

## 'AGAPÉ' IN I CORINTHIANS XIII

IN THIS study of the word *agapé* in chapter XIII of the first Epistle to the Corinthians, I intend to examine briefly the recent exegetical interpretations of *agapé* in this chapter and to add a critical note at the end.

What is the real purport of *agapé* in this text? What does St. Paul *primarily* mean by this word? Has Paul *primarily* in mind man's love for God or man's love for his neighbour? or has he both?

These are in general the questions that have offered no little difficulty to quite a number of biblical scholars who have attempted to give the right answer.

To read the mind of St. Paul and discover exactly what he means is not an easy task. St. Paul has not written a textbook of dogmatic or moral theology where truths are all nicely set in a logical order; he had as many different and complicated problems to deal with as he had Churches to address. And to avoid going astray from the mind of St. Paul two things should be well borne in mind from the very beginning. First of all, the exegete should make it a point to be objective in the examination and analysis of the scriptural texts, he should shake off all prejudices which could easily determine him 'a priori' to a particular interpretation which rightly fits in with his own frame of mind or corroborates his philosophical or theological views. Secondly, it is very important to emphasize the fact that Paul's doctrine should be understood in the light of the Gospels, in the light of Christ's teaching. Paul has not preached but Christ! He calls his message 'the gospel', 'my (our) gospel', 'the gospel of Christ'. Paul says 'my gospel', for the simple fact that he was aware of a particular note in his preaching; but it would show utter ignorance of St. Paul to hint in any way that his doctrine is not Christ's doctrine. Consequently, the more we study the Pauline Epistles in the light of Christ's teaching, the more we can fathom their import and the surer we are of our interpretation.

### THE ORIGIN OF AGAPÉ

Paul uses this word sixty five times, nine of which occur in I Cor. XIII. Wherefrom does he borrow this word? what is the history of *agapé*? It would prove very useful to our purpose if we could know with full certitude the environment where it was born and the circumstances which

have influenced its development in meaning. But specialists are still in some disagreement. Anyhow, we are contented to point out briefly the explanation which is accepted by most of the exegetes.

The Greeks had four terms to indicate 'love' and 'friendship', namely φιλεῖν, στέργειν, ἐρᾶν, ἀγαπᾶν.

φιλεῖν is the most generic term and it covers all types of love: love of things and of persons, love of God and love of men; it denotes a love born out of a sensible attraction.

στέργειν expresses a love that is sensible, but not sensual, a love that is constant and natural; such is, for example, the love of parents towards their children and vice-versa.

ἐρᾶν indicates a love that is passionate and, at most, sensual.

ἀγαπᾶν denotes the love of esteem and friendship.

Ἀγαπάω is found frequently in classics, but not ἀγάπη which term stands for the old word ἀγάπησις.

According to Grimm the word Agapé is a '*vox solum biblica et ecclesiastica*', and Cremer holds that it is 'entirely foreign to profane Greek'; on the contrary, Dr. Deissmann maintains that it is found in Egyptian Greek; he quotes in proof a letter of a Dionysius to Ptolemy (between 164 and 158 B.C.) and says that even if 'the LXX passages in which agapé occurs are all older than the papyrus, it is impossible to suppose that the word was formed by the LXX and passed thence into Egyptian Greek; the matter lies the other way: the LXX took over a word of the Egyptian vernacular, of which by chance we have only one example'.

In his '*Neue Bibelstudien*' Dr. Deissmann goes on to prove that the word agapé, which occurs first in the Septuagint, was familiar to the translators as existing in the popular Greek speech of the Alexandrians. He points out on the authority of the American Professor Thayer's Lexicon, that agapé is used once by Philo; he declares that it is impossible to prove that Philo borrowed the word from the Septuagint, and he, therefore, assumes that both Philo and the translators found the word in the Graeco-Alexandrian dialect.

W.M. Ramsay criticized Deissmann's proofs as unconvincing. He said Deissmann's assumption that agapé was used once by Philo is contrary to the assertion of all the German authorities who maintain that agapé is not found either in Philo or in Josephus. Nevertheless, Ramsay was on Deissmann's side in the general question, and did not argue that agapé had not been used in the Alexandrian Greek, but he did not take

Deissmann's proofs as trustworthy.

Fr. Spicq in his '*Agapé Prolegomènes a une étude de Théologie Néo-Testamentaire*' holds that agapé 'reflète la langue parlée à l'époque hellénistique, notamment le dialecte égypto-alexandrian employé par la Septante' and adds that this conclusion is now 'assurée depuis les travaux de A. Deissmann et J.H. Moulton'.

