

BABEȘ-BOLYAI UNIVERSITY, CLUJ-NAPOCA
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THEOLOGY

**AGAPÉ AND ITS THEOLOGICAL-SOCIAL DIMENSION
IN THE MESSAGE OF THE SYNOPTIC GOSPELS**

Summary of the Doctoral Thesis

Doctoral Supervisor:

Rev. Prof. Univ. Dr. STELIAN TOFANĂ

Doctoral Candidate:

Rev. FLAVIU-GABRIEL FLEȘER

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Key words: SYNOPTIC GOSPELS, diakonia, love of neighbor

Approached superficially by contemporary man, deeply affected by the spirit of secularization, diakonia, or love of neighbor transformed into deeds, appears to be a relatively new element in our Church's missionary work. The primordial source of this social, philanthropic-diaconal work lies in the boundless love shared with humanity by God. This immeasurable love constitutes the foundation of Christian philanthropy and lies at the basis of humanity's communion (κοινωνία) with God and of people's communion with one another.

The Synoptic accounts convey to us, with intensity and emphasis, the idea that the commandment to love God and the commandment to love one's neighbor are, in fact, not two distinct commandments, but one single, essential commandment. Thus, the central idea of this work is to highlight the principal aspects of agapic love, taking as its starting point the passages containing the terms ἀγάπη, ἀγαπάω, and ἀγαπητός throughout the Synoptic Gospels. The research is interdisciplinary, with ἀγάπη constituting a broad and relevant topic for all theological disciplines (dogmatics, missiology, but especially biblical exegesis, patristics, and ethical-moral analysis).

In the introductory part of the work, the technical aspects of the methods used to research the topic and carry out the doctoral thesis are presented. Respect for chronological/temporal criteria is self-evident, since the approach seeks to faithfully outline the spiritual dimensions of agapic love and to distinguish it from the other forms of "love" outlined/mentioned in the biblical and philosophical-patristic context: ahabah, eros, storge, and philia. Numerous correlations exist among all these terms, especially the New Testament terms; the newer ones derive from the older ones through the enrichment and Christian transformation of their original meanings, which were closely connected to ancient thought.

Because love represents the fundamental and defining characteristic of Christianity, as well as the theme and basis of the teaching of faith and the principles of conduct of the Church of Christ, it has been treated with great dedication by theologians throughout the ages, transcending confessional boundaries as well as the strict framework of the various theological disciplines. Since the term ἀγάπη also occurs in a pre-Christian context and became established in the first Christian centuries, it is reflected in ancient literature, mythology, and philosophy, as well as in early patristic writings and in the works of many thinkers, philologists, and Orthodox or other-confession theologians of the modern and contemporary periods. Given that, in Greek, unlike many modern languages, four terms were used to delineate love (ἔρως, στοργή, φιλία, and ἀγάπη), the similarities

and, above all, the distinctive/particular features of these terms have been highlighted, with emphasis on their relationships, and especially on the complex relationship between eros and agapé. In this latter respect, we point to the seminal work of Professor A. Nygren, the Swedish Lutheran theologian who also pursued studies and interests in philosophy.

A fundamental and thorough monographic exegetical study of agapic love in the New Testament is that of Professor Ceslaus Spicq, whose work stands out for its detailed analysis of all passages/verses in which the terms ἀγάπη, ἀγαπάω, and ἀγαπητός occur in the New Testament. Relevant are not only the theologian's explanations and assertions, but also the sources he used and the exegetical commentaries of some of his predecessors, both Catholic and Protestant/Lutheran.

The social dimension of ἀγάπη in the New Testament context, particularly in the Synoptic tradition, is more clearly outlined in the Acts of the Apostles, the Johannine writings, the Pauline Epistles (materialized in the agapae, ἀγάπαι – the Christian love feasts, collections [Mt. 25:40], and the well-ordered mutual assistance prescribed in the Pastoral Epistles), and the Catholic Epistles (James, Jude), while it is also present in the first three Gospels.

In Romanian theological bibliography, many works stand out for highlighting the multiple aspects of ἀγάπη. Father Professor Ioan Ică Sr. devoted much of his work to agapic love in the exegesis of Saint Maximus; Rev. Prof. Dumitru Belu produced a treatise on love; Father Dumitru Stăniloae considered and stated that love lies at the foundation of the Holy Trinity and is shared with human beings for their salvation; and the meanings of love for God and for one's neighbour have been highlighted and rediscovered by our great teachers of theology. In this sense, ἀγάπη is revealed both as the source of Christian social work and as an important missionary-philanthropic imperative.

