Agape the Key to God's Presence
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Love is not one of the charismatic gifts, like tongues or prophecy or miraculous healing. It's not called a "gift" but "a more excellent way" (12:31) that is, it's the way to use the gifts. It's the thing that makes the difference to everything else. Even good things, like tongues or giving yourself martyrdom, are no good without agape. Agape is the catalyst that creates value. It's what makes a child's hand-drawn birthday card infinitely more precious than the grudging gift of a million dollars.

Agape is listed by Paul as one of the "fruits of the Spirit." Tongues are one of the "gifts of the Spirit." What's the difference between the gifts and the fruits?

First, the gifts were immediate. For example, one receives the gift of tongues suddenly and all at once. But the fruits, like physical fruits, take time to ripen. Second, the gifts are more external: They are given from without, and the recipient of a gift is essentially passive. But the fruits are more internal. They too are graces from God; but like a plant we must do the growing, through our own free cooperation. We must train ourselves in them as habits. Third, the gifts are primarily for the community, for the edification of the Church and world. But the fruits are for individual holiness. They're important because they perfect the most important entity in the world, the one that will still be alive after all the galaxies have died: yourself.

The gifts of the Spirit are listed in I Corinthians 12:4-11. Tongues is well down the list. The fruits of the Spirit are listed in Galatians 5:22-23. Love heads the list, then joy and peace.

In the first three verses of chapter 13, Paul compares the infinite value of agape with the finite value of five other crucial things. Even if I have these other things in their fullness, but do not have agape, I have nothing at all.

For agape is not "outside" these other valuable things. It's the heart and soul of all value.

The five things Paul mentions are put in a hierarchy, from the lowest to the highest. The first is the gift of tongues. If I speak with the tongues (languages) of men other earthly languages that I've never learned but I am miraculously given, as the disciples were at Pentecost if I have this but lack agape, my speech is mere noise. What transforms worthless noise into worthwhile speech is agape.

To appreciate this point we must understand the very high value the Greeks, to whom Paul is writing, gave to language. They saw it as that which most clearly distinguishes man from beast. They defined man as the animal who had language.

The Greek word for language, or speech, or word -logos is much more important in Greek than any of the words we use to translate it. For logos means not only (1) word but also (2) thought and (3) the object of thought, or truth. John 1:1 could be translated: "In the beginning was the Thought" or "In the beginning was the Truth." Jesus is called the Word of God, the speech of God, the tongues of God. Language is so important that Jesus Himself is called God's language.
Paul next compares agape with something much more vital than tongues in fact, the most important of all charismatic gifts (14:1-5). This is the gift of prophecy. A prophet is a mouthpiece for God. He speaks not for man to God, but for God to man.

Jesus said that the greatest of all the Old Testament prophets was John the Baptist (Luke 7:28). Therefore John must have prophesied with agape, yet his style was harsh rather than kind. Agape calls for kindness on some occasions, harshness on others. It was Jesus' agape for the Pharisees that made Him harsh to them. It was shock therapy, which they needed.

The third thing Paul compares with agape is understanding, in fact the very highest kind of understanding, the understanding of "all mysteries" i.e., the great hidden truths of God like the Trinity, or God's hidden plan to save the whole world through Christ. Understanding these things is far greater than prophecy, for these mysteries are the "things into which angels long to look" (1 Peter 1:12). Our anti-contemplative, practical age appreciates supernatural mysteries about as much as a medieval mystic would value a stock market tip. Yet even this is nothing without agape. Agape is greater than understanding because it's the essence of our final end, while understanding is only its accompaniment. The accompaniment divorced from the essence is like bass notes without a melody.

Fourth, Paul says love is even greater than faith. This is remarkable, for faith is even greater than knowledge. The whole Christian life begins in faith, progresses in faith and culminates in faith. Only in heaven will knowledge replace faith, when we no longer see "through a glass darkly," but face to face. Without faith no one can please God (Heb. 11:6); without faith no one can be saved (John 3:18). Jesus was constantly exhorting faith and bemoaning the lack of it. Faith is the key that unlocks the doors to God's presence. Jesus sought nothing more than faith except agape. Faith is the necessary beginning of the Christian life, but agape is its essence and its consummation. Faith exists for the sake of agape, as the root exists for the sake of the fruit, the beginning for the sake of the end. "Faith without works, [of agape] is dead" (James 2:26).

