

Agape and Eros: Critiquing the Views of Anders Nygren and Carsten Johnsen

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Presented to Gospel Study Group, Andrews University

March 25, 2017

In Revelation, the Agape apostle John is inspired to reveal the major flaw of the first church, Ephesus. That flaw, I believe, lies at the core of all other flaws addressed in the remaining churches. That decline of Ephesus is defined by her loss of Agape. A new view of God is therefore making its way into the apostolic church. As Jesus says at the conclusion of all seven church admonitions, “He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.” And the supreme gift of the Holy Spirit, eager to be given, declares Paul, is Agape.

Today’s effort to briefly explore two views of Agape exposes, I believe, the core of the cosmic debate over the character of God. The challenging issue that keeps us wandering through so many variant views of God’s character, or so it seems to me, *is not a problem of accurate revelation, but a problem of distortion and resistance by man*. “Bewildering sophistry,” a term borrowed from Ellen White, likely defines many attempts to understand, to grasp, the love of God.

As I was growing up God’s Love was often presented as contractual, wholly dependent on my choices, hopefully those choices would impact a mostly impassive God. The initiative for a relationship to occur was my responsibility. So it was easy for me to become enamored with the rush of righteousness by faith teachers that burst upon the scene of Adventism primarily in the 1970s. Prayer, study, and witnessing—I was taught and believed—would keep the relationship humming with the primary relationship responsibility being mine. God’s character of Agape was nebulous and at an arm’s length at best.

Anders Nygren

And then, in the 1980s, I was touched by exposure to the *1888 Materials*, in fact, reading all 1812 pages within months of their release in 1988. Over the years that followed, I began to define God's Love leaning heavily on the insights of Swedish theologian Anders Nygren's *Agape and Eros*. By the early 1930s, he had developed what he called "motif-research"; a scientific investigation into Christian concepts using a historical critical method. Agape was his specialty; ecumenicalism his underlying objective. It is said that no one else in the 20th century had a greater impact on the theological understanding of God's Love—even capturing many of us 1888 Message believers.

His 700 page tome is divided into two parts:

- "A Study of the Christian Idea of Love"; with the Old Testament virtually ignored, and
- "The History of the Christian Idea of Love," from the apostolic church to Nygren's champion of Agape, Martin Luther.

Nygren rightly asserts the study of Agape to be "one of the most central and yet most neglected in the theological field." To him, the problem of a distorted Agape arose within the early church of the 2nd century. He outlines a mingling of New Testament Agape, Hellenism's Eros and Jewish Law (Nomos); which he concludes led to Agape's demise.

A significant emphasis of his study—on his way to Luther—was unpacking the teachings of Augustine. While we can celebrate the fact that Nygren illuminates and decries Augustine's attempt to synthesize Agape and Eros into Caritas (charity), we must ask ourselves a crucial question. Did Nygren define Agape correctly? While he unpacks Platonic Eros and its distinction between heavenly Eros and its soul ascension from that of vulgar Eros and its corruption of the earthly body, his grasp of Agape deserves scrutiny! *This is critical because a biblical understanding of Agape is symbiotically connected to the way we understand and embrace God's character.*

Nygren's Agape Essentials

- Agape is *unmotivated* and, therefore, springs forth *spontaneously*. In regards to God's love directed toward man, he asserts that we look in vain for a reason why God loves. Moreover, he claims that God's love is therefore groundless with nothing rational in man to love. The only ground for God's Love is found in Himself. So when it is said that God loves a man, Nygren claims that this is not a judgement on what man is like, but on what God is like. His evidence includes harlots and publicans. He thereby assumes that the seeking of such egregious sinners by Jesus proves, from a legal standpoint, that God's love must be inexplicable.
- Closely related to the first point is Nygren's belief that Agape is *indifferent to value*. Any attachment of value to the one loved would thereby eliminate spontaneity and introduce motivation. God's "no limits" love is therefore continually unconditional.
- God's love is characteristically *creative of value* in the one loved. Agape does not recognize an innate value, but creates it.
- Agape is the *initiator of fellowship* with God. To Nygren, our repentance doesn't move God—only His Love initiates movement. Here he reveals his understanding of the impassiveness of God. Virtually emotion-free is Nygren's God; nothing we do influences His Agape toward us. It follows then, there is no way from man's side to God which leads to the conclusion that Agape is God's way to man.

