

NO GREATER LOVE: A CHRISTIAN APPROACH TO FRIENDSHIP AND RACE

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“Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down
his life for his friends.”

—John 15:13 (KJV)

I. INTRODUCTION

“I have a black friend.”² Too many (white) people have uttered these words in an effort to seem enlightened, to seem more familiar with people of color than they actually are, and as such, to seem less regressed in their approach to race and racism.³ Implied in the statement is a defense: “I

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² I am focusing on white-black ethnic tensions in this essay as they are especially contentious in the public discourse of the United States at this time—centered in, among other things, Christian debates around Critical Race Theory. These debates are certainly reaching beyond the United States and across cultural lines and much of what I write here is just as applicable for the tensions between any two ethnic groups. That is, some of the particulars may work out differently if we are talking about whites and Asians or blacks and Hispanics, but the conclusions should largely remain consistent.

³ For the purpose of this essay, I will refer to race and ethnicity interchangeably, though this is generally a far more complex issue. Neither term has precise definitions that are universally acknowledged. While I am not an anthropologist, my understanding is that race typically refers to groups of human beings based primarily on physical (phenotypical) characteristics and, to a lesser extent, cultural characteristics, whereas ethnicity tends to refer primarily to a more comprehensive and diverse set of cultural or social characteristics. See Conrad Phillip Kottak, *Mirror for Humanity: A Concise Introduction to Cultural Anthropology*, Eleventh Edition (New York: McGraw-Hill Education, 2018), 216-232. Seeing race as primarily biological simplifies the distinction, as biological racial features are subject to genetic inheritance apart from culture being learned (and so different biological races can share a

can't be racist because I have a black friend." Such reasoning raises several issues, one of which is an ontological problem.⁴ It often narrows the definition of friendship to merely a form of acquaintance. Yet, inherent in that 'black friend' statement is also an understanding that racial tension and friendship have something to do with each other. If friendship and race are connected, yet friendship is something more than acquaintance, is it not worth exploring this connection a little more deeply? And, recognizing that this phenomenon is widespread, is there something particular about the nature of Christian friendship that is relevant here? Or even more directly, can a deeper understanding of Christian friendship move us beyond this tokenistic line of thinking?

In this essay, *I will suggest that a biblical understanding of friendship, expressed in the Christian virtue of love, is essential to improving discussions of race and ethnicity in this complex moment of our history.*

In order to make this case, we need a contextualized understanding of the Christian concept of love and some of its constituent expressions. We will also need a biblical and historical survey of how it is portrayed in relationship to both friendship and race. In particular, we will look at a few Hebrew Bible and New Testament passages concerning love for others, especially in contexts where multiple social groups are present (across racial and other social divides). We will then set the New Testament concepts in their classical contexts, especially some of the earliest work done on friendship as an ethical virtue. With this background described, we will then consider two applications for Christians to consider. Firstly, however, we must narrow our definition.

culture). The difficulty arises in that there is a perceived overlap in these concepts—most notably around the cultural assumptions people typically make around the physical trait of skin color (i.e., certain skin colors are associated with certain cultures). From an anthropological point of view, however, most of our discourse on *race* and *racism* in the public square is probably more precisely an issue of ethnicity or general culture than it is strictly racial. Nevertheless, given the current state of discourse, I am using the terms interchangeably and to refer, primarily to cultural differences.

⁴ Other problems with this reasoning, but which are beyond the scope of this essay, include: 1) It often assumes uniformity without distinction: 'All black people are the same, so if I'm good with one, I must be good with all.' It often assumes equality without distinction: 'I'm colorblind, there's no difference between black and white. See George Yancey, *Beyond Racial Gridlock, Embracing Mutual Responsibility* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2006), 29-40. For a more academic approach to the issues of color blindness, see Helen A. Neville, Miguel E. Gallardo, and Derald Wing Sue, eds., *The Myth of Racial Colorblindness: Manifestations Dynamics, and Impact* (Washington D.C.: American Psychological Association, 2015), especially pages 3-20. 2) It often assumes a fairly narrow definition of racism: 'Racism happens between individuals, systems cannot be racist.' See Yancey, *Beyond Racial Gridlock*, 20-23. 3) It completely ignores the feelings and wellbeing of the person of color, rendering them a token in a majority white world and ignoring what it may cost them to have friends across racial lines. There are, undoubtedly, numerous other problems.

II. WHAT IS LOVE?

Broadly construed, saying anything productive about any virtue in the current landscape of virtue ethics is nearly impossible. As Alistair McIntyre—who helped launch the revival of interest in virtue ethics in the 1980s—noted: “There are just too many different and incompatible conceptions of virtue for there to be any real unity to the concept.”⁵ Basic definitions are not without disagreement and varying philosophical systems are simply incompatible. Yet, definitions and clarity around philosophical systems and some semblances of conceptual unity are necessary for this discussion to be productive.

Defining love—the central concept behind notions of friendship—in the context of an ethical system has specific challenges. Of course, love is a highly prioritized virtue in many ethical and philosophical systems, and so it is addressed regularly and in varying ways across cultures and time.⁶ New Testament conceptions of love differ from their classical background which differ from Patristic and medieval and more modern ideas—yet there are remarkable similarities throughout. The expression of love in friendship, as such, is challenging to define with any precision or conceptual unity across time and geography.

Hellenistic definitions of love—given that both classical philosophy’s contribution to virtue ethics and the New Testament canon emerge from this time and culture—are a good place to start. Usually, in Attic Greek, there are generally considered to be three primary terms: ἔρως, φιλία, and ἀγάπη. Relationships defined by ἔρως are typically characterized by intense desire for the recipient, prompted by the merit or qualities of the object, and include a sexual component. The feelings of φιλία would also be produced in response to the merit or qualities of the recipient, and be portrayed as more of an affectionate regard toward friends, family members, and other acquaintances. Most classification systems will identify the concept of friendship specifically with φιλία. Explanations of ἀγάπη, however, especially in the Christian tradition (drawing from Koine Greek), will specify it as the love God has for his people, the love his people have for him, or the love they have for humankind in general.⁷

⁵ Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), 169.

⁶ This is certainly true in the Christian faith. As Paul notes in 1 Cor 13:13: “And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love.”

⁷ These broad approaches to ἔρως, φιλία, and ἀγάπη, particularly in seeing how they relate to the objects of love and specifying φιλία as the domain of friendship are quite common. For example, see the “friendship” in the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. This article draws on the definitions of ἔρως, φιλία, and ἀγάπη as found in Henry George Liddell, et al., *A Greek-English Lexicon* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), 6, 691, and 1,934. Of course, classical literature cannot be so easily reduced to just these three concepts. And the New Testament and Early Christian canon are equally complex. As BDAG indicates and affirms, ἔρως and ἐράω are not really used in the New Testament, φιλία, φίλος, and φιλέω are used extensively throughout both the classical period and the New Testament, and ἀγάπη has little classical background, but a rather rich presence in the New Testament. See

Tempting as it is to locate understandings of love within friendship solely in *φιλία* and its related terms—as readings of C.S. Lewis often do—the kind of love that undergirds Christian friendship might actually be equally located in the concept of *ἀγάπη* or *compassionate love* as it is sometimes described.⁸ The classical and New Testament backgrounds, as we shall see, are open to as much.

III. HEBREW BIBLE

The New Testament concept of love in the context of friendship will undoubtedly draw from its foundation in the Hebrew Scriptures, a body of literature that paints a picture of love and friendship that transcends socially distinct categories of culture/race by finding its primary expression in the love of one's neighbor.⁹ As the concept develops through the canon, it begins to take on the qualities of intimacy and self-sacrifice that are recognizable as love in the sense of close friendship.

