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# Short Note

# "Do You Love Me?"

**By J. Harold Greenlee**

The Louw&Nida Greek-English Lexicon and other sources claim that the two common words for love in the New Testament, *agapē* and *philia*, have overlapping meanings. This is incorrect, as the following discussion will explain.[*]

The four Greek words for love, as C. S. Lewis pointed out, are *agapē, philia, storgē*, and *erōs*. However, *agapē* is not merely one of four forms of love; it often stands alone and also properly undergirds and accompanies each of the other loves to keep them true to their proper nature. In contrast to the other loves that are emotion-based, *agapē is* based on the will. *Agapē* regards its object to be of high or even of supreme value. The Bible properly directs us to love the Triune God with *agapē,* since God is of supreme value in the highest possible sense. It is also the love with which God loves our human race.

Some people mistakenly say that *agapē* is a special love from God; it is not. Its object may even be an unworthy object, e.g., John 3:19, "men loved the darkness." Some also say that God's grace is necessary for us to love with *agapē.* The grace of God is doubtless necessary to enable us to love everyone in the world, including enemies, but it is not by God's grace that someone loves money or position with *agapē* love—in other words putting these things in the highest category of desires.

The only proper object of *agapē* on earth is human beings—every human being. Why? Because human beings, and only they, are created in the image of God, and each one is of supreme value.

Then how does *agapē* interact with the other forms of love? *Philia* is the love of friendship. But friendship must be supported by *agapē,* recognizing friends as being of intrinsic value in themselves and not merely someone to be used for our benefit.

The love between family members—called "natural affection" in the King James Version—is *storgē*, the love that begins with the first sight of one's newborn baby, or, in a sense of expectation, even in the months before birth. But *storgē* must be supported by *agapē,* to avoid a selfish dependence of a parent on the child, or vice versa. *Philia*, friendship, may well be added as children become older. *Storgē* occurs in the New Testament only in its negative form, *astorgos*, "not having family love," in the lists of evil qualities found in Romans 1:31 and 2 Timothy 3:3.

Marital love, the special love between husband and wife, is *erōs*. This word does not occur in the New Testament. Despite its negative connotation in English words such as "erotic," it is a holy, God-given love, covering all that is included in Christian marriage. Husbands and wives should also love each other with family love, *storgē*, and certainly *philia*, sincere friendship. But *erōs* must be supported by *agapē,* in recognition of the intrinsic value of each spouse.

Of special concern in this article is the relationship between *agapē* and *philia* in the New Testament. Our relationship with God is almost always presented as *agapē,* but in John 16:27, "the Father himself loves you because you have loved me," Jesus is speaking of *philia*, the love of affection and friendship, in relation to both the Father's and people's love.

In John 11:3 Mary and Martha send word to Jesus that their brother Lazarus, "whom you love," is sick. The love mentioned here, and also in v. 36, is *philia*. Lazarus was a friend of Jesus. Of course, the sisters were also friends of Jesus, but in verse 5, when the sisters are included with their brother, the author refers to

[*] My original source is C. S. Lewis's book *The Four Loves,* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1960), based on his radio presentations that I heard in 1957. D.A. Carson deals with the meaning of *agapē* and *philia* in his *Exegetical Fallacies* (2nd ed., Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker, 1996, pp. 31–32, 51–53.)

*agapē,* to avoid implying too close a relationship between Jesus and the sisters. But both esteem, *agapē,* and friendship, *philia,* are implicit.

An insightful passage for a discussion of the Greek words for love in the New Testament is the interchange between the risen Jesus and Peter as recorded in John 21:15–17. First, though, the question arises as to whom or to what Jesus refers as the object of love in his question to Peter, "Do you love me more than these?" There are three possible objects, and in fact there is a Greek construction that would have made clear which of the three is intended, but as it is stated here, "these" can be interpreted in any of three ways: "more than you love these other disciples," "more than these other disciples love me," or "more than you love your fishing equipment." I believe Jesus is asking Peter if he loves Jesus more than he loves his fishing equipment; Jesus wants to know whether Peter will resume following him or return to his fishing business.

Before discussing the ensuing dialogue between Jesus and Peter, let me give an illustration. Suppose I tell my wife some evening at dinner, "Ruth, I esteem you very highly as a person." (That is, *agapē.*) She might reply, "Thank you, dear. I'm glad." Then suppose I have been away on business for a few days. When I return home I immediately say, "Ruth, I esteem you very highly as a person." She could well say, "Is that the best you can do? How about a little romantic love (*erōs*)?"

I will now give an expanded rendering of this passage, including what I believe are the thoughts in the minds of both Jesus and Peter.

Jesus begins by asking Peter, "Do you love me as your Lord (*agapē*) more than you love your fishing work?" A few weeks earlier, Peter might have replied, "Yes, Lord, of course! What do you have in mind?" But with his recent denial of Jesus still in his mind, *agapē* sounds rather distant. So he replies, in effect, "Yes, Lord, you know that I have deep affection for you (*philia),* as well as loving you as my Lord." Jesus accepts Peter's reply and gives him an assignment. (The meaning of the three assignments calls for a separate discussion.)

Again Jesus asks, "Do you love me as your Lord (*agapē)*?" Peter again gives the same answer, and Jesus accepts it and gives him an assignment.

Finally, Jesus says, in effect, "Peter, I hear what you are telling me, so I will come up to your level of response; have you truly repented of your denial and truly love me *(philia)* as your friend as well as your Lord?"

Peter is grieved when Jesus faces his failure so directly; but he replies earnestly, "Lord, you know everything; you know that I have repented and love you with affection as my friend." Jesus again accepts Peter's response and once more gives him an assignment.

This is well enough for those who have access to the Greek text. But in English and many other languages, we can translate both *philia* and *agapē*—and, for that matter, the other two words for love—as "love." However, the noun *agapē* together with its related verb *agapaō* 'to love' and the adjective *agapētos* 'beloved' occur some 700 times in the New Testament; *philia* and its related words occur only about 70 times, with the noun *philia* sometimes translated "friendship." So "love" in the NT is most commonly *agapē*.

Love is the heart of the Gospel. I am confident that there is no occurrence in the New Testament in which *philia* does not have the sense of friendship or affection, and no instance in which *agapē* does not have the sense of recognition of high value. Although these two different Greek words may be translated into other languages as a single word, and although *agapē* undergirds the meaning of *philia,* the two words do not have overlapping meanings.

*J. Harold Greenlee, a retired missionary of One Mission Society (formerly OMS International), is the author of more than a dozen books and more than 150 articles, mostly pertaining to New Testament Greek, including* A Concise Exegetical Grammar of New Testament Greek *(1963, 1986), his classic textbook,* Introduction to New Testament Textual Criticism *(1964, 1995), and his most recent book,* The Text of the New Testament: From Manuscript to Modern Edition *(2008).*