

The Difficulty of Understanding God's Love Based on the Bible

How easy is it to understand God's love? After all, he says he is love!¹

Over the centuries, theologians have used the Bible to understand this love, so what have they discovered? Well, the simple answer is: CONFUSION. The results of using the Bible has produced 4 'camps' of understanding, not one. There is no real consensus. That should 'ring alarm bells'.

Don Carson wrote a book on this maze of understanding in 2000 with the title "The Difficult Doctrine of the Love of God"². In it, he highlights the lack of perfect understanding of God's love and how the use of scripture doesn't bring clarity.

He notes that there are a number of different ways the bible speaks of the love of God:

1. The peculiar love of Father for the Son, and of the Son for Father: (The intra-Trinitarian love of God) – On two occasions it is recorded that Father loves the Son, once with the verb *agapē* (ἀγαπάω),³ and once with *phileō* (φιλέω).⁴
2. God's providential love for all that he has made: (His loving providence)
3. God's desire to rescue his fallen world. (His salvific love) – This love (*agapē*) is the why he gave his Son for the whole world – not just people.⁵
4. God's particular, effective, selecting love toward his elect: (His love for his human family) – This love (*agapē*) is specifically for us,⁶ so it's different to his love for humanity.
5. God's love directed toward his obedient children: (His conditional love) – We remain in his benevolent *agapē* love (ἀγάπη) while ever we obey him.⁷

I could add a 6th type of love:

6. God's love which directs him to rebuke those he loves.⁸ This is also *agapē* love according to the Greek version of the OT (The Septuagint).⁹

The problem occurs when theologians take any one of these 5 ways that God loves and absolutizes it (i.e. makes or treats it as absolute), so that it is seen as the exclusive way he relates to us. This theological process turns this exclusive way of loving us into the controlling grid by which the 4 other ways of talking about the love of God are relativized (i.e. the other 4 depend on the main way love operates).

This narrowing down of God's love so it could be understood has created different theologies and groups of believers. Namely: Arminian (including Amyraldian) and Calvinist – among many others.

"The arguments marshaled on both sides are of course more numerous and more sophisticated than I have indicated in this thumbnail sketch. But recall for a moment the outline I provided in the first chapter on the various ways the Bible speaks about the love of God: (1) God's intra-Trinitarian love, (2) God's love displayed in his providential care, (3) God's yearning warning and invitation to all human beings as he invites and commands them to repent and believe, (4) God's special love toward the elect, and (5) God's conditional love toward his covenant people as he speaks in the language of discipline. I indicated that if you absolutize any one of these ways in which the Bible speaks of the love

1 – I John 4:8, 16

2 – D. A. Carson (2000) "The Difficult Doctrine of the Love of God" p:75 [PDF version]

Free Download: s3.amazonaws.com/tgc-documents/carson/2000_difficult_doctrine_of_the_love_of_God.pdf

3 – John 3:35

4 – John 5:20

5 – John 3:16

6 – Ephesians 5:25

7 – John 15:10

8 – Proverbs 3:12

9 – www.ellopos.net/elpenor/greek-texts/septuagint/chapter.asp?book=26&page=3

of God, you will generate a false system that squeezes out other important things the Bible says, thus finally distorting your vision of God.”¹⁰

So how shall we forge ahead through this predicament?

There is an alternative way to understand God’s love, one which has been approached by some theologians through the study of the Greek words for ‘love’. Let’s do that and see what we get.

We know that *eros* (ἔρως), or erotic love, isn’t used in the NT, so it can be eliminated. Another type of love, *storgē* (στοργή), describes natural or instinctive affection, such as the love of a parent towards a child. This is often referred to as ‘motherly love’. It appears only once in the NT as *philostorgos* (φιλόστοργος) where it refers to the *ekklesia* being kindly affectionate towards each other.¹¹ The word *agapē* appears 116 times in the NT, primarily in relation to godly love or God-like love, so it is the one that is usually studied. We could study this specific one for ourselves.

However, is a word study the best way to really comprehend his magnanimous love?

We’ve been taught that *agapē* is ‘self-sacrificial love’, ‘God-kind-of love’ – i.e. an altruistic type of love. But is this accurate as far as the 1st century believers were concerned or is this definition a Christian invention?

Carson investigated *agapē* and produced the following information:

