

Some common misperceptions of the love of God

Word-based reductionism

Doubtless the most famous form of this error received its classic exposition by A. Nygren. He analysed love with reference to three Greek words: *erōs*, denoting acquisitive affection, often connected with sexual love; *philia* (and the cognate verb *phileō*, 'to love'), having to do with reciprocal friendship, including all the emotional life that sustains such friendship; and *agapē* (and its cognate verb *agapaō*, 'to love'), denoting a self-sacrificing commitment to another's good. In some expositions, *agapē* has no necessary emotional component. Precisely because it is primarily an act of will, such love can be demanded of people; when we are commanded to love, we are obliged to seek their good, even if we frankly dislike them.

This analysis is deeply flawed. R. Joly has shown that the relatively late flowering of *agapaō/agapē* (and hence its spurt to dominance in the LXX and the NT) has to do with developments within the language itself. More importantly, even within these books the distribution of this word group vitiates Nygren's thesis. When Amnon incestuously rapes his half-sister Tamar (2 Sam. 13, LXX), twice we are told that he 'loved' her, once with *agapaō* and once with *phileō*. It is hard to see how this love differs from *erōs*, acquisitive and sexual love (though the word *erōs* is never found in the Bible). Twice John tells us that the Father 'loves' the Son, once using *agapaō* (John 3:35), once using *phileō* (John 5:20), and it is difficult to detect any difference in meaning. When Paul tells Timothy that Demas has forsaken him because he 'loved' this present, evil world (2 Tim. 4:10), the verb is *agapaō*; this love is scarcely a willed commitment to the good of the other. Most striking, perhaps, is the so-called love chapter, 1 Corinthians 13. There Paul tells his readers that if he were to give away all he possesses to the poor, and even submit his body to the torture of the flames (both willed acts for the good of others), it would be possible to do so without love (*agapē*). This surely demonstrates that the love he has in mind is more sweeping than mere altruism, than mere commitment to the good of the other, however self-denying. Such

LOVE

'God is love', John writes (1 John 4:8), a statement the Bible makes about no other being. The truth of the statement is one of the glories of the Bible's picture of *God. It rules out impersonal pantheism; it denies the cogency of the deist vision, in which God is no more than powerful and distant. The God of the Bible is a person, and love, like *holiness, is so much bound up with who he is as a person that John can make this stupendous claim. Many have pointed out, rightly, that the statement cannot be reversed: 'Love is God' would depersonalize God as effectively as deism, for it would elevate 'love', an impersonal affection or impersonal willed sacrifice, to divine status. The reality is far more stunning: God is not only sovereign; he is a person, in whom love is so much constitutive of his being that he can no more abandon love than he can turn away from holiness.

For complex reasons, many in the Western world, both Christians and unbelievers, have drifted towards understandings of the love of God that are demonstrably sub-biblical, sometimes patently anti-biblical. To isolate three of these, and sketch something of a biblical response to each, will set us on a path towards a renewed understanding of some of the varied ways in which the Bible speaks of the love of God.

considerations are easily multiplied.

In other words, although there are, as we shall see, unique and wonderful elements to the love of God, they cannot be univocally tied to one particular word-group.

The view that God becomes more loving as one moves from the OT to the NT

This second claim is no more valid than the first. Its superficial defensibility rests on the large number of OT chapters that pronounce *judgment, both on the covenant people and on their neighbours, primarily using the categories of war, famine and pestilence. By contrast, it is argued, Jesus tells us to turn the other cheek and to love our enemies. Moreover, some Christian theology has interpreted OT law primarily or exclusively in terms of strict accounting and unbending justice ('an eye for an eye'), and the new covenant in terms of grace and forgiveness.

This sort of contrast is achieved only by a highly selective reading of the evidence. It may be that we are impressed by the OT's pictures of temporal judgment because by and large we are a generation that focuses on the concerns of this world. But the NT is far more colourful in its descriptions of final judgment than is the OT, and many of the most colourful metaphors of hell are found on the lips of Jesus. To reflect on, say, Revelation 14 is to reject for ever the notion that God is somehow sterner under the old covenant than under the new, or that the God of the NT is a kinder, *gentler God. Moreover, even the inauguration of the old covenant is bound up with the revelatory declaration that Yahweh is 'the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin' (Exod. 34:6-7, NIV). Indeed, the two words rendered 'love and *faithfulness' (*hesed* and **met*) recur repeatedly in the pages of the OT; it appears that John renders them '*grace and *truth' (John 1:14-18, certainly within their semantic range).

But this does not mean that there is no development at all along the axis of redemptive history. Far from moving from an *angry God to a loving God, however, the framework is more sweeping. Just as the love of God becomes clearer as one moves from the history, literature and types of the OT to the

revelation of the NT that culminates in Jesus and his cross and in the kingdom he brings, so the wrath of God becomes clearer as one moves from the history, literature and types of the OT to the revelation of the NT that culminates in Jesus and his cross and in the final sanctions that await all who reject the gospel.