But even the works of agape are no substitute for agape itself. The fifth and last thing Paul mentions is this: Good deeds without agape are nothing, for God does not want deeds first of all, but hearts. Even He cannot give Himself our free love. That's the one thing we must do, and that is most precious to Him.

Agape is essential because it will lead to everything else we need. It will lead to the true worship of God; in fact, it is the true worship of God. It will lead to discernment of God's will. When Jesus was asked how we could know whether His teaching was from God or not, He replied, "If your will were to do the will of My Father, you would understand My teaching, that it is from Him," (John 7:17). We do not understand things by loving them (in fact, lust for things blinds our understanding), but we understand persons only by loving them. And God is a person, not a thing.

Agape will also lead to sanctity and obedience, for if we love God we will want to obey Him. In fact, only the power of love enables us to give up our will to His. Agape will also lead to justice and true love of neighbor, for agape is "love in action: not "love in dreams." Love will produce its own appropriate deeds. Not that a subjective motive is enough, but good motives and good works are inseparable. Good trees produce good fruit.

Agape will even lead to heavenly understanding. Those who love God most will understand Him most in heaven. In fact, that is true even on earth. Simple saints are wiser than sophisticated theologians (though it's possible to be both). Simple lovers know what nuanced scholars do not.
Finally, agape will also lead to the one thing everyone seeks: happiness. Not a temporary, shallow happiness, but one that lasts. Dante reveals the hiding place of true peace: "In His will, our peace." That means agape, for agape is willing God's will. This "yes" is the secret of worship, understanding, sanctity, justice, contemplation, happiness and peace. This is the one "pearl of great price" worth selling everything in the world to get. Only it's free.

Listen to poor families that have become rich. They always say the same thing: The best years were the struggling years, because then we had more love. The exchange of even a little love for even a lot of worldly goods is the most foolish exchange we can make. "For what does it profit a man if he gains the whole world and loses his soul?"

Agape is simple; that's what makes it difficult. It's not too complex for us; we are too complex for it. We must learn to become like little children. God is a little child: utterly simple and pure of heart. That's how He can govern the whole universe: from the center. And that's how we must govern our lives.

Here at last, in I Corinthians 13:4-6, is what "agape" is.

Paul doesn't give us the kind of definition a philosopher would want. Instead, he describes it. He gives us 15 concrete attributes of agape. They tell us what it does. This is what scientists call an "operational definition" - the most practical kind.

We'll never be able to own anything that does not eventually wear out and get boring. But we can give something that never ends and never bores: agape. It's the gift of self. Heaven won't be boring, not because we will get forever but because we will give forever. Living forever without giving forever is not heaven but hell.

Affection sooner or later becomes cloying. Eros eventually becomes a drug requiring ever-increasing doses of excess to ward off boredom. And even friendship finds a rock to founder on, for though its sea is immense, it has shores.

But St. Paul announces something utterly new when he tells us, in three simple and astonishing words, "Agape never ends" (I Cor.13:7). "Luv" ends, but love never ends. "I shall love you forever" usually means about two weeks, because the human heart is fickle. Only agape's promises are not broken. Only God's kind of love endures.

One day everything will be made of agape. All those things that you made of agape in this world will last, and be in heaven; but nothing else. In fact, the only thing that will not be burned up in the world's Last Judgment is the one thing stronger than the fire of destruction: the fire of creation. For love is the fire of creation; God created sheerly out of love. just as the only way to control a passion is by a stronger passion; just as the only way to conquer evil love is by a stronger good love; so the only way to endure the world's final fires is not by any water that tries to put it out, but by the only fire that is stronger still: agape, the very fire of God's being. Only love is stronger than death.

Even the spiritual gifts fail, Paul tells us in I Corinthians 13:8: "As for prophecies, they will pass away; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will pass away." (This is the charismatic "gift of knowledge:" not knowledge itself; of course there will be knowledge in heaven.) The spiritual gifts are for time. Agape is for eternity. The spiritual gifts are like a placenta, and agape is the baby. Even spiritual gifts are finite and imperfect (verse 9). Everything in this world is imperfect.
But wait. That's wrong. Not everything. A messenger from another world, a perfect world, is here among us. That messenger is the only perfect thing in human experience. That's what Paul tells us in verse 10: Agape is perfect! "When the perfect comes, the imperfect will pass away." Agape's perfection is a prophet of doom for the imperfect. When the baby is born, the placenta is no longer needed, drops off and dies.