A. EXODUS AND LEVITICUS: LOVE AND CULTURAL/RACIAL BOUNDARIES

In considering the Hebrew Scriptures' concept of love—especially imperatives to do so—a good place to establish background is the legal codes of the Torah. Perhaps the key text concerning love for others is that from Lev 19:18 which eventually becomes the second greatest commandment according to Jesus.¹⁰

You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against any of your people, but you shall love (בְּרַחֵם or ἀγαπάω) your neighbor (עֲרֵב or πλησίος) as yourself: I am the Lord.¹¹

It is clear from the second phrase that the Israelites have a moral imperative to love their neighbors. It's not only a matter of their identity,

Walter Bauer, et al., *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 6–7, 389 and 395, and 1,056–1,059. In addition to *ἔρωσ*, *φιλία*, and *ἀγάπη*, we might also consider other terms, including *στοργή* as well as possibly *ἐπιθυμία*, *μανία*, *φιλαυτία*, *ξενία*, *πράγμα*, *ερωτοτροπία* (most often known by its Latin counterpart *ludus*), and others. As with most languages, there is overlap in the definitions of these terms and drawing reliable distinctions is impossible. Definitions shift, semantic ranges widen, and varying contexts create varying uses. Nevertheless, studies of friendship will typically begin with *φιλία*.

⁸ On Lewis, see his chapter on *friendship* in C.S. Lewis, *The Four Loves* (New York: HarperCollins, 1960), 73–115. Here, Lewis argues for an expanded understanding of friendship. Later readings of Lewis, as well as Aristotle (who focuses on *philia*) and Cicero (who focuses on *amicitia*), as one might expect, tend to simplify to the point of oversimplification.

⁹ The New Testament understanding of the Hebrew Scriptures, of course, was mediated through the Hellenistic culture of the day. For extensive arguments on this, see Martin Hengel, *Judaism and Hellenism: Studies in their Encounter in Palestine during the Early Hellenistic Period*, Volumes 1–2. trans. by J. Bowden (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1974).

¹⁰ See Matt 22:35–40, Mark 12:28–31, and Luke 10:25–28. See also John 13:31–35.

¹¹ Lev 19:18. The Hebrew word for love is as would be expected (בְּרַחֵם) in such a context. I am including the LXX vocabulary here for its correspondence to the New

but a matter of the Lord's identity (concluding with his "I am the Lord" identification).

The two questions that necessarily emerge from this phrase are what it means to love and who exactly the neighbors are.¹² To answer both questions, the context is quite important. Throughout this chapter of Leviticus, the Lord commends to Moses a series of ritual and moral holiness codes, particularly focused on the relations between people from 19:9–18.

The question of what this love looks like, then, might be explained in the content of the other commands in relationship to other people (assuming that neighbors are in view throughout the chapters—an issue to which we must return). The behavior, then, that explains this love includes leaving parts of the harvest for others in need, not stealing or lying, dealing justly, refraining from slander, not taking advantage, not hating, but correcting, and not taking vengeance. Taken together, the picture of love painted here is one of material provision, treating with honesty, and sacrificing one's own rights or advantages for the sake of the other.

The more complex question in this passage is that of the identity of the neighbor. In the LXX, most of these terms are specifically rendered using the term *πλησίος*—which appears in 19:11, 13, 15, 16, 17, and 18. The Hebrew term translated as neighbor in 19:18 (עֵרֵךְ) is a broad term that can mean neighbor, friend, or simply other (person). For example, the relationship between God and Moses is described using this terminology: "Thus the Lord used to speak to Moses face to face, as one speaks to a friend..."¹³ As such, it is clear that neighbor is someone who is relationally somewhat close. But the Hebrew term is slightly more varied than the Greek translations would indicate. The term is found in 19:13, 16, and 18. In 19:11, 15, and 17, a different term is used (i.e., עֲמִית). This is important for two reasons. First, it broadens the semantic range of who might be considered a neighbor in this passage. Secondly, it means the context should be weighed even more highly. Indeed, several other terms for groups of people are included here: the poor (19:10, 15), the alien (19:10), the laborer (19:13), the deaf and blind (19:14), the great (19:15), your people (19:16, 18), and kin (19:17). It would seem, then, that *neighbor* might be a way of talking about all of these groups of people and the command in 19:18 is a summary of the preceding laws in both defining *neighbor* and defining *love*.

If this understanding of neighbor is right, then there are cultural (i.e., racial/ethnic) implications to one of the first terms used. The first set of commands concerning the gathering of the harvest indicates a kind of sacrificial care for the poor and the alien:

When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not reap to the very edges of your field, or gather the gleanings of your

Testament concepts already discussed. All Scripture references are to the NRSV translation unless otherwise noted.

¹² The question of identifying one's neighbor is, of course, famously taken up by Jesus and a scribe and leads to the telling of the parable of the Good Samaritan in Luke 10:25–37.

¹³ Exod 33:11.

harvest. You shall not strip your vineyard bare, or gather the fallen grapes of your vineyard; you shall leave them for the poor and the alien (גֵּר): I am the Lord your God.¹⁴

The Israelites are to be concerned with the wellbeing of the alien, again as a matter of the Lord's identity as much as their own. This term derives a special significance in the account of one of the most important moments in the history of the people of God: the first Passover. As the meal is described in some detail in Exodus 12, there are a few conspicuous phrases that indicate that the people of God at that time were not limited to merely ethnic Israelites.

For seven days no leaven shall be found in your houses; for whoever eats what is leavened shall be cut off from the congregation of Israel, *whether an alien or a native of the land*.¹⁵

The Israelites journeyed from Rameses to Succoth, about six hundred thousand men on foot, besides children. *A mixed crowd also went up with them*, and livestock in great numbers, both flocks and herds.¹⁶

The Lord said to Moses and Aaron: This is the ordinance for the Passover: *no foreigner shall eat of it, but any slave who has been purchased may eat of it after he has been circumcised*; no bound or hired servant may eat of it.¹⁷

If an *alien who resides with you* wants to celebrate the Passover to the Lord, all his males shall be circumcised; then he may draw near to celebrate it; *he shall be regarded as a native of the land*. But no uncircumcised person shall eat of it; there shall be one law for the native and for the alien who resides among you.¹⁸

In his important work on race in biblical theology, J. Daniel Hays notes an important distinction being made.¹⁹ There are present those who are ethnically not Jewish, but who are nevertheless adherents to the Law to the point of being circumcised. The term used is that of *sojourner* or *alien* (גֵּר), the same as in Lev 19:10. This is in distinction from *foreigners* (נֹכְרִים) who have not submitted themselves to the Law. In other words, even in this foundational meal, people of varying races are to be treated as equally a part of God's people on the basis of their adherence to the Law, not on the basis of ethnic heritage.

¹⁴ Lev 19:9–10.

¹⁵ Exod 12:19.

¹⁶ Exod 12:37–38.

¹⁷ Exod 12:43–45.

¹⁸ Exod 12:48–49.

¹⁹ J. Daniel Hays, *From Every People and Nation: A Biblical Theology of Race* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2003), 69–70.

What's also very important here is that there are, again, two different social groups of varying relational distance. Both *foreigners* and *sojourners* are present and to be cared for, yet there is an essential distinction between them. Those who are likewise submitted to Yahweh are to be seen as much closer relations in terms of the care they are shown, indistinct from (ethnically Jewish) family.

As such, the consistent witness of the Hebrew Scriptures is that the people of God are to treat as their own and to love those who demonstrate a religious adherence to the Word of God regardless of a particular ethnic or racial designation.²⁰

B. WISDOM LITERATURE: THE INTIMACY OF FRIENDSHIP

As one might expect from praxis-oriented literature, several of the Proverbs address friendship as a social institution. Taking what has been, to this point, a communal understanding of love, the wisdom literature of the Hebrew Scriptures demonstrates an individually intimate character to friendship in the context of love. For example, Prov 17:17 echoes the language of Lev 19:18.

A friend (עֵר or φίλος) loves (בְּהֵא) at all times,
and kinsfolk are born to share adversity.