The thesis that God hates sin but loves sinners

There is a small element of truth in this thesis. God always *hates sin; he is invariably and implacably opposed to it. And it is true that God loves sinners: God 'demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us' (Rom. 5:8; cf. John 3:16). Nevertheless the thesis, with its simplistic antithesis between the personal sinner and sin in the abstract, is mistaken. The same apostle who declares that God's wrath is revealed from heaven against 'all the godlessness and wickedness of men' (Rom. 1:18) also speaks of God's wrath against individuals (2:5); indeed we are all 'by nature children of wrath' (NRSV). The first fifty Psalms repeatedly describe the kinds of people on whom God's wrath rests, not just the kinds of sin. Indeed, the language can move from God's wrath to God's hate and abhorrence: 'The arrogant cannot stand in your presence; you hate all who do wrong. You destroy those who tell lies; bloodthirsty and deceitful men the Lord abhors' (Ps. 5:5-6, NIV).

None of this means that God's wrath is arbitrary or whimsical. In Scripture, God's wrath, however affective, is the willed and *righteous response of his holiness to sin. God's holiness, like God's love, is intrinsic to the very being of God; his wrath is not. To put the point another way: God has always been holy, as he has always been love; he has not always been wrathful. But where his holiness confronts the rebellion of his creatures, he must be wrathful (and the entire sweep of the Bible's storyline insists he is), or his holiness is anaemic. Yet for all that he is no less the God of love.

Some ways in which the Bible speaks of the love of God

The expressions 'love' and 'to love' have a wide range of uses when human beings are the subject: he loves his work; they fall in

love; she loves her husband; they make love; he loves woodwork and milkshakes. Similarly, precisely because God is a person who enters into a variety of relationships, the Bible speaks of God's love in several distinguishable ways. To name but five:

Intra-Trinitarian Love

Twice John's Gospel speaks of the love of the Father for the Son (3:35; 5:20); elsewhere it speaks of the love of the Son for the Father (14:30-31). Clearly this is not the love of redemption. The Father's love for the Son is manifest in his determination to 'show' him everything he does, and to ensure that all honour the Son even as they honour the Father (5:16-30); the love of the Son for the Father is displayed in the perfection of his obedience (14:30-31; *cf.* 8:29). Thus in John's Gospel there is a profound sense in which the intra-Trinitarian love of God is not only temporally and logically prior to his love for his creatures, but is constitutive of the nature of God. Moreover, the cross-work of Jesus is first of all motivated by this intra-Trinitarian love of God, for the cross comes about, in John's theology, precisely because the Father determines that all will honour the Son, and because the Son obeys so perfectly that he accomplishes his Father's commission and goes to the cross. Ultimately this intra-Trinitarian love becomes the critical model of Christian unity under the lordship of Jesus (15:9-16; 17).

God's providential love

When he made everything, God declared that it was 'very good' (Gen. 1:31). It was, after all, the product of his own hand, of his very character, not least of his love. Even now, with his image-bearers in full-fledged rebellion against him, he rules with *providential care; he 'causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous' (Matt. 5:45). Thus he provides a model for Jesus' followers' love for their enemies (Matt. 5:44); God's providential rule is assumed to be a reflection of his love.

God's yearning, salvific love

God is the one who cries, 'Why will you die, O house of Israel? For I take no pleasure in the death of anyone' (Ezek. 18:31-32). God loved 'the world' (John 3:16), an expression which in John most commonly refers to the

entire moral order of men and women in rebellion against their Creator. His most astounding display of love, the sacrifice of his Son, was in its potential sufficient 'for the sins of the whole world' (1 John 2:2).

God's elective love

'I have loved Jacob, but Esau I have hated' (Mal. 1:2-3), God declares. Referring to these words, the apostle Paul points out that they were uttered before either of the brothers was born, precisely so that 'God's purpose in election might stand' (Rom. 9:11-13). The Lord did not choose Israel because they were choice; rather, he set his affection on them because he loved them (Deut. 7:7-10). In other words, he loved them because he loved them: one cannot probe further back than that. Paul well understands the intervening, sovereign grace that reached into his own life (*e.g.* Gal. 1:15-16). The result is that he can scarcely make mention of Jesus and the cross without a personal confession of delight; *e.g.* he mentions the Son of God, and adds, 'who loved me and gave himself for me' (Gal. 2:20).

