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The Paradoxical Love of the Cross

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The most significant revelation of God's grace and God's love ever given to mankind is the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ. The divine mystery, revealed openly in the cross of Christ, contains heights we cannot scale and depths we cannot plumb. It is a truly amazing paradox!

Now, I choose the word "paradox" intentionally. By paradox I have in mind a reality or event that encompasses elements that appear to be contradictory. It is not a logical riddle but the breaking in of a new horizon of meaning that cannot be fully assimilated by the human intellect. When I speak of the cross as the revelation of God's paradoxical love, I mean the cross not simply as an event in past history but as an abiding reality that impinges upon human life in every age. Yet it always appears as something unexpected and out of the ordinary.

133

The Mystery of Agape

When I use the term "love" in this meditation I will be referring mainly to *agape*—the primary word for love in the Greek New Testament. *Agape* is a unique kind of love, a love that the natural person simply does not know. It is unconditional love—not dependent on the worth of the one who is loved. It is gratuitous love—given to the undeserving. In this sense it is close to the meaning of grace. It is a love that "does not seek its own," as Paul describes it (cf. 1 Cor. 13:5, KJV). It does not seek its own perfection or fulfillment. It is self-sacrificing, not self-regarding. It finds its fulfillment in the sacrifice of itself, in letting go of the self in order that others might live. It is the kind of love that creates value in the one that is loved, rather than the love that finds value.

Martin Luther, who rediscovered the meaning of *agape*—its depth and breadth as seen in the New Testament—astutely observed: "Sinners are beautiful because they are loved. They are not loved because they are beautiful." This

admirably sums up the essence of *agape* as the power of creative transformation.

This unique love, found perfectly in God, is often contrasted with another kind of love, *eros*. *Eros* is the spiritual love that the Greek philosophers and poets often celebrated. It is the love that seeks unity with the highest and aspires to fulfillment and perfection in union with God. This type of love has made a significant impact on Christian theology through the ages. It has been very important in the development of Christian mysticism.

I confess that I have a kind of love-hate relationship with mysticism. On the one hand, I appreciate so many of the classics of spirituality that have their source in Christian mysticism. Yet at the same time I cannot deny a tension, sometimes even a cleavage, between the claims of the mystics and the gospel of free grace. It is significant that the word *eros* does not appear in the New Testament.

Another Greek word for love, *philia*, refers to friendship or mutual love. It has an important role in cementing human relationships, but it is never unconditional. It has its rightful place in the Christian life, but it is not the supernatural love that we know as *agape*. *Philia* goes out to those who share common interests. *Agape* goes out to all, even to those who are our adversaries.

Agape, the paradoxical love of the cross, is a sign of both divine judgment and divine mercy. It reveals the powerlessness of Jesus Christ on the cross as the supreme power in the universe. It is a sign of judgment united with mercy, of power united with meekness. It slays even while it heals, it overcomes even while it submits. It perseveres even while it relents. It is both a crucified love and a conquering love.

The eminent German theologian Jürgen Moltmann in his book, *The Crucified God*, speaks of God's love as a crucified love. My primary criticism of Moltmann's book, and for that

matter of his theological system in general, is that he tends to lose sight of this other dimension of love—that it is triumphant. To have a full Christian perspective we need more than a theology of the cross. We also need a theology of the resurrection and the ascension. Let us also say a theology of Pentecost. A theology of the cross has to be held in tension with a theology of glory. We not only suffer and die with Christ, but we also have a foretaste of the glory that is to be revealed on the last day.

Agape unites love as law and love as grace. In *agape* we see the paradoxical unity of obligation and permission. It lifts one upward even while it proceeds downward. I am sure most of you are familiar with that inspiring gospel song, "The Love of God," which speaks of God's love this way: "It goes beyond the highest star and reaches to the lowest hell." Love reaches both up and down.

I was brought up on German chorales of the former Evangelical Synod of North America. We had other hymns as well, but the chorales made an indelible impression on me. I still recall the words of one of those hymns:

In Thy service, Lord of mercy,
We would find our chief delight.
Show us then some place to labor
In Thy kingdom, Lord of light.²

This is indeed the love of the cross: finding delight in lowly service rather than in possession of the highest good. This love of the cross is both all inclusive and all exclusive. It is the first because it goes out to all people, to the elect and to the reprobate, to the lost and the saved, no matter what their race or creed. Yet it is also exclusive because it calls upon people to enter by the narrow gate and walk the straight way (Matt. 7:13-14). The costly road of discipleship is under the cross.