We must die to our spiritual childhood, to our physical childhood. Jesus does not tell us to remain little children, but to become children: new kinds of children, adult children. The Holy Spirit urges us forward to birth and newness. Christianity is the most progressive, the most forward-looking idea that has ever entered the mind of man. How it ever got the "bad press" of being stagnant, retrogressive or "conservative" is a mystery. It must be that Satan knew that the Big Lie will work where the little lie will not.

The knowledge we now have, even by revelation and faith and the spiritual gifts, is compared to the knowledge we will have in heaven as a pinhead to a galaxy.

And agape endures all things because Jesus does. Everything suffered by each cell of His Body which is what we are is suffered by Him. This is no fancy symbolism or myth or "spiritual meaning": This is literally true. Jesus Christ experiences everything that you experience, the least of your joys, the greatest of your sorrows,. It is never you alone who suffer or laugh. "Behold, I am with you always." Did you think that was empty rhetoric? Moreover, whatever we make our brothers and sisters endure, we make Him endure, because He is agape incarnate and agape "endures all things."

C.S. Lewis ends the greatest sermon I have ever read outside the Bible, "The Weight of Glory," with this insight: "Next to the Blessed Sacrament itself, your neighbor is the holiest object presented to your senses," for in both Christ is truly hidden. Though He is hidden, agape still can see:

"It is a serious thing to live in a society of possible gods and goddesses, to remember that the dullest and most uninteresting person you can talk to may one day be a creature which, if you saw it now, you would be strongly tempted to worship, or else a horror and a corruption which you now meet, if at all, only in a nightmare. All day long we are, in some degree, helping each other to one or other of these destinations... There are no ordinary people. You have never talked to a mere mortal. Nations, cultures, arts, civilizations -these are mortal, and their life is to ours as the life of a gnat. But it is immortals whom we joke with, work with, marry, snub and exploit immortal horrors or everlasting splendors"

And that leads us to Paul's capstone: the eternal destiny of agape.

The deeper we look, the closer we approach Ecclesiastes' terrifying truth about this world: "Vanity of vanities, all is vanity."

In fact, Pascal says, 'Anyone who does not see the vanity of this world must be very vain indeed." In other words, nothing here "under the sun" can wholly win our hearts.

But God can, and God is love (agape). And love is right here under the sun.
"Agape" love is eternal because it's the very stuff of which God is made, just as sunbeams are the very stuff of the sun. That's why it is the only thing in life that never gets boring.

Even other loves get boring. Selfish loves get boring because if I love you to fill up my needs, then I am eventually filled, and bored. Or else I'm not filled, and therefore frustrated. In neither case can I be happy. There is no possible escape from the dilemma of boredom vs. frustration within the framework of egoism. Only the breaking of that framework by agape can ever solve the problem. Only agape can ever make us happy forever.

We've tried everything else, and every one of our billions of experiments with life has failed. Yet so incredible is our foolishness we keep trying, hoping that the next wife or husband or job or vacation or dose of drugs will bring us the inner peace we long for. That's why today's psychiatric couches and divorce courts are filled.

All 15 features are things we deeply desire. But only agape has them. Take, for instance, the first: How can we get patience? Despite good intentions, we find ourselves continually losing patience even with those we love most. The natural loves, valuable as they are, are not enough. They are like a garden, but they need a gardener. That is the role of agape: it perfects the other loves. When we have agape toward someone, it becomes not only possible but natural to be patient with them, for "agape is patient."

Try being patient without agape. It just doesn't work. It works only as long as you feel patient. So you try substituting hard willpower for soft feeling: "I'll be patient with so-and-so if it kills me" and it almost does. You discover (1) that your will is ridiculously weak, and (2) that even when you succeed in repressing your impatience, it's still there, and your "love" is cold and formal. Patience has to come from the heart, not from feelings or "iron resolution." The heart the center that's the ballpark where agape plays.

