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LET LOVE BE UN-HYPOCRITICAL:  
THE *AGAPE* OF GOD AND AMNON

*A. W. Morris, MDiv, PhD*

INTRODUCTION

More than fifty years ago, Billy Graham delivered a passionate evangelistic message called “True Love.” With characteristic zeal he proclaimed to his audience that the Greeks had not one but *four* words for love: *storge* (family affection), *eros* (romantic / sexual love), *phileo* (friendship), and, fourthly:

*Agape* love. This is another word that the Greeks used; they invented this word for the New Testament. This is God’s love. *Agape* love is a supernatural love, a love that we know nothing about apart from God. It’s so deep and so wide and so high and so great and has such dimensions to it that no words in any language can describe it.<sup>1</sup>

It is worth asking whether the Greeks actually invented the word ἀγάπη (*agape*) specifically for the New Testament. Also, does this word refer only to God’s supernatural love that is higher than the other three and beyond all human description?

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<sup>1</sup> Transcribed from a video recording of “True Love,” given by Billy Graham in St. Louis, MO in 1973  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ahKWms8ItLQ> (accessed 10/01/2024).

A Christian understanding of love is based not on Greek philosophy but on plainly interpreted Scripture. This article demonstrates that the Scriptures reveal not four but *two* categories of love; and any expression of love – physical, emotional, relational, spiritual, or any combination thereof – falls into one of these two categories.

### FOUR LOVES

The idea of four Greek categories of love did not originate with Billy Graham. The first modern treatment of this topic was a book by C.S. Lewis titled *The Four Loves* (1960). In the broadest sense he distinguished between what he called “need-love” and “gift-love,” and then he devoted a full chapter to each of the four loves:

- 1) Affection: “The Greeks called this love *storge* ... I shall here call it simply Affection. My Greek Lexicon defines *storge* as ‘affection, especially of parents to offspring’; but also of offspring to parents.”<sup>2</sup>
- 2) Friendship: “We admit of course that besides a wife and family a man needs a few ‘friends.’ But the very tone of the admission, and the sort of acquaintanceships which those who make it would describe as ‘friendships’, show clearly that what they are talking about has very little to do with that *Philia* which Aristotle classified among the virtues or that *Amicitia* on which Cicero wrote a book.”<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> C.S. Lewis, *The Four Loves* (New York, NY: Harper Collins Publishers, 1960), 41.

<sup>3</sup> Lewis, *The Four Loves*, 73.



- 3) Eros: “By *Eros* I mean of course that state which we call ‘being in love’; or, if you prefer, that kind of love which lovers are ‘in’.”<sup>4</sup>
- 4) Charity: “That such a Gift-love comes by Grace and should be called Charity, everyone will agree.”<sup>5</sup>

The first three he classified as “need-love,” but Charity he classified as Divine Love or “gift-love.” Lewis did not directly link the Greek word ἀγάπη (*agape*) to Divine Love or Charity in his book, but he did mention it in a personal letter from 1954 that was published in 1966:

*Charity* means love. It is called Agape in the New Testament to distinguish it from Eros (sexual love), Storge (family affection) and Philia (friendship). So there are four kinds of love, all good in their proper place, but Agape is the best because it is the kind God has for us and is good in all circumstances.<sup>6</sup>

Only a few years after Billy Graham’s message, Norman Wright and Wes Roberts wrote a pre-marital counseling book titled *Before You Say “I Do”* (1977). In chapter 3 they described the three types of love needed in marriage:

Eros is the love that seeks sensual expression. Eros is a romantic love, sexual love. It is inspired by the biological structure of human nature. The husband and wife, in a

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<sup>4</sup> Lewis, *The Four Loves*, 117.

<sup>5</sup> Lewis, *The Four Loves*, 172.

<sup>6</sup> W.H. Lewis and Walter Hooper, eds., *The Letters of C.S. Lewis* (New York, NY: Harper Collins Publishers, 1966), 601.

good marriage, will love each other romantically and erotically.

