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Timothy P. Jackson: The Priority of Love

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INTRODUCTION

The Fate of Charity

*And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three;
and the greatest of these is love.*

—1 Corinthians 13:13¹

THE ECLIPSE OF CHRISTIAN CHARITY

Saint Paul put love first among the enduring virtues, and love has had a central place in much subsequent Christian ethics.² Paul's words in 1 Corinthians did not announce a moral departure; Jesus himself had summarized the Mosaic Law and Hebrew prophets in terms of the two primary commandments to love God and neighbor (Matt. 22:37–40; Mark 12:28–31; Luke 10:25–28). No end of ink, sweat, tears, and blood has since been spilled in trying to fathom what, concretely, love demands of individuals and groups. Nonetheless, for all this, the distinctive *priority* of the virtue has not always been clear in the Christian ethical tradition. Hence the two key questions for this book: First, what does it mean to call love of God “the *greatest* and *first* commandment” (Matt. 22:38), or to call love simpliciter “the *greatest* of these” (1 Cor. 13:13)? Second, how does love's primacy relate to other human values, within and without the Christian church, often associated with love? For both Jesus and Paul, love is intimately related to openness to self-sacrifice, to take a controversial example, yet several influences have combined in this century to give self-sacrifice a bad name. “Love” continues to permeate culture, high and low, but the word signifies very different things (from eroticism to friendship to altruism) to very diverse people.

My concern, then, is with the preeminently commanded Christian excellence, what *New Testament* Greek calls *agape* and I will frequently

¹ Unless otherwise noted, all biblical quotations are from *The New Oxford Annotated Bible with the Apocrypha*, New Revised Standard Version (NRSV), ed. by Bruce M. Metzger and Roland E. Murphy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991). I do occasionally cite the Revised Standard Version (RSV), the King James Version (KJV), and the New International Version (NIV), when these translations are preferable for my purposes.

² Edward Collins Vacek, S.J., holds that “love has *not* been central in most Christian ethics and dogmatic theology.” See Vacek, *Love, Human and Divine: The Heart of Christian Ethics* (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 1994), p. xiii. Stanley Hauerwas and Richard Hays, in contrast, have taken exception to what they perceive as the *overemphasis* on love in Christian moral reflection. I respond to Hauerwas and Hays in the third section of this introduction.

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refer to as “charity,” “neighbor-love,” or simply “love.”³ *Agape* resonates with a number of non-Christian virtues, from Stoic *miseriordia* to Buddhist *mahakaruna*, but it remains distinctive and assigning it priority may even appear paradoxical. One paradox, Christianly understood, is this: all human beings are created for agapic love, to give it and receive it, to be fulfilled by it as first virtue, yet much of human life is unloved and unloving. Pauline sensibilities seem not to abide with us. Of course, even first-century Christians did not always embody the radical teachings of Jesus, and the twentieth century was not monolithic in its rejection of a costly benevolence.⁴ (One thinks of Bonhoeffer, King, and Mother Teresa from the West; Gandhi and the Dalai Lama from the East.) But the robust ideal of love is largely alien to our elites and their public discourse. Once connoting an unconditional love of neighbor binding on all, the word “charity” is now commonly construed to mean supererogatory philanthropy, optional almsgiving. Traditional versions of “taking up the cross” or “sharing patiently in affliction” tend to be rejected as impossible (thus dispiriting) ideals or reviled as fanatical (even masochistic) compulsions. At a minimum, an individual ethic of health and prudential adjustment and a political ethos of autonomy and procedural justice are strong competitors with a more ancient ideal of personal compassion and social solidarity. “Self-realization” vies with “saintliness,” the two no longer being equated.

What accounts for the relative eclipse of charity, even at times within the confessing Christian community? The norm of suffering love has always had its detractors—Jesus went to the cross, after all—but Nietzsche’s late-nineteenth-century charge that Christianity is inspired by *ressentiment* was a watershed. For Nietzsche, self-assertion rather than self-denial was the principle most to be extolled. Freud sounded similar themes early in the twentieth century by characterizing *agape* as basically unjust and deluded, although he offset Nietzsche’s aestheticism somewhat by accenting distinctively ethical concerns (e.g., social justice).⁵

³ I use “charity,” “love,” “personal care,” “loving care,” and *agape* more or less interchangeably, as I make clear below.

⁴ Vacek has maintained that love should not be equated with either beneficence, doing good deeds, or benevolence, which he defines as the disposition to do such deeds. He reminds us (1) that one might assist another with an ulterior, even an insidious, motive and thus not embody benevolence as a trait of character, and (2) that one might love others (e.g., a statue or deceased parents) without being able or even disposed to care for their needs (see *Love, Human and Divine*, pp. 35–36). I interpret benevolence more broadly, however, as consistently willing another’s good, whatever that entails: not a mere abstract well-wishing but an emotional engagement, not an intrusive agenda but an ever-attentive commitment. Thus I associate it with agapic love.

⁵ See Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents*, trans. and ed. by James Strachey (New York: W. W. Norton, 1961), esp. chaps. III and IV.

Both men doubted what Nietzsche called “the value of the ‘unegoistic,’”⁶ and both built on Machiavelli’s critique of the ideal of personal innocence as inevitably leading to social impotence. Although there are significant differences between them, both Nietzsche and Freud sought, in sum, to dethrone *agape* and give priority to some variant of controlled erotic instinct.

Other, less purely textual, factors might be cited. The Nazi Holocaust seared the conscience of an era with what many perceived as Christian and Jewish passivity before a radical, altogether worldly, evil. Recently some feminists have been wary of any moral outlook, religious or secular, that recommends a forgiving mildness, much less self-abnegation. Such qualities are frequently thought to retard personal development and reinforce political oppression. They may even be lethal. Carol Gilligan is eloquent and representative when she writes:

The notion that virtue for women lies in self-sacrifice has complicated the course of women’s development by pitting the moral issue of goodness against the adult questions of responsibility and choice. In addition, the ethic of self-sacrifice is directly in conflict with the concept of rights that has, in the past century, supported women’s claim to a fair share of social justice.⁷

In light of such earnest concerns, it is difficult indeed to praise the charisma of goodness as self-giving. In the extreme, it may seem that will to power and political competition define us most deeply after all. Neither postmodernism nor a too wary feminism is the main cause of charity’s decline, however. For all their rhetorical power and influence, Nietzsche and Freud represent a more flamboyant rejection of the ideals of obedience to God and love of neighbor than is evident in Western popular culture.⁸ I have responded elsewhere to Nietzsche and Freud, as

⁶ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Genealogy of Morals*, preface, sec. 5, in *Basic Writings*, ed. and trans. by Walter Kaufmann (New York: Modern Library, 1968), p. 455.

⁷ Gilligan, *In a Different Voice* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1982), p. 132. On Christian calls for self-sacrifice as reinforcing female “guilt,” see Mary Daly, *Pure Lust: Elemental Feminist Philosophy* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1984), pp. 213–16. For a summary of some of the theological literature, see Barbara Hilkert Andolsen, “*Agape* in Feminist Ethics,” in *Feminist Theological Ethics*, ed. by Lois K. Daly (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox, 1994). Andolsen’s thesis is succinctly stated: “*Agape* defined exclusively as other-regard or self-sacrifice is not an appropriate virtue for women who are prone to excessive selflessness” (p. 151). It should be clear that my definition of *agape* is not so “exclusive.”

⁸ The extent to which U.S. society has been secularized is hotly contested, and there is no doubt some slippage between theoretical self-image and practical reality. Nonetheless, two statistics are often cited as representative of current commitments: over 90 percent of Americans claim to believe in God, and over 70 percent claim to participate in or give to charitable organizations. On the difficulty of interpreting American religious practices, see

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well as to such talented scions as Michel Foucault and Richard Rorty,⁹ but the eclipse of charity is not to be traced primarily to these authors. They stand too completely outside the Judeo-Christian¹⁰ tradition to be responsible for any basic loss of inspiration.

