

# LOVE, MATH, AND GOD'S CHARACTER

*By D.A. Carson*

What is distinctive about Christian love?

Is it the vocabulary? Christian love, many argue, is not erotic love, *eros* (a word not found in the New Testament), nor is it friendship or emotional love, *philia*. It is *agape* love – that is, love that is characterized by neither lust nor emotion, but by self-sacrifice.

But that isn't quite right. The two dominant verbs for "to love" in the Greek Bible are *phileo* and *agapao*, and both are used in a wide variety of ways. Like the English verb "to love," the range of uses is broad, and the context is determinative. For example, in the Greek translation of 2 Samuel 13, when Amnon incestuously "loves" and rapes his half-sister Tamar, we are told he "loved" her: one instance with *phileo* and the other with *agapao* – scarcely an instance of self-sacrifice, certainly an instance charged with lust and emotion. In John's Gospel, we are twice told that "the Father loves the Son" (3:35; 5:20), the first with *agapao* and the second with *phileo* – and it is difficult to detect any difference between them. Scholars who have tracked the way the "love"-vocabulary in Greek changed across the centuries rightly point out that *agape* first finds extensive distribution in the Greek Bible, and not in some other Greek literature, because that was the way the language was changing at the time.

We should have guessed most of this from the opening verses of 1 Corinthians 13. Paul writes, "If I give all I possess to the poor and surrender my body to the flames, but have not love, I am nothing" (3:3). It is difficult to imagine more powerful ways of displaying self-denial than giving away all one's possessions to the poor, and willingly dying a martyr's death. But Paul insists that all this may be undertaken *without love*, and in that case it is worth nothing. So *agape*, the controlling word in 1 Corinthians 13, cannot be reduced to self-sacrifice. If it is not special vocabulary, what is distinctive about Christian love?

Is it the place the Bible assigns to love (whatever the vocabulary used)? Certainly that is closer to the mark. According to the Lord Jesus, the first and greatest commandment is to love God with heart and soul and mind and strength; the second is to love your neighbor as yourself. Love is the distinctive mark of the Christian before a watching world (John 13:34-35).

Can we say more as to what is distinctive about Christian love?

*First*, the relative value placed on love in 1 Corinthians 13 is striking. Tongues of men

and angels, the gift of prophecy, grace-given insight into the “mysteries” of God, mountain-moving faith, absolute altruism, and courageous martyrdom, are all worth nothing apart from love. In the divine mathematics, six minus one equals zero.

*Second*, the functional description of how love acts (13:4-7) is staggering in its simplicity and profundity. Christian love may be hard to define comprehensively, but it is not hard to describe. “It is not rude” – in this brutal age that is politically correct but rarely courteous. “It keeps no record of wrongs” – when nurtured bitterness cripples millions, and not a few Christian leaders make a career out of keeping score. It “does not delight in evil” – when most television dramas and popular publishing positively relish evil, and Christians, too, absorb it in massive doses, and feel little revulsion. “It does not boast” – in a culture that confuses humility with servility.

*Third*, it is to be distinguished from grace-gifts (*charismata*) that are sovereignly *distributed* to believers (12:11). Unlike them, love is “the most excellent way” (12:31) to be pursued by *all* believers. Today many pant after the gift of teaching, others after prophecy. I have not detected a rush of enthusiasm to grow in love, the most excellent way, the way that is open to all of us.

*Fourth*, of the three virtues in the so-called Pauline triad – faith, hope, and love – the greatest is love (13:13). Paul does not here explicitly tell us why love is the greatest of the three. But the answer is not hard to find in the broader strands of biblical theology. God is not faith; God is not hope, but God is love (e.g., 1 John 4:8). With God, love is self-originating. He does not love us because we are lovable, or worthy, or beautiful, or irresistible, or good, or because He needs us and might be lonely without us. He loves us despite our sin, despite our rebellion, despite the fact that we are all by nature the objects of His wrath (Eph. 2:3). He loves us because He is love.

And as the Gospel of the Son He loves transforms us – us whom He has loved from all eternity – we are changed into His image, so that we too love the unlovely. In a derived sense, our love becomes self-originating as well: it depends on who we are, by God’s grace, not on the loveliness of the people we perceive. All of this is the fruit of the Gospel, and a reflection of the character of God. That is what is distinctive about Christian love.

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