

NEW ENGLAND PASTOR

"One interest will prevail . . . Christ our righteousness."

March/April 2011



THE LOWLINESS OF AGAPE

GRAPPLING WITH THE ESSENCE OF GOD

Articles

3

EDITORIAL:

A Concern

By Bill Brace

4

The Lowliness of Agape

by Carsten Johnsen

6

A Promise Kept—Part 1

by Ron Duffield

9

Stripping Solomon's Song of Its Erotic Reputation

by Shawn Brace

12

The Justified Life: What Does It Look Like?

by Jerry Finneman

14

EDITORIAL:

Who Starts Revival?

by Shawn Brace

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A Concern by Bill Brace

Is it possible? I have struggled with the thought for some

time now: Could it ever be, as one of my old seminary professors predicted, that *eros* would someday replace *agape* as the greatest of virtues in the minds of many Christians? And would that be the final deception as he predicted—the Omega of apostasy?

No way! But then, it does seem to be happening. The impossible now seems to be a possibility.

The movement in that direction has been a gradual one, but lately it's picking up steam. For centuries the road upward for *eros* from its dark, sinister position has been a difficult one, filled with potholes and roadblocks, especially within the ranks of conservative scholarship. This group seemed to understand that *eros* and *agape* were diametrical opposites—the former was all about “self” and the latter focused solely upon the “other.” Yes, conservatives were convinced the two were as unlike as night and day. However, presently, and unfortunately, we are in an era of a different interpretation.

In recent years I have seen the gradual but increasing erosion of the philosophical/theological understanding of the differences between these two loves. First, the idea was broached of a need for “a bit of *eros*” in marital relationships; and then, recently, came the idea that *eros* was to be included in *agape*. I see such sentiments nowadays in books written by dedicated individuals within our ranks who, I have no doubt, earnestly love the Lord.

However, could the aforementioned prediction really come to pass—could *eros* ever supercede *agape* as the “ultimate expression of love?” Well, if history teaches us any lessons, the possibility

looms much larger today within our parameters than it did a generation or two ago. Those of us who study history, especially history in the context of the great controversy, know full well how small compromises of truth eventually become gargantuan heresies. The truth of the gospel, the truth about death, and the Sabbath truth are three classic examples which ought to serve as reminders to us.

As we all know, the word “*eros*” is never mentioned in the New Testament. Whereas *agape* is utilized hundreds of times, *eros* never appears. The dark principle is there, of course, but the word is not. The favorite word to describe God's love is *agape*—a love that is selfless, self-sacrificing, and even unconditional. On occasion, God's love is described as *philos*—a friendship level of love. But never is the word *eros* synonymous with, or in the context of, God. And for good reason, which, I thought at least, was quite obvious. It appears that I have been naïve. Forgive me for being so.

And forgive me for my above facetiousness! So, I, too, would like to make a prediction: My professor's prediction will come true—unless we intensely wrestle against its happening. If we do not, the trend will continue, and someday soon, perhaps sooner than we realize, *eros* will transcend its original position as the opposite of *agape*, above its present-day inclusion of *agape* to a future equality with *agape*. Finally, philosophically and theologically, it will even claim the erroneous position as the greatest of all virtues. I ask: Could the rewriting of 1 Corinthians 13, thus, be far behind?

Some who are reading this may be asking: Why the worry? Why the concern? Aren't you making a mountain out of a molehill? It sounds like a “tempest in a teapot.” Well, for those of us, and I may be in a very small minority, who are

burdened about this, it means everything. The platform upon which all truths of the Seventh-day Adventist Church are founded is the pureness of *agape* and *agape* alone. Not one pin of that foundation can be altered, lest the total structure collapse. Thus, I believe this to be an issue of no small proportions.

Where did this trend originate? How has it been able to increase in strength? Has it been the influence of Hollywood and our popular music in recent decades with their glorification of *eros*? I'm not sure, but let us not minimize how much we have been influenced in our thinking and our lifestyles by these powerful tools. (Where did I hear recently of the famous personage who said something like this: “I will know a nation's soul not by its laws, but by its music”?)

I ask: Are there others who care about this issue? I sincerely hope so.¹

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1 For further reading on this growing trend, see <http://newenglandpastor.blogspot.com/2011/02/wrong-about-agape.html>. See also Carsten Johnsen, *Agape and Eros* (Loma Linda, Calif.: The Untold Story Publishers, 1982).

Bill Brace has been involved in urban ministry for over twenty-five years. He pastors Seventh-day Adventist congregations in Braintree and Norwood, Massachusetts. In addition, he maintains an active radio ministry. His program “Portraits of God” is currently heard on several stations around the United States. He and his wife, Melanie, live in Norfolk, Massachusetts, and they have three grown children, one son-in-law, a daughter-in-law, and four beautiful grandchildren.

The Lowliness of Agape

by Carsten Johnsen



Here we come back to what all research has agreed on: Agape is characterized, not

by an *ascending* movement, but rather by a *descending* movement.¹ There is nothing in man that could enable him to climb up to God. Only the proud philosophy of Eros spiritualism could ever mobilize the incredible amount of self-conceit it must take in order to imagine that man, in his mannishness, possesses a spark of divinity, automatically pushing him all the way up to the highest pinnacles of the “mount of the Congregation,” the throne of God (Isaiah 14:12-14).

The Bible has an anthropology entirely different from this pagan pride and self-sufficiency. Christianity informs us that, on the contrary, it is God who has to come down to man. Why? The reason is simple. There just does not exist any way leading upward from man to God. There only exists a way leading downward from God to man. And this way is called Agape. True Christian love is revealed, not as a way of taking, but as a way of giving; not as a way of human pride, but as a way of divine humility.

It may sound bold in the midst of a Greek-inspired culture to speak about the *humble God*. Throughout our lives we have imbibed the arch-pagan thought-forms of platonic idealism with all its vain-glorious insistence on climbing, climbing—in one’s own power—to the stars. What glory could there be to us—children of a Hellenist world—in meekness? But it is God Himself who uses this description about Himself:

“Learn of me. I am meek and lowly in heart.” Matthew 11:29.

