

The WORD That Turned the World UPSIDE DOWN

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How could one word transform millions into persons ready to die for their convictions, and other millions into their bloodthirsty persecutors?

What is the power of this new and strange word?

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Preface

"I may be able to speak the languages of men and even of angels, but if I have no *agape*, my speech is no more than a noisy gong or a clanging bell.

"I may have the gift of inspired preaching; I may have all knowledge and understand all secrets; I may have all the faith needed to move mountains—but if I have no *agape*, I am nothing.

"I may give away everything I have, and even give up my body to be burned — but if I have no *agape*, this does me no good." (Paul in 1 Corinthians 13:1-3.¹ In the original Greek, the word for love is *agape*)

¹ Bible texts in this Preface are from The Good News Bible, The Bible in Today's English Version.

"Dear Friends,... *agape* comes from God. Whoever loves [with *agape*] is a child of God and knows God. Whoever does not love [with *agape*] does not know God, for God is *agape*. And God showed His *agape* for us by sending His only Son into the world, so that we might have life through Him. This is what *agape* is: it is not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son to be the means by which our sins are forgiven....

"God is *agape*, and whoever lives in *agape* lives in union with God and God lives in union with him. *Agape* is made perfect in us in order that we may have courage in the Judgment Day. ... There is no fear in *agape*; perfect *agape* drives out all fear. So then, *agape* has not been made perfect in anyone who is afraid, because fear has to do with punishment.

"We love [with *agape*] because God first loved us [with *agape*]." (John, in his First Letter, 4:7-19)

The WORD That Turned the World *upside Down*

So you think it's fantastic that one little word could turn the world upside down?

Yes, the world was once powerfully shaken by a little band of men from Palestine who carried news embodied in one rather obscure word. Their terrified enemies in Thessalonica (a city in modern-day Greece) confessed its impact: "These men who have turned the world upside down have come here also" (Acts 17:6, RSV). The dynamite-laden messengers: Christ's apostles, especially Paul and his colleague John.

The word that performed this mighty feat was one little known in the ancient Greco-Roman world — a Greek term, *agape* (ä gä'pay). It meant "love," but it was revolutionary. It came to carry a spiritual wallop that overwhelmed people's minds, catalyzing humanity into two camps, one for and the other against the heavenly idea.

Those that were for it were transformed overnight into recklessly joyous followers of Jesus, ready to lose property, go to prison, or even to die a tortured death for Him. Those catalyzed against it as quickly became cruel, bloodthirsty persecutors of those who saw light in the new concept of love. None who heard the news could ever sit on the fence.

The mysterious explosive in this spiritual bomb was a radically different idea than had been dreamed of by the world's philosophers or ethics teachers. It was a new invention that took friend and foe alike by surprise.

It wasn't that the ancients had no idea of love; they talked about it plenty. In fact, the Greeks had three or four words for love (our modern languages usually have only one). But the kind of love that came to be expressed in *agape* mercilessly exposed all other ideas of love as either non-love or *anti-love*.

All of a sudden mankind came to realize that what they'd been calling "love" was actually veneered selfishness. The human psyche was stripped naked by the new revelation. If you welcomed the spiritual revolution, you got clothed with *agape* yourself; if not, having your robes of supposed goodness ripped off turned you into a raving enemy of the new faith. And no

one could turn the clock back, for *agape* was an idea for which its fullness of time had come.

When John took his pen to write his famous equation "God is love" (1 John 4:8), he had to choose between the several Greek words. The common, everyday one — *eros*— packed a powerful punch on its own. Something mysterious and powerful, *eros* was thought to be the source of all life. It swept like a torrent from a broken dam over all obstacles of human will and wisdom, a tide of emotion common to all humanity. If a mother loved her child, her love was *eros*, thought to be noble and pure. Likewise, the dependent love of children for their parents and the common love of friends for each other. Further, the mutual love of man and woman was a profoundly mysterious drive.

