

## NOT CONFIDENTIAL

A public lecture first given by Dr Alan Branford at a meeting of The Middle Chamber Society (Adelaide) on Thursday, 22 June 2017

# Charity in its Most Ample Sense – An Exploration of the Meaning of Charity

by Dr Alan Branford (© 22 June 2017)

## Prologue

Why does the title of this lecture say “Charity [\*in its most ample sense\*](#)”?

In order to answer this question we must first explore the Ancient Greek origins and meanings of the virtues **Faith, Hope and Charity**.

We must then acknowledge the perils of translating words and indeed texts from one language to another, and how words within a language can change their meaning over time.

In the specific case of “**charity**”, it will be instructive to discuss, at least in overview, the journey of the Bible from the original Ancient Hebrew and Ancient Greek texts to the present day English-language versions of that holy book.

## The Three Beatific Virtues

Within Christianity, **Faith, Hope and Charity** are called the **Three Beatific Virtues**, as they are considered blessings bestowed by God.

Faith, Hope and Charity, since the early Christian era, have been symbolically represented by a **cross**, an **anchor** and a **heart**, respectively. Also, the three symbols are often combined into one composite symbol, as illustrated below.



Western Philosophy is largely derived from Ancient Greek traditions, and the Ancient Greek origins of the Three Beatific Virtues are:

**Pistis** (πίστις, *pístis*) – Faith

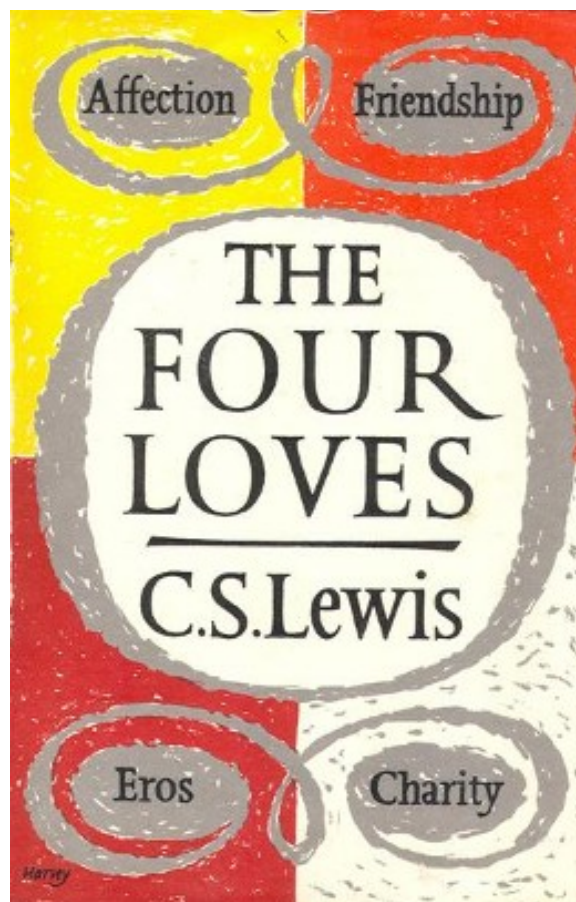
**Elpis** (ἐλπίς, *elpís*) – Hope

**Agape** (ἀγάπη, *agápē*) – Charity

Now, **πίστις** (Faith) and **ἐλπίς** (Hope) are relatively straightforward, and are not the focus of this lecture.

But we need to explore the Ancient Greek origins of **ἀγάπη** (Charity) more carefully.

### The Four Loves



In Modern English, we are rather imprecise in how we use the word “love”. Spouses will say, “I love you.” But we could also hear expressions like, “The sailor made love to the prostitute”, or “The coach loves his players”, or even “I love ice-cream”!

Ancient Greek has four distinct words for “love”, depending on the sense in which the word is meant: **στοργή** (*storgē*), **φιλία** (*philia*), **ἔρως** (*érōs*) and **ἀγάπη** (*agápē*).