In a good marriage the husband and wife are also friends. Friendship means companionship, communication, and cooperation. This is known as *philia*.

Agape is self-giving love, gift love, the love that goes on loving even when the other becomes unlovable. *Agape love is not just something that happens to you; it's something you make happen.* Love is a personal act of commitment. Christ's love (and hence the pattern for our love) is gift love. Christ's love for us is sacrificial love. Christ's love is unconditional. Christ's love is an eternal love. Agape is kindness. It is being sympathetic, thoughtful, and sensitive to the needs of your loved one. Agape is contentment and agape love is forgiving love.<sup>7</sup>

Wright and Roberts did not mention *στοργή* (*storge*), most likely because they did not deem it as relevant to marriage as the other three. They used Lewis's term "gift-love" as a synonym for *ἀγάπη* (*agape*); and their descriptions of *ἔρως* (*eros*), *φιλία* (*philia*), and *ἀγάπη* (*agape*) generally match those of Lewis and Graham.

Around twenty years later, Warren Wiersbe wrote *The Bible Exposition Commentary* (1996), a two-volume edition covering the entire New Testament. His comments on NT

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<sup>7</sup> H. Norman Wright and Wes Roberts, *Before You Say "I Do"* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House Publishers, 1977), 23–24 (emphasis original).

passages dealing with love focused on the Greek words used in those passages, which were only ἀγάπη (*agape*) and φιλία (*philia*):

- **John 21:9–18:** “In His questions in John 21:15–16, our Lord used *agape*, which is the Greek word for the highest kind of love, sacrificing love, divine love. Peter always used *phileo*, which is the love of friend for friend, fondness for another.”<sup>8</sup>
- **Galatians 5:22–26:** “This word for love is *agape*, which means divine love.”<sup>9</sup>
- **Colossians 3:18–19:** “However, the husband has the responsibility of loving his wife; and the word for ‘love’ used here is *agape*—the sacrificing, serving love that Christ shares with His church. A marriage may begin with normal, human, romantic love, but it must grow deeper into the spiritual *agape* love that comes only from God.”<sup>10</sup>
- **1 Thessalonians 4:9–10:** “*Philia* love is the love of deep affection, such as in friendship or even marriage. But *agape* love is the love God shows toward us. It is not simply a love based on feeling; it is expressed in our wills. *Agape* love treats others as God would treat them, regardless of feelings or personal preferences.”<sup>11</sup>
- **1 John 2:7-11:** “When we read in 1 John about “love,” the Greek word used is *agape* (ah-GAH-pay), the word for

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<sup>8</sup> Warren W. Wiersbe, *The Bible Exposition Commentary, Volume 1* (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1996), 398.

<sup>9</sup> Wiersbe, *The Bible Exposition Commentary, Volume 1*, 720.

<sup>10</sup> Warren W. Wiersbe, *The Bible Exposition Commentary, Volume 2* (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1996), 142.

<sup>11</sup> Wiersbe, *The Bible Exposition Commentary, Volume 2*, 177.

God’s love toward man, a Christian’s love for other Christians, and God’s love for His church (Eph. 5:22–33). Another Greek word for love, *philia* (fee-LEE-ah), used elsewhere, carries the idea of ‘friendship love,’ which is not quite as profound or divine as *agape* love.”<sup>12</sup>

Wiersbe did acknowledge that the terms ἀγάπη (*agape*) and φιλία (*philia*) were at times used interchangeably as close synonyms.<sup>13</sup> But he consistently treated “*agape* love” and “*philia* love” as separate categories with different meanings.

More recently, Jen Wilkin wrote *In His Image* (2018) on the communicable attributes of God. In the chapter on love she explained,

The Greek of Jesus’s day, which is also the language of the New Testament, distinguishes four different kinds of love, using a specific word for each. Becoming familiar with them helps us understand how the Bible describes God’s love, and can help clear up some of the cultural fog that has settled around our own conceptions of it. *Eros* is the word used to describe romantic love. *Philia* is the word used to describe brother-sisterly love shared between peers. *Storge* is the word used to describe a parent’s love for a child. *Agape* is the word used to describe the love of God.”<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Wiersbe, *The Bible Exposition Commentary, Volume 2*, 486.

