



AGAPE LOVE IN 1 CORINTHIANS 13:1-13: PSYCHOLOGICAL CORRELATES OF WELL-BEING AMONG NIGERIAN PEOPLE

By

Okoh, Blessing Uenoson

Department of Religion and Human Relations

Faculty of Arts

University of Delta, Agbor

Delta State

+2348038791103

blissing.okoh@unidel.edu.ng

&

Simon Jeji Majimre

Department of Christian Religious Studies

Faculty of Arts

Kaduna State University, Kaduna

+2348037325648

sjmajimre@gmail.com

Abstract

This paper investigates the psychological correlates of Agape love, as conceptualized in 1 Corinthians 13:1-13, with well-being among Nigerians. This study is informed by glaring and increasing theoretical understanding of love without contextualising it in people's mind. Drawing upon an interdisciplinary approach, this study synthesises exegetical analysis of the biblical text with psychological theories of well-being and an examination of the socio-cultural context of Nigeria. The research explores how the characteristics of Agape love such as patience, kindness, selflessness, and enduring hope, can foster positive psychological states, enhance social connectedness and contribute to overall well-being. By analyzing existing academic literature, this paper aims to bridge the gap in understanding the empirical investigation of Agape love as a psychological correlate of well-being within the Nigerian population. The study concludes that the cultivation of Agape love can serve as a significant resource for promoting mental health, resilience, and flourishing in a society grappling with various socio-economic and cultural challenges. Recommendations for further research and practical applications within religious institutions, counselling, and community development initiatives in Nigeria are also provided.

Keywords: Agape love, 1 Corinthians 13, psychological well-being, Nigeria, Christian ethics, positive psychology.

1. Introduction

The pursuit of well-being is a universal human endeavour, encompassing physical, mental, and social dimensions of a fulfilling life. In recent years, the field of psychology has witnessed a paradigm shift, moving beyond a primary focus on pathology to an increased interest in the factors that contribute to human flourishing (Hernandez *et al.*, 2017:18). This has led to a growing body of research on positive psychology, which explores concepts such as happiness, life satisfaction, and the role of character strengths in promoting well-being. In the Nigerian context, where individuals navigate a complex interplay of cultural traditions, religious beliefs, and socio-economic challenges, understanding the pathways to well-being is of paramount importance. The nation faces significant mental health challenges, with a substantial gap between the demand for mental health services and the available resources (Fadele *et al.*, 2024: 1). This underscores the need to explore culturally relevant and accessible resources that can foster psychological resilience and well-being.

One such resource, deeply embedded in the religious fabric of Nigerian society, is the concept of Agape love, as articulated in the Christian scriptures. While the theological significance of Agape love has been extensively explored, its psychological implications, particularly as a correlate



of psychological well-being, remain a relatively under-researched area, especially within the Nigerian context. This study aims to bridge the gap by examining how Agape love influences psychological well-being among Nigerian people.

Conceptual Clarification

For the sake of context and better understanding, it is important to clarify the key concepts that make the research topic. Hence, the following concepts are defined.

Agape Love Agape is a Greek word *ἀγάπη* that can be referred to as unconditional love. It embraces selflessness and concern for the welfare of others always portrayed by sacrifices, kindness and generosity. The word originates from Ancient Greek where it was used to explain love in its perfect and selfless fashion. Agape is the love of God for man (Lewis 1960). It is often considered the highest form of human connection and is rooted in principles of compassion, empathy, and genuine care (Resilience Lab, 2024). In a biblical context, agape love is described as a love that is not based on emotions or feelings but on the will and choice to prioritise another's highest good, even when it is not reciprocated. This type of love is characterized by unselfishness, giving, and even sacrifice, and it is often associated with the divine love of God. The term "Agape," particularly as described in 1 Corinthians 13:1-13, refers to a selfless, unconditional, and sacrificial love that is believed to be a divine gift. This form of love is distinct from other forms of love, such as familial love (*storge*), friendship (*philia*), or romantic love (*eros*). It is characterized by patience, kindness, humility, and a commitment to the well-being of others, even in the absence of personal gain.

Psychological Well-Being: The term psychological well-being is defined as the subjective experience of positively valenced feelings or cognitive appraisals including lower activation effects such as calm or satisfied, as well as higher activation effects such as excited or thrilled (Hernandez, 2018, p. 19).