The only One who had any chance of conveying to our hearts what is really divine was Jesus Christ. He had to reveal to us in his factual life on earth day by day what an extreme form love was bound to

take in order to be of any reasonable help to you and me whatsoever.

But how does it come to pass that the core of this revelation is simply: God as the Meek One? Has God always been like that? Will He always go on being like that? Or is it just a mode of momentary crisis, a transitory phase?

Let me hurry to say: I do not believe it is a mere transition. This is among the most permanent features in God’s nature. He *is* “like that.” There is evidence enough to establish this as a fact. The attribute of “going down” is not an attribute of God developed only at the critical moment when such “going down” became a desperate necessity, an emergency

True Christian love is revealed, not as a way of taking, but as a way of giving; not as a way of human pride, but as a way of divine humility.

measure for the sake of our salvation. It is not limited to the accident of our father Adam’s fall into sin in the Garden of Eden. It is an effulgence of God’s very being, all the time. God’s descent into the depths of creation and redemption is an expression of His constant nature. He goes all the way down to the lowest levels because His essence is lowliness. And this is not by virtue of an automatic principle. He is the One who goes down to me, because He loves me, and that is a love that makes separation an unbearable atrocity to Him.

And His going down to me was a personal heart affair, involving fatal personal risk. In fact, God’s act of creation and redemption never avoids being an act of destiny-laden drama. It is high time we became more anxious to look into the elements of that drama.

We may safely say, however, that to the pagan West, this revelation came as a bolt from the blue. One may think of many reasons why it was rejected. But maybe one reason is to be found in the fact that it was so utterly simple. Simplicity of thought and action is certainly not the strong point of this race. In order to accept the unexpected Agape message, a hitherto unknown measure of candor and sincerity was demanded. This we did not have.

True, it also demanded an actual transvaluation of all values. But that does not for one single moment mean that value had to be given up in favor of valuelessness, or that reason had to given up in favor of unreason. On the contrary.

But in what sense, then, was there a dramatic clash of worldwide dimensions at the moment when paganism and Christianity had their historic encounter?

You know *where* they were destined to meet in a more spectacular way than ever before. And you also know where they meet still today with a force of drama which has no parallel in human history. It is in our super-civilized Western World, the battlefield of the end time.

What Christianity has really meant, after all, to our world is hardly realized until we finally get to see Agape and Eros arrayed side by side as the two gigantic rivals they really are.

Still, it may be that we fail to see the drama that is bound to happen and the all-out battle that is bound to be fought wherever those two irreconcilable enemies come to grips with each other in a life-and-death struggle. Sooner or later, every human being possessing a living human heart is obliged to come down into the valley of decision in a *saeculum finale* like this.

But what we so easily forget is the fact that Plato's Eros spirit represents nothing less than a way to salvation. In other words, it is a religion; hence, a formidable rival to Christ's Agape. At the same time that same Eros is *non*-religion, or even *anti*-religion. Pagan spiritualism, ancient and modern (i.e., the openly impersonal, as well as the presumptively "personal" type of spiritualistic philosophy), is nothing but man's constant endeavor to climb up to God to save himself. So, if Agape is the immutable doctrine of man's salvation along the humble road of theocentricity (God-centeredness, which coincides with other-centeredness), then Eros is just as certainly the immutable doctrine of

man's salvation along the proud road of anthropocentricity (man-centeredness, coinciding with self-centeredness).

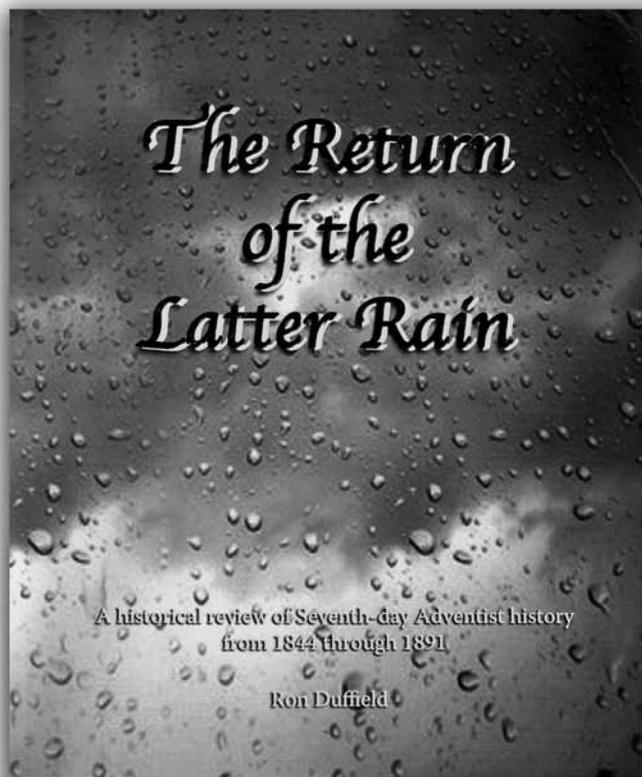
Nygren has obviously grasped something essential in this crucial Either-Or relationship between Agape and Eros. There is the intransigence of inexorable rivalry in it. Wherever Eros is seen to progress, Agape is bound to regress, and vice versa. You cannot stack one farthing on the one without openly betraying the other.

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- 1 This article was adapted from Carsten Johnsen, *Agape and Eros* (Yucaipa, Calif.: US Business Specialties, 1982), 79-82, and Idem., *The*

Maligned God (Sisteron, France: The Untold Story Publishers, 1980), 28-29.

Carsten Johnsen, Ph.D., (1914-1987) was a Professor of Philosophy, Systematic Theology, and Christian Ethics at the Graduate School and Theological Seminary at Andrews University. A native of Norway, he also held teaching positions at various schools in the United States, Europe, and Africa. A prolific author, he wrote numerous books including *Man, the Indivisible—Totality Versus Disruption in the History of Western Thought*; *The Maligned God*; and *Agape and Eros*.



