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By Cecil Taylor

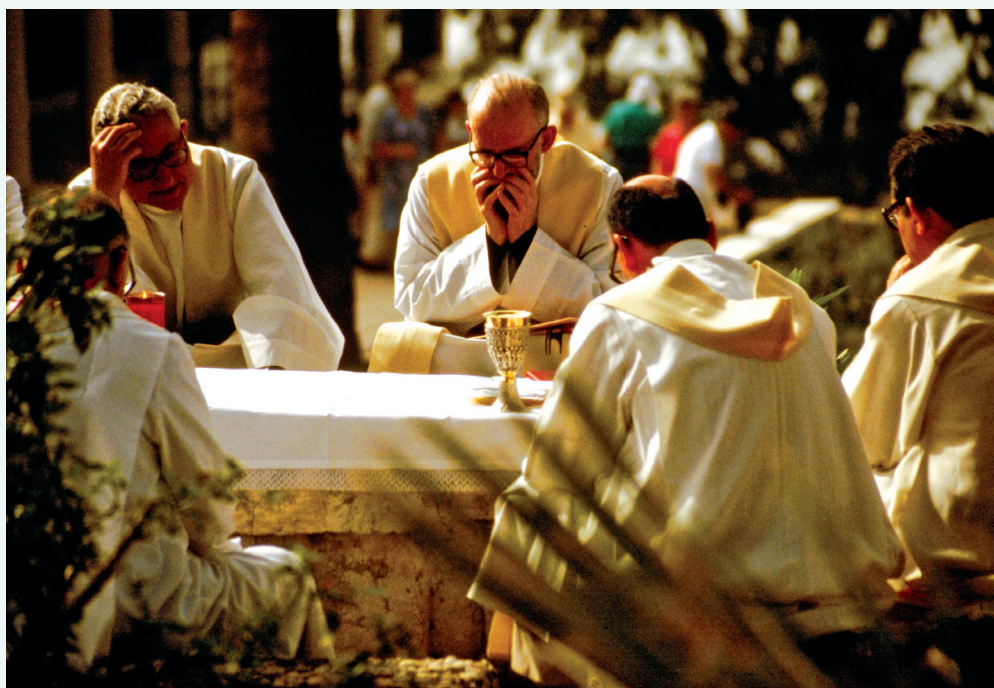
IN PAUL'S LETTERS THE great Greek words for love are the verb *agapao*, the noun *agape*, and the adjective *agapetos*. Other terms appear far less commonly. By one count, the *agap-* group occurs 136 times in the Greek New Testament.¹ The terms easily form four clusters.

God's Love for Men—The love of God lay at the heart of Paul's gospel. When the apostle spoke of God's love he usually linked it to salvation. "The supreme expression of this undeserved love is Christ's death on the cross as a sacrifice for sins (Rom 5:8; Eph 2:4-5; 2 Thess 2:16; cf Gal 2:20)."² Love moved Christ to give Himself up for the church (Eph. 5:25-26). In Ephesians 3:18-19, Paul stressed the limitlessness of the Lord's love.

God's love draws believers into His family. "In love He predestined us to be adopted through Jesus Christ" (Eph. 1:4-5, HCSB).³ The love of God is crucial to a believer's assurance and security (Rom. 8:31-39). Paul thus prayed fervently that the Ephesian Christians would come to understand God's love fully (Eph. 3:14-21).

Some references to "the love of God" (or "of Christ") are ambiguous (2 Cor. 5:14; 2 Thess. 3:5). Grammatically these phrases may mean either God's (or Christ's) love for men or men's love for them. Normally, however, "love of God" means God's love for men.⁴

Some think Romans 5:8 is ambiguous, asking who the "us" is. The objects of the love Paul mentioned there, though, were the "helpless," "ungodly," "sinners," and "enemies."⁵ The context clearly points to God's love for fallen men, not men's love for God!



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Despite what some claim, 2 Corinthians 5:14 is not ambiguous. Doubtless, Paul loved God, but Christ's love for men was what drove Paul on.

Men's Love for God—Paul seldom spoke of men's love for God or Christ (Rom. 8:28; 1 Cor. 2:9; 8:3; 16:22; Eph. 6:24; 2 Tim. 3:4). Although Paul twice quoted the second "greatest" commandment (Rom. 13:8-10; Gal. 5:14) and never the first (Matt. 22:37; Mark 12:30; Luke 10:27), he surely assumed the primary duty of loving God.

Love for Christian Brothers—For Paul, love defined the Christian life (Eph. 5:1-2). Often he linked love with faith and hope and set the trio at the heart of the Christian life (1 Cor. 13:13; Col. 1:4; 1 Thess. 1:3). Love led Paul's list of the fruit of the Spirit (Gal. 5:22). Faith shows itself in "love" (v. 6). To be "rooted" in Christ (Col. 2:7) was to be "rooted...in love" (Eph. 3:17).

All love in a Christian, toward God or other believers, comes from God. The Holy Spirit pours God's own love into a believer's heart

Above: In Galilee, believers share communion in the garden of the Church of the Beatitudes.

Far left: Remnant of a small statue that depicts a man and

a woman—maybe a husband and wife—embracing. Paul wrote, "Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself for her" (Eph. 5:25, CSB).

(Rom. 5:5; Gal. 4:6-7; Phil. 1:8). What overflows to others must first be received from above.⁶

No follower of Christ had to be told to love other believers; God taught them to do this (1 Thess. 4:9). Love to all the saints accompanies real faith in Christ (Col. 1:4). Love also serves as the evidence of truly being known by God (1 Cor. 8:3). Absence of love casts doubt on the Holy Spirit's presence in a man's life and therefore whether he belongs to God (Rom. 8:9). Love constitutes a debt no believer will ever pay off (13:8-10).