Agape is the catalyst not only for other virtues, like patience, but also for other loves, like affection. When we have agape we find that we can begin liking the people we used to dislike. If this seems impossible, reflect that you do it to yourself all the time. You love yourself even when you do not like yourself; and the more you love yourself, the more you like yourself. All you have to do is to apply this love of self to your neighbors. In other words, exactly as Jesus said, love your neighbor as you love yourself.

Agape is even a catalyst for the perfection of erotic love in marriage. Selfish sex is not even erotically good sex. The only way to total sex is total love.

This beautiful insight can be found in a document that nearly everyone in the modern world thinks threatening and joyless: Humanae Vitae. Contraception is un-erotic for the same reason it's immoral: It is contrary to the nature of sex. Only the total act of love that is open to life, only the giving of self that holds nothing back, that says no to neither pleasure nor children nor charity, only sex that is neither erotically repressed nor contraceptively repressed nor selfishly repressed, is total sex and totally joyful. Agape totalizes sex. It spreads its nature of self-giving into all dimensions, even the physical.

If any one of the 15 attributes Paul lists is closest to the heart of agape, it's that agape "does not insist on its own way." We're all born into this human race with original sin. The simplest way to understand this is to watch an infant or young child. Sometimes he is kind and patient when he feels
like it but sometimes he is arrogant, jealous or resentful, and he always insists on his own way. When kindness is his own way, he is kind; when not, not. "My will be done" is inscribed on the human soul, as our spiritual heredity.

Agape is the antidote to this fatal spiritual disease. "Agape is the fulfillment of the law," as Paul says, because it "does not insist on its own way" but on God's way.

That agape should exist, that a self should be unselfish that is a paradox. It seems like an impossibility. It is a miracle. Buddha did not understand this miracle, though he understood the disease better, perhaps, than any non-Christian ever has. His "first noble truth" of dukkha is a profound insight into the depth of our alienation, the suffering that is caused by our innate selfishness. He knows that our problems are not in our society or even our actions first of all, nor even in some peripheral aspect of our being that a psychologist could cure, but in our very self. He sees that we need radical surgery. Unfortunately, his only solution is a kind of spiritual euthanasia, killing the patient (ego) to cure the disease (egotism). His therapy is to eliminate all desire.

But there's good news. There's no need to go to Buddha for euthanasia. The patient can be cured; the leopard can change its spots. Jesus dissolves the apparently un-dissolvable glue that binds egotism to ego. He kills the cancer of selfishness and reveals underneath it a real self which "does not insist on its own way."

His prognosis is the deepest of all paradoxes: "He who loves his life loses it, and he who loses his life saves it." Buddha saw the first part of this paradox, but not the second; the symptoms of the disease, but not the cure. The modern West does not even see the disease, and glorifies selfishness by making it pleasant and respectable. Hug yourself. Be your own best friend, Look out for Number One.

If you follow this vast crowd of false prophets who dominate our age, you will, quite simply, lose your soul. A recent poll revealed that of all the sciences, psychology has the lowest percentage of religious believers. (Astrophysics and theoretical neurology were among the highest.) But if you let your will die and be replaced by a love that does not insist on its own way, you'll find yourself reborn. Give up what you think is your self and you will find what God designed as your self.

The modern West affirms both self and selfishness. The traditional East denies both. The common premise of both philosophies is that the two must always go together. Christ comes with a sword and divides selfishness from self, sin from sinner. We must love sinners passionately, as the East does not. But we must hate sin passionately, as the modern West does not.

Jesus kills the cancer by nailing it to the cross; and the patient survives because there is Resurrection. He exchanges selves with us: We are in Him, crucified; He is in us, sanctifying. He is the love that "does not insist on its own way." That love can be in us only because He is in us. We attain it not by trying a little harder, but by faith, by letting Him invade us and possess us.

Finally, what does Paul mean by saying that agape bears, believes, hopes and endures all things?

Jesus does this. He is agape incarnate. He bears all things, like Atlas bearing the world on his shoulders. He does not only bear His own cross, He bears the crosses of the whole world. He bears His cross to the world and He bears the world to His cross. They meet, the patient and the cure, on Calvary's operating table.
Agape believes and hopes all things because Jesus' faith and hope are as infinite as His charity. Jesus always believes in us more than we do in ourselves. Look how God believed in Job even when Job hardly believed in God or himself any more.