**Storge** (στοργή, *storgē*) (/ˈsto:rgi:/) means “love” in the sense of “affection”. It was used to express affection within a family, and also it could be used to express love for one’s country or a favourite sporting team.

**Philia** (φιλία, *philía*) (/ˈfɪljə/ or /ˈfɪliə/) means “love” in the sense of “friendship”. The philosopher [Aristotle](#) developed the theory of φιλία in his writings.

**Eros** (ἔρως, *érōs*) (/ˈɪrɒs/ or /ˈɛrɒs/) means “love” in the sense of “sexual passion”. The philosophers [Socrates](#) and [Plato](#) developed quite extensive theories of ἔρως.

**Agape** (ἀγάπη, *agápē*) (/ˈæɡ əˌpeɪ/ or /ˈɑːɡəˌpeɪ/ or /ɑːˈɡɑːpeɪ/).

In pre-Christian times, ἀγάπη was principally used for the unconditional love of a parent for a child and the unconditional love between spouses. This form of love had no sexual component, which is considered separately by the concept of ἔρως. Thus, ἀγάπη could be considered the highest or purest form of love.

The early Christian Church extended the principle of ἀγάπη by defining it to mean the unconditional love of God (the parent) for mankind (the children), and therefore the unconditional love that mankind should have for God and for his fellow man. In this form, it is often referred to as “Christian love”.

## A Fabulous Lecture

Let us now return to the question why I am considering “[Charity in its most ample sense](#)”?

One must appreciate that words can change their meaning over time. Sometimes this change is subtle, other times it is very stark. Take for example the word “[fabulous](#)”.

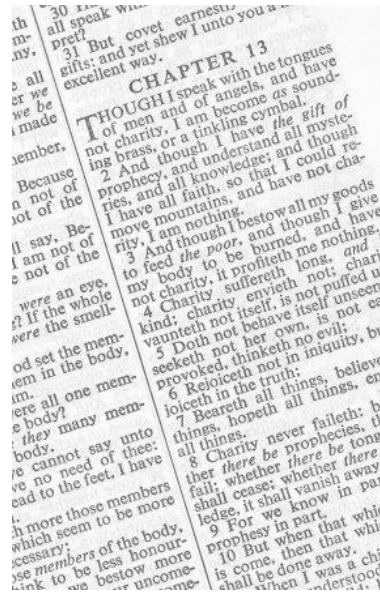
If you were to say to me later, “[Professor, that was a fabulous lecture!](#)”, then I would take that as a compliment. Today we use the word “[fabulous](#)” to mean “[exceptionally good; marvellous; superb](#)”, but pedantically this usage is informal. The actual meaning of the word “[fabulous](#)” is “[unbelievable; purely imaginary](#)”. It is derived from the word “[fable](#)”. Your comment would actually be an accusation that I invented the whole thing!

Now “[charity](#)” has not undergone so great a change, but rather it has lost some of its punch, as it were. Nowadays, we have a very limited conception of “[charity](#)”. Today, most people think of “[charity](#)” as giving money to Oxfam or volunteering at Meals on Wheels.

In reality, “[charity](#)” means the pure, unconditional love conveyed by the Ancient Greek notion of “[ἀγάπη](#)”. I am emphasizing this point by saying “[Charity in its most ample sense](#)”.

## The Apostle Paul on The Three Beatific Virtues

The **Apostle Paul** expounds on what is meant by **ἀγάπη** in **Chapter 13** of his first letter to the **Corinthians**.



The Chapter culminates in the famous verse 13, **1 Corinthians 13:13**,

**13 νυνὶ δὲ μένει πίστις, ἐλπίς, ἀγάπη, τὰ τρία ταῦτα: μείζων δὲ τούτων ἡ ἀγάπη.**

*(Latin alphabet transliteration:*

**13 nynì dè ménei pístis, elpís, agápē, tà tría taûta: meízōn dè toutōn hē agápē.)**

Let us examine this verse in particular a little more closely, as it illustrates the difficulty we have with understanding contemporary English translations of **1 Corinthians 13** as a whole.

