

## What is Love?

By Eric FONNER (From *ExploreGod.com*)

There is something innate in us that longs to be loved, but what exactly are we longing for? Even before *A Night at the Roxbury* got the refrain of “What is love?” stuck in our heads, people have been trying to answer this question.<sup>1</sup> A simple Google™ search of the word “love” yields well over one billion results, and every month 246,000 people ask the search engine, “What is love?”<sup>2</sup> Much of modern music addresses the topic in one way or another. Libraries are filled with books, poetry, journals, and philosophical treatises on the subject. Many of our films and TV shows are consumed with the idea of love. So what exactly is it?...

Given all this exposure, one would think we’d all be experts. And yet, if we were to ask one hundred people to define love, we’d get one hundred different answers. In fact, many would suggest that, despite its pervasiveness in media and culture, love is an ambiguous and somewhat enigmatic concept. This uncertainty comes in part from the unusually broad use of the word “love.” In the English language, we use it to describe our feelings about a wide spectrum of things. I *love* chocolate. I *love* going to the mountains. I *love* my spouse and children. In each of these uses, the level of intensity and the significance of the object of affection varies greatly.

### The Source of Love

People are divided on the origin of love. Evolutionary theorists suggest that love is just a chemical reaction leading to certain procreative instincts. Geoffrey Miller, taking a cue from Charles Darwin’s theory of sexual selection, proposes that “our minds evolved not just as survival machines, but as courtship machines.”<sup>3</sup>

Richard Dawkins suggests that our genes are actually hard-wired to reproduce themselves.<sup>4</sup> And if this is the case, then love is nothing more than our genes inducing whatever chemical processes are necessary to ensure that our progeny outlives us. Evolutionary theory may account for the proliferation of our species, and indeed there are biological and physiological reactions that produce human emotions in every person. Yet many of us may feel unsatisfied by the claim that our innermost feelings come from mere chemical interactions.

We are moved by stories of people who give of themselves, even their lives, for the ones they love—a husband for his wife, a mother for her child. The love motivating this kind of self-sacrifice seems to override our natural instinct for self-preservation. Most theists point to these kinds of actions and suggest that love is something that originates outside of us, with God. The Bible says that God himself is love<sup>5</sup> and that we humans know how to love because God first loved us.<sup>6</sup> Whatever its origin, one thing’s for sure: our understanding of love is anything but clear.

### Agapē Love

The Greek language sheds light on the meaning of this elusive concept by using a variety of greatly nuanced words to describe different types of love. The New Testament, which was written in common Greek, uses two of these words: *philia* and *agapē*. *Philia* is the root of the

English word “Philadelphia,” which means “brotherly love.” *Agapē* is divine, unconditional love, such as God’s love for humanity.

*“Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. Love never fails.”* (The Apostle Paul)<sup>7</sup>

*Agapē* implies a willingness to put another’s wishes and needs before your own.<sup>8</sup> The philosopher C. S. Lewis defined it as “a steady wish for the loved person’s ultimate good as far as it can be obtained.”<sup>9</sup> This *agapē* form of love goes far beyond what many of us think of when we consider love, as demonstrated in these verses:

1. “Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one’s life for one’s friends.”<sup>10</sup>
2. “Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.”<sup>11</sup>
3. “Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her” (i.e., as Christ died for the church).<sup>12</sup>
4. “For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son.”<sup>13</sup>

These passages convey the notion that love is sacrificial, unending, selfless, and unconditional.

### True Love

When in a relationship, many of us ask, “Is this true love?” What we’re really asking is, “Will it last?” There is something innate in us that longs to be loved unconditionally, to be safe in a relationship no matter what happens. To be accepted even when we fail or make a mistake, when we have bad breath or no make-up, when we are selfish or insensitive.

This is far from the shallow, selfish type of “love” that Hollywood sells. Many of us chase after this idea of love. Then, when it doesn’t last, we’re left confused and heartbroken. “True” love—unconditional love—must go beyond the warm and fuzzy feeling of being “in love.”<sup>14</sup> With commitment as the foundation of unconditional love, “falling out of love” is not an option. We invest, we sacrifice, we give, we choose not to give up—and in this our love grows. True love is unconditional love. It is a deep, abiding love that is not always glamorous or sexy, yet is the source of true joy, life, and fulfillment.

### Miraculous Love

Bono, the main vocalist for the rock band U2, talks about this type of love in his song “Miracle Drug.” He says, “I’ve had enough of romantic love. I’d give it up for a miracle drug.”<sup>15</sup> Bono recognizes that romantic love, while important, is incomplete without the greater, deeper, more intimate *agapē* love. What’s more is that he acknowledges this love is not easy to come by. In fact, the rocker says it’s actually a miracle. When we humans are able to love someone selflessly—even to the point of sacrificing our lives—it’s a miraculous experience. In this we can find true freedom, for we realize that we are not slaves to feelings and emotions,

which change from day to day. Rather we can cling to a higher power, the Author of love. And there we find a love that is not of this world.

#### Footnotes

1. *A Night at the Roxbury*, directed by John Fortenberry (Paramount Pictures, 1998). The film is based on a recurring *Saturday Night Live* sketch called "The Roxbury Guys." The trademark of the sketch and film is Will Ferrell and Chris Katan bobbing their heads in unison to the beat of "What Is Love," a song by Haddaway.
2. According to Google Adwords Keyword Search Tool, February 8, 2012, exact match. Locations: All, Languages: All, Devices: Desktops and Laptops.
3. Geoffrey Miller, *The Mating Mind—How Sexual Choice Shaped the Evolution of Human Nature* (New York: Anchor Books, 2000), 3.
4. Richard Dawkins, *The Selfish Gene* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989).
5. *The Holy Bible*, New International Version © 2011, 1 John 4:16.
6. *ibid.*, 1 John 4:19.
7. *Ibid.*, 1 Corinthians 13:4–8a.
8. For more detail on the four types of love, see C. S. Lewis, *The Four Loves* (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 1991).
9. C. S. Lewis, *God in the Dock: Essays on Theology and Ethics* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1972), 49.
10. *The Holy Bible*, John 15:13.
11. *Ibid.*, Matthew 5:44.
12. *Ibid.*, Ephesians 5:25.
13. *Ibid.*, John 3:16.
14. C. S. Lewis presents a particularly excellent description of this concept: "Being in love is a good thing, but it is not the best thing . . . You cannot make it the basis of a whole life. It is a noble feeling, but it is still a feeling. Now no feeling can be relied on to last in its full intensity, or even to last at all. Knowledge can last, principles can last, habits can last; but feelings come and go. And in fact, whatever people say, the state called "being in love" usually does not last. But, of course, ceasing to be "in love" need not mean ceasing to love. Love in this second sense—love as distinct from "being in love" is not merely a feeling. It is a deep unity, maintained by the will and deliberately strengthened by habit; reinforced by (in Christian marriages) the grace which both parents ask, and receive, from God. They can have this love for each other even at those moments when they do not like each other; as you love yourself even when you do not like yourself. They can retain this love even when each would easily, if they allowed themselves, be "in love" with someone else. "Being in love" first moved them to promise fidelity: this quieter love enables them to keep the promise. It is on this love that the engine of marriage is run: being in love was the explosion that started it." C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: HarperCollins, 1952), 108-09.
15. "Miracle Drug," *U2.com*, <http://www.u2.com/discography/lyrics/lyric/song/85/>.