Where the NRSV translates *friend*, in this context, we find the same Hebrew word as Lev 19:18 (i.e., *neighbor*). Interestingly, the LXX renders the concept as φίλος (singular) rather than πλησίος, an even more love-oriented semantic choice. Likewise, the verb *love* follows Lev 19:18, whereas the LXX shifts the verbal sentiment rather radically to something like “may a friend be always present for you.” The concepts are helpfully maintained, but now applied to more individual contexts. The parallel line—“*and kinsfolk are born to share adversity*”—suggests that this is more than mere acquaintance as the parallel term to *friend* becomes *kinsfolk*, literally *brother* (אָח or ἀδελφός). This closeness or relational intimacy in describing friendship is likewise acknowledged in Prov 18:24: “Some friends (עֵר) play at friendship but a true friend sticks closer than one's nearest kin (אָח).”²¹

²⁰ This notion is, of course, supported by the presence of gentiles amongst the faithful in the Hebrew Scriptures, from Jethro to Caleb to Rahab to Ruth to Shamgar and so on. Jesus picks up this distinction between ethnic privilege and adherence to the Word of God (or doing the will of the Father) in Mark 3:31–35.

²¹ See also Prov 27:9–10: “Perfume and incense make the heart glad, but the soul is torn by trouble. Do not forsake your friend or the friend of your parent; do not go to the house of your kindred in the day of your calamity. Better is a neighbor who is nearby than kindred who are far away.”

Beyond shifting the scope to individual and intimate familial relationships, the wisdom literature of the Hebrew Bible also begins to describe relational activities within friendship. For example:

Those who withhold kindness from a friend, forsake the fear of the Almighty.²²

One who forgives an affront fosters friendship, but one who dwells on disputes will alienate a friend.²³

Those who love a pure heart and are gracious in speech will have the king as a friend.²⁴

Make no friends with those given to anger, and do not associate with hotheads.²⁵

Well-meant are the wounds a friend inflicts, but profuse are the kisses of an enemy.²⁶

The substance of friendship is, once again, focused on the other in its posture. It goes beyond the *friendliness* of mere acquaintance to demanding kindness at the risk of offending God, forgiveness, and even well-intentioned critique—all while also being beneficial in this life for the one showing such love.²⁷

C. DAVID AND JONATHAN: AN EXAMPLE OF FRIENDSHIP AND LOVE

Drawing together the broader focus on love (*ἀγαπάω*) that we have seen in the Torah and the intimacy of friendship we have seen in the Wisdom Literature, we must also briefly consider where these concepts merge in, perhaps, the most celebrated of friendships in the Hebrew Bible: David and Jonathan.²⁸ Much of what we know of their friendship is found in 1 Samuel 20. There we find two men who treat each other as family, intimately,

²² Job 6:14.

²³ Prov 17:9.

²⁴ Prov 22:11.

²⁵ Prov 22:24.

²⁶ Prov 27:5–6.

²⁷ While Proverbs certainly promotes a focus on others, it is worth noting that this posture is not wholly altruistic. As practical wisdom, the advice is fundamentally still meant to give an advantage to the one enacting the advice. That is, there is meant to be a practical benefit to the one showing love to the other, even if it is not stated explicitly in the particular proverbial statement.

²⁸ There may also be a dimension of diversity built into this friendship as well. David, notably, had a gentile great grandmother, Ruth the Moabite (see Ruth 4:13–22). He also grew up a shepherd, in the fields outside of Bethlehem. Jonathan, of course, was the son of the first King of Israel, Saul, of the tribe of Benjamin. Perhaps these differences are significant. Perhaps not.

even to the point of formalizing their mutual affection in a covenant. The language used in the LXX is that of ἀγαπάω.

Jonathan made David swear again by his love for him; for he loved him as he loved his own life.²⁹

Jonathan's love was demonstrated in incredible self-sacrifice. At the narrative climax of the chapter, Saul screams at Jonathan: "For as long as the son of Jesse lives upon the earth, neither you nor your kingdom shall be established."³⁰ Jonathan's love for David, as Saul makes clear, is at the expense of eventually taking the throne of the kingdom of Israel. And when Jonathan defended David in that moment, Saul famously hurled his spear at him. Jonathan kept his promise to warn David and continued to support him, despite the personal cost.³¹

D. SUMMARY OF HEBREW BIBLE DEFINITIONS

As we have seen, the Hebrew Scriptures describe friendship in intimate, familial terms, and can be characterized by virtuous relational activities, including the notion of significant personal self-sacrifice intrinsic to friendship. Likewise, such friendships are built on broad commands to love one another that, importantly, seem to transcend socially distinct categories of race or ethnicity.

IV. NEW TESTAMENT

There are, indeed, numerous places one could turn to understand concepts of friendship and love in the New Testament, especially if looking at the fullness of the concepts as expressed in several different words.³² Any study of love in the New Testament is necessarily incomplete because of the frequency of the use of these word groups. For the purpose of this essay, we will focus on those passages in which friendship language is explicitly noted and the uses of ἀγάπη are clearly in reference to human relationships.

A. LOVE AS DIRECTED TOWARD FRIENDS IN JOHN 15:13

The language of friendship and love appear together quite prominently in the Gospel of John in the midst of Jesus's discourse in the upper room (John 13–17). Here, we begin to see the fundamental character of love in the context of friendship from the mouth of Jesus.

This is my commandment, that you love (ἀγαπάω) one another as I have loved (ἀγαπάω) you. No one has greater love (ἀγάπη)

²⁹ 1 Sam 20:17.

³⁰ 1 Sam 20:31a.

³¹ In 1 Sam 23:15–18, Jonathan strengthened David, and they make a new covenant, even while David remained on the run from Saul.

³² The verb ἀγαπάω is used 143 times in the New Testament. The noun ἀγάπη is used 116 times. Additionally, the verb φιλέω is used 25 times, the noun φίλος is used 29 times, and various other forms of both are used several times.

than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends (φίλος). You are my friends (φίλος) if you do what I command you. I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends (φίλος), because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father. You did not choose me but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last, so that the Father will give you whatever you ask him in my name. I am giving you these commands so that you may love (ἀγαπάω) one another.³³

Much could be said about Jesus's understanding of ἀγάπη from these verses. Jesus brings some definition here to what that friendship is—it is more than a functional relationship (master to servant). It involves the sharing of knowledge, and it is a relationship of choice.³⁴ But the love expressed in these verses by Jesus for his friends—and demonstrated in just these terms in chapter 19, giving his life for them—is clearly one of self-sacrifice for a close companion.³⁵ Indeed, it is the essential quality for their friendship. Indeed, it is not until self-sacrificial ἀγάπη is in the picture that Jesus begins to consider the disciples friends rather than servants (v.15). Indeed, this took time to develop. Within that statement we find a sense of progression. It is likewise expressed in the phrase: “I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing.”³⁶ Jesus clearly indicates that there is a previous relationship with the disciples, one that certainly would be appropriately described as somewhat intimate. He had been traveling with some of them for multiple years at this point. Yet, it is not until the discourse in the upper room that Jesus reveals fully his plans, deepening their knowledge of him through self-disclosure. At this point, now that they are prepared to understand his plan to die and rise again and return to the Father (a major theme throughout the discourse), he can call them friends (φίλος).

Beyond that defining moment, it is also being commended to them for their mutual relationships. Twice in the space of six verses, Jesus tells them to love one another. This notion of the mutuality of love having pervaded friendships is introduced earlier in the discourse (John 13:34–35) and then reinforced later in the discourse where an equivalent statement about the love between God and Christ and the disciples is made using a different verb: “for the Father himself loves (φιλέω) you, because you have loved (φιλέω) me and have believed that I came from God.”³⁷ There is clearly

³³ John 15:12-17.

³⁴ This is presented as unidirectional in this case, though that may be the unique character of the friendship being between the disciples and Jesus Christ himself (i.e., humans with the divine Son of God).

³⁵ John helpfully connects the beginning of this discourse (in the setting before the meal) with the crucifixion itself. See John 13:1: “Having loved (ἀγαπάω) his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end (τέλος).” John 19:31: “When Jesus had received the wine, he said, ‘It is finished (τετέλεω).’ Then he bowed his head and gave up his spirit.”

³⁶ John 15:15.

³⁷ John 16:27.

substantial overlap, here in John's Gospel, in the concepts of ἀγάπη/ἀγαπάω and φιλέω.

We must not read too much into the specifics as this is a single instance from which to extrapolate an obviously unique relationship. Nevertheless, within it we can see at least two levels of acquaintance, the more intimate of which is termed *friendship* and which, in Jesus's words, includes selfless sacrifice even to the point of death.