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A Promise Kept—Part 1

by Ron Duffield



During the weekend of March 13 and 14, 1858, James and Ellen White attended meetings at Lovett's

Grove, Ohio.¹ On Sunday afternoon, a funeral service was conducted by James in the schoolhouse where the Sabbath meetings had been held. When he had finished speaking to the full house, Ellen arose and feeling urged by the Spirit of the Lord to bear her testimony, began to speak words of comfort to the mourners. While speaking, she was taken off in vision and for two hours through divine revelation the Lord opened before her "the great controversy of the ages between Christ and Satan":

The vision at Lovett's Grove, Ohio, on a Sunday afternoon in mid-March, 1858, was one of great importance. In this the theme of the great controversy between Christ and His angels on the one side and Satan and his angels on the other, was seen as one continuous and closely linked chain of events spanning six thousand years. This vision has put Seventh-day Adventists into a unique position with clear-cut views of the working of Providence in the history of our world—a viewpoint quite different from that held by secular historians, who see events of history as the interplay between the actions of men, often seemingly the result of chance or natural developments. In other words, this vision and others of the great conflict of the ages yield a philosophy of history that answers many questions and in prophetic forecast gives the assurance of final victory of good over evil.²

For nearly five months following her Lovett's Grove experience, Ellen White worked to write the vision and publish it in book form. In early September, 1858,

volume 1 of *Spiritual Gifts* was available under the title, *The Great Controversy Between Christ and His Angels, and Satan and His Angels*.³

The Lord continued to lay a burden on both James and Ellen White to have her publish more in regard to the Great Controversy, but these were very busy times, and Satan was ever ready to bring about delays. The continuing struggle to establish church order took up a good part of the early 1860s. In May, 1863, "the

James White expressed his desire that Adventist ministers spend more time presenting Christ. But they must themselves have more than just a theory of Christ; there must be "an indwelling Christ." True to his own words, James began to emphasize Christ in all his sermons and in his dealings with others.

first official General Conference session" convened in Battle Creek and "marked the completion of the organizational structure among Seventh-day Adventists."⁴ Yet this did not end the growth pains of an advancing movement. The unrest and Civil War taking place in the United States during this time also required time and attention.⁵

The dire need of health reform and the newly erected Western Health Reform Institute in Battle Creek, along with the challenges of those who brought in fanaticism, were very wearing on both James and Ellen. They were no strangers to sickness themselves, with James suffering four strokes between 1865 and 1873, which required extra time and attention from Ellen, taking her away from her important writing.⁶ She was not only a wife but also a mother, giving birth to their fourth child, John Herbert, in September, 1860. Three months later their young baby would die only to be joined by the eldest son Henry in December, 1863.⁷

These examples represent only a small sampling of the trials James and Ellen White faced during these years of strenuous labor for God's end-time church. Finally, in November of 1870, *The Spirit of Prophecy*, volume 1, was published, covering the story of creation down through the reign of Solomon. In 1876, volume 2 was published, covering the life and teachings of Christ and His miracles. Volume 3 followed in 1878 covering the remaining story of the life of Christ through to His crucifixion. But the one book which laid so heavily on Ellen White's heart was volume 4, which would become the *Great Controversy*.

The Lord desired that Ellen and James White be free from their other labors so she could spend time in writing more fully the themes of the great controversy. Living in Battle Creek, where James was editor of the *Review*, did not leave them time for this work. Their plan was to leave in the summer of 1881 and head west to California where Ellen could devote more time to writing. James also had a burden on his heart: to present more fully the subject of redemption.

The spring and early summer of 1881 we spent together at our home in Battle Creek. My husband hoped to arrange his business so that we could go to the Pacific coast and devote ourselves to writing. He felt that we had made

a mistake in allowing the apparent wants of the cause and the entreaties of our brethren to urge us into active labor in preaching when we should have been writing. My husband desired to present more fully the glorious subject of redemption, and I had long contemplated the preparation of important books. We both felt that while our mental powers were unimpaired we should complete these works—that it was a duty which we owed to ourselves and to the cause of God to rest from the heat of battle, and give to our people the precious light of truth which God had opened to our minds.⁸

In February 1881, James White expressed his desire that Adventist ministers spend more time presenting Christ. But they must themselves have more than just a theory of Christ; there must be “an indwelling Christ.” True to his own words, James began to emphasize Christ in all his sermons and in his dealings with others. Such was the result of dwelling on Christ more fully:

With some there is an unutterable yearning of soul for Christ, and the writer is one of this class. With some of us it has been business, work, and care, giving Christ but little room in the mind and in the affections. With others it has been nearly all theory, dwelling upon the law and the prophets, the nature and destiny of man, and the messages, while destitute, to an alarming degree, of an indwelling Christ. . . .

Our preachers need more encouragement. They should preach Christ more, and they should know more of Him upon whom all our hopes of success here, and of Heaven hereafter, depend.⁹

Through late June and July, 1881, James and Ellen White continued their

ministry in Battle Creek. James was still editor-in-chief at the *Review*. Often they went to the grove near their home for a season of prayer. Ellen White later recalled one such occasion:

While walking to the usual place for prayer, [James] stopped abruptly; his face was very pale, and he said, “A deep solemnity is upon my spirit. I am not discouraged, but I feel that some change is about to take place in affairs that concern myself and you. What if you should not live? Oh, this cannot be! God has a work for you to do. . . . I feel a sense of danger, and with it comes an unutterable longing for the special blessing of God, an assurance that all my sins are washed away by the blood of Christ. I confess my errors, and ask your forgiveness for any word or act that has caused you sorrow. There must be nothing to hinder our prayers. Everything must be right between us, and between ourselves and God.”

We there in humility of soul confessed to each other our errors, and then made earnest supplication for the mercy and blessing of God. My husband remained bowed some minutes after our prayers had ceased. When he arose, his countenance was cheerful and happy. He praised the Lord, saying he felt the assurance of the love of Christ.¹⁰

Not long after this, James began to sense the possible effects on the work in Battle Creek if he and Ellen were to leave for the West Coast. Ellen “urged upon him the importance of seeking a field of labor where [they] would be released from the burdens necessarily coming upon us at Battle Creek.” In reply, James spoke of various matters which required attention before they could leave—duties which someone must do. Then with deep feeling he inquired:

“Where are the men to do this work?

