

# The Three Faces of Love: A Pattern For Christian Marriage

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*From the world of evolutionary psychology, we have good news and bad news: The good news is that human beings are designed to fall in love. The bad news is that they are not designed to stay that way. The synapses just start firing differently after two years.*

From the realm of statistics we have good news: The number of divorces in America is dropping. We also have bad news: The reason for the decline is that millions decide not to get married at all. They just live together for a while and split up.

What has gone wrong? I believe the root of our distress is the loss of a Christian concept of love. People's natural tendency is to get married selfishly. The main love they seek is self-love, and self-love will not carry a marriage.

## ROMANCE OR ARRANGEMENT?

A man and a woman choose each other because two people catch each other's eye, and the rest is history. For a man the attraction may especially mean physical appearance, while a woman may be more interested in the man's ability to provide, or to show kindness and sensitivity—someone who will be a good father and be there for her and the children. Both sexes are attracted to lively, pleasant people who pay attention to them.

But romance fades, and the fire of attraction cools. What happens then? What began as a romance may end up as an arrangement. Too often the two parties are essentially two individuals joined in a mutually agreeable and advantageous relationship. Each gives and gets the best he or she can. But what happens when one spouse begins to feel he or she is giving more than the other? That person may think, "It is time for a divorce."

Oil billionaire J. Paul Getty put it succinctly. He said, "A long-lasting relationship with a woman is only possible if you are a business failure." Getty, married five times, ended his life living with someone who was not his wife. His theory was, since he was giving more money and prestige to his spouse, he deserved a continual string of younger, prettier women.

At their root, both the romance and the arrangement are selfish forms of love. One seeks raw pleasure, the other the masked pleasure of security or an easier life. And both seek it in what they hope another will do for them.

## THE SOLUTION—THE THREE FACES OF LOVE

### Eros-Romantic Love

The first face of love is eros (or romance)—the love we read about in Proverbs 5:15-19:

Drink water from your own cistern,  
running water from your own well.  
Should your streams overflow in the streets,  
your streams of water in the public squares?  
Let them be yours alone, never to be shared  
with strangers.  
May your fountain be blessed,  
and may you rejoice in the wife of your youth.  
A loving doe, a graceful deer—  
may her breasts satisfy you always,  
may you ever be captivated by her love.

Eros is a sense of excitement at being with another person, a sense of passion or yearning to hold that person. It is a desire to reach into the depths of one person's soul. The Bible never actually commands eros, because it doesn't have to. God simply blesses this type of love, because it happens naturally. In Song of Songs 5:8 we read, "O daughters of Jerusalem I charge you—if you find my lover, what will you tell him? Tell him I am faint with love." That's romantic love. The voice of romantic love is repeated several times in the Song of Songs.

Proverbs 5:19 specifically praises the sexual or the sensual side of love: "May you ever be captivated by her love." Proverbs 5:15 gives us a specific warning against promiscuity in telling us to "drink from our own cistern," but this opposition to promiscuity is not opposition to godly sensuality within marriage. Since eros occurs naturally, the issue is not how to get it, but how to keep it. The question you might ask at a wedding ceremony is not, "How did they fall in love?" but more likely, "Will they stay in love?" And the answer to this question may emerge when we look at the second face of love, agape.

### Agape-Christlike Love

Agape is the love that causes God to seek and redeem lost, deformed, and rebellious sinners who can give Him nothing. In some ways it is the opposite of eros. While eros is love for that one special person, agape is love that goes to everyone. Agape flows not from need but from fullness or sufficiency. It is the love of the Good Samaritan in stopping to save a man who might have spit on him if awake. It is Jesus washing the disciples' feet. Agape empties itself for the sake of another.

Unlike eros, agape does not occur naturally. It contradicts too much of our nature. Where can we find the strength for such love? The biblical answer to this dilemma is, "We love because God first loved us," 1 John 4:19. Agape is a supernatural love, and we must seek this love from God.

Agape and eros work together to make a marriage strong. If eros is the love that fades, agape is the love that is too cool to keep a marriage strong on its own. Imagine that your spouse asks you the age-old question, "Do you love me?" You aren't feeling very much eros, so you answer in terms of agape. "You are spineless, ugly, weak, and boring. But I love you because you are the spouse God has given me, and I know He wants me to love you. After all, He tells me to love my enemies, so I think I can love you." That would be the fast way to

marital ruin. Our spouse needs to feel desirable, loved, and special. Romance keeps marriage from descending into a mere routine—a mere partnership in the struggles of life. No marriage can be sustained on agape love alone.