"Is God *eros*?" asked the ancient pagans. Yes, answered their philosophers, including the great Plato, because *eros* is stronger than human will. It produces the miracle of babies. It makes friends and families. And it dwells in everyone by nature. Therefore, said the pagans, it must be the spark of divinity in all humans.

For the ancients, love was pretty much -what it is for us today—the "sweet mystery of life," the elixir that makes an otherwise intolerable existence possible to endure. Plato hoped to transform the world by a kind of love that he considered "heavenly *eros*." Words derived from it today have an exclusively sexual meaning, but Plato tried to get the world to climb out of that swamp of sensuality by a spiritually uplifting idea, something noble and inspiring. It was based on climbing higher, getting free of physical lust, being attracted to a greater spiritual good for the soul.

But John could never bring himself to write that God is *eros*. He astounded the thinkers of his day by saying, "God is *agape*." And between those two ideas there stretches a vast gulf wider than the east is from the west.

The apostles' idea was revolutionary in at least three ways:

1. If one loves with *agape*, he has "boldness in the day of judgment" (1 John 4:17). Without it, one cringes in terror when confronted with ultimate judgment. With it, he walks fearlessly into God's presence past all His holy angels, utterly unashamed and confident. That was anciently unheard of.

2. "There is no fear in love [*agape*] but perfect love [*agape*] casts out fear. For fear has to do with punishment, and he who fears is not perfected in love [*agape*]" (verse 18, RSV). Fear with anxiety is the substratum of human existence in all ages. Fear too deep to recognize can make us sick, gnawing at the vitals of the soul until one's physical organs weaken in their resistance to disease. Years may go by before we can see or feel it, but at last the weakest organ of the body breaks down, and doctors must try to repair what *agape* would have prevented by conquering the fear.

3. Every sublime moral and ethical goal of humanity is nothing without *agape*, says Paul in his famous love chapter of 1 Corinthians 13. One can "speak in the tongues of men and of angels," "have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge," have "faith, so as to remove mountains," "give away all I have, and... deliver my body to be burned," and yet not have the all-important ingredient. He ends up "nothing." And *agape* has a phenomenal quality of enduring "all things," for *agape* "never ends." (RSV)

How did *agape* differ so much from the common idea of love? How could the apostles' idea possibly be such a threat to Plato's noble concept? The answer is found in clear-cut contrasts between the two ideas:

Ordinary human love is dependent on the beauty or goodness of its object. We naturally choose friends who are nice to us, who please us. We fall in love with our sexual opposite who is beautiful, happy, intelligent, and attractive, and turn away from one who is ugly, mean, ignorant, or offensive.

In contrast, *agape* doesn't depend on the beauty or goodness in its object. It stands alone, sovereign, free. The ancients had a story that illustrated their most sublime idea of love:

Admetus was a noble, handsome young man with all the personal qualities of excellence. He fell sick with a disease that the oracle of the gods pronounced would be fatal unless someone could be found who would die in his place. His friends went from one to another, inquiring, "Would you be willing to die for Admetus?" All agreed that he was a wonderful young man, but "Sorry," they said, "we couldn't die for him." His parents were asked, and they said, "We love our son, but sorry, we couldn't die for him." Finally his friends asked the beautiful girl who loved him, Alcestis. "Yes," she said, "because he is such a good man and because the world needs him so, I am willing to die for him!"

The philosophers boasted: "This is love — willing to die for a good man!" Imagine their shock when the apostles said that wasn't it at all. "One will hardly die for a righteous man — though perhaps for a good man one will dare even to die. But God shows his love [*agape*] for us in that while we were yet sinners Christ died for us," yes, "while we were enemies." (Romans 5:7, 8,10, RSV)

A message like that either captured your soul or turned you into an implacable enemy.

Natural human love rests on a sense of need. It feels poor and empty of itself and requires an object to enrich its own life. A husband loves his wife because he needs her, and a wife loves her husband for the mutual reason. Two friends love each other because they need each other. It's natural. Each feels empty and alone.