B. LOVE AS SELFLESS SACRIFICE GENERALLY IN THE PAULINE EPISTLES

For Paul, the key characteristic of ἀγάπη also seems to be selfless sacrifice. Indeed, his use of the term as something expressed by God the Father or Jesus Christ is often referenced in connection to the ultimate example of selfless sacrifice, Jesus's death on a cross for the sake of others:

Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved (ἀγαπητός) children, and live in love (ἀγάπη), as Christ loved (ἀγαπάω) us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.³⁸

But God proves his love (ἀγάπη) for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us.³⁹

And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved (ἀγαπάω) me and gave himself for me.⁴⁰

In each case, God's or Christ's love for their people is expressed in the gospel itself, the death of Christ "giving God's righteousness to those who believe."⁴¹ When Paul commends the concept to the recipients of his letters—suggesting that they also express love within the context of human relationships—it carries the same sense of selfless sacrifice on behalf of others.

Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he

³⁸ Eph 5:1-2.

³⁹ Rom 5:8.

⁴⁰ Gal 2:20b.

⁴¹ See Rom 3:21–26. The nature of the selflessness of Christ is likewise demonstrated in Heb 12:2: "...looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God."

humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross.⁴²

Let us therefore no longer pass judgment on one another, but resolve instead never to put a stumbling block or hindrance in the way of another. I know and am persuaded in the Lord Jesus that nothing is unclean in itself; but it is unclean for anyone who thinks it unclean. If your brother or sister is being injured by what you eat, you are no longer walking in love (*ἀγάπη*).⁴³

For you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters; only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence, but through love become slaves to one another.⁴⁴

In all three of these cases, those showing love are expected to voluntarily restrict themselves, to willingly give up their rights for the sake of others as an expression of that love. Whether it is the sacrifice of dietary freedoms or voluntarily taking on cultic laws to placate the consciences of weaker brothers, selflessness is a key aspect of demonstrating love. Paul picks up this notion of sacrificing one's rights rather pointedly in 1 Corinthians 9:

For though I am free with respect to all, I have made myself a slave to all, so that I might win more of them. To the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to win Jews. To those under the law I became as one under the law (though I myself am not under the law) so that I might win those under the law. To those outside the law I became as one outside the law (though I am not free from God's law but am under Christ's law) so that I might win those outside the law. To the weak I became weak, so that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all people, so that I might by any means save some. I do it all for the sake of the gospel, so that I may share in its blessings.⁴⁵

While these verses lack a specific reference to *love*, it is quite clear that the self-sacrificial deference articulated in the Romans and Galatians passages above finds expansion here. In these verses, Paul declares a commitment not just to diversity and hospitality in broad terms, but to gospel-centered, self-sacrificial accommodation. The immediate context of the passage shows that Paul is demonstrating his posture of deference, his adaptation to the people for the sake of their salvation. The discussion of idol meat in chapter 8 almost certainly fell along ethnic dividing lines.⁴⁶ At

⁴² Phil 2:3–8.

⁴³ Rom 14:13–15.

⁴⁴ Gal 5:13.

⁴⁵ 1 Cor 9:19–23.

⁴⁶ The cultural division certainly includes religious, not merely ethnic or racial division. Paul spent most of chapter 8 discussing food that had been sacrificed to *pagan* idols. Some Christian converts viewed the idols as meaningless non-deities and so felt free to eat the meat that had been sacrificed. It was no different than non-sacrificed meats. Others felt the

the time, Christianity was comprised of Jewish converts (those, including Paul, who grew up with the Jewish ethnic heritage, including its Mosaic Law) and gentile converts (non-Jews who came to the faith). In fact, one of the biggest debates in the New Testament itself is whether gentile converts have to convert to Jewish practices as well (see Acts 15:1–35 or Gal 2:11–21 in addition to 1 Corinthians 9). This discussion of idol meat, then, fell along Jew-gentile racial lines and also explains why Paul talks about becoming one “under the law” and one “outside the law.” Those are not just theological distinctions, but distinctions that fall along ethnic or racial lines.

Paul’s response, then, is striking. It suggests that merely tolerating diversity in a superficial way is insufficient. He took the serious step of adapting. He *became* one “under the law.” He *became* one “outside the law.” He maintained his own personal views (or cultural expressions) to be sure. That much is clear in chapter 8. Yet, he adapted.⁴⁷ He moved across these ethnic boundaries. In his letters in general, Paul is clear that the Jew-gentile distinction is comparatively insignificant (see especially Eph 2:11—3:13). God shows no partiality when it comes to race. But Paul goes a step further here in arguing that he became like the others. He embodied both groups. This was more than mere acknowledgment. This was careful study and adaptation so that he was at home among them and they with him. Where a diversity of God’s people exists, they should not just embrace each other, but embrace each other’s cultures. Paul concludes: “*I have become all things to all people, so that I might by any means save some.*” Paul is ready to assume a posture of deference for the salvation of any—for the sake of the gospel. Surrendering rights working across racial or ethnic lines are his philosophy of ministry to do this very thing.

C. LOVE AS SELFLESSNESS IN 1 CORINTHIANS 13

Returning to the concept of love, one of the more well-known parts of the Pauline corpus to explore dimensions of and, perhaps, define *ἀγάπη* in detail, is the famed love chapter in 1 Corinthians 13. Here, we get an extensive description of *love*, but in a particular context—a section of the letter beginning in chapter 12 in which Paul is addressing a question that the Corinthians had written to him about spiritual gifts—that is, spiritual maturity (see the use of *πνευματικός* in 12:1). Starting in 12:4, Paul notes that there are a variety of gifts (*χάρισμα*), and this variety is necessary. This necessary variety should never cause them to be divided (which they had

meat had been contaminated by the pagan ritual and so would be defiling themselves to eat from it. The whole discussion revolves around the question of having a weak conscience (8:7–13 especially) and so it is no accident that Paul says “to the weak, I became weak, so that I might win the weak” in 9:22.

⁴⁷ Importantly, though, this is not theological universalism. The whole purpose of adaptation was that “some might be saved” (9:22–23) by means of the gospel. Paul was not tolerating diversity on the essentials of the faith—but he was willing to set aside the Law for it.

been, apparently across social and socio-economic lines).⁴⁸ They should never feel inferior or ashamed about having certain spiritual gifts. But, neither should they feel superior. In the last verse of chapter 12, he promises to show “a still more excellent way.”⁴⁹ Paul begins by addressing the absence of love in the first few verses of the next chapter.

If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. If I give away all my possessions, and if I hand over my body so that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing.⁵⁰

We see that Paul is still on the subject of spiritual gifts. He mentions tongues, prophetic powers, knowledge or understanding, and faith—each of which appeared in his list of spiritual gifts in 1 Cor 12:8–11. To this list, he adds self-sacrifice in 13:3. And to each, he adds the requirement of love (*ἀγάπη*). It is the inclusion of love that is the difference between spiritual maturity (*πνευματικός*) and mere giftedness (*χάρισμα*). Indeed, they had clearly been shown to have the gifts. At the beginning of the letter, in 1 Cor 1:7, Paul notes that they are “not lacking in any spiritual gift (*χάρισμα*).” Yet, when it comes to their maturity, they are severely lacking. His argument a little later in the letter makes this abundantly clear:

And so, brothers and sisters, I could not speak to you as spiritual people (*πνευματικός*), but rather as people of the flesh, as infants in Christ. I fed you with milk, not solid food, for you were not ready for solid food. Even now you are still not ready...⁵¹

Paul references an example of this immaturity in his description of their selfish behavior at the Communion table (see especially 1 Cor 11:17–22). Again, the difference between maturity and mere giftedness is love. But, interestingly, he has not yet defined love. In chapter, 13, he finally begins exploring it by making the case spiritual gifts without love are annoying (like noisy gongs and cymbals), worthless, and produce no gains. At this point, the argument is fairly logical if the goal is to merely elevate the necessity of love. But the real rebuke of the Corinthians for the lack of love comes with the robust definition in the next few verses.

Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in

⁴⁸ 1 Cor 11:17–34.

⁴⁹ 1 Cor 12:31: “But strive for the greater gifts. And I will show you a still more excellent way.”

⁵⁰ 1 Cor 13:1–3.

⁵¹ 1 Cor 3:1–2.

the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.⁵²

There are two simultaneous arguments here. The first is a positive definition of love as patient, kind, trusting, hopeful, and enduring. The second argument is a definition of what love is not. It is not envious, boasting, arrogant, rude, insistent on its own way, irritable, or resentful. Of course, Paul has already mentioned some of these negative ideas earlier in the letter. Love is not rude—see 1 Cor 7:35. Love does not insist on its own way—see 1 Cor 10:24: Love is not arrogant—see 1 Cor 4:6, 4:18-19, and especially 5:2. In each case, the Corinthians are found to be lacking in love. Yet, Paul does not leave it there. He concludes by pushing them toward an aspiration.

Love never ends. But as for prophecies, they will come to an end; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will come to an end. For we know only in part, and we prophesy only in part; but when the complete comes, the partial will come to an end. When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child; when I became an adult, I put an end to childish ways. For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known. And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love.⁵³

Paul envisions a time when spiritual gifts will fall away. They will become unnecessary. Faith will not be required because Christians will be in the presence of Jesus Christ himself. Knowledge will not be necessary. Tongues will cease as God's people will be singing in unison of the glory of God for eternity.⁵⁴ Prophecy will be finished as eternity will have arrived. But even then, how humans act toward one another, the love they show to one another, will still matter—primarily because it is more than an ethical virtue, but an eschatological actuality.⁵⁵ Love will persist beyond the return of Jesus Christ. And yet, there is hope for the Corinthians that they may begin to practice love.

Paul uses metaphors to demonstrate his hope that the Corinthians may practice love. The first is the idea that he used to be a child and so behaved like a child, but then he grew up. It's an especially poignant metaphor because, remember, he had already introduced the concept back in 1 Cor 3:1, when he called them spiritual infants. He is saying that they can be on a path of growing up—and they might just grow up someday. They might

⁵² 1 Cor 13:4-7.

⁵³ 1 Cor 13:8-13.

⁵⁴ See Rev 5:13.

⁵⁵ N.T. Wright captures the sentiment well: "Love, agape, is not so much a virtue to be worked at, though it is surely that as well as the ultimate bridge, in terms of human character, from present Christian living into the future kingdom. Many things do not last; love does." N.T. Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God: Christian Origins and the Question of God, Volume 3* (London: SPCK, 2003), 296.

put behind them the childish ways of thinking they know everything and putting down others. This is Paul's version of virtue formation concerning love. Likewise, when Christ returns, all gifts will cease to be important. Yet, selfless love for one another will persist. "And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love."⁵⁶ Chapter 14 concludes the discussion of spiritual gifts, urging the Corinthians to especially pursue love by pursuing prophesying as it is a gift that can serve each: "Pursue love (*ἀγάπη*) and strive for the spiritual gifts, and especially that you may prophesy."⁵⁷

In 1 Corinthians 13, then, *ἀγάπη* is necessarily something to be expressed (through the use of spiritual gifts in this case) for the benefit of the church in Corinth—a selfless commitment to unity in a church full of people that were struggling to put each other ahead of themselves—and particularly across social lines—and given the previously discussed context of 1 Corinthians 9, probably across racial and ethnic lines. Love expressed in these relationships is necessary for the functioning of the whole community and so must be obtained in a process that, metaphorically, looks like growing up.

D. THE SELFISH EXERTION OF PRIVILEGE IN GALATIANS 2 AND 1 CORINTHIANS 6

While we have seen what the New Testament suggests love can be—selfless sacrifice on behalf of another, especially a friend—it is worth a brief detour to consider what love is not—to see love by contrast. Interestingly, it also progresses (though in a different direction) and is expressed in the interactions of a small closely related social group (like a church). Paul's description of what love is not (1 Cor 13:4–7) has already been discussed. It is not boastful, arrogant, rude, insistent, irritable, resentful, or rejoicing in wrongdoing. Yet, there are even more subtle and less active forms of an acute lack of love that should be considered—particularly around Paul's notion of 'insisting on its own way' from 1 Cor 13:5. In Galatians 2, to consider an example of this, Paul recounts his interactions with Peter at Antioch.

But when Cephas came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he stood self-condemned; for until certain people came from James, he used to eat with the Gentiles. But after they came, he drew back and kept himself separate for fear of the circumcision faction. And the other Jews joined him in this hypocrisy, so that even Barnabas was led astray by their hypocrisy. But when I saw that they were not acting consistently with the truth of the gospel, I said to Cephas before them all, "If you, though a Jew, live like a

⁵⁶ 1 Cor 13:13.

⁵⁷ 1 Cor 14:1.

Gentile and not like a Jew, how can you compel the Gentiles to live like Jews?"⁵⁸

The situation is not complex. Peter, just after his experiences with Cornelius (Acts 10) was presented with a question from circumcised believers as to why he would dine with Gentiles (Acts 11:3). In chapter 11, Peter explains in elaborate detail exactly what had happened in chapter 10—the content of his dream, the conversion of Cornelius and his household, and the arrival of the Holy Spirit amongst these Gentiles. The story is also told a third time in Acts 15, where Peter holds the position that Gentiles should not be required to abide by Jewish legal restrictions, arguing:

And God, who knows the human heart, testified to them by giving them the Holy Spirit, just as he did to us; and in cleansing their hearts by faith he has made no distinction between them and us. Now therefore why are you putting God to the test by placing on the neck of the disciples a yoke that neither our ancestors nor we have been able to bear? On the contrary, we believe that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will.⁵⁹

Notice his argument: it's not just a matter of requiring something that the gospel does not require; it's a matter of hypocritically requiring something that they, themselves, cannot bear. This concept becomes the substance of the rebuke Peter received from Paul according to Gal 2:11–14.⁶⁰ That is, Peter had stood up for gospel impartiality across ethnic and racial lines in Acts 15 but had slipped into refraining from eating with Gentiles by the events of Gal 2:1–10. Paul argued that this sort of separation over a cultural issue was contrary to the gospel and, because he had previously dined with Gentiles, this reversion was hypocritical.⁶¹ Given the relatively low stakes of dinnertime decorum, it would have been easy to pass this over. Yet, separation at table fellowship has been shown consistently to lead to a tiered social hierarchy. From the dispute over food distribution amongst Hellenists and Hebrews in Acts 6:1–6 to the division of the church along

⁵⁸ Gal 2:11–14.

⁵⁹ Acts 15:8–11.

⁶⁰ I take the position here that Acts 15 and Gal 2:1–10 are relaying the same set of incidents from slightly different perspectives. This is, of course, not without debate as many commentators argue for a correspondence between Acts 11:27–30 and Gal 2:1–10. See, for example, Thomas R. Schreiner, *Galatians* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010), 138–139. The case that Gal 2:1–10 corresponds to Acts 15 has been made by Mark Goodacre on his blog: Mark Goodacre, *The Jerusalem Council: Gal. 2.1–10 = Acts 15*, September 26, 2006. See <https://ntweblog.blogspot.com/2006/09/jerusalem-council-gal-21-10-acts-15.html>. F.F. Bruce argues for a hybrid position. See F. F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Galatians*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982), 128. As my primary interest here is the incident in Antioch, it is simply worth noting that in both Acts 15 and Galatians 2, Paul leaves Jerusalem for Antioch and has some sort of departure of vision with Barnabas.

⁶¹ It is important to note here that the addressed distinction between Jews and Gentiles is cultural. But not every place in the New Testament which discusses Jew and Gentile distinctions is merely cultural. It is a logical fallacy to reduce discussions of some other passages to cultural distinction when salvation historical concerns may be in view.

class lines in 1 Cor 11:17–22, the social impact of Peter’s dining decision is to create the very partiality against which he had argued. We might see it as the exertion of a kind of ethnic or racial privilege—an almost unthinking, seemingly inconsequential assertion of his status as a Jew in a society that was struggling to see cultural impartiality amongst Jews and Gentiles.