We come across agapé fourteen times in the Septuagint; it renders the Hebrew word '*ababab*'. It does not denote sensible love and it is found twice in opposition to *misos* (hatred). It occurs with a certain frequency in the Cantic of Canticles, for it lends itself easily to a spiritual interpretation – an indication of the special religious role it will play in the New Testament. For, as J.S. Banks says, from the Septuagint it 'became then current in the religious language of Jesus and Christians, and its history shows how a vulgar, unclassical word might become a central idea of the universal religion, surpassing the tongues of men and angels'.

#### LOVE IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

To the concept of God as Father, abundant in mercy, Spouse of Israel (especially in Osea and in Canticles), corresponds the fundamental and first principle:

'Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God is one Lord: and thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thine heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy might. And these words, which I command thee this day, shall be upon thine heart: and thou shalt teach them diligently unto thy children . . .' (Deut. 6,4ss)

With these words began the well-known Jewish prayer 'Shema' Israel', which was still recited in our Lord's time (Mc. 12,29) twice a day. This was the precept par excellence, as the Lord defined it when he recalled it in his teaching (Mt. 22,37ss; Lk. 10,27s; Mc. 12,29s).

To love God is to make Him the complete gift of self; to be at His service in everything and for everything and to put at His disposal our intellect (in Hebrew 'heart'), our soul (the sensitive potencies), and our power (all physical qualities). But the Old Testament does not stop there! We find closely connected with this love for God a note of kindness and sympathy towards the afflicted, the orphans, widows, and the needy. In some of the Psalms and in the Prophets (I Sam. 15,22; Jer. 7,21ss; Os. 6,6) this charitable attitude is placed even above the ceremonial rites themselves. Already in Deut. 10,12-19 we find love of neighbour

(strangers) prescribed to the Jews:

'For the Lord your God, he is God of gods, and Lord of Lords, the great God, the mighty, and the terrible, which regardeth not persons, nor taketh reward. He doth execute the judgement of the fatherless and the widow, and loveth the stranger, in giving him food and raiment. Love ye therefore the stranger: for ye were strangers in the land of Egypt'.

And in Lev. 19, 16ss we read:

'Thou shalt not go up and down as a tale bearer among thy people: neither shalt thou stand against the blood of thy neighbour: I am the Lord. Thou shalt not hate thy brother in thy heart: thou shalt surely rebuke thy neighbour, and not bear sin because of him. Thou shalt not take vengeance, nor bear any grudge against the children of thy people, but thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself: I am the Lord'.

Vengeance and grudge, even in the heart, were not allowed among the Jews. Love should reign among the chosen people: that was the command of the Lord God!

#### THE STEP FROM THE OLD TO THE NEW TESTAMENT

Jesus Christ in his teaching has taken up the two precepts of love and, unifying them, he has fused them into one virtue which he exalted above all the others. But it is important to note that on the lips of the Redeemer the precept of love towards neighbour has taken quite a new aspect. In the O.T. love for neighbour was prescribed to all the Jews; but who was 'the neighbour' for the Israelite of the Old Testament? The neighbour was called '*ab* (brother), *rēa'*, companion (*socius*), *qârôbbh* (a relative), '*āmit*, member of the same family or tribe, and all these terms denote exclusively the Israelites who through circumcision belonged to the same people, to the same collectivity. Sometimes the word 'neighbour' is referred to the *ghêr* (the foreigner who lived among the Jews and accepted the yoke of all their law), Lev. 19, 34; Deut. 10, 19, and so, besides these, all the others are excluded. The comments of the Rabbinical Literature about the laws regarding the love of neighbour are in accordance with what we have just said; they point out that the love of the Hebrews did not go beyond Israel, it did not reach the 'Samaritan, the foreigner or the proselyte' (*Mekilta*, Ex. 21, 14-35).

Christ set forth to pull down the barriers that choked Israel's love

within her walls!

'You have heard that it was said, Thou shalt love thy neighbour, and hate thine enemy: but I say unto you, Love your enemies, and pray for them that persecute you; that ye may be sons of your Father which is in heaven: for he maketh his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sendeth rain on the just and the unjust. For if you love them that love you, what reward have ye? do not even the publicans the same? And if ye salute your brethren only, what do ye more than others? do not even the Gentiles the same? Ye therefore shall be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect'.

When Christ was asked who was the neighbour, he replied by the parable of the Samaritan. He gave to the word 'neighbour' its true value and its true meaning: the neighbour is every man, all men:

The Samaritan, the Gentile as well as the Jew, the publican, the sinner, the sinful woman as well as the just, the enemy as well as the friend! Charity should be universal, it should embrace everybody, as God's mercy is showered on everybody!

#### THE GREAT COMMANDMENT

Jesus has just finished answering the Sadducees' question about the risen life, when one of the scribes, who heard the dispute and found that our Lord answered to the purpose, came up and asked him: 'Which is the first commandment of all?'