Infinitely wealthy of itself, *agape* feels no need. The apostles said that the reason God loves us is not because He needs us, but because — well, He *is agape*. "You know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich" (2 Corinthians 8:9, RSV). To this day we are staggered by the idea of a love that "seeketh not her own" (1 Corinthians 13:5). Even churches seem drawn almost irresistibly to representing God's love as a seeking-its-own thing, a motivation inspired by His own acquisitive instinct. God saw a hidden value in us, it is assumed; and He was simply making a good bargain when He bought us.

We come to resemble what we worship, so multitudes worship such a God because they too are seeking a good bargain. Their religion is the soul of acquisitiveness—what they want to acquire is heaven and its rewards — celestial real estate, and this self-centered motive is what keeps them going. When *agape* breaks through into this egocentric milieu, the reaction is pretty

much what happened when it broke upon the ancient world and transformed lives.

Natural human love rests on a sense of value. Many Africans still follow the ancient bride-price system, which faithfully mirrors the more subtle basis of all our other cultures as well. The amount of the bride price to be paid depends on the expense of education the girl's parents have invested in her. A few cows suffice for one who can barely scrawl her name; astronomical dowries are demanded for girls who have been to Oxford or Cambridge.

We also pigeon-hole one another. Few treat the garbage man as courteously or patronizingly as we do the mayor or governor. If, like water seeking its own level, "ye love them which love you, what reward have ye? do not even the publicans the same? And if ye salute your brethren only, what do ye more than others?" asks Jesus (Matthew 5:46,47). "Men will praise thee, when thou doest well to thyself. (Psalm 49:18)

In contrast, *agape* is an idea from outside this world. Rather than being dependent on the value of its object, *it creates value in its object.*

Suppose I have a rough stone in my hand. I picked it up in a field. If I try to sell it, no one would give me even a nickel for it. This is not because a stone is inherently bad, but because it is so common it is worthless. {*Eros* is not bad; it's worthless, for it is as common as stones.)

Now suppose that as I hold this rough stone in my arms, I could love it as a mother loves a baby. And suppose that my love could work like alchemy and transform it into a piece of solid gold. My fortune would be made. This is an illustration of what *agape* does to us.

Of ourselves we are worth nothing other than the dubious chemical value of our bodies' ingredients. But God's love transforms us into a value equivalent to that of His own Son: "I will make a man more precious than fine gold; even a man than the golden wedge of Ophir." (Isaiah 13:12)

Doubtless you have known some example of human flotsam that has been transformed into a person of infinite worth. John Newton (1725-1807) was one. A godless seafarer who dealt in the African slave trade, he became a drunken wretch who fell victim to the people he tried to enslave. At length *agape* touched his heart. He gave up his vile business, was transformed into an honored messenger of glad tidings. Millions remember him for his hymn that discloses the "fine gold" that he became:

"Amazing grace! how sweet the sound
That saved a wretch like me!
I once was lost, but now am found;
Was blind, but now I see.

'Twas grace that taught my heart to fear,
And grace my fears relieved;
How precious did that grace appear,
The hour I first believed."

Natural human love goes in search of God. All heathen religions are based on the idea of God being about as elusive as a cure for cancer. People imagine that He is playing hide-and-seek and has withdrawn Himself from human beings. Only special ones are wise or clever enough to discover where He is hiding. Millions go on long journeys to Mecca, Rome, Jerusalem, or other

shrines, searching for Him. The ancient Greeks outdid all of us in building magnificent marble temples on their highest hills in which they felt they must seek Him.

Again, *agape* is the opposite. It is not humans seeking after God, but *God seeking after man*: "The Son of man is come to seek and to save that which was lost" (Luke 19:10). The shepherd left his 99 sheep that were safe and risked his life to find the one that was lost; the woman lit a candle and searched her house until she found the one lost coin; the Spirit of God searched for the heart of the prodigal son and brought him home. There is no story in all the Bible of a lost sheep required to find his shepherd! This upset all common human ideas.