Metaphors for Love

There are a number of metaphors for love that we find in Scripture. One of these is a torrent of rain. This is also a metaphor for grace. God sends His rain, His grace, to fall upon us. We see this in the words of our Lord, "He causes His sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous" (Matt. 5:45, NIV). Here one discerns another metaphor for love—the shining of the sun. On the basis of his biblical study, Luther referred to love as a "furnace of fire."

Some metaphors for love are misleading. One example is an artesian well. You dig down and make contact. But love is not a power waiting to be tapped or released. It is not gained by digging deeper into the self. In evangelical Christianity love means getting out of yourself, getting away from yourself, getting into the needs, hopes and desires of others.

It is also a mistake to depict love as a magnet that draws all things to itself. This is the idea of love found in Buddhism, where we have the image of the Buddha under the Bo-tree with his enigmatic smile, a symbol of perfect equanimity or tranquillity. The supposition is that such persons will draw other people to themselves by virtue of their inner achievement and inner contentment. This image of the perfected holy person conflicts with the New Testament portrayal of Christ, who is always active, even in prayer. He is the Good Shepherd seeking the lost sheep. He is compared to a woman who diligently seeks for the lost coin. Christ is Francis Thompson's "Hound of Heaven" who pursues sinners even into the darkness. In Buddhism, religion is a quest for inner peace, a peace that is apparent in specially holy persons. In Christianity, true religion is a witness—to what God has already done for us and for the whole world in the suffering, death and resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Those of you who are conversant with process theology and philosophy will know that in these circles love is sometimes described in terms suggestive of a vacuum cleaner, which sucks in almost everything but leaves out the coarse material. Yet *agape* love does not leave out the coarse material; it sanctifies it.

Although *agape* is divine in its source, it is both human and divine in its goal. It is directed to God as well as to our neighbor in need. It is particular in its origin, but it is universal in its outreach. It is directed to God even while it is directed to our neighbor. Why? Because we meet God in our neighbor. When *agape* is directed to God it takes the form of up-welling joy, thanksgiving and praise. It is not a conscious effort to ascend upward mystically to God; it is being lifted into the very presence of God by free grace.

Some of you may be familiar with the Roman Catholic Carmelite nun of nineteenth-century France, Thérèse of Lisieux. She had considerable difficulty with the piety of her cloister—its orientation to merit and gaining security through human works. She finally discovered, through her private reading of Scripture, the message of free grace. This is why some of the other nuns felt threatened by her. Her vision represented an attack on the very foundation of their religious life as sisters. Thérèse expressed discomfort with the metaphor of the stairway to perfection, a product of mystical spirituality. It conveys the impression that heaven must be conquered, that salvation is attained by climbing upwards. She much preferred the metaphor of the lift to heaven—the elevator of free grace. All that is necessary is a simple act of faith. She had not read the Reformers, and if she had she probably would have been reprimanded. Yet she had studied holy Scripture and had come to discern its message. She made the grand discovery echoed in the old gospel song, "Love Lifted Me." We are *lifted* into the presence of God, into fellowship with Him, through love.³

Movements in Love

There are movements in love. There is an upward movement to God, and there is a downward movement. There is also an outward movement to both neighbor and the world. One of my difficulties with Anders Nygren's celebrated work *Agape and Eros*⁴ is that he makes little if any place for love directed to God. In his interpretation *agape* is focused only on our neighbor, whereas faith is focused on God. My reading of Scripture tells me that love to God is as crucial as love to our neighbor, perhaps even more so.

The point is that in loving God we do truly love our neighbor. In seeking the glory of God we will seek the welfare of our neighbor. The ancient church father, Irenaeus, put it this way, "The glory of God is man fully alive." There is no separation then between serving God and serving our neighbor. God is glorified when we go out to the lost and forsaken. We need to remember the directive of General William Booth, founder of the Salvation Army: "Go for souls and go for the worst." As we descend into the depths we are actually closer to God than if we would try to lift ourselves by works of merit up to the spiritual realm above the depths, i.e., above our material world.

The wondrous story of the gospel is God's descent to earth in the person of His Son and in the person of His Spirit at Pentecost. Once we receive the grace of God that sets us free from the power of sin and death we are then motivated to offer our lives to God as a living sacrifice in thanksgiving for what God has done for us and in us. We are also motivated to share the good news of Christ's glorious coming with all with whom we come in contact. We reach up to clasp the hand of God in thanksgiving, and we reach out to clasp the hands of those who are perishing in order to bring them to a saving knowledge of the Lord Jesus Christ.