Another example of this kind of exertion of privilege is argued against by Paul in 1 Cor 6:1–8. Here, the dispute is not cultural, but legal. Paul rebukes the Corinthians for taking each other to civil courts to litigate disagreements. It is their right to do so, though Paul makes a strong case that it is not in their best interest as a witness of the gospel. He concludes his argument with an important statement:

In fact, to have lawsuits at all with one another is already a defeat for you. Why not rather be wronged? Why not rather be defrauded? But you yourselves wrong and defraud—and believers at that.⁶²

While he does not use the language of *love* in this chapter—possibly because of where he is rhetorically working toward in chapter 13—he clearly outlines the key feature of it: selfless sacrifice. He argues that the exertion of rights (or of privilege) is not the ideal. But willingly being defrauded or wronged for the sake of the other (or giving up rights or privileges) was essential to their spiritual maturity and gospel witness. One cannot help but wonder if Paul had Jesus Christ in mind as his example, one who ironically submitted himself to the civil courts of the Gentiles to be wronged and defrauded for the sake of his beloved people.

E. SUMMARY OF NEW TESTAMENT DEFINITIONS

While the New Testament has much to say about *ἀγάπη*, we can see that it certainly involves selfless sacrifice, even to the point of sacrificing one’s life. It is demonstrated by God and Jesus Christ to their people or friends and also commended to them for the benefit of one another. Such love is to be practiced within the church and is characteristic of both broad relationships and particularly close relationships (such as friendships). It likewise extends beyond racial and ethnic lines of division. Finally, the selfless part of this *ἀγάπη* is in contrast to the exertion of rights or privileges that in some way harm another.

V. GRECO-ROMAN CONTEXT

The New Testament pictures of love and friendship, along with their backgrounds from the Hebrew Scriptures, as we have seen, include a few distinct elements: a familial kind of intimacy (beyond mere acquaintance), selfless and sacrificial interaction, and something of an intentionality to traverse ethnic or racial boundaries. The New Testament, likewise, establishes important reasoning behind the imperatives to love, especially within

⁶² 1 Cor 6:7–8.

the context of Christian relationships (or friendships). We will turn now to the Greco-Roman social context of these New Testament concepts to see if we can further describe friendship as a virtuous pursuit.⁶³

As before, we need to establish that *ἀγάπη* is a relevant term to discussions of friendship. The major difficulty in sorting out this background, like that of New Testament Greek, is linguistic complexity. In the Classical Period, love was typically talked about using a variety of terms in addition to *ἀγάπη*. While *ἀγάπη* is certainly present in classical drama, philosophy, and literature, the emphasis on it as a distinct kind of love seems to be somewhat later than the Classical Period. The classical antecedents tend to focus on the *ἔρως* and *φιλία* word groups.⁶⁴ Yet, there is an important connection between the concept of friendship and the virtue of *ἀγάπη*. Most notably, Aristotle, in his tract on friendship in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, is quite happy to intersperse uses of the verb *ἀγαπάω* to describe the relationship between friends.⁶⁵ Nevertheless, it will be helpful to consider love and friendship more widely.

A. PLATO'S SYMPOSIUM

The first major treatise on love from the Classical Period, and which remains influential even today, is Plato's *Symposium*. In it, Plato focuses on *ἔρως*, though in terms of both the more recent understanding of erotic love as well as selfless, sacrificial love.⁶⁶ That is, in Plato, *ἔρως* transcends the merely physical and, among other things, points people to the eternal form of love itself. We begin to see glimpses of this toward the beginning of the dialogue in a speech from Eryximachus:

So you can see how extremely powerful Love (*ἔρως*) fundamentally is, in all his manifestations; it's not going too far to say that he is omnipotent. But it is the Love (*ἔρως*) whose fulfillment lies in virtuous, restrained, and moral behaviour from both gods and men who has the greatest power and is the source of all our happiness. It is he who makes it possible for us to interact on good terms with one another and with our divine masters.⁶⁷

⁶³ It is important to note here that some would suggest limiting ourselves to first-century Roman culture on the basis of proximity to the composition of the New Testament. However, given the widespread use of Greek in the Alexandrian Empire (the forerunner of the Roman Empire) and that Roman culture was self-consciously influenced by Greek literature, history, art, philosophy, rhetoric, and culture, to limit is to ignore. As such, the classical background necessarily remains fairly broad in its scope, including classical Greek literature to the 5th century BCE.

⁶⁴ For example, Plato seems to collapse the definitions of *ἔρως*, *ἐπιθυμία*, and *φιλία* at one point in an early dialogue. See Plato, *Lysis*, 221b.

⁶⁵ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1156a, 1165b, 1167b, etc.

⁶⁶ Plato also appears to be comfortable using *ἀγαπάω* interchangeably. See Plato, *Symposium*, 180b.

⁶⁷ Plato, *Symposium*, 188d. See Plato, *Symposium*, trans. R. Waterfield (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 23–24.

In his speech on love, Eryximachus extends love beyond that of a close interpersonal relationship (i.e., a lover), but to a wider array of interpersonal relationships and even into the abstract. In this part of his speech, he advocates for a virtuous expression of love, moral in its outlook, and befitting both divine and human relationships. This notion is picked up later when Socrates discusses something of a progression in relationships:

You should use the things of this world as rungs in a ladder. You start by loving one attractive body and step up to two; from there you move on to physical beauty in general, from there to the beauty of people's activities, from there to the beauty of intellectual endeavours, and from there you ascend to that final intellectual endeavour, which is no more and no less than the study of that beauty, so that you finally recognize true beauty.⁶⁸

Speaking as the priestess Diotima of Mantinea, Socrates outlines what has become known as the 'ladder of love.' The progression here, though, is important. To fully experience love (ἔρως) in the fullest metaphysical sense, a person begins with the beauty of a body, a single individual. Expressing affection—if we are to take the previous statements on the virtue of love as indicators, including selfless sacrifice—for an individual, this love then expands to two bodies. From there, one can abstract to love of people in general and, then, to the love of beauty itself. This is a roadmap of moving from expressing genuine, relational love of a person to the love of wider groups. This progression is significant when it comes to the Christian notion of expressing love—recognizing a progression from deep relationships with certain individuals to groups to ideas themselves—not unlike the tiered progressions we saw in both Leviticus and John 15.

B. ARISTOTLE'S RHETORIC AND NICOMACHEAN ETHICS

The classical expression of this kind of progression of loving relationships is subsequently seen in Aristotle's understanding of love (which he terms φιλίος—related to the verb φιλέω—but encompasses a wider variety of close relationships than the translation friendship implies).⁶⁹ While his most extensive discussion on the topic is found in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, we shall begin with a definition from his *Rhetoric*:

Let *loving* (φιλέω), then, be defined as wishing for anyone the things which we believe to be good, for his sake but not for our

⁶⁸ Plato, *Symposium*, 211c. See Plato, *Symposium*, 55.

⁶⁹ Scholarship on the precise nature of friendship in the Classical Period is divided over the presence of emotional aspects in the concept. Some argue that it is a matter of duty, like familial relationships, and so carries very little in the way of affective qualities. David Konstan, however, has argued extensively that φιλία is primarily an affective bond. See David Konstan, *Friendship in the Classical World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997). He subsequently has argued that this quality of φιλία is expressed, then, within the emotion of love. See David Konstan, *The Emotions of the Ancient Greeks: Studies in Aristotle and Classical Literature* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2006), 170–176.

own, and procuring them for him as far as lies in our power. A *friend* (φῖλος) is one who *loves* and is *loved* in return, and those who think their relationship is of this character consider themselves *friends*. This being granted, it necessarily follows that he is a *friend* who shares our joy in good fortune and our sorrow in affliction, for our own sake and not for any other reason. For all men rejoice when what they desire comes to pass and are pained when the contrary happens, so that pain and pleasure are indications of their wish. And those are *friends* who have the same ideas of good and bad, and *love* and hate the same persons, since they necessarily wish the same things; wherefore one who wishes for another what he wishes for himself seems to be the other's *friend*.⁷⁰

Aristotle's definition of φιλέω here is one that focuses not only selfless sacrificial elements ("for his sake but not for our own"), but also the mutuality of sharing a similar worldview and goals. David Konstan summarizes the concept this way:

Returning to the definition of loving or to *philein*, it is clear that it represents an altruistic or generous sentiment in regard to another (wishing the good for that person's sake) that includes the desire or intention to provide the other with what she or he values. No other conditions for loving are specified: nothing is said, for example, about duty or obligation. As far as the performance of services is concerned, loving just consists in the uncoerced wish to provide them. Here, then, there is no tension between the sentiment of love and the requirement or even the demand that one help others in achieving the goods to which they aspire.⁷¹

This understanding of φιλέω from Aristotle's *Rhetoric*, of course, coheres well with the biblical understanding of close relationships (or friendships) based on intimacy (with Christ or each other), willingness to sacrifice, and adherence to the same religious convictions from a selfless disposition.