Structurally, the present work consists of two parts, comprising two and three chapters respectively, preceded by an introduction and followed by "Conclusions," which synthesize the essence of the work but do not bring to an end the research of a topic that proved to be particularly comprehensive.

PART I: EROS (ἜΡΩΣ), PHILIA (ΦΙΛΙΑ), STORGE (ΣΤΟΡΓΗ) AND AGAPÉ (ΑΓΑΠΗ)

A) The first chapter of the initial part, entitled SEMANTIC DISTINCTIONS OF THE TERMS IN THE BIBLICAL-PATRISTIC CONTEXT, contains terminological clarifications, emphasizing the multitude, variety, and complementarity of the names given to love (ahb בְּהָב, ahabah הָבָה, agapé ἀγάπη, storghή, φιλία, caritas, philanthropy, mercy/almsgiving, generosity, diakonia, diaconal service, διακονία, misericordia, compassion, philanthropy).

Our exegetical approach concerning ἀγάπη, ἀγαπάω, and ἀγαπητός in the Synoptic reflection, and beyond, begins with extensive terminological clarifications concerning key words that highlight the most important meanings of love for God and interpersonal love, that is, love and philanthropic diakonia (διακονία). All these terms, including ἀγάπη (together with ἀγαπάω, ἀγαπᾶν and all derived verbal forms, as well as the adjective ἀγαπητός), are described thoroughly and rigorously in biblical, philosophical-linguistic, and theological lexicons, concordances, and dictionaries.

During the New Testament period and the first Christian centuries, love of God and neighbor was designated by different terms: agapé, φιλία, στοργή, ἔρως, caritas, philanthropy, mercy/almsgiving, generosity, diakonia, diaconal service, and διακονία/service through deeds. These terms are complementary and carry numerous and varied semantic nuances. In the Greek translation of the Hebrew texts (the Septuagint), the Hebrew verbal root *ahb* אהב was rendered and replaced by the verb ἀγαπάω (agapaō), while the noun *ahavah* אהבה found its equivalent in ἀγάπη/agapé.

These terms occur predominantly in the Pauline and Johannine writings, whereas the adjective ἀγαπητός, with the primary sense of “beloved,” “esteemed,” or “worthy of sincere appreciation,” appears more frequently in the Holy Gospels than in the other books of the New Testament canon. Prof. Spicq showed that although ancient Greek had four terms expressing the concept of love, the most significant among them is ἀγάπη, because it rises above the material and somatic sphere of ἔρως, surpasses natural parental care and filial affection (στοργή), and goes beyond the limits of friendship (φιλία). Ἀγάπη signifies sacrificial, deeply spiritualized, all-embracing, universal, and altruistic love.

Among these four forms of “love,” ἀγάπη distinguishes itself as a form of love that transcends rational calculation, standing above reason and the criteria of human judgment. Paradoxically, agapic love judges, perceives, and recognizes true values. Whether it has profound religious meanings (sacrificial love) or secular meanings (esteem, preference), ἀγάπη distinguishes between authentic and false values. Ἀγάπη prevails over the other “loves” or forms of love (ἔρως, στοργή, and especially φιλία), first and foremost, though not exclusively, through its meaning of sacrifice; it is all-sacrificing love, seemingly illogical if its spiritual meanings and implications are disregarded.

In the New Testament sense, the term ἀγάπη means: 1. Pure/holy love, the highest form of love, above every other love; love of God, but also love of brothers/fellow human beings; evidence, testimony, and confession of love (Mt. 24:12; Rom. 5:8; 1 Cor. 4:21; 2 Cor. 13:13; Eph. 5:2; 1 Pet. 4:8; 2 Jn. 1:6). 2. The agapic feast/table of the first Christians (Jude 12–13; 2 Pet. 2:13): the community that would ordinarily gather after worship and Eucharistic celebration; a meal of fraternal

communion, established in the early Church and practiced during the first Christian centuries (Acts 2:46; 20:11; 1 Cor. 11:21, 33).

