

LOVE

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Christian Romance, Marriage, Friendship

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Wipf & Stock
PUBLISHERS
Eugene, Oregon

Wipf and Stock Publishers
199 W 8th Ave, Suite 3
Eugene, OR 97401

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Christian Romance, Marriage, Friendship
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Copyright©1987 by Allen, Diogenes
ISBN 13: 978-1-55635-132-7
ISBN 10: 1-55635-132-1
Publication date: 12/14/2006
Previously published by Caroline Publications, 1987

In gratitude to Jane M. Allen
who has had a hand in every-
thing I have written.

Acknowledgments

This book was written during a sabbatical leave from Princeton Theological Seminary while I was a Fellow at the Center of Theological Inquiry, Princeton, New Jersey. It is my pleasure publicly to thank Thomas W. Gillespie, the President of the Seminary, and James I. McCord, the Chancellor of the Center, for their generous encouragement and support.

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Introduction

Whenever we hear the word "love" in our society, we immediately think of romance. Even though there are many other sorts of love, such as the love between parents and children, love between children, love between friends, love of country, love of nature, and even love of ideas, as well as love of music and the other fine arts, still it is romantic love between a man and a woman that usually comes to mind when we hear the word "love."

This has not always been true. The idea of romantic love is a creation of the Middle Ages. This does not mean that people before that did not fall in love, but it is relatively recent that people have prized romantic love between man and woman as an *ideal*, as something splendid, as something that ennobles people and enables them to realize their natures, as perhaps the highest and most desirable form of love. We are so used to this view of love that we find it hard to realize that it is radical. Yet prior to the Middle Ages, romantic passion was considered to be a misfortune. In classical times it was friendship that was praised as the highest form of love between human beings. That friendship is a very distant second to romantic love in our scale of values indicates how much our ideals have changed. There are literally thousands of books, not to mention magazine stories, films and soap operas, whose theme is romantic love. A story devoted solely to genuine friendship is hard to find. One of the few that comes to mind, *Three Comrades*, concerns three ex-servicemen who go into business together after the war. In order to express the nature and extent of their friendship, however, the author has to introduce the tragic romantic love of one of the comrades for a dying woman. That tragic love, rather than the devoted support of two of the comrades for their friend in his sorrow,

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becomes the focus of interest. Generally speaking, we simply do not find the ups and downs of friendship enough to sustain our interest in a story.

The notion of passionate yet ennobling love between a man and woman as a distinctive way to human fulfillment posed a new question for Christian thinkers when it first appeared in the twelfth century. More than one medieval writer sought to find a way to reconcile the two great commandments—that we are to love God and to love our neighbor—with romantic love, which is not a commandment at all. (St. Paul's injunctions that a husband is to love his wife is not an endorsement of romantic love). Denis de Rougemont in his classic work, *Love in the Western World*, goes so far as to claim that the exalted status of romantic love actually made it a rival *religion* to Christianity in some circles. This daring hypothesis has now been rejected by most scholars. In addition, Irving Singer, a philosopher at M. I. T., who has just published the second volume of a highly regarded trilogy on love in western culture, distinguishes between romantic love and courtly love, the latter a literary creation of the troubadours in the High Middle Ages. Courtly love often involved a married woman and a suitor and its most important theme was the unattainability of the lady. This distinction is useful, and I myself shall be concerned with romantic in contrast to courtly love.

Even though Singer and others claim that de Rougemont went too far, nonetheless Singer himself champions a modified view of romantic love between man and woman. He pits it against the tendency of Christianity to turn us toward God and neighbor and away from romance as a source of self-realization. The love of God that comes from above is contrasted to human passionate love between man and woman, and it is to the potential of romantic love that Singer directs us. In their different ways such writers claim that

there is a tension between Christian love and romance which requires our attention, whether we be Christians or not, given the importance each of them has in our society.

We can find, however, little guidance on the relation between divine love, which is frequently referred to as "agape," and human passionate love. Secular marriage manuals, advice on the mechanics of sexuality, and psychologically based studies of love and sex usually ignore Christianity or cast it in the form of a repressive social force. Most Christian people receive little instruction on what it is to love God and their neighbor that can equip them to deal with romantic love maturely. To most Christians, love of God means that we are to have a sense of gratitude for our existence and for the gift of forgiveness, and that we are obliged to obey Christian ethical teaching. We are taught that everyone is our neighbor and that we are to help all people as best we can. This in itself is fine, but it does not sufficiently equip people to come to terms with the passion of romantic love, especially with its accompanying notion that love between man and woman is the main place to find happiness.

