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**What is "Love"? - Part 1**  
***Defining the Word from the Bible***

By Tal Davis

Name your price  
A ticket to paradise  
I can't stay here any more  
And I've looked high and low  
I've been from shore to shore to shore  
If there's a shortcut I'd have found it  
But there's no easy way around it

Light of the world, shine on me  
Love is the answer  
Shine on us all, set us free  
Love is the answer

Who knows why  
Someday we all must die  
We're all homeless boys and girls  
And we are never heard  
It's such a lonely, lonely, lonely, lonely world  
People turn their heads and walk on by  
Tell me, is it worth just another try?

Tell me, are we alive, or just a dying planet?  
What are the chances?  
Ask the man in your heart for the answers

And when you feel afraid, love one another  
When you've lost your way, love one another  
When you're all alone, love one another  
When you're far from home, love one another  
When you're down and out, love one another  
All your hope's run out, love one another  
When you need a friend, love one another  
When you're near the end, love  
We got to love, we got to love one another

"Love is the Answer" by England Dan and John Ford Coley (1979)  
Writers: John Wilcox, Kasim Sulton, Roger Powell, Todd Rundgren  
Publisher: Warner Chappell Music, Inc.  
Lyrics licensed and provided by LyricFind  
(You can listen to it here:  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d404PeooWl8>)

What is the favorite theme of most songs, poems, movies, television, books, etc.? The obvious answer is, of course, love. But is it really "the answer?" If so, to what? Whether it is or not, love, especially around Valentine's Day, is the theme of most popular songs (like the one above), many movies, and lots of television shows (especially on the Hallmark Channel). Some movies, like Titanic and Pearl Harbor, mix historical action with fictional romance. Most men say it messes up those movies with all that love stuff. Women say it messes them up with all that war and action stuff. So, sorry guys, in this three part series, titled "What is 'Love'?", we are not going to focus on war or action, but only on love. But don't tune out.

In this three part article series we will answer that all important question, "What is love?" In this first installment we begin by defining "love" from a Biblical worldview perspective. The second part will discuss who it is we are to love and how. The third segment, titled, "Whoops, I've 'fallen' in love!" will present a Christian perspective on romantic love.

Before we begin defining Biblical love we need to understand that there were three words in the ancient

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Greek language which we translate into English as "love."

The first Greek word was *eros*. This is romantic or sexual love between man and woman. This kind of love is what is usually talked about in modern popular culture. It is where we get the English term "erotic." In fact, it is fair to say, pop culture is obsessed with it. However, from a Biblical point of view, this is the basest form of love. It is not really biblical love at all. This word is never used in the New Testament at all.

The second word translated as love was *phileo*. This is what we might call "brotherly love." It characterizes friendships and comradery. It is the basis for the city name Philadelphia, the City of Brotherly Love. This kind of love is obviously good and appears several times in the Bible, but it is not the highest form of biblical love.

*Agape* was the third Greek word translated as love. This is God's kind of love, real unconditional love. It is the kind of love most often found in the New Testament. It is what John uses in John 3:16: "For God so loved (*agape*) the world..." This is also the love that the Apostle Paul speaks of in 1 Corinthians 13, the famous "love chapter." It is from that wonderful passage that we derive our definition of biblical love. (Note: The translators of the Kings James Version, for some reason, rendered *agape* in 1 Corinthians 13 as "charity.")

But before we define what love is, first let's clarify what biblical love is *NOT*. For one thing it is *NOT* a feeling. Feelings and emotions are okay, but they come and go. They can be affected by brain chemistry, the weather, drugs, etc. Feelings and emotions also can be manipulated and distorted by crafty and unscrupulous charlatans.

Also, love is *NOT* something that can be earned, bought, sold, or stolen. It can only be *given*. Television advertisements usually focus on showing and getting love from someone by buying them jewelry, gifts, or other items. The sad thing is, many sincere women and men believe that is how one exhibits genuine love. But real love is not a commodity. (More about what Paul says love is not is detailed below.)

So, then, what is Biblical love?

