

“Where Does Your Agape Stick?”

David Seabaugh

Editor’s Note: Seabaugh starts in an educational setting—a Lutheran school—and finishes with a mission you can draw on a napkin at the coffee shop. This article is an example of how our most deeply held Christian beliefs will be expressed most meaningfully if we pay attention to the question: What is this person able to hear? This question is at least as important as: What do I want to say? This article can remind the reader, also, that we are educated, we grow as we serve, in mission.

A couple years ago I was invited to my children’s Lutheran school to conduct chapel. I had done this before, and it was always a delightful time. However, this particular chapel would change my life. The chapel services involved a series on the Ten Commandments, and I had been asked to speak on the Sixth Commandment, “Do not commit adultery.” No problem. I teach this stuff in confirmation. I’ll just talk “in code” to the seventh and eighth graders and conveniently avoid the challenges of speaking directly about adultery to the younger children. A day or so before the service, I was informed that the seventh and eighth graders were away that day, leaving the preschool through sixth grade for my adultery talk. Lovely! There went my avoidance strategy. Oh, and talk about a delicate situation! Not only did I have to speak to children of multiple developmental stages about a really sensitive issue, but I knew for a fact that there were many children in the room with challenging home situations which likely involved adultery of one form or another.

After prayer and a little too much hand-wringing, I decided to approach the subject with as much simplicity as possible. Perhaps if I could capture the most basic beauty of God’s design for marriage, I wouldn’t have to delve into the innumerable complexities of sinful behavior. In order to keep things super-simple, I decided to use some basic illustrations. Not being much of an artist, I decided to represent the people as stick figures and their relationships with arrows. The arrows signified love. This wasn’t fickle emotional love, but *agape* love, which could be best defined as unconditional commitment. The arrows pointed to the one who benefited from the love, indicating what kind of relationship existed. Little did I know it, but in that moment Agape Sticks was born.

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The day of the chapel came and the pressure was on to explain what these stick figures and arrows meant. The children got the stick figures right away, but would they understand the arrows? Did they ever! It was as simple as right versus wrong for them. I explained that God made us to have our love arrows pointing to others all the time (Figure 1). When we love others, we are committed to them and they benefit, even if it doesn't benefit us in return. When everyone does that, it's a beautiful picture. This was obviously good and right to

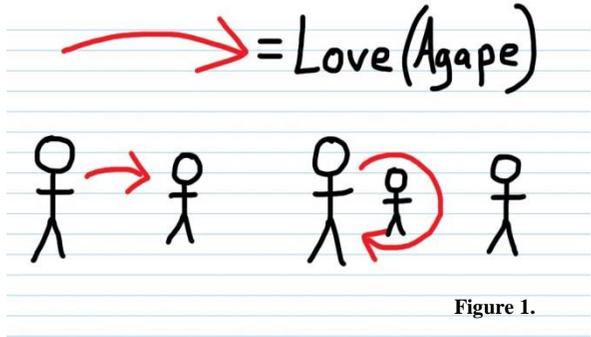


Figure 1.

the children. The opposite was equally clear. If God made us to love others, then the opposite of that was to love ourselves. I drew another arrow that curved back to the stick figure. The room changed. The children knew it. This was not good. I drew some other stick figures in the same picture to further demonstrate this selfish love. A love arrow missed one stick figure entirely, leaving him isolated and alone. The other stick figure must have felt loved, but the love wrapped around him, and so the one really benefiting from the love wasn't him. The children understood both scenarios and even expressed compassion for the poor stick figures. These children totally got it.

At this point, the marriage relationship was easy to draw. He loves her. She loves him. It's really as simple as that (Figure 2). The arrows created a kind of circle in continuous motion between the two. Everyone was loved completely without any arrow pointing back to self. When "Little Johnny" enters the picture, Dad and Mom love Johnny, and Johnny learns to love them back the same way. It's a thing of beauty.

