

May 2010

Agape: The Responsible Choice

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Recommended Citation

Ciampa, Mark (2010) "Agape: The Responsible Choice," *Verbum*: Vol. 7 : Iss. 2 , Article 16.
Available at: <https://fisherpub.sjfc.edu/verbum/vol7/iss2/16>

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Agape: The Responsible Choice

Abstract

In lieu of an abstract, below is the essay's first paragraph.

"Dr. Martin Luther King's "Love, Law, and Civil Disobedience" offers an important message today as it did when it was given in 1961. The essential message is one of love and respect for our fellow man, and can we honestly look at our society today and claim we have reached a point of love and respect for all people? When we examine recent events, health care reform, issues in education, war, and immigration, we should realize we still have a ways to go."



Mark Ciampa

***** Agape: The Responsible Choice**

Dr. Martin Luther King's "Love, Law, and Civil Disobedience" offers an important message today as it did when it was given in 1961. The essential message is one of love and respect for our fellow man, and can we honestly look at our society today and claim we have reached a point of love and respect for all people? When we examine recent events, health care reform, issues in education, war, and immigration, we should realize we still have a ways to go.

If we examine just the title of Dr. King's speech, we can discover a kind of chain of command: first love, then law, and then civil disobedience. Love for not only ourselves but also all humans should be our number one priority. But love can have many different meanings to different people and to complicate things further, our definitions of love can change depending on the situation we happen to be in at the moment. It is important for Dr. King to make sure we have a clear understanding of what he exactly means when he uses the word "love."

Dr. King's use of the word "love" can best be described in terms of the agape, a Greek word for love. This love is deeper than just a mere friendship or romantic interest; it suggests a sense of care and concern for people not because they happen to look a

certain way or because you enjoy their company. The love of agape is based on the fact the other person shares in your humanity. This love should be the ultimate goal for all of us because it is “an overflowing love which seeks nothing in return.” Dr. King’s description agape is essential if we are going to fully understand why anyone would support a non-violent civil disobedience movement.

Martin Luther King Jr. suggests people have two choices when they are faced with situations they see as unjust: they can either choose the path of violence to enact change or they can choose the path of non-violence. If people decide to use violence to bring about justice, they may be able to achieve their immediate goal but in the end they are only hurting themselves in the future. Dr. King says “unborn generations will be the recipients of a long and desolate night of bitterness.” Those who have lost the fight will ultimately still harbor some resentment against those who won. They will wait in the shadows until their time comes and they are able to organize, rise up, and possibly use violence to take back control. There is no sense of inward change because they were forced to accept a new order or face death or imprisonment.

If we look at our aggressive actions in the Middle East, we can understand what King meant with the above quote. We were able to achieve our goal, but at a cost. The attitude of the people in the Middle East appears to be changing and instead of welcoming the US as the liberating heroes, our troops are finding more and more opposition in the form of roadside bombs and other improvised explosive devices. Our fight does not appear to have an end in sight. Even if we do pull out of the Middle East, I believe there will continue to be people who will still hold a grudge against the US and the West, for our military actions and they may want some kind of revenge.

Hatred and violence can really only bring about more hatred and violence. If we want to reach true change and demonstrate true love and compassion for people, we need to do so with the non-violence suggested by Dr. King and others, this way people are not forced to accept change out of fear. By using non-violence and civil disobedience we can help expose injustices and prejudices and hopefully bring about not just an outward change, but an inward one as well.

It is not easy to bring about an inward change in others, let alone you, but I think it can be done. Dr. King suggests we take the words of Jesus to heart when he says “love your enemies” because it demonstrates your ability to look beyond actions and see people as people. We need to love the person and hate the sin. By following non-violence, Dr. King suggests we can demonstrate the power of love. Others will see that you are willingly accepting suffering to expose injustices in the present system.

Dr. King places law second in his list because society has created laws based on what the majority seems to think is right for the present moment. We need some sense of an agreed upon order in our communities or else we run the risk of anarchy. But sometimes laws are created out of fear or prejudices and instead of promoting justice and protecting human dignity, like the race laws throughout the country in the 1950's and 1960's. They can impose a kind of caste system where the majority holds power over the minority. When society works to hold people down or create some form of class control, Dr. King suggests that it is our duty to practice civil disobedience and try to right the wrongs.

I think several of our current policies (health care, attitudes about immigration, and education) do just this. We are trying to keep the status qua, but at what cost? Is it

really important that a select few make an extra thousand at the expense of others? When we practice agape, we should be concerned about upholding basic human dignity. In a country as advanced as ours, everyone should be offered at least a fair chance to have medical treatment, but our current system allows only those with the means to have access to the very best while those who with little can barely have access to basic health care options. What kind of message are we as a society sending to those who are shut out from health care? I think it is one of love, but a love of money and profit instead of love of our fellow humans.

The same things can be said about both immigration and education attitudes. Those who have are hesitant to change because they like the status qua. They see no problem with the current systems because they are not directly negatively impacted. But this attitude does not help bring about a society of agape. Dr. King described the student movement of civil disobedience as way “to bring into being a positive peace, which makes for true brotherhood, true integrations, [and] true person-to-person relationships.” The students and others involved in the movement were seeking agape through positive means. They sought not only outward change but also an inward change in people.

Change is never easy, but real change towards agape is worthwhile. Sometimes all it takes is just one person to stand up for what it morally right. That one person’s actions can strike a chord with another person and when a similar situation is presented, that person will begin to rethink his/her actions and/or response to the situation. Liberty Mutual Insurance recently released several commercials showing this very principle: people doing the right thing and helping others out while another person witnesses the action and does a good deed in return. If we want to bring about the true person-to-person

relationships Dr. King focuses on in his speech, we need to be able to recognize our commonalities instead of focusing on differences. We need to stand up for our fellow humans and offer help wherever we can. I can only imagine how much our society would benefit from valuing all of its members instead of only recognizing the contributions of a select few.

King, M. L. "Love, Law, and Civil Disobedience." *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings of Martin Luther King, Jr.* New York: Harper & Row, 1986.