For its part, the best of feminism, Christian and non-Christian, looks to women's lives and relationships for models of nurturing care that are stifled in patriarchal society. Here something like *agape* is retrieved as an ideal instead of abandoned. Admittedly, many Christian feminists are reluctant to extol self-sacrifice as at the heart of Jesus' gospel, lest this encourage victims of injustice to accept their lot or traditionally self-effacing groups to stifle their moral agency. The good news is most fundamentally about joy and fulfillment, they maintain, rather than self-denial. Gail O'Day, for instance, finds good exegetical grounds for avoiding talk of "sacrifice":

The love to which Jesus summons the community [in John] is not the giving *up* of one's life, but the giving *away* of one's life. The distinction between these prepositions is important, because the love that Jesus embodies is grace, not sacrifice. Jesus gave his life to his disciples as an expression of the fullness of his relationship with God and of God's love for the world. Jesus' death in love, therefore, was not an act of self-denial, but an act of fullness, of living out his life and identity fully, even when that living out would ultimately lead to death.¹¹

This is an eloquent reminder, first, that Jesus is not willing death for its own sake, and, second, that his Passion is a gift to others given out of strength rather than a flight from himself indulged in weakness. Death on the cross is a precious fruit of his inspired personality, not its thwarting. That said, however, an additional word of caution—or is it closer to abandon?—is in order.

For all the redemptive power and uncanny resolution behind Jesus' crucifixion, it still represents the acceptance of real vulnerability and loss. Though sinless, he experiences dread before the prospect of a shameful and agonizing death, and he even asks the Father, "if it is possible, let this cup pass from me" (Matt. 26:39). The Gospel of John has Jesus say

the "Survey of U.S. Church Attendance," *American Sociological Review* 63, no. 1 (February 1998); and Robert Wuthnow, *Learning to Care* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995).

⁹ See my *Love Disconsoled: Meditations on Christian Charity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), esp. chap. 3.

¹⁰ Some object that the adjective "Judeo-Christian" is misleading or triumphalist, but the common biblical wellspring in the love of God (*hesed*) makes the term sufficiently comprehensible, I believe, when used with discretion.

¹¹ O'Day, "The Gospel of John," in *The New Interpreter's Bible*, vol. 9, ed. by Leander Keck (Nashville: Abingdon, 1995), p. 734.

from the cross the wondrously self-possessed, “It is finished” (19:30), but Matthew has him cry out the pathos-filled, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” (27:46). We must not lose sight of either dimension of the Messiah, the divine or the human. Only a dualistic Socrates lets the body go without regret, and only a docetic Christ is beyond pain and suffering. Although Jesus’ death is a revelation of his steadfast love and a fulfillment of God’s saving purpose, it also comes at a cost that must be knowingly embraced.¹²

Far from being masochistic, agapic love of God and neighbor is what we were made for, according to Scripture; but far from being synonymous with either *eros* or prudence, such love is not premised on temporal merit or motivated by temporal reward. “Reward” is spoken of by the *New Testament* Jesus as a *result* of virtue, but it is usually “in heaven” and seldom the primary *motivation* for keeping a commandment.¹³ Nor does virtue depend on human will-power alone: “not my will but yours [God] be done” (Luke 22:42). The thought that virtue is commanded by a supernatural power is, at best, ticklish for postmoderns. But Christians hold that when *agape* is commanded, however irksome the gesture, this empowers rather than retards spiritual health, rather like a doctor ordering a patient to exercise. To be commanded by God and to keep a commandment of God is to have an intimate relation with God.¹⁴ Moreover, to be related to God in love is invariably to come into loving relation with oneself and others. We can even love our enemies (Matt. 5:44; Luke 6:27–28) because, being forgiven by God in Christ, we can forgive ourselves.

Even when self-directed, forgiveness is a form of sacrifice (chapter 4), since one is refusing a just claim that might otherwise be pressed. But all self-sacrifice must be voluntary and constructive, as charitable feminists contend. If it is to remain an expression of *agape*, sacrifice cannot be the upshot of coercion, masochism, or mere profligacy. In the best of feminism, nonetheless, loving concern, including empathy with and effort to

¹² O’Day is well aware of this, and she fittingly employs the more conventional language of sacrifice at times: “the threat of martyrdom will present the disciples with the same situation that Jesus faced: the giving up of one’s life for one’s friends ([John] 15:13; cf. 10:11, 15, 17).” See *ibid.*, p. 766.

¹³ References to “reward” are overwhelmingly Matthean: the Greek noun (*misthos*) occurs nine times in Matthew, with the Greek verb (*apodidomi*) appearing three times; no other canonical Gospel uses the verb “to reward,” and the noun appears only once in Mark and only twice in Luke. The author of the Gospel of Matthew is unknown, but she or he may have used sayings collected by the apostle Matthew. If so, given Matthew’s original métier (tax collector), we should not be surprised by the more frequent use of language of payment and exchange.

¹⁴ As O’Day makes clear; see her commentary on “The Gospel of John,” esp. pp. 732–33.

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abolish suffering, is upheld and clarified as a human (and divine) ideal.¹⁵ “Postmodernism” is a crude label for a symptom rather than a disease, in short, and the deepest insights of feminism are decidedly part of the solution to love’s eclipse rather than the problem.

The contemporary fate of charity was sealed not so much by direct attacks on agapic love itself as by ill-considered defenses of three related virtues: prudence, freedom, and justice. (These defenses have been offered both by Christians and by those who see themselves as secular heirs to the Christian moral tradition.) Prudence, defined as healthy attention to one’s peace and future prosperity; freedom, defined as absence of arbitrary or coercive external restraint; and justice, defined as keeping contracts civilly and distributing basic goods based on merit, all have their place. Indeed, it is the chief glory of liberal democracy to have deployed the language of “rights and duties” in an effort to safeguard these three essentials. But neither prudence, nor freedom, nor justice alone can do the work of agapic love, and in the absence of such love, all three of these other goods wither. When exponents of other virtues suggest (explicitly or implicitly) that they can *supplant* charity in some quarter of life, they cut morality’s root in all quarters.¹⁶ Yet when either exponents or opponents of *agape* argue that it is “*directly in conflict*” with rights and duties, or with social justice generally, they pluck morality’s modern flower.¹⁷

¹⁵ See, among Christian theologians, Dorothee Soelle, *Suffering* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1975); and Lisa Sowle Cahill, *Sex, Gender, and Christian Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), esp. chap. 6. Among works by secular philosophers, Eva Feder Kittay’s *Love’s Labor: Essays on Women, Equality, and Dependency* (New York and London: Routledge, 1999) is especially insightful on the place of vulnerability and service in human life: rather than assuming the equality of autonomous individuals, she emphasizes that “no one escapes dependency in a lifetime, and many must care for dependents in the course of a life” (p. xiii). Nel Noddings’s *Caring: A Feminine Approach to Ethics and Moral Education* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984) offers an ethic based on natural tenderness and maternal nurture that is in some respects similar to putting charity first. Noddings is highly doubtful, however, of the language of “self-sacrifice” (p. 99), and she declines to call her position “agapism,” even as she rejects “the notion of universal love” as “a source of distraction” (pp. 28–29). For criticisms of a gender dualism found by some in both Noddings and Carol Gilligan, see *An Ethic of Care: Feminist and Interdisciplinary Perspectives*, ed. by Mary Jeanne Larrabee (New York and London: Routledge, 1993). For her part, Kittay maintains that, at present, “it is mostly women who are dependency workers” but “there is nothing inherently gendered about the work of care” (p. xiii).

¹⁶ Various feminists have provided powerful analyses of the limits of justice in particular. See, e.g., Iris Marion Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), esp. chap. 1; and Agnes Heller, *Beyond Justice* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1987). Heller argues that “all claims to justice are rooted in certain values other than justice itself—namely, in ‘freedom’ and ‘life’” and that “while justice may well be a precondition of the good life, the good life is something beyond justice” (p. v). As indebted as I am to Heller, her central focus on rational freedom is alien to strong *agape*, as defined below.

¹⁷ Stanley Hauerwas has written that “the current emphasis on justice and rights as the

Consider two prominent cases. John Rawls has claimed that justice is “the first virtue of social institutions, as truth is of systems of thought.”¹⁸ Susan Moller Okin has defended this thesis, explaining that “justice takes primacy because it is the most *essential*, not because it is the *highest*, of virtues.”¹⁹ For Okin, generosity and the other higher moral sentiments are forms of “supererogation,” while “justice is needed as the primary, meaning most fundamental, moral virtue *even* in social groupings [such as the family] in which aims are largely common and affection frequently prevails.”²⁰ Okin’s views are especially surprising in light of her own observation that “contemporary theorists of justice, with few exceptions, have paid little or no attention to the question of moral development—of how we are to *become* just.”²¹ If the most fundamental virtue is that which is most indispensable to the growth of moral persons, however, it seems clear that (agapic) love is prior to justice. For moral persons only evolve over time and with a good deal of “parental” care that is not premised on the reciprocity characteristic of justice. Our adult capacity for balancing competing interests and for keeping valid contracts comes only after our unconditional nurturance by others while we are weak and dependent children, incapable of either stating our interests or entering into binding agreements.

