Is Biblical Love a Feeling or an Action?
Scripture: 1 Corinthians 13:1-3
Code: BQ021312

If I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, but do not have love, I have become a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I have the gift of prophecy, and know all mysteries and all knowledge; and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. And if I give all my possessions to feed the poor, and if I deliver my body to be burned, but do not have love, it profits me nothing. (1 Corinthians 13:1–3)

The thirteenth chapter of 1 Corinthians may be, from a literary viewpoint, the greatest passage Paul ever penned. Among many other things, it has been called the hymn of love, a lyrical interpretation of the Sermon on the Mount and the Beatitudes set to music. Studying it is somewhat like taking apart a flower; part of the beauty is lost when the components are separated. But the Spirit's primary purpose in this passage, as in all Scripture, is to edify. When each part is understood more clearly, the whole can become even more beautiful.

Agape (**love**) is one of the rarest words in ancient Greek literature, but one of the most common in the New Testament. Unlike our English *love,* it never refers to romantic or sexual love, for which *eros* was used, and which does not appear in the New Testament. Nor does it refer to mere sentiment, a pleasant feeling about something or someone. It does not mean dose friendship or brotherly love, for which *philia* is used. Nor does *agape* mean charity, a term the King James translators carried over from the Latin and which in English has long been associated only with giving to the needy. This chapter is itself the best definition of *agape*.

Dr. Karl Menninger, the famous psychiatrist and founder of the Menninger Clinic, has written that "Love is the medicine for our sick old world. If people can learn to give and receive love, they will usually recover from their physical or mental illness."

The problem, however, is that few people have any idea of what true love is. Most people, including many Christians, seem to think of it only in terms of nice feelings, warm affection, romance, and desire. When we say, "I love you," we often mean, "I love me and I want you." That, of course, is the worst sort of selfishness, the very opposite of *agape* love.

Alan Redpath tells the story of a young woman who came to her pastor desperate and despondent. She said, "There is a man who says he loves me so much he will kill himself if I don't marry him. What should I do?" "Do nothing," he replied. "That man doesn't love you; he loves himself. Such a threat

isn’t love; it is pure selfishness.”

Self–giving love, love that demands something of us, love that is more concerned with giving than receiving, is as rare in much of the church today as it was in Corinth. The reason, of course, is that *agape* love is so unnatural to human nature. Our world has defined love as “romantic feeling” or “attraction,” which has nothing to do with true love in God’s terms.

The supreme measure and example of *agape* love is God’s love. “God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son” (John 3:16). Love is above all sacrificial. It is sacrifice of self for the sake of others, even for others who may care nothing at all for us and who may even hate us. It is not a feeling but a determined act of will, which always results in determined acts of self–giving. Love is the willing, joyful desire to put the welfare of others above our own. It leaves no place for pride, vanity, arrogance, self–seeking, or self–glory. It is an act of choice we are commanded to exercise even in behalf of our enemies: “I say to you, love your enemies, and pray for those who persecute you in order that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven” (Matt. 5:44–45). If God so loved us that, even “while we were enemies, we were reconciled to God through the death of His Son” (Rom. 5:10; Eph. 2:4–7), how much more should we love those who are *our* enemies.

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