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ETHICS OF LOVE? MORALITY AND THE MEANING OF DIVINE LOVE¹

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Abstract

While there is wide agreement on the importance of love to Christian ethics, just what an ethics of love includes and entails differs depending upon how Christian love is understood. Toward clarifying the relationship between love and Christian ethics, this essay briefly engages the highly influential agapist conception of love and questions its sufficiency as the basis of Christian ethics. Consideration of some apparent shortcomings of the agapist conception leads to the proposal that the continued quest for a more intentionally and distinctively biblical conception of divine love is integral to a compelling and faithfully Christian ethics of love.

Keywords: Christian ethics, love, agape, eros, altruism.

Introduction

“Love is the only norm.”² This statement, when unpacked, is the basis of Christian ethics according to Joseph Fletcher’s seminal work, *Situation Ethics*. Even if one successfully addresses the numerous questions that arise surrounding the supposition that love is the foundation of Christian ethics, an enormous query remains. What is love? This is perhaps the most enduring criticism of Fletcher’s system of situation ethics.³ One might point out that perhaps the criticism, while seemingly valid in itself, is unfair to pin specifically to Fletcher, considering the notorious difficulty pertaining to various attempts to define love.⁴ However, that

¹This article is dedicated to the memory of my beloved teacher, colleague, and friend, Dr. Miroslav Kiš, to whom I will ever remain grateful.

²Joseph F. Fletcher, *Situation Ethics: The New Morality* (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster, 1966), 69.

³See David Clyde Jones, *Biblical Christian Ethics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1994); Norman Geisler, *Ethics: Alternatives and Issues* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1971), 75.

⁴Divine love is conceived and described in various ways. As Kevin J. Vanhoozer puts it, “the problem is not *that* God loves, but rather *what* God’s love is.” “Introduction: The Love of God—Its Place, Meaning, and Function in Systematic Theology,” in *Nothing Greater, Nothing Better: Theological Essays on the Love of God*, ed. Kevin J. Vanhoozer (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2001), 7.

is just the issue; it is difficult, if not impossible, to construct a system of ethics upon an idea which is, at best, imprecise. Nevertheless, while Fletcher's particular variety of love ethics differs substantially from other varieties of love ethics, he is certainly not alone in positing love as a foundational principle of normative ethics.⁵

Scripture appears to endorse the centrality of love with regard to Christian ethics. For instance, Paul presents the theological virtues of faith, hope, and love, "but the greatest of these is love" (1 Cor 13.13).⁶ Jesus located love at the heart of Christianity. When asked to identify the greatest commandment Jesus responded by restating two love commandments found in the OT, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.' This is the great and foremost commandment. The second is like it, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' On these two commandments depend the whole Law and the Prophets" (Matt 22:37–40; cf. Mark 12:30–31; Deut 6:5; Lev 19:18). Nevertheless, while biblical emphasis on love is readily apparent, what an "ethics of love" actually entails has historically been much more difficult to ascertain.

This essay is offered as a sort of prolegomena to a potential ethics of love, based on the premise that Christian ethics ought to be rooted in a distinctively Christian theology, which itself must be firmly grounded in Scripture. For this reason, I will briefly discuss issues relative to the theological conception of divine love, followed by a review of some relevant biblical-linguistic questions which point to my thesis that a more intentionally and distinctively biblical conception of divine love is integral to a Christian ethics of love.

The Agape-Eros Distinction in Theology

In the history of Christianity, there is no shortage of definitions of love. Yet, despite a richly varying history of finely nuanced theological conceptions, the broad contours of divine love have remained strikingly constant in the classical

⁵A number of ethicists and theologians have employed the concept of love as central to Christian ethics. Among many others, consider Reinhold Niebuhr, *Love and Justice: Selections from the Shorter Writings of Reinhold Niebuhr*, Library of Theological Ethics (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1992); Gene H. Outka, *Agape: An Ethical Analysis*, Yale Publications in Religion (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1972); Stephen G. Post, *A Theory of Agape: On the Meaning of Christian Love* (Lewisburg, PA: Bucknell University Press, 1990); Paul Tillich, *Love, Power, and Justice; Ontological Analyses and Ethical Applications* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1954); Edward Collins Vacek, *Love, Human and Divine: The Heart of Christian Ethics*, Moral Traditions & Moral Arguments (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 1994).

⁶All biblical references are from the NASB unless otherwise noted.

theist tradition ranging from Augustine to Thomas Aquinas to Martin Luther.⁷ These three towering thinkers in the history of Christian theology agree that God's love is absolutely gratuitous, pure, and unilateral beneficence, with the object(s) of divine love providing no actual or possible enjoyment or value to God in Godself.

Augustine's view is rooted in a divine ontology which conceives of God as perfect, absolutely simple, timeless, immutable, self-sufficient, and impassible.⁸ Hence, it is not surprising that Augustine seems to struggle to describe the nature of divine love. For instance, he writes, "In what way then does He [God] love us? As objects of use or as objects of enjoyment? If He enjoys us, He must be in need of good from us, and no sane man will say that; for all the good we enjoy is either Himself, or what comes from Himself. ... He does not enjoy us then, but makes use of us. For if He neither enjoys nor uses us, I am at a loss to discover in what way He can love us."⁹ Notably, even with regard to Augustine's so-called use love (*uti*), God does not love any external goodness, but he loves only his own

⁷Since the scope of this work does not permit a survey of the vast historical theology of love, I have selected three of the most influential theologians in Christian history, from the early church (Augustine), from the medieval church (Aquinas), and from the Reformation (Martin Luther). These three suffice to show the continuity of the broad contours regarding the Christian conception of divine love. See, in this regard, John C. Peckham, *The Concept of Divine Love* (New York: Peter Lang, 2014), 31–92. For more on the historical theology of love consider Vincent Brümmer, *The Model of Love: A Study in Philosophical Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993); John Burnaby, *Amor Dei, a Study of the Religion of St. Augustine. The Hulsean Lectures for 1938* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1960); Liz Carmichael, *Friendship: Interpreting Christian Love* (New York: Clark, 2004); Martin Cyril D'Arcy, *The Mind and Heart of Love* (London: Faber & Faber, 1954); Anders Nygren, *Agape and Eros*, trans., Philip S. Watson (London: S.P.C.K., 1953); John M. Rist, *Eros and Psyche: Studies in Plato, Plotinus, and Origen* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1964); Denis de Rougemont, *Love in the Western World* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1957); Irving Singer, *The Nature of Love*, vol. 1 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987).