Empathy, defined as “the capacity . . . to see things from the perspective of others,” is indeed “crucial for a sense of justice,” as Okin suggests,²² but empathy is more akin to the necessary condition for justice than to justice itself. Better put, empathy and compassion are required to direct the neutrality (the “blindness”) of justice; true empathy does not merely apprehend what others feel or need, it affirms and acts on these conditions for the others’ sake. In short, fair play within the economies typical

primary norms guiding the social witness of Christians is in fact a mistake.” See his *After Christendom?* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1991), p. 45. Given the qualifying adjective “primary,” this claim resonates well with my theses about the priority of agapic love in Christian ethics. At times, however, Hauerwas goes further and seems to suggest that Christians should see liberal democratic accounts of justice, perhaps *any* account that refers to reciprocity or contract, as *antithetical* to Christianity—as when he subtitles *After Christendom? How the Church Is to Behave if Freedom, Justice, and a Christian Nation Are Bad Ideas*. A dualistic opposition between love and justice, the language of *agape* and that of “rights,” is very far from what I have in mind. Again, reciprocal justice cannot simply replace agapic love, and there can even be tensions between them; but once the priority of that love is recognized, it allows the best modern appeals to prudence, freedom, and justice to find their limited yet proper place.

¹⁸ Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1971), p. 3.

¹⁹ Okin, *Justice, Gender, and the Family* (New York: Basic, 1989), p. 28.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 29.

²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 21.

²² *Ibid.*

of justice depends on love as the unconditional willing of the good for would-be players, rather than the other way around.²³

Ironically, nineteenth- and twentieth-century champions of prudence, freedom, and justice have done such an able job that the stage is now set for a corrective: a critical defense of the priority of love, defined as *agape's* primacy among divine gifts and human goods. A fatal misunderstanding must be preempted at the outset, however. I offer here a defense of the “priority of love,” but the “love” in question (*agape*) must not be identified with any purely human achievement or even with any strictly human aspiration. My case is mounted in terms both contrasted with and borrowed from Occidental philosophy,²⁴ but my starting point is decisively theological.²⁵ The key to love is provided by neither the cosmos as a whole nor human nature in particular, but rather by God’s supernatural holiness. God *is* love (1 John 4:8), and we are dependent on God’s gracious self-revelation for a rudimentary understanding of and participation in this Goodness. Since God is the Creator of all that is, God’s loving nature cannot be totally alien to—much less contradictory of—creatures, especially those made in the divine Image. But to seek to ground an account of agapic love in the rhythms of the material universe or the recesses of the human heart is to travel down the now dead-end of immanence. Or so I have argued elsewhere.²⁶

Natural processes are too arbitrary and amoral to be the chief inspiration for virtue, and human instincts are too frail and fallible. Naturalism runs aground on the devastation and ugliness left behind by earthquakes

²³ The inspiration behind Okin’s position is her understandable insistence that “intimate” associations like the family not fall below justice even while claiming to rise majestically above it. Her discussion of the “legal fiction” of coverture—whereby upon marriage a wife’s property, children, and legal rights became her husband’s—is a devastating indictment of marriage law in the eighteenth century, and beyond (see *ibid.*, pp. 30–31). Moreover, Okin is surely correct to contend that love and justice are not simply at odds. But it seems best to say that love is not independent of justice or that love must not be guilty of injustice, rather than that justice has “moral primacy” (p. 32). Again, *because* human beings only emerge as agents by virtue of being shown a gratuitous care, agapic love has chronological priority; and because a harmony that is without scarcity and conflict is our highest ideal, agapic love also has moral priority.

²⁴ Perhaps the most magisterial recent effort to fathom love’s mysteries, philosophically, is Irving Singer’s three-volume *The Nature of Love* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984–87). My uses of the words “appraisal” and “bestowal” (and their variants) in this introduction and throughout this book are adapted from Singer’s first volume, *Plato to Luther* (1984).

²⁵ My debt to Anders Nygren is considerable; see his *Agape and Eros*, originally published in three volumes in the 1930s, trans. by Philip S. Watson (New York: Harper and Row, 1969).

²⁶ See my “Ambivalences About Nature and Naturalism: A Supernaturalist Response to Theodore W. Nunez”; “Naturalism, Formalism, and Supernaturalism: Moral Epistemology and Comparative Ethics”; as well as the preface to this volume.

and diseases, for instance, while a reliance on human personality alone comes to smash on guilt and mortality. Love often comes to us sinners unsought, and, in any case, we did not create our own natures. (Whether we were created by God or are the result of blind chance is, of course, the subject of continued debate.)²⁷ Kant turned to noumenal agency to escape the amorality of a purely phenomenal world of Newtonian mechanism—How is moral responsibility possible in an apparently necessitated universe?—and he memorably associated human dignity with “the moral law within.” (Whether Kant is best seen as discovering dignity or as constructing it is also much disputed.) But Kant struggled with the radicality of human evil and the poverty of an ethic of consistency alone. He never could cope, I believe, with a thoroughgoing fanatic who regularly rejects his own and others’ (putative) dignity. The *New Testament* maintains, at any rate, that self-reliance is not enough: a supernatural gift is called for if human beings are to practice charity. Conversion from above is the one thing needful, not analysis of the external world or introspection of one’s internal powers.

As von Balthasar has observed, God’s *agape* liberates the world, but it comes originally as scandal and indictment. As the fullest disclosure of

²⁷ Two accessible defenses of the latter, neo-Darwinian alternative are Richard Dawkins’s *The Blind Watchmaker: Why the Evidence of Evolution Reveals a Universe Without Design* (New York and London: W. W. Norton, 1987) and Daniel C. Dennett’s *Darwin’s Dangerous Idea: Evolution and the Meaning of Life* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1995). Dawkins’ and Dennett’s books are too complicated to respond to in detail here, but they seem entirely successful in establishing two things: that variation occurs within individual species and that speciation occurs across species over time. The causal mechanism at work, however—the how behind these empirical thats—remains debatable. The issue, as Dennett emphasizes, is whether Mind can be understood as an effect rather than a First Cause, as the result of purposeless forces rather than their antecedent author (*Darwin’s Dangerous Idea*, p. 66). Evolution by natural selection *may* be the sole cause of human origins, in which case Christian theism is false, but random mutation as an ingredient in explaining how “descent with modification” has led to present-day complexity and diversity seems a nonstarter. Coupling random mutation with natural selection does no better, since the latter idea is notoriously hard to define without circularity. For their part, both Dawkins and Dennett charge that the theistic appeal to an intelligent Creator is vacuous. As Dawkins puts it, “To explain the origin of the DNA/protein machine by invoking a supernatural Designer is to explain precisely nothing, for it leaves unexplained the origin of the Designer” (*The Blind Watchmaker*, p. 141). One wonders if Dawkins quite appreciates the point of referring to God as a transcendent, necessary Being, but, as I say, the debate continues. Theists will begin with their supernaturalist premise (a loving God) and reason *to* design, while Darwinians will begin with their naturalist premise (random mutation plus natural selection) and reason to *no* design, at least no intentional design. For critiques of neo-Darwinism, see Phillip E. Johnson’s *Darwin on Trial* (Washington, D.C.: Regnery Gateway, 1991) and Jonathan Wells’s *Icons of Evolution: Science or Myth?* (Washington, D.C.: Regnery Gateway, 2000). For an interesting discussion of love in relation to evolutionary biology, see Stephen J. Pope, *The Evolution of Altruism and the Ordering of Love* (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 1994), esp. chaps. 4 and 5.

God's love, the cross of Christ is both pitfall and rescue. Having first cast him into the pit of dread and self-doubt, God's love

goes in search of man in order to lift him out of the pit, free him from his bonds and place him in the freedom of the divine love that is now human as well. . . . Stumbling into the pit, [man] learns two things: that the love offered him is quite unlike anything he knows as love; and that the scandal exists in order to make him see the uniqueness of this new love—and by its light to reveal and lay bare to him his own love for what it is, lack of love.²⁸

Strictly speaking, neither God nor *agape* requires an apologia, but I try to do three things in this book: to define an ethic of Christian love, to refine it through criticism of the tradition from whence it comes, and to show in detail how it differs from some significant competitors. This volume is not a systematic argument. Two of the chapters originally appeared as self-contained essays, and I have made no attempt to relate the chapters generally as steps in a single deductive line. I offer no sustained theory of *agape*, judging the subject uncondusive to such treatment, but rather provide kaleidoscopic perspectives on Christian love with special reference to its relation to social justice. Social justice is a fruit of the redemption issuing from God's love, but it is not that love itself.

