

God's Love and Responding Human Love: The Basis and Nature of Ethics in the New Testament

L. W. Hurtado (University of Edinburgh)

Abstract

The deity affirmed in the New Testament writings (the foundational texts of Christianity) is declared to love the world and humanity, and this love is posited as God's motivation for creating and redeeming the world. In its ancient Roman setting, the idea that a deity acted loves humanity was highly unusual. Indeed, in the minds of many ancient people, it would have been judged ridiculous. But the New Testament repeatedly ascribes to God this powerful love for humanity, even though humans are portrayed as sinful, disobedient to God, and even as enemies of God. The New Testament also makes this divine love the basis and pattern for Christians, who are expected to love in imitation of God. That is, Christians are to love because God loves them and the world. Indeed, in the New Testament, love (Greek: *agapē*) is to be the core motivation of all Christian ethical/behavioural responsibility, and the central characterization of Christian ethics. Moreover, following the pattern of God's love, Christian love is to be extended even to enemies and persecutors, not simply to fellow believers. This gives Christian ethics a distinctive basis and character.

The Loving God

The Greek words translated "love/to love" comprise a significant body of New Testament vocabulary, and one of the striking emphases in the NT is that God loves the world and humanity.¹ Indeed, in NT discourse about God, references to God's love are frequent.² Some examples of relevant statements in the NT will serve to confirm this. We may commence with the earliest NT writings, the letters of the Apostle Paul, for whom God's love is central.³ In his letter to Roman Christians, he refers to God's love having been "poured into our hearts" (Romans 5:5), and declares

¹ Victor Paul Furnish, *The Love Command in the New Testament* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1972) remains a rich and impressive study of the theme of love in the NT, addressing texts in the Gospels, Pauline letters, Johannine writings, Catholic epistles, and even the "Apostolic Fathers". The classic study of NT words for "love" is Robert Joly, *Le vocabulaire chrétien de l'amour est-il original? Philein et agapan dans le grec antique* (Brussels: Presses universitaires de Bruxelles, 1968). See also the appendix in Furnish, 219-31; and W. Günther, H.-G. Link, C. Brown, "Love," *Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, ed. Colin Brown (3 vols.; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1975-78), 2: 538-51. On *agapē* (noun) and *agapan* (verb) in particular, the most frequently used words for "love" in the NT (116 and 143 times respectively), see, e.g., G. Schneider, "ἀγαπή," *Exegetical Dictionary of the New Testament*, eds. Horst Balz and Gerhard Schneider (3 vols.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990-93), 1:8-12.

² Strangely, NT scholars have not devoted as many publications to "God" as to other topics in the NT. I have reviewed previous scholarship, and have offered my own analysis in a recent small volume: Larry W. Hurtado, *God in New Testament Theology* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2010).

³ "When Paul speaks about love, his starting point is the *love of God*": Schneider, "ἀγαπή," 1: 10.

that God proved “his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ died for us” (Romans 5:8). In the climax of a soaring passage in his epistle to the Romans, Paul assures his Christian readers that nothing in all creation “will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Romans 8:39). In another letter he refers to God simply as “the God of love and peace” (2 Corinthians 13:11), and just a few lines later in the same context, in a benediction familiar in Christian tradition, he refers to “the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit” (13:13).

It is immediately apparent that in these NT texts God’s love is seen as connected particularly with Jesus, and most powerfully revealed in him, whom the NT declares to be the climactic expression and embodiment of God’s purposes. On the one hand, God is portrayed as having given over Jesus, his “beloved Son”, to suffering and shameful death on the cross to express God’s redemptive love for a sinful world (e.g., Romans 8:32). On the other hand, Paul also refers to Jesus as himself prompted by love, and so willingly having laid down his life to fulfil God’s redemptive purposes (e.g., Galatians 2:20).⁴ So, God’s redemptive love is linked with, and mirrored uniquely in, Jesus’ self-sacrificial love.

This emphasis on God’s love is by no means confined to Paul. For example, in one of the most familiar statements in the NT, the Gospel of John declares, “God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life” (John 3:16). In the final writing in the NT (Revelation), we also have a reference to Jesus as “the one who loved us and loosed us from our sins through his death” (Revelation 1:5), Jesus’ love here, of course, taken as expressive of God’s redemptive love.

It is important to underscore the point that the NT presents God’s love as directed toward a world and humanity seen as sinful and even in rebellion against God, and so, utterly unworthy of God’s love. To be sure, echoing an emphasis from the Old Testament, the NT urges love *for* God, and promises blessings and rewards to those who love God faithfully (e.g., Mark 12:30; Romans 8:28; 1 Corinthians 2:9).⁵

⁴ Similarly, Ephesians 5:2 refers to Jesus (“Christ”) as having loved and given up himself to death “for us” (Ephesians is traditionally a part of the Pauline corpus, but many scholars regard it as written in Paul’s name by an admirer after Paul’s death).

⁵ Of course, the key OT text is Deuteronomy 6:4-5, which is cited by Jesus in reply to the question from a scribe about which is the first and great commandment (Mark 12:28-31).