Where are those who will have an unselfish interest in our institutions, and who will stand for the right, unaffected by any influence with which they may come in contact?” With tears he expressed his anxiety for our institutions at Battle Creek. Said he: “My life has been given to the up-building of these institutions. It seems like death to leave them. They are as my children, and I cannot separate my interest from them. These institutions are the Lord’s instrumentalities to do a specific work. . . . It is my greatest anxiety to have the right man in the right place. If those who stand in responsible positions are weak in moral power, and vacillating in principle, inclined to lead toward the world, there are enough who will be led. Evil influences must not prevail. I would rather die than live to see these institutions mismanaged, or turned aside from the purpose for which they were brought into existence.”¹¹

James had made up his mind. He would rather die than live to see changes come into Battle Creek into the work for which he had poured out his life and soul. Within days, as he and Ellen headed off together in a carriage for a campmeeting, James became chilled and soon developed a severe sickness. By the end of the week it was evident that unless the Lord healed him, he would pass to the grave. It was there, as Ellen White sat by the side of her dying husband, that the Lord gave her a promise for the future of the work:

When I sat with the hand of my dying husband in my own, I knew that God was at work. While I sat there on the bed by his side, he in such feverness, it was there, like a clear chain of light presented before me: The workmen are buried, but the work shall go on. *I have workmen that shall take hold of this work.* Fear not; be not discouraged; it shall go forward.

It was there I understood that I was to take the work and a burden stronger

than I had ever borne before. It was there that I promised the Lord that I would stand at my post of duty, and I have tried to do it. I do, as far as possible, the work that God has given me to do, *with the understanding that God was to bring an element in this work that we have not had yet.*¹²

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- 1 This article is adapted from Ron Duffield, *The Return of the Latter Rain* (4th Angel Publishers, 2010).
- 2 Arthur L. White, *Ellen G. White: The Early Years* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald, 1985), 366.
- 3 This would later be published with other material

under the title *Early Writings*. Ellen was only thirty years old at the time, but over the next fifty plus years, this small book of just 219 pages would be expanded to a total of 3602 pages as the five-volume Conflict of the Ages Series, with only the fifth and final book bearing the original, all-inclusive title *The Great Controversy*.

- 4 Arthur L. White, *Ellen G. White: The Progressive Years* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald, 1986), 33.
- 5 *Ibid.*, 34-72
- 6 *Ibid.*, 73-238, 381.
- 7 *Ibid.*, 70-72; Idem., *The Early Years*, 24-31.
- 8 Ellen G. White, *Life Sketches*, 247.
- 9 James White, "Eastern Tour," *Review & Herald*, Feb. 8, 1881, 88.
- 10 Ellen G. White Manuscript 6, Sept. 1881.
- 11 Idem., *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 1

(Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press, 1948), 106-107.

- 12 Idem., Manuscript 9, "Responding to New Light," Feb. 3, 1890; in *The Ellen G. White 1888 Materials* (Washington, D.C.: Ellen G. White Estate, 1987), 540, emphasis supplied. This description of Ellen White sitting by her dying husband was given years later as she preached to those leaders gathered at the 1890 General Conference. She made a direct connection between this promise that God had made and the message that was being presented by Jones and Waggoner, which so many were at that time rejecting.

Ron Duffield, a fifth-generation Seventh-day Adventist, lives in Dixie, Washington.

Stripping Solomon's Song of Its Erotic Reputation

by Shawn Brace



There is a word that keeps popping up in contemporary interpretations of the Song of Songs. It almost seems like one cannot

open a commentary or read an article on this small book without coming across the word. What is the word? Erotic. Most current scholars, rejecting the allegorical interpretation of the book that reigned supreme for centuries—if not millennia—have now attached themselves to such a view of Solomon's tantalizing book.

Just as a small sampling, note how a few scholars utilize the word "erotic" to describe the Song. G. Lloyd Carr, for example, writes that the Song has "clear erotic elements,"¹ while Richard M. Davidson says that the book uses "language that is erotic and sensual."² At the same time, Tremper Longman III posits that the book "utilizes some of the most erotic imagery in the Bible."³ And there are certainly a plethora of books and commentaries that even utilize this word in their titles, clearly indicating their views on the eroticism of the Song—titles such as *The Song of Songs and the Eros of God*;⁴ *Song of Songs: erotic love poetry*;⁵ and *Exquisite Desire: religion, the erotic, and the Song of Songs*.⁶ And even secular publications cannot resist attributing eroticism to the Song, as is evidenced by an article in the *The Washington Post* entitled, "Falling in Love With the Erotic Song of Solomon."⁷ No matter where one turns, it seems that Solomon's song is associated with erotic love.

But while the Song of Songs may definitely be saturated with sexual imagery—whether overtly expressed or more discreetly—need it necessarily be labeled "erotic"? Such a question, though it may seem purely semantical to some, has important implications for not only the interpretation of the Song itself, but also for the Christian's understanding of

relationships, romance, sexuality and, yes, our understanding of God and His character. This article seeks to address that issue.

A Reaction

There is little doubt that the trend in labeling the Song as "erotic" is a reaction to the traditional custom of allegorizing the book. For centuries, even millennia, interpreters proposed that the sensual imagery Solomon portrayed was not to be interpreted literally, but that he merely meant it to be in reference to God and His people. There were very few "controls" as to how one determined which images allegorically represented greater theological realities. The interpreter was his or her own police and needed no real justification for proposing a deeper meaning to a given passage other than what made sense at any given moment. Thus, Rabbi Moshe Alshich (ca. 1502-1591) could propose that when the Song talks about the woman's two breasts, it is really speaking about Moses and Aaron.⁸ Similarly, Protestant interpreter Richard F. Littlefield (1833-1890) suggested that the two breasts represent the Church nurturing her children with the Old and New Testaments.⁹

It is not hard to see why such seemingly arbitrary interpretations would be distasteful to contemporary interpreters. A purely allegorical approach to the book seems to have stemmed more from a false understanding of sex and the body than from the text—and the Bible as a whole—itsself. As Richard M. Davidson points out, such interpretations are influenced by pagan Greek philosophies, such as Platonic dualism and stoicism, which set up a false "dichotomy between things of the flesh and things of the spirit."¹⁰ Allegorical interpretations were a way to explain away the allegedly "immoral" sexual undergirdings of the Song.