Throughout these pages I defend a position I call “strong *agape*.” Let me elaborate on both words in the quoted phrase. When viewed interpersonally, as the conversion of human relations wrought by the grace of God, *agape* involves three basic features: (1) unconditional willing of the good for the other, (2) equal regard for the well-being of the other, and (3) passionate service open to self-sacrifice for the sake of the other. Lest the first two features seem to refer only to internal dispositions, the third puts an explicit premium on a particular action: bearing one another's burdens (cf. Gal. 6:2). The word “strong,” in turn, implies that agapic love is a metavalue, that virtue without which one has no substantive access to other goods, either moral or nonmoral.²⁹ Other goods are genuine, so there is no question of denigrating norms of justice or of vilifying aesthetic pleasures and personal happiness. Moreover, the strong agapist does not claim the kind of self-sufficiency or invulnerability claimed by some (e.g., Socrates) who advocate a life of moral rigor. Such a claim is untrue to the social needs and ethical fragilities experienced in the flesh.³⁰ Nonetheless, *agape* has a unique priority; it is the necessary condi-

²⁸ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Love Alone: The Way of Revelation* (London: Sheed and Ward, 1968), p. 60.

²⁹ I borrow the term “metavalue” from Gerald Doppelt, “Is Rawls's Kantian Liberalism Coherent and Defensible?” *Ethics* 99, no. 4 (July 1989): 823–24.

³⁰ See *Love Disconsoled*, esp. chap. 5. I argue there, in effect, that accent on the priority of agapic love must be preceded by that same love's disconsolation, lest we venerate a cruel or dogmatic sentimentality.

tion to realizing and sustaining other human values in any adequate form. As Saint Paul affirms so famously in 1 Corinthians 13:1–3,

If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love [*agape*], I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. If I give away all my possessions, and if I hand over my body so that I may boast [or, to be burned], but do not have love, I gain nothing.

Note that outward actions of service and sacrifice are futile if unmotivated by love. Indeed, virtually any temporal good one can think of tends to go over into its opposite without charity, as romantic lovers who end up hating each other can attest.

My title, *The Priority of Love*, is a double entendre. On the one hand, as suggested, I argue that love is antecedent (axiologically and chronologically) to other goods in being the necessary condition for their full enjoyment. On the other hand, I argue that love has an internal *telos* or proclivity in tending to bring about caring personalities: *agape* generates itself as its first priority. *Agape* does not bestow *only* itself or aim at extirpating other passions—erotic desire is not, as such, an enemy—but charity does take precedence in persons and give precedence to developing persons. Love of others, first and foremost the Holy Other, is the chief means and end of self-realization. Self-love is compatible with or even part of *agape*, broadly construed,³¹ but proper self-love comes only through self-transcendence. Self-realization comes, that is, via interpersonal service that does not look first to personal gain. We must attend to ourselves and our neighbors, but we often care best for ourselves by forgetting the ego and nurturing the other with patience. We cannot return to “the Golden Age, before mankind was burdened with sin and sorrow, and before pleasure had been darkened with those shadows that bring it into high relief, and make it happiness;”³² but Christians, in turn, wisely decline to equate what now passes for happiness with the highest virtue.

TWO MORE LIMITED SENSES OF “CHARITY”

As noted, I treat “charity” as a synonym for *agape*. In contemporary contexts, however, “charity” often means something considerably more limited: assistance to the poor, either personal generosity shown to an indigent few or socially organized philanthropy aimed at the needy more

³¹ Here I part company with Nygren, *Agape and Eros*, p. 100ff.

³² Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Marble Faun*, in *The Complete Novels and Selected Tales of Nathaniel Hawthorne*, ed. by Norman Holmes Pearson (New York: Random House, 1937), p. 637.

systematically. One speaks here of “charities,” referring to private institutions that distribute staples like food and clothing or that provide basic services like health care and education. This form of charity is analogous to medieval almsgiving. The key difference, however, is that private charity is now frequently thought admirable but morally optional—a matter of pure supererogation—whereas Thomas Aquinas, for instance, considered almsgiving “a matter of precept.”³³ Even today, when the agencies of support are branches of local or national government, terms such as “public aid” or “social welfare” are more likely to be used than “charity,” and then the support is more likely to be seen as a right than as a gift. But when aid to the unfortunate (private or public) is construed as morally optional, this represents a significant narrowing of the biblical and medieval meanings traditionally assigned to the term “charity.” However much biblical and medieval contexts may have differed, both held that giving assistance to the poor and afflicted was an obligatory expression of love of neighbor, at least for Christians.

A second specific sense of charity points toward mercy or forgiveness, that facet of *agape* that used to be called “meekness.” When understood as an act, this charity is the pardoning of another for some offense (or perhaps the commuting of his or her punishment), the releasing of another from a debt (or at least the reduction of its amount), and so on. When construed as a trait of character, in turn, such charity is the disposition to be patient and long-suffering. A charitable person is habitually compassionate, showing others leniency and understanding, giving them the benefit of the doubt, being slow to anger and quick to reconcile, and so on. Whether an action or a virtue, this second sense of charity accents willing the good for another in ways that go beyond strict calculation of what is (normally) considered his or her right. Here charity fosters another’s well-being beyond what is contractually required and often at real cost to oneself. An enduring question for those who commend charity in this sense is how it relates to justice, particularly secular or naturalistic conceptions of it.

If justice is defined as giving persons their due (*sum cuique*, in Cicero’s Latin), is charity antithetical to it, distinct from but compatible with it, altogether unrelated to it, or somehow even identical with it? Is mercy or forgiveness to be seen as unjust, for instance, or rather as more than just? Does charity so eschew retaliation as to be incompatible with all retributive justice, personal and political, or does even “meekness” at

³³ Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* [1256–72], trans. by the Fathers of the English Dominican Province (Westminster, Md.: Christian Classics/Benziger Brothers, 1981), vol. 3, II-II, Q. 32, art. 5, p. 1321. As Thomas elaborates, “we are bound to give alms of our surplus, as also to give alms to one whose need is extreme” (ibid., p. 1322); see also *ST*, II-II, Q. 66, art. 2.

times take up the sword to defend the innocent and rebuke the guilty? I attempt to answer these questions in detail, but this much can be said at the outset. Being the “root of all virtue,” a metavalue, makes charity too important, too fundamental, to count as a (mere) duty of justice. Charity is the wellspring of rights and duties, justice, and the like, but it is not itself a right or a duty in the modern sense. *Agape* is beyond all economies of exchange, all questions of desert or contract, at least when human beings are the subjects and objects of love. Being fallen, no human being has a straightforward claim to be loved purely on his or her merits. No doubt, God deserves to be loved as a function of His supreme beauty and goodness, but we sinful folks cannot insist that we ought to be loved as a matter of justice (defined as *suum cuique*). We are loved by God, and if we are lucky by one another, via a spontaneous and long-suffering gift. God commands the giving of love to our neighbors, but such a command is not premised on the objective worthiness of human beings but rather on God’s own expansive holiness and humanity’s neediness and sacred potential. We love the neighbor agapically to build her up and to participate in the life of God.

WHY SHOULD LOVE, OR ANY ONE VIRTUE, HAVE PRIORITY?

The Question of Anti-essentialism

In asserting love’s priority I may seem to betray the anti-essentialist spirit that leads me to literature and art (chapter 4) more readily than to abstract theories for a useable picture of the good life. Putting charity first may seem a regression to a narrow and dogmatic ethics that equates a single, rather idiosyncratic, activity with the fundamental good for all humanity. Past efforts to define a supreme, universal good have at times been beautiful and awe-inspiring, and their influence on Western civilization can hardly be overestimated. But there is an emerging consensus that the more foundationalist of these efforts have not worked out well. The trouble with the foundationalist quest for singlemindedness and purity of heart is that it tends radically to underestimate the multiplicity and uncertainty of our moral concerns; it tempts us to be insufficiently pluralistic about value and insufficiently fallibilist about knowledge.³⁴ It may move us, most basically, to deny the extent to which culture and the good are human creations, even if divinely inspired. Thus the putative

³⁴ For a general critique of foundationalism, see my “The Possibilities of Scepticisms: Philosophy and Theology Without Apology,” *Metaphilosophy* 21, no. 4 (October 1990): 303–21. For a fine sampling of the spectrum of views on moral universalism, see Gene Outka and John P. Reeder, Jr., eds., *Prospects for a Common Morality* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993).

supreme good (e.g., reason) becomes a tyrant, dominating rather than complementing other human faculties (e.g., emotion and imagination) and enticing exponents to fanaticism.³⁵ Why should putting charity first be any different?