From an exegetical perspective, the term ἀγάπη denotes both the fatherly love of God (the Creator and Providence) for human beings and the love through which human beings respond to divine love. In Holy Scripture, ἀγάπη appears as an authentic and elevated form of love; it has a profound spiritual meaning that stands in strong contrast to eros, an eminently secular term for bodily/earthly love, and is also significantly distinct from philia (friendship, in the sense of ancient philosophy, which presupposes a certain reciprocity) and storge (parental love or filial affection, generally limited to the family or kinship group).

The multitude and variety of terms used to designate love and service of one's neighbor should not disorient us; on the contrary, they should help us understand that these notions are complementary, that they clarify one another, and that they all point to the fact that at the foundation of love and service of neighbor lies God's boundless love for humanity.

B) In chapter II, entitled LOVE IN THE OLD TESTAMENT AND PRE-MESSIANIC JUDAISM, shows that the Jews (Mt. chapters 5–7) did good deeds only to those of their own nation and religion or to their benefactors (even when the latter were pagans), while if someone harmed them, they retaliated according to the Law of Talion (Mt. 5:38). For the Jews, the “neighbour” toward whom they were required to direct their love and good deeds was, in fact, someone belonging to the same nation/tribe and faith.

In the Old Testament, God reveals Himself as the Source of Wisdom, as Lord of justice and love; the Hebrew verbal root *ahb* and its derivatives – *ahavah* (feminine noun) – attest to this truth both through their frequent use and through the multitude and variety of their meanings. God's love for the people of Israel is demonstrated by the fact that He chose this people from among the nations of the lands of the East and repeatedly saved them from destruction throughout their troubled history. The Israelites' love (*ahavah*) – their response to God – is connected with these realities: therefore, He is often called the living Lord, the One who brought the people out of slavery/from the land of Egypt, “leading them into the blessed land of Canaan, into the land flowing with milk and honey” (Exod. 3:17). Israel persisted for a long time in an ungrateful attitude toward God's goodness and love.

From the books of the Old Testament, we observe that God's goodness is manifested through His love throughout creation, because “the Lord loves righteousness and justice; the earth is full of His mercy” (Ps. 33:5; 119:64). “The Lord is righteous in all His ways and merciful in all His works” (Ps. 145:17). Divine love is immeasurable and overwhelming, for His glory/*kabod* “rises to the

heavens,” “is great to the heavens,” and is “greater than the heavens” (Ps. 36:6; 57:11; 108:5). “As high as the heavens are above the earth, so great is His mercy toward those who fear Him” (Ps. 103:11). “As a father has compassion on his children, so the Lord has compassion on those who fear Him” (Ps. 103:13).

In the New Testament, agape, ἀγάπη – love – acquired meanings and significance of particular importance; the foundations and evidence of this love appear in countless passages. In the New Testament, true philanthropy emerges, transcending Jewish exclusivism and extending the sphere of brotherhood to encompass all people, faithfully reflecting divine philanthropy.

PART II: AGAPE IN THE MESSAGE OF THE SYNOPTIC GOSPELS

A) In chapter I, entitled AGAPÉ ἀγάπη IN THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO MATTHEW, emphasis is placed on the fact that, before Christ, the commandments of love had to be fulfilled rigorously and rationally (“with the mind” rather than “with the heart”), whereas in the New Testament, love of God and love of one’s neighbor no longer constitute mere religious-legal regulations, but paths of spiritual approach to God and to others, paths toward the Kingdom of Heaven and authentic spiritual communion.

The relationship between human love for God and human love for one’s neighbor is exceptionally profound; the two parts of the dual commandment of love are complementary and mutually harmonious. For the first time in the New Testament writings, the notion of agapic love appears in Mt. 3:17, where the heavenly Father professes His pure and boundless love for Jesus, affirming His divinity.

The Father's unchanging love for His Son is expressed through the term agapan, ἀγαπᾶν, and is a true and authentic love with multiple and varied forms of manifestation. The Father’s love for Christ, however, has a much broader range of action and a far more extensive semantic sphere, extending from Christ to humanity and manifesting itself in the great work of salvation of the human race. The love shown by the Father toward His Son constitutes undeniable evidence of His Messiahship and the authenticity of His mission.