And yet, as can often happen, it seems that many contemporary commentators have gone from one ditch to the other.

Rightfully rejecting the false separation of the body from the spirit, many have gone in the complete opposite direction and they see a merely literal application—a sanctified "sex manual," if you will.¹¹ While this, in and of itself, may not be all that troubling, so intent are these interpreters on divorcing the Song from an allegorical approach that they insist upon its eroticism.¹² And such a view simply does not hold up to the evidence—both theologically and from a purely exegetical approach.

Defining "Erotic"

It seems as though the problem has much to do with the sentiment that sex and erotic love are essentially synonymous. But even beyond this, aside from sexuality, erotic love, in many people's minds, seems to be an all-encompassing "romantic type of love." C.S. Lewis, for example, in his classic, *The Four Loves*, describes *eros* simply as the "complex state of 'being in love.'"¹³ Erotic love, it is alleged, is the almost indescribable "chemistry" that takes place between two people who are romantically attracted to one another. Butterflies flutter in the stomach. Palms get sweaty. All other interests in life seem to disappear. And, when the romance progresses, it is what husband and wife enjoy in the marriage bed.

The Song of Songs, the thinking goes, must therefore be describing that blissful, almost holy, type of erotic love that God desires for Christians to enjoy romantically. It appears to be undeniable that when Solomon and his lover engage in beautiful romantic interplay for eight chapters, they *must* be elevating erotic love to the celestial realm.

But is it correct to attach romantic, sexual love solely to *eros*?¹⁴ To be sure, no one can deny that many well-meaning people—even Christians—act romantically with an erotic motivation. But Norwegian theologian Carsten Johnsen is not satisfied with relegating romance and sex "to the realms of evident Eros."¹⁵ He writes that

“had we been thoroughly influenced by the Bible as a main source of our cultural heritage—and the Bible means both Testaments, harmoniously joined together—then we would never have wandered about, weighed down miserably, by misconceptions and rash conclusions of that sadly pagan kind.”¹⁶ Erotic love, after all, as Anders Nygren reminds us, can be equated with “acquisitive desire . . . which, as such strives to obtain advantages.”¹⁷ And, as we will discover below, the Bible associates nothing of the sort with *any* type of love the Christian is to engage in—sexual or otherwise.

Thus, Carsten Johnsen gives us a reality check and reminds us of the source of sexual love. Speaking about the true beauty a woman possesses, he writes:

Do not misunderstand me. I am not saying one single disparaging word about the natural beauty in a woman’s body. It certainly is not Eros who has had anything to do with creating that. The Creator’s name is Jesus Christ, and He is Agape. It is not Eros who has made sex a pleasant experience, any more than he has made strawberries taste delicious. It is God, and God only, who has prepared all things that are good—really good. It is He who has invented feminine beauty.¹⁸

G. Lloyd Carr echoes Johnsen’s sentiments when he posits, “In summary, *agape* . . . is not to be limited to self-giving, non-sensual ‘love.’ It is a word filled with all the Hebrew concepts of passion, sexual attraction, friendship, obedience, loyalty, duty, and commitment to the other person. *Agape*-love is not just for bloodless ‘saints’; it is the expression of our full humanity and wholeness.”¹⁹

Based on this perspective alone, one does have to wonder if it is justified to label the Song as “erotic.”

The Biblical Support for *Agape*

Divorcing the Song of Songs from eroticism isn’t merely a philosophical exercise, however. The above interpreters did not arrive at their conclusions in a

vacuum. It would appear as though there is actual biblical support for doing so.

One of the most telling indications that the Song has nothing to do with eroticism is the attitude some of the earliest interpreters had towards its romantic nature. When Jewish scholars translated the Old Testament into Greek in the third and second centuries BC—in what is now known as the Septuagint or LXX—they had every opportunity to bring out its erotic tone. Yet, they did otherwise. Over and over again, 19 times in fact, when translating the Hebrew term for “love”—whether taking the form of a noun or verb—and the term for “beloved,” the LXX translators chose the Greek word *agape*. Not once is the word *eros* used.

In fact, with the exception of one place, this is true of the whole Old Testament. And, interestingly, the one place that the LXX utilizes the word *eros* is very enlightening. In Proverbs 7:18, Solomon places these words in the mouth of an “immoral woman” who invites a “young man devoid of understanding” (v. 7) to “Come, let us take our fill of love until morning; let us delight ourselves with love.” The latter word for “love” in English is what the LXX translates as *eros*. And, clearly, the translators viewed it in a negative light, seeing as they place it in the mouth of an immoral woman who reveals, in the next verse, “that [her] husband is not home.”

So the only place in the whole LXX where *eros* is utilized is by an immoral woman who is seeking to have an affair while her husband is gone on a long journey.²⁰ Thus, it seems that the translators made a deliberate and conscious effort to separate erotic love not only from sexuality, as in the case of the Song of Songs, but from God’s people altogether.

Of course, the LXX translators were not necessarily inspired as the original biblical authors were. As with all previous and subsequent interpreters, they were merely trying to deduce the intent of the original authors. And yet, when the inspired writers of the New Testament came along, they found no place for *eros* in their arsenal of Greek words either. Not once does any New Testament author

utilize the word. This is not only true of God’s divine love for humankind, but also the love that is supposed to be enjoyed between husband and wife.

Perhaps the most well-known passage that addresses the love a husband and a wife are to have for one another is Paul’s exposition in Ephesians. There, Paul admonishes husbands to “love [their] wives,” (Ephesians 5:25) adding a few verses later that “husbands ought to love their own wives as their own bodies” (v. 28). Each time, echoing the beautiful language of the Song of Songs, Paul utilizes the word *agape*. There is no room for *eros* in this relationship. After all, Paul’s point is that, in so doing, husbands are acting as Christ does towards “the church.”