The moral alternatives open to individuals are so dependent upon context, and the range of permissible options is so broad even within a given context, that putting any particular virtue or principle ahead of all others may seem an exercise in oversimplification, if not self-deception. Why not be content with individuals who are dutiful spouses and parents in the morning, ruthless politicians during the day, and carefree aesthetes at night—individuals who make little effort to rank their several interests and activities or to integrate their public and private selves? Human lives do not run along a single set of ethical tracks, and the attempt to formulate a first principle of practical reason binding on all seems inevitably vacuous (“Good is to be sought and promoted, evil to be shunned”) or stultifying (“*Semper Fidelis!*”). Why should love be the fundamental normative force—constant, apprehensible, and overriding—rather than justice or even self-assertion? Why shouldn’t *agape* itself be as relative and doubtful as any other human standard? With these questions we approach the heart of the matter.

The answer I defend, a characteristically Christian answer, is that charity is a participation in the very life of God and, as such, the foundation of all virtues for those made in the Image of God. Scriptural warrants can be adduced for this answer—for example, the two great love commandments (Matt. 22:37–40), Paul’s panegyric on “the greatest of these” (1 Corinthians 13) and his promise that “the God of love and peace will be with you” (2 Cor. 13:11), John’s declaration that “God is love” (1 John 4:8), and so on—but in the end many evidences will tend to be autobiographical. The Bible is not self-interpreting, and there are no knock-down arguments (exegetical, empirical, or metaphysical) convincing to all. Strong agapists are those who feel themselves touched by an infinitely loving Presence that allows them to be present to others and themselves, an ineffably kind Word that echoes in the words with which they explain the world. Here is no works righteousness, to repeat, since the immediate impact of the Present Word is indictment for sin. Gratitude for the serendipitous and forgiving love of God, the *ens realissimum*, is where strong *agape* begins, rather than where it ends, both existentially and

³⁵ John Rawls considers Christian purity of heart—for example, Aquinas’s subordination of all human aims to a dominant end (God)—to be irrational, even mad; see his *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap/Harvard University Press, 1971), p. 554. For a response to Rawls, see my “To Bedlam and Part Way Back: John Rawls and Christian Justice,” *Faith and Philosophy* 8, no. 4 (October 1991): 423–47; and “The Return of the Prodigal? Liberal Theory and Religious Pluralism,” in *Religion and Contemporary Liberalism*, ed. by Paul J. Weithman (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1997).

logically. The God who is love simply invites and empowers a response in kind.

More prosaically, there are two reasons why strong *agape* is not undone by the anti-essentialist comments and questions rehearsed above. First, strong *agape* acknowledges a broad and complex range of traits, values, and action-guides as legitimate, even indispensable, for a well-lived life. The metaphysical comfort that comes from reducing ethical reflection to an algorithmic science, proof from uncertainty, or from vilifying certain goods (e.g., erotic gratification) because they are subject to the vicissitudes of time and chance, is resisted out of love itself. Love appreciates the plenitude and ambiguity of the world, balancing affirmation of what is believed to be worthy or sacred with resistance to what is believed to be ugly or evil. Love itself is the greatest, but not the only, good; nor can it obviate all need to choose between goods in cases of scarcity or conflict. Second, strong *agape* emphasizes *putting* charity first as personal action and disposition rather than merely *discovering* it to be first as human capacity and need. There is a performative aspect to love; it is productive rather than merely appraisive. One does not determine love to be the universal human good the way one might discover a dime in one's pocket. Love *makes* itself the good by enriching whomever it touches, and the egalitarian assumption that this performative capacity is shared by all persons makes love a natural ally of liberal democracy. The liberalism I have in mind, however, will be prophetic rather than bourgeois, based first on charity rather than a calculating justice (chapter 1).

Love seeks to elicit those virtues in self and others without which human flourishing is impossible; and without this eliciting, the virtues remain as unrealized as seeds that go unwatered. Love in particular is a passive potential that must be sparked from without by an initially gratuitous care. (This is the partial truth in the romantic emphasis on ethical creativity.) By awakening others' benevolence, charity makes the world valuable in ways not otherwise realizable; the interactions designed to display love are in fact necessary to produce it. Persons must be cultivated as and by lovers, and without the care extended to human beings in infancy, life itself is not possible (chapter 5). It is worth reemphasizing, even so, that the potential to be built up by love is itself an intrinsic feature of human nature that must be recognized rather than invented. For all its drive to bestow value, human charity does not create all good *ex nihilo*: creatures are not God.

Other Christian Foci?

Thus far, I have written as though objections to putting charity first come most potently, if not exclusively, from modern or postmodern secularists. Stanley Hauerwas and Richard Hays, both United Methodist pro-

fessors at Duke Divinity School, are important exceptions to this rule. Hauerwas writes that “if Christianity is primarily an ethic of love I think that it is clearly wrong and ought to be given up, since our moral experience reveals that such an ethic is not sufficient to give form to our moral behavior.”³⁶ Hays has recently defended both the general thesis “that no single principle can account for the unity of the New Testament writings” and the specific thesis “that the concept of love is insufficient as a ground of coherence for the New Testament moral vision.”³⁷ These claims may seem to cut against my project, but I do not argue that (human) love alone is *sufficient* for ethics (Christian or otherwise). I suggest, instead, that the love awakened in us by God’s own love has *priority* in relation to other basic values, that it is their *necessary* source and end. Other virtues are indispensable to the good life (e.g., justice), and the cross is central to the Good Book (Matt. 10:38). But agapic love, I maintain, has primacy in animating our moral characters as well as in explaining the meaning of sacrifice.

If Hauerwas and Hays confined themselves to noting that “love’s not all you need,” there would be no dispute. But Hauerwas allows that *emphasis* on love “is bad theology which results in bad ethics, or it is bad ethics that results in bad theology.”³⁸ Hays does not simply reject the thesis that love is the *one and only* Christian ethical ground; he writes that “for several reasons love cannot serve as *a* focal image for the synthetic task of New Testament ethics.”³⁹ Reading these intimations of love’s eclipse, I am reminded of the quarrel between W. H. Auden and e.e. cummings over the language of songbirds. How ironic that English-speaking poets should take natural beauty as the occasion for argument; how sad that Bible-believing ethicists should take supernatural goodness as a similar occasion. Yet important issues are at stake here, and I pay my respects to colleagues in the faith by responding at some length.

Culling arguments from the two champions of “the Duke school,” one finds perhaps six main challenges to the priority of love. The first three are from Hauerwas:

1. “While it is true that God in his essence is charity, love cannot be assumed as an end in itself—i.e., that love is the purpose of God’s eternal will. God is not the God of love because he wills love but because he is the truth of our existence. God’s identity is prior to his presence and the love we find in his presence is possi-

³⁶ Hauerwas, “Love’s Not All You Need,” *Cross Currents* 24 (summer 1972): 227.

³⁷ Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1996), p. 5.

³⁸ Hauerwas, “Love’s Not All You Need,” p. 226.

³⁹ Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament*, p. 200; emphasis mine.

ble only because he stands for goods prior to such presence. . . . God can come to us in love only because he comes to us as God, the creator, sustainer, and redeemer of our existence.”⁴⁰

2. “As an ethic of love the Gospels would be an ethic at our disposal since we could fill in the context of love by our wishes, but as a story we cannot control it for one can tell stories only as the story is allowed to tell itself through us.”⁴¹
3. “Christian ethics as an ethics of love reinforces our illusions by retreating into an ethic of interpersonal understanding and acceptance as if becoming an I to a Thou is the height of human attainment. But ethically our life involves more than person-to-person interaction; we exist as social creatures, and as such we confront social problems that require not love but justice. . . . good will is no less tyrannical than bad will in its continued control of the other.”⁴²

Thesis (1) is about what love is and is not; (2) is about how love is and is not known; (3) is about what is and is not worth knowing.

