

AGAPE

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* TO THE GLORY OF T.G.A.O.T.U. *

Introduction

Worshipful Master, dear brothers,

As we are once again gathered to celebrate our fellowship at this beautiful Festive Board, I'd like to share some thoughts on the term we use for it, *Agape*. This being our second such recent gathering and so close to Thanksgiving, I find it especially timely, due to some interesting aspects of the history of the term; but more on this is a minute.

The history of the word

In Greek, since at least Classical period, *Agape* is the most common word for love. There are many Greek words roughly equivalent to the English "love" and you are probably familiar with the elaborate theories¹ surrounding the specific meanings of each, such as *Eros* for passionate love, often with connotations of physical intimacy; *Philia* for the love between friends or the affinity for things, animals and activities; and *Storge* for the tender, nurturing love of a parent to a child. In actuality though, this neat taxonomy is simply not supported by Greek literature of any age. In Greek texts, we find each of the words mentioned here, plus several others, often used interchangeably. *Agape* is the least specific of these words, and on it we will focus for two reasons: it appears in our jurisdiction's 2nd degree ritual, and it is the term to describe the table of fellowship after our meetings.

Agape in our ritual

The California 2nd Degree Ritual is almost unique, at least among North American jurisdictions, in that it uses the "Charity" passage in the Candidate's Circumambulation. Most other jurisdictions use a passage from Amos:

"Thus He shewed me; and behold, the Lord stood upon a wall made by a plumb-line, with a plumb-line in His hand. And the Lord said unto me: Amos, what seest thou? And I said, A plumb-line. Then said the Lord, Behold, I will set a plumb-line in the midst of my people Israel. And I will not again pass by them any more²".

Here in California, we instead use the majority of the 13th chapter of Paul's Second Letter to the Corinthians. In keeping with the customary use of the King James Version, the word *Agape* has been translated "Charity", which unnecessarily narrows the richness of the passage, which appears to actually be an anthem to Love.

¹ For a popular treatment of this Christian outlook on Greek words for "love", see *The Four Loves* by C. S. Lewis

² *Amos 7:7-8*

When properly translating *Agape* as Love, the passage (loosely translated) asserts:

“Without Love, I am nothing.”

“Without love, all knowledge and insight is hollow.”

“Without Love, all my charity is in vain.” (and this statement clearly points out that “charity”, in its common meaning, in place of “love” is a mistranslation)

“Without Love, even my self-sacrifice would be a waste.”

“Love is patience, kindness, humility, decency, unselfishness, justice and goodness”

“Love is greater than hope, greater than faith – it is the greatest of virtues.”

The reasons why we use a different scriptural passage than most jurisdictions, or the meaning and purpose of the Amos passage in the ritual are outside this short treatment’s scope. Let’s look at the second occurrence of the term *Agape* in our evening, this Festive Board.

Agape – The Festive Board

Essential human activities, such as making shelter and eating, universally exhibit ritual aspects. From the rudimentary protocol of tribal meals to the various religious traditions, mystery schools and private societies, eating and drinking have been adorned with ceremony. The ingestion of food, being an ingestion of energy, and the sharing of that energy has been observed as a spiritual event in every religion. At the same time, thanksgiving to deity is considered a fundamental duty during the ceremonies. For example, the Christian Eucharist (*Eucharistia* in Greek) is but one of the contemporary rituals for such sharing, indeed communion, or coming into commonness, with each other and the Giver of All. The term Eucharist means Thanksgiving. In general, toasts and libations (*spondes*) are common during ceremonial meals.

Pre-Christian Parallels and Early Usage of the Term

Ritualized meals are to be found in every religious and mystical tradition in history as well as in the annals of philosophical schools of East and West alike. As but one example, the Symposia of Classical Greece were gatherings of friends, or, more formally, members of a defined group or society, for the purposes of discourse, fellowship, instruction and mutual information. The term literally means “drinking together”, but ample literature describes commonly elaborate feasts, sometimes lasting for days. The ritual aspects of the symposia varied by group, social setting and era, but typically included toasts, libations, and a certain form or protocol, enforced by a master of ceremonies.

Although historically tied to early Christianity, the term *Agape* for such formal gatherings does appear in the Greek language before the Christian era, interestingly for funerary banquets.

The Christian Agape

The term *Agape* for a formal, ritual “breaking of bread” appears in association with Christianity in the 1st century of the Common Era and as an institution finds its height in the period from the 2nd to the end of the 4th century. In that early state, the Christian movement was lacking the articulate Eucharistic ritual of subsequent times, so the time around the table was a combination of shared meal, sacrament and time for discourse, teaching and common prayer. Contemporary with the spirit of the Hellenistic culture in which the practice evolved, it incorporated elements of the Passover Seder, secular Symposia

and the Christian Communion. Eventually, the practice fell from favor with the Church, and was essentially abandoned by the 7th century.

With the evolution of Christian Monasticism came the highly ritualized version of the *Agape* known as the *Trapeza*, literally meaning “the table”. At prescribed times, the monks come together to a common dining room, sing, pray, share food and, depending on the rules of their order, talk with each other, listen to a Cantor (singer) or reader, or to a sermon by one of their own. Both the *Trapeza* and the early Christian *Agape* were also times to accommodate and care for visiting brethren.

One difference of the early Christian Agape from other ancient ceremonial meals was the lack of class distinctions – all members of the group would share place and food at the table, “on the level”, if you will.

In modern times, several religious orders practice forms of the *Agape*, which may include the Eucharist, public confession and resolution of differences, even the ritual washing of feet.

Love, the Verb

Steven R. Covey points out that “love” is both a noun and a verb, and that “love” the noun is a result of “love” the verb.

The New Testament, like other holy texts, exhorts “Beloved, love one another” and “Love thy neighbor”. These are calls to practice, to *do* Love, the verb.

The Meaning of the Agape for us

This is our time to celebrate and enjoy each other’s company, perform the basic family function of eating and drinking as brothers, affirm our commitment to our Brotherhood’s ideals, share our thoughts, ideas and knowledge and finally leave, energized and refreshed, having truly *experienced* the Agape, coursing through us in this room, the Love, essential life force to every one in the world. John the Evangelist posited, “Everyone that loves is born of God and knows God³” because “God is Agape⁴”.

Thank you.

³ 1 John 4:7 (KJV)

⁴ 1 John 4:8 (KJV)