

# THE AGAPE CHURCH<sup>1</sup>

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The world was once powerfully shaken by a little band of men from Palestine who carried news embodied in one rather obscure word. Their terrified enemies in Thessalonica (a city in modern-day Greece) confessed its impact: “These men who have turned the world upside down have come here also” (Acts 17:6, RSV). The dynamite-laden messengers: Christ’s apostles, especially Paul and his colleague John.

The word that performed this mighty feat was one little known in the ancient Greco-Roman world—a Greek term, *agape*. It meant “love,” but it was revolutionary. It came to carry a spiritual wallop that overwhelmed people’s minds, catalyzing humanity into two camps, one for and the other against the heavenly idea.

Those that were for it were transformed overnight into recklessly joyous followers of Jesus, ready to lose property, go to prison, or even to die a tortured death for Him. Those catalyzed against it as quickly became cruel, bloodthirsty persecutors of those who saw light in the new concept of love. None who heard the news could ever sit on the fence.

The mysterious explosive in this spiritual bomb was a radically different idea than had been dreamed of by the world’s philosophers or ethics teachers. It was a new invention that took friend and foe alike by surprise.

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<sup>1</sup> 1 Cor. 13:1-8. 371, 457.

It wasn’t that the ancients had no idea of love; they talked about it plenty. In fact, the Greeks had three or four words for love (our modern languages usually have only one). But the kind of love that came to be expressed in *agape* mercilessly exposed all other ideas of love as either non-love or anti-love.

All of a sudden mankind came to realize that what they’d been calling “love” was actually veneered selfishness. The human psyche was stripped naked by the new revelation. If you welcomed the spiritual revolution, you got clothed with *agape* yourself; if not, having your robes of supposed goodness ripped off turned you into a raving enemy of the new faith. And no one could turn the clock back, for *agape* was an idea for which its fullness of time had come.

When John took his pen to write his famous equation “God is love” (1 John 4:8), he had to choose between the several Greek words. The common, everyday one—*eros*—packed a powerful punch on its own. Something mysterious and powerful, *eros* was thought to be the source of all life. It swept like a torrent from a broken dam over all obstacles of human will and wisdom, a tide of emotion common to all humanity. If a mother loved her child, her love was *eros*, thought to be noble and pure. Likewise, the dependent love of children for their parents and the common love of friends for each other. Further, the mutual love of man and woman was a profoundly mysterious drive.

“Is God *eros*?” asked the ancient pagans. Yes, answered their philosophers, including the great

Plato, because *eros* is stronger than human will. It produces the miracle of babies. It makes friends and families. And it dwells in everyone by nature. Therefore, said the pagans, it must be the spark of divinity in all humans.

For the ancients, love was pretty much what it is for us today—the “sweet mystery of life,” the elixir that makes an otherwise intolerable existence possible to endure. Plato hoped to transform the world by a kind of love that he considered “heavenly *eros*.” Words derived from it today have an exclusively sexual meaning, but Plato tried to get the world to climb out of that swamp of sensuality by a spiritually uplifting idea, something noble and inspiring. It was based on climbing higher, getting free of physical lust, being attracted to a greater spiritual good for the soul.

But John could never bring himself to write that God is *eros*. He astounded the thinkers of his day by saying, “God is *agape*.” And between those two ideas there stretches a vast gulf wider than the east is from the west.

The apostles’ idea was revolutionary in at least three ways:

1. If one loves with *agape*, he has “boldness in the day of judgment” (1 John 4:17). Without it, one cringes in terror when confronted with ultimate judgment. With it, he walks fearlessly into God’s presence past all His holy angels, utterly unashamed and confident. That was anciently unheard of.

2. “There is no fear in love [*agape*] but perfect love [*agape*] casts out fear. For fear has to do with

punishment, and he who fears is not perfected in love [*agape*]” (vs. 18, RSV). Fear with anxiety is the substratum of human existence in all ages. Fear too deep to recognize can make us sick, gnawing at the vitals of the soul until one’s physical organs weaken in their resistance to disease. Years may go by before we can see or feel it, but at last the weakest organ of the body breaks down, and doctors must try to repair what *agape* would have prevented by conquering the fear.

