of His work as High Priest in the second apartment of His heavenly sanctuary, the time of its ultimate cleansing on this antitypical Day of Atonement. It's His work going forward just now. It's His ministry of the "growing up" of His people that they may no longer be immature, "tossed about" by confusion, but may "grow up" before His coming.

What will be their goal in "growing up"? "The measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ."

An impossible goal? It's not their "work" to achieve it; their "work" is to "let this mind be in [them] which was also in Christ Jesus" (Phil. 2:5). The "let" suggests that the Holy Spirit will impart to them that "mind" if they do not resist Him.

"Is it a sin to be deceived?" The closer we come to the close of human probation, the more tragic it will be to let ourselves be deceived by the clever Enemy of truth. It's too late in the day for that! It's true, there are people in the church who are "tricksters," as Paul says, waiting for a chance to deceive anyone with their supposed "new light."

How can you avoid ever becoming a victim? "Speak the truth in *agape*," listen to it in *agape*, then you'll "grow up" out of the childishness that is always grasping every sensational story and idea.

"Growing up" is always painful in some ways. We once had a couple in our church who had a 20-year-old son who had the mind of a 3-year old. What a burden for the parents! What does the Lord Jesus think of a church composed of retarded-growth saints? How painful for Him!

But retarded-growth people often appear very cheerful, full of smiles and laughter, for they do not realize their condition. To those who are spiritually "retarded," Jesus says, "Thou knowest not" (Rev. 3:17, KJV). Blissful ignorance, "knowing not," is an embarrassment for the Lord this near the end of time; it's the shameful boast of His unperceptive people, "I am rich, have become wealthy, and have need of nothing" (Rev. 3:17).

The best good news comes now: the growing up process is going on! "The whole body," the church, is like a human body that grows in perfect symmetry and unity. It has joints and muscles and nerves and organs, and they all function in an impressive unity like a healthy human body. Paul's idea is that the truest "church growth" is not where specialist gurus come in to cause it, but where the members themselves, filled with *agape*, are adding new people, and helping those already in the church to grow.

That is the ultimate "evangelism," which will be demonstrated perfectly when that "other angel coming down from heaven, having great authority"

illuminates the earth “with his glory,” calling every honest-hearted soul to “come out of Babylon” (Rev. 18:1-4). And, praise God! His people still scattered in “Babylon” will heed the Voice and come!

That “other angel” is again a symbol of a people who have the message and are the messengers. The outpouring of the Holy Spirit as “the latter rain” will supply the holy energy. The beginning of that final “gift” was given long ago, but it was not welcomed at the time. But God will not permit His seed to return unto Him void; He is watching over that “most precious message,” and in His providence it will bear its fruit.