Nygren's Agape Summarized

- Agape is sovereign in relation to its object, and is directed to both the evil and the good. It is spontaneous, overflowing, and unmotivated.
- Agape is sacrificial giving.
- Agape is God's way to man.
- Agape is God's grace; salvation is the work of Divine love.

- Agape is unselfish love; it “seeketh not its own”; “gives itself away”
- Agape lives the life of God.
- Agape is freedom in giving.
- Agape is primarily God’s love; “God is Agape.” Even when attributed to man, it’s Divine, not human, love.
- Agape loves—creates value in its object.

Nygren and the Parables

Nygren’s largest investment of proof for his Agape exposition involves the parables of Jesus. He posits that all parables have the Agape motif as their principal theme.

Therefore, to Nygren the parables do not say that God must act rationally, but that God does in fact act irrationally. Divine Love baffles all rational calculation. Nygren proceeds to argue that even the traditional Jewish outlook logically says it is totally unacceptable and illogical to believe that God loves sinners. This appeal seems odd as he has little respect for the Jewish understanding of love given their emphasis of Law; but then he’s working to garner all the support of those who would reject Agape as having a rational basis.

In the parable of the Prodigal Son, Jesus teaches, says Nygren, that the extension of forgiveness to even the prodigal is revolutionary. Normality says it doesn’t happen that way in real life, so here we see God acting irrationally. Therefore, we see that Jesus’ parable is not demonstrational religion, but revelational.

To Nygren, rational demonstrational religion starts at the ordinary human life and makes its way up to the religious life in accordance with the rules of ordinary human affairs. Its aim is to arrive at certain religious and ethical truths.

In contrast, revelational religion is irrational and starts with the religious life. Only if God comes to us and reveals Himself can we possibly come to him. So Nygren concludes that this revelational religion is not certain abstract propositions about God, but simply fellowship that surpasses our rational minds.

Disruption emerges as Nygren asserts that Jesus did not come as a theologian to purify our conception of God through *demonstration*, but to give us a new *revelational fellowship*. Remember, Nygren's foundation for understanding the parables is the spontaneous Divine Love that baffles all rational calculation. In either/or fashion, to think otherwise, he says, is to conclude that God is one of us.

The parable that receives a lion's share of his argument is the Parable of the Laborers. Nygren concludes that God's entering into equal fellowship with the 11th hour laborer as well as the all-day worker is humanly senseless. Equal pay for unequal work!??? "If this is just," writes Nygren, "then fellowship with God is not regulated." So it must be rooted in Agape—the irrational and spontaneous.

To Nygren the principle of justice requires a due proportion between work and wages. He concludes that this lack of proportion illuminates the purpose of the parable which was to exclude the principle of justice from the religious relationship. He asserts that "motivated justice" must give way to "unmotivated Love." Nygren says that when spontaneous Love and Generosity are found, the exercise of Justice is obsolete and invalidated. And the disruption goes on...

It is not surprising that Nygren would so favorably quote Nietzsche that, "Christianity is the transvaluation of all ancient values." I'm not sure what happened to the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, in whose lives crucial ancient values are illustrated!!

Carsten Johnsen

Carsten Johnsen was Norwegian and though he earned two doctorates in philology and theology his understanding of the humility of Agape led to his strong preference for being called "Uncle" or "Brother". He taught in a number of SDA colleges on different continents including ten years at the Andrews Seminary from 1968-78. Having read six of Carsten's books, I can say that the renewing of my mind is underway in an unprecedented way. Not only is he brilliant, but his reverence for Scripture and Ellen White's prophetic gift is extraordinary!