3. Every sublime moral and ethical goal of humanity is nothing without *agape*, says Paul in his famous love chapter of 1 Corinthians 13. One can “speak in the tongues of men and of angels,” “have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge,” have “faith, so as to remove mountains,” “give away all I have, and . . . deliver my body to be burned,” and yet not have the all-important ingredient. He ends up “nothing.” And *agape* has a phenomenal quality of enduring “all things,” for *agape* “never ends” (RSV).

How did *agape* differ so much from the common idea of love? How could the apostles’ idea possibly be such a threat to Plato’s noble concept? The answer is found in clear-cut contrasts between the two ideas:

Ordinary human love is dependent on the beauty or goodness of its object. We naturally choose friends who are nice to us, who please us. We fall in love with our sexual opposite who is beautiful, happy, intelligent, and attractive, and turn away from one who is ugly, mean, ignorant, or offensive.

In contrast, *agape* doesn't depend on the beauty or goodness in its object. It stands alone, sovereign, free. The ancients had a story that illustrated their most sublime idea of love:

Admetus was a noble, handsome young man with all the personal qualities of excellence. He fell sick with a disease that the oracle of the gods pronounced would be fatal unless someone could be found who would die in his place. His friends went from one to another, inquiring, "Would you be willing to die for Admetus?" All agreed that he was a wonderful young man, but "Sorry," they said, "we couldn't die for him." His parents were asked, and they said, "We love our son, but sorry, we couldn't die for him." Finally his friends asked the beautiful girl who loved him, Alcestis. "Yes," she said, "because he is such a good man and because the world needs him so, I am willing to die for him!"

The philosophers boasted: "This is love—willing to die for a good man!" Imagine their shock when the apostles said that wasn't it at all. "One will hardly die for a righteous man—though perhaps for a good man one will dare even to die. But God shows his love [*agape*] for us in that while we were yet sinners Christ died for us," yes, "while we were enemies" (Rom. 5:7, 8, 10, RSV).

A message like that either captured your soul or turned you into an implacable enemy.

Natural human love rests on a sense of need. It feels poor and empty of itself and requires an object to enrich its own life. A husband loves his wife because he needs her, and a wife loves her husband for the mutual reason. Two friends love

each other because they need each other. It's natural. Each feels empty and alone.

Infinitely wealthy of itself, *agape* feels no need. The apostles said that the reason God loves us is not because He needs us, but because—well, He is *agape*. "You know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich" (2 Cor. 8:9, RSV). To this day we are staggered by the idea of a love that "seeketh not her own" (1 Cor. 13:5). Even churches seem drawn almost irresistibly to representing God's love as a seeking-its-own thing, a motivation inspired by His own acquisitive instinct. God saw a hidden value in us, it is assumed; and He was simply making a good bargain when He bought us.

We come to resemble what we worship, so multitudes worship such a God because they too are seeking a good bargain. Their religion is the soul of acquisitiveness—what they want to acquire is heaven and its rewards—celestial real estate, and this self-centered motive is what keeps them going. When *agape* breaks through into this egocentric milieu, the reaction is pretty much what happened when it broke upon the ancient world and transformed lives.

Natural human love rests on a sense of value. We also pigeon-hole one another. Few treat the garbage man as courteously or patronizingly as we do the mayor or governor. If, like water seeking its own level, "ye love them which love you, what reward have ye? do not even the publicans the same? And if ye salute your brethren only, what do

ye more than others?” asks Jesus (Matt. 5:46, 47). “Men will praise thee, when thou doest well to thyself” (Ps. 49:18).

In contrast, *agape* is an idea from outside this world. Rather than being dependent on the value of its object, it creates value in its object.

Suppose I have a rough stone in my hand. I picked it up in a field. If I try to sell it, no one would give me even a nickel for it. This is not because a stone is inherently bad, but because it is so common it is worthless. (*Eros* is not bad; it’s worthless, for it is as common as stones.)

Now suppose that as I hold this rough stone in my arms, I could love it as a mother loves a baby. And suppose that my love could work like alchemy and transform it into a piece of solid gold. My fortune would be made. This is an illustration of what *agape* does to us.