Agape enriches eros by its realism. Agape sees the flaws in the beloved and loves anyway. It reminds us that our beloved cannot satisfy all our dreams. Agape also stabilizes eros. The initial thrill of eros is fun, but in marriage we spend more time with our heads in the washing machine than sipping something cool in the Jacuzzi. Agape gives staying power to marriage when eros cools. It also revives love, because small acts of sacrificial kindness make each spouse more lovable and make the other feel loved.

### Side-by-Side and Face-to-Face

How do you keep both eros and agape thriving? You must keep both the side-by-side and the face-to-face aspects of your relationship strong. By side-by-side I mean a husband and wife who work together facing the world as Adam and Eve worked together. Adam needed a helper. He got that, but he also found more. He found in Eve someone uniquely and marvelously suited to him. He found he no longer was alone in the world. Genesis 2:18 tells us, “It was not good for the man to be alone.” Yes, Adam needed a helper, but he also needed a partner. He needed someone to be side-by-side with him and someone with whom to stand face-to-face.

I suggest that the easiest part of this equation to lose is the face-to-face. Maybe the money is tight; maybe the scramble is on to balance work, children and marriage. It’s easy to lose track of the face-to-face as you work side-by-side.

This issue became very clear to me in my second semester as a professor at Covenant Seminary. On February 1 my wife, Debbie, got a stomach virus, later diagnosed as Giardia. The first two or three days she did not feel too bad, and she had no fever. But the inability to keep food down or in slowly got worse and worse. We noted our doctor’s bafflement and clung to every sign of improvement. On February 12 she awoke, threw up and went right back to bed. I decided it was time to go to the hospital. Debbie was diagnosed, checked in and put on an IV. I spent the entire morning at the hospital with her, then went home to get our house, children and my teaching preparations in order.

The dirty dishes and laundry of two adults and three young children had already been decaying for two weeks by this time. My classes required a lot of preparation since I was in my first year of teaching at the graduate level, and this week was the heaviest of the term, as I had to give long, scheduled-guest lectures. Then for good measure, the freezer broke, I got a cold and electrical problems erupted in house. The rest of February 12 was spent working on our home, and that continued into the next day. The afternoon of the second day I began working on my lectures, and I confess I never made it to the hospital that day.

Friday morning, two days after we checked her in, Debbie was much better and called to ask when I was coming to see her. Now I was just beginning to think about getting my neglected classes in order, and I wanted to stay and get some of my work done. But it was Valentine’s Day, so I knew I had to go in. Entering the hospital, I realized I needed some kind of gift. In a typical male impulse, I grabbed the biggest bunch of flowers in the gift shop. It wasn’t anything beautiful and delicate and discreet. I was going for big. I carried them up, and my wife happened to be peeking out the door as I came down the corridor. Almost at once tears of joy came to her eyes, and she said what only a dear woman can, “Those are the most beautiful flowers I’ve ever seen.”

They weren’t the most beautiful flowers she had ever seen, but what she meant was, “I’m so glad to see you

and to see that you still love me.” We had planned a big Valentine’s date for that night, but I believe that morning in the hospital may have been the best Valentine’s we have ever had, because I remembered what it meant that Debbie is “bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh” (Genesis 2:23). What had happened in those fourteen days is that there was so much side-by-side in our marriage the face-to-face almost disappeared. At that moment in the hospital we were uniting the eros and the agape.

### Philia—The Love of Friendship

What about the third face of love—philia? Philia is the love of affection, the feeling you have for someone you admire and with whom you enjoy spending time. Whereas eros can be described as the love that needs another and agape as the love that flows from sufficiency, philia is the love that takes pleasure in another. Eros is love for just one special person, and agape is love for all, but philia is love for a handful. Eros is never commanded, agape is always commanded, and philia is commanded occasionally, “Be devoted to one another in brotherly love,” Romans 12:10.

If you were not married to your spouse, would he or she still be a friend? Would he or she still be someone you found interesting and good company? I will never forget the first time I went to church with my wife and heard her sing. Nor will I forget the first time I heard her play the piano. She has hand-eye coordination I can only envy—you should see her type or catch a Frisbee. My wife is bright and witty, and I would like her if she were not my wife.

It is vital that we treasure the pleasant traits of our spouse, because the longer we live together, the better we will come to know each other’s faults. We all crack our knuckles or fail to hang up towels. I still forget to put my snack food and dishes away, and my wife still forgets to slide the driver’s seat back. It is here that eros can do us in. The simple realization that the man or woman of your dreams is not perfect can escalate into petty quarrels. We feel the pain of shattered expectations, and hard words can fly. This is where agape must do its work by covering a multitude of sins, and philia must remind us of whatever is excellent or praiseworthy in our spouse.

What sort of love marks your home? Marriages today fall apart because both romantic love and the love of the arranged marriage are based in selfishness. The Christian marriage knows three loves: the fire of eros, the discipline of agape, and the pleasantness of philia. Wise couples try to nurture all three.

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