



Debunking *Eros*

Recently, my graduate students discussed how US culture sometimes idolizes sex. Citing a friend, one said, “the orgasm has replaced the cross as the place of transcendence in 21st century American culture.” A recent study suggested that, though casual sex is more accepted than ever, loneliness is too.¹ Twenty-seven percent of Americans feel isolated, but loneliness is far worse among eighteen to twenty-two year-olds, followed by Millennials. The least lonely were Americans aged seventy-two and older—those having fewer sexual encounters.²

Western culture often celebrates *eros* (romantic or sexual love) exclusively, but Scripture speaks of four distinct types of love: *storge* (love for those who are familiar, such as family, neighbors, coworkers, etc.), *agape* (God’s love), *philia* (love between kindred spirits), and *eros*.

Sometimes, it can seem like everyone is either in romantic love or pursuing it. US culture and churches often elevate this kind of love, focusing an inordinate amount of energy, attention, and resources on dating, romance, and marriage. Other loves, like *philia*, are neglected.

Of the human loves, CS Lewis argued that *philia* offers the greatest joy and human connection.³ The least physical of the loves, *philia* is centered on shared interests. *Eros* means passion for another or passion itself, whereas *philia* is the love that forms friendships based on shared passion for an ideal, issue, or subject. *Philia* brings people together, where they discover that they are not alone. If you have ever been to a CBE conference, you would know that they are absolute *philia* festivals. As one CBE supporter wrote me recently:

I need to remind you how much CBE has done for my life. Those early conferences I attended, the books I carried home—like lessons I learned, the recognition that I wasn’t alone in my thinking carried me through some tough years.

As people discover they are not alone—that someone else holds the same view—new and powerful possibilities become evident. The power of *philia* is born. Those who thought they were alone are thrilled to discover traveling companions. As Lewis notes, this is how movements begin! It also explains why people who want friends have trouble finding them. *Philia* is always focused outward, Lewis

notes. As friendships deepen, the core of who we are is revealed—what we are called to accomplish, heal, create, and challenge.

The pleasures of *philia* are not embodied, like *eros*. As Lewis notes, the side-by-side work of those who share the same calling is where we are surprised by joy and where we find deep companionship orchestrated by God. In this way, *philia* reveals the deeper meaning of our lives, identity, and purpose.

But just as culture elevates *eros* as the highest love and ignores *philia*, so does the church. As egalitarians, this narrow concept of love should greatly concern us, because *eros* feeds, in part, the church’s obsession with gender roles. When *eros* love is treasured above any other kind of love, romantic relationships between men and women become our primary focus and we overlook the importance of *philia*. *Philia* is about sharing vision and ideas, learning from one another, and discovering God’s purpose for our lives. This is the kind of love that fuels mutual submission and equal dignity in men and women. It also builds healthy professional relationships between men and women.

Gender roles separate men and women, limiting their opportunities for *philia* as colleagues and co-leaders and the deep joy we all derive from love that is not romantic. Tragically, gender essentialism obscures the fullest purposes of women, because they are not free to discover and fan into flame the gifts God has given them. Rather, men are given leadership roles and women are called only to “roles” of submission/support. The impact of gender roles, in the workplace or romantic relationships, is that women must be demure and submit, whereas men must be aggressive and bold. In both cases, we limit our potential for *philia*—equal and passionate exchanges of ideas between men and women. This love flourishes in egalitarian communities, because we value individuals for what they think and their God-given calling, rather than their adherence to gender roles. We also subvert the narrow confines of *eros* as the only love permitted to men and women.

The deepest transcendence between humans is not the fruit of *eros* but *philia*, and both are eclipsed by the transcendence of Christ in the human soul. If Christians can gain a healthier regard for *philia*—coupled with a robust critique of *eros* and how it promotes gender roles—our relationships as men and women gifted and called to flourish side by side will be happier and healthier.

1. Kasandra Brabaw, “This Is How Often People Actually Have One-Night Stands,” *Refinery 29*, June 2017, <https://www.refinery29.com/en-us/2017/06/157756/one-night-stand-casual-sex-facts>.
2. Alexa Lardieri, “Study: Many Americans Report Feeling Lonely, Younger Generations More So,” *US News and World Report*, May 2018, <https://www.usnews.com/news/health-care-news/articles/2018-05-01/study-many-americans-report-feeling-lonely-younger-generations-more-so>.
3. Lewis, CS. *The Four Loves*. London: HarperCollins Publishers, 1960.