

Note: With this edition of *Ekklesia Then & Now*, I am changing scripture quotations to the English Standard Version (ESV), which is more readable but just as accurate as the New American Standard Bible (NASB), which I have previously used. Also, in the past, I have used [QuickVerse](#) (which did not offer the ESV) as my electronic Bible research resource, but I have switched to [e-Sword](#). Since most e-Sword resources are free, I heartily recommend to anyone looking for Bible software. Thanks to my good friend and brother, Eric, for referring me to e-Sword.

"How Do I Love Thee?"



Elizabeth Barrett Browning
Sir William Ross

Like many men, I suspect, I do not welcome the questions "how or why do you love me?" Either by nature or cultural programming, most men are just not wired for emotional confessions. Perhaps we fall back on a snippet of poetry we remember from some high school English class: "[How do I love thee?](#) Let me count the ways..." We probably can't go past the first line or maybe the second ("I love thee to the depth and breadth and height my soul can reach"), but then we're lost. "Go on," my wife would say, but I'm at a loss. It's not surprising that classic love poem was penned by a woman (Elizabeth Barrett Browning, [Sonnets from the Portuguese](#), #43, 1850).

"I love you because I'm commanded to," I offered recently. That wasn't received all that well, but let me suggest in this issue of *ET&N* that it is the best possible affirmation of love, more reliable and lasting than a mere poet can conceive.

Then

Koine Greek, the primary language of the New Testament, included at least five words for specific kinds of love, four of which are used in Bible.

ἔρως

The idea we usually associate with "love"—**eros** (romantic or sexual love), from which we derive the word "erotic"—is never used in the New Testament. It is not that the Bible denigrates sexual love. In fact, an entire Old Testament book (Song of Songs) is laced with it, and it is viewed as a vital part of marriage. I find Paul's view of marital sex a bit stilted but since he was apparently never married, he can be forgiven if he does not fully appreciate this marvelous gift of God. He seems to prefer that no one ever had sex, allowing it in marriage "*so that Satan may not tempt you because of your lack of self-control*" (1 Corinthians 7:5b). God created hormones, sex, and human sexual desire. Properly exercised, it is a form of glue that binds husband and wife together. As such, it does not merely serve to keep us from sinful expressions of **eros**, it also reinforces the other forms of love.

στοργή

A second type of love, familiar love—love of parents for children or children for parents—is **storge**, and is only used in a negative sense in the New Testament. In his list of sinful behaviors in Romans 1, Paul includes **astorgos**, which

is translated "unloving" (NASB), "heartless" (ESV, NIV), "without natural affection" (KJV, YLT), or "show no kindness" (NCV). Paul was probably referring to those who lacked the normal love and concern for their own families (1:31).

σπλάγχνον **Splagchon** literally refers to internal organs (spleen, intestines, heart) but figuratively means "emotions," such as sympathy, pity, or affection. Paul, for example, used **splagchon** in Philippians 1:8—"For God is my witness, how I yearn for you all with the **affection** [**splagchon**] of Christ Jesus." John used it in 1 John 3:17: "But if anyone has the world's goods, and sees his brother in need, yet closes his **heart** [**splagchon**] against him, how does God's love [**agape**] abide in him?" That Paul refers to the affection (**splagchon**) of Jesus helps demonstrate His humanity. He had emotions like the rest of us and certainly wrestled with competing emotions.

φιλέω Another type of love is **phileo**, which is used many times in the New Testament. This is a close love, often rendered "brotherly love." It is the type of love Jesus had for Lazarus, the brother of Mary and Martha (John 11:3). **Phileo** is a deep, meaningful love, as demonstrated by a comment by Jesus: "**the Father himself loves** [**phileo**] you, because you have **loved** [**phileo**] me and have believed that I came from God" (John 16:27).

ἀγάπη The final form of love—some would say the highest form—is **agape**. It is also the most difficult for human beings to display because it is self-sacrificing and altruistic. While the expression of **phileo** or **storge** might call for giving others what they want, **agape** calls for giving what they need, implying both an intimate knowledge of the individual and a sense of the larger picture of human existence. **Agape** is the kind of love God displays towards people: "**For God so loved** [**agapao**] the world, that He gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish, but have eternal life" (John 3:16.) and "**Greater love** [**agape**] has no one than this, that someone lays down his life for his friends" (John 15:13). These are God's answers to Elizabeth Barrett Browning's poetic question—"How do I love thee?" Regardless of how difficult it may be for humans to maintain **agape**, however, that is precisely the kind of love we are called to. It calls for denial of **self**, putting the needs of others first.

The well-known exchange between Peter, who had denied Jesus, and the resurrected Jesus, who knew Peter needed reassurance and rehabilitation in order to fulfill his particular mission, involved both **phileo** and **agape**. The conversation goes like this:

"When they had finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, '**Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these?**' He said to him, 'Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.' He said to him, '**Feed my lambs.**'"
"He said to him a second time, '**Simon, son of John, do you love me?**' He said to him, 'Yes, Lord; you know that I love you.' He said to him, '**Tend my sheep.**'"
"He said to him the third time, '**Simon, son of John, do you love me?**' Peter was grieved because he said to him the third time, '**Do you love me?**' and he said to him, 'Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you.' Jesus said to him, '**Feed my sheep**'" (John 21:15-17).