<sup>13</sup> Wiersbe, *The Bible Exposition Commentary, Volume 1*, 398.

<sup>14</sup> Jen Wilkin, *In His Image: 10 Ways God Calls Us to Reflect His Character* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2018), 33. She cited *The Four Loves* by C.S. Lewis as a source for her descriptions.

Interestingly, none of these authors cited any Greek grammar textbook or linguistic treatise to support their claims. They simply treated it as “common knowledge” that the four words for love in the Greek language represented different categories of love, with ἀγάπη (*agape*) being the highest category that refers exclusively to God’s love.

### MEANING AND CONTEXT

Any word in any language has a range of possible meanings, and the meaning of any *specific use* of a word is entirely dependent upon the *context* in which it is used. The word “touchdown” means something completely different on a football field than on an airstrip. The words ἔρως (*eros*), στοργή (*storge*), φιλία (*philia*), and ἀγάπη (*agape*) all have ranges of meaning in the Greek language, and as Christians our understanding of these words depends on the various contexts in which they are used in Scripture.

The Biblical context for these words includes the Greek Old Testament (known as the Septuagint [abbreviated LXX]), which was translated more than two centuries before the writing of the New Testament. The authors of the NT frequently quoted the LXX directly rather than simply translate the Hebrew OT text on their own, and the usage of these words in the LXX is equally relevant to their use in the NT.

The noun ἔρως (*eros*) is not used in the NT and is used only twice in the LXX:

- **Proverbs 7:18**, where the seductress says to the simpleton,

δεῦρο καὶ ἐγκυλισθῶμεν ἔρωτι (“Come and let us be reeled in to love(making)”)

- **Proverbs 24:51** (30:16 in Hebrew), where one of the things that never says “enough” is a ἔρως γυναικὸς (“sensuous wife”)

The noun στοργή (*storge*) is not used in the NT or the LXX, but the adjective ἀστοργος (usually translated “heartless”) is included in “sin lists” describing rebels against the gospel (Romans 1:31) and false believers in the last days (2 Timothy 3:3). The noun φιλόστοργος (“affection,” a compound of φιλία [*philia*] and στοργή [*storge*]) is used in connection with φιλαδελφία (“love of brother”) in a series of positive commands to believers (Romans 12:10).

The noun φιλία (*philia*) and verb φιλέω (*phileo*) are both used in the LXX and the NT. The noun φιλία is only used once in the NT by itself (James 4:4, referring to “friendship with the world”), but it is a constituent of several compound words that refer to “love of” something – φιλαδελφία (love of brother), φιλάργυρος (love of money), φιλοπρωτεύω (love of being first), etc. The verb φιλέω not only referred to “love” in the general sense, but it could also refer specifically to kissing, either romantic (Proverbs 7:13, Song 1:2), familial (Genesis 33:4), or formal (Mark 14:44).

The verb φιλέω (*phileo*) could also be used synonymously with ἀγαπάω (*agapao*) to refer to God’s love either for the Son or for His people:

- **John 3:35:** “The Father loves (ἀγαπάω) the Son and has given all things into his hand.”

- **John 5:20:** “For the Father loves (φιλέω) the Son and shows him all that he himself is doing.”
- **Hebrews 12:6:** “For the Lord disciplines the one he loves (ἀγαπάω) and chastises every son whom he receives.”
- **Revelation 3:19:** “Those whom I love (φιλέω), I reprove and discipline, so be zealous and repent.”

There is no discernible difference in meaning between ἀγαπάω (*agapao*) and φιλέω (*phileo*) in either of these parallel uses. One of the primary topics of the gospel of John is the relationship between God the Father and Jesus the Son, and the theological contexts of Hebrews 12:6 and Revelation 3:19 are nearly identical – in both cases the topic is God’s discipline of believers in Christ.