1. In pre-classical Greek, there was a clash between two verbs used for ‘love’ – *κυνέω* ‘to kiss’ and *κύνω*, ‘to impregnate’. Certain forms of these two verbs were identical which produced confusion.
2. This led to the rise of many salacious puns which meant that there needed to be a change.
3. *κυνέω* was forced out of the language and it was replaced by *phileō* (φιλέω). This is the word used when Judas kissed Jesus.
4. This meant that *phileō* could mean ‘to kiss’ or ‘to love’. More confusion.
5. This is why there was a rise in new words for love which were invented in a later Greek period.
6. By the Hellenistic era *agapē* (ἀγαπάω) had come in existence, but not the noun of it (ἀγάπη).
7. This means that *agapē* was an invented word with no theological attachments to it.
8. In the OT Septuagint, *agapē* always refers to a form of noble, ‘higher’ love which is less emotional than our normal understanding of love.
9. When Amnon raped his half-sister Tamar,¹² the Septuagint states that he had *agapē* and *phileō* for her. (Not a god-like use of *agapē*)
10. When Paul writes that Demas has deserted him because he loves the present evil world,¹³ Paul used *agapē*. (Not a god-like use of the *agapē*)
11. The use of *agapē* in ‘the love passage’¹⁴ of the NT is not outlining an altruistic kind of love, it’s highly relational.
12. Any believer can give their body to be burned, or they can feed the poor, as acts of self-denial, without love (*agapē*) being involved.¹⁵ (This is altruistic but it doesn't describe an action of love.)
13. Jesus obeyed Father because he had *agapē* for him. That means that obedience comes out of love. We’re not to be obedient so we can get love.

10 – D. A. Carson (2000) “The Difficult Doctrine of the Love of God” p:75

11 – Romans 12:10

12 – 2 Samuel 13:1-15

13 – 2 Timothy 4:10

14 – 1 Corinthians 13

15 – 1 Corinthians 13:3

14. Father had *agapē* for his Son and shared his glory with him, before he did anything that equated to obedience. He had it before creation.¹⁶ (This is relational love, not altruism.)
15. Jesus had *agapē* for his disciples and he called them his friends, not ‘servants’/‘slaves’.¹⁷ (This is relational love, not altruism.)
16. With the interchangeability between *phileō* and *agapē* in the Greek, *phileō* can mean ‘to kiss’, but *agapē* is never used that way.
17. The problem for linguists which Christians can fall into is known as ‘illegitimate totality transfer’. This happens when all the forms of a word (Greek in this case) is attached to a particular context. This means that we must interpret any ‘love’ word in context to get it’s meaning in every instance.

What has happened to our understanding of God’s love through the teachings of theologians, according to Carson, is this:

*“...I suspect that the heritage of understanding agapē to refer to a willed love independent of emotion and committed to the other’s good has been influenced by the schoolmen and other philosophical theologians of a bygone era, who denied there was feeling in God. To have feeling, they argued, would imply passivity, i.e., a susceptibility to impression from people or events outside himself, and this is surely incompatible with the very nature of God. Thus God’s love must be fundamentally different from ours. The only point of similarity between God’s love and our love, they argued, is self-communication; it is not emotion or feeling.”*¹⁸

This is exemplified in The Westminster Confession of Faith (1646) which asserts that God is “without... passions”. Christians most likely take this at face-value to mean that God is emotionless, which is false. The word originally used in the 17th century inferred that God wasn’t swayed or influenced by emotions as humans are, not that he was devoid of emotion. This understanding is accurate.

Carson’s most striking takeaway from his study is this:

*“One of my most forceful impressions is that the categories of the debate gradually shift with time so as to force disjunction where a slightly different bit of question-framing would allow synthesis. Correcting this, I suggest, is one of the useful things we may accomplish from an adequate study of the love of God in holy Scripture. For God is a person. Surely it is unsurprising if the love that characterizes him as a person is manifest in a variety of ways toward other persons. But it is always love, for all that.”*¹⁹



Enough of painful theology. What’s the solution for us sons? How do we understand the Trinity’s love towards us?

Let’s approach this investigation from the perspective of Kingdom reality.

(1) People who have had a visitation from Jesus or who have been taken in their spirit to Heaven have experienced his love first-hand. Some have been ‘bowled over’, ‘flattened’, when he increased the intensity of his love towards them. Some felt like they were dying while experiencing his love. Others have described their experience of being immersed in “liquid love”. These people know what his love is like, they’ve experienced it and no one can tell them otherwise. Therefore, his love is real and it’s overpowering.

16 – John 17:5

17 – John 15:15

18 – D. A. Carson (2000) “The Difficult Doctrine of the Love of God” p:28-29

19 – D. A. Carson (2000) “The Difficult Doctrine of the Love of God” p:77

(2) Putting it in a simple context: How do we work out the love any person has for us? Our experience tells us that we need to get related to the person and experience their type of love, their level of love, and how they manifest their love to us. That's how we know our mother loves us, or our friends love us – how we experience it in relationship with them. Sure, we can read about their love in a letter to us, or a birthday card they send to us, or a speech that they give at one of our decade-ending birthday parties. However, it's really the time we spend with them, relating to them, that we experience that love. This is when we know their love is genuine or not: When we go through difficult times we assess how they assist us. In the same way, we can understand the Trinity's love for us. Jesus exemplified this. He had an intimate relationship with Father, he was one with Father. Through his life experiences as a man, he knew completely how much Father loved him, what type of love it was, and how that love was manifest between them. This is what we're called to do.

So let's forget about *agapē* love, because that was the choice of a Greek word from a limited set of existing love words, and let's experience it to the full. It's only then that we'll be able to explain it to others, which is what we would do if we were sharing how some person loved us.

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(Readers will need to look up for themselves any scriptures alluded to in this document)