Of ourselves we are worth nothing other than the dubious chemical value of our bodies’ ingredients. But God’s love transforms us into a value equivalent to that of His own Son: “I will make a man more precious than fine gold; even a man than the golden wedge of Ophir” (Is. 13:12).

Doubtless you have known some example of human flotsam that has been transformed into a person of infinite worth. John Newton (1725-1807) was one. A godless seafarer who dealt in the African slave trade, he became a drunken wretch who fell victim to the people he tried to enslave. At length *agape* touched his heart. He gave up his vile business, was transformed into an honored messenger of glad tidings. Millions remember him

for his hymn that discloses the “fine gold” that he became:

“Amazing grace! how sweet the sound  
That saved a wretch like me!  
I once was lost, but now am found;  
Was blind, but now I see.  
‘Twas grace that taught my heart to fear,  
And grace my fears relieved;  
How precious did that grace appear,  
The hour I first believed.”

Natural human love goes in search of God. All heathen religions are based on the idea of God being about as elusive as a cure for cancer. People imagine that He is playing hide-and-seek and has withdrawn Himself from human beings. Only special ones are wise or clever enough to discover where He is hiding. Millions go on long journeys to Mecca, Rome, Jerusalem, or other shrines, searching for Him. The ancient Greeks outdid all of us in building magnificent marble temples on their highest hills in which they felt they must seek Him.

Again, *agape* is the opposite. It is not humans seeking after God, but God seeking after man: “The Son of man is come to seek and to save that which was lost” (Luke 19:10). The shepherd left his 99 sheep that were safe and risked his life to find the one that was lost; the woman lit a candle and searched her house until she found the one lost coin; the Spirit of God searched for the heart of the prodigal son and brought him home. There is no story in all the Bible of a lost sheep required to find his shepherd! This upset all common human ideas.

Paul was obsessed with this great idea: “The righteousness based on faith says, Do not say in your heart, ‘Who will ascend into heaven?’ (that is, to bring Christ down) or ‘Who will descend into the abyss?’ (that is, to bring Christ up from the dead). But what does it say? The word is near you, on your lips and in your heart (that is, the word of faith which we preach)” (Rom. 10:6-8, RSV).

That “word of faith” is as closely related to *agape* as a photographic negative is to a photographic print. Faith is the response of an honest human heart to this tremendous revelation of *agape*, and Paul’s point is that this tremendous “word is near you.” Have you heard the News? Here’s the evidence: God has already chosen you and sought you out where you’ve been hiding from Him! The Good Shepherd is always on search-and-rescue looking for us.

Our human love is always seeking to climb higher. Every first-grader wants to enter the second grade; a child who is six says “I will soon be seven.” No job seeker wants demotion instead of promotion. The State politician longs to get into the national game, and probably every national senator at some time dreams that he/she might make it to the White House.

Who has ever heard of a national president voluntarily resigning in order to become a village servant? Plato’s idea of love could never imagine such a thing. Neither can we!

What sobered the ancient world was the sight of Someone higher than a president stepping down lower and lower, until He submitted to the torture-

racked death of a criminal. In what is probably an outline of Paul’s favorite message in Philippians 2:5-8 (RSV), we can trace seven distinct downward steps that Christ took in showing us what *agape* is:

“Though He was in the form of God, [He] did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped.” When we get into high positions in politics, business, or even the church, it is our nature to worry about falling. “Uneasy lies the head that wears a crown.” But the Son of God abdicates His crown voluntarily, motivated by this strange, unearthly love, *agape*.

Paul’s brilliant depiction of the relationship of the church and its members to Christ, as set forth in 1 Corinthians 12. Paul considers the church to be the “body of Christ” which “is not one member, but many” (vss. 27, 14). “As the body is one, and hath many members, and all the members of that one body, being many, are one body: so also is Christ.” (vs. 12).

There is no English adjective that can be used to describe this relationship of the body to the head, or of the various members of the body to each other. Hence it is necessary to employ a Latin derivative as an adjective to describe this “body” relationship: corporate. (The word comes from the Latin *corpus*, meaning “body.”)