The Problem of Self-Love

What about self-love? Is there a place for such a concept in the Christian life? Many of those who have made accommodation to *eros* spirituality also make a prominent place for self-love. They will go so far as to say, "You have to learn to love yourself rightly before you can love God." They claim that self-love is actually the basis for all other kinds of love. Even the eminent theologian St. Augustine held that there is a wrong love of self and a right love of self. By the latter he meant the love of the spiritual self or the higher self, which is within us.

We seem to receive a divine sanction for self-love when Jesus gave the great commandment, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind ... And ... You shall love your neighbor as yourself" (Matt. 22:36-39; Luke 10:25-28, NKJ). The question to be asked, however, is whether this is really an injunction to love ourselves or simply an acknowledgment that we naturally love ourselves, and thus we should love our neighbor with the same force that we apply to the service of ourselves.

My perception is that in the New Testament self-love is *consistently* something to be overcome. We are not commanded to love ourselves, though self-love is recognized as inherent in our very beings. The goal is to rise above this love of self into the love of neighbor and the love of God. When we do this we will have a sense of self-worth, a sense of dignity and of self-identity, but it is derivative worth, not an inherent worth. Our worth, our significance, our status all derive from God and depend completely upon God. We must not seek to advance, to adulate, or to exalt the self.

Invariably the question arises, "Does *agape* exclude hope?" When we talk about hope, we are, of course, referring to an abiding Christian virtue. Hope really means "hoping for ourselves." Biblical Christians would have difficulty

with the French Quietist, Fénelon, who said that we are to “love God without fear and without hope.”⁵ God wants us to hope for our own salvation, and to hope for the salvation of others. He does not want us to hope for these things as ends in themselves, but rather as means to the advancement of God’s kingdom and as means to God’s glory. We should be willing to abandon self-salvation for the salvation of the world (cf. Rom. 9:3; Ex. 32:32). Here again we come to the paradox of true love (Matt. 10:39). By losing ourselves we find ourselves in the end. We actually gain our lives when we lose our lives.

Reinhold Niebuhr, who had some profound things to say on the subject of love, concluded that Christianity rules out self-love but not self-realization.⁶ Self-realization, however, comes as the byproduct, never the goal. It is the consequence, not the purpose of Christian endeavor.

There is nothing inherently wrong with natural love, the love of self. But due to our sin all natural loves have become questionable, and therefore they must be redeemed. *Philia* and *eros* both need to be transformed. A true regard for self breaks self-centeredness! But this true regard for self is no longer self-love, but rather a love that rises above the self. The self, in my opinion, should never be the *object* of love. The self instead should be the channel of love, or the agent of love.

Love and Faith

In the sixteenth-century debate on works and grace, a critical distinction was made between love and faith. The Roman Catholic side seemed to hold that we are justified by faith *plus* works of love. The Reformers argued that we are justified by faith, indeed only by faith, but it is never a faith without works of love. Another way to phrase this is that we are justified by faith alone and sanctified by faith working through love, or sanctified by

works of love.

I would not want to leave the impression that justification by faith alone is the *whole* of the gospel. I would rather say that it belongs to the essence of the gospel. I make this point because it is important to affirm that the gospel includes sanctification. Luther seemed to say much the same when he warned his followers that Calvary must be supplemented by Pentecost. After the Reformation had crystallized he began to see that many of the people who had accepted his gospel of salvation by free grace alone were living more immoral lives than when they were Catholics. He realized that he had been leaving something out, namely, the power of Pentecost—the cleansing and purifying power of the Holy Spirit. Pentecost needs to be acknowledged, and preached in conjunction with the message of the cross. Faith and love are correlatives: they belong together. So we say of faith that it receives, while love descends. Faith relays, while love creates. God loves us, but we too love in the power of God’s love. Our love, our *agape* love, corresponds with God’s love. Our love is an echo of His love, a mirror of His love. Once it is separated from God, human love becomes simply mutual love. Mutual love is a good thing, for it is surely better than no love at all. Yet it is not redeeming love. We are redeemed only by God’s love for us, not by our love for God or by our love for our neighbor. Yet our love for both God and neighbor is a sign of God’s love for us.