Some may argue, of course, that this demonstrates that Paul is not speaking about the sexual relationship between husbands and wives, since God is not a sexual being and therefore sexual love cannot be included in God’s *agape* love. As Richard M. Davidson has pointed out, though, “the relational aspects of human sexuality correspond to the I-Thou relationship within the Godhead,”²¹ and, there is, therefore, full justification in associating God’s heavenly *agape* with humankind’s sexual expression of it in a committed and monogamous relationship.

Thus, it seems that the weight of evidence leads us to conclude that not only is the Song devoid of any erotic content, but that those who want to remain faithful to the biblical model will not allow it to creep into their lives—even, or perhaps especially, in relation to sexuality.

So What?

As with all reflections on biblical teachings, one must always tie the concepts to a relevant foundation. And it is only natural to wonder what relevance there is in rescuing the Song from its erotic reputation. As stated above, this is not merely an exercise in semantics.

To begin with, if we are to continue painting the Song with an erotic brush, we would be forced to the following conclusions:

1. If it is true that the basic idea of *eros*,

as set forth by Anders Nygren, is that of “acquisitive desire . . . which, as such strives to obtain advantages,” then each marriage partner is fully justified in selfishly jockeying for position or advantages in the marriage bed.

2. Thus, sex becomes an acquisitive experience, rather than one of giving.
3. If a person is justified in acting out of self-interest in this area of life—the apex of human relationships—then he or she would be justified in doing so in other areas of marriage as well.
4. If this behavior is acceptable in marriage—the most beautiful and God-revealing of human experiences—then a person would also be justified in acting out of self-interest with *everyone*.
5. More importantly, if God is the giver of sex—which He is—then He is the giver of erotic love.
6. If He is the giver of erotic love, it must be a part of His nature—for He cannot give to us that which He does not Himself have.
7. If erotic love is a part of God’s nature, then one is justified in attributing self-acquiring—rather than self-giving—motives to God. This, quite alarmingly, calls into question the Cross itself, for it implies that Christ’s sacrifice was for the purpose of acquiring for Himself, rather giving of Himself.²²

Of course, these conclusions rely heavily upon how one defines *eros*. If there is some inherent goodness in *eros*, then the whole argument falls apart. And this may be so. On the other hand, at the very least, one cannot argue with the fact that the Bible, in no way, encourages any person to act with erotic love. It simply cannot be supported.

What *can* be firmly supported biblically is the notion that we are called, as followers of Christ, to reflect His nature of *agape* love in all areas of life—socially, emotionally, spiritually, yes, sexually. And by so doing, we can be rescued from the selfish nature we are all born with—that of acquiring for ourselves, seeking advantages for our

own benefit, seeking our own pleasure rather than the pleasure and wellbeing of others. This is what *agape* love does for us. As Carsten Johnsen reminds us, which surely encourages us to aim higher in our relational pursuits, “True Christian love is revealed, not as a way of taking, but as a way of giving.”²³

And when we strip the Song of its erotic reputation, it sets us up to do just that.

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- 1 G. Lloyd Carr, *The Song of Solomon: an introduction and commentary* (Leicester, England: Inter-Varsity Press, 1984), 34.
- 2 Richard M. Davidson, “Theology of Sexuality in the Song of Songs: Return to Eden,” *AUSS* 27 (1989): 19.
- 3 Tremper Longman III, *Song of Songs*, NICOT (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2001), 161.
- 4 See Edmee Kingsmill, *The Song of Songs and the Eros of God: A Study in Biblical Intertextuality* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009).
- 5 See Judith Ernst, *Song of Songs: erotic love poetry* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2003).
- 6 See Carey Walsh, *Exquisite Desire: religion, the erotic, and the Song of Songs* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000).
- 7 See Adelle M. Banks, “Falling in Love With the Erotic Song of Solomon.” *The Washington Post* 11 Feb. 2006: B09.
- 8 For a summary of various allegorical interpretations, see Duane Garret and Paul R. House, *Song of Songs/Lamentations*, WBC (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2004), 60-74.
- 9 See *Ibid.*, 73.
- 10 Davidson, 2.
- 11 This appears to be the view that Joseph Dillow takes in *Solomon on Sex* (New York: Thomas Nelson, 1977).
- 12 To be fair, not all who label the Song as “erotic” interpret it as being *only* literal. Davidson, for example, thinks the Song can be interpreted typologically. See Davidson, *Flame of Yahweh: Sexuality in the Old Testament* (Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson, 2007), 632.
- 13 C.S. Lewis, *The Four Loves* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1960), 131.
- 14 Though current Dictionaries do often define the word “erotic” as simply “sexual desire,” it is the assumption in this article that the word “erotic” cannot be divorced from its Greek etymological

forefather *eros*—with all of its connotations. Thus, “erotic” and *eros* are used synonymously throughout the article. See David M. Carr, *The Erotic Word* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 9, who, while arguing in favor of defining the Song of Songs and other parts of the Bible in an erotic sense, also inseparably links “erotic” with *eros*.

- 15 Carsten Johnsen, *Agape and Eros* (Yucaipa, Calif.: US Business Specialties, 1982), 36. It is the humble opinion of this particular writer that this book should be required reading for every seminary student.
- 16 *Ibid.*
- 17 Quoted in Carr, 62.
- 18 Johnsen, 40.
- 19 Carr, 63.
- 20 Technically speaking, there are two places in the Old Testament that were translated using *eros*, but the second one, Proverbs 30:16, seems to be a curious translation. There, the LXX interprets the Hebrew “barren womb,” as “the love [*eros*] of a woman.” But even here, this seems to be cast in a negative light, since it is speaking of three things that will never be satisfied, and four that will not say “enough.” This seems to imply that this is a lustful type of “love,” that can never be satisfied.
- 21 See Davidson, 631, n. 102.
- 22 Interestingly, Pope Benedict XVI himself seems confused about this distinction between *eros* and *agape* in his Encyclical Letter, *Deus Caritas Est*. Even after stating that the New Testament does not associate *eros* with God or the Christian, he still goes on to write that “*eros* and *agape* . . . can never be completely separated,” adding that “man cannot live by oblation, descending love alone. He cannot always give, he must also receive.” Perhaps most alarming of all, however, is his assertion that “God loves, and his love may certainly be called *eros*.” Taken from *Deus Caritas Est*, available online at http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/encyclicals/documents/hf_ben-xvi_enc_20051225_deus-caritas-est_en.html. Accessed 26 March 2010.
- 23 Johnsen, 79.