But the more remarkable emphasis is on God's love toward humanity pictured as alienated from God, captive and "dead" in sin, and even as "enemies" of God. For example, Ephesians 2:4 refers to God as "rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us even when we were dead through our trespasses."

As observed earlier in this paper, the key expression of God's love for sinful humanity is in Jesus' suffering and death. Earlier in this paper I noted Paul's statement in Romans 5:8 that "God proves his love for us in that while we were still sinners Christ died for us" as indicative of this. Here, I draw attention particularly to Paul's characterization of the human situation in which this divine love was expressed: Christ died for us, Paul says, "while we were still sinners." Just a few lines later in this same passage Paul uses even more dramatic language, stating that "while we were enemies [of God], we were reconciled to God through the death of his son" (Romans 5:10).

Notice that the situation is one in which *humanity is alienated from God*. Humanity is pictured as having turned its back on God, turning to false gods and to selfish and sinful behaviour that is also harmful to others.⁶ In religions more typically, the gods are pictured as needing to be reconciled to humans. Human misbehaviour typically alienates the gods, and then humans need to placate the gods and attempt to restore the relationship with them, usually by some sort of sacrificial ritual. But the NT turns this upside down, picturing God as having taken the initiative towards an erring humanity. Although humanity has committed offences against God, this God is the one who seeks to restore the relationship, aiming to overcome human alienation and reconcile humanity to God! This virtually stands the typical religious view on its head!

Of many examples of this in the NT, one of the most astonishing is given in Paul's statement (in Romans 3:25). In this text, to overcome humanity's sinful alienation and to put humans right with God, God himself provided an atoning sacrifice in Jesus' death. The Greek word that I translate here as "atoning sacrifice" is *hilastērion*, a word which comes from the practice of offering sacrifices to placate deities, making a "propitiation" to gods to coax them to forgive offences.⁷ But here,

⁶ A classic and extended NT description of the erring tendencies of humanity is Romans 1:18—3:20.

⁷ J. Roloff, "ἱλαστήριον," *Exegetical Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. Horst Balz and Gerhard Schneider (3 vols.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990-92), 2: 185-86.

in an extraordinary reversal of all previous human thought, Paul refers to God as having provided a “propitiation”! This veritably explodes the image, introducing a radical new view of this God as so intensely loving sinful humanity that he seeks to overcome human alienation, doing this through the costly sacrifice of Jesus’ death.

But, in addition to this particular astonishing statement, in the ancient Roman world the fundamental idea that God loves humanity was unprecedented. In those cultures in which Christianity has long been influential, people typically take the notion that God loves humanity for granted and as unremarkable.⁸ But this was not always so, and in historical terms the idea that God intensely loves humanity comes to expression first in early Christian teaching such as we have quickly reviewed here. I can find no statements about gods loving humanity in Roman-era “pagan” texts, or in philosophical discussions of that era. It is certainly not a typical thought in Roman-era religion, not even very visible, and I suspect that many people found the idea that God loves humanity as incredible and even bizarre.⁹

So, to underscore the main points of the discussion thus far, the NT presents a most unusual deity characterized by a robust love for humanity, a love that prompts this God to take the initiative in overcoming the alienation of humanity for the purpose of establishing a relationship with humanity. There is no indication of God loving humanity out of need to be fulfilled or to acquire something lacking in God. This is a *redemptive* and giving love that is expressed for the sake and benefit of humanity.¹⁰

Answering Human Love

In addition to positing love as the motivation for God’s redemptive initiative, the NT also makes God’s love the basis and model for the answering love that Christians are

⁸ This is true both of believers and atheists. Adherents of the latter stance (essentially a reaction against traditional Christian faith) would likely grant that if there were a God this God would love humanity.

⁹ See, e.g., the various prayers to pagan deities included in Mark Kiley (ed.), *Prayer from Alexander to Constantine: A Critical Anthology* (London: Routledge, 1997), 123-204; and the essays in *Faith Hope and Worship: Aspects of Religious Mentality in the Ancient World*, ed. H. S. Versnel (Leiden: Brill, 1981) by J. N. Bremer, “Greek Hymns,” 193-215; and H. S. Versnel, “Religious Mentality in Ancient Prayer,” 1-64; and also Werner Beierwaltes, “The Love of Beauty and the Love of God,” in *Classic Mediterranean Spirituality*, ed. A. H. Armstrong (New York: Crossroad, 1986), 293-313.

¹⁰ The divine love described in the NT is also entirely different than the sort of erotic love ascribed sometimes to the Greek gods (e.g., Zeus, who is pictured in Greek myths as desiring human women and having sex with them).

called to exhibit. In the little writing, 1 John, for example, we have several statements declaring God's love and summoning Christians to love in response.¹¹ Let us consider 1 John 4:7-12, which I quote in its entirety:

Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love. God's lover was revealed among us in this way: God sent his only son into the world so that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins. Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us.