Paul was obsessed with this great idea: "The righteousness based on faith says, Do not say in your heart, 'Who will ascend into heaven?' (that is, to bring Christ down) or 'Who will descend into the abyss?' (that is, to bring Christ up from the dead). But what does it say? The word is near you, on your lips and in your heart (that is, the word of faith which we preach)" (Romans 10:6-8, RSV).

That "word of faith" is as closely related to *agape* as a photographic negative is to a photographic print. Faith is the response of an honest human heart to this tremendous revelation of *agape*, and Paul's point is that this tremendous "word is *near you*." Have you heard the News? Here's the evidence: God has already chosen you and sought you out where you've been hiding from Him! The Good Shepherd is always on safari looking for us.

Our human love is always seeking to climb higher. Every first-grader wants to enter the second grade; a child who is 6 says "I will soon be 7." No job seeker wants demotion instead of promotion. The State politician longs to get into the national game, and probably every national senator at some time dreams that he/she might make it to the White House.

Who has ever heard of a national president voluntarily resigning in order to become a village servant? Plato's idea of love could never imagine such a thing. Neither can we!

What sobered the ancient world was the sight of Someone higher than a president stepping down lower and lower, until He submitted to the torture-racked death of a criminal. In what is probably an outline of Paul's favorite message in Philippians 2:5-8 (RSV), we can trace seven distinct downward steps that Christ took in showing us what *agape* is:

1. "Though He was in the form of God, [He] did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped." When we get into high positions in politics, business, or even the church, it is our nature to worry about falling. "Uneasy lies the head that wears a crown." But the Son of God abdicates His crown voluntarily, motivated by this strange, unearthly love, *agape*.

2. He "emptied Himself," or "made Himself of no reputation." We humans will fight to the death to maintain our reputation. And daring deeds of valor are not always the same as emptying oneself as Christ did, for Paul says one can give his "body to be burned" and yet lack *agape*. When he says Christ "emptied Himself," he meant a voluntary surrender *for eternity* of everything held dear, something quite impossible to do apart from *agape*.

3. He took "the form of a servant [slave]." Can you imagine a more dismal life than always being forced to work without wages or thanks? Angels are said to be servants, "ministering spirits" sent to wait on us (Hebrews 1:14). If the Son of God had become like one of them, that would have been a

great condescension on His part, for He was their Commander. But He stepped still lower:

4. He was made in the "likeness of men," "lower than the angels" (Psalm 8:5). Not the sun-crowned, majestic splendor that Genesis says Adam enjoyed, but the degraded level of fallen man in the abysmal human debasement of the Greco-Roman world. No human being has ever fallen so low but that the Son of God has come far enough to reach him or her. And once let that *agape* steal its way into our hearts, all lingering traces of any holier-than-thou spirit melt away before it, and *agape* makes it possible to reach the hearts of others.

5. "And being found in human form, He humbled Himself." In other words, He was not born to live an easy life in either Caesar's or Herod's palace. His mother had Him in a stinky cattle shed, forced to wrap her little one in rags and lay Him in a donkey's feed box. His became the life of a toiling peasant. But this was not enough:

6. He "became obedient unto death."

This pregnant phrase means something different from the suicide's mad leap in the dark. Suicide is never "obedient unto death." Jesus stayed by and faced reality. The kind of death Christ was "obedient" to was not an escape from responsibility. It was not like Socrates drinking his hemlock. It was like going to hell, the conscious condemnation of every cell of one's being under the assumed or understood frown of God. The seventh step in condescension Christ "took" in our place makes clear what an awful price He paid for us:

7. "Even death on a cross." In Jesus' day such a death was the most humiliating and painful possible. Not only was it the cruelest ever invented, not only the most shameful — being strung up naked before the taunting mob who watched your agony with glee — death on a cross carried a built-in horror deeper than all that. *It meant that Heaven cursed you.*

The reason was that the respected ancient writer Moses had declared that anyone who dies on a tree is "accursed by God" (Deuteronomy 21:23). And everybody believed it, of course. If a condemned criminal was sentenced to be slain with a sword or even burned alive, he could still pray and trust that God would forgive him and look kindly on him. He could feel some support in his death.