Shawn Brace pastors the Bangor and Dexter churches in Maine. He and his wife, Camille, have a beautiful son, Camden, and they just welcomed their daughter, Acadia, into the world on February 9. When Shawn isn’t busy pastoring, he loves spending time outdoors—especially photographing the beauty of New England.

The Justified Life: What Does It Look Like?

by Jerry Finneman



Justification by faith is a transaction that takes place privately between a sinner and God.

The sinner, convicted of sin by the Holy Spirit, is brought to repentance toward God and believes in Christ alone for justification. What, then, will the justified life look like?

The justified life is a surrendered, regenerated, born again, sanctified and godly life lived by faith in Jesus. The person living a justified life is one who sits at the feet of Jesus, communes with Him and is changed progressively by beholding Him. It is a God-humbled, directed, and empowered life. It is a grace-filled, reformed life awaiting “the blessed hope.” The person living the justified life knows God and loves to obey His holy law.

Merely telling people what they ought to do and how they ought to live is not sufficient, since we “all have sinned and come short of the glory of God.” While it is true that living the justified life is living a godly life, we need to understand that Satan will tempt us to be and do good in order to get us away from godliness. Nicodemus was a very good man doing good things, but he did not become godly until he saw the uplifted Savior on the cross (John 3:5-7, 14). Martha, too, was good. She did a great job preparing fabulous dinners, but she needed godliness. It was not that she should give up making great dinners. She could have settled for less in food preparation in order to take more time to sit at the feet of Jesus, thus becoming filled with His godliness by His Spirit.

The power of the Holy Spirit works through God’s word within the mind and thus subdues it. Burdens of guilt and of striving to be good enough are then lifted from the weary heart. This is the experience of the justified

life. Concerning the experience of justification by faith, the following is found in a letter written October 12, 1896, from Adelaide, South Australia:

What is justification by faith? It is the work of God in laying the glory of man in the dust, and doing for man that which it is not in his power to do for himself. When men see their own nothingness, they are prepared to be clothed with the righteousness of Christ.¹

The justified life is a surrendered, regenerated, born again, sanctified and godly life lived by faith in Jesus. The person living a justified life is one who sits at the feet of Jesus, communes with Him and is changed progressively by beholding Him.

What is it that man cannot do for himself? Seven pages previous to this we note:

Christianity proposes a reformation in the heart. What Christ works within, will be worked out under the dictation of a converted intellect. The plan of beginning outside and trying to work inward has always failed, and always will fail. God’s plan . . . is to begin at the very seat

of all difficulties, the heart, and then from out of the heart will issue the principles of righteousness; the reformation will be outward as well as inward.²

Putting the two thoughts together, we learn what the justified life looks like. It is a God-humbled life, with Christ working from within, reforming the heart, thus effecting outward changes. Believing in Christ alone means the focus of the believer is changed from self, about how “I” am doing, and turned to Christ, as with the very religious persons—Nicodemus and Martha.

The justified life is first directed to Christ, then toward others concerning how these might be helped and won to Christ. Following what Christ did while earth-bound, the justified one will labor for others. He will also take time to be refreshed by communion with Jesus. He learns to “be still and know that” God is “God” (Ps 46:10). This becomes habitual in the life of the justified.

In the justified life, there is a leaving off of destructive habits that governed the previous unconverted life. In the justified life there is learning new constructive habits through God’s grace working within. His grace brings us into harmony with His law—reaching mind, body and spirit. Moody had it right when he said, “The law tells me how crooked I am. Grace comes along and straightens me out.”³

Never are we justified *by* keeping the law; neither are we ever justified *from* keeping it. We are justified in order *to* keep God’s holy law of righteousness. The prepositions tell the story. This obedience to God’s law is truly living the justified life.

Grace is God’s teacher. It teaches and enables us to say “yes” to righteousness and “no” to ungodliness. Paul specified this in his letter to a young preacher, encouraging him to educate

people along these lines. He wrote:

For the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men. It teaches us to say “No” to ungodliness and worldly passions, and [“yes”] to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age, while we wait for the blessed hope—the glorious appearing of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ, who gave himself for us to redeem us from all wickedness and to purify for himself a people that are his very own, eager to do what is good. These, then, are the things you should teach (Titus 2:11-15, NIV).

New habits are formed in the neural pathways of the brain under God’s wonderful and marvelous educating grace. These pathways are not “grooves” as such, but the idea reminds me of a sign on a country road with deep tracks worn by vehicle wheels. The sign advised: “Choose well your rut; you’re going to be in it a long time.”

Habit formation is the process by which new behaviors become automatic. If you instinctively reach for a cigarette the moment you wake up in the morning, you have a habit. By the same token, if you lace up your running shoes and hit the streets as soon as you get home, you’ve acquired a habit.... [T]he behavioral patterns we repeat most often are literally etched in our neural pathways. The good news is that through repetition, it’s possible to form new habits.⁴

Habits are formed by thinking and doing. There is a saying that goes like this: “Sow a thought, reap an action. Sow an action, reap a habit. Sow a habit, reap a character. Sow a character and reap a destiny.” There is a line of communication over intersecting neurons extending from one cell to another within the brain. New thoughts, new behaviors, new habits are formed and thus changes

are effected in the character with heaven as its destiny for the justified life. This is not some self-help, strong “backbone” theology. It is not by the exercise of will power that changes us. But changes in the justified life have to do with the will—the power to choose. This chosen change is the justified life.