For example, “all the members of that one body, being many, are one body” (vs. 12). They bear a corporate relationship one to another.

“By one Spirit are we all baptized into one body. . . The body is not one member, but many.” (vss. 13,

14). Paul describes the corporate unity of the church.

But there is more than unity: “If the foot shall say, Because I am not the hand, I am not of the body; is it therefore not of the body? . . . Is the [ear] therefore not of the body? . . . God set the members everyone of them in the body, as it hath pleased Him. . .

“Now are they many members, yet but one body” (vss. 15-20). Here Paul is speaking of corporate diversity in one body.

And the various members have a mutual interdependence: “The eye cannot say unto the hand, I have no need of thee: nor again the head to the feet, I have no need of you.” (vs. 21). Here the apostle describes corporate need.

God has built something else into the “body”: “Those members of the body, which we think to be less honorable, upon these we bestow more abundant honor; and our uncomely parts have more abundant comeliness. . . God hath tempered the body together” (vss. 22-24). This is corporate balance.

And the purpose of this “tempering together” is important: “That there should be no schism in the body; but that the members should have the same care one for another” (vs. 25). Here is corporate concern.

Such concern expresses itself in various ways: “Whether one member suffer, all the members suffer with it (vs. 26). Here is corporate pain. And if “one member be honored, all the members rejoice with it.” Thank God, there can be corporate joy.

The whole consists of many members intimately related: “Now ye are the members of the body of Christ, and members in particular.” (vs. 27). The Greek word for “particular” is *meros*, which denotes a corporate relationship. At the feet washing Jesus tells Peter that if “I wash thee not, thou hast no *meros* with Me” (John 13:8). He says elsewhere that “if thy whole body therefore be full of light, having no *meros* dark, the whole shall be full of light, as when the bright shining of a candle doth give thee light” (Luke 11:36).

How beautifully our human body illustrates this divinely inspired relationship! If on a sharp rock, my whole body feels the pain and sympathizes with the injured member. The leg shares the guilt of projecting the poor toe against the sharp stone; the other leg wishes it had taken more of the weight so as to lessen the injury; the eye wishes it had been more observant to see the danger; the hands cooperate by rubbing the wounded toe to bring comfort; the whole body halts in order to care for its suffering member, and in perfect cohesion and unity seeks relief.

I admit that *eros* has been the prime motivation for many decades in our work. But what are the results? The answer is clear: Lukewarmness. We don’t want to continue for many decades to come going around in this vicious circle of egocentricity. We want to learn to appreciate the cross, and want to cost God to save us, that our hearts may be moved by this appreciation to serve the Lord “by faith” and not because of a hope of reward.

In fact, Paul's doctrine of being "under grace" as opposed to being "under law" has reference to this very experience. If our motivation to serve Christ is permeated by either a fear of punishment if we don't, or hope of reward if we do, to that extent precisely are we "under the law". To the extent that our motivation is prompted by a heart appreciation of God's love revealed at the cross, we are "under grace."

We read that the 144,000 are those that "follow the Lamb whithersoever he goeth." They are the first generation in all human history of whom this can be spoken in its ultimate sense. For the first time in history, the Lord has a people who have concern for his honor and glory than for their own security. As *agape* reached its depth and height and length and breadth in the experience of Gethsemane and the Cross, so *agape* will find its full and complete response in the 144,000 who will become mature enough to be fitted to be a "mate" to Christ in the final wedding.

After probation closes the people of God will have no more fear for their own security. Their concern is not for their own security or reward, but simply that "God's holy name" should not "be reproached."<sup>2</sup> Also look at 7BC 981, "I will not turn traitor when God be most glorified and most honored by my loyalty." This at last will become the supreme motivation. That experience of thorough Christ-like motivation will be synonymous in receiving the seal of God.

#### **ELDER'S CHARGE**

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<sup>2</sup> *Great Controversy*, p. 619.

The duties of the bishops are suggested in the Greek word used to designate the officer—*episkopos*—"one that watches, one that looks about, or after things." It is used with the meaning of a "lookout man, watchman, watcher, stationed in some high place (*skopia*) to overlook a country, especially in war." It is very easy to be seen how readily and appropriately this word would be chosen from the Greek, and adapted to the office of the elder, when it is remembered how often in the Scriptures Christians are spoken of, not only as dwellers in a strange country, but in an enemy's country. The Christian life is represented as a warfare (2 Cor. 10:3-5).

