

The Negative Use of the Concept of Agape Love in the New Testament

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Abstract : Upon hearing or reading the term agape love in a Christian context, one typically thinks of God's love for people and the type of love people should have for God and others. While C.S. Lewis, a significant propagator of this view, and others with a similar opinion are correct in their knowledge of agape in the New Testament in most occurrences, nonetheless, examples of this term appear in the New Testament having quite a different sense. The New World Encyclopedia, regarding the verb form of agape, 'agapao,' comments that it is occasionally used also in a negative sense, but here and elsewhere, there is no elaboration on the significance of these negative instances. If intensity and sacrifice are the crucial constituents of God's agape love and that of his followers, who are commanded to love as God does, the negative instances of this term in the New Testament conceivably indicate that a person's love for improper recipients is likewise intense and sacrificial. This is significant because one who has chosen to direct such love neither to God nor his "neighbors," but to inanimate things or status, clearly shows his priorities, having decided to put all his energy and resources into them while demeaning those for whom God has required such love, including God himself. It is not merely a matter of a person dividing his agape love among several proper objects of that love, but of directing it toward improper targets. Not to heed God's commands regarding whom to love is to break God's entire law, and not to love whom one should, but to love what one should not, is not merely a matter of indifference, but is disloyalty and loathing. An example of such use of the term agape occurs in Luke 11:43 where the Pharisees do not and cannot love God at the same time as loving a place of honor in the synagogues and greetings in the public arena. The exclamation of their dire peril because of their love for the latter reveals that the previously mentioned love objects are not in God's gamut of proper recipients. Furthermore, it appears to be a logical conclusion that since the Pharisees love the latter, they likewise despise God and those whom God requires his people to love. Conversely, the objects of the Pharisees' love in this verse should be what followers of God ought to despise and avoid. In short, appearances of the use of the verb agapao in a negative context are blatant antitheses to what God expects and should alert the reader or listener to take notice. These negative uses are worthy of further discussion than a brief aside by scholars of their existence without additional comment.

Keywords : agape love, divine commands, focus, new testament context, sacrificial

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