Exegetical Analysis of 1 Corinthians 13:1-13

Paul's first letter to the Corinthians addresses a myriad of issues within the nascent Christian community in Corinth, a bustling Roman colony known for its commercial prosperity and diverse cultural influences. The Corinthian church, though gifted with spiritual manifestations, was plagued by divisions, ethical lapses, and a misunderstanding of spiritual gifts. In this context, 1 Corinthians 13 emerges as a pivotal chapter, often referred to as the "love chapter," strategically placed between discussions on spiritual gifts (chapters 12 and 14) to highlight the supreme importance of love as the guiding principle for their exercise (Nguyen, 2022:3).

Brief Historical and Cultural Context of Corinth and Paul's Letter

Corinth was a cosmopolitan city, a melting pot of various cultures, philosophies, and religions. Its strategic location made it a significant trade hub, leading to both economic prosperity and moral laxity. The city was home to the temple of Aphrodite, associated with prostitution, and various mystery cults. This environment likely influenced the Corinthian believers, who struggled to reconcile their new Christian identity with the prevailing cultural norms. Paul's letter, therefore, served as a pastoral response to specific reports and questions from the Corinthian church, aiming to correct their misconceptions and guide them towards a more mature understanding of Christian life and community (Nguyen, 2022: 4-5).

Textual Analysis of Key Terms ("agape," "love," "faith," "hope")

1 Corinthians 13 is a poetic and profound exposition on the nature of agape love. Paul contrasts agape with other spiritual gifts and human achievements, emphasizing its indispensable and enduring quality. The chapter can be broadly divided into three sections:

The Supremacy of Love (verses 1-3): Paul begins by asserting that even the most impressive spiritual gifts—speaking in tongues, prophecy, knowledge, and faith that can move mountains—are



meaningless without agape love. He extends this to acts of extreme self-sacrifice, such as giving away all possessions or even one's body to hardship, declaring them profitless without love. This highlights that the motive behind an action, rooted in agape, is more crucial than the action itself. Nguyen (2022: 7) notes that Paul uses a series of conditional sentences to underscore this point, emphasizing that spiritual gifts, while important, are empty without love at their core.

The Characteristics of Love (verses 4-7): This section provides a vivid description of agape love through a series of verbs and adjectives, often referred to as the “love is/love is not” passage. Agape is patient, kind, does not envy, does not boast, is not proud, does not dishonor others, is not self-seeking, is not easily angered, keeps no record of wrongs, does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes and always perseveres. These characteristics paint a picture of a love that is active, relational, and focused on the well-being of the other. This detailed portrayal offers a psychological blueprint for interpersonal behavior that fosters positive relationships and contributes to individual and communal well-being.

The Permanence of Love (verses 8-13): Paul contrasts the temporary nature of spiritual gifts (prophecy, tongues, knowledge) with the eternal nature of agape love. He uses the analogy of childhood versus maturity to illustrate that these gifts are partial and will cease when “perfection comes.” The ultimate and enduring realities are faith, hope, and love, with love being the greatest of these. This emphasizes that while spiritual gifts serve a purpose in the present age, agape love transcends time and remains eternally significant. This enduring quality of love has profound psychological implications for resilience, meaning-making, and long-term well-being.

Well-being in Nigerian Society

Understanding well-being in Nigeria necessitates a deep appreciation of its unique socio-cultural landscape, economic realities, and the pervasive influence of religious beliefs. The concept of well-being, while universally sought, is often shaped by local contexts, and in Nigeria, these contexts present both opportunities and significant challenges.

Nigeria is a highly diverse nation, with its rich cultural tapestry which profoundly influences individual and collective perceptions of well-being. Traditional communal values, strong family ties, and a sense of collective identity often serve as significant sources of support and resilience. In many Nigerian cultures, well-being is not solely an individual pursuit but is deeply intertwined with the welfare of the family and community. Social harmony, respect for elders, and adherence to cultural norms often contribute to an individual's sense of belonging and psychological comfort.

However, psychological well-being in Nigeria is significantly influenced by a complex interplay of socioeconomic, cultural, and societal factors.

Socio-economic Factors: Poverty and unemployment are major determinants of mental health issues in Nigeria (Taiwo, 2024). Low socioeconomic status is strongly linked to poor self-reported mental health, including depression, anxiety, and sleep problems (Agberotimi *et al.*, 2020). The harsh economic realities, job loss, and financial insecurity contribute significantly to psychological distress among young Nigerians (Adekunle, 2024; Eneh & Eneh, 2024). The increasing cost of living further exacerbates mental health disorders (Ewhrudjakpor, 2009).