Jesus answered him: 'The first commandment of all is: Listen, Israel: there is no God but the Lord thy God; and thou shalt love the Lord thy God with the love of thy whole heart, and thy whole soul, and thy whole strength. This is the first commandment, and the second, its like, is this, Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself. There is no other commandment greater than these'. And Matthew putting it more succinctly, adds: 'On these two commandments, all the law and the prophets depend. . .' and after this, no one dared to try him with further questions. (Mc. 12, 28-34; Mt. 22, 34-40).

This is the teaching of the Lord about love!

And the same teaching we find in St. Paul!

'The man who loves his neighbour has done all that the law (commands) demands. All the commandments, Thou shalt not steal, Thou shalt not covet . . . and the rest, are resumed in this one saying, Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself. Love of our neighbour refrains

from doing harm of any kind; that is why it fulfills all the demands of the law' (Rom. 13,10s). And in his Epistle to the Galatians Paul repeats the same teaching: 'After all, the whole of the law is summed up in one phrase, Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself'.

The supremacy of the first precept is also echoed in Paul's words: 'Scimus autem quoniam diligentibus (agapôsin) Deum omnia cooperantur in bonum . . .'

#### CONTEXT: I COR. CH. XII-XIV

St. Paul's doctrine of our love towards God and our neighbour is dispersed in all his Epistles, for, as we have said in the introduction, St. Paul wrote his letters on the occasion of the particular needs of the churches. Consequently, we have first to investigate briefly what was happening at Corinth when St. Paul wrote his first letter to the Christians of this famous city.

St. Paul had news of Corinth from 'Chloe's people' (Cor. 1,11) either by letter or word of mouth. He learned of the serious division caused by the intrigues of the False Apostles, and of other signs of party-spirit. Paul seemed to have taken no immediate action, and at the beginning of Spring (of some year which may be anything between 54 to 57) three leading Corinthian Christians crossed the sea and arrived at Ephesus to see Paul. They brought a letter from the loyal Corinthians who had now reached a state of great distress and alarm. The letter asked for advice on several subjects including the relations of Christians to pagans. Making a plausible guess at some of the contents of the letter which the visitors brought, we can say that two of the subjects treated at great length were:

- (a) the question of eating food which had been offered to pagan gods – this involved the whole topic of social intercourse between Christians and pagans (chh. 8-10)
- (b) the right use of extraordinary spiritual gifts, especially the gift of speaking strange languages (chh. 12-14)

We are here concerned with the second question.

Corinth had received an abundance of those extraordinary spiritual gifts which God bestowed on the earliest Christians to enable them to gain converts and to weld them together into one body. A number of Corinthian Christians had been particularly fascinated by the miraculous power of speaking new languages, and had made it a regular and disproportionate part of Christian worship (a use for which it was never

intended), till it had become a burden and a nuisance to the general body of Christians.

St. Paul replies strongly to this over-estimation of certain spiritual gifts, especially the gift of languages. He reprimands the Corinthians and makes a threefold protest:

- (i) all special favours are divine, they come from God (ch. 12, 1-12).
- (ii) all have their place, but only a limited place, in the church (ch. 12, 12-31a).
- (iii) without charity (agapé) all gifts are vain; charity is superior to all, for it is eternal (chh. 12, 31b-13, 13).

Chapter 14 condemns the way in which the Corinthians have misused the gift of languages and lays down rules for its public use.

Chapter 13, which is under study, shows 'the perfect way' the 'excellentiorem viam'; it shows that charity is this way, for it is supreme!

#### I COR. XIII INTERPRETED BY ITS CONTEXT

'I Cor. XIII interpreted by its context' is the heading of an article written in 'The Journal of Bible and Religion' by Professor I.J. Martin. It seems to me that Martin's interpretation is a real contribution to the right understanding of Paul's hymn of love.

Martin says that Paul, after presenting his case thoroughly in regard to the whole matter of spiritual gifts, and before dealing with the specific situation at hand, he intimates 'that there is one Christian gift that transcends all others and gives one the most conclusive demonstration of the Spirit. This he reveals as Christian love or Agapé. In exaltation of this most excellent gift, he sings his matchless song, the thirteenth chapter of First Corinthians. At first thought, this wonderful hymn of praise seems somehow out of place, but we must recall that most adeptly Paul here sets aside that highly covered gift of tongues and replaces it with the unequal gift of love. Very carefully, with great prudence, and with winsome spirit, he is creating the atmosphere and opening an approach for the difficult problem of glossolalia which he is to dethrone from its self-appointed prestige, and practically to banish from the public service. Such a correction is very precarious and difficult to make and requires the best art of a skilled adviser and counsellor'. And now comes Martin's contribution. According to Professor Martin, in only three instances had previous scholarship been aware of the particular aspect of his thesis, and not one of these scholars had exploited the idea or the approach to its full.