Paul offered multiple motivations for Christians to love one another. Sometimes he said love was a commandment believers must obey (Rom. 13:8-10; Gal. 5:14). At other times he urged love



Left: The southern steps leading up to Herod's Temple in Jerusalem. At the top of the steps, cut in half by the perpendicular wall that was added later, is the eastern Huldah Gate (closed up). Through the arched gate, persons entered to go up stairs leading to the Temple Mount. Two factors have lead to the belief that Peter preached his Pentecost sermon on these steps. First, rabbis commonly met with their students here, offering instruction on these steps. Second, numerous mikvehs located at the base of the steps would have been provided a place for baptizing the new converts.

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because it provided the purity required to meet the coming Lord (Phil. 1:9-10; 1 Thess. 3:12-13). At still other times he appealed to Christ's example, especially to the love He showed in His sacrificial death (Rom. 15:2-3; 1 Cor. 10:31-11:1; 2 Cor. 8:8-9; Eph. 4:32-5:2; Phil. 2:4-8; Col. 3:12-14). And again he cast it as a man's enthusiastic response to God's grace, meaning that loving others is a way to thank God for His love (2 Cor. 8:1-9).⁷

Love for one another explains the passages about "the strong" and "the weak." If a Christian demands full liberty when it might make the weak in faith stumble, he sins against love (Rom. 14:15; 1 Cor. 10:23-24).⁸ Love surrenders even innocent things if they cause a brother to stumble. "Love means the refusal to see, think of, or deal with, one's neighbour except in the light of what Christ has done for him, as the brother for whom Christ died."⁹

Love also illuminates the exercise of spiritual gifts. Each may rejoice

Right: Church of the Ascension on the Mount of Olives. Since the 4th cent., Christians have come to this

spot to celebrate Jesus' ascension into heaven. The capitals on the structure date to the 1140s and the dome to 1200.

in using his gifts, but over against love the best gifts amount to nothing (13:1-3). Love demands that the Christian concern himself with others, not just himself. In time all gifts will become inoperative and disappear (vv. 8-10). Not love. With faith and hope, love abides as the greatest of the three (v. 13).¹⁰

Loving "one another" was critically important to the early church, surrounded as it was by foes. To Jews, Christians were heretics to be hated and eliminated if possible. Additionally, Romans saw Christianity as an illegal religion; Christians were to be persecuted and punished. To pagans Christians were atheists because they had no visible gods. The infant church was "a persecuted, struggling minority, always on the brink of extinction."¹¹



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Christians needed each other just to survive!

Love for All—Any thought that Christians should love only other Christians was alien to Paul. While



Left: Dated to the 14th cent., one of the partial frescos located in the Mamertine Prison in Rome depicts a gathering of the faithful; the hands depict a posture of worship or adoration. Paul was likely imprisoned here at one time. Paul instructed the believers at Rome: "Be devoted to one another in brotherly love" (Rom.

12:10a, NASB).

Above: View of the Colosseum in Rome. Upon its completion, the Romans had 100 days of celebration, events that included the slaughter of 9,000 wild beasts and 2,000 gladiators. Many Christians were martyred here during the early persecutions, which lasted until Emperor Constantine.

in error (1 Cor. 4:14; 2 Cor. 2:4; 12:19; 13:2-4,10; Gal. 2:11-14).¹² In the face of heresy and error, harsh words may be the truest form of love!

Love is of highest importance in Paul's letters. In light of Paul's emphasis on "love," for systematic and New Testament theology books not to give it more attention is strange.

believers must do good "especially for those who belong to the household of faith," meaning Christian brothers, they are expected to do good also to "all" (Gal. 6:10) and "everyone" (Rom. 12:9,17-21), which includes "outsiders" (1 Cor. 5:12; Col. 4:5; 1 Thess. 4:12). Paul prayed that his readers would abound "with love for one another and for everyone" (3:12) and added, "always pursue what is good for one another and for all" (5:15).

Many think the *Hymn of Love* (1 Cor. 13) is about love for those "inside," meaning fellow believers.

The chapter, though, does not contain a single word about loving only those in the Christian community. Paul seemingly meant to describe Christians as loving all persons.

Some accuse Paul of inconsistency, calling for love but spewing harsh language against those who opposed the gospel (Gal. 1:8-9; 5:12; Phil. 3:2). In his defense, when the truth is threatened, particularly gospel truth, "tough love" may be required for the sake of another person's salvation. Genuine love was what sparked Paul's hard words and aggressive behavior to correct those

1. Roger Mohrlang, "Love" in *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*, ed. Gerald F. Hawthorne and Ralph P. Martin (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 575.

2. Ibid.

3. Unless indicated otherwise, all Scripture quotations are from the Christian Standard Bible (CSB).

4. Leon Morris, *Testaments of Love: A Study of Love in the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981), 139, note 31.

5. Ibid., 133.

6. C.E.B. Cranfield, "Love" in *A Theological Word Book of the Bible*, ed. Alan Richardson (New York: Macmillan, 1962), 136.

7. Following Mohrlang, "Love," 576-77.

8. Herman Ridderbos, *Paul: An Outline of His Theology*, trans. John Richard DeWitt (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975), 295.

9. Cranfield, "Love," 136.

10. Ridderbos, *Paul: An Outline of His Theology*, 295-96.

11. Morris, *Testaments of Love*, 208.

12. Mohrlang, "Love," 578.

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