The first authorized translation of the Bible into English was commissioned in the reign of King James VI and I, and **1 Corinthians 13:13** is rendered as

**13 And now abideth faith, hope, charity, these three; but the greatest of these is charity.**  
*(King James Version)*

But if you pick up just about any contemporary translation of the Bible, you will find this verse translated something like

**13 And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love.**  
*(New International Version)*

As we have already observed, “**charity**” in its modern usage is typically thought of too narrowly to convey the full weight of **ἀγάπη**, whereas “**love**” is used too loosely in general. There is an extra irony here, though, as most people think that the word “**love**” in **1**

**Corinthians 13** is referring specifically to the intimate love between spouses. Just think of how often you have heard verses from this chapter read out at weddings!

If we wish to use **1 Corinthians 13** as a lesson on **ἀγάπη**, we run headlong into the problems that beset the translator of any text from one language into another. We shall find it instructive to now look at these translational problems in general, as well as investigating the history of translations of the Bible into English in particular, in order to fully round out our understanding of **ἀγάπη**.

## Big Hopes

Many years ago, I was chatting with an elderly man whose native tongue was Russian. He was telling me that in his youth, he had read many of the great books of English literature, but in Russian translation. He remarked particularly about the classic Charles Dickens novel “**Big Hopes**”. After a pause, I burst out laughing when I realized that he was talking about “**Great Expectations**”!



*The Churchyard Scene from “Great Expectations” by Charles Dickens  
“And you know what wittles is?” by F. A. Fraser. c. 1877. 5 x 6.3 inches. An illustration for  
the Household Edition (Frontispiece).*

Now, it may be argued that “**big hopes**” and “**great expectations**” mean the same thing in English, but the latter has a certain elusive quality that the former lacks. I cannot imagine Charles Dickens calling the book “**Big Hopes**”.

This episode has stuck in my mind as it illustrates some of the perils faced by the translator. The subtle style and quality – the “feel”, as it were – of the original text to a native speaker of the source language can be elusive in the destination language: “**Big Hopes**” versus “**Great Expectations**”.

Of course there can be more immediate difficulties for the translator. Even if the words in the source language have a direct translation into the destination language, there can be the obstacles of grammatical constructions in the source language that have no equivalent in the destination language and idiomatic expressions in the source language for which by definition a literal translation is useless.

## Lost for Words

But there is an even more treacherous impediment awaiting the translator: a word in the source language that simply has no corresponding word in the destination language. Cultural differences can give rise to such problems.

An example of this was given in an article “[Generous by nature](#)” in the *New Scientist* magazine of 13 August 2016 (p26ff). The East African tribe of herders called the **Maasai** have a word “[osotua](#)” which the article describes as follows, “... anyone in need can request aid from their network of friends. Anyone who’s asked is obliged to help, often by giving livestock, as long as it doesn’t jeopardise their own survival. No one expects a recipient to repay the gift, and no one keeps track of how often a person asks or gives.”



*Maasai cattle herders – A cover photograph from the website for the [Oсотua Foundation](#)*

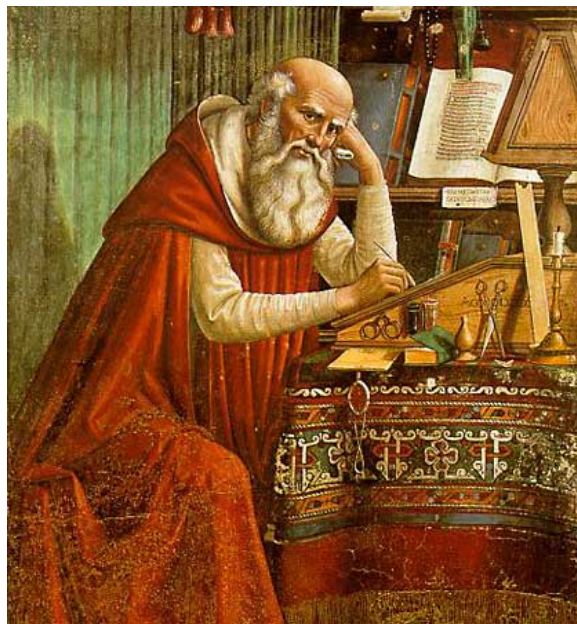
The practice of *osotua* is a very important part of Maasai culture, but not in the English speaking world. The Maasai therefore have a word for the practice, whereas English does not. If a piece of text is being translated from Maasai to English and the text contains the word “*osotua*”, then what is the translator to do?