(a) In 1894 Charles Hodge published his work 'An Exposition of the First Epistle to the Corinthians'; writing in connection with his study of this passage, he says;

'We have not in this chapter a methodical dissertation on Christian love, but an exhibition of that grace as contrasted with extraordinary gifts, which the Corinthians inordinately valued. Those traits of love are therefore adduced which stood opposed to the temper which they exhibited in the use of their gifts. They were impatient, discontented, envious, inflated, selfish, indecorous, unmindful of the feelings and interests of others, suspicious, resentful, censorious. The Apostle personifies love, and places her before them and enumerates her graces, not in logical order, but as they occurred to him in contrast to the deformities of character which they exhibited'.

(b) In 1903 H.L. Goudge, writing for the Westminster Commentary, published his volume on 'The First Epistle to the Corinthians'. His comment on I Cor. XIII ran so:

'In the following passage, St. Paul has the Corinthian Church before him. He is not attempting to give a complete account of the characteristics of love; he is contrasting love with the spirit that the Corinthians were showing, pointing out how love guides men in the use of gifts, and is itself superior to any of them'.

(c) In 1925 the Right Rev. Archibald Robertson and the Reverend Alfred Plummer, writing in the 'International Critical Commentary', say:

'Everyone of the moral excellences which Paul enumerates tells, for they are no mere abstractions, but are based on experience, and are aimed at the special faults exhibited by the Corinthians'.

These were the three instances mentioned by Professor Martin in 'The Journal of Bible and Religion' (1950) where he expounds his idea, or rather, as he says, where he 'exploits the idea'.

'For the Apostle,' says Martin, 'Agapé is the all-essential Christian proof or evidence that one is in the Spirit, or is possessed of or by the Spirit of the Lord. Without Agapé glossolalia and any other outward display become mere empty form, without meaning and value. So, too, for Paul, glossolalia, along with prophecy and knowledge, is purely a temporary exhibition which in time will pass away. Agapé (love), however, is something essential and eternal, as a manifestation of the presence

of the spirit of God, a part of the divine plan. Glossolalia is but a manifestation of the childstate of Christian growth and maturing; but the glossolalists thought otherwise of themselves and of their gifts of 'speaking with tongues' and 'interpreting', In chapter XIV Paul enters into specific treatment of the situation in the Corinthian church. It is apparent that his definite purpose is to put glossolalia and all other gifts in their rightful place in relation to the cause. His treatment and disciplinary measures (ch. 14, 26-31) clearly reveal his estimate of the gift of tongues as exercised in the specific instance in Corinth and in general'.

Thus we may echo the words of the late Dr. Mofatt when he wrote in 'Love in the New Testament' (1929):

'The hymn of love was written out of a close and trying experience; if it is a rhapsody, it is a rhapsody of a realist who has come safely through contact with the disenchanting life of the Churches; it is not a song in the air by one who idealizes religious life, but wrung from long intercourse with ordinary Christians, especially those at Corinth, where ascetic difficulties, a women's movement, the inveterate party-spirit of city life, the Greek passion for rhetoric and theosophy, pietistic ardours, a love of what was showy and exciting, and personal animosities, due in part to differences in culture and social position, were threatening to tear the Church asunder'.

Hence Professor Martin concludes that Chapter XIII was not an attempt to praise Christian Agapé for itself, but rather a dramatic presentation of characteristic Christian virtues set in contrast to those manifested by the Christian glossolalists.

'Noting the virtues of Agapé', continues Professor Martin, 'we can safely draw the conclusion that the Corinthian glossolalist was known for his impatience, mercilessness, envy, boasting, pride, all accepted under the guise of religious living, even Christian living. If these were proclaimed as fruits of the Spirit, it was no wonder that Paul was so greatly disturbed about the future of the faith and cause of Christ. Certainly these traits of character were not those of genuine Christian personality. The marks of the truly Christlike disciple were to be found in Paul's dramatic description of Agapé. This higher type of Christian witness was marked by the individual's patience, mercy, sympathy, humility, moral control, and general Christlikeness! This kind of a person had the moral courage, the spiritual patience,

the divine wisdom, and the humble willingness to bear all things, believe all things, hope all things, and endure all things (1 Cor. 13,7) It was Paul's determined belief that one did not truly possess the Spirit of God as revealed in Jesus Christ unless one also exhibited the moral and spiritual character of such a spirit (Col. 3,5-17)'. .

I have dealt a little at length with Professor Martin's approach for it seems to me that his explanation is a great help to the right understanding of Agapé, since he brings out the real context of the chapter very well and very clearly too. Consequently, the exegete may start his analysis on a safe ground and will not mistake the right way from the very beginning; it depends then on the exegete's skill and ability to find the rightful interpretation *which fits in with the whole doctrine of St. Paul* and which could only be found in the light and study of other Pauline texts.

(To be continued)

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