Today, when I hear, “He’s often hard to grasp,” I get it! Carsten’s thoughts and our own Western way of thinking are often in conflict. To quote him:

“... the spirit of prophecy restored my faith in the Word of God as a source of realism I could depend on 100%. I must first give you some brief information about the diametrically opposite, the irrealism of the leading philosophical trend of our Western civilization. That is, the age old tradition of a humanism which is pagan through and through and which has given itself the beautiful name of idealism. I am dumbfounded now to discover how thoroughly that type of idealism, which is a synonym for spiritualism, has penetrated the basic thinking of every one of us. Our minds are so sick as a result of the pattern of thought pervading this philosophy, that we are hardly able to understand, off hand, anymore, the philosophy the Bible teaches on every page. The first Christians could understand it easily. But you and I have been so heavily imbued with the thought forms of pagan dualism that our thinking has to be reconditioned or geared back to a pattern of thought in harmony once more with Biblical realism. The spirit of prophecy messages, so marvelously geared to the outward form of expression peculiar to 20th century people, and yet remaining perfectly in accordance with the realistic substance of biblical thinking, evidently accomplish the wonder of making it possible for 20th century man to appropriate the realism of old.” *The Mystic Omega of End-time Crisis*, p 6-7.

As I studied, it became evident that I was heavily imbued with disruptive pagan thought forms. I was initially surprised by his relentless opposition to Nygren’s view of God, even though there were concepts of Agape where they agreed.

Carsten’s Christian Realism

To grasp Carsten's deep concern about Nygren's Agape, we must see that foundational to all of Carsten’s theological and philosophical thought is his commitment to what he calls *Christian Realism*—defined as the wholeness of *intelligent thought* and *living emotion*. In contrast to Christian Realism, Western (Greek) and Eastern philosophies, pagan at their core, are disruptive of virtually everything—including thought and emotion.

Even in Christianity we find influence of this Greek-based split thinking: Soul from body, law from grace, works from faith. This is a major issue for Carsten in his evaluation of Nygren who can't quite break loose from the disruption of Hellenism. At times, especially with soul and body, Nygren tries to avoid disruption, but his separation of grace and law, and faith and works, reveal his inconsistency.

At the core of Carsten's opposition to Nygren, is Nygren's assertion that intelligent thought and Agape are at odds. To Carsten, Agape makes total sense—even the apparently irrational parables.

According to Carsten, "ultra-modern existentialists have developed a veritable state of acrobatics by which they manage to see something eminently positive and basically good in the totally absurd, rather than what is rational and objective."

Hence, Nygren's concept of Agape is free from intelligent motivation. Carsten believes that this is humanistic slander against the intelligent rational Agape nature of God.

While Carsten agrees that Agape is definitely other-centered and holds all the characteristics of 1 Corinthians 13, God's love is NOT spontaneous and unmotivated. Carsten's view of Agape rejects an impassive God and instead celebrates a Divine emotion rooted in what he calls *stern realism*—a full orb ed realism with no disruption, that is, stripped of all disrupting pagan thought forms. Obviously then, Carsten is a great student of unitary Hebrew thought and the loving-kindness emphasis of God found in the Old Testament; an Old Testament/New Testament loving-kindness that eludes Nygren.

Is Agape Feminine and Eros Masculine?

In Carsten's critique of Nygren, he draws from one of his dissertations, *The Part of the Story You Were Never Told about Women*. In this work, he examines differential psychology with a biblical lens and takes issue with the stereotypes of men and women. He argues that when it comes to distinguishing the emotional

self-centered gender from the rational other-centered gender we have it backwards. Generally, he asserts, the prototypical woman belongs in the rational other-centered category more so than men! He uses the nursing mother in Isaiah as an example of the nurturing thoughtful side of the woman. "A mother won't forget, but even if she does, I won't forget." Isaiah 49:15

Carsten develops the point that men are much more inclined to irresponsibility or a "playboy" mentality. He then posits the point that Agape is feminine and Eros is masculine. (Interestingly, even the Greek reveals the gender distinction.) This emerges from his affirmation that the irresistible forces of simple Motherliness exert a transforming influence on all aspects of her love. Could this be one reason why God uses the term "Bride" to refer to His Church? To love is our highest calling.

