THE DEMANDS OF LOVE

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TO SPEAK OF THE DEMANDS of love seems to introduce an obligation into a relationship which cannot be compelled. To love a person is to enjoy him and to seek him instinctively. There seems to be a kind of autonomy about love: certain results follow if the relationship exists; but to speak of demands seems to rob the relationship of its spontaneous, unbidden character in which the very freedom from demands or possessiveness is a guarantee of its genuine quality. To make demands on the basis of love seems to cast love rather in the categories of precept, and to introduce a note of emotional blackmail which destroys the very relationship and turns it into something else: duty, or pity or fear.

Similar difficulties have produced much dissatisfaction with the scholastic framing of the concept of love. It is said that love is something which can eventually only be experienced, and to attempt to frame it in any categories but its own is radically to prejudge the question. The scholastic treatment of love, by classifying it with the activities of the will, produces either serious inaccuracies or makes of it something so cold and inhuman as to be quite repulsive. The stress on self-direction towards a rationally approved object, on giving, getting, possessing, approving, enjoying, seems to miss the whole rich colour of experience. The parallel considerations, concerning objects of willing which are truly good, apparently good, those which may be desired in themselves and those which can only be desired in relation to something else, seem to be more concerned with logistics than with love as people know it.

It is argued that love has been represented in terms so voluntaristic that not only has the human warmth of the thing perished from religion, but a deeply legalistic mentality has been fostered in christian living: good people are satisfied with keeping the commandments under the mistaken persuasion that this is the love of God. Moreover, as a result of the same voluntarism, a kind of casuistical catholicism has developed, which is quite different from the true love of God and neighbour which is supposed to mark genuine christianity. The fire of charity does not burn; keeping the

commandments becomes the sole measure of virtue; the spontaneous, generous, promptings of love are supplanted by fear of the judgment.

Underlying this sort of difficulty there is the conviction that we really know what love is. The unspoken axiom is that our generally accepted meaning of love is, or ought to be, its theological and ascetical sense also.

Good people are rightly convinced that if they could love God more their religious difficulties would be ended. Tepidity, as they term it, would be warmed to zeal; energy would replace sloth; no difficulty would be too hard to overcome; prayer would become a delight and a glory would light up the drabness of trying to be moderately good. It is little enough consolation to be told that if you were zealous, energetic, full of prayerful fortitude and of the faith which sees the glory in ordinary things, then you would love God. Basically the problem is that when people of our cultural background speak of love – or 'charity' in the religious sense – they are not talking of the same thing as Christ or St Paul.

To put it in another way: when we say that God is love we must not allow ourselves even implicitly to limit God to what we may understand by love. It is God who defines by his inscrutable attributes and providence what love is, not the current notion of love which defines God. This is not merely a minor logical point: rather it is a quite flourishing practical heresy: for many modern writers on theology attempt to measure God and his revelation against completely aprioristic persuasions of God as declared by their persuasions about 'love'. Admittedly the problem is unavoidable because, with the intrinsic limitations of language, when we attempt to speak of a personal God we tend to build up in our own minds a picture of a human personality, and then raise our pictures to the infinite. But the problem becomes much more acute and practical when this process leads to what is in fact a judgment that certain characteristics are less becoming to God than others. Love as we understand it we apply readily to God with all the associations of benign fatherhood, kindness, gentleness, mercy. Anger and wrath are excluded or explained away from practical impact on our lives. Wrath is declared to be no more than an anthropopathism; but if that is so, by exactly the same standard so is the fatherly love of God for us.

To exclude wrath from the love of God robs the christian message of some of its terrible grandeur and urgency, and comes close to substituting a vague human optimism for redemption. Fundamen-

tally, the error which excludes wrath from love in this anaemic theologizing is that we tend to think of ourselves as something distinct from God's decree of creation, as something which God can and ought to and does love apart from the decree. But apart from that decree there is simply nothing there to be loved: the ground-rules for love are the same eternal and unalterable decree which gives us existence. God sets the meaning of love, and not by courtesy of human acceptance. When we are told that no decent human father would let his child undergo the judgment of wrath and rejection because this is inconsistent with love, we may accept or debate the opinion. But when we are told that therefore God could not, because he is love, is simply to confuse the question. God's decree does not depend upon our receiving it as suitable to our way of thinking or imagining. What God is and has decreed is love: to reject aspects of this decree as made known to us by his revelation is simply arrogance and pride. Nor may it be said that this is merely an arbitrary metaphysical approach, whereby the term love is used to mean something which is diametrically opposed to the reality. God's revelation of himself, the life and teaching of Christ, and the consequences and working out of these tell us what love is: and given this data, there is no difficulty which does not stem from sentimentality or the blind conviction that we know better.