Cultural Factors and Stigma: Cultural beliefs and traditions play a crucial role in shaping perceptions of mental illness in Nigeria. Many Nigerians attribute mental disorders to supernatural beliefs, spiritual forces, curses, or witchcraft (Orngu *et al.*, 2015, Lasebikan, 2016; Labinjo, 2021). This often leads to individuals seeking help from traditional healers or spiritualists before formal mental health services (Lasebikan *et al.*, 2012).

Stigma and discrimination are pervasive, with mental illness often labeled, devalued, and associated with perceived dangerousness (Ogunwale *et al.*, 2023; Oluokun, 2024). This stigma significantly hinders help-seeking behaviour and contributes to the underutilisation of mental health services (Yale Medicine, 2012, Akinbobola, 2024). Even healthcare professionals may hold



stigmatizing attitudes toward psychiatric patients (PMC, 2018). The lack of advocacy for mental illness as a result of fear of stigmatization further compounds the problem (Urigwe, 2010).

Other Factors: Internet addiction has also been identified as a factor influencing the psychological well-being of students in Nigeria (Hussaini & Akachukwu, 2025). Additionally, homelessness factors contribute to psychological well-being concerns among urban residents (Ekhaese *et al.*, 2021). Limited access to quality education, healthcare, and basic infrastructure further exacerbates these challenges, particularly in rural areas. Political instability, insecurity, and corruption also contribute to a pervasive sense of uncertainty and stress, affecting the psychological state of the populace. The constant struggle for basic necessities can lead to chronic stress, anxiety, and a diminished sense of control over one's life, all of which are detrimental to well-being.

Influence of Religious Beliefs on Well-being in Nigeria

Religion plays an exceptionally prominent role in Nigerian society, with Christianity and Islam being the dominant faiths, alongside various indigenous belief systems. For many Nigerians, religious belief is not merely a private affair but a central organizing principle of life, influencing moral values, social norms, and coping mechanisms. Religious communities often serve as vital social support networks, providing a sense of belonging, purpose, and hope, particularly in the face of adversity. In the context of well-being, religious beliefs can offer several benefits:

1. **Meaning and Purpose:** Religion often provides a comprehensive worldview that imbues life with meaning and purpose, offering answers to existential questions and a framework for understanding suffering. This sense of purpose is a key component of eudaimonic well-being.
2. **Social Support:** Religious congregations often function as strong social networks, providing emotional, practical, and spiritual support to their members. This social connectedness can buffer the effects of stress and loneliness, enhancing psychological well-being.
3. **Coping Mechanisms:** Faith and prayer are frequently employed as coping strategies during times of crisis and hardship. Belief in divine intervention or a benevolent higher power can foster optimism and resilience.
4. **Moral Guidance:** Religious teachings provide ethical frameworks that guide behaviour, promoting virtues such as compassion, forgiveness, and altruism, which are positively correlated with well-being.

Madubuike (2023:71) highlights the concept of *Ifunanya* (Agape Love) therapy within the Igbo worldview, emphasising its role in promoting physical and mental health, and social cohesion. This indigenous therapeutic approach underscores how unconditional love, deeply rooted in cultural and religious beliefs, is seen as essential for holistic well-being in Nigeria. Also, Sulaiman *et al.* (2023:10) found that spiritual well-being and intrinsic religiosity were associated with improved mental health during the COVID-19 pandemic. This demonstrates the inherent connection between spiritual concepts and psychological health within the Nigerian context.

An Analysis of Agape Love as a Psychological Correlate of Well-Being

The characteristics of Agape love, as meticulously detailed in 1 Corinthians 13:4-7, offer a profound psychological blueprint for fostering well-being. These attributes are not merely abstract virtues but actionable behaviours and attitudes that directly align with established psychological correlates of flourishing.

Nexus between the Characteristics of Agape Love and Psychological Well-being

Patience *μακροθυμει* Psychologically, patience is closely linked to emotional regulation, resilience, and stress management. An individual who practices patience is better equipped to handle adversity, delay gratification, and maintain composure in challenging situations. This directly contributes to reduced negative affect and enhanced coping mechanisms, both crucial for well-being. In a society often characterised by economic hardship and social instability, patience can foster a sense of inner calm and perseverance, preventing burnout and promoting mental fortitude.



Kindness *χρηστεύεται*: Kindness involves benevolent and compassionate behavior towards others. From a psychological perspective, acts of kindness are known to activate the brain's reward system, leading to increased happiness and a sense of purpose. It strengthens social bonds, fosters empathy, and promotes prosocial behavior, all of which are fundamental to positive relationships and social connectedness, a key correlate of well-being (Hernandez *et al.*, 2017:25). The reciprocal nature of kindness also contributes to a positive feedback loop, enhancing both the giver's and receiver's well-being.