But if the judge said, "You must die on a tree," all hope was gone. Everybody understood that God had turned His back on the wretch forever. This is why Paul says that Christ was "made a curse for us: for it is written, Cursed is everyone that hangeth on a tree" (Galatians 3:13). The kind of death Christ died was that of the lost who must perish at last in hopeless despair — it's what Revelation calls "the second death." Of course it was a million times worse for Christ to endure than it will be for them because His sensitivity to the suffering was infinitely greater than any of theirs.

Imagine a crucified man on a cross: crowds come to jeer at him as today we flock to a ball game. Like an old, wrecked car that children throw rocks at, he is a human writeoff, abandoned to be mocked and abused in horror unspeakable. You must not even feel or express pity or sympathy for him, for if you do, you disagree with God's judgment of him! You are on God's side if you throw rotten eggs or tomatoes at him. So people thought.

This was the death that Jesus became "obedient" to. In His despair He cried out, "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" (Matthew 27:46). Be quiet and reverent as you think about it. You and I are the ones who would have had to go through that if He had not taken our place.

This idea of *agape* has been dying out among many professed followers of Christ because a pagan notion has subtly infiltrated our thinking. I refer to the doctrine of the natural immortality of the soul. If there is no such thing as real death, then Christ did not truly die. If He went to Paradise the day He was on the cross (as many mistakenly believe from a misplaced comma in Luke 23:43), then there was no true emptying of Himself, no true death on the cross, no dying the equivalent of the second death, which is the real thing. If so, Christ did not, could not, pay the penalty for human sin—and that would mean, *we have to*.

The doctrine of the natural immortality of the soul logically makes Christ's sacrifice to be a sham, a pretended stage play of enduring the wrath of God for sinners, when in fact He was sustained throughout by confidence of great reward to come. But when the darkness overtook Him on Calvary, the light of His Father's face was completely withdrawn. His cry "Why hast thou forsaken me?" was no actor's wail. Isaiah was right: "He hath poured out his soul unto death" (Isaiah 53:12), even "the second death." (Revelation 2:11)

The infiltration of a false idea from ancient paganism began soon after the apostles' time, for Jesus warned the first of the seven symbolic churches of Revelation 2: "Thou hast left thy first love [*agape*]"(verse 4). When God's enemy saw the power packed in that idea, his first move was to lead the early church into apostasy on that essential point. We can document step by step the progressive abandonment of the idea of *agape* by the so-called Church Fathers.

Augustine finally worked out a synthesis of *agape* and self-centered love that became the foundation of medieval Catholicism. Luther tried to restore *agape*, but sad to say, his followers returned to the doctrine of natural immortality, and again *agape* nearly died out. The world is now ripe for its rediscovery.

By now we can probably begin to sense the gulf that separates human love from *agape*. Unless enriched with it, human love is really disguised selfishness. Even parental love can be a mere "seeking our own," a subtle form of selfishness.

Our present epidemic of marital infidelity is evidence enough of the self-centered aspect of sexual love. Love for each other when it's *eros* is based on egocentric motivations. No wonder it dies! In contrast, *agape* "seeketh not her own" and "never faileth" (1 Corinthians 13:5,8). Remember: *eros* is itself not something bad; we're all here because of it. But if your marriage is based only on *eros*, it is probably headed for the rocks.

Having said all this, one additional contrast between human love and God's love remains:

Natural human love wants the reward of immortality: agape dares to relinquish it. This was what overturned all the value systems of antiquity.