To summarize, ἔρως (*eros*) and στοργή (*storge*) were both used rarely in Scripture and had limited ranges of meaning, with ἔρως (*eros*) referring primarily to sexual love and στοργή (*storge*) referring primarily to familial affection (or lack thereof). φιλία (*philia*) and φιλέω (*phileo*) were used more often and could refer specifically to kissing or more generally to the love of God for humans, the love of humans for each other, or the love of humans for non-human things such as money or primacy.

### THE SEMANTIC RANGE OF *AGAPE*

The noun ἀγάπη (*agape*) and verb ἀγαπάω (*agapao*) were used a combined total of more than 500 times between the NT and LXX. To get an idea of their overall ranges of meaning, here is a representative list of biblical uses of these terms:

- **Ephesians 3:17–19:** “That you, being rooted and grounded in love, may have strength to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love (ἀγάπη) of Christ that surpasses knowledge ...” This is the meaning to which the aforementioned authors are referring – the transcendent, perfect, Divine love of God Himself.
- **John 3:35:** “The Father loves (ἀγαπάω) the Son and has given all things into his hand.” Again, as the previously mentioned authors describe, this is the perfect love between God the Father and God the Son.
- **1 John 4:10:** “In this is love (ἀγάπη), not that we have loved (ἀγαπάω) God but that he loved (ἀγαπάω) us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins.” This is describing God’s perfect love expressed toward humanity through Christ’s death on the cross.
- **Deuteronomy 6:5:** “You shall love (ἀγαπάω) the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might.” This command, quoted by Jesus (Matthew 22:37, Mark 12:30), describes the appropriate response of wholehearted love for God from God’s people that reflects God’s love for us.
- **1 Corinthians 13:4–7:** “Love (ἀγάπη) is patient and kind; love (ἀγάπη) does not envy or boast; it is not arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth. Love (ἀγάπη) bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.” This is a list of characteristics that describe how God intends for love to be expressed among His people,



especially in the context of worship in the gathered church.

- **Ruth 4:15:** “He shall be to you a restorer of life and a nourisher of your old age, for your daughter-in-law who loves (ἀγαπάω) you, who is more to you than seven sons, has given birth to him.”

The women of Bethlehem blessed Naomi by reminding her of the strong familial love between Naomi and her daughter-in-law Ruth.
- **1 Samuel 20:17:** “And Jonathan made David swear again by his love for him, for he loved (ἀγαπάω) him as he loved (ἀγαπάω) his own soul.”

David and Jonathan had a covenantal brotherly love for each other despite the fact that they were not blood relatives.
- **Ephesians 5:25:** “Husbands, love (ἀγαπάω) your wives, as Christ loved (ἀγαπάω) the church and gave himself up for her ...”

The love of a husband for his wife within the marriage covenant is intended to be reflective of Christ’s sacrificial love for the Church.
- **Song 2:7, 3:5, 8:4:** “Do not arouse or awaken love (ἀγάπη) until it pleases.”

The emotional and physical desire that God intends for a husband and wife to express only to each other within their marriage covenant is not to be aroused before marriage.
- **Judges 16:4:** “After this he [Samson] loved (ἀγαπάω) a woman in the Valley of Sorek, whose name was Delilah.”

Samson’s sexual appetite for Gentile women was first gratified through an unnamed Philistine wife

(Judges 14) and then eventually through Delilah, who married Samson and then betrayed him to the Philistines.

- **1 Kings 3:3:** “Solomon loved (ἀγαπάω) the Lord, walking in the statutes of David his father, except that he sacrificed and made offerings at the high places.”  
Early in his reign as king of Israel, Solomon loved the Lord; but his love was not entirely pure because he worshiped at pagan “high places” that should have been destroyed.

- **2 Timothy 4:10:** “For Demas, loving (ἀγαπάω) this present world, has deserted me and gone to Thessalonica.”

Paul’s fellow-laborer Demas loved the world, not in the way that God loved the world (John 3:16) but in the way that God’s people are commanded *not* to love the world (1 John 2:15).

