

Two different approaches in conflict

When the New Testament speaks of love, it usually uses the term *agape*. We will only be able to appreciate what *agape* means, if we understand the nature of God. The main thrust of *agape* as portrayed in the Bible suggests a love that is not stimulated by the person being loved (that would be characteristic of the secular-romantic notion of love); rather, it loves the other person because it *chooses* to love.

In New Testament times, like today, there were other concepts of love as well. When non-Christian Greeks spoke of love, they usually used the term *eros*. This word did not only refer to sexual desire. *Eros* is a general longing for something that one does not have, but ought to have or would like to have. It's a love stimulated by the person or object loved. *Eros* means, "I want you, I need you, I desire you, because I'm incomplete without you."

The eros approach

The distinction between *eros* and *agape* can serve as a foundation for a typology that has far-reaching consequences. *Eros* depends on feelings that have been stimulated by the person being loved. This is the only way the person loving becomes capable of loving thoughts, which in turn lead to loving deeds. These dynamics can be represented as follows:



Most people's notion of love is based on the *eros* approach. Feelings come at the beginning of the process. Many Christians find it difficult to demonstrate love through loving deeds when it is not in keeping with their feelings. They believe that it would be hypocritical. Within the framework of the *eros* approach, this argument is perfectly logical. Without feelings it cannot work.

The agape approach

The *agape* approach has a different starting point. Since *agape* is not stimulated by the person loved but by the person loving, it is not dependent on loving feelings to initiate the process. It begins with a *choice* to think loving thoughts. Any person who has experienced the love of God is capable of making this choice. Our loving thoughts enable us to perform loving deeds. While it cannot be guaranteed, these deeds very often have a positive effect on our feelings. The *agape* approach can be represented by the following diagram:

Since God's love is in you, you can choose to think loving thoughts and do loving deeds.



Note that this approach does *not* exclude our feelings. Yet they are not necessarily experienced at the beginning of the process. Most often, they come at the end. In other words, they follow our thoughts and our deeds. *Agape* means that you don't have to wait for loving feelings to emerge before you can love others. Since God's love is in you, you can choose to think loving thoughts and do loving deeds. And then you can lean back, relax, and marvel at the positive effect that your loving thoughts and deeds have on your feelings.

Only on the basis of the *agape* concept does Jesus' command to love our enemies make sense (Matt. 5:44). Actually, this command is a key to understanding what *agape* is all about. Jesus said, "If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that? And if you greet only your brothers, what are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that?" (Matt. 5:46-47). There is nothing meritorious in the secular-romantic notion of love. If it works (i.e. if there are strong loving feelings), great! But if the feelings are missing, too bad! There will be nothing to carry you through times of emotional crisis. *Agape*, on the other hand, will enable you to love even in situations that begin with strong negative feelings.

A first exercise

Take a moment to think of a person who is dependent on your love, but to whom it is difficult to express love. Now think through the practical effects that both the *eros* and the *agape* approaches would have on your relationship with that person. The following diagram is an example from my seminars. You may want to develop a similar diagram for the relationship you are working on.