Note in this passage the tight connection between God's love and the answering love that Christians are to express. God's love is prior, and is the source of Christian love: "love is from God" (v.7). This is also expressed still more directly in another statement a few verses later: "We love because he first loved us" (4:19). Moreover, as in statements previously noted, God's love is portrayed as supremely expressed in sending his Son "to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins" (v. 10).¹² But my focus at this point is on the emphatic connection the text establishes between God's love and the loving response that Christians are to exhibit: "Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another" (v. 11).

The answering Christian love is to be directed to other believers, which takes us into what we call "ethics", the nature of behavioural responsibilities to others. Indeed, we may say that love for God in the NT is not expressed primarily in ritual actions, but in loving regard for others, as reflected in John 13:35, "By this all will know that you are my disciples, that you have love for one another." God's "vertical" action of love is to generate a "horizontal" love (for others) in those who receive God's love. In fact, a verses later the author expressly makes Christian love for others the necessary expression of love for God: "Those who say 'I love God,' and hate their brothers or sisters are liars," and "The commandment we have from [Jesus] is this: Those who love God must first love their brothers and sisters" (4:20-21).

¹¹ See also Furnish's discussion of love in the Johannine epistles (*Love Command*, 148-58).

¹² "Atoning sacrifice" translates the Greek word ἱλασμός (*hilasmos*), which is obviously cognate with the word ἱλαστήριον (*hilastērion*), used in Romans 3:25, as noted earlier in this paper.

It is noteworthy that the NT presents God's love as generating Christian love for fellow believers, but there is more.¹³ The NT urges a love that reaches beyond the Christian fellowship to a circle as wide as that to whom God extends his love. So, just as God loves a rebellious and alienated humanity that in its sinfulness makes itself enemies of God, so Christians are called to love all people, not only those outside the Christian fellowship, but even those who oppose them. Paul, for example, exhorts his readers in Rome, "Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them," "Do not repay evil for evil," and "If it is possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all," and "Beloved, never avenge yourselves" (Romans 12:14-19).¹⁴

Still more memorably, Jesus is reported as directing his followers, "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbour and hate your enemy,' but I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven . . . For if you love those who love you, what reward do you have? . . . Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect" (Matthew 5:43-48). The "perfection" called for here is, obviously, a loving perfection or completeness that extends to all. Here explicitly Christian love is to include even enemies and persecutors, which rather directly follows the pattern of God's redemptive love as we have noted it. "If love cost God what was most dear to him [Jesus, his beloved Son], the same will certainly apply to a disciple."¹⁵

This approach provides a different interpretation for loving one's neighbour or one's brother, one unknown either to rabbis or Greeks. It is God's love, creating the new realities amongst mankind, which is itself the basis and motivation for love between people.¹⁶

As observed by Günther and Link about Jesus' saying, "the radical and laconic nature of the sentence—enemies are to be loved—is quite foreign to Rabbinic teaching," and there is a similar dearth of parallels in Greek philosophical tradition.¹⁷

¹³ Note Furnish's critical and cogent discussion of charges that the Johannine view of Christian love excludes outsiders (*Love Command*, 144-48).

¹⁴ On this passage and the particularly curious statement in 12:19-20, see Furnish, 107-8.

¹⁵ Günther, Link, Brown, "Love," 544.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 544.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 544. Although the hatred of one's enemy ascribed to Jewish tradition in Matt. 5:43 is not attested in rabbinic sources, cf. the explicit statement in the Qumran text, *IQRule of the Community (IQS)* 1.9-10 that members of the Qumran community are "to love all the sons of light, each one according to his lot in God's plan, and to detest all the sons of darkness, each one in accordance with his guilt."

Summary

Although “it is impossible to hold that the love command always and everywhere has a central place in the ethical teaching of the New Testament,” it is nevertheless clear that “it was regarded as a crucial part of the church’s witness to Christ,” and that Christians felt it a necessity to interpret the meaning of the love-command for the varied situations in which they found themselves.¹⁸ Moreover, as Furnish judged, “For most of the New Testament writers the love command is not just one among numerous important statutes of the law, but the *decisive* and *central* commandment,” and for them God’s claim upon human obedience is decisively found, not in the OT law, but in “the person and work of Jesus Christ.”¹⁹ That the NT presents love as a *command* makes it a response to God and the expression of God’s love, not a sentimental feeling, but an answering obedience. “Only when love is understood as a duty is it truly free to be love in the Christian sense.”²⁰

This NT love-obligation arises from the prior love of God for the world and humanity that has been expressed from creation of the world onward and supremely in the giving of God’s Son, Jesus, to redemptive suffering and death. Indeed, it is difficult to see that the strong demand of love in the NT can be responded to effectively except on the basis of deep gratitude for God’s prior and enabling love.

Regrettably, and with deep shame, Christians must acknowledge that down through history they have often failed to exhibit the answering love for one another and for others that is commanded in the NT. But for Christian ethical effort today, the model is not the ambiguous history of Christianity, but, as in the NT, the declaration of God’s love shown in Jesus.

¹⁸ Furnish, *Love Command*, 198.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 200.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 201.