- **1 Kings 11:1–2:** “Now King Solomon loved many foreign women ... from the nations concerning which the Lord had said to the people of Israel, ‘You shall not enter into marriage with them, neither shall they with you, for surely they will turn away your heart after their gods.’ Solomon clung to these in love (ἀγάπη).”

Solomon loved all of his Gentile wives and all the false gods that went with them.

- **Ezekiel 16:37:** “Therefore, behold, I will gather all your lovers with whom you took pleasure, all those you loved (ἀγαπάω) and all those you hated ...”

The prophets metaphorically described Israel’s idolatry as adultery and prostitution with Israel’s “lovers” (see also Jeremiah 2:25, Hosea 8:9, Lamentations 1:2).

- **Hosea 3:1:** “And the Lord said to me, ‘Go again, love (ἀγαπάω) a woman who is loved (ἀγαπάω) by another man and is an adulteress, even as the Lord loves (ἀγαπάω) the children of Israel, though they turn to other gods and love cakes of raisins.’”

Gomer, the woman Hosea was commanded to marry (Hosea 1:2), committed adultery against Hosea; yet he took her back even though she had been “loved by another.”

- **2 Samuel 13:1,4,15:** “Now Absalom, David’s son, had a beautiful sister, whose name was Tamar. And after a time Amnon, David’s son, loved (ἀγαπάω) her.”

“And he [Jonadab] said to him [Amnon], ‘O son of the king, why are you so haggard morning after morning? Will you not tell me?’ Amnon said to him, ‘I love (ἀγαπάω) Tamar, my brother Absalom’s sister.’”

“Then Amnon hated her with very great hatred, so that the hatred with which he hated her was greater than the love (ἀγάπη) with which he had loved (ἀγαπάω) her. And Amnon said to her, ‘Get up! Go!’”

In one of the most sinful and disturbing narrative accounts in all of Scripture, David’s oldest son Amnon lusted after his half-sister Tamar (in violation of Leviticus 18:9, which prohibited sexual relations with either “your father’s daughter or your mother’s daughter”). Amnon’s crafty cousin Jonadab concocted a plan to help Amnon gratify his incestuous lust – pretend to be ill and ask Tamar to be his nurse. Once Amnon had deceived her into coming into his bedchamber to feed him cakes while he was lying on his bed, Amnon forcefully grabbed her and demanded that she have

sexual relations with him. Tamar protested that such disgraceful things were not done in Israel, a likely allusion to the violation of Jacob's daughter Dinah (Genesis 34:7). Tamar even tried to persuade Amnon to ask his father to give her to him rather than take her by force; but Amnon did not listen and sexually violated her, after which his hateful scorn for her was even stronger than his lust for her had been.

To summarize, ἀγάπη (*agape*) and ἀγαπῶ (*agapao*) were used hundreds of times in Scripture and could refer to God's perfect love within the Godhead, God's perfect love expressed to humans, spiritual human love for God, romantic human love within marriage, familial human love, close brotherly friendship, tainted worship, worldliness, idolatry, polygamy, adultery, and incestuous lust that leads to rape.

### TRUE OR FALSE?

What do we make of the fact that the same word ἀγάπη (*agape*) is used in Scripture to describe God's perfect love and Amnon's incestuous lust? Notwithstanding Billy Graham's rhetorical flourish, Amnon's "*agape*-love" for Tamar was most certainly *not* God's love. It was sinfully natural, the overflow of Amnon's depravity. It was a love that we know all too well apart from God. It was so shallow and so small and so low and so evil and had such vacuity to it that almost no words in any language can describe it. On the other hand, the positive examples of "*agape*-love" in Scripture include the family affection of Ruth and Naomi, the friendship of David and Jonathan, and the romantic / sexual love portrayed in the Song

of Songs. Are ἔρως (*eros*), στοργή (*storge*), φιλία (*philia*), and ἀγάπη (*agape*) really four discrete and separate categories?

The use of these words in Scripture reveals *two* categories of love – “true” and “false.” There are expressions of love that reflects God’s character and God’s commands (such as a husband for his wife within a Christ-honoring marriage), and there are expressions of love that *do not* reflect God’s character or God’s commands (such as Amnon for Tamar).

