

Giving Christianity Back to Agape Love: A New Paradigm for Being Church Together

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Chapter Discussion Questions

Prayer to open or close discussion adapted from the Introduction, p.xii:

“Let these words open us to our highest thoughts and deepest wisdom- to the wellspring of God within you.”

Introduction

1. How have you had a love-hate relationship with the church?
2. Where does Jesus fit into that relationship?
3. p.xii: “Agape is a Greek word in the New Testament referring to a love that is without limits and beyond conditions. Agape is the love that God has for us, and that we are called to have towards one another. In a time when churches are dying and failing, giving Christianity back to agape love has the power to bring life into a religion that feels old, worn out, and over-institutionalized.”

Do you agree that agape love has the power to bring life to a religion that has been over-institutionalized? If so, how?

4. p. xii: “part of being “progressive” is openness to the process of dialogue- listening with an open heart, even when others disagree with you; committing to respectful conversation where we truly hear the other side, acknowledging and honoring the perspective of another.”

Are there people in your life who you can respectfully disagree with (i.e. on religious or political matters)? What helps you truly honor the perspective of the person you disagree with? Are there people you disagree with who you have a hard time respecting or seeing God in?

5. The closing of the Introduction says on p.xii: “Let these words open you to your own highest thoughts and deepest wisdom- to the wellspring of God within you.”

How can you let the words of these pages help you tune into your own highest wisdom?

Chapter 1: Agape: Unconditional Love

1. This Chapter begins on p.1 saying, “In the world we live in, conditional love is the norm.”

How has this been true in your life experience- at family, work, communities or churches?

2. Page 3: “The image of God as a Judge, sitting on a throne, judging good and bad, is what many churchgoers grew up with. This Judge determines our merits based on whether we’ve met the correct standard of belief or behavior. This Santa Claus god rewards or punishes us according to whether we’ve been ‘naughty’ or ‘nice.’

“From this view, God’s love of us is based on whether or not we’ve measured up. If we measure up, God rewards us with heaven. If we don’t, God punishes us with hell and damnation.”

Then on pages 4-5: “Jesus did not present a God who was the arbiter of the Ultimate, Divine Trade Agreement- ‘Do or believe the right things, and you’ll receive my love. If you don’t, you won’t!’”

How has the church created a God in the image of human love?

How much did you grow up with this the image of God from church, family, or society? How much does it continue to stay with you, even if you might believe otherwise?

3. Page 1: “Agape is the first love that each of us are loved with. ‘We love because God first loved us.’” (1 John 4: 19) Page 2 says Agape love, like the love of the father in the story of the Prodigal Son, isn’t fair: “Divine love isn’t something that we ‘deserve’ or earn. The radical thing about divine love is this- God loves us, and there’s NOTHING we can do about it.”

In what settings or through what people have you experienced this unconditional, agape love?

4. Have you (or someone you know) ever had a “peak spiritual experience” such as the Near Death Experience Matt’s mother describes on page 4? What spiritual lessons did you/others take from that experience?

5. In the Near Death Experience of Matt’s mother, she relates, “I felt like saying to God ‘You don’t want to love me this much, cause I’ve done a lot of bad things.’ But there was no judgment, only more love; unconditional, exquisite, extravagant, limitless love.”

To what extent do our minds doubt that God can really love us without conditions? Do you feel like God couldn’t love you THAT much?

Blessing from page 5: “Albeit imperfectly, we are called to live into Jesus’ great invitation- to love God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength, and to love our neighbor as we love ourselves. (Matthew 22: 37-39)... God loves us unconditionally. Our task- individually and as communities- is to be instruments of that love.” Amen.

Chapter 2: Embodiment

1. Matt describes the experience that kept him engaged and inspired as a youth during church: the West Virginia work camp. He says on page 7: “Now, more than 20 years after college, I understand why the West Virginia work camp touched my life so deeply. Work camp was an embodiment of all that I saw as good, true, and beautiful in Christianity. The people at work camp “embodied” a faith that was lived out.”

In what ways have people inside or outside of church embodied a faith for you that was “lived out,” not just in words but in deeds?

2. p. 8: “A faith that isn’t lived out has little power in a world where faith is also used as a weapon.”

What instances in history and in current events come to mind of faith being used as a weapon?