⁸It is widely recognized that Augustine was affected by Plato's ontology through the influence of neo-Platonism. The concepts of absolute simplicity, aseity, and others are congruent with Plato's theory of the *proton philon* (highest love). Accordingly, Augustine comments, "the perfection of His [God's] being is consummate because He is immutable, and therefore neither gains nor loses." Augustine, *Ep.* 118.3.15 (NPNF 1:877). Further, God has an "ineffably simple nature." Augustine, *Trin.* 15.19.37 (NPNF 3:424). He is the "unchangeably eternal" one. Augustine, *Conf.* 11.31.41 (NPNF 1:319). Moreover, he is the "eternal, spiritual, and unchangeable good." Augustine, *Civ.* 15.22 (NPNF 2:648).

⁹Augustine, *Doctr. chr.* 1.31.34 (NPNF, 2:1109). For Augustine, "to enjoy a thing is to rest with satisfaction in it for its own sake. To use, on the other hand, is to employ whatever means are at one's disposal to obtain what one desires." Augustine, *Doctr. chr.* 1.4.4 (NPNF, 2:1090).

goodness.¹⁰ In this way, divine love is not affected by its object and, accordingly, human love is in no way advantageous to God. Thus, Augustine, while positing that God does love humans, restricts divine love to pure beneficence.

Thomas Aquinas adopts a similar perfect being ontology, including the notion that God is utterly impassible, and thus divine love cannot be affected.¹¹ God loves, but his is a passionless love, it is an “act of the will.”¹² Divine love (*caritas*) may thus be equated with benevolence. Such love is never caused by its object but always by God alone. As such, divine love is therefore nothing more or less than a purposive, rational act of God’s will.¹³ God can neither enjoy, nor appreciate any beings; love provides no value for God who remains altogether unaffected.

Martin Luther, although providing nuance regarding the notion of impassibility in his theology of the cross (*theologia crucis*),¹⁴ nevertheless ultimately maintains that God has no passions in saying, “God is not capable of suffering.”¹⁵ He is perhaps

¹⁰In God’s “use” of humans there is “no reference to His own advantage, but to ours only; and, so far as He is concerned, has reference only to His goodness.” Augustine, *Doctr. chr.* 1.32 (NPNF, 2:1109, 1110). “But neither does He use after our fashion of using. For when we use objects, we do so with a view to the full enjoyment of the goodness of God. God, however, in His use of us, has reference to His own goodness.” Augustine, *Doctr. chr.* 1.32.35 (NPNF 2:1109).

¹¹Aquinas is clear that “in God there are no passions. Now love is a passion. Therefore love is not in God.” Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* 1.20.1.1. Further, “sorrow ... over the misery of others belongs not to God.” Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* 1.21.3. God’s virtues that relate to giving and liberality are purely products of the divine will. Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* 1.21.1.

¹²“Therefore acts of the sensitive appetite, inasmuch as they have annexed to them some bodily change, are called passions; whereas acts of the will are not so called. Love, therefore, and joy and delight are passions; in so far as they denote acts of the intellectual appetite, they are not passions. It is in this latter sense that they are in God. Hence the Philosopher says (Ethic. vii): ‘God rejoices by an operation that is one and simple,’ and for the same reason He loves without passion.” Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* 1.20.1.

¹³For Aquinas, “the will also should be the efficient cause of that act” of love. Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* 2-2.23.2.

¹⁴For instance Dennis Ngien theorizes that Luther’s theology actually requires divine passibility. Dennis Ngien, *The Suffering of God According to Martin Luther’s Theologia Crucis*, American University Studies, Series VII, Theology and Religion 181 (New York: Peter Lang, 1995). This is based on Luther’s *communicatio idiomatum*, ascribing to Christ’s divinity what happens to humanity and vice versa. Martin Luther, *Luther’s Works*, ed. Jan Pelikan, Hilton C. Oswald, and Helmut T. Lehmann, 55 vols. (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1999), 37:210 [hereafter *LW*]. However, it seems that for Luther, divine passibility is actually limited to God in Christ, but does not reach God in Godself. Cf. Alister E. McGrath, *Luther’s Theology of the Cross: Martin Luther’s Theological Breakthrough* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1985). See the further discussion in Peckham, *The Concept of Divine Love*, 77–86.