Perhaps they could just use the Maasai word in italics and have a footnote giving an explanation; this would be expedient but clumsy. Or they could try to find an English word that has a meaning vaguely approximating the Maasai word; this would inevitably be incorrect and could have significant adverse consequences for the understanding by the reader of the translation. There is no perfect solution.

## Ancient Translations of the Bible into Greek and Latin

The Bible has been translated many times, of course. The **Septuagint** is the most significant of a number of **Ancient Greek versions of the Old Testament** from the pre-Christian era. Early translations of the Old Testament into other languages, such as Latin, were often based on the Septuagint and not the original Hebrew.

In the early Christian era, portions of the New Testament were translated from the Ancient Greek original into Latin, giving rise to a patchwork of translations of the Bible (and other texts later deemed non-canonical). In the late fourth century, **Pope Damasus I** commissioned Eusebius Sophronius Hieronymus (known today more commonly as **Saint Jerome**) to synthesize the Latin translations of the Ancient Greek **Gospels** into an authoritative version.



*Saint Jerome in His Study, fresco by Domenico Ghirlandaio, 1480; in the Church of Ognissanti, Florence*  
from *Encyclopædia Britannica Online*, retrieved 29 January 2017,  
<<https://www.britannica.com>>

St Jerome later turned his attention to the Old Testament, translating most of it directly from its source Hebrew into Latin. Other scholars contributed in bringing together scholarly Latin translations from Ancient Greek of the New Testament **Acts**, **Epistles** and **Apocalypse (Revelation)**. Collectively, this work is referred to today as the **Vulgate Bible**; its name in Latin is *Biblia Vulgata* meaning the “**Common Bible**”, another term used for the work.

## Pre-Reformation Translations of the Bible into English

Although portions of the Bible had been translated into **Old English** from the Vulgate Bible during the First Millennium, it was not until the late 14th century that the first complete English language Bible was produced, when **John Wycliffe** (c. 1330 – 31 December 1384), an Oxford University theologian, translated the Vulgate Bible into **Middle English**.



*John Wycliffe*

*from Encyclopædia Britannica Online, retrieved 29 January 2017,  
<<https://www.britannica.com>>*

Wycliffe was also a strident critic of various aspects of the Catholic Church, and his writings influenced amongst others the Czech Church Reformer **Jan Hus** (c. 1370 – 6 July 1415). Wycliffe and Hus were very significant figures in precursor movements that culminated in **Martin Luther**'s launch of the **Protestant Reformation**.

John Wycliffe attracted many followers, who were referred to derisively as the **Lollards**, a term thought to be derived from Middle Dutch meaning “mumblers” or “mutterers”.



## The Tyndale Bible

The first translation of the Bible into English **based on the original sources** was a translation into **Early Modern English** by **William Tyndale** (c. 1490–94 – 6 October 1536). Like John Wycliffe nearly two centuries before, William Tyndale believed that the people should be able to read the Bible in their own language, and that the Scriptures, not the Bishops, should determine practices and doctrines.



*William Tyndale*

*from Encyclopædia Britannica Online, retrieved 29 January 2017,  
<<https://www.britannica.com>>*

On **31 October 1517**, **Martin Luther** (10 November 1483 – 18 February 1546) had released his **Nine-five Theses**, a treatise that condemned the Church's practice in regard to **indulgences**. (According to legend, he **nailed** his Ninety-five Theses to the **door of All Saints' Church** in Wittenberg.) This is regarded as the birth of the **Protestant Reformation**, and Tyndale's objective of producing an English translation of the Bible must be seen against this theological and political backdrop.