In the face of the malice and hatred of the Pharisees, love and goodness are set forth as victorious. In the confrontation with the Pharisees, which Christ apparently avoids, He is the One upon whom the hopes of the people rest and who achieves victory (Mt. 12:20–21). Paradoxically, Christ, loved by God the Father and blessed by the Spirit (Mt. 12:18), conquers the hostility of His opponents through love, goodness, and utmost discretion. By perfectly fulfilling the prophecy of

Isaiah, Jesus, the chosen, beloved, and blessed One who receives God's love generously, reflects this love and subsequently shares it with humanity through His saving work.

An analysis of the verbs *agapaō* and *doulein*, ἀγαπάω and δουλεῖν (Mt. 6:24), shows that both love and service have a dynamic meaning of self-giving and involvement, but love presupposes total and voluntary commitment, a self-offering. Love constitutes the strongest bond between human beings and God and, respectively, among human beings themselves. By emphasizing that “we cannot serve two masters” (6:24), the sacred author underlines a fundamental feature of New Testament love: it is a decisive and free choice; it does not annul or diminish human freedom but presupposes it.

The lover of God (*theophilos*/Θεοφιλία) is simultaneously a lover of humanity (*philanthropos*/φιλόανθρωπος) and stands in clear contrast to the lover of money and worldly possessions (*argyrophilos*/ἀργυρόφιλος). Agapic love demonstrates that the voice of the heart prevails in our choices (Mt. 6:21) and that, by loving God, the human being adheres to Him and worships/glorifies Him. Consequently, agapic love, ἀγάπη, is complete adherence or total self-giving.

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus states the dual commandment of love for God (Mt. 6:24) and love for one's neighbour/fellow human beings (6:43–48). The commandment to love one's neighbor (5:43) takes up the text of Leviticus and retains its religious significance; however, Jesus does not impose this love in the Old Testament sense by appealing to the authority of the Torah/Law, nor does He give it merely legal meanings, but rather religious-moral ones. Christ gives this love a renewing spirit, transforming and perfecting it, just as He does other Jewish institutions and ordinances.

Love of neighbor is not an optional concept or one of secondary importance, but a clear commandment whose fulfillment is mandatory and constitutes a prerequisite for attaining eternal life and reward (Mt. 19:16–21). The cooling of love and the increase of lawlessness (Mt. 24:12), together with many other negative realities, can weaken both the bond between human beings and God and the bonds among people, namely the spiritual unity and cohesion of the Church and Christian society.

A few days before His crucifixion, the Savior summarized His entire teaching and brought together the two commandments of love for God and for one's fellow human beings, placing them at the foundation of all Christian doctrine and moral conduct and emphasizing that their fulfillment constitutes an essential prerequisite for entering the Kingdom of Heaven. Only with Christ does love (ἀγάπη) acquire profound spiritual meanings and “a universal and unlimited sphere of action.”

AGAPÉ ἀγάπη IN THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO MARK

B) In chapter II of the second part, predominantly exegetical in character and entitled AGAPÉ ἀγάπη IN THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO MARK, we note that love constitutes the greatest and most significant commandment of the Gospel and, consequently, deserves sustained and profound attention.

Clearly, the account in Mark 12:30–33 must be analyzed together with its context and comparatively, in close relation to the parallel pericopes in Mt. 22:34ff. and Lk. 10:25ff. (the Lucan text serving as an introduction to the parable of the Good Samaritan). The Evangelist Mark clearly and insistently affirms the primacy of love, love as the supreme virtue and value: “There is no commandment greater than these” (v. 31).

Within this Holy Gospel, the following themes are reflected: Jesus’ love/appreciation for the rich young man (Mk. 10:21); love as the greatest commandment of the Gospel (Mk. 12:30–33); Jesus – the beloved Son sacrificed by the Father – in the parable of the wicked tenants (Mk. 12:1–12, v. 6).

In the Gospel according to Mark, the God of Christians is revealed as the authentic God of love. The Evangelist presents, on the one hand, a God full of love and willing to sacrifice, who solemnly affirms/proclaims His profound love at the Jordan and on Tabor and who offers His only and beloved Son, υἱὸν ἀγαπητόν, for the correction of the wicked tenants of the vineyard.