¹⁵*LW* 38:254. He adds, “the Deity surely cannot suffer and die.” *LW* 37:210.

even more adamant that divine love does not enjoy good but merely confers good. Even if human nature was capable of loving God, God would remain unaffected by such love in accordance with his self-sufficiency and impassibility.¹⁶ Furthermore, the gratuitous love of God (characterized thematically as *agape*) is to be sharply differentiated from all human types of love. As Luther puts it: “Rather than seeking its own good, God’s love flows forth and bestows good.”¹⁷ In this way, “sinners are attractive because they are loved; they are not loved because they are attractive.”¹⁸ God receives nothing from humans but rather liberally gives out of his extravagant goodness.¹⁹

Despite the striking agreement amongst the conceptions of divine love of Augustine, Aquinas, and Luther, sharp disagreements appear regarding the matter of *human* love. Augustine believed that humans could love God as the only true object of love. The relative quality of love as desire is dependent upon its object; desirous love for a good object is proper human love. Although this love is itself a gift of God, humans ought to desire God as the ultimate object of goodness and in this way truly love Him. “The right will is, therefore, well-directed love [*amor*], and the wrong will is ill-directed love [*amor*]. Love [*amor*], then, yearning to have what is loved, is desire [*cupiditas*]; and having and enjoying [*frui*] it, is joy; fleeing what is opposed to it, it is fear; and feeling what is opposed to it, when it has befallen it, it is sadness. Now these motions are evil if the love [*amor*] is evil; good if the love [*amor*] is good.”²⁰ The view of Aquinas has a great deal in common with Augustine, positing the possibility of true human love for God and for others,

¹⁶It should be noted that Luther at times speaks of divine love by employing passionate language. For instance, he speaks of God’s love as the “blood of love.” *LW*, 30:300, 301. He also speaks of the zeal of the Lord against the enemies of God’s people. *LW*, 16:102. In these cases, nevertheless, divine love is a willed love that remains unaffected by external influence.

¹⁷*LW* 31:57. Cf. Daniel Day Williams, *The Spirit and the Forms of Love* (New York: Harper & Row, 1968), 78.

¹⁸*LW* 31:57. Luther writes, “God’s love does not find, but creates, its lovable object; man’s love is caused by its lovable object . . . sinners are lovely because they are loved: they are not loved because they are lovely. [L]ove of the cross means . . . that which betakes itself not to where it can find something good to enjoy, but where it may confer good to the wicked and the needy.” Martin Luther, *D. Martin Luthers Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe*, 56 vols. (Weimar, Germany: Böhlau, 1883–1938), 1:36 [hereafter *WA*], quoted in Nygren, *Agape and Eros*, 725, 726.

¹⁹Thus, divine love is an overflowing spring. *WA* 36:360, 8, quoted in Nygren, *Agape and Eros*, 730. Cf. Singer, *The Nature of Love*, 1:328. Luther compares this to a furnace saying, “If anyone would paint and aptly portray God, then he must draw a picture of pure love, as if the Divine nature were nothing but a furnace and fire of such love, which fills heaven and earth.” *WA* 3:424, 16, quoted in Nygren, *Agape and Eros*, 724.

²⁰Augustine, *Civ.* 14.7 (NPNF 2:574).

including the possibility of friendship with God. For Aquinas, love is always directed towards some good (*amor concupiscentiae*) which is willed toward someone (*amor amicitiae*) whether oneself or another.²¹ Luther, however, adamantly disagrees with both Augustine and Aquinas, positing that it is utterly impossible for humans to love God. According to Luther, because of intrinsic sinfulness, humans are ontologically incapable of love. Thus humans may only “Love God by admitting your utter and total inability to love God.”²² Luther states, “No one is able to love God from his whole heart, etc., and his neighbor as himself.”²³ For Luther, then, all true love flows downwards, there is no such thing as love that flows upwards toward God.

The general agreement about divine love and yet considerable disagreement relative to human love among these thinkers is not surprising considering the similarity of their doctrines of God on the one hand and the dissimilarity of the respective soteriologies on the other hand.²⁴ For all three theologians, God is (among other things) utterly impassible. If God is, in fact, utterly impassible, divine love could be nothing more or less than what these great thinkers have defined, in a word: beneficence. No mutuality, no reciprocity, no bilateral divine-human love relationship is possible. Divine love must be merely God’s goodness infused or otherwise bestowed upon human objects who could make no difference to the life of God in Godself. As such, divine love amounts to what has been termed in many Christian circles as (thematic) *agape*: pure giving that never receives.

Perhaps the foremost recent contributor to this notion of *agape* as distinctly Christian love is Anders Nygren. Through Nygren’s work the categories of *agape* and *eros* in thinking about divine love have become incredibly influential such that nearly every serious work on the topic of love deals with these categories.²⁵ Nygren defines divine love as *agape* by contrasting it with *eros*.²⁶ For Nygren, the

²¹Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* 2-1.26.4.

²²Singer, *The Nature of Love*, 1:327.

²³LW 34:309.

²⁴The contrast is sharpest between Luther and Aquinas due to Luther’s axiomatic view of *sola gratia*. However, Luther also disagrees with Augustine’s allowance for an upward love (desire) toward God.

²⁵See Nygren, *Agape and Eros*. Gene Outka goes so far as to state, “Nygren so effectively posed issues about love that they have had a prominence in theology and ethics they never had before. . . . Thus, whatever the reader may think of it, one may justifiably regard his work as the beginning of the modern treatment of the subject.” Outka, *Agape*, 1. For a contemporary advocate of Nygren’s view of *agape* see Colin Grant, “For the Love of God: *Agape*,” *Journal of Religious Ethics* 24, no. 1 (1996): 3–21.

²⁶He contends that *eros* and *agape* “represent two streams that run through the whole history of religion, alternately clashing against one another and mingling with one another.

only true Christian love (*agape*) is: (1) spontaneous and unmotivated; (2) indifferent to value; (3) creative; and (4) the initiator of fellowship. Nygren's perspective is further laid out in a series of antitheses, he contends that "*Eros* is acquisitive desire and longing" while "*Agape* is sacrificial giving." "*Eros* is an upward movement, man's way to God" while "*Agape* is sacrificial giving' which 'comes down ... God's way to man.'" "*Eros* is man's effort" while "*Agape* is God's grace." "*Eros* is determined by the quality, the beauty and worth, of its object, it is not spontaneous but 'evoked', 'motivated'" while "*Agape* is sovereign in relation to its object, and is directed to both 'the evil and the good'; it is spontaneous, 'overflowing', 'unmotivated.'"²⁷