In his *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle's great treatise on the practical application of virtue—how one must live in order to live well—Aristotle expands his discussion of the virtue of φιλέω considerably.⁷² This is especially important to this essay because Aristotle does not include other forms of *love* in his list of virtues. Rather, he treats love (φιλέω) in the context of close relationships:

The perfect form of *love* (φιλία) is that between the good, and those who resemble each other in virtue. For these friends wish each alike the other's good in respect of their goodness, and they are good in themselves; but it is those who wish the good of their

⁷⁰ Aristotle, *Rhetoric*, 1380b-1381a (Freese, LCL). Each italicized word is a form of φιλία or one of the related verbs.

⁷¹ Konstan, *Emotions of the Ancient Greeks*, 175–176.

⁷² See David Konstan's discussion of this topic in Konstan, *Friendship in the Classical World*, 67–78.

friends for their friends' sake who are friends in the fullest sense, since they love each other for themselves and not accidentally.⁷³

Again, Aristotle affirms the selfless character of love. This much is likewise seen in his earlier example of a mother loving a child, demonstrated in provision of resources for success even when the return of love is not possible.⁷⁴ What is especially important here is that Aristotle suggests the basis for the friendship is the moral character (*ethos*) of the other—their goodness, loved for themselves—and not some practical end or utility (which is itself fleeting). He continues: “Hence the friendship of these lasts as long as they continue to be good; and virtue is a permanent quality.”⁷⁵ Indeed, regard for the other’s moral character or virtue—not the virtue itself, but the expression of the virtue in that person—is the primary aspect of the loving bond between them. This love of the virtue expressed in the other is expressed most fully in the deepest relationships.

C. CICERO'S *DE AMICITIA*

Cicero, at least early in his life, followed Aristotle’s definition of friendship.⁷⁶ But as he neared the end of his life, he composed a work dedicated to describing friendship, commonly called *De Amicitia* (on friendship).⁷⁷ In it, he defines friendship in terms of intimacy at first, and then directly connects it to virtue itself:

For friendship is nothing else than an accord in all things, human and divine, conjoined with mutual goodwill and affection, and I am inclined to think that, with the exception of wisdom, no better thing has been given to man by the immortal gods. . . . Again, there are those who place the “chief good” in virtue and that is really a noble view; but this very virtue is the parent and preserver of friendship, and without virtue, friendship cannot exist at all.⁷⁸

Cicero sees friendship as a gift of the gods, a divine blessing characterized by affinity in all things human and divine—not unlike the kind of loving relationships envisioned in the Torah that were built upon an affinity in adhering to the Word/Law of God. Cicero continues in his description to praise the many social advantages of friendship:

⁷³ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1156b (Rackham, LCL). I have substituted love for Rackham’s translation of *φιλία* as friendship in order to avoid the inherent limitation of this concept to friendship in the modern sense.

⁷⁴ See Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1159a.

⁷⁵ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1156b (Rackham, LCL).

⁷⁶ Cicero, *De Inventione*, 2.166. “Friendship is a desire to do good to someone simply for the benefit of the person whom one loves, with a requital of the feeling on his part” (Hubbell, LCL). See also Konstan, *Friendship in the Classical World*, 130.

⁷⁷ In the Loeb series, it is called *Laelius de Amicitia* and it is sometimes called simply the *Laelius* as it is named for Gaius Laelius, a statesman in the Middle Roman Republic, chosen by Cicero as the primary character of the dialogue.

⁷⁸ Cicero, *De Amicitia*, 6 (Falconer, LCL).

Therefore, among men like those just mentioned, friendship offers advantages almost beyond my power to describe. In the first place, how can life be what Ennius calls “the life worth living,” if it does not repose on the mutual goodwill of a friend? What is sweeter than to have someone with whom you may dare discuss anything as if you were communing with yourself? How could your enjoyment in times of prosperity be so great if you did not have someone whose joy in them would be equal to your own? Adversity would indeed be hard to bear, without him to whom the burden would be heavier even than to yourself. . . For friendship adds a brighter radiance to prosperity and lessens the burden of adversity by dividing and sharing it.⁷⁹

In enumerating benefits, Cicero focuses on unity of mind that comes from shared experience. He begins with relational vulnerability in sharing the fulness of one’s thoughts. In very practical terms, he notes the true joy of sharing prosperity and relief that comes from sharing the burden of hardship from within intimate friendship. And a little later, he notes that the orientation of a relationship with a friend is far more significant than that with a passing acquaintance, for it is directed at hope. “Seeing that friendship includes very many and very great advantages, it undoubtedly excels all other things in this respect, that it projects the bright ray of hope into the future, and does not suffer the spirit to grow faint or to fall.”⁸⁰ Friendship is not valuable in the immediate; it promises its advantages for the future. It is not surprising, then, that Cicero goes on to focus on the connection between this kind of intimate friendship and political allegiance.

While Cicero does not explicitly address friendship across ethnic or social lines at this point, it is worth noting that focus on shared experiences and open discussion (more so than commonly held traits or desires) and his focus on the hopeful orientation of friendship do not require racial or ethnic homogeneity. Indeed, one might argue that the richness of shared experience will be deepened with some kind of cultural diversity in the mix. Nevertheless, particularly as it leads toward political allegiance, the most core convictions or beliefs should be held in common.

D. SUMMARY OF CLASSICAL BACKGROUND

The classical background of the concepts of friendship and love affirms our New Testament understanding through precedence and enrich our understanding. In particular, the descriptions of *love* (ἔρως and φιλία) anticipate the New Testament’s understanding of love (ἀγάπη). The antecedence for Christian conceptions of love as selflessly sacrificial on behalf of close others certainly has widespread attestation from those works focused on the nature of love (ἔρως) from Plato and friendship-love (φιλία) from Aristotle. We see further that there is a progression to loving relationships from mere

⁷⁹ Cicero, *De Amicitia*, 6 (Falconer, LCL).

⁸⁰ Cicero, *De Amicitia*, 7 (Falconer, LCL).

attraction to deeply sacrificial investment in the abstract—from superficial desire to a profound affection for virtue in the other. The selfless aspects of the relationship correspondingly progress and remain so out of a shared hope. These notions seem, then, to correspond to the biblical version of love that is based on a mutual sharing of religious ideals and convictions (i.e., shared experiences in Cicero) and adherence to the Christian faith and submission to God. Yet, there is a fundamental difference that is worth noting at this stage. The Christian notion of friendship-love transcends racial and ethnic boundaries (see the Hebrew Scriptures' background as well as specifically Paul's understanding of selflessness in 1 Cor 9:19–23) in a way that it does not for Aristotle or Cicero. The Classical background still operates with rigid boundaries between men and women, owners and slaves, and the various ethnicities. Christian love, however, attempts to upend these categories through selfless love.

VII. PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS: TWO SUGGESTIONS

Given what we have seen in the biblical foreground and classical background, I would suggest that there are some important implications for ecclesial life to be drawn from this study. The key observations we must consider center around an expanded, yet specific definition of Christian love (*ἀγάπη*) expressed in friendship as selfless (or other-focused), sacrificial, (including the surrendering of privileges or rights), familial in its orientation, and centered on affinities that transcend ethnicity or culture. Additionally, we have seen that there a progression to such loving relationships in which Christian love is expressed more fully for close friends (rather than strangers).