Not Envious (*οὐ ζήλοιοι*): Envy, a negative emotion arising from comparison with others, is detrimental to well-being, leading to feelings of inadequacy, resentment, and unhappiness. The absence of envy, as one of the characteristics of Agape love, promotes contentment, gratitude, and an appreciation for others' successes. Psychologically, this fosters a healthier self-concept and reduces the cognitive distortions associated with social comparison, thereby enhancing positive affect and overall life satisfaction.

Not Boastful (*οὐ περπερεύεται*) and Not Proud (*οὐ φουσιούται*) Boasting and pride are often rooted in insecurity and a need for external validation. Agape love, being humble, frees individuals from this need, promoting genuine self-acceptance and a focus on intrinsic worth rather than external accolades. Psychologically, humility is associated with greater self-awareness, stronger interpersonal relationships, and reduced narcissistic tendencies, all of which contribute to a more stable and authentic sense of well-being.

Does Not Dishonour Others (*οὐκ ἀσχημονεῖ*): This characteristic emphasises respect, dignity and appropriate social conduct. Psychologically, treating others with honor fosters trust, mutual respect, and positive social interactions. It reduces conflict and promotes a harmonious social environment, which is crucial for collective well-being. This is particularly relevant in diverse societies where intergroup relations can be strained.

Not Self-seeking (*οὐ ζητεῖ τὰ ἑαυτῆς*): Self-seeking behaviour, driven by ego and personal gain, often leads to isolation and dissatisfaction. Agape love, being selfless, prioritizes the needs and well-being of others. This altruistic orientation is strongly linked to increased happiness, a sense of meaning, and reduced symptoms of depression. Engaging in prosocial behavior and contributing to something larger than oneself provides a profound sense of purpose, a core component of eudaimonic well-being.

Not Easily Angered (*οὐ παροξύνεται*): The ability to manage anger and avoid irritability is vital for emotional regulation and healthy relationships. Agape love's characteristic of not being easily angered promotes emotional stability, empathy, and constructive conflict resolution. Psychologically, this reduces chronic stress, improves interpersonal communication, and fosters a more peaceful internal and external environment.

Keeps No Record of Wrongs (*οὐ λογίζεται τὸ κακόν*): This refers to forgiveness and the release of resentment. Holding onto grudges is psychologically damaging, leading to chronic stress, anxiety, and impaired relationships. Agape love, through its capacity for forgiveness, promotes emotional healing, reconciliation, and psychological liberation. This is a powerful mechanism for enhancing mental health and fostering resilience in the face of past hurts.

Does Not Delight in Evil but Rejoices with the Truth (*οὐ χαίρει ἐπὶ τῇ ἀδικίᾳ, συγχαίρει δὲ τῇ ἀληθείᾳ*): This characteristic underscores a commitment to justice, integrity, and authenticity. Psychologically, aligning one's values with truth and justice promotes cognitive consistency, moral integrity, and a strong sense of self. It fosters a positive moral identity and contributes to a sense of purpose and meaning, particularly when individuals are engaged in advocating for what is right.

Always Protects (*πάντα στέγει*), Always Trusts (*πάντα πιστεύει*), Always Hopes (*πάντα ἐλπίζει*), Always Perseveres (*πάντα ὑπομένει*): These enduring qualities of Agape love are directly linked to resilience, optimism, and a positive outlook. "Always protects" implies a commitment to safeguarding the well-being of others. "Always trusts" fosters secure attachments and reduces anxiety in relationships. "Always hopes" is a direct correlate of optimism, providing a future-oriented perspective that sustains individuals through difficulties. "Always perseveres" speaks to grit and determination, enabling individuals to overcome obstacles and achieve long-term goals.



These attributes collectively build psychological strength and contribute to a robust sense of well-being, even in the face of adversity.

The Enduring Nature of Agape Love (Faith, Hope) and Resilience

1 Corinthians 13:13 states, “And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love.” The enduring nature of faith, hope, and love, with love being supreme, has profound implications for psychological resilience and a positive outlook. Faith, in this context, can be understood as a deep trust in divine providence and a belief in a benevolent order, which provides a stable foundation amidst life’s uncertainties. Psychologically, this translates to a sense of security, reduced anxiety, and the ability to find meaning even in suffering. Hope, a future-oriented construct, is a powerful predictor of well-being and resilience. It enables individuals to envision a better future, set goals, and persevere in the face of obstacles. When individuals possess hope, they are more likely to engage in problem-solving, seek support, and maintain a positive effect even when circumstances are challenging. Agape love, as the greatest, underpins both faith and hope, providing the motivation and context for their enduring presence. It is the active expression of these virtues, transforming them from abstract concepts into live realities that foster psychological strength and a sustained positive outlook.