When Hauerwas denies in (1) that love is “an end in itself,” and then contrasts God’s “identity” with God’s “presence,” he is chiefly warning us not to idolize *human* love, not to equate ethics with our own amorphous velleities. He is surely right when he insists that God’s will that we love him “is not love directed at *any* being, but the particular God of Israel whose freedom is the power and the weakness, of redemption on the cross.”⁴³ As I emphasize in chapter 3, Christian ethicists owe Hauerwas a massive debt for bringing them back to the distinctiveness of biblical stories, in contrast to speculative moral rules or fashionable cultural trends. But he makes too much of a good thing. When he writes, for instance, that “Jesus comes not to tell us to love one another, but to establish the condition that makes love possible,” and that “the Gospel is not about love, but it is about this man, Jesus Christ,” he sets up misleading dichotomies.⁴⁴ To say that the meaning of love for Christians cannot be separated from the story of Jesus is not to say that love is not an end in itself. It is rather to say that the end of relation to Jesus is personal knowledge of love, and vice versa. Coming to know God is a matter of recognizing and serving a living Person, rather than of analyz-

⁴⁰ Hauerwas, “Love’s Not All You Need,” p. 227.

⁴¹ Ibid., p. 228.

⁴² Ibid., p. 230.

⁴³ Ibid., pp. 227–28.

⁴⁴ Ibid., p. 228.

ing an inanimate object or comprehending an abstract idea.⁴⁵ Hauerwas's telling point is that this process engages the whole creature in company with others and before the cross, rather than the intellect alone in contemplative isolation and before our democratic idols. One can no more relate the history of God without making some general identifications, however, than one can write a human biography without ascribing some typical traits. Properly understood, saying "Jesus is Lord" is synonymous with saying "God is love." *Agape* itself "rejoices in the truth" (1 Cor. 13:6).

Another questionable dualism is evident in Hauerwas's claim (2) about stories. Stories, like principles, can be read (self-)deceptively or enacted (self-)destructively; and even *New Testament* narratives about the Father and the Son are open-ended, requiring free participation by finite "children" for their full significance (e.g., Matt. 5:44–45; Eph. 5:1–2; and cf. Matt. 23:37–39). Although irreducibly Christocentric, the Christian story is not fixed, nor is it told exclusively by God, nor is it infallible, in so far as it is mediated by fallen creatures. One does not have to be deaf to others' stories, furthermore, or to other genres within one's own tradition, to be a faithful (re-)teller of scriptural wisdom. However unintentionally, Hauerwas leaves the impression that efforts to find common ground with other religions or constructively to employ nonconfessional arts and sciences (including the language of "rights") is apostasy. In a highly situationalist and secular age, his caveats help keep the church true to itself, but one does not have to be John Rawls to want to balance particularity and universality, or Pelagius to want to validate a measure of human freedom as responsive to divine grace.⁴⁶

Perhaps the most troubling division set up by Hauerwas is that in (3), between love and justice. The division trades, I fear, on a distressing habit of treating perverse or indulgent versions of love as though they were the genuine articles. There are many false coins of "love" in circulation, but the task is to spot and reject them, not to devalue the treasury altogether. I have already said a good deal about love and justice above, so I will only protest here that *truly agapic* love, a love genuinely rooted in God's holiness, has priority in Christian ethics, not some manipulative or sentimental sham. Love never falls below justice, never gives less than is due, but if history has taught us anything it is that a reciprocal "justice"

⁴⁵ I elaborate this observation in chap. 1, associating it with the primacy of biblical theology over Hellenistic philosophy.

⁴⁶ I too have warned against undermining biblical faith by accommodating it too closely to secular reason. See Jackson, "To Bedlam and Part Way Back" and "*Prima Caritas, Inde Jus*: Why Augustinians Shouldn't Baptize John Rawls," *Journal for Peace and Justice Studies* 8, no. 2 (1997): 49–62. Yet the limits of secular reason stem largely from its misunderstanding of the meaning of love.

without love is itself volatile and destructive. To speak only of what has been earned or contracted for is to forget that we all require unconditional nurture and forgiveness. The neglect of care and mercy leads at best to dishonest social philosophy, at worst to corrosive hatred and endless vendetta.

With great rhetorical force, Hauerwas claims that “the black man [in the United States] discovered that there is no greater enemy to his people than the white liberal’s attempt at loving reconciliation, for such reconciliation comes without destroying the structural racism of our society.”⁴⁷ But one might hold up the Truth and Reconciliation Commission’s work in South Africa as a useful contrast. As Hauerwas knows, the Commission is a courageous and highly practical effort to attend to *love, justice, and truth simultaneously*. It does not deny or ignore the structural racism of apartheid, but rather challenges its legacy out of a faith that refuses any fundamental divide between charity and veracity. To set these two at odds is to risk a cynicism in which forgiveness must always be based on dishonesty and reconciliation on connivance. Hauerwas avoids cynicism when he goes on to say, “my argument is that love, even in interpersonal relations, that is embodied without justice is sentimental and destructive rather than realistic and upbuilding.”⁴⁸ This is a marked departure from his more oppositional language, however, and is quite compatible with strong *agape*.

We are left, in the end, with this thesis from Hauerwas:

Even if love is freed from its sentimental perversions, it is still not an adequate principle, policy, or summary metaphor to capture the thrust of the Gospel for the Christian’s moral behavior. Love is dependent on our prior perceptions of the truth of reality that can finally be approached only through the richness of the language and stories which form what we know. The Christian is thus better advised to resist the temptation to reduce the Gospel to a single formula or summary image for the moral life.⁴⁹

Two comments are in order. First, Hauerwas himself comes close to announcing a single principle “to capture the thrust of the Gospel”: the priority of truth, rather than the priority of love. Jesus does say, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life” (John 14:6), but he also summarizes the law and the prophets with the two love commands of Matthew 22 and fulfills the law and the prophets with the final love command of John

⁴⁷ Hauerwas, “Love’s Not All You Need,” p. 230.

⁴⁸ Ibid., p. 231. See also Hauerwas and Charles Pinches, *Christians among the Virtues* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1997), pp. 85–88, where the “true love” whose name is “God” makes “forgiveness, reconciliation, and restoration” possible beyond the “either/or of blindness or revenge.”

⁴⁹ Ibid., pp. 231–32.

15:12. Can there be any better testimony to the harmony of *veritas* and *caritas* than this convergence? Is it not because God so loved the world that we have the Suffering Servant about whom we share gospel truths (cf. John 3:16)? Second, to reiterate, the priority of love is not a monism that “reduces the Gospel to a single formula.” Strong *agape* neither wallows in tolerant “sincerity” nor venerates “general utility.”⁵⁰ There are many virtues, acts, and effects required by Scripture; and to call (human) charity a necessary condition for Christian morality is not to say it is sufficient.⁵¹ It is slightly more accurate to think of *agape* as a “summary image” for the moral life, yet this in no way threatens the richness of the Gospel stories. The stories themselves witness to the one true God whose essential nature is love; as von Balthasar notes, “love is not just *one* of the divine attributes, any more than man’s answering love is *one* of the Virtues.”⁵²

Let me return now to Hays and his three objections to love and its priority:

4. “At least four major New Testament witnesses—Mark, Acts, Hebrews, and Revelation—resist any attempt to synthesize their moral visions by employing love as a focal image.”⁵³
5. “[Love] is not really an image; rather it is an interpretation of an image.”⁵⁴
6. “The term [‘love’] has become debased in popular culture; it has lost its power of discrimination, having become a cover for all manner of vapid self-indulgence.”⁵⁵

Concerning (4), I grant the descriptive exegetical point: the word “love” does not often appear in the four texts he lists. As Hays himself points out, however, Mark 12:28–34 itself describes love of God and neighbor

⁵⁰ Hauerwas writes, “Great immoralities are not the result of evil intentions, but [of] a love gone crazy with its attempt to encompass all mankind within its purview” (ibid., p. 235). This is a useful critique of a utilitarianism that treats human welfare as an aggregate sum, but the Gospels themselves call for something very like the “craziness” Hauerwas alludes to. The difference is that, in Scripture, one is called to love all persons, like Christ, where they are and one at a time. Tribalism is just as much a temptation, Desmond Tutu and others remind us, as false “universalism.”

⁵¹ With Charles Pinches, Hauerwas has recently written: “We affirm the centrality of charity, but contrary to a good bit of recent theological opinion, we believe that charity cannot stand alone.” See *Christians among the Virtues*, p. xv. I am not sure whose “theological opinion” Pinches and Hauerwas are objecting to, but it cannot be that of the strong agapist.