In continuity with the classic conception of divine love, Nygren believes that God lacks nothing and, hence, desires nothing (perfection and self-sufficiency). As such, the aspects of love represented by the *eros* motif are utterly inappropriate to a Christian conception of divine love. Rather, divine love in Christianity (thematic *agape*) is not emotive, evaluative, or motivated but a purposive, willed, indifferent love totally distinct from any need or desire. Biblical expressions of divine emotion "are on this view merely crude anthropomorphisms."²⁸ All other types of love (e.g. *eros*, *philia*) are not Christian love.²⁹ *Eros* is ruled out for the aforementioned reasons while friendship love (*philia*) is considered inappropriate due to the vast inequality between God and humans. Nygren frames his study as a motif analysis, rather than a linguistic study, but nevertheless claims that *agape* was a theme specifically chosen by the NT writers to convey this *sola gratia* type of love which is "indifferent to human merit" and also to exclude all other concepts of love.³⁰ In support of this view, he contends that the NT conception of love is different from the OT conception of love.³¹ As such, for Nygren, the love between God and the world is a one-way connection that is wholly predicated on

They stand for what may be described as the egocentric and the theocentric attitude in religion." Nygren, *Agape and Eros*, 205.

²⁷Nygren, *Agape and Eros*, 210. In this way, *eros* stems from self-love whereas *agape* is divine love toward others.

²⁸Gary D. Badcock, "The Concept of Love: Divine and Human," in *Nothing Greater, Nothing Better: Theological Essays on the Love of God*, ed. Kevin J. Vanhoozer (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2001), 40.

²⁹Nygren, *Agape and Eros*, 92.

³⁰Nygren, *Agape and Eros*, 57. In fact, he goes so far as to consider it a "new creation of Christianity." Nygren, *Agape and Eros*, 48. However, Carmichael points out, "More objective scholarship suggests that the appearance of *agape* is to be attributed, not to theological motivation but to the natural evolution of the Greek language." Carmichael, *Friendship*, 36.

³¹Nygren, *Agape and Ero*, 62. This is in keeping with his view of discontinuity between Judaism and Christianity.

the sovereign will of God. God gains no value from this relationship. Divine love is utterly gratuitous.³²

Consequently, the only *true* agent of love is God; humans in themselves are incapable of *agape* love. Thus, a human loves God only “because God’s unmotivated love has overwhelmed him and taken control of him, so that he cannot do other than love God.”³³ Human to human *agape* love may take place, but it is not actually originated by humans. Rather, it is divine love that flows through humans.³⁴ As Nygren puts it, “What we have here is a purely theocentric love, in which all choice on man’s part is excluded.”³⁵ *Agape* love is thus unconditional love predicated on the divine will alone, which itself is in accordance with the superabundance of the divine nature of *agape*; divine love, then, could never be earned or merited.³⁶ True *agape* love is nothing else than that unilateral beneficence that flows from God to others.

Although Nygren’s view has come under a great deal of criticism, it remains an influential study, and many of his conclusions remain in significant streams of biblical and systematic theology. For instance, Nygren’s basic premise regarding the categories of need love (corresponding to *eros*) and gift love (corresponding to thematic *agape*) continues to be influential (and at times, axiomatic) in some circles.³⁷ On the other hand, numerous questions have been raised regarding his reconstruction of historical theology as well as the adequacy of a conception of divine love that rules out genuinely mutual divine-human relationships.³⁸ Indeed,

³²“God does not love in order to obtain any advantage thereby, but quite simply because it is his nature to love with a love that seeks, not to get, but to give.” Nygren, *Agape and Eros*, 201.

³³Nygren, *Agape and Eros*, 214. For Nygren, “[t]herein lies the profound significance of the idea of predestination: man has not selected God, but God has elected man.” Nygren, *Agape and Eros*, 214.

³⁴Thus, “To the extent that man participates in the divine, and only to that extent, is it right for me to love him.” Nygren, *Agape and Eros*, 215.

³⁵Nygren, *Agape and Eros*, 213.

³⁶“The man who is loved by God has no value in himself; what gives him value is precisely the fact that God loves him. *Agape* is a value-creating principle.” Nygren, *Agape and Eros*, 78.

³⁷For instance, these categories were adopted and popularized by C. S. Lewis in *The Four Loves* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1988).

³⁸For some direct criticisms of Nygren’s view, see Brümmer, *The Model of Love*, 137; Burnaby, *Amor Dei*; Thomas Jay Oord, “Matching Theology and Piety: An Evangelical Process Theology of Love” (Ph.D. dissertation, Claremont Graduate University, 1999), 113; Williams, *The Spirit and the Forms of Love*, 38. In this regard, according to Martin d’Arcy, “*Eros* and *Agape* are not enemies but friends.” D’Arcy, *The Mind and Heart of Love*, 304. Cf. Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, 3 vols. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951), 1:281.

in the field of theology, Nygren's so-called *agapist* conception of divine love has endured heavy criticism from many recent theologians who believe that the exclusion of reciprocal love rules out meaningful divine-human relationships.³⁹ From the standpoint of biblical scholarship, many have pointed out the failure of Nygren's *agape* motif to cohere with the biblical data, even when investigation is restricted to the NT.⁴⁰ Indeed, perhaps the strongest criticism of Nygren, despite his claim to not be making a semantic argument, is the apparent biblical testimony which contradicts Nygren's proposed motifs, to which we now turn.⁴¹