The current practical difficulty in these conclusions is centered in the last two. The world around us is tearing itself apart over some of these very issues—especially that of various forms of prejudice on the basis of culture and ethnicity. In particular, Christians within the woke movements and those friendly to Critical Race Theory are lining up against Christians in the anti-woke movements positioned against the conclusions being drawn by Critical Race Theory.⁸¹ This division paints a picture of our Christian faith that is rather unlike the Christian expression of love that we have

⁸¹ At this point, it is worth noting that there is significant debate around the existence of structural or systemic racism. Critical Race Theory, for example, is concerned with “the relationship among race, racism, and power. The movement considers many of the same issues that conventional civil rights and ethnic studies discourses take up but places them in a broader perspective that includes economics, history, setting, group and self-interest, and emotions and the unconscious.” Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic, *Critical Race Theory: An Introduction*, Third Edition (New York, NYU Press: 2017), 3. That is, CRT is fundamentally concerned with showing where and how structural racism works. Yet, others suggest that systems cannot be racist, only individuals can. See Yancey, *Beyond Racial Gridlock*, 20–23. While mediating between the two sides of this debate is well beyond the scope of this paper, I would think that Christians with a robust view of the fall and human sinfulness should, at least, be open to the possibility that human institutions (like governments and culture) would be subject to structural deficiencies like racism and prejudicial ethnocentrism.

seen in the New Testament. As Christians, we have an opportunity and, perhaps, an obligation to find a productive way forward in these battles, if not for our own benefit, for the benefit of the witness of the Church. And as such, I will make two suggestions based on this study.

A. SACRIFICE PRIVILEGE TO ESTABLISH RELATIONSHIPS ACROSS RACIAL AND ETHNIC BOUNDARIES

I propose that it is essential for Christians to establish relationships specifically across ethnic and cultural boundaries when possible.⁸² This may seem counterintuitive or at odds with the conclusion drawn above, that love is expressed on the basis of affinity rather than cultural designations. Nevertheless, combined with the model of tiered relationships, it might be a worthwhile starting point. For the deeper affinity-based friendships to begin, the pool of acquaintances must be widened. A Christian, then, might go out of his or her way to make acquaintance with people who are not like them, who do not think like them, who do not look like them, and who do not share their cultural background.

Establishing such relationships will require two important commitments: 1) observing and suspending privilege, and 2) a commitment to some form of selfless humility—both critical parts of the definition of Christian love that we have observed.

In practical terms, the first is a matter of becoming aware of one's unconscious privileges. This can be done to some extent through readings and a kind of abstract introspection. However, simply spending time with others of different cultures and making the effort (selflessly) to learn about and appreciate other cultures will help us appreciate what liberties we take and what privileges we might have. It is important to note this works both ways across ethnic boundaries. We cannot pretend that cultural differences do not exist, but rather, we must actively accommodate one another, tolerating ignorance and committing to mutual education. And in seeing these different directions of accommodation, it might become clearer where prejudice and partiality (in need of the gospel) reside in our society.

This kind of accommodation is particularly important in churches. As a white minister, I may, out of theological conviction, want people from other cultures or ethnic groups to join my church. But am I willing to think through my church service, my programs, the way my church does its ministerial work from the perspective of those others? Are my liturgies largely unchanged from hundreds of years ago? Are my hymns primarily from the Victorian era, a time where composers and lyricists represented a

⁸² Forming relationships across ethnic and cultural boundaries, or across so-called racial boundaries, should not, however, be confused with partiality. While framed often in economic terms, the biblical tradition is quite clear that impartiality is to be maintained both ways, neither favoring the majority culture nor favoring the minority culture. In the Hebrew Scriptures, see Exod 23:1-2, Lev 19:15, Deut 1:17, and Isa 11:4. In the New Testament, consider how Mark shows Jesus addressing equally Jairus's daughter (a child of a wealthy Jewish leader), a woman with a medical issue, and a Gentile man—all together in chapter 5. See also Luke 20:21.

majority white culture? How do people from other cultures experience these things? What accommodations are we making to help them feel at home? Where is the search for unspoken privilege in our activities and services? Where is the selfless sacrifice on our part? Even if I decide to maintain certain traditions, is it not worth having conversations with people about how they experience my church from their cultural perspective?

In practical terms, the second commitment is far simpler. Given Christ's example in the cross and Paul's understanding of accommodation in ministry in passages like 1 Cor 9:19–23, Christians simply need to be willing to selflessly sacrifice for others. We must assume the real costs and take the first step. I should talk to someone I would not otherwise engage. I should go to places I would not otherwise visit. I should be willing to watch movies that come from and represent cultures not my own and read books about things I might not otherwise engage. I must keep learning. I must take the first step so that a real friendship has the chance to form. When I appreciate other cultures on their own terms, I might have a chance at forming an organic relationship that is truly Christian in its character and nearly familial in its expression. Yet, while I maintain that one must hold these theological convictions (as I have argued throughout this essay), people of other cultures are not my theology projects. Having my theological conviction precede my action may look like a concession in how I go about making friends. Truly being accommodating, however, will give me substantive, intimate, unforced friendships.

B. DEVELOP DEEP FRIENDSHIPS FROM WITHIN THOSE RELATIONSHIPS THAT CAN PROGRESS

If we have begun to develop relationships across cultural and ethnic boundaries, I propose that we can and should begin to demonstrate true love within those friendships. But, and this is important, this will not be the course for all relationships. Ethnicity as the basis of forming a general relationship can be possibly useful. As the basis of a close relationships or deep friendship, however, ethnicity is wholly inadequate. As we saw repeatedly throughout the Scriptural arguments, particularly in the Torah, as well as in Aristotle, mutuality or affinity to something else, a higher set of convictions, is necessary. As Christians, our common faith and ideals must be at the heart of those friendships—akin to Aristotle arguing that it is not the love of the virtue nor the love of utility, but the love of the virtue expressed in the other person, that is the basis of deep friendship. And so, from within acquaintances of other races and ethnicities, we must find true friends with whom we share the most essential Christian convictions. And then, we must invest deeply, selflessly, and sacrificially in those close relationships.

Given the hierarchy and progressions of relationships already identified in the biblical and classical texts, such close friendship should, then, have an effect on one's love for the wider group. That is, love for a close other, as it deepens to the love of the abstract within them, can be extrapolated

to the other, the stranger, and then humanity in general. Or in personal terms, the more I love truly close friends (with whom I share the greatest of affinities but not necessarily an ethnicity or culture), the more I should show compassion to other acquaintances of that other ethnicity or culture (with whom I share fewer affinities), and the more I should desire the wellbeing of all people.

VIII. CONCLUSION

Returning to where we began, I commend to you this argument: *a biblical understanding of friendship, expressed in the Christian virtue of love, is essential to improving discussions of race and ethnicity in this complex moment of our history.* Seeing the news the last few years has only increased my fear that the current debates about racial injustice in the United States will not be quelled by political means. While I would think any Christian should support the right to protest, the freedom of speech, and the abolition of any remaining systemic injustice—as well as the need to protect religious freedoms and question, or even resist, the totalizing conclusions and world views promoted by progressive secular approaches to race and ethnicity—I fundamentally believe that a Christian understanding of gospel-driven love (and its social expression in friendship) is our best chance at making progress in this fracturing debate on race and ethnicity. Indeed, genuine and deep relationships that transcend racial and ethnic boundaries are not just a good starting point for Christians, but perhaps the only useful starting point. The empathy that comes with true friendship, as it is biblically defined, is essential.

This essay began with a simple phrase: “I have a black friend.” If we only ever mean by that a superficial acquaintance that I am using tokenistically, defensively, or self-promotionally, then we will not only subvert progress in the matters of ethnicity and race, but we will also miss out on the fullness of Christian love and friendship as advocated for in the Scriptures. So, make a black friend. Make a white friend. Make friends across cultural boundaries and then, if the deeper friendship emerges, love those friends as Christ loved his.