⁵² von Balthasar, *Love Alone*, p. 49.

⁵³ Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament*, p. 202.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

as having significant primacy: “There is no other commandment greater than these” (12:31). Moreover, the signal emphasis on love in so many other places in Scripture seems to justify giving it general pride of place as an ethical focus. “Words from the *agape* family occur 341 times,” William Klassen notes, “and are found in every book of the NT.”⁵⁶ The very heart of ethical monotheism, in both biblical *Testaments*, is expressed by the equation of God with a holy love and by the correlative commandment to love as God does (see pages 14–15 above). This observation means little without a concrete context in which love takes practical form, but the same can be said of any biblical virtue or symbol.

Hays would have us employ “community, cross, and new creation” as regulative images in doing Christian ethics, and I find this strategy highly edifying. The three focal images do not preclude our triangulating on a single subject, however, any more than speaking of God as “Father, Son, and Holy Spirit” prevents us from calling God a “Trinity” (a triune Person). If we lose sight of the indicative unity of God’s personality, on the other hand, we will also fail to see the imperative unity of human virtues. One of Hays’s paramount concerns is to “speak meaningfully about the unity of New Testament ethics,”⁵⁷ but his metaphorical means tend to thwart his moral end. He sometimes juxtaposes analyses from his three focal points without integrating them or harmonizing their tensions; yet when he does reconcile the three images, it is by giving the cross exclusive authority. I myself have highlighted the importance of openness to self-sacrifice in Christlike love. But Christian feminists come into their own when they insist that an occlusive or uncritical emphasis on crucifixion may be disruptive, not just of secular society between women and men but also of the kingdom of God. The unqualified extolling of self-sacrifice and/or nonresistance may encourage masochism on the part of women and perpetuate misogyny on the part of men, the feminist case

⁵⁶ Klassen, “Love (NT and Early Jewish Literature),” in *The Anchor Bible Dictionary* (New York: Doubleday, 1992), vol. 4, p. 384. Klassen concludes that the double commandment that results from associating Deuteronomy 6:5 and Leviticus 19:18b probably did not originate with Jesus himself (pp. 385–86). This conclusion meshes well with an emphasis on Jesus’ final commandment in John 13:34 as supplanting self-love as a standard in Matthew 22:39. Klassen also makes an important point relevant to my response to Hays: “Interpreters of Jesus are appropriately united in seeing the command to love one’s enemy as a normative summary of the attitudes and action of Jesus, even though the words ‘neighbor’ and ‘love’ are not current [i.e., common] terms of Jesus. He thinks in concrete terms” (p. 386). Hays, like Hauervas, understandably wants to focus on the concrete and historical, but this does not preclude normative summary. There is a Fourth Gospel in addition to the Synoptics, and even the Synoptics generate general ideals out of personal encounters with God (see my chap. 1).

⁵⁷ Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament*, p. 204.

runs, hence we need criteria to help us discern when and how such *kenosis* is appropriate.⁵⁸

These criteria may be found, I believe, in the logic of agapic love. *Agape*'s willing of the good for the whole person, as well as for the wider community, means that self-respect, voluntariness, and social constructiveness are all relevant factors. Concerns for community and new creation themselves must move us to refuse to go to the cross at times. If self-denial would be despairing or coerced or destructive, then *agape* itself must rule it out. Hays notes that Saint Paul does not recommend suffering for its own sake,⁵⁹ and his discussion of Paul's ambivalent yet (for its time) impressive endorsement of male-female equality is nuanced.⁶⁰ One wants to hear more, however, about the principled limits (if any) Hays himself would place on suffering and service, especially for those without social power. What are the proper means and ends of action for those who wish sincerely to be obedient to God? Hays's commitment to pacifism is clear, but I am not sure how he squares his conviction that "love [in 1 Corinthians 13] does not mean uncritical acceptance"⁶¹ with the utter nonresistance to evil literally enjoined in Matthew 5:39.⁶²

This brings us to objection (5). Hays maintains that "the content of the word 'love' is given *fully and exclusively* in the death of Jesus on the cross; apart from this specific narrative image, the term has no meaning."⁶³ That is an overstatement. Christ's cross is the most profound revelation of God's love for creatures, but it is not the only revelation. As the self-giving logic of *agape* writ large, the cross has singular (in the sense of unsurpassable) power and authority, but it is not the sole temporal enactment of divine love. Dining with tax collectors, feeding the five thousand, forgiving the woman caught in adultery, healing the sick, giving sight to the blind, enabling the lame to walk, suffering little children to approach, challenging the scribes and Pharisees, even driving the moneychangers from the temple—as Hays well knows, all of these are potent images of Jesus' love for God and the world. Jesus' raising of Lazarus from the dead, although it lacks the soteriological import of his own crucifixion, is a striking manifestation of charity: love both lifts up and goes under, both gives life and surrenders it. Kenotic self-surrender is a defining fea-

⁵⁸ I do not mean to suggest that Hays is unaware of the feminist misgivings I describe; see, for example, his respectful but critical discussion of Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza in *ibid.*, pp. 266–82.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 31.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, esp. pp. 55–56 and 65.

⁶¹ Hays, *First Corinthians: Interpretation* (Louisville: John Knox, 1997), p. 232.

⁶² I discuss Christian just war theory and pacifism in chap. 3, and I return in that context to a dialogue with Hays's position concerning the use of violent means to resist evil.

⁶³ Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament*, p. 202; emphasis mine.

ture of Christ's identity, a prototype that all who would follow him are called to emulate (Mark 8:34–35), but contagious joy (John 15:11) and righteous indignation (Mark 11:15–19) are also morally salient.

Although his Passion is in basic respects the consummation of Jesus' life and teaching—the watermark of his obedience to God and service to humanity—it need not overwhelm the rest of the gospel. Because it is indispensable to the Father's redemptive purpose carried out by the Son, the cross is not to be understood as some horrible calamity or freak accident. But neither is it all we know of divinity. The Son of God, the biblical canon attests, is both vital life and slain death, the model of joy who walks on water as well as the man of sorrows who stoops to rescue those in despair. It would be a grave mistake to think that openness to self-sacrifice is either tangential to Jesus' character or optional for his followers. The need and vulnerability of human beings, together with their sinfulness, make unreciprocated giving essential for both Christ and Christians. Yet it would also be shortsighted to ignore incarnate love's capacity for fellowship and even prudence. In short, all three features of interpersonal *agape*, not merely willing sacrifice, are crucial for a complete Christocentric ethics.⁶⁴

Let this be said a thousand times: Christian love suffers for the truth and embraces martyrdom when necessary. Christ movingly resists the temptation to let God's cup pass from him and avoid the cross, but not all invitations to drink from the grail of death and self-denial are from God. Jesus wisely escapes would-be murderers on a number of occasions (e.g., Matt. 12:14–15; John 11:53–54). Moreover, he commends Mary for anointing him with costly nard (John 12:1–8), an act that must seem self-indulgent to pure utilitarians even as Judas finds it wasteful. The

⁶⁴ In "The Ethics of Self-Sacrifice," *First Things* (March 1999), John Milbank mounts a powerful critique of disinterested self-giving. In spite of numerous insights, however, Milbank fails to distinguish sufficiently between self-sacrifice as a necessary means to various ends (including conviviality and joyful sharing with God and others) and self-sacrifice as an end in itself. To celebrate self-sacrifice as *the* good, desirable for its own sake, is indeed masochistic, as Milbank suggests; even as to treat death as the precondition for ethics is nihilistic. But given the neediness and vulnerability of human beings in this life, forms of unreciprocated service are often necessary. Milbank notes the occasional need for unilateral service, but he tends to limit this to extraordinary or fallen circumstances, to be fully repaired or redeemed in heaven. In reality, however, self-sacrifice is not called for by calamity and sin alone; it is also required by human finitude as such. Even the Christ child is born in want. Death does not make ethics possible, but human needs and potentials do; Adam and Eve would not have been self-sufficient even if they had not fallen into mortality. As perceptive and well-written as "The Ethics of Self-Sacrifice" is, what it presents as a critique of the liberal state and its anonymous utilitarianism is actually an assault on the dependency of creatures, as well as on the cross of Christ. In time, Christlike love does take the form of openness to self-sacrifice (cf. John 15:13–15), even if in an afterlife this willingness can be set aside.

challenge is to discern and then act on God's will—"not my will, but yours, be done" (Luke 22:42)—without ordaining in advance what precise form this obedience must take. Some means (e.g., murder, rape) will be forever ruled out as hateful by the end of God's love, while other means (e.g., forgiveness, service) will be regularly ruled in as hopeful. But self-sacrifice is not an end in itself. If talk of "the priority of love" risks becoming overly abstract and permissive, Hays's accent on the cross risks becoming overly concrete and preemptive.