I am not suggesting that in our love of God and love of neighbor our emotions ought to be of such an intensity that Christian agape can be a successful rival of romantic love for our allegiance. Rather I am claiming that there are in fact vital connections between the two great commandments of Christianity and the widespread belief in and desire for romantic love. People can be greatly helped in understanding their religion, as well as enriched in their practice of a passionate love of another by knowing those connections. One of the main purposes of this book is to show the vital connections between Christianity and the widespread ideal and experience (for they are not identical) of passionate love between man and woman. I will show how agape is an indispensable

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ingredient of love between a man and a woman, and on the other hand, how romantic love can make a vital contribution to our love of God and neighbor.

However much friendship has been made to play second to romantic love in modern western culture, it continues to exist as a significant form of love between people. Social and geographic mobility have made it an especially hard relationship to sustain over a long period of time, but it is such an important way in which human beings find life worth living that it deserves careful consideration in its own right. Like romantic love between a man and woman, friendship requires agape as an ingredient. Even though friendship and romantic love are very different, they have one thing in common: the need to love our neighbor as we love ourselves. If they lack that as an integral part, then both of them lack what they need to sustain themselves. They will fail to be proper realizations of themselves, and because of that failure can even become destructive. They can all too easily become, for example, dominated by possessiveness and jealousy.

Our situation today has become more complicated because of our sceptical reaction to the *ideology* of romantic love. Falling in love is indeed thrilling, but people have learned from experience that the thrill does not last and that people who fall in love do not live happily ever after. In addition, Freud's ideas on sex and love have been used as a rationalization for pursuing sexual pleasure that is free from all moral considerations, on the grounds that such inhibitions are simply the product of our socialization. For some people today it is regarded as a mark of maturity to be cynical about love and marriage, and to engage in sexual pleasure with as little emotional involvement and commitment as possible.

This kind of sensuality, defended in the name of "science," is not a new phenomenon. For example, Plato's dialogue *Phaedrus*

opens with a long speech by a well-known Sophist—the ancient equivalent of an “up-to-date” and “well informed” person—in defense of sex without love or commitment. But we today are particularly vulnerable to modern sensuality and cynicism, not because Freudian popularizations are necessarily sound, but because our theory of romantic love is so unrealistic. If the ideal of romantic love is rejected, there is no viable reason generally available in our culture to resist sensuality. Then sexual practices become simply a pragmatic matter of personal tastes—whether heterosexual, homosexual, or bisexual—from the most casual and promiscuous to any number of arrangements people choose to make. The danger of disease, the threat of unwanted pregnancies, the inconvenience of abortion, and the like become the only consideration.

I myself am not ready to give up on love, and I think it can be distinguished from the unrealistic expectations which have surrounded it in recent centuries. In this respect I am in agreement with Irving Singer, perhaps the most philosophically profound defender of romantic love today, but his approach is a secular, perhaps even an anti-Christian, one. I myself will seek to free romantic love of its lack of realism, which has rightly made it subject to criticism, in a religious context. On the other hand, my view is idealistic. That is, I believe both friendship and romantic love are ideals to be striven for with varying degrees of success. Therefore in this book I will try to give an account of these two loves, as well as of marriage and Christian love in their highest forms, so that people in our society can have an accurate but unacademic knowledge of what they are, why they are worth striving for, and what it takes for them to be realized. The only defense against sensuality is the reality of these loves themselves. To describe them and their worth and cost accurately gives people a genuine choice of how they are to live.

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I shall begin, then, with the very familiar and biblical idea of the love of neighbor. However familiar it is as an idea, we are actually very unfamiliar with it as a reality. Not only do we fail to practice it very well, we really do not understand it very well even as an idea. This is not because of any particular obtuseness on our part. It is because love of neighbor is a *perfect* love, and perfection is not common. Unless we have experienced perfect love, we are unlikely to have a very clear idea of what it is. I shall therefore give an example of the experience of perfect love so that what I am talking about will be quite concrete, before we consider in detail friendship, romantic love, and marriage.