

Missionary Singles Issues: Love

The conversation between Jesus and Peter in John 21:15-17 goes something like this:

Jesus: “Peter, do you love me?”

Peter: “Yes, Lord, you know that I love you.”

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What is going on in this conversation? It seems like Jesus and Peter are repeating the same thing over and over without really communicating. This is not the case.

Lost in Translation

Who would know more about things getting lost in translation than missionaries serving in places other than their passport culture? Such missionaries are keenly aware of trying to explain the concepts of Christianity in cultures which may not even have the concept, much less have words for the concept.

The problem in understanding what is taking place between Jesus and Peter is that English has only one word for love. Jesus and Peter in this case begin the conversation using different words for love, and only on the third time do they use the same word.

In English we may say “I love hamburgers,” “I love you,” and “I love God.” We use the same word for quite different kinds of love. Other cultures often have a richer vocabulary when it comes to love. To understand the different aspects of love for single and married people we need to at least realize that there are different kinds of love.

Three Dimensions of Love

In the 1980s Psychologist Robert Sternberg used factor analysis, a complicated statistical procedure, to study different kinds of love. After analyzing many different ways that love was used in sentences, he concluded that there were primarily three different dimensions of love. He called them decision/commitment, intimacy, and passion.

The Greek language in which John records the conversation between Peter has a variety of words for different kinds of love. That is what Peter and Jesus were disagreeing over. The three Greek words describing what Sternberg “discovered” a few years ago are agape, phileo, and eros. Peter and John were using agape and phileo 2000 years ago talking about different dimensions of love.

Agape (Decision/Commitment)

In John 21:15 the first time Jesus asked, “Peter, do you love me?” Jesus used the Greek word “agape.” Considering scripture passages that use agape is the best way to learn what agape love is.

- God loves (agape). John 3:16, “God so loved the world...”
- Jesus loves (agape). John 15:9, “As the father has loved (agape) me, so have I loved (agape) you.”
- God commands us to love (agape). John 13:34, “As I have loved (agape) you, so you must love (agape) one another.”
- Sinners can love (agape). Luke 6:32, “Even sinners love (agape) those who love (agape) them.”
- Evil people love (agape). John 3:9, “Men loved (agape) darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil.”

- Demas loved (agape). 2 Timothy 4:10, “Demas, because he loved (agape) this world has deserted me.”
- Agape love is best defined in the “love” chapter, 1 Corinthians 13. “Love (agape) is patient, love (agape) is kind...”

Of course, agape occurs many more times in the New Testament, but these passages illustrate its meaning. Agape love involves making a choice and a making a commitment to that choice. The traditional marriage vows were all about agape love. They include commitment to the other person “for better or for worse, for richer or for poorer, in sickness or in health, until death do us part.” There is no mention of only as long as you arouse me sexually or as long as I like you.

Descriptions of agape love include such words as unconditional, thinking, fidelity, caring, decision, faithful, cognitive, and mental. This is the cognitive part of love in which individuals make decisions to commit themselves to another person for life. Single missionaries are encouraged to love people with agape love.

Phileo (Intimacy)

In John 21:15 when Peter replied to Jesus, “You know that I love you. Peter used the Greek word “phileo” rather than agape (which Jesus had used). Again considering scripture passages that use phileo is the best way to learn what phileo love is.

- God loves (phileo). John 5:20, “The Father loves (phileo) the Son.”
- Jesus loves (phileo). John 11:3, “The sisters sent word to Jesus, ‘Lord, the one you love (phileo) is sick.’”

- People love (Phileo). John 16:27, “The father himself loves (phileo) you because you have loved (phileo) me.”
- People love (phileo). Romans 12:10, “be devoted to one another in brotherly love.”
- People may love (phileo) too much. Matthew 10:37, “Anyone who loves (phileo) father, mother, son, or daughter more than me is not worthy of me.”
- People may love (phileo) wrong things. 1 Timothy 6:10, “The love (phileo) of money is a root of all kinds of evil.”

Of course, phileo occurs more times in the New Testament, but these passages illustrate its meaning. Phileo love is what we would call close friendship. Philadelphia is a city in Pennsylvania today, a city in Asia Minor in New Testament times, and a Greek word usually translated “brotherly love.”

Descriptions of phileo love include words such as closeness, bonded, connected, communication, support, sharing, feelings, and warmth. This is the emotional part of love in which individuals share intimately (not sexually). Single missionaries are encouraged to love people with phileo love.