As for Hays's objection (6), again his point is well taken, but only to a degree. "Love" has been bowdlerized in many quarters, as has "freedom," but why let such a splendid moral term be appropriated by mass culture? As Martin Luther King, Jr., wrote: "When I speak of love I am not speaking of some sentimental and weak response. I am speaking of that force which all of the great religions have seen as the supreme unifying principle of life."⁶⁵ Instead of quitting the field and leaving it to the enemy, I would rather try to win back a standard that (for all its tatters) can still inspire our best moral allegiances. Hence this book. If relativism is the besetting theoretical malaise of our time, to shift the metaphor, then the Christian antidote must begin with the resounding declarations that "God is love" (1 John 4:8) and "the God of love and peace will be with you" (2 Cor. 13:11). This witness stands the best chance of making clear that the unity of *New Testament* ethics stems from the coherence of the divine Personality rather than the abstraction of deontological rules or the objectivity of utilitarian values.

"Love," one might say, is both a proper name and an ethical concept. "Love" is God's proper name, in the sense that it is the most univocal identification we can make of God; and it is an ethical concept, in the sense that it entails various habits and behaviors as normative for human beings. The cross, on the other hand, is more like God's earthly garment than God's proper name. (It makes sense to say that the Persons of the Trinity "eternally love" one another, but it is nonsense to say that they "eternally go to the cross" for one another.) If we reject the priority of love and multiply moral symbols or criteria without explaining how they might be integrated into a single moral identity (divine or human), then we risk reinforcing relativism rather than combating it. Hays stresses that the Pauline "eschatological reservation" forbids us to see even the servant community as the kingdom fully come,⁶⁶ and he even notes elsewhere that "Paul insists that there is nothing to be gained by self-sacrifice where

⁶⁵ King, "A Time to Break Silence," in *I Have a Dream: Writings and Speeches That Changed the World*, ed. by James M. Washington (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1992), p. 150.

⁶⁶ Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament*, p. 25.

love is absent.”⁶⁷ Like Mark (on his interpretation), however, Hays would apparently have Christians use “the cross” as the “controlling symbol” and “single fundamental norm” that gives shape to “community” and “new creation.”⁶⁸ Thus self-abnegation in a more or less fixed cruciform pattern becomes, de facto, the singular Christian measure.

Why, in contrast, do I put love rather than cross first? More precisely, why do I see openness to sacrifice as a feature of *agape* but actual sacrifice as neither its lone nor its trumping idiom? One reason is that love is the more holistic concept; it has ready implications for the motives of agents (no hatred), the forms of actions (nothing less than justice), and the consequences of actions (palpable benefits must outweigh harms), whereas self-sacrifice tends to reduce to a deontological rule of behavior. In his elaboration of “taking up the cross” in the Gospel of Mark, Hays himself notes: “Mark focuses . . . on simple external obedience rather than on motivation or the intention of the heart. There is no visible concern with the problem of *how* it is possible to obey.”⁶⁹ As a reflection of unswerving trust in God, this is impressive; but such an elevation of self-sacrifice is likely to be inattentive to both character traits and communal consequences. Love surrenders its legitimate interests only when this can be done consensually and constructively, to repeat; if the motive is self-loathing or the end result is chaos, love is not present. Neither good will nor social utility alone makes for virtue, but narrowing moral vision to a single form of action is also incompatible with strong *agape*. I talk a good deal about suffering and sacrifice in chapter 1, and I contend in chapter 4 that the willingness to give forgiveness, although a mini-crucifixion, should be unconditional. But a preoccupation with the cross as the unique epitome of Christian virtue leaves us with a truncated ethics, insensitive to context. Although far from a dour rule-monger, Hays hazards such truncation in his relentless exhortation to walk the *Via Dolorosa*.⁷⁰

A second reason for love’s priority is that when we affirm with John that “God is love” (1 John 4:8) and with Paul that “the God of love and peace will be with you” (2 Cor. 13:11), we can better remind ourselves that the life of charity is participation in the holiness of a personal God, and commanded as such. Because God has the narrative coherence of a person, it is possible to know God via stories, parables, and even direct encounters. Hays is correct to emphasize the story of the crucifixion as deeply revelatory of God’s nature. But Christians declare “God is love,” rather than “God is cross,” precisely because God is a living Person

⁶⁷ Hays, *First Corinthians*, p. 226.

⁶⁸ Cf. Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament*, pp. 80 and 84.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 83.

⁷⁰ Friend that he is, Dr. Hays will forgive me for the playful suspicion that his being raised a Boston Red Sox fan is not irrelevant here.

rather than any one object or any past act, however ideal and reproducible. By foregrounding John's definitive affirmation, Jesus' endorsement of (proper) self-love (Matt. 22:39), Jesus' closing command to "abide in my love" (John 15:9), together with Paul's own putting of charity first (1 Cor. 13:13), we are better able to keep Christian virtue from lapsing into a cramped resentment or world-hatred.

Heaven knows that inordinate zeal to be self-immolating is not the chief vice of our time. But why not say that the three focal images of "community, cross, and new creation" triangulate on charity as God's essence, thereby illustrating how the ethical monotheism of the Bible can help rectify contemporary relativism? Of all the virtues, agapic love most opens itself to the reality of others to address them as they are. *Agape* is internally complex, to be sure, but so is the Trinity. It is precisely this diversity within unity—the balancing of unconditional commitment, equal regard, and passionate service—that permits a lithe yet resolute following after God, as opposed to a desperate and chaotic pursuit of happiness. Since you are creatures of the Most High, the *New Testament* counsels, you must "pursue love and strive for the spiritual gifts" (1 Cor. 14:1).

First Corinthians 13:4–8 is often thought of Saint Paul's "panegyric" on *agape*:

Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends.

Paul culminates chapter 13 by calling *agape* "the greatest of these," more indispensable even than faith and hope. Hays warns against the sentimentality that easily results from lifting these and the preceding lines out of context and treating them as "a hymn or an independently composed oration on love," but Hays himself writes that the purpose of the chapter "is to portray love as the sine qua non of the Christian life and to insist that love must govern the exercise of all the gifts of the Spirit."⁷¹ In the Corinthian setting, "gifts" refers most immediately to speaking in tongues, prophesying, and other charismatic practices. It is legitimate to add, even so, that a Christian ultimately sees the whole of existence as a gift of the Spirit to be governed by love.⁷² The challenge is to discern what, specifically, this means.

In sum, one need not apologize for praising love above all. When properly understood, love's priority cannot be pressed into the service of

⁷¹ Hays, *First Corinthians*, p. 221.

⁷² Hays himself makes this "hermeneutical transfer"; see *ibid.*, pp. 231–32.

a reductionism that would make moral propositions deductively certain and moral persons sublimely self-sufficient, but it can be a crucial aid in countering an errant “pluralism” that would make moral claims utterly relativistic and moral persons psychologically fragmented. The detaching of charity from certainty and self-sufficiency—as well as from procedural justice (chapter 1), personal immortality (chapter 2), in-principle pacifism (chapter 3), endless vengeance (chapter 4), and both pure autonomy and crude vitalism (chapter 5)—amounts to a disconsoling doctrine in many ways. Love’s embracing forms of self-sacrifice may even seem close to masochism. I conclude, nonetheless, that love has its own brand of optimism. Love serves the authentic needs of others even unto death, but it also joyfully affirms the goods of life; to put charity first is to enter into a fellowship with the Creator of life (theonomy) that is the foundation of all other virtues. Perhaps charity is a “useless passion” (Sartre), an unrequited longing for a nonexistent God in an absurd world; perhaps “love” is now but a smokescreen for “vapid self-indulgence” (Hays), a hopelessly romantic notion in a debased culture. But the superlative charisma of a Goodness larger and more “personal” than ourselves, for whom we constantly pine and whom we occasionally intuit, suggests otherwise. The strong agapist holds, at any rate, that even amid ambiguity and suffering we can be touched by Love and, however haltingly, love in return.