This little band of soldiers, then, on the way to their own country, having to make their way through both a strange and an enemy's country, choose one of their number and set him upon—*epi*—a high place—*skopia*—thus making him their *episkopos*, their lookout man, their sentinel, to watch for danger; their scout, to detect the plans of the enemy.

In Paul's address to the elders of the church at Ephesus, he said: "Take heed therefore unto yourselves, and to all the flock, over the which the Holy Ghost hath made you overseers" (Acts 20:28). In Hebrews it is said, "Obey them that have the rule over you, and submit yourselves; for they watch for your souls, as they that must give account" (Heb. 13:17). The duty of the bishop is, therefore, to be a watchman, not only outside of the church but in the church as well—not only to watch the enemy, but also to watch those within his own camp.

This view corresponds to the idea suggested by the phrase above quoted from both Peter and Paul, "Feed the flock of God." The idea here suggested is that of a shepherd; and this is directly conveyed by Peter in the same chapter before referred to, where he says: "And when the chief Shepherd shall appear, ye shall receive a crown of glory that fadeth not away" (1 Peter 5:4). Christ is the chief Shepherd, he is "that great Shepherd of the sheep," and the bishops are under-shepherds. This word and its scriptural illustrations give an excellent, perhaps the best, view of the duties of the bishop.

"So when they had dined, Jesus saith to Simon Peter, Simon, son of Jonas, lovest thou me more than these? He saith unto him, Yea, Lord; thou knowest that I love thee. He saith unto him, Feed my lambs. He saith to him again the second time, Simon, son of Jonas, lovest thou me? He saith unto him, Yea, Lord; thou knowest that I love thee. He saith unto him, Feed my sheep. He saith unto him the third time, Simon, son of Jonas, lovest thou me? Peter was grieved because he said unto him the third time, Lovest thou me? And he said unto him, Lord, thou knowest all things; thou knowest that I love thee. Jesus saith unto him, Feed my sheep" (John 21:15-17).

Three times the Saviour told Peter to feed the flock, and each time before he told him this he asked him, "Lovest thou me?" Thus he would impress upon Peter, and upon every soul who should come after Peter, in his place, the all-important consideration that before he should attempt to feed Christ's flock, he must be assured in

his very soul that he loves Christ. To every man who is chosen to the office of elder, this question is asked: "Lovest thou me?" "Feed my lambs." And again the second time: "Lovest thou me?" "Feed my sheep." And the third time: "Lovest thou me?" "Feed my sheep." And oh, that it might be repeated from the depths of the heart of every elder of every church in the land, "Yea, Lord, thou knowest that I love thee?"

Jesus himself has given us one characteristic of a good shepherd: "The good shepherd giveth his life for the sheep" (John 10:14). Jesus gave His life for the sheep, To protect the sheep, the good shepherd will face a bear, or a lion, or both; but the hireling will run when he sees but a wolf coming.

Another duty of the good shepherd is to seek for the straying. "If a man have an hundred sheep, and one of them be gone astray, doth he not leave the ninety and nine, and goeth into the mountains, and seeketh that which is gone astray? And if so be that he find it, verily I say unto you, he rejoiceth more of that sheep, than of the ninety and nine which went not astray. Even so it is not the will of your Father which is in heaven, that one of these little ones should perish" (Matt. 18:12-14). When one of the flock has gone astray and is lost, it is not sufficient excuse for the shepherd to say, "I had not time to visit him." He has not time for anything else just then. That is what he is there for. This is the work of a shepherd.

The elders are under-shepherds, as they must be like the chief Shepherd, they cause the flock to lie down in green pastures—fresh pastures, pastures

of tender grass; to lead them beside the still waters; to restore their souls; to lead them in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake; to comfort, and encourage them as they enter the valley of the shadow of death; to prepare a table before them in the presence of their enemies; and thus to make goodness and mercy to follow them all the days of their lives, and that they may dwell in the house of the Lord forever.