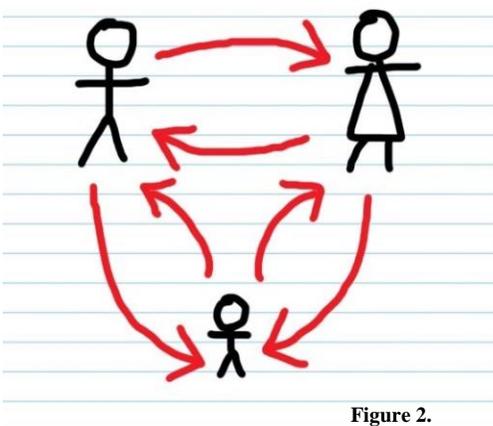


Figure 2.

I would have loved nothing more than to stop right there and leave them with the pristine image of God’s intention for marriage. But we don’t have a Sixth Commandment because all our arrows stay straight. So I swallowed hard and drew my man and woman up there again. This time, his love wrapped around her and back to himself. Her love did the same and returned to her. Suddenly we had a very different image (Figure 3). Yes, there was a relationship, but it wasn’t the same. The children started saying things like, “He just loves himself,”

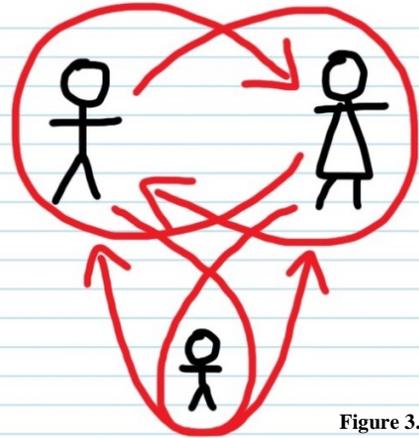


Figure 3.

and “She’s only using him.” I drew Little Johnny, and the sadness in the room became palpable. Both Dad’s and Mom’s arrows went around Johnny and back to themselves. “Nobody really loves him,” a child said. Then came the hardest part of the drawing. I had to explain that with this kind of self-love, we’re actually taking from someone else. So there comes a time when we feel like we’re not getting enough from that person. Unfortunately, we tend to look to other people to fulfill what we can’t seem to get from our spouse. I drew another woman in the picture, and had the arrow of the man go around her and her arrow around him. I drew another man next to the first woman with the same result (Figure 4). “Children, this is adultery.”

Of course, the saddest part of the picture was still Little Johnny. In that moment,

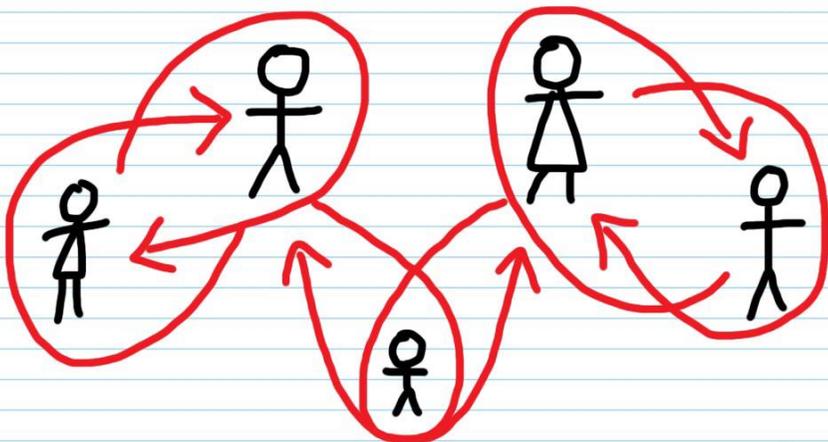


Figure 4.

I looked out over the children and saw the faces of so many “Little Johnnys.” I expected tears or self-defense or some sort of backlash from them. There was nothing of the sort. They were intrigued and conversant, as if their crazy confused world had just been made clear and they only wanted to talk it out. These Little Johnnys needed the Gospel, and by the grace of God, the door was wide open. I asked them about what kind of arrow Jesus had. They shouted, “Straight!” “Does Jesus’ arrow ever curve back to Himself?” “No!” “How do we benefit from Jesus’ love?” “Jesus died for our sins. We are forgiven!” “What about people who commit adultery? Can they be loved by Jesus and forgiven?” “Yes!” they shouted.