**First, love (*agape*) is the key ingredient in the Christian life.**

*1 If I speak with the tongues of mankind and of angels, but do not have love, I have become a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. 2 If I have the gift of prophecy and know all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. 3 And if I give away all my possessions to charity, and if I surrender my body so that I may glory, but do not have love, it does me no good. (1 Corinthians 13:1-3 NASB)*

Real love is a choice to put other's needs above your own. Note, it is a choice. In his First Corinthian letter, Paul says it is greater than the spiritual gifts of tongues or prophecy or knowledge (or any other). In fact, spiritual gifts, no matter how impressive they may be, are useless without love. Paul addressed the issue of spiritual gifts, which was a major problem in the Corinthian church, in 1 Corinthians chapters 12 and 14. It was no accident that he inserted his discourse on love right in the middle of that discussion. Paul says that even having faith enough to move a mountain is worthless without love. Furthermore, giving away possessions for a good cause is also inadequate if not done in love. Paul even says sacrificing one's body is of little value if not done in love. Love is the key ingredient in the Christian life. It is the basis and motivation for all

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## Contact Information

If you wish to contact us directly, you may do so by the following methods:

321 Anton Dr., Tallahassee, FL 32312

E-mail:

[info@marketfaith.org](mailto:info@marketfaith.org)

Phone: 850-383-9756 (Tallahassee, Florida)

Fax: 850-514-4571

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Christian ethics, morals, business, and family life.

## Second, love (*agape*) is an action word, not passive.

*4 Love is patient, love is kind, it is not jealous; love does not brag, it is not arrogant. 5 It does not act disgracefully, it does not seek its own benefit; it is not provoked, does not keep an account of a wrong suffered, 6 it does not rejoice in unrighteousness, but rejoices with the truth; 7 it keeps every confidence, it believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.* (1 Corinthians 13:4-7 NASB)

Paul lists several qualities that characterize *agape* love. It is patient and kind (v. 4a). Love celebrates truth, always trusts, and perseveres (vs. 6b, 7). Paul then lists some negative qualities that do not characterize *agape*. He says love is not jealous, it does not brag, and is not arrogant. It does not act disgracefully, nor seek its own benefit. It is not provoked and does not keep records of wrongs. It does not delight in evil behavior (vs. 4b-6a).

Howard Hendricks, the late Dallas Theological Seminary professor, once suggested a good, but convicting, exercise for believers to do. He said to read this passage and put your name wherever "love" appears. "Jack is patient, Jack is kind, etc." Of course, we have to be honest and admit we do not always live up to those standards.

In any case, real love involves doing loving

acts. It is an action word. The opposite of love is not just hate. Most Christians are not guilty of that malicious attitude. But apathy and indifference are also the opposites of love. Many Christians are guilty of those sins. Remember what James stated:

*So for one who knows the right thing to do and does not do it, for him it is sin.* (James 4:17 NASB)

So we see that active love (*agape*) is the main thing in the Christian life. But there is one more quality needed to adequately define Biblical love.

## Third, love (*agape*), unlike everything else, is never ending.

*8 Love never fails; but if there are gifts of prophecy, they will be done away; if there are tongues, they will cease; if there is knowledge, it will be done away. 9 For we know in part and we prophesy in part; 10 but when*

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*the perfect comes, the partial will be done away. 11 When I was a child, I used to speak like a child, think like a child, reason like a child; when I became a man, I did away with childish things. 12 For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face; now I know in part, but then I will know fully, just as I also have been fully known. (1 Corinthians 13:8-12 NASB)*

Paul again asserts the superiority of love over all spiritual gifts. He says that the gifts of prophecy, tongues, and knowledge, will at some point disappear. He says when the "perfect" comes, they will be unnecessary. It is not exactly clear what Paul means by "the perfect" (*teleios* - "the completion" or "the end"). Probably it refers to Jesus' Second Coming when all things will be made whole and we will all see all things as they really are, just as God now knows them and us.

But, meanwhile Paul says this in conclusion:

*But now faith, hope, and love remain, these three; but the greatest of these is love. (1 Corinthians 13:13 NASB)*

He says that until Christ comes, three key elements of Christian living remain: faith, hope, and love. But, he unhesitatingly says, the greatest of them is agape love. It may not be "the answer" (only Jesus is The Answer), but the one great enduring quality that should characterize a Christian is LOVE! Now we know what it means. In the next installment we will examine just who it is God wants us to love. The answer may surprise you.