Faith is the root, love is the fruit. Faith is the foundation, love is the flower that blooms, the evidence of whether our faith is false or genuine. Faith works through love, and love works from faith and toward faith. Love works toward faith because all who love will seek to share the gospel of redemption and reconciliation with those they meet. As I have already said, we are justified by faith, but we are sanctified by love.

Love and Hope

I wish now to delve more deeply into the mystery of the relationship of love and hope. The three theological virtues, so-called, are faith, hope and love. In evangelical Protestantism we do not actually see these three as virtues but rather as gifts from God. In another sense they are works. Why? Because faith means believing, and that is, in one sense, a work. Love means exercising or practicing something. Hope is a work, too, in the sense that hope involves actually hoping. Hope, furthermore, is a direct fruit of faith (Rom. 5:4-5).

Rudolph Bultmann, one of the twentieth century's most influential biblical scholars, had some profound insights into Paul's conception of hope. (I acknowledge that Bultmann's overall system was heretical, but we need to remember that there is a remnant of orthodoxy in every heresy, just as there is a taint of heresy in every orthodoxy.)

Hope is the trust in God which turns away from itself and the world, which waits patiently for God's gift, and which, when he has given it, does not consider it to be a possession of one's own disposal but is confidently assured that God also will maintain what He has bestowed.⁷

Both hope and faith look toward receiving. *Eros*, on the other hand, always looks toward obtaining. There is a proper altruism in true hope. When we hope, we should hope for the salvation of others as well as ourselves. We hope for our own salvation because this is God's will and this redounds to God's glory.

It is important to note the very real differences between natural hope and spiritual hope. Spiritual hope is centered in God. It is theocentric, not anthropocentric. Furthermore, spiritual hope has a social dimension. It is not just personal or individual. We hope not just for ourselves but for the

coming of the kingdom and the triumph of the kingdom in the world. Luther said it well, "To give much is His delight and glory, and He is pleased if we expect much good from Him."⁸

God is pleased when we hope for ourselves, for others and for the triumph of His kingdom. Some years ago I asked one of my brightest students at Dubuque Theological Seminary to write a paper on hope. His paper contained this very profound statement: "Far from being anthropocentric this hope represents the very abandonment of the self and its center in favor of the Christocentric working of God's Spirit." I wholeheartedly agree!

This is precisely where I have another criticism of Anders Nygren. He speaks much about love and much about faith but leaves out the element of hope. I think he does this for a purpose. He wants to make *agape* completely theocentric, i.e., completely centered in God. Yet when one speaks of hope one really has to include the self in some way. A genuinely Christian perspective is really theanthropocentric because Christian life is centered in God and humanity at one and the same time.

Paradoxical Aspects of Love

I would like now to examine more closely the paradoxes associated with *agape*. It is both submission and conquest. It is both self-emptying and self-fulfilling. It contains both sorrow and joy. Jesus wept over Jerusalem. He went to the cross in sorrow, almost at the point of despair, yet the angels in heaven were singing because they saw in His cross the defeat of Satan. They witnessed the glory of the cross. Love is both upward and downward. It goes up to God and down to those in need.

Furthermore, love is both motivated and unmotivated. Anders Nygren spends much time insisting that *agape* is unmotivated. There is nothing that motivates God to love

us. There is no worth in ourselves that wins His sympathy and favor. Yet we need to recognize that love has a motivation all its own. Its goal is to uproot sin and to make us holy, i.e., to transform us into God's very image. God loves us while we are still in our sins, but He loves us so much that He will not leave us in our sins. He lifts us up to a new foundation. He creates in us a clean heart. He cleanses us by His Spirit.

This paradoxical love of the cross that I have been speaking of is preeminently exemplified in Jesus Christ Himself. It is seen most gloriously in His sacrificial life and death. He was both victor and victim. He was both priest and sacrifice. He was both Lord and servant. He was and is both Lion and Lamb.

P. T. Forsyth, the Scottish Congregationalist preacher and eminent theologian, observed that "In Christ God did not send a message of His love which cost the messenger His life but Himself loved us to the death and to our eternal redemption." An insightful statement, isn't it? Christ is not merely the foremost example of love, the model of love. He is the Savior who delivered us by His love.

