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Theology Brief Preview

THE SOVEREIGNTY OF LOVE

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The Love-Command as a "Fulfilment"

The command of love which forms the centrepiece of Jesus' moral teaching (Mt. 22: 37-40 and parallels) was elicited by a rabbinic discussion that sought to identify a unifying interpretative principle for the requirements of the Torah as a whole. That love "fulfils" the law means four things: (*a*) The whole range of moral norms that give form to a godly life is implied in it: commands of the law, lists of virtues, warnings of temptations, detailed social responsibilities. Interpreted together in this way, they cease to threaten the ultimate tragedy of incompatible moral demands; (*b*) Yet the unification of the demands does not abolish essential differences. Asked about the "first" or "greatest" command, Jesus proposed not one love-command but two, the distinction between the Creator and the created good still appearing clearly within the framework of love; (*c*) Law, therefore, despite the menacing appearance of its plural and prescriptive structure, satisfies the requirements of our moral nature when "written on the heart" (cf. 2 Cor. 3:3; Heb. 8:10); (*d*) So the love-command is the historical climax of the revelation of God's will, giving us the last word on the fulfilment of our existence.

The Breadth of Love

Such an extended use of the term "love" confronts two alternative conceptual dangers. On the one hand, it may seem to leave love without definite content and critical force: if nothing falls outside the scope of the concept, nothing is unloving. Alternatively, one of the love's aspects may supplant the others, so that we understand our obligations too narrowly: if love is sensitivity, we imagine that everything is to be done with a display of emotion; if love is faithfulness, we become suspicious of independence and originality; if love is practical helpfulness, we undervalue attitudes that are not sufficiently energetic, and so on. The mistake is not to think that sensitivity, faithfulness and practical energy are expressions of love; it is to concentrate on one and ignore the others. We should not, then, expect a taut definition of love. Love is to

be described at large, as an unfolding practical relation of the subject to its object, in which there are many moments, passive and active: admiration, desire, practical purpose, settled commitments, identification, etc. In this way the medieval tradition distinguished a variety of types of love—desire, good-will, admiration, friendship etc.no—not conceived as alternatives, but as moments of experience that succeed one another variously in the course of a life that gives and receives love.

Formally expressed, the object of any love is "a good"; but that is broad enough to allow objects of different kinds. It is intelligible to say that we "love" qualities, experiences of sight and sound, states of existence, and so on, but we also love persons. Personal loves, given priority in Jesus' love-commands, are open to reciprocity and mutual communion. Marriage, uniquely mutual and enduring, can be seen as an ideal paradigm of identification in love, an image of the love between Christ and his followers (Eph. 5:25-30). But love has many forms, and friendship affords a more widely applicable matrix of love (Jn. 15:12-14). Three closer explorations may make this general picture clearer.

Love conceived as Will

An influential early 20th century theory (Nygren, Barth) posed a stark alternative between Christian love (*agapē*) and natural love (*eros*), the one marked by self-giving and the other by self-seeking. In love we are either self-enclosed or outgoing, either exploiting or yielding. The reduction of love to these two wholly subjective attitudes excluded even such phenomena as desire and friendship. Though most accounts influenced by this theory have thought of "agapic" love as morally superior, the original conception was that no value-judgment could be made between these two; they simply demanded a radical choice. Behind that proposal lay the long philosophical history of "the will", which was first conceived, in the early middle ages, on the model of God's decision to create. Prior to any judgment of fact or value, the will was "indifferent" to objective good and evil. The mainstream philosophy of mind in the medieval and early-modern West embodied this conception in the theory of the two faculties of the mind, intellectual and voluntative. Love, classified under the will, was seen as subjective and arbitrary, and at this point disappeared from among the major topics of philosophy, leaving theology to make what sense of it it could.

Love conceived as Knowledge

But love must be thought of, also, as a way of knowing the world—the highest way imaginable to human beings whose existence is always expressed in agency. And the implication of this is that truth, the essential criterion of knowledge, is also a criterion of love. But as a true knowledge of the world grasps the manifold differences that constitute its complex order, knowing each thing for what it is and not taking it for something else, so must a true love. When the church fathers spoke of an "ordered love" they meant that love needed to be conformed to the order of reality. In Augustine's phrase, we love God "as" God, and the neighbour "as" neighbour, *i.e.* with an understanding of what "godhead" and "neighbourhood" imply. As God is the condition of all being, so the love of God is the condition for truthful love of any created thing. Faithfulness to the grounding reality of the object is the key to the economy of *differentiated* action:

in one case faithfulness to an agreement, responsiveness to contingencies in another, attention to natural relations in a third. To love business partners *as* business partners, students *as* students, children *as* children, patients *as* sick people, is why we need generalised practices and norms governing business, education, healthcare etc. An entrepreneur needs to understand how the accepted practices that govern competition in business serve the specific goods of employment and distribution of goods, but must also be aware that these do not exhaust the demands of love. There are demands that can only be grasped in terms of the particularities of a situation, as when a rival in some difficulty may need help. And as in the parable of the Samaritan, purely contingent encounters may impose duties of love. Failure to recognise the different character of our relations and of the demands they impose is a failure to love well.

Love in the Form of the Virtues

Varieties in love determine the variety of virtues: a majestic good evoking love in the form of humility, an imperilled good evoking love in the form of courage, a good postponed evoking love in the form of patience, etc. Love is not one virtue among others, patristic theologians taught, but a “golden chain” that binds virtues together, or, as the scholastics said, the “form” of the virtues. Virtues are governed by special norms: humility by the demand not to think too highly of ourselves, courage by the demand not to value our own safety above greater public goods. These special norms make different requirements, but all derive their obligatory force from the law of love. This lays upon us the task of interpreting the requirements well, making sure that they are transparent to love. The healthcare professional may need to conform to bureaucratic and procedural rules; but in dealing with sick patients these need also to be given a kindly face. There is such a thing as the wrong virtue at the wrong time—a humility when courage is needed, or an efficiency when patience is needed. Habitual virtues can dictate automatic responses that narrow the range of moral perception, closing our eyes to other demands of love.

Love and Justice

A special challenge to the sovereignty of love is presented by the relation of love to justice, which does not follow the pattern of the other virtues. Between love and justice there can arise a tension. To explore and resolve it involves distinguishing two ways of speaking about justice outlined by Aristotle: as a virtue of acts of judgment, with its own special norms, and (more typically of the New Testament usage) as a general success in acting to serve the common good. There are high theological stakes in this discussion, which bears directly on divine forgiveness and the scandal of the cross. Can we conceive of absolute norms of justice, by which even God’s love is determined? There are also major implications for the special norms of political activity: are institutional practices bound by absolute norms of justice, or is Christian love free to refashion them? These questions are directly relevant to political theory in general, and to international relations theory in particular.

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