I left that day with a tremendous sense of relief, affirmation, and a new appreciation for the power of simple illustration. How could I have possibly taught through the Sixth Commandment without referring to the raw mechanics of sex at all? There was something about this method that seemed to unlock the truth for preschoolers and teachers alike. It’s as if we had dug down to the foundation and found the most basic layer upon which everything else is built. I had been taught an intricate complex theology that begged for higher and higher levels of education. I knew how that house was built! Yet, after a master’s degree in theology and years of pastoral ministry, I had never understood the Sixth Commandment better or more intuitively than when I drew stick figures and arrows for preschoolers. I was beginning to rediscover the foundation, and it left me wanting more.

If stick figures and arrows could so beautifully explain the Sixth Commandment, what other eternal truths could they make plain? I began to fill sheets of paper with drawings. Some of the best illustrations made their way into sermons. It was a time of immense spiritual growth for me. I could see my own agape arrow, when it stuck to others and when it returned to me. I could see God’s arrow toward me. At the same time, I found the tangled, complex systems of theology unraveling right before my eyes into something simple, accessible, memorable, and transferable. The mission of God and our place in it took on a new significance with each revelation. Even long-standing Lutheran theological debates, such as the interplay of justification and sanctification, were immensely clarified with a few stick figures and arrows. As I began to share this illustrative method with others, I would often say, “Where does your agape stick?” The name Agape Sticks stuck.

It’s truly challenging to do justice to the Agape Sticks method with the written medium, but let me at least try to give you a taste of the clarity these illustrations can bring to the foundations of our faith.

If we were to assign an arrow to God, what direction would it point? Of course, it would be pointed to us. God is love. He’s committed to us and we benefit. God doesn’t benefit from making us or providing for us. He’s already complete unto Himself! Well, God made us in His image. Think of it like a reflection. If God’s arrow is pointed to us, then we should reflect His arrow back to Him and outward to

others (Figure 5). We love God and we love our neighbor. In a reflection, the image is not the real thing, but it looks like the real thing. In the same way, our love is not God’s love, but it is a reflection of His love for us. We love because He loves us. That’s the image of God.

God created us to live as an interdependent community. When everyone reflects God’s love to

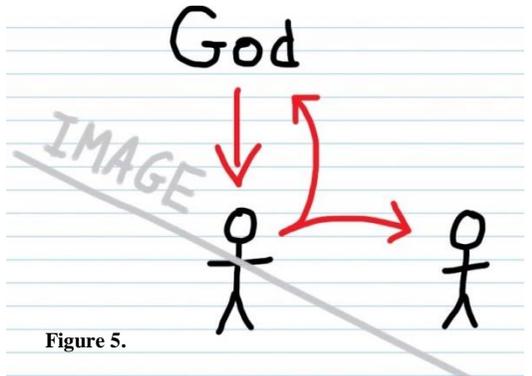


Figure 5.

Him and each other, we get a picture filled with a lot of arrows (Figure 6). Take a look at how everyone is committed to everyone else. Everyone benefits . . . a lot. In this picture, each person has the love of God and three other people, all without a

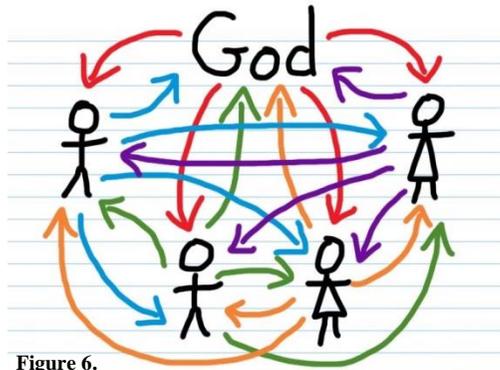


Figure 6.

single arrow returning to themselves. Imagine what a supportive environment this must be! Consider how the God-given gifts and talents of all four people would work together as a team! God made the whole creation to function as an interdependent whole. In a world of perfect mutual love, God’s supply is funneled fully to every creature. It’s the original picture of paradise.