English versions almost always lose the nuances of the interaction because of the use of "love" as a translation for different Greek words. The first two times Jesus asks Peter "Do you love me?" (vv. 15-16) He uses the word **agape**, but in his responses, "You know that I love you," Peter uses the word **philao**. A better

translation/interpretation therefore might be "Peter, are you prepare to sacrifice yourself for me?" to which Peter responds, "Lord, you know I care about you."

It sounds as if Peter, knowing how he failed on the night before Jesus' crucifixion, could not bring himself to claim an unqualified commitment—a marked change from his brash "I will lay down my life for you" (John 13:37). There is an overtone of shame in Peter's response to Jesus—"I care about you, but I have shown that I lacked complete **agape**."

The third time Jesus asks "Do you love me?" (v. 17), He uses **philao**. It is as if Jesus understands that Peter's shame prevents him from claiming total self-sacrifice and in using **philao** says, "I understand that you lack confidence. **Philao** is enough is enough for now." Jesus does not leave it at that, however; He goes on to tell Peter that he will sacrifice himself for the Gospel: "...when you are old, you will stretch out your hands, and another will dress you and carry you where you do not want to go" (John 21:18b).

God knows, of course, that it is not in human nature to love consistently. Scripture therefore includes many commands about loving—God (Mark 12:30) and others (Mark 12:31). The works of John (his Gospel and his letters) are particularly identified with the importance of love in the Christian life.

Now

As I said in the introduction, my wife was less than impressed when I told her once that I love her because I am commanded to do so. She probably would have preferred to hear I love her because she is a beautiful woman, a great mother, a caring wife, a sensitive giver, a wonderful teacher, a thrifty shopper, a creative cook, or a deep thinker (all of which she is), but I'd like to suggest that my perception of all of those characteristics and others is inconsistent and unreliable. Consequently, the only genuinely meaningful and reliable reason for love comes from God's commands.

Part of this hinges on how we view God's commands—as capricious, dictatorial demands or as paternal guidelines for human joy. The fleshly [self](#) tends to resent authority, but the renewed self is submissive and understands that God's commands are issued out of **agape** love—knowing what we need rather than what we want.

So, with apologies to Ms. Browning, let me offer something to my wife publicly that I do far too little privately:

How do I love thee?
Let me count the ways.

In eros, we conceived
Our beautiful child,
Our greatest gift.
And continue to share
Our vulnerable shells
In ways no other can.

And when we find ourselves
In a room with those
unknown,

In phileo I search for you,
Seeking the respite of one
Who loves me
Despite myself.

We share our storge
For our children,
Delighting in their
faithfulness,
And agonizing in their
missteps.
We are together
In celebration and agony.

Just as that first time,
My splaychon leaps
When you enter a room
And simply smile
Or come my way
With a gentle touch.

You are what God
Knows I need,
And among His perfect commands,
This is the easiest to obey.

Yes, I love thee
To the depth and breadth and height
My soul can reach.
With profound agape
I would gladly sacrifice
Myself for you.

Jesus says there is
No marriage in heaven.
But when we leave this life
For timelessness with Him,
We will still be together
Best friends...forever.

Discussion

There were several subscribers who appreciated my admittedly novice attempt at poetry. I appreciate your comments.

From a subscriber in Colorado:

Great issue, Dick. It helps to put into words the feelings we have for our wives and for others, especially our creator and savior. One point of clarification though. There is strong evidence that the apostle Paul was married. You can find this in 2 Corinthians 12:7-9. :-) :-) :-) This comment usually draws comments from the ladies in Bible class who wouldn't otherwise speak up. :-)

You made a good choice in switching to e-Sword. I too was using Quick Verse but changed after I found e-Sword.

Keep up the great work. I look forward to each issue.

From a subscriber in Georgia:

Hello Dick,

I finally got around to reading this issue, and I think it was a great piece.

The fact of the matter is, even though I love my wife dearly, if it weren't for Christ's command to love my wife as he loved the church, I would eventually succumb to my natural inclination to broaden the likelihood that my genes would survive beyond my life. In short, I'd be no better than a tom cat (At least I would want to be that way. Tom cats might actually be more successful.).

Another word that I have heard associated with love is the Greek word "ktisis". The way I understand this word as Paul used it, it refers to both God's creative regeneration of our spirit through Christ and human institutions. I'm not sure why the overlap in usage seems to occur. I'm working from recall here. But beyond these two usages, I seem to recall another modern author referring to "ktisis" as an ultimate level of love achieved when each spouse encourages the other to be creative with their lives, even to the point of self-sacrifice. Have you heard of this usage of "ktisis"?

[DS] According to Strong, **ktisis** means "formation" or the thing formed; hence "building, creation, creature, ordinance." Paul uses **ktisis** to refer God Himself as Creator (Romans 1:25), created things in general (Ephesians 3:9, Colossians 1:16), and those who believe in Christ Jesus as a new creation (Ephesians 2:10, 4:24; Colossians 3:10). God's acts of **ktisis** are certainly expressions of love and, perhaps, His desire to be loved. Extending the concept of **ktisis** to humans is certainly intriguing, although I would suggest that a couple's desire and attempt to have children from their union is probably a better example of loving **ktisis** than a mutual encouragement to creativity. It's an intriguing addition to the ideas of love expressed in Scripture.



Unsure about or don't agree with something in Ekklesia Then & Now? First, be a Berean (Acts 17:10-11). If you still disagree, [post a message](#) so we can all share in the discussion!

NEXT ISSUE: Scratching a Roaring Lion

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