It may be said that if there is no situation of wrath there is no redemption. The love and mercy of God is made known to us in the life and teaching of Christ; but it is precisely a loving mercy which delivers or preserves mankind from wrath. Basically, the truth presented is that he who effectively accepts Jesus is free, he who rejects Jesus is under wrath. The New Testament is stronger and more specific on the subject of wrath than even the Old; and this stronger and more disturbing teaching is itself a consequence of the outpouring of divine love at the incarnation.

Speculatively, the demonstration of divine love and mercy could have taken many forms; but divine love as manifested at the incarnation produced a new historical situation of fact. The initiative lay purely with God; and by his providence, when God became man, a new situation of wider and deeper love was achieved. Here the love of God for man is in a true sense unconditional and does not depend upon any recognition or gratitude which man gives it or denies it. But from this new situation as a whole new fields of duties and possibilities opened before man, because of the new relationship between Christ and mankind; but they are not new

in the sense that they are all offered to man to be accepted or declined without moral consequences. The choice of Christ and his message is not simply an open option; Christ's teaching is authoritative and is his law. The law is the law of charity; but it is a law having in itself the moral force to oblige the consciences of men. Charity is not merely a word to stand as an emotional crutch for the religiously or morally or emotionally inadequate; it is not an escape clause built into the awesome contract with Christ the redeemer which objectively exists for all of us; it is not a blanket defence to be invoked before the judgment seat of God. And yet the law of charity is not only obligatory, it is possible of fulfilment; because by Christ's merits and grace we can do what Christ taught, knowing and accepting his teaching as love which demands love.

Love towards God is the great commandment, the principal demand of Jesus: and his second demand is that we should love our neighbour as ourselves.[1] What does this mean in the concrete? The most generalized 'theory' of love in the teaching of Christ is to be found in the discourse after the last supper.[2] Here the theology of love of the Godhead for Christ and men is declared, together with the obligation of men to love God in himself, and in Christ who is in the Father as the Father is in him.[3] 'If you love me, keep my commandments'.[4] 'He who has my commandments and keeps them, he it is who loves me; and he who loves me will be loved by my Father; and I will love him and manifest myself to him.'[5] 'He who does not love me, does not keep my words'.[6] 'But that the world may know that I love the Father; and as the Father has commanded me so do I . . .'[7] 'As the Father has loved me so have I loved you; abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love'.[8] 'This is my commandment that you love one another as I have loved you'.[9] 'You are my friends if you do what I command you'.[10]

Consequently there is a simple equation between loving Christ and doing what he taught, just as Christ's love for the Father was expressed in his obedience to the Father's commandments. And here we see in its most acute form the difficulty which arises from identifying the common human notions of love with love in God. When we contemplate the passion it is more than difficult to see

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[1] Mat 22, 39. [2] Jn 14–17. [3] Jn 14, 10. [4] Jn 14, 15. [5] Jn 14, 21.
[6] Jn 14, 24. [7] Jn 14, 31. [8] Jn 15, 9; 10. [9] Jn 15, 12. [10] Jn 15, 14.

in it God's love for Christ. When we say that God did not will the maceration of Christ, and that it was not the suffering of Christ that pleased him but rather Christ's heroic will to follow the commands of charity, even if the result was crucifixion, we find ourselves arguing further that even to permit the passion of Christ, for whatever reason, presents us with the mystery of God's love at its most incomprehensible. The love of the Father for Christ was a love of complete preference; and yet it was consistent with the demand that led to the crucifixion. And it is the very perfection of the obedience of Christ and his uncompromising sacrifice of self which lays the groundwork for the new order of love which is his law, and at the same time brings judgment on the world.

