

Doctrinal Brief: Is Love An Action Or An Emotion?

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Sometimes common things are the most difficult to define. One example would be the word "love." Even though love may seem to be lacking on many levels in our present age, there is no lack of the word "love" in our vocabulary. In the English language we use, perhaps even overuse, the word "love" to mean everything from a preference for a certain type of food to the deep affection that exists between husband and wife.

As we strive to define love in our present culture, a common question is often debated: "Is love an action or an emotion? Is it primarily something we do or something we feel?" There are those who argue on either side of the issue. Most dictionary definitions begin by describing love as a feeling, emotion, or affection. This should not surprise us as dictionaries usually reflect how a word appears in common usage. On all levels—pop culture, music, poetry, movies, and the media in general—love is often portrayed as a feeling one has, perhaps about another person.

In contrast to this concept of love, there are those who contend that love is not an emotion but purely an action. Even though it has been almost two decades since Gary Smalley wrote his *Love Is a Decision* book, his statements about love are still being held today: "Genuine love is a decision, not a feeling." "Once we've made that decision to honor, love is the action we take no matter how we feel." "Out of our decision to honor flows loving actions regardless of our feelings—regardless of the cost."¹ We can understand where Smalley is coming from. Sometimes we have to do things that are loving even though we do not feel like doing them.

But what about a biblical definition of love? On the basis of Scripture, would we conclude that love is an action or an emotion? First, we have to realize that arriving at a biblical definition of love involves focusing on more than a few words in the original languages or studying a couple of key passages. God uses many words to convey what we often communicate by the English word "love." There is the word *φιλέω* which denotes the attachment that exists between friends. There are words that describe a kindness or goodness that one person shows to another (*בִּטּוֹן*—*φιλιανθρωπία*—*χρηστότης*). Some words denote a compassion or mercy, a love that is moved by the misery of another person (*מִחָנּוּן*—*ἔλεος*—*οἰκτιρισμός*—*σπλαγχνία*). Scripture also describes a love that is undeserved and gracious (*יְחִינּוּ*—*χάρις*). In the Old Testament *דָּבָר* pictures a love that is steadfast, unfailing, and loyal. Another group of words or phrases (*אֲפִיכָהּ*—*ἀνοχή*—*μακροθυμία*) refers to a loving forbearance, longsuffering; or patience. Even though *הַבְּהָרָה* and *ἀγάπη* are given a rich meaning in Scripture, they are simply general words for love within their respective languages. It is God in his Word who uses these common words for love to denote a deep emotion of affection without concern for the worthiness or unworthiness of the object loved. He uses these words to describe a love that is as strong as death (Song of Songs 8:6), a love that is everlasting (Jeremiah 31:3), a love that is self-sacrificing (John 15:13), and a love that he demonstrated when he sent his Son to save sinners (Romans 5:8). Its presence turns us into God's children (1 John 3:1). Its absence makes us nothing but noisemakers (1 Corinthians 13:1).

As we look at the various words for love and how they are used in Scripture, is the focus more on the action or the emotion? The answer to this question would seem to be "yes." There is no doubt that 1 Corinthians 13 describes some of the things that love does (does not boast, is not rude or self-seeking, keeps no records of

¹ Smalley, Gary and John Trent, *Love Is a Decision*, Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1989, p. 40.

wrongs). Yet it would be hard to imagine the presence of things such as patience and kindness, or the absence of things such as envy and anger, without any emotion in the picture.

Or we think of Paul's words to husbands in Ephesians 5. He says that a husband's love for his wife is to be like the love that Christ had for his church. God's love in Christ moved him to action. God sent his Son into the world. The Good Shepherd laid down his life for his sheep. God raised Jesus from the dead. Christ promised to send the Holy Spirit. The Lord assures us he will return. All of these are actions. Yet Scripture reveals that God's feelings² for us played a part in moving God into action. Deuteronomy 7:7 speaks about an affection God had for his people. Matthew 9:36 tells us the Savior had compassion on the wandering masses because they were "harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd." Scripture ascribes positive emotions, affections, and feelings to the Savior God as he cares for his people.

As we Christians live in a world where the love of many has grown cold, God would have us apply this biblical concept of love which includes both emotions and actions. These actions and emotions will always be guided by God's Word. We will speak the truth in love, even when society calls such an action loveless. We will reveal sin for what it is, even when our unbelieving society rejects such an action and labels it loveless. In love we will direct people to the only Savior they will ever have, even though these people live in a pluralistic age and confess the creed of pluralism. In this way we will give glory to God and serve the best interests of the people we are loving.

It is not enough to feel bad about our neighbor's situation if we do nothing to help him. At the same time to say that love is an action devoid of feelings is to forget that God made us complex emotional beings with feelings and affections. Such loving feelings are not sinful when they flow out of the love that our Savior had for us. Nor are they an optional part of Christian love. Such loving feelings will lead us to imitate the loving actions our Savior had for us and all people.

When defining Christian love, it is wise to include both aspects—emotion and action. For example, the author offers the following definition: Christian love is a deep concern for another that leads us to act in that person's best interests.

² When we speak about God's feelings we are reflecting the anthropopathic language of Scripture which ascribes human emotions to God.