Eros (Passion)

In Greek mythology Eros was the god of sexual love worshiped as a fertility deity. It is not surprising that the Greek word “eros” does not appear in the Bible.

However, the Old Testament has several erotic passages that describe such sensuality.

- Proverbs 5:18-19, “Rejoice with the wife of your youth. Let her breasts satisfy you at all times and be ravished always with her love.”
- Song of Songs 5:4, “My lover put his hand through the latch opening and my heart began to pound for him.”

- Song of Songs 7:7-8, “Your body is like a palm tree and your breasts like clusters of the fruit. I said, “I will climb the palm tree and take hold of its fruit.”
- Genesis 29:17-21, “Rachel was lovely in form and beautiful...Jacob served seven years to get her, but it seemed like only a few days. He said to Laban, ‘Give me my wife. My time is completed and I want to lie with her.’”

Descriptions of erotic (eros) love include such words as sexual arousal, touching, hot, physical, petting, oral sex, and sexual intercourse. This is the motivational part of sex which leads to sexual relations. Currently such relationships are often called “friends with benefits.” The couple again intends it to be just physical intercourse one time with no emotional involvement. Of course, single missionaries are discouraged from such love.

Contemporary English uses “passion” as referring to any powerful, compelling emotion driving a person, such as a “passion for souls.” Missionaries are urged to express this.

Agape & Phileo (Commitment & Intimacy)

Single missionaries are encouraged to love individuals with both agape love and phileo love. Although it is in the Old Testament so it is not written in Greek, the relationship between David and Jonathan is one including both kinds of love. Notice the underlined words in the following verses.

- Agape: 1 Samuel 18:3, “Jonathan made a covenant with David.”
- Agape: 1 Samuel 20:17, “Jonathan had David reaffirm his oath out of love...”
- Phileo: 1 Samuel 18:1, “Jonathan became one in spirit with David.”
- Phileo: 1 Samuel 20:42, “We have sworn friendship with each other.”

Sometimes in scripture agape and phileo appear to be virtually interchangeable, such as when Jesus talks about the Pharisees loving the important places in the synagogues and marketplace (Matthew 23:6; Luke 11:43).

Eros & Phileo (Passion & Intimacy)

Many in today’s world say that eros love is acceptable if the couple also have phileo love, they like each other and are friends. That is, it is acceptable to have sexual intercourse if they love (phileo) each other and neither is married. American culture calls this premarital sex to take away the stigma that comes from calling it fornication or sexual immorality as the Bible does. Single missionaries are discouraged from this kind of sexual activity.

Eros & Agape (Passion & Commitment)

Of course, eros love is acceptable if a man and woman have made an agape commitment (marriage), but then they are no longer single missionaries! Although this is not sinful, it makes little sense. Sternberg calls this fatuous love, silly or foolish. A marriage in which spouses have no phileo love would be quite empty with a lack of companionship and intimacy.

Agape, Eros, & Phileo (Commitment, Passion, & Intimacy)

Again, this is acceptable, even great—but such people are no longer single missionaries. This combination of all three kinds of love is a great goal for all married couples. The challenge for such couples is to keep all three kinds of love at a high level throughout their marriage.

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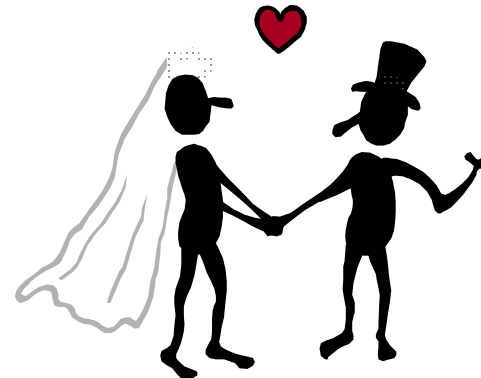
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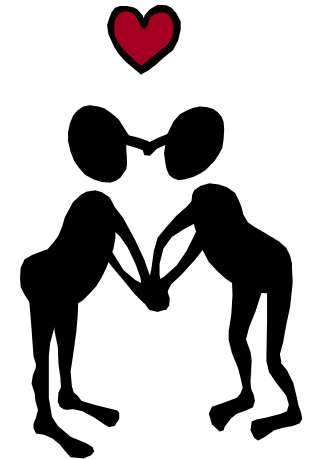
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