In British artist Louis Parsons' analysis of his painting (seen on website depicting Agape as feminine and Eros as masculine), he writes:

"The more obviously masculine figure (Eros) in the right piece is reaching upward, to the peak and fulcrum of its possibility. The feminine figure (Agape) on the left is embracing, flowing, and adapting to the wave of colours flowing through the piece. There is a masculine fire that burns with a sense of agency and accomplishment and a feminine flow of water that cools, flows, nurtures and dances."

Additionally, let's keep in mind that the Greek thinkers that now shape our Western thought forms were virtually all men. As we've already seen, one of Western man's key characteristics is a separation of the theoretical from the reality of the practical.

Carsten's Personalization vs. Nygren's Depersonalization

Most important, Carsten is a strong advocate of *personalization*. Conversely, Nygren practices depersonalization as he has a strong inclination to see Agape as an abstraction thereby making Agape independent of any reality outside itself. To Carsten this is "the tragic age-old mistake of Spiritualism." Yes God is Spirit! But the Spirit of God is rooted in real personalism, not an abstract mirage.

Carsten defines personalism by two major characteristics:

- Free Will
- Created in God's Image

These are motive enough for God to love all, whether believer or unbeliever—no spontaneity needed! Moreover, motive enough for us to love all; whether spouse, family, friend or enemy! They even enable the parables to make perfect sense! Yes, we are often unlovable in each other's eyes, but never to God who gave to us these two incomparable gifts: Free Will and Creation in His Image.

While it is true, as Nygren says, God's love creates value in the one loved, it is also true that our personal value to God is traceable to and validated by at least two epic events: Our Creation and Calvary's Redemption.

For Carsten, Nygren has badly distorted Agape. It is true that Nygren critically dismisses the upward salvation-seeking "heavenly" Eros of Plato as well as his acquisitive bodily "vulgar" Eros. While Nygren does acknowledge the Creation of the body, his appreciation of such biblical reality is not entirely clear, as we shall see, given his appreciation of the Agape celebrating yet Creation-abhorring Marcion.

As Nygren's Agape is unmotivated and spontaneous, this begs the question of how then can Agape really influence the other "neighborly" loves—husband/wife, brotherly, familial and even the call to love our enemies? If Nygren is to be consistent, he should also conclude that God's Agape works through the involved humans only spontaneously and irrationally. But must Love be stripped of intelligent thought and the attendant living emotion? Consistency means, therefore, that Nygren is on thin ice at best. If I'm a rational being and I'm called to love with God's Love, which Nygren and Luther acknowledge, does that mean that Love is irrational? If so, where does that leave the gifts of, "created in God's image" and "free will"? These are understated entities in Nygren's world, thereby bypassing the real beauty of our willing cooperation with, "Christ in you, the Hope of Glory!" In contrast, Carsten's Christian Realism describes an Agape that encompasses all God-Created expression.

Carsten makes a special point of developing the idea that because God created Man and Woman he also created marital sex. This experience of husband and wife predates sin and through Christ in fallen humans marital sex becomes part of the Agape story of restoration. Agape, through the operation of yielding our wills in freedom, finds the appropriate expression in all relationships through our created bodily senses. Thus Agape does not disrupt but instead celebrates the wholeness of personalism with our Created bodies and free-wills functioning under Agape's direction.

Nygren's commitment to academic neutrality as part of his exegesis model is another error he makes. Exegesis, I believe, is led by Word/Spirit revelation and is processed through the uniqueness of the individual Spirit-led mind. Nygren's historical critical leaning appears to flip those two with the rational mind taking precedence thereby undermining revelation.

So it was with 2nd century heretic Marcion who had a substantial influence over Nygren. While Nygren held Marcion's views tentatively, he admired his commitment to New Testament Agape—an Agape that was flawed. Here's why: Marcion rejected the God of the Old Testament arguing the Father of Christ was the true God—not that Old Testament God that created these despicable bodies! Undoubtedly, Marcion's rejection of the Old Testament played a major role in Nygren's abstraction/depersonalization of Agape.