On the other hand, the verb agapan, ἀγαπᾶν, also carries tender meanings, as in the parable of the wicked tenants. In this parable, especially in the key verse Mk. 12:6, we are presented with an exceedingly merciful and compassionate Master, a Father who offers His one and beloved Son in the hope of the return and correction of the tenants who had already treacherously and repeatedly killed His messengers/servants, who were deeply and genuinely devoted.

Here the verb agapan, ἀγαπᾶν, is closely connected with doulein; love is ontologically linked to service. The idea is emphasized that the adjective ἀγαπητός, which expresses divine love, self-sacrifice, and service, translated into Latin as “carus,” also points us, in thought and heart, toward caritas – divine love that surpasses all the spiritual dimensions that human reason attributes to this noble sentiment.

Among the three Synoptic Evangelists, Mark insists most strongly on the tender, warm, human forms through which Jesus manifested His love toward those who came to Him with pure thoughts and aspirations. Thus, to the young man who diligently kept the commandments and sought the Kingdom and eternal life, Jesus gave a warm, loving look. He appreciated his effort and the purity he had already demonstrated.

By commanding people to love Him sincerely and completely, with all their soul and all their heart, and to show Him complete faithfulness (Mk. 12:30–33), He showed that love knows no limits and cannot be placed either under the sign of doubt or that of compromise. The sacred author revealed that the One who asks for this complete love is, in fact, a God of love, a wholly loving Father, who does not impose love only through words (a solemn and authoritative commandment), but also through deeds.

Jesus is the perfect Word, the Logos, prefigured, proclaimed, and revealed to humanity, but at the same time He is perfect love, disclosed to humanity, veiled or manifest, from the beginnings of humankind in the Garden of Eden (Gen. 3:15), through the prophets, the Cross, and the saints, to the present day.

AGAPÉ ἀγάπη IN THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO LUKE

C) In the final chapter, AGAPÉ ἀγάπη IN THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO LUKE, it is emphasized that the sacred author gave the Gospel strong social accents and highlighted the fact that Jesus chose His Apostles from among the poor or asked His disciples and those seeking perfection to renounce earthly riches in order to serve Him.

Luke emphasized that the rich's guilt does not consist in the amount of wealth they have accumulated, the abundance of their meals, or material prosperity, but in their spiritual insensitivity and lack of mercy toward those in need.

Within this Holy Gospel, the following themes are reflected: brotherly love (Lk. 6:27, 32 and 35); the centurion's love/appreciation for the Jewish people (Lk. 7:5); love and forgiveness, ἀγάπη, in the account of the sinful woman's forgiveness (Lk. 7:36–50); the universality of love – love revealed by the Good Samaritan (Lk. 10:27); love of places of honour and public recognition (Lk. 11:43); the primacy of love for God (Lk. 11:42); and the meanings of love and lovelessness in the Parable of the Prodigal Son (Lk. 15:11–32).

In the Gospel according to Luke, we readily see that the sacred author surpasses his predecessors through elevated language, an appropriate style, and a richness of subtle and profound meanings. He uses the verb *agapan*, ἀγαπᾶν, the noun *agapē*, ἀγάπη, and the adjective *agapētos*, ἀγαπητός, in both a profound religious (transcendent) sense and a secular sense.

In conclusion, most contemporary theological works addressing the theme of ἀγάπη through a multidisciplinary lens remain, from an exegetical standpoint, superficial; often, the philosophical or philological perspective takes precedence over the theological one. In numerous cases, agapic love is

presented predominantly from a moral-ethical perspective and less from an exegetical perspective inspired by the thought and lived experience of the Holy Fathers.

The present work identifies, investigates, and highlights the particularities of agapic love, relating it to *ahabah*, *eros*, *storge*, and *philia*, the forms of “love” outlined in the pre-Christian Jewish, philosophical-mythological, as well as Christian patristic, ecclesial, and theological-social contexts.

Having been involved body and soul for a long time in what is today generically called “social-philanthropic assistance,” I am firmly convinced that the Church to which we belong and with which we identify spiritually is both entitled and duty-bound to offer, generously and without discrimination, light and assistance, guidance and material and spiritual support, following the perfect model of the Saviour and the example of self-sacrifice set by the Apostles and the early Church.

I believe that the primordial source of all forms of manifestation of love for one’s neighbor in which we are deeply involved is, in fact, the philanthropy of God, the perfect and boundless love of the living God, forgiving and loving toward humanity.