William Tyndale was forced to pursue his work on the Continent, as the act of translation of the Bible, or even the possession of translated writings, was now considered heresy in England. Tyndale's translation of the New Testament was printed in 1526 at Worms, and its dissemination around Europe, including England began.

Tyndale was by now an outlaw heretic in England, the Holy Roman Empire and elsewhere. Tyndale did not manage to finish his Old Testament translation. He was betrayed to the Imperial authorities by an erstwhile friend and he was captured at Antwerp. As a heretic, he was **burnt at the stake** at Vilvoorde, near Brussels, in 1536. He in fact was killed by **garrotting** just before the pyre was lit. (I do not know if it was standard practice in the Holy Roman Empire at that time to garrotte the heretic prior to the burning, or whether it was a special commutation of the normal sentence in Tyndale's case. I note that garrotting was a

form of execution used in Spain, and Spain at that time was also part of the Hapsburg domains.)

### **Sir Thomas More – Saint or Sinner?**

**Sir Thomas More** (7 February 1478 – 6 July 1535) died nearly 500 years ago, and yet he still today stirs passionate debate among Christians. To the Catholic Church he is **Saint Thomas More**, having been canonized by Pope Pius XI in 1935 as a **martyr**. To some Protestants, he is regarded as one of the **most evil men** of English history. That is quite some spread of opinion!

More was a statesman during the reign of England's **King Henry VIII**, notably **Lord Chancellor of England** from 1529 until 1532. He was also a philosopher, theologian and author.



*Sir Thomas More, 1527*

*Portrait by Hans Holbein (1497/98 – 1543), Oil on oak panel  
from The Frick Collection, retrieved 29 January 2017, <<http://collections.frick.org>>*

Thomas More was opposed to King Henry's attempts to divorce his wife, **Catherine of Aragon**. This opposition translated into opposition to the break of the Church of England from Rome, engineered by **Sir Thomas Cromwell** to enable the divorce/annulment to proceed. **The Act of Supremacy 1534** confirmed the English sovereign as the Head of the Church of England, and **The Treasons Act 1534** made disavowal of the former a treasonable offence. More steadfastly refused to acknowledge The Act of Supremacy 1534 and so he was convicted of treason. He was **executed in July 1535**, despite Cromwell's many attempts to convince him to change his mind.

## A Matter of Translation

Sir Thomas More was also vehemently opposed to efforts to translate the Bible into English. His motives for this opposition are disputed, according to one's opinion of the man generally.

Some argue that he was a man of principle who firmly believed that only a man of education – and in his time that usually meant a priest – could properly interpret the Scriptures, from their source form. Translations into the vulgate would tempt the uneducated man to try to read the Scriptures for himself, and thus inadvertently to be misled because of the problems inherent in translating.

More's opponents would argue that he was fundamentally a man with authoritarian views, and that keeping the Scriptures out of the reach of the masses was required to keep firm state control.

This lecture is not intended to be a study of Sir Thomas More – indeed many books have been written on the man, his views and his times. I shall not therefore delve into his motives, but rather I wish to concentrate simply on one particular verse of Scripture.

### 1 Corinthians 13:13

Let us return to [1 Corinthians 13](#) in the Bible, and in particular to the verse [1 Corinthians 13:13](#),

<sup>13</sup> νυνὶ δὲ μένει πίστις, ἐλπίς, ἀγάπη, τὰ τρία ταῦτα: μείζων δὲ τούτων ἡ ἀγάπη.

Sir Thomas More famously [used this very passage to deride the Tyndale Bible](#), claiming that if Tyndale couldn't even get this right, what hope was there for the common man. For the Tyndale Bible translates the verse in question as

<sup>13</sup> Now abideth fayth hope and love even these thre: but the chefe of these is love.  
(Tyndale Bible)

Sir Thomas More argued that the correct translation should use the word “[charity](#)” where Tyndale uses “[love](#)”! Sir Thomas More was correct!