Application to Nigerian Context

The conceptual framework of Agape love as a psychological correlate of well-being holds significant relevance for the Nigerian context, offering a culturally resonant and potentially transformative approach to addressing the nation’s well-being challenges. This model could be applicable in the following ways:

- 1. Addressing Mental Health Stigma and Promoting Help-Seeking:** The pervasive stigma surrounding mental illness in Nigeria often prevents individuals from seeking professional help (Fadele *et al.*, 2024: 3). The principles of Agape love, particularly kindness, compassion, and non-judgment, can help dismantle this stigma within religious communities. When congregants and leaders embody Agape, they create a safe and supportive environment where individuals feel accepted and understood, encouraging them to open up about their struggles and seek appropriate care. The emphasis on collective well-being inherent in Agape can also foster a sense of communal responsibility for mental health, leading to more proactive support systems.
- 2. Fostering Resilience in the Face of Adversity:** Nigerians often face significant socio-economic challenges, including poverty, insecurity, and limited access to resources. The enduring qualities of Agape love patience, hope, and perseverance can serve as powerful psychological resources for resilience. When individuals draw upon these virtues, they are better equipped to cope with hardship, maintain a positive outlook, and continue striving for a better future. The belief in a loving God who provides hope can be a profound source of strength, enabling individuals to navigate difficult circumstances without succumbing to despair.
- 3. Strengthening Social Cohesion and Community Support:** In a society with strong communal ties, Agape love can reinforce and enhance existing social support networks. The selfless nature of Agape encourages individuals to care for their neighbors, share resources, and provide practical and emotional support to those in need. This strengthens community bonds, reduces social isolation, and creates a safety net that contributes to collective well-being. The *Ifunanya* (Agape Love) therapy in the Igbo worldview, as described by Madubuike (2023: 71), exemplifies how this unconditional love is already recognised as essential for physical and mental health and social cohesion within a Nigerian cultural context.
- 4. Promoting Forgiveness and Reconciliation:** Interpersonal conflicts, ethnic tensions, and historical grievances can significantly undermine well-being at both individual and societal levels. Agape love’s characteristic of “keeping no record of wrongs” and its emphasis on truth and justice provide a framework for forgiveness and reconciliation. By fostering a spirit of forgiveness, individuals can release the psychological burden of resentment, leading to



emotional healing and improved relationships. This is crucial for building peaceful and harmonious communities.

5. **Cultivating Positive Self-Perception and Identity:** In contexts where individuals may face discrimination or marginalization, the unconditional acceptance inherent in Agape love can foster a strong sense of self-worth and a positive identity. When individuals understand that they are loved and valued unconditionally, it can counteract negative self-perceptions and promote psychological well-being, regardless of external circumstances or societal judgments.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This study provides valuable insights into the psychological correlates of Agape love among Nigerians. The findings highlight the potential benefits of incorporating Agape love principles into mental health interventions and suggest avenues for further research. By fostering social support, emotional regulation and spiritual fulfilment, Agape love can contribute to enhanced psychological well-being in diverse cultural contexts. Hence, based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are hereby given:

- i. **Curriculum Integration:** Religious institutions (churches, seminaries, Bible colleges) should integrate the psychological dimensions of Agape love into their curricula and sermons. This can educate congregants on how biblical principles directly contribute to mental health and healthy relationships, fostering a more holistic understanding of faith.
- ii. **Faith-Based Counselling:** Counsellors and therapists, particularly those working within faith-based organisations in Nigeria can incorporate the principles of Agape love into their therapeutic approaches. This can provide a culturally sensitive framework for addressing issues such as interpersonal conflict, self esteem, forgiveness, and the development of positive coping mechanisms.
- iii. **Community-Based Programmes:** Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and community development initiatives can design programs that leverage the communal aspect of Agape love to build stronger social support networks, promote altruism, and foster collective resilience in vulnerable communities. This could include initiatives focused on mutual aid, conflict resolution, and mental health awareness campaigns framed within the context of unconditional love.
- iv. **Leadership Training:** Training programmes for religious and community leaders should emphasize the importance of embodying Agape love in their leadership, promoting an environment of kindness, empathy, and non-judgment. This can help dismantle mental health stigma and encourage open dialogue about well-being within their communities.

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