In the discourse after the supper, Christ sets an explicit dichotomy between his love and the world. Because the disciples had been chosen out of the world, and were therefore not of the world, the world hated them as it hated Christ, and would continue to hate them as it had hated Christ.[1] The theme of rejection is developed: because the world rejected Christ, the Paraclete will convince the world of sin and of justice and of judgment.[2] And in the prayer of the great high Priest the antithesis between the men whom God had given him out of the world and who had believed in him, and the 'world' which hated them, because they were not of it, is fundamental.[3]

But if 'this is love: that we follow his commandments'[4] it does not follow that christian love is a passionless thing, a matter of stoical and cold obedience. If there is to be a complete adherence to the words and commandments of Christ, it is difficult to see how it could be anything but a passionate, self-consuming devotion. The synoptics teach the same sort of hard doctrine, but more concretely. They declare that the words and commandments of Christ, if kept and obeyed, are love.

The love of God is presented by Christ as one of two radical choices: no man can serve two masters.[5] The claims of God's service are absolute: they necessarily exclude whatever may stand in the way of that service which specifies and declares love. Loving God means to serve him as a slave;[6] it means that his kingdom and righteousness must be sought before everything else;[7] it demands that everything which hinders God's service or leads to sin must be

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[1] Jn 15, 17–21. [2] Jn 16, 8–11. [3] Jn 17. [4] 2 Jn 6.
[5] Mt 6, 24; 23, 37. [6] Lk 17, 7 ff. [7] Mt 6, 33.

cut off,[1] even property, family and friends, and this without hesitation or looking back.[2] Christ realizes fully that the effects of his teaching will be for many radically divisive.[3] It will break the false peace of smug complacency of the world which Jesus would have destroyed.[4] In particular Jesus mentions two great obstacles to those who seriously mean to love God: these are mammon and pride, or the self-regarding vanity which feeds pride. The man who gives himself to the piling up of riches is a man of little faith, a gentile, lacking in the loving trust which should characterize our relationship towards God.[5] The desire for public esteem and prestige is not consistent with the service and love of God: the first places in the synagogue and honorific greetings in the market-place are causes of woe if loved.[6] Many of these things are sufficiently human, we should say, venial; but the point is that Christ tells us that we cannot practise love in his sense and at the same time be content with merely the natural standards of honour and dishonour, self-respect and bourgeois esteem. We are obliged to limit even the good and beautiful things of love in order to make room for God. The 'world' is that which takes these values as self-defining and beyond criticism, or even close analysis. It was the world in this sense which rejected and despised Christ.

What has been said about the equation of Christ-loving and Christ-obeying must not be restricted to the sphere of clearly defined commandments as we have come to understand that word. Christ's words and commandments are wider than the mere imperatives of do and do not. And yet, because they are wider than mere imperatives, they include the imperatives. In the collection of teachings which we know as the sermon on the mount, Christ declares, apparently paradoxically, that those whom the world calls blessed are really under woe: and contrariwise, those whom the world would take to be unfortunate are really blessed.[7] Even a cursory study makes it clear that Christ is here teaching that the world and the attitudes of the world are not sufficient to themselves. It is particularly hard for those who are naturally adequate and effective to accept this: to those who have riches and power, and who therefore are full, lauded, honoured and laughing, the world is most delightful and enticing: if they are to accept Christ's teaching it will be with great difficulty. But on the

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[1] Mt 25, 29 ff. [2] Lk 9, 61–62; 14, 26. [3] Lk 12, 51–55. [4] Lk 12, 51–53.
[5] Mt 6, 30–34. [6] Lk 11, 43; Mt 23, 6 ff. [7] Mt 5, 3–12; Lk 6, 20–26.

other hand those who are poor, sad, hungry and harried are blessed: not that their state is in itself happy, but because it helps them accept that more than this world exists; and therefore they turn more readily from earth to heaven. It is not stated absolutely that this is what will happen: but by and large what Jesus said of the beatitudes and woes is correct, and was proved particularly correct in his own life. On the whole it was the poor and the despised who received him and his message, while the powerful and secure scoffed at him, or considered him a danger to their interests.