God's conditional, covenantal love

'Keep yourselves in God's love', Jude exhorts his readers (v. 21), clearly implying that it is possible for Christians *not* to keep themselves in the love of God. According to John, on the night that he was betrayed Jesus exhorted his followers to remain in his love, adding, 'If you obey my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have obeyed my Father's commands and remain in his love' (John 15:10). Such texts do not tell us how people become Christians; rather, assuming that followers of Jesus are in view, they tell us that Christians remain in the love of God and of Jesus by obedience, in precisely the same way that children remain in their parents' love by obedience. Of course, in another field of discourse one might legitimately speak of the same parents' love as unconditional. Nevertheless, the child who explicitly disobeys his or her parents may well experience unpleasant sanctions, as opposed to remaining in the parents' love; that is one of several ways of speaking of familial love. The same emphasis is often found among the old covenant people of God. For instance, in the Decalogue the Lord declares he is a God who shows 'love to a thousand generations of

those who love me and keep my commandments' (Exod. 20:6).

Three important implications

Numerous theological and personal inferences might legitimately be drawn from the evidence so far adduced. Here three points will suffice, all of cardinal importance.

The *first* is that if any one of the five ways just articulated in which the Bible speaks of the love of God is absolutized, not only are the others vitiated but theological nonsense is the inevitable result. Emphasize the last of the five, out of its rightful context, and the result is a return to the most egregious merit theology. Men and women will become painfully introspective, wondering if they have been good enough today to win God's love. Emphasize the fourth out of its rightful place, and the result will be hyper-Calvinism, a rather mechanistic view in which God has only love for the elect and only wrath for the reprobate, making the free offer of the gospel for the latter a presumptuous offence before God. Emphasize the third without recourse to the others, and the result is a rather pathetic Deity who has done all he can do, and now pleads for our repentance and loyalty, though there is very little he can do to elicit them. And so we might go on.

Secondly, not only must we take account of all the ways in which the Bible speaks of the love of God, but we must do so with an eye to proportion and function. In other words, these various ways of speaking about the love of God must have a voice in our theology in a fashion analogous to their roles in Scripture. This means we must do more than list them; we must see how they operate in Scripture, with what themes they are linked, what ethical inferences are drawn, and so forth.

Thirdly (and most important), it is essential to see how these various ways of talking about the love of God fit into the Bible's storyline and are related to the person and work of *Jesus Christ. If the mission of the Son is the result of the intra-Trinitarian love of God, so also it is the fruit of the Father's love for this lost world; the measure of that love is the Son himself (John 3:16). In love, the Father makes a gift of an entire people to his Son; in love, the Son perfectly performs his Father's will and preserves all who are given to him (John 6:37-40). The entire plan

of redemption finds as its wellspring the love of God, poured out on sinners who are God's enemies and far from being intrinsically lovely. This is one of the distinctives of God's love: while with only rare exceptions human love in this fallen world is poured out only on that which the lover finds lovely, God's love springs from within himself, and, at least in the second, third and fourth ways of speaking of his love, it is not dependent on the loveliness of the person or thing that is loved.

Christian love

Christian love can be understood, and best practised, only when it is seen to be a reflection of God's love in its varied dimensions. Moreover, like the love of God, the love believers are to display is not so much invented under the new covenant as sharpened or brought into clearer focus. Jesus' response to the person who asked him what the greatest commandment is (Mark 12:28-31), *i.e.* to love God with all your heart and soul and mind and strength, and your neighbour as yourself, was not entirely innovative; it brought together two crucial OT passages (*viz.* Deut. 6:4-5; Lev. 19:18).

Failure to love God lies at the heart of idolatry, and God's response is jealous wrath (*cf.* Exod. 20:4-5; Jas. 4:4-5). But if Christians love, whether God or fellow Christians, it is in response to God's love (Col. 3:12-15; 1 Pet. 1:8; 1 John 4:11). Although Christian love is invariably the obligation of Christians, it is the fruit of the Spirit (Gal. 5:13). It is characterized by *humility and gentleness (Eph. 4:1-2); in emulation of the Master, it eschews retaliation (1 Pet. 3:8-9). Inevitably self-restraint becomes a watchword (Rom. 14:13-15) as the Christian learns to love with heart and attitude no less than with action (1 Cor. 13).

The many connections between Christian love and the various ways in which the Bible depicts the love of God demand far more reflection than is possible here. But one telling example may be offered. Some have argued that the love on which 1 John insists within the community is inferior to the love that Jesus enjoins for enemies (Matt. 5:43-47). This judgment depends on what *we* find more difficult: in this case, loving enemies as opposed to loving (ostensible) friends. But the proposal is sterile. Love for one's enemies is analogous to the third and fourth ways in

which the Bible speaks of God's love (listed above). By the work of the Spirit (Rom. 5:5), itself the fruit of the cross, we learn to emulate God in this respect: we love the unlovely, the love springing up from within, for we ourselves have been so loved. But love for others in the household of faith in some ways mirrors the intra-Trinitarian love of God (John 17). In both cases, God's love is the motive and standard of ours. In such a framework, to label some expressions of love 'inferior' and others 'superior' is presumptuous indeed, for behind all these various ways of speaking of the love of God is one God whose nature is love.

Bibliography

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