Marcion possessed a Hellenistic visceral aversion to matter—contempt for the body. With Judaism's wholistic approach to the soul/body inseparability, it follows this understanding influenced Nygren's view that "Christianity is a fundamentally different thing from Judaism." Additionally Marcion's rejection of matter leads to the logical conclusion that Creation is a Divine non-event, the incarnation is meaningless, and the Cross is impotent as Christ didn't really die. Not an admirable example of one to reference as possessing a worthy view of Agape.

Nygren, as did Marcion, associates Nomos with Old Testament Judaism and Grace with New Testament Agape. To arrive at the view of Agape that he presently embraces, he unpacks 1300 years of church history and finds Luther. So with these two, Marcion and Luther, Nygren undermines personalism—the bedrock of

Christian Realism. Marcion takes down matter, the Creation of the body and Luther nixes free will with his *Bondage of the Will* diatribe. The upshot for both Marcion and Luther and yes, Nygren, is that Grace virtually displaces Law creating a disruption that continues to reverberate through Christianity.

Closing Thoughts

A careful look at Nygren, as done by Carsten, reveals that his depersonalization of Agape leads to a heartlessness in defiance of Christian Realism!! Intelligence AND living emotion are, to be sure, dichotomized. According to Carsten, the motif-scholar, is a radical dualist leaving man badly disrupted—vacillating between reason and emotion—perhaps a battle known as cognitive dissonance? To Carsten, this separation by Nygren is nothing other than Plato’s and Buddha’s “idea-ism”—and the two meet in irrational depersonalized Spiritualism resulting in what Carsten called “Dionysian intoxication” or “super-excited subjectivism.” I think “Baal Peor” fits as well!

Carsten’s Agape Essentials

- Agape is rational and is characterized by *Christian Realism* defined as *Intelligent Thought* and *Living Emotion*
- Agape is motivated by *God’s Personalism*; shared through *our Creation* and the extension of *Free Will*, validated through *Calvary’s Redemption*. Revelation 4:11 tells us we were created for God’s pleasure, as does Ellen White: “We were brought into existence because we were needed.” ST 4/22/03
- While Eros is defined by vanity in all forms, Agape is characterized by humility and self-sacrifice.
- Justice is integral to the expression of Agape.
- Agape tends toward femininity, so it closely aligns with Motherliness. Eros, on the other hand, tends toward masculinity.
- Everyone is considered a potential saint under Agape’s influence.

- Unlike Nygren's God, a lover of non-value, the God of Agape is a lover of value. Carsten sees all our value "in Christ."
- Agape allows no disruption: Soul/Body, Grace/Law, and Faith/Works are each simply two sides of the Agape coin.
- Agape is experienced fully only through a repentance that need not be repented of.

I've concluded that Nygren's view of Agape, a view I enthusiastically embraced up until less than two years ago, is actually what I call a masculine Agape. A corrupted and irrational hybrid that distorts God's character! To claim that God is irrational and impassive keeps Him detached and we lose the intimacy He so desires. "Come now, let us reason together," He beckons. And the resulting "reasoning" together—intelligent thought—combines with the Fruit of the Spirit to manifest living emotion! AGAPE!

This Christian Realism is completely personalized in man by God's Image and Free Will allowing one to rationally view everyone as a potential saint. Nygren's Agape, in contrast, is depersonalizing—unmotivated and irrational—not even considering the natural value of the person being loved.

May we reassess and reject all analysis of God's character that leads to an irrational disruptive Agape...which isn't Agape at all. God's Church needs to remove Nygren's irrational Agape from life support; to cease the endorsement of what amounts to the Hegelian axiom: "Absurdity is bound to triumph in the end." Nyet!

In conclusion, Carsten's view of Agape, with his rigorous focus on metanoia (repentance) as the only way to experience Agape, resonates with the 1888 Message better than any other I've studied. The 1888 Message is in reality an Agape Message that attracts my mind and reaches my heart as no other Gospel exposition. It is this personalizing Message, the Christian Realism of Intelligent Thought and Living Emotion, that leads to "godly sorrow that works repentance to salvation not to be repented of." 2 Cor 7:10. This living experience will reflect the Supreme Gift of the Holy Spirit—Agape—to illuminate the world with His Revelation 18 Glory!

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