In Romans 12:9, Paul commanded his readers to let their love be ἀνυπόκριτος (“un-hypocritical”), that is, without any false pretense or insincerity (the term ἀνυπόκριτος is usually translated “sincere”). Peter similarly reminded his regenerated readers that their souls had been purified for φιλადελφίαν ἀνυπόκριτον (“un-hypocritical brotherly love” [1 Peter 1:22]). Clearly, the command to love one another in a way that is *not* hypocritical pre-supposes the possibility of loving in a way that *is* hypocritical; and there are many examples in Scripture:

- Solomon’s love for God early in his life was tainted with hypocrisy. He had already married Pharaoh’s daughter (1 Kings 3:1), who would eventually turn his heart away from God like all the rest of his wives (1 Kings 11:1–3); and he still worshiped God at pagan “high places” (1 Kings 3:3).

- Amnon’s love for Tamar was the very definition of hypocrisy. Amnon pretended to be ill and maneuvered Tamar into his bedroom so that he could commit an abomination by sexually violating her (2 Samuel 13:6–14).

- Demas’s hypocrisy was revealed when he deserted Paul’s gospel work because of love for the world (Philemon 1:24, 2 Timothy 4:10).

- Jesus repeatedly rebuked the scribes and Pharisees for their hypocrisy. The scribes affirmed the importance of loving God and loving neighbor (Mark 12:32–33) but also devoured widows’ houses and for a pretense made long prayers (Mark 12:38–40). The scribes and Pharisees were, according to Jesus, the fulfillment of Isaiah’s prophecy about those who worshiped God with their lips but whose hearts were far from God (Matthew 15:1–9, quoting Isaiah 29:13).

Even if Lewis and the others are correct about how the ancient Greeks categorized love, the semantic “overlap” among the four terms in Scripture – especially ἀγάπη (*agape*) with the other three – precludes any strict separation of their meanings. The only non-overlapping categories of love in Scripture are “true” and “false.”

### CONCLUSION – WHY DOES IT MATTER?

What difference does it make if we erroneously categorize “love” as long as we strive to love God and love others as God has loved us? The problem is that the “four loves” error tends to *devalue* the non-*agape* “loves.” In particular, the physical and emotional love between husband and wife that God created in Genesis 2 and celebrated in the Song of Songs is treated as somehow having nothing in common with “*agape*-love”:

From Lewis: “You see Agape is all giving, not getting. Read what St Paul says about it in First Corinthians Chap. 13.”<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Lewis and Hooper, *The Letters of C.S. Lewis*, 601.

Does God *not* intend for a husband and wife to be all about giving *to* each other rather than getting *from* each other in their marriage bed?

From Wright and Roberts: “Agape is kindness. It is being sympathetic, thoughtful, and sensitive to the needs of your loved one.”<sup>16</sup>

Does God *not* intend for a husband and wife to be sympathetic, thoughtful, and sensitive to each other in their marriage bed?

From Wilkin: “It is *agape* that 1 Corinthians 13:4–8 describes, the familiar passage we read at weddings ... What makes this passage beautiful for a wedding is the way it challenges the couple to transcend mere *eros*, or even *philia* ...”<sup>17</sup>

Does God *not* intend for a husband and wife to be patient, kind, un-self-seeking, etc., in their marriage bed?

*Any expression of love can be either true or false, and no expression of love that reflects the character and commands of God is any “higher” or “lower” than any other.* When a husband and wife become one flesh as God intended from the creation of the world, their emotional and physical expression of love for each other is not somehow inferior to praying with someone or visiting sick people in the hospital or donating money to help hurricane victims. Our responsibility is not to “transcend” the “lower categories” of love. Our responsibility is to love God and

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<sup>16</sup> Wright and Roberts, *Before You Say “I Do”*, 24.

<sup>17</sup> Wilkin, *In His Image*, 35.

love others without hypocrisy, whatever those specific expressions of love might entail.