³⁹For instance, consider Brümmer, *The Model of Love*; Burnaby, *Amor Dei*; Carmichael, *Friendship*; D'Arcy, *The Mind and Heart of Love*; Charles Hartshorne, *The Divine Relativity*, 2nd printing ed. (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1964); Charles Hartshorne, *Omnipotence and Other Theological Mistakes* (Albany, NY: State University of New York, 1984); Eberhard Jüngel, *The Doctrine of the Trinity: God's Being Is in Becoming*, trans. Horton Harris (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1976); Eberhard Jüngel, *God as the Mystery of the World: On the Foundation of the Theology of the Crucified One in the Dispute between Theism and Atheism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1983); Sallie McFague, *Models of God: Theology for an Ecological, Nuclear Age* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress, 1987); Jürgen Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom: The Doctrine of God*, trans. Margaret Kohl (San Francisco, CA: Harper & Row, 1981); Thomas C. Oden, *The Living God* (San Francisco, CA: Harper & Row, 1987); Schubert Miles Ogden, *The Reality of God and Other Essays* (New York: Harper & Row, 1966); Oord, "Matching Theology and Piety: An Evangelical Process Theology of Love"; Catherine Osborne, *Eros Unveiled: Plato and the God of Love* (Oxford, UK: Clarendon, 1994); Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Systematic Theology*, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley, 3 vols., vol. 1 (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1991); Clark H. Pinnock, "Constrained by Love: Divine Self-Restraint According to Open Theism," *Perspectives in Religious Studies* 34, no. 2 (2007): 149–160; Post, *A Theory of Agape*; Richard Rice, "Process Theism and the Open View of God: The Crucial Difference," in *Searching for an Adequate God: A Dialogue between Process and Free Will Theists*, ed. David Ray Griffin, John B. Cobb, and Clark H. Pinnock (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000), 184; Mark Lloyd Taylor, *God Is Love: A Study in the Theology of Karl Rahner* (Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1986); Williams, *The Spirit and the Forms of Love*.

⁴⁰For instance, Reinhold Niebuhr explicitly criticizes Nygren for making the distinction between *agape* and human love too sharp. *The Nature and Destiny of Man: A Christian Interpretation*, 2 vols. (New York: Scribner, 1964), 2:84. Many others have pointed out that the distinction between *agape* and other words for love, specifically the *philia* family, is not supported by the linguistic data. For instance, Badcock contends, "The Bible itself does not actually make the rigid distinction that Nygren presupposes between Christian love, *agape*, and other forms of human love." "The Concept of Love," 37. Cf. John A. T. Robinson, "*Agape* and *Eros*," *Theology* 48, no. 299 (1945): 99; Post, *A Theory of Agape*, 88, 89.

⁴¹In this regard, William Klassen comments, "Nygren's thesis has been all but discredited." "Love in the NT and Early Jewish Literature," *ABD* 4:385. See, further, Roy F. Butler, *The Meaning of Agapao and Phileo in the Greek New Testament* (Lawrence, KS: Coronado Press, 1977), 70; Geraint Vaughan Jones, "*Agape* and *Eros*: Some Notes on Dostoevsky," *Expository Times* 66, no. 1 (1954–1955): 3; Oord, "Matching Theology and

Agape in the NT

Confusion over the precise meaning of divine love is not peculiar to the realm of systematic theology, but also appears relative to the understanding of *agape* within biblical scholarship. Numerous studies of love posit, to a greater or lesser degree, a unique type of NT love which is exemplified by the term (or theme) *agape*. In this way, remnants of Nygren's view seem to linger in some theological circles. In positing a unique and prime position for *agape* as the exclusive and inimitable Christian love, some have asserted that the *agape* root is almost totally absent in pre-biblical Greek.⁴² With that, some scholars have believed that the *agape* word group was used by NT writers to signify a new and unique concept of love. Others have claimed the use of the *agape* word group was used merely to distinguish from Greek concepts of love such as *eros* (which does not appear in the NT) and "not because the word had a particularly positive connotation."⁴³ However, the verb *agapaō* appears often in post-Homeric literature and the noun *agape* seems to come from translating the Hebrew word for love, *ahab*.⁴⁴ Accordingly, some believe the *agape* word group was already becoming prominent at the time of the biblical usage and its presence in the NT is not necessarily the result of a choice to convey some new or distinct meaning. Robert Joly makes the compelling argument, widely adopted by contemporary scholars, that the increase in usage of the *agape* word group in the NT may be accounted for exclusively on the basis of diachronic linguistic shifts rather than theological purpose(s).⁴⁵ As D.

Piety," 123; James Moffat, *Love in the New Testament* (New York: Harper, 1930); John M. Rist, "Some Interpretations of *Agape* and *Eros*," in *The Philosophy and Theology of Anders Nygren* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1970), 172.

⁴²See Ethelbert Stauffer, "Ἀγαπάω, Ἀγάπη, Ἀγαπητός," in *TDNT*, eds. Gerhard Kittel, Geoffrey William Bromiley, and Gerhard Friedrich (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1964), 1:37. There is a striking increase in the use of the *agapaō* word group in biblical Greek relative to extra-biblical literature around the time of the LXX. Further, while *agapaō* appears relatively frequently in Greek from Homer onward, the noun *agape* is not very well represented in extra-biblical Greek literature, if at all. Whether the noun *agape* is attested at all in pre-LXX Greek has been a matter of some dispute, though an older noun, *agapesin*, is present in classical Greek literature.

⁴³Leon Morris, *Testaments of Love: A Study of Love in the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1981), 103.

⁴⁴See W. Günther and H. G. Link, "Love," in *New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, ed. Colin Brown (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1986), 2:539.

