



By Robert E. Jones

IDENTIFYING KEY THEMES IN JOHN'S writings¹ is relatively easy because the apostle used certain key words repeatedly. New Testament scholars have identified at least 10 prominent themes in John's writings. One of these is love, a theme the apostle defined primarily through two Greek words: the verb *agapao* and the noun *agape*. The verb *agapao* occurs throughout ancient Greek literature; the noun *agape* appears primarily, however, in biblical literature. The term is in every New Testament book except Mark, Acts, and James. Of the 116 uses of *agape* in the New Testament, 30 occur in John's writings. Additionally, more than half of all the New Testament occurrences of the verb *agapao* (143 times) appear in John's writings (72 times).² By his prominent use of these two words for love, the apostle set out to describe his unique understanding of the nature of God's love and the importance for Christ's followers to practice love. The late New Testament scholar Leon Morris aptly defined the importance John placed upon love: "Clearly love matters a good deal to this author."³

Love Expressed

John's direct and powerful affirmation "God is love" (1 John 4:8) forms the foundation for everything else the apostle had to say about love. For John, love was an attribute that helped define God's essential nature. Because God is love, He expressed that love in tangible ways. Two of these expressions are prominent in John's writings.

First, God has expressed His love by sending His only begotten Son into the world for the purpose of offering salvation to every person (John 3:16). In John's understanding, the Lord loves all people simply because love is the heart of His character. God's love for people is based on His own nature, not on people's worthiness. In fact, God loves all people in spite of our unworthiness, which is the basic idea of *agape* love.

Consequently, God's love for people finds its highest expression in the gift of His Son; more specifically, Jesus' death on the cross. John declared that love consists of this major truth—that the Father demonstrated His love for the world by sending His Son to be the perfect sacrifice for every person's sins (1 John 4:10). Indeed, the reason why anyone has come to know love is because Christ laid down His life for us all (3:16). We can thus love because God first loved us (4:19) with a love so great that the end goal of that love is making us God's children through faith in Jesus Christ (3:11). In this sense, then, the Son mediated God's love by bringing this heavenly reality into the world.

Second, John did not focus exclusively on God's love for the world; the apostle also declared that God loves His Son (John 3:35). While the Father's love for His Son existed before the world's foundation, the

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Below: At Ephesus, the Church of St. John. Late in the 4th

century, a church was built over a grave at Ephesus, supposedly the tomb of John, the Beloved Disciple.

In his Gospel, John was likely referring to himself when he wrote of the disciple whom Jesus "loved" (Greek, *phileo*; John 20:2).





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Above: Small torso statue depicts a man and a woman—maybe a husband and wife—embracing. The Greek word for affection that family members had for each other was *storge*.

Right: Interior of the Garden Tomb at Jerusalem. The niches on which the bodies were placed were located to the left, in the section behind the gate.

Lower right: On this marble grave marker, a young man and woman—presumably a married couple—shake hands. The couple has been separated by death. While it is unclear which spouse has died, their handshake and closely mirroring positions suggest a love transcending death. Dated to the 4th cent. B.C.; from outside Athens, Greece.



ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/ (63/0033)

manifestation of this love to the world came through the Son's obedient death on the cross and His subsequent glorification (10:17; 17:24).

Interestingly, John declared the Son's love for the Father only once (14:31). Instead, the apostle emphasized the Son's love for those the Father had given to Him (15:9). Emphatically, John declared that Jesus had loved His own all the way to the end of His earthly ministry (13:1). Jesus wanted His followers to abide in His love for them (15:9-10), while understanding also that His love for the disciples was an extension of the Father's love for them (17:23).

