When Love is not Love: ἀγάπη in First Corinthians 13
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Through the centuries, First Corinthians chapter 13 has been read, heard, and interpreted by countless people in numerous ways and in many situations. This Hymn to Love is a favourite passage for many. Yet it can be questioned whether the devotees of this passage of scripture truly understand its principal character, ἀγάπη. I argue that the word ‘love’ is not adequate to fulfill the role of ἀγάπη and seek to present a better understanding of ἀγάπη. In the Greek language of Paul’s day there were many words which modern translators simply render as ‘love’. There was ἐρως, ἐρωτικός, ὑπερθέλεω, and ἀγάπη. Eros is the passionate desire for beauty. ἐρωτικός is the selfless care and affection one has for a friend. ἐρωτικός is the emotional bond felt in kinship or family. And ἀγάπη denotes a general carinė and kindly disposition towards humanity in general. As Percv Ainsworth noted in 1912, “The word in (Paul’s) great Christian hymn is none of these”.¹ None of these words was sufficient to express what Paul wanted to say to the Corinthian community. Paul needed a different word and settled on ἀγάπη. According to A. Nyren, this use of ἀγάπη is, “a new creation of Christianity”.² However, ἀγάπη translated as love is problematic, for just as ἐρως, ἐρωτικός, ὑπερθέλεω, and ἀγάπη were unable to express ἀγάπη, so too is ‘love’.

‘Love’ cannot express ἀγάπη because ‘love’ has been worn thin by world in which we live and is too heavily burdened with the meaning our present cultural environment attributes to it. By using ‘love’ in First Corinthians 13, and indeed in all portions of the New Testament where ἀγάπη is written, we not only pollute ἀγάπη but we give a false and impossible definition of human love. People seeking human affection in the ‘love’ as described by Paul will only be disappointed since what Paul describes is not love but ἀγάπη. Love is blind, jealous, and fickle but ἀγάπη is none of these things. In order to avoid debasing the meaning of ἀγάπη by translating it as ‘love’ it would be better to simply leave it as it is. This allows ἀγάπη to mean precisely what Paul intended and nothing more.

Ἀγάπη is the indefinable pathway, means of transportation, and ultimate destination of the Christian community past and present. It is the ὀξύνω in which the gifts of the Spirit burn. It is the distinguishing characteristic of the Christian community which is functioning in unison with the will and person of God. Indeed, ἀγάπη is ‘God-ness’, and even more so, ἀγάπη is God. Ἀγάπη is the very being of God Himself and the realm in which Christians find themselves truly alive.³

Although ‘love’ sounds sweet to our ears and reverberates in our hearts it does not convey the true meaning of ἀγάπη. As Paul used a word which only had meaning for the Christian
community so too should modern English philologists create a specific and unique word. If no such word can be created then let *avatē* retain its position.

I will show you a still more excellent way. 
If I do not have *avatē*, I am nothing. 
If I do not have *agapē*, it profits me nothing. 
*Avatē* is patient; *avatē* is kind; 
*Avatē* is not envious or jealous; 
*Avatē* is not boastful and is not arrogant. 
*Avatē* does not act unbecomingly; 
*Avatē* does not seek its own. 
*Avatē* is not provoked. 
*Avatē* does not take into account a wrong suffered. 
*Avatē* does not rejoice in unrighteousness but rejoices with the truth: 
*Avatē* bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. 
*Avatē* never ends. 
There abide faith, hope, *agapē*, these three; but the greatest of these is *agapē*. 
Pursue *avatē* (1 Cor. 12:31; 13:2b. 3a. 4-8a. 13) [NRSV]

Notes

2. A. Nygren, “Agape & Eros” 1. i. 32, translated by A. G. Hebert, as found at [Oxford English Dictionary Online](http://dictionary.oxford.com/mvaccess.library.utoronto.ca/cgi/entry/50004240?query_type=word&queryword=agape&first=1&max_to_show=10&sort_type=alpha&result_place=1&search_id=scWP-YqErY0-15569&hiliten=50004240) (April 12, 2006) 
3. Ainsworth, 212

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