⁴⁵Joly contends the preference for the *agape* word group was present in Hellenistic times and that the change took place for linguistic reasons from the fourth century BC onward; specifically, *philein* was moving from "love" to "kiss" (due to the disappearance of the older word for kiss) while *agapan* moved from conveying "be content with" to conveying "love" with some overlap with previous meanings. See *Le vocabulaire chrétien de l'amour est-il original: Philein et agapan dans le grec antique* (Brussels: Press universitaires de

A. Carson explains, “there are excellent diachronic reasons in Greek philology to explain the rise of the [*agape*] word group, so one should not rush too quickly toward theological explanations.”⁴⁶

Leon Morris nevertheless maintains the unique significance of *agape* as utilized by the NT writers. While he acknowledges that “the linguistics” do not prove the distinctive nature of the *agape* word group, he nevertheless believes that the biblical writers chose this word “because they had a new idea about the essential meaning of love.”⁴⁷ He dismisses the term *philia* as deficient to convey “the essential New Testament idea of love.”⁴⁸ For the Christian conception of love, only the term *agape* will suffice.⁴⁹

However, as Morris himself recognizes, the lexical evidence does not seem to support such an exclusive meaning. On the contrary, the evidence casts doubt on the idea that *agape* is a word that connotes merely (or even primarily) the unilateral gift love of God, distinct from other words for love. In the LXX, for instance, the *agape* word group has a broad semantic range, including referring to rapacious lust

Bruxelles, 1968), 33. So Carson, *Exegetical Fallacies* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 1996), 51, 52; Moisés Silva, *Biblical Words and Their Meaning: An Introduction to Lexical Semantics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1995), 96. C. C. Tarelli suggested something similar prior to Joly. See “Agape,” *Journal of Theological Studies* 1 (1950): 64–67. Cf. James Barr, “Words for Love in Biblical Greek,” in *The Glory of Christ in the New Testament*, ed. L. D. Hurst and N. T. Wright (Oxford, UK: Clarendon, 1987), 6, 11. Benjamin B. Warfield also saw *agape* as the word that was current at the time of writing, not as a deliberate choice by the authors. “Terminology of Love in the New Testament,” *Princeton Theological Review* 16 (1918): 184.

⁴⁶D. A. Carson, *The Difficult Doctrine of the Love of God* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2000), 27.

⁴⁷Morris, *Testaments of Love*, 125. Morris adopts Nygren’s “basic idea of *agape* [a]s that of self-giving love for the unworthy” while allowing that Nygren may have been too sharp in his distinctions between *agape* and *eros* and “equated it [*agape*] too narrowly with the use of particular Greek words.” Nevertheless, Morris contends, “there is such a love as he [Nygren] describes as *Agape* and that it is the Christian understanding of love seems clear. God’s love for us is evoked by God’s own inner nature, not by anything worthy in us” and divine love “evokes a corresponding love within people.” Leon Morris, *John* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995), 293.

⁴⁸Morris, *Testaments of Love*, 119. Cf. Ceslas Spicq, “Ἀγάπη,” in *Theological Lexicon of the New Testament* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994), 11.

⁴⁹Similarly, Stauffer sees *agape* as possibly conveying a colorless sense to mean something like prefer, denoting “a free and decisive act determined by its subject,” whereas *eros* “seeks in others the fulfillment of its own life’s hunger.” Stauffer, *TDNT* 1:37. Cranfield states that “Although used for euphony as a synonym for *phileō* and *eraō*, *agapao* lacked the warmth of the former and the intensity of the latter.” Charles E. B. Cranfield, “Love,” in *A Theological Word Book of the Bible*, ed. Alan Richardson (London, UK: SCMP, 1950), 134.

as is seen in the use of the *agape* word group in the narrative of Amnon's rape of his sister, Tamar (2 Sam 13:15; see also other examples of misdirected or deficient "love" in Pss 11:5; 52:3; Amos 5:15; Hos 9:1). Further, *phileō* and *agapaō* seem to be used interchangeably on numerous occasions in the LXX (Gen 37:3–4; Lam 1:2) and show close connection in the NT, overlapping with regard to every major aspect of love such that they are often used interchangeably. Both terms are used to describe the Father's love for the Son (John 5:20; cf. John 3:35), the Father's love for the disciples because of their love for Jesus (John 16:27; cf. 14:21, 23), Jesus's love for humans (Rev 3:19; cf. 3:9), Jesus's love for individuals (John 11:36; cf. 11:5), human love for other humans (John 15:19; cf. 13:34), human love for their own life (John 12:25; cf. Rev 12:11) and both terms describe the disciple whom Jesus loves (John 20:2; cf. 21:7).⁵⁰

Such usage, especially with divine agency, demonstrates that *phileō* is not an inferior type of love but in fact may describe the very love of God, falsifying the assertions of some that *agapaō* is the only term sufficient to depict divine love and that *phileō* is a lesser, merely human, kind of love. Rather, both word groups may refer to the highest and noblest aspects of love or to inferior qualities such as misdirected love.⁵¹ As D. A. Carson states, "there is nothing intrinsic to the verb

⁵⁰Notably, the only subject-object relations of love that are not described by *phileō* are human love for the Father and Christ's love for the Father. However, the compound *philothēos* does describe "lovers of God" (2 Tim 3:4) and Jesus's love for the Father is only explicitly stated once. The absence of instances of *phileō* descriptive of Christ's love for the Father, then, is probably accidental given that explicit mention of Christ's love for the Father appears only once. Further, both the *agapaō* and *phileō* word groups are used of preferential love (Matt 10:37; John 11:5; 13:1), misdirected love (Matt 23:6; Luke 20:46; 22:15; Rev 22:15; 2 Tim 4:10; cf. Prov 21:17), conditional divine love (John 14:21, 23; 16:27), emotion and/or passion (John 11:36; 13:1; compare James 4:4), pleasure, enjoyment and/or evaluative love (Matt 3:17; 6:5; 17:5; 23:6; compare Gen 27:4, 9, 14), familial (Matt 10:37; Col 3:19; cf. Gen 37:3–4) and other insider love (John 13:1; 15:14–15), and love that includes discipline (Rev 3:19; Heb 12:6). See the extensive discussion of the various NT terms for love in Peckham, *The Concept of Divine Love*, 352–372.