God has not written an encyclopedia article for us about *agape*. Instead, He sent His Son to die on a cross, so we could see it. The true dimension of that sacrifice is that it is infinite, complete, and eternal.

Christ went to the grave for us, not because He deserved it, but because we did. In those last few hours as He hung there in the darkness, He drained the cup of all human woe to its dregs. The bright sunshine in which He had walked while on earth was gone. All thought of reward to come fled His mind. He could not see through to the other side of the dark and awful grave that gaped before Him. God is *agape*, and Christ is God, and there He is — dying

the death we deserve. (The fact that the Father called Him back to life the third day in no way lessens the reality of His total commitment on the cross in our behalf.)

Now we come to something disturbing. It's not enough for us to say, "Fine, glad He went through that; but you mean I must learn to love with *agape*? Impossible!"

We sinful, self-centered mortals can learn to love with *agape*, for John said: "Love [*agape*] is of God, and he who loves [with *agape*] is born of God and knows God. He who does not love [with *agape*] does not know God; for God is love [*agape*]." (1 John 4:7,8 RSV)

Moses is an example of one who learned.

The Lord gave him a special test one day. Israel had broken their "old" covenant by worshipping a golden calf, and He proposed to Moses that He wipe them out with a divine "H-bomb," and start from scratch with a new people — Moses' descendants.

The temptation to take the place of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob was a very real one. God liked him, but had had enough of Israel. He offered Moses a terrific promotion with fame for all time. So what did he do? Accept the proffered honor, and let Israel go down the drain?

Moses was torn to his depths. He had never cried so much in his life. Listen, as in broken sobs this mortal like ourselves tries to change God's mind:

"Oh, this people have sinned a great sin, and have made them gods of gold. Yet now, if thou wilt forgive their sin — ." Here Moses breaks down; he can't finish the sentence. (This is the only dash in the entire King James Bible!) He glimpses the horror of an eternal hell stretching before him if he shares Israel's fate. But he makes up his mind. He chooses to be lost with them: "... and if not, blot me, I pray thee, out of thy book which thou hast written." (Exodus 32:31,32)

Moses stood the test. I can imagine the Lord throwing His arms of love around His weeping servant — He had found a man with love like that in His own heart.

Paul had found that same *agape* in his heart, for he also wished himself "accursed from Christ" for the sake of his lost people (Romans 9:1-3). Everyone who sees the cross as it truly is and *believes*, finds the miracle of *agape* reproduced in his own heart. This is how the world will be turned upside down again, "for the love [*agape*] of Christ constraineth us" that we "should not henceforth live unto [ourselves], but unto Him which died for [us], and rose again." (2 Corinthians 5:14,15)

We miss the point of the New Testament if we miss *agape* in it. We also stay in the dark about what faith is, for New Testament faith is a human heart-appreciation of the "breadth, and length and depth, and height" of the *agape* of Christ (Ephesians 3:18,19). There can be no real change of heart in righteousness by faith without a true appreciation of it.

Here we are in the last moments of time before the second coming of Christ. The "remnant" church of the last days is to be distinguished as those who "keep the commandments of God, and the faith of Jesus" (Revelation 14:12). How does one truly "keep the commandments"? A sobering answer comes: "*agape* is the fulfilling of the law" (Romans 13:10). Nothing less.

It's the basic idea of God's last message of mercy to the world in Revelation 14:6-12. It must be there if any one *can* get ready to meet the Lord when He returns in glory! The faith that works miracles today in justification by faith is a melted-heart response to the amazing *agape* displayed in the sacrifice of that Lamb of God. That idea is *again* "present truth." (2 Peter 1:12)

As the apostles fanned out telling their story, the cross became the world's moment of truth. In that lightning flash of revelation, every man saw himself judged. The cross became the final definition of love; and that's why that word *agape* turned the world upside down. Let it turn your life upside down!