## Love versus Charity

Tyndale's use of the word "love" for "ἀγάπη" has ultimately won out, in the sense that most modern translations use it, as we remarked earlier.

But the Vulgate Bible of Saint Jerome renders the verse in question, in Latin, as

<sup>13</sup> nunc autem manet fides spes caritas tria haec maior autem his est caritas.  
(Vulgate Bible)

Note that "caritas" and not "amor" is used here to translate "ἀγάπη". Thus it could be argued that, even if "caritas" had not previously meant "ἀγάπη", its use thereafter includes "ἀγάπη" as one of its meanings. The Modern English word "charity" is derived from "caritas", and thus it inherits the meaning of the word "caritas".

At the time of Sir Thomas More, the translation using the word "charity" where Tyndale uses "love" was the more appropriate.

As a side note, it is somewhat ironic to observe that the King James Version of the Bible is very substantially derived from Tyndale's Bible, **except for the verse in question**,

<sup>13</sup> And now abideth faith, hope, charity, these three; but the greatest of these is charity.  
(King James Version)

An ironic twist indeed!

There is no neat way out of this impasse. Pedantically, the English word "charity" does mean ἀγάπη and yet hardly anyone realizes it. Using the word "love" for ἀγάπη in 1 Corinthians 13:13 arguably comes closer in the minds of the typical reader to what is meant, but it is still not completely satisfactory.

Yet another irony awaits us though. We have already in the English language the word "agape" (/ˈæɡ əˌpeɪ/ or /ˈɑːɡəˌpeɪ/ or /ɑːˈɡɑːpeɪ/), the transliteration into the Latin alphabet of the original Ancient Greek word "ἀγάπη"!

The English language has a long tradition of appropriating words from other languages. In the **early Seventeenth Century**, the word "agape" officially entered the English language, with exactly the meaning of the original Ancient Greek.

You may already have noticed that English also contains a heteronym for "agape" (/ˈæɡ əˌpeɪ/ or /ˈɑːɡəˌpeɪ/ or /ɑːˈɡɑːpeɪ/), namely "agape" (/əˈɡeɪp/ or /əˈɡæp/) meaning "wide open". ("He stood there with his mouth agape.") However, this word only entered the English language in the **mid Seventeenth Century**, **after** the "ἀγάπη" word!

But, of course, it is only nerds like I who knows that there is an English word "agape" that has the meaning of the Ancient Greek word "ἀγάπη".

We seem to be unable to adequately translate the word “ἀγάπη” into English in a way that can be understood by the everyman; that ἀγάπη is the true meaning of **Charity, in its most ample sense**.

Also, in addition to this primary lesson, a second lesson to take home from this lecture is that translations of important texts should never be taken carelessly at face value. A more careful exegesis of the text is to be recommended for the true scholar.

In summary, the English word **Charity, in its most ample sense**, means the Ancient Greek concept of **Agape** (ἀγάπη, agápē) (/ˈæɡ əˌpeɪ/ or /ˈɑːɡəˌpeɪ/ or /ɑˈɡɑːpeɪ/). It is the highest and purest form of love: unconditional, non-sexual love. The most eloquent description of ἀγάπη may be found in Chapter 13 of the Apostle Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians.

\* \* \* \* \*

### **Some Useful Web Resources**

*Bible Gateway*, <<https://www.biblegateway.com>>

*The Online Greek Bible*, <<http://www.greekbible.com>>

*Vulgate Latin Bible With English Translation*, <<http://vulgate.org>>

*Read the Tyndale Bible Free Online*, Bible Study Tools,  
<<http://www.biblestudytools.com/tyn>>

*Perseus Digital Library*, Gregory R. Crane, Editor-in-Chief, Tufts University,  
<<http://www.perseus.tufts.edu>>

*Latin Dictionary and Grammar Resources*, <<http://www.latin-dictionary.net>>

*Transliterate Greek and Hebrew*, Logos Bible Software, <<http://transliterate.com>>

*Dictionary.com* <<http://www.dictionary.com>>