⁵¹Many scholars consider the terms synonymous (or nearly synonymous) in most cases, while recognizing minor differences in the overall semantic range. See Carson, *Exegetical Fallacies*, 51–52; Gustav Stählin, "φιλεω, καταφιλεω, φιλημα," *TDNT* 9:115, 116, 124; Raymond E. Brown, *The Gospel According to John I–XII* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1966), 498; William Hendriksen, *The Gospel According to John* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1953), 2:487, 494–500; Köstenberger, *John*, 596; Günther and Link, "αγαπω," *NIDNTT* 2:543. For example, relative to personal love, the verb *phileō* is always used in the NT within an associative relationship of some commonality, i.e., "insider love," whereas *agapaō* may signify both "insider" and "outsider" love (more often the former). However, the *phileō* word group includes love for the other (including the stranger) in the compound terms *philoxenos* and *philoxenia* (1 Tim 3:2; Rom 12:13; Heb 13:2; cf. Matt 11:19; Luke 7:34). Notably, in this regard, the oft-mentioned variation of terminology in John 21:15–17 is underdeterminative. Many scholars view the variation between *agapaō* and *phileō* in John 21

ἀγαπάω (*agapao*) or the noun ἀγάπη (*agape*) to prove its real meaning or hidden meaning refers to some special kind of love.”⁵² As numerous scholars have recognized, then, the usage of the *agape* word group in Scripture does not support the view that *agape* exclusively connotes a unique type of divine or Christian love.⁵³

Nevertheless, notwithstanding the considerable evidence that stands against the view that Scripture reserves *agape* for some special kind of exclusively divine gift love, Nygren’s *agapist* conception of divine love remains in popular and scholarly works alike, including numerous theological dictionaries, encyclopedias, and biblical commentaries. As such, considerable confusion exists in both theological and biblical scholarship over the precise meaning of love generally and divine love specifically.

Agape and Ethics

The issues surveyed above are striking not only with regard to the potential implications for theology and biblical scholarship, but with respect to the viability of an intelligible, Christian, ethics of love. Despite the aforementioned theological and linguistic difficulties, the *agapist* view has wielded significant influence on the development of some lines of Christian ethics. However, others question whether the *agapist* conception of divine love as emotionally aloof, disinterested, mechanical, perfunctory and unilateral, can adequately speak to the ethical issues that Christians face, especially with regard to human relationships and suffering. Perhaps proponents of the *agapist* conception of divine love would argue that only such pure love merits the name Christian love (*agape*) and the fact that such love seems so foreign to human nature says nothing about its validity as such. Accordingly, humans would ideally be *utterly* self-abnegating, without desire, wholly beneficent individuals, lacking any self-love or regard for self.⁵⁴ However,

as merely stylistic while those who believe the variation signifies difference of meaning are divided on what difference of meaning is purported to be entailed thereby. In this regard, see the discussion in John C. Peckham, *The Love of God: A Canonical Model* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2015), 75, 76. Cf. the discussion in Peckham, *The Concept of Divine Love*, 366, 367.

⁵²Carson, *Exegetical Fallacies*, 32. Carson does see a special meaning for divine love, but finds no basis for such a view in the semantics but in the “sentences, paragraphs, discourses, and so forth.” *Ibid.*, 53.

⁵³In addition to Carson, consider the works of Roy F. Butler, *The Meaning of Agapao and Phileo in the Greek New Testament* (Lawrence, KS: Coronado, 1977), 70–72; Victor Paul Furnish, *The Love Command in the New Testament* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1972), 20, 21.

⁵⁴Some Christian ethicists, however, have long recognized valid forms of self-love while cautioning against selfish love, especially the type of self-interest advocated in ethical egoism. For example, Vacek makes a case for a positive role of self-love (Edward Collins Vacek, *Love, Human and Divine: The Heart of Christian Ethics* [Washington, DC: Georgetown

this raises the question; if the true character of love is altogether selfless and disinterested then in what way can humans actually love?⁵⁵ Unless one maintains an extremely optimistic view of human nature, it would appear that if human love is possible, it is something quite different from purely selfless altruism. On the other hand, Luther's view remains available: there is no such thing as human love (*agape*) except that which is purely the action of God bestowed on and through a passive human agent.

Notably, a number of biblical texts appear to suggest the possibility of genuine human love (*agape*). For instance, Jesus exhorted his disciples, "A new commandment I give to you, that you love [*agapaō*] one another, even as I have loved [*agapaō*] you, that you also love [*agapaō*] one another" (John 13:34). What are Christians to make of such ethical commands? Beyond the fact that this text seems to assume that humans can actually love one another,⁵⁶ this text also seems to posit some similitude between that love which Jesus had for his followers and the kind of love that he expects Christians to have for one another. Thus, divine love (modeled in the incarnate one himself) is presented as the ground for truly Christian love.⁵⁷

Furthermore, as we have seen, elsewhere Jesus also proclaims: "You shall love [*agapaō*] your neighbor as yourself" (Matt 22:39; Mark 12:31; cf. Lev 19:18, 34). This, coupled with the so-called golden rule (Luke 6:31; Cf. Matt 7:12) would seem to contradict an ethics of utter self-abnegation.⁵⁸ Rather, an ethics based on

University Press, 1994], 239–244) and also discusses the tradition that has favored self-love (Vacek, *Love, Human and Divine*, 199, 200). Cf. the discussions in Outka, *Agape*, 275; Post, *A Theory of Agape*, 17, 18.

⁵⁵Further, it seems to me that a more biblical conception of love would defeat Nietzsche's critique of "*agape*" as "resentment" and "suppression" by (among other things) showing his criticism of so-called Christian love to be a straw man that is not representative of Christian love as it is understood and depicted in Scripture. See, in this regard, Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Antichrist* in *The Complete Works of Friedrich Nietzsche*, ed. Oscar Levy, trans. Anthony M. Ludovici (New York: Macmillan, 1911), 16:128–135.