A person coming to Christ for the first time may have an extremely weak will. To whatever extent that may be, this very condition is actually an advantage for him or her. This is no problem for God. God welcomes such a condition. Just as soon as the resolve is made by a

Merely telling people what they ought to do and how they ought to live is not sufficient, since we “all have sinned and come short of the glory of God.”

person to surrender his/her will to God, He takes immediate possession and begins to train it how to choose a “self-controlled, upright and godly life;” in other words, the justified life. This is the result of God’s grace in the soul and thus revealed in the character. This is “the sanctifying power” of God within the believer.⁵

The justified life exists when a person is “willing to be made willing,” allowing Christ to bring body, mind, spirit and emotions into alignment with

God’s will. God will not give up His efforts to save a person, but He will not coerce. When a person responds to God’s Spirit and receives Christ as his Savior and Lord, something happens to his mind. What is it? We call it regeneration, new birth, justification by faith. It’s the beginning of grace-growth. This is the beginning of justified life.

In closing, we end as we began with the question, “The justified life: what does it look like?” It looks like the life of someone who has been with Jesus, not unlike the time when elders and rulers in Israel saw the holy boldness of Peter and John as they preached the gospel and healed the sick. The rulers knew these fishermen were uneducated and untrained men. In shock, they looked on with terrified astonishment, recognizing that the change and power seen in these disciples was because they “had been with Jesus” (Acts 4:13). They witnessed the justified life.

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- 1 Ellen G. White, *Special Testimonies to Ministers and Workers* (Series A, No. 9, 1897), 61, 62.
- 2 *Ibid.* p. 54. (The first quote regarding “justification by faith” is found in *Testimonies to Ministers*, 456, and the one this footnote references is found in *Counsels in Diet and Foods*, p. 35. Both are from the same letter).
- 3 D.L. Moody, quoted in “Children’s Ministry” magazine, May/June, 1999, 86.
- 4 *Psychology Today*, <http://www.psychologytoday.com/basics/habit-formation> retrieved 5 December 2010.
- 5 Ellen G. White, “The Review and Herald,” June 3, 1890.

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Who Starts Revival?

by Shawn Brace

In his small commentary on Romans, E.J. Waggoner relays an insightful thought that is vitally important. The underlying principle he shares has far-reaching implications. He writes, “The righteousness which is of the law, that is, men’s own righteousness, is on the principle of doing something in order to live. The mere statement of the case is sufficient to show its impossibility; for life must necessarily precede action. A dead body does not do something in order that it may live, but it must be given life in order that it may do something.”¹

At first glance you may not see the connection, but it seems to me that Waggoner’s thought relates to our present discussions on revival.

How?

So often, we can unwittingly fall into the trap of putting the proverbial “cart before the horse.” Whether intentional or not, we subtly give the impression that what *we* do is responsible for starting revival, what *we* do is responsible for “restoring life,” as the literal definition of “revival” means. Thus, we sometimes fall into the ditch of proposing that prayer, Bible study, personal witnessing, etc., are those things which bring about revival.

But this cannot be so, anymore than telling a lifeless corpse that he or she needs to pray in order for life to be restored. Life can only be restored by an external source. Simply put, we cannot revive ourselves.

One Scriptural example that comes to mind is that well-known passage in Ezekiel that depicts the valley of “dry bones.” As Ezekiel looks over the lifeless valley, God poignantly asks him, “Son of man, can these bones live?” Almost bewildered, Ezekiel can only answer by saying, “O Lord God, You know” (Ezekiel 37:3).² And then, all of a sudden, right before his eyes and ears, Ezekiel hears rattling and sees bones coming together. Sinews, flesh, and skin attach to the

bones and the breath of God is breathed into the bones, making “an exceedingly great army” (v. 10).

Of course, the punch line to the whole vision is what God shares at the very end. Speaking about His people, He declares to Ezekiel in the prophetic perfect, “I will put My Spirit in you, and you shall live. . . Then you shall know that I, the Lord, have spoken it and performed it” (v. 14).

Does this not teach us how revival takes place, how God’s people are brought back to life? It is not we, the valley of dry bones, who try to breathe life back into ourselves. Absolutely nothing good resides within us. We are unable to start ourselves, unable to bring ourselves back to life. No amount of Bible reading or prayer—as important as these things are—can bring revival. It is only God’s Spirit that can “perform it,” thus robbing us of any grounds we might think we have in which to boast.

Of course, I am sure there are many who have read this exposition thus far and said, “But what about us? What role do *we* play?” The same role God ever asks us to play: to simply *believe* He is able to do what He says He will do and to choose to receive the revival that He is trying to accomplish. Make no mistake about it: God cannot achieve revival without our cooperation. He cannot restore us to full spiritual life if we insist on continuing to commit “spiritual suicide.” This is where prayer and Bible study—as the cart being pulled by the horse—comes into play. We engage in these things, not as a way of starting revival, but as a way of receiving it.

No doubt many will think of the long catalogue of Ellen White quotes that say things like “revival need be expected only in answer to prayer,”³ etc. But I think such statements can be balanced by, and must be interpreted in light of, this type of quote from her as well, “It is not because of any restriction on the part of God that the riches of His grace do not flow earthward to men.

If the fulfillment of the promise is not seen as it might be, it is because the promise is not appreciated as it should be. If all were willing, all would be filled with the Spirit.”⁴

On the other hand, it may seem merely semantical to some to propose that God is the one who starts, maintains, and finishes revival, and that we merely receive it. But it is an important distinction. Otherwise, if *we* start revival—either through prayer, Bible study, or otherwise—it makes God indebted to us and places us in position to “earn” it, in some sense.

In closing, I will quote a friend of mine on Facebook who responded to a question I posted about whether “praying people” or “God” starts revival. He acutely noted: “Nothing good can come from ourselves. Only as we respond to the urgings of the Holy Spirit, can revival begin. We can choose to ask God to work in our lives, & [sic] allow Him to do so, but the instigation of the process must find its source in God.” Well put!

So let’s “choose” to receive what God is trying to give us!

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- 1 E.J. Waggoner, *Waggoner on Romans* (Berrien Springs, Mich.: Glad Tidings Publishers, 199-?), 164.
- 2 Unless otherwise indicated, all scriptures are taken from the *New King James Version*.
- 3 Ellen G. White, *Selected Messages*, vol. 1 (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald, 1980), 121.
- 4 Idem., *The Acts of the Apostles* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press, 1911), 50.

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