This interdependent paradise is lost with the advent of selfishness (Figure 7). See what happens to our illustration when the arrows turn on themselves. God still

loves them, but they no longer reflect God’s love back to Him, nor do they love others. The mutual support and the supply of diverse gifts and talents have been hoarded and cut off. The ability to work together as a team has been severely impaired. They’re only interested in themselves! The selfishness spreads like a cancer, turning the entire creation in on itself. Nearly every social evil in history can be illustrated with this one drawing: Poverty, starvation, war, abortion, prejudice, and the list goes on.

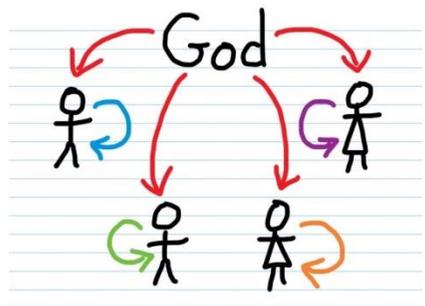


Figure 7.

In this light, the mission of God is simple. God wants His interdependent paradise back. How does God accomplish His mission? He loves us even more. God blessed Abraham to be a blessing to the families of the earth. God gave Moses the law and the tabernacle to encourage an interdependent community. God even chose David, a king whose heart reflected His own, so that His people might still experience selfless love. Time and time again, arrows bent toward self with terrible, often tragic, results. God's greatest expression of love came through Jesus, God Himself in the flesh, who embodied the perfect image of God. Not only that, but He took the sins of the world upon Himself, offering forgiveness and a new life now and forever to all who would, by grace, believe.

The Agape Sticks illustration of Jesus (symbolized by the ancient *Chi Rho*) shows Him being sent by God out of love for us (Figure 8). Everything from Jesus' birth to His teachings, miracles, suffering, death, and resurrection are all expressions of God's love for us. God saves us through Jesus. So far we've done nothing. As recipients of that love *through* Jesus, we love God and others *through* Jesus. Having been loved like this, we can now reflect the image of God back to Him and to others through Jesus. We praise God through Christ. We love sacrificially as He did. We gather as an interdependent community commonly referred to as the Body of Christ. We look forward to Jesus' returning and reestablishing a renewed interdependent paradise. Mission accomplished.

While you can get a taste of Agape Sticks here, the real magic happens with a Bible open and a sheet of paper and a pen. Sick figures and arrows were amazingly effective in faith discussions with an atheist who, after seeing the illustration of an

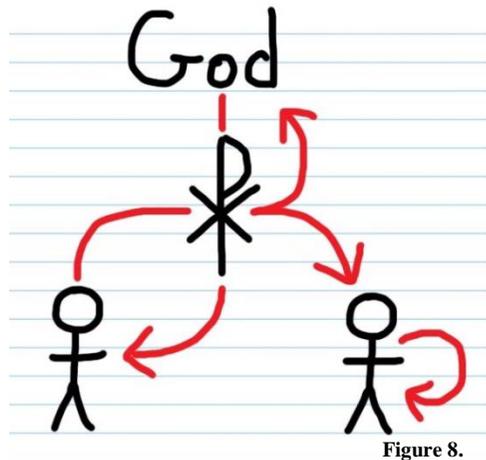


Figure 8.

interdependent world, admitted that it would be great if everyone lived that way. With this method, challenging and complex relationship issues can be illustrated clearly, providing a chance to ponder a way forward with agape love. There have been countless times while I was teaching or preaching, regardless of the group's age or culture, that a picture spoke a thousand words and eyes lit up with fresh understanding. Perhaps the most touching is when the youth, bombarded with messages of self-love, is able to say, "I can see my arrow now. I know where my agape should stick. I'm going to love others the way Jesus loves me."

What started in a Lutheran school chapel service has taken on a life of its own. I guess I wouldn't be writing this article otherwise. By God's grace I've had the

opportunity to train teachers, missionaries, and the next generation of God’s church to use Agape Sticks. Recently I took a sabbatical from my pastoral duties to write a year-long multi-cultural discipleship curriculum utilizing Agape Sticks. It’s called the Harvest Incubator for Mission, administered by LINC-Twin Cities. Along with that, I produced Agape Sticks videos on YouTube for anyone to watch, use, and reproduce. Just search for Agape Sticks. I hope you find them helpful . . . especially if you’re teaching the Sixth Commandment to a room full of Lutheran school children.