⁵⁶This need not mean that humans have the capacity within themselves as apart from God, but may assume the necessity of the work of the Holy Spirit in the life of the Christian.

⁵⁷Perhaps one might suggest the possibility that the love of Jesus for his followers was merely a product of his humanity. However, this cannot be the meaning if one considers the comparison in John 15:9, "Just as the Father has loved Me, I have also loved you; abide in My love."

⁵⁸Whereas self-sacrifice is virtuous in the appropriate circumstances, "as a universal principle, self-sacrifice is self-contradictory." Vacek, *Love, Human and Divine*, 184. Imagine a world where every individual always acts self-sacrificially. When two people arrive at the same door they would both insist on holding the door open for the other and, consequently, neither would ever enter. So Vacek, *Love, Human and Divine*, 184. That is, if everyone always gives but never receives, then there would be no one to receive what is

appropriate and unselfish self-love is suggested, which implies that at least some form of self-love is appropriate for the Christian, since it is presented as a basis of neighbor love itself. This likely refers to a proper, unselfish, regard for self which is manifested in love for others, perhaps as is modeled in the parable of the Good Samaritan.⁵⁹

Elsewhere, even some aspects of divine love appear to incorporate some motivation that is contingent upon its object.⁶⁰ For instance, consider the words of Jesus recorded in John 14:21, 23, “He who has My commandments and keeps them is the one who loves [*agapao*] Me; and he who loves [*agapao*] Me will be loved [*agapao*] by My Father, and I will love [*agapao*] him and will disclose Myself to him. ... If anyone loves [*agapao*] Me, he will keep My word; and My Father will love [*agapao*] him, and We will come to him and make Our abode with him” (cf. John 10:17; 16:27).⁶¹ This indicates that humans may not only love one another, but may actually love God and that such love for God can also, at least partially, affect God’s love for human beings.

The words of Jesus in these verses seem to conflict with the agapist view that divine nature and love requires disinterest. Moreover, the presentation of love in these verses appears to depict some significant role for the object(s) of divine love. Not only is this suggestive with regard to the possibilities of human love but it also requires that divine love not be exclusive to evaluation. How could this be? What, then, is *agape*? Is it possible that both thematic *agape* and altruism are misunderstood, misapplied, or both to some degree?⁶² The answers to these and

given. As Stephen Post observes, “Self-less, purely one-way love may be an understandable exaggeration of unselfishness, but its impact is essentially negative in that it undermines the circular flow of giving and receiving in which *agape* is sustained and supported.” Post, *Theory of Agape*, 12. Further, Gene Outka warns that utter “self-sacrifice in itself would appear to provide no way of distinguishing between attention to another’s needs and submission to his exploitation and no warrant for resisting the latter.” Outka, *Agape*, 275.

⁵⁹See the discussion of other-inclusive love and unselfish self-interest (e.g., as seen in Eph 5:28–30) in Peckham, *The Love of God*, 130–138.

⁶⁰Although there is a tendency to conflate conditionality and merit, I believe and have argued elsewhere that divine love is always unmerited and, yet, foreconditional. That is, God bestows love prior to any conditions but the continued enjoyment of love relationship with God is conditional upon appropriate response. See the discussion in Peckham, *The Love of God*, 201–203.

⁶¹Jesus states, “for the Father Himself loves you, because you have loved Me and have believed that I came forth from the Father” (John 16:27). “For this reason the Father loves Me, because I lay down My life so that I may take it again” (John 10:17).

⁶²The cogency of this critique of the adequacy of the agapist of divine love for ethics has been recognized elsewhere. For example, Stephen G. Post presents a sustained criticism of what he calls “the idealizations of a one-way love.” Post, *A Theory of Agape*, 10. Cf. Stephen G. Post, “The Inadequacy of Selflessness: God’s Suffering and the Theory of

other questions that flow from a renewed consideration of the canonical conception of love hold significant implications for the development of a distinctively biblical and Christian ethics of love.

Conclusion

While conclusions regarding the nature of divine love and its place in Christian ethics continue to proliferate, it seems to me that views founded upon the agapist conception of divine love do not suffice for Christian ethics. In my view, an ethical system based on utterly disinterested-love, wherein “love” gives but never receives, would (among other things): depersonalize ethics from its biblical context of relationship, remove the Christian motivation of bringing pleasure/delight to God, require total self-abnegation which seems opposed to the biblical ideal for unselfish but not self-loathing love, and lack the covenantal context of love. Moreover, it seems that the agapist conception of divine love, wherein “*agape*” love is only attributable to God, stands at odds with Christ’s command to “love [*agapao*] one another, even as I have loved [*agapao*] you” (John 13:34) and thus tends to distort and reduce the nature and force of Christ’s example of love that is to be reflected by Christians.

Perhaps the way forward for an ethics of love requires a deliberate return to examine the meaning of divine love as posited in the biblical canon in order to clarify the potential meaning and function of divine love and, only then, its implications for Christian ethics. Such an investigation would take seriously the questions that continue to rise to the fore, including but not limited to: What if divine love is much more relational than the agapist conception of love allows? What if love actually involves some degree of reciprocity and give and take, as is being increasingly suggested by numerous theologians? What if the love of God is, in fact, the personal and relational love that the incarnate God modeled while he was on earth and called humans to reflect? The implications for Christian ethics could be enormous; focused attention on the canonical conception of divine love might illuminate a way forward toward a more distinctively Christian and biblical ethics of love.

Love,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 56, no. 2 (1988): 213–228; Stephen G. Post, *Altruism & Altruistic Love: Science, Philosophy, & Religion in Dialogue* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002). Cf. Gene Outka, *Agape*, 275.