Love Commanded

A unique emphasis John placed on love was the *commandment* to love. John expressed this truth through Christ's powerful declaration to His disciples to love one another in a manner similar to His love for them (13:34). This "new commandment" was new primarily because of the distinctive emphasis Jesus placed on it. The phrase "as I have loved you" provided both the

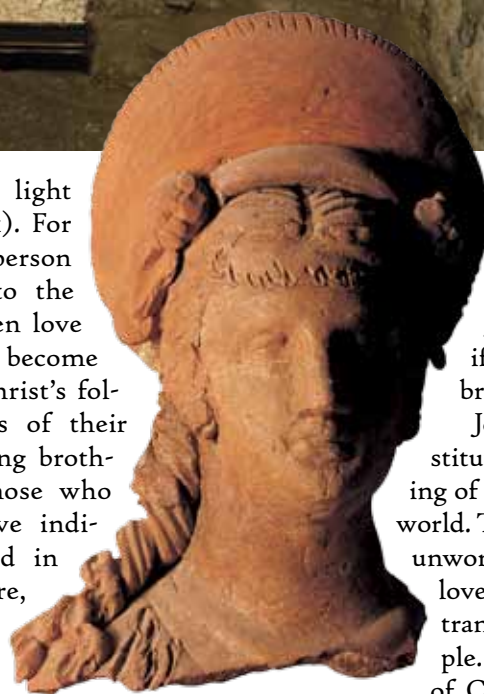


norm for this love and the reason for it. The context for Jesus' command was His statement to the disciples that He was about to leave them (v. 33). Therefore, Jesus called on His followers to do to one another after His departure that which He had done to them while He was with them. Furthermore, this new commandment took on a level of prominence over the other commandments through Jesus' startling declaration that all people would know that the disciples were His true followers as they observed believers practicing this brotherly love (v. 35). Consequently, the command to love one another is more than just a moral demand, for it expresses a call for action that forms an essential part of the Christian community.

This emphasis on brotherly love carries over into the Book of 1 John, where the apostle linked it closely with Christian fellowship. John saw Christians as bound to God and to one another. For example, John declared that Christians have fellowship with one another when they walk in the light (1 John 1:7). So,



Left: Interior of the Tomb of Lazarus in Bethany. Measuring about 21 square feet, the interior originally had three burial niches. Two of these are mostly covered by reinforcement work. John used the Greek word that described love between friends, *phileo*, to describe Jesus' love for Lazarus (John 11:3,36).



Lower left: Terra-cotta head of Eros from the workshops of the agora in Pella. Eros was the Greek god of love. Although a common Greek word for passionate—mostly sexual—love, *eros* is not mentioned in the Greek New Testament.

the believer who walks in the light will also love his brother (2:9-11). For John this was the proof that a person had passed from darkness into the light. As a result, God's children love one another because love had become part of their character (3:14). Christ's followers project the genuineness of their new birth salvation by practicing brotherly love (4:7). In contrast, those who do not love their brothers give indication they do not know God in saving faith (v. 8). Furthermore, practicing brotherly love among Christ's disciples demonstrates that God's love has been perfected, or matured, in His children (v. 12). Nevertheless, John saw the necessity to urge His readers to love one another (3:11,18), and to do so according to Jesus' commandment (v. 23).

John reminded his readers that the command to brotherly love was not new in the sense that they had heard it "from the beginning" (v. 11), probably meaning from the beginning of their Christian experience. But in another sense, brotherly love was the beginning point for their expression of Christ-like love. If a

person could not love his brother, one he could see with his own eyes, he certainly could not love God, the One he could not see (4:20). In fact, John pointedly said a person is a liar if he says he loves God but hates his brother (v. 20).

John's emphasis on brotherly love constitutes a revolutionary new understanding of love Christians are to manifest in the world. Through God's love, and in spite of our unworthiness, believers in Christ express love to one another because Christ has transformed us and made us loving people. In brotherly love, then, the followers of Christ reflect a fellowship that is not of this world. This is the law of love, and it is possible only because God first loved us (v. 19). **B**

1. For the purposes of this article, John's writings include the Gospel of John, 1 John, 2 John, 3 John, and Revelation.

2. Andreas Kostenberger and Raymond Bouchoch, *The Book Study Concordance of the Greek New Testament* (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 2003).

3. Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to John*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 203.

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