

Daily Life with Christ. Love-15: Understanding the objective, universal, unchanging, eternal nature of love—Understanding love is not linguistically dependent.



(Online copy at <http://www.fbcweb.org/Doctrines/031518.pdf> and <http://www.fbcweb.org/doctrines.html>).

**Setting:** George is a Dallas Seminary graduate who teaches biblical Greek and Hebrew at Oral Roberts University. He believes in the fundamentals of the Christian faith. He is also committed to a Bible-onlyism that eschews philosophy. Suzie calls herself a free-thinking Christian. She is a bit of an anti-intellectual: she never reads anything substantive, she knows very little of Christian history or philosophy. She is pretty much sensate, which means that she constantly needs sense stimulation to avoid boredom. She often needs to stay busy and have her physical senses stimulated for enthusiasm. Her minister never challenges her to love God with her mind. Steven is a Christian who believes in the fundamentals of the faith and believes the Bible is the very Word of God. However, because he understands philosophical realism, he is able to avoid certain philosophical errors that permeate contemporary Christianity, which both George and Suzie unwittingly have become victims to. The topic under discussion in this article is the relationship between language and love.

**Steven:** As per our last few conversations, I am basically making five claims: (1) the universal definition of love on the most fundamental level is the undeniable desire for what one perceives as a good; (2) that this love is in all creatures—all creatures seek their good; (3) that there are

different offices of love that are determined by the nature of the relationship between the lover and the object of love—for example my love for my child is going to be different than my love for my wife because of the different offices/natures/relationships/beings—even though the same word is used of both of these loves (in the Hebrew OT, the Greek of the NT, and in our English world); (4) there are two broad categories of love: improper and proper; and (5) the aforementioned claims are self-evident, objective, undeniable, and universal. Can either of you, George or Suzie, give me a single example where my five universal claims do not hold?

**Suzie:** Well, earlier you said that everyone seeks his good every single waking moment. What about those who are depressed? Being depressed is not a good to seek.

**Steven:** Why are they depressed? They are depressed because they are not getting what they see as a good. It is precisely because they are wired to seek what they perceive as good and are not getting it, for whatever reason, that they are depressed. They are sad and depressed because they do not have the good that they cannot help but desire.

**Suzie:** What about suicide? Some people seek suicide . . . that certainly is not a good.

**Steven:** But why do some people desire suicide? Is it not always because it is viewed as a greater good than staying alive?

**George:** I still think that one cannot really understand love in the Bible apart from understanding the original Greek and Hebrew words?

**Steven:** So, you are saying that love is culturally relative to those language speakers? That those human beings knew love because they happened to be blessed with living in the time of the original languages of Scripture? That the meaning of love is based on the original linguistic community (as per Ferdinand de Saussure) rather than the reality of love itself?

**George:** But you cannot understand love without language? We cannot think without language.

**Steven:** That is patently false! Moreover, if that were true, then we would have no direct access to reality as such, all mediation would have to come through language, which is cultural laden. This would make knowledge totally subjective. If that were the case, then you would have no right to claim any objectivity, let alone biblical objectivity.

**George:** Are you saying that we can know love without language thought?

**Steven:** Yes! The reality of love is not linguistic dependent. In realism, the person abstracts love from the extra-mental world wherein the knower and the known become one. Consider your own Bible, George. Did the believers of the New Testament understand love (for man or for God) by grabbing Greek lexicons or by being blessed to live in culture of a Greek way of thinking? What does the Bible teach about how love is understood? By abstracting the reality of love as per “God demonstrated His own love in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us (Rom 5:8)” . . . “We know love by this, that He laid down His life for us; and we ought to lay down our lives for the brethren (1 John 3:16).” Love is abstracted from reality, just like the entities of all things, not abstracted from language.

**George:** But you cannot understand anything without language! We cannot think without language?

**Steven:** That is manifestly false on many levels. Consider what are you doing when you are looking for the right word to express a *thought* . . . or when you use the wrong word and say, “but that is not the right word, that is not what I meant”! Express a thought? Use wrong word? I meant? Are there not some thinking and intentions taking place as you look to choose the right word to express a reality?

**George:** I see what you are saying. But it is hard for me to think that one can understand love without linguistic dependence.

**Steven:** Don't you think that Abraham and the patriarchs loved God with a love that did not depend upon the Canaanite linguistics of their day? It is not as if Abraham had a Hebrew or Ugaritic dictionary to look up “love.” And if the meaning of the word depended on his culture, then by definition it is relative and thus subjective. What about the two million Jews that came out of Egypt who were told to love God? Was that love determined by Egyptian culture they came out of? Do you think they needed an Egyptian or Ugaritic or Hebrew dictionary to find the meaning of love? The same could be said of gentiles who became believers in the New Testament and who loved God . . . did their love depend upon their language? . . . did they need lexicons to find the reality of love? What about the adulteress who braved the scornful eyes of the religious self-righteous crowd to wash the feet of Jesus, of whom Jesus said “she loved much”! Was it because she understood love through her linguistic community? Of course not! The same love she had is the same love we can have because of the universal nature of love, not because of being linguistically conditioned. There is one human nature and one reality regardless of linguistic community, which is why we can obtain objectivity in love and everything else.

**George:** But you are talking about spiritual love. This is different.

**Stephen:** It is true that spiritual love is a supernatural enablement from God. However, it is merely the raising up of natural love to a supernatural level. There are no supernatural lexicons. The basics of abstraction works the same way on a natural and supernatural level, which is one reason the same word is used of human love and God's love, and why we behold love on a natural level, but with divine enablement we can behold the love of God through His actions recorded in the Word of God, e.g., manifested on the Cross.

**Suzie:** See there, I told you that all of these efforts in word study analysis of love was a waste of time. You just need to feel love, there is the direct connection.

**Stephen:** The difference, Suzie, is that your direct connection is with your feelings. The reality of your love is in your emotions instead of the extra-mental object in the world. You are anchoring love in self, in how you feel. I am anchoring love in the extra-mental world. There is a radical difference. However, I am not denying that feelings and emotions are natural results of love.

**George:** But don't you think language is important?

**Stephen:** Absolutely! But in realism, language express what we know rather than determines what we know. There are two radically different views of reality: either we live in a strictly materialistic world consisting of things extended in space (as per Rene Descartes) or we live in a metaphysical world of form/matter (Aristotle). Only in the world of form/matter can there be Realism because only in such a world can the form of the object perceived come to exist directly in the mind of the knower—be it a tree, bunny, or love. We are either Idealists who start with words or Realists who start with reality. Only the Realist can account for undeniable, objective, and universal knowledge of love or anything else.