Finally, there is joy in *agape* love, joy in the practice of the love of the cross. There is joy in God's love for us, and there is joy in our love for God. There is joy in service to our neighbor as well. But we do not serve our neighbor in order to find joy and happiness. That would be to go back to the anthropocentric kind of thinking that we have already seen is detrimental to the life of faith. We serve simply out of love, simply because we care. We serve because the Holy Spirit has planted within us a caring concern for others. This distinction is supremely important. Joy and happiness come as the fruit, the by-product. They are the evidence of something deeper within us that is the gift of love. This gift is really the gift of Jesus Christ Himself, who lives within us by His Spirit.

Agape love is both unilateral and bilateral. By unilateral I mean that it proceeds outward, whether the other person responds or not. This is the key to understanding *agape* love. At the same time, *agape* does seek to create a relationship with the other person. There is, then, this bilateral dimension.

Paul Tillich, a mid-twentieth-century theologian and philosopher whose influence is still vast on the academic scene, sought to accommodate the gospel to Hellenism, to incorporate within the gospel both biblical and Hellenistic motifs. He tried to make a place for both *agape* and *eros*. In the end he regrettably subordinated *agape* to *eros*. Tillich basically defined love as the desire for union with the valuable.¹⁰ By this he meant union with God, the being who has preeminent value. But is that what love is in the New Testament? Love is not desire at all. Love is the readiness to give and to serve, as the Holy Spirit moves within us and directs us. Luther was right in saying, "Good work is done when one neither intends nor knows it."¹¹ There is something spontaneous about *agape* love. You do not stop to reflect upon it, you simply do it. *Agape* love is always love in action.

Tillich saw the symbol of love as a flock of birds soaring off into the sky. But that again is not *agape*, it is *eros*. In the wider Platonic tradition love is sometimes depicted as an arrow shot into the sky toward heaven. But love is downward as well as upward. It is upward only when we are being *lifted* upward by the Spirit to God.

I take exception to Bernard of Clairvaux's assertion that the highest kind of love is the love of self for the sake of God.¹² Loving ourselves for the sake of God is not New Testament teaching. Bernard believed that we can attain a perfected love of self, but this is still remaining within the self. True love, Christian love, drives one out of the self into the needs and aspirations of one's neighbor, or it is simply

not *agape*.

Moreover, I do not wish to say with the venerable theologian St. Augustine, "The more we love God the more we love ourselves." I would rather say, "The more we love God the more we will forget ourselves, especially as we concentrate on service to others."

May God give us clear insight to understand the nature of the wondrous love of Calvary, and may His Spirit move us to love both Him and our neighbor with the supernatural love of the cross.

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Endnotes

- 1 Quoted in Jürgen Moltmann in his *The Crucified God*, trans. R. A. Wilson and John Bowden (New York: Harper & Row, 1974), 214. See Luther, *Heidelberg Disputation*, xxviii.
- 2 E. Kockritz, "In Thy Service, Lord of Mercy," *The Evangelical Hymnal*, ed. David Bruening (St. Louis: Eden Publishing House, 1922), No. 322.
- 3 *The Autobiography of Saint Thérèse of Lisieux: The Story of a Soul*, trans. and ed. John Beevers (New York: Doubleday, 1989), 49, 56, 92, 114.
- 4 Anders Nygren, *Agape and Eros*, trans. Philip S. Watson,

(Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1953).

- 5 In Gerald Heard, *A Preface to Prayer* (New York: Harper & Bros., 1944), 200. Cf. François Fénelon, *Christian Perfection*, trans. Mildred Whitney Stillman, ed. Charles F. Whiston (New York: Harper, 1947), 143.
- 6 Reinhold Niebuhr, *An Interpretation of Christian Ethics*, (1935; reprint New York: Seabury/Crossroad, 1979), 33.
- 7 Rudolf Bultmann and Karl Heinrich Rengstorf, *Hope*, trans. Dorothea M. Barton (London: Adam and Charles Black, 1963), 37.
- 8 *What Luther Says*, ed. Ewald M. Plass (St. Louis: Concordia, 1959), 2: 1089.
- 9 P. T. Forsyth, "Faith, Metaphysic, and Incarnation," *Methodist Review* 97 (New York: September 1915), 708.
- 10 Paul Tillich, *Love, Power and Justice* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1954), 30-31.
- 11 In Heinrich Boehmer, *Road to Reformation*, trans. John W. Doberstein and Theodore G. Tappert (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg, 1946), 163.
- 12 *Bernard of Clairvaux: Selected Works*, trans. & ed. G. R. Evans (New York: Paulist Press, 1987), 195-97.