3. The Chapter quotes a recent Washington Post article: "Majorities of young people in America describe modern-day Christianity as judgmental, hypocritical and anti-gay... many Christians don't even want to call themselves "Christian" because of the baggage that accompanies the label.”

How do you feel about the word “Christian” with the way many modern-day Christians are perceived? Would/do you claim the word for yourself? Why or why not?

4. p. 9: “Jesus' life was a life of deep and profound embodiment- of the fruits of the spirit, of service, of compassion in action... . ‘Giving Christianity Back to Love’ is about embodying all that Jesus embodied; about living and “incarnating” all that Jesus lived and incarnated.”

What about Jesus’ life and example do you most want to embody in your own life?

5. Page 10 says that Christianity needs to shed “its judgment of others; its condemnation of people of other faiths, and of no faith at all. It needs to shed its attachment to dogma and limiting beliefs that no longer resonate with common sense Christians- beliefs about salvation and sin, God and Jesus, scripture, science, and sexuality. Christianity needs to shed the ways that violence and prejudice are perpetrated in the name of God, religion, and Jesus. It needs to shed its idea that Christians have an exclusive hold on spiritual truth, thus perpetuating religious superiority in our pluralistic world.”

In your experience of Christianity, what does the church most need to shed?

Closing blessing from Page 10: “Jesus invites us to die to old ways to make room for resurrection and new life; to make room for a spirituality that inspires us anew each day in living out the fruits of the spirit- love, peace, joy, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.”

Chapter 3: A New Christian Reformation: Beliefs and Embodiment

1. Chapter 4 names the decline of traditional church, and the importance of grief. p.11: “Our grief honors the love and appreciation we have for church traditions and experiences that have shaped us.”

How have you seen church change in your lifetime? Are these changes that you welcome, or for which you grieve?

2. Page 12: “an increasingly vocal minority in the church is seeking a different way. This minority mourns the fear and violence committed in the name of Jesus, while seeking to move the church in a radically different direction. In this new direction, love comes first, and beliefs are secondary.”

What has been the importance of beliefs in your life or congregation?

Have you ever seen people’s beliefs used as a gatekeeper to church membership?

3. Page 13-14: “Jesus offered a new way of holding our beliefs, based on one criterion- love... Jesus’ question to Christians today is simple- do your beliefs align with love? ... Several hundred years (after Jesus) in the era of Constantine, Christianity on the whole reverted back towards a foundation of beliefs. It is perhaps the ultimate irony that beliefs again became primary, now in Jesus’ name... Modern day mystics and reformers are encouraging us to move back to a simpler creed: that love is our path, love is our guide, and love is our foundation.”

What has been your experience of Christian beliefs? Have they been rooted in love?

4. Page 15-16: “When we get too legalistic about religious things, religion becomes a stumbling block for others. Then people think the whole of religion is about belief.”
p.16: “While beliefs are not the foundation of our faith, our beliefs are important. The beliefs we hold determine the behaviors we live out... Today, beliefs shared in the name of Jesus are turning thinking people away from church. Beliefs seen as “Christian” do not resonate with the God of agape love that Jesus incarnated.”

Of the Chapter titles, which behaviors by Christians have most turned you off- those with respect to homosexuality, the belief that God created only one right way home through Jesus Christ, or another belief?

5. Page 17: Have you personally experienced Christians that have a “warm heart, but chilly theology?”
6. Page 18: “What if our task, as a church, was to reconnect to the God of unconditional love? ... To give Christianity back to agape love, we must shed old beliefs and traditions that do not align with unconditional love... As we affirm that “God is Still Speaking”, we do well to hold our beliefs lightly.”

What beliefs do you have trouble holding “lightly?” i.e. perhaps you might be less open (or even defensive) when confronted with a contrary belief.

7. Page 18: How do you live out your faith as Rainer Maria Rilke said over a century ago in “Letters to a Young Poet”: “Have patience with everything unresolved in your heart and to try to love the questions themselves”?

Have you been part of churches that value having the answers over living the questions?

Which does your current church value more: the questions, or the answers?

Close with a blessing from Rilke: “Try to love the questions themselves as if they were locked rooms or books written in a very foreign language... The point is to live everything. Live the questions now. Perhaps then, someday far in the future, you will gradually, without even noticing it, live your way into the answer.”