The teaching of the beatitudes is a radical revaluation of things by the authority and the spiritual wisdom of Christ. In several applications in the context of the obligations of the old law, which he had not come to destroy but to fulfil,[1] Jesus gives a new message which takes out the positive element in the old law and extends its possibilities. All of these have the same pattern, 'You have heard that it was said . . . but I say to you . . .' These injunctions are therefore precepts: four of them deal with man's relationship to his neighbour; three treat of the relationship of justice and love, the fourth of the relationship between man and woman. The fundamental difference between the commands of the old law and the commands which Christ gave was that the old law based itself on justice whereas Christ asks for something more. The old law asked love for love, hate for hate; it allowed a human reaction of emotion to control action to a considerable degree. Christ requires that not the emotions, but the free deliberate choice of the heart shall determine action. It is much more noble than justice. It is able to love when there are apparently only grounds for hate: it is able to forgive. These commandments of Christ, or Christ's interpretations of the commandments, give us to see that what he wants is a reshaping of man as God wanted him to be. Man's tendency is to try to protect himself from the impact of these demands by restricting his obedience to the external, making his judgment stand upon what can be seen, judging only the tangible evil as evil and often not even that. But Christ insists that man is not compartmentalized. What is internal will come out, the thought will become the deed, the wish the act. Jesus makes the conception of mere prohibition of acts to stand upon something much deeper and more wide reaching: for the omission of sin he substitutes and demands active virtue.

Consequently it is not accurate to think of the commandments

[1] Mt 5, 17.

of Christ as merely ethical: ethics really demand only justice, and Christ demands much more: ethics are concerned with the abstract good, but only in the light of loving is even abstract love possible. If the commands and words of Jesus are taken merely as an ethical code then they are indeed impossible. But if these are accepted as part of a larger scheme of objective redemption then they become possible. The ethical teaching of Jesus is a command; but it is simultaneously a promise of grace without which there would be no hope of fulfilment.

Lovelessness is nothing other than rejecting Christ and what he stands for. And though what Christ stands for is not to be reduced to a merely humanitarian understanding of the golden rule,[1] Christ taught as only he could that love of our neighbour expressed in simple concrete acts is identified with love for him. It is not that we are to love Christ vicariously by loving our neighbour; it is rather that we love Christ in our neighbour and our neighbour in Christ. In his teaching on the last judgment, Christ identifies practical charity towards the neighbour with charity towards himself. But in this context[2] we are confronted with a difficulty which is central to the demands of love. Christ came out of love, to show us how to love God, and himself, and our neighbour: and he directly sanctions his teaching with the threat of hell. If there is no exercise of love there is no condemnation.

But in God wrath and love do not exclude each other. God's wrath springs out of his love and compassion. For man, love of God means precisely the uncompromising and effective adherence of our whole being to him; the full acceptance of Christ's law is to love Christ and to be loved by God. But God's compassion working out in the redemption brought by Christ, when it encounters in man an adverse will instead of love and gratitude, turns into wrath.[3] This does not argue change in God or, as it were, passion induced in him. It is the situation of objective refusal of redemptive love which entitles us to use the term. It could be said that, supposing grace to be offered, the first demand of love is that we should accept to be lovable to God. In God's actual dispensation, love must be accepted by man; there must be a certain mutuality, for the objective benevolent offering of love is not the same as the union of wills and hearts which personal love requires. Repeatedly Christ warns of the objective situation which comes into being when

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[1] Lk 6, 31. [2] Mt 25, 31 ff. [3] Mt 18, 34; Mk 3, 5; Rom 2, 5.

goodness and love are rejected. It would be false to represent this situation as arising from a new act on the part of God. It is not as though man was being punished by a second merely extrinsic happening after having refused the offer of forgiveness and love; it is rather that, because he has not accepted love and forgiveness, there is nothing, meaningfully, for God to love.

To love is to keep Christ's words and to observe them. In the New Testament as in the Old, all the reasons for divine wrath can be led back to one which is fundamental, man's contempt for God. The gentiles sinned by their contempt for God as shown in the revelation of nature,[1] the jews by disregarding and violating his will in the law.[2] For St Paul the cause of wrath is simply sin, and in both these contexts the antithesis is love.[3] The more fundamental reason is that any form of 'apostasy' from God necessarily involves the wrath of God: and very often the antithesis is again charity.[4] More specifically, the cause of wrath is contempt of God's kindness, patience and tolerance which should lead to penance with a full change of heart.[5]

Another reason for wrath in the New Testament is the response to the love of God shown to us with lack of love towards our neighbour: or similarly showing mercilessness in return for mercy. The parable of the unforgiving servant[6] is a direct answer to Peter's question about how often are we to forgive. The conclusion of that parable is the wrath of the master upon the servant who, being forgiven, would not forgive.[7] Similarly, when Christ healed the man with the withered arm on the sabbath, his anger was kindled against the pharisees because in their censorious righteousness they objected to his showing this mercy, and took it as an occasion for deciding to destroy him.[8] Again St Paul virtually equates the uncharity of judging our neighbour with contempt for God, and states that God who offers forgiveness in patience has also reserved a judgment of wrath.[9]

The prime examples of this attitude are the jews and particularly the pharisees: in so far as they would not listen to Christ, would not receive his words, they did not love, and in consequence laid themselves open to wrath. But the working out of wrath is not a distinct step or consequence; the wrath of God and what it implies or effects

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1 Rom 1, 18; 3, 20.
2 Rom 2, 17 ff; 3, 19 ff.
3 Eph 5, 6; Col 3, 6.
4 Cf Rom 5, 8, 10 etc.
5 Rom 2, 4.
6 Mt 18, 21.
7 Mt 18, 33.
8 Mk 3, 5.
9 Rom 2, 1 ff.

seems to be initially, at least, identified with its causes. The result of rejecting Christ and his love is a further hardening of heart, a further abandonment to the very sins and lovelessness which were the causes of wrath in the first place. The most characteristic effects of wrath are unbelief and apostasy and the catastrophy of ever-widening sin which follows from them. Hence lovelessness, the refusal to unite one's mind and will with that of Christ, begets further lovelessness, and so on into complete moral chaos. The Old Testament emphasizes the connection between the law of God and death. The eschatology of the New Testament introduces the idea of destruction.[1] But the most terrible form of eschatological destruction is not annihilation but eternal torment:[2] the situation described by wrath is as extensive as the previous situation of love and forgiveness had been. And it is intrinsic to the choice of lovelessness that wrath, and exclusion, should follow from it.

Since wrath and preservation from it dominates the New Testament, the question of how to be delivered is asked and answered from the very beginning. John the Baptist in his preaching insisted upon the essential element, which was and is the change of heart. It would seem that, when he attacked the pharisees who had come up to be baptized by him, it was because they sought some sort of preservation from the wrath to come, but lacked the disposition of true penance.[3] But not even the pharisees are excluded, though the test remains that the works of penance be performed.[4]

The Baptist also warns that Christ will separate out the wheat from the chaff, and Jesus makes it clear through his preaching that only by acceptance of him and his message can we escape the wrath which is implicit in refusal. The love of Christ for sinners, his parables of mercy and the very circumstances of his death between two thieves, accentuate the double aspect of the problem of the demands of love in relation to the wrath which is the only alternative to accepting the dispensation of love. There is the unshakable confidence in continuing mercy, and the real sense of the importance of obedient love which itself is impossible without humility. And given the initial union of wills, there is the beginning of a union in love which can grow until Christ's mind and heart become our life force.

It is in this sense that perfect love casts out fear. If there is a

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[1] Cf Rom 9; Apoc 14 ff. [2] Apoc 14, 10 ff; Mt 18, 34. [3] Mt 3, 7.
[4] Mt 3, 8–12.

perfect love, then fear of the wrath has no place, because the only possible ground for wrath is disunion of will which perfect love excludes. If love is less than perfect, that is, if the demands of love are not fully met, then there is room for fear. And even in a very generous response we know that rejection is still possible.[1] Nevertheless the final testimony of the gospel is not to the Gehenna of wrath but to the compassionate love of Christ.

The demands of love are not to be interpreted even in the context of the wrath of God as an arbitrary set of rules leading on to rewards and punishments. Love is a matter of person calling upon person for a response. The ability to make the response is the exclusive prerogative of personal dignity; and it is no diminution of personal dignity that a personal response is required of us by God. The fulness of our response is very difficult to measure, because we are likely to become more aware of the demands of love the more generous we show ourselves. Our capacity to love increases with exercise and growing awareness of the mighty circulation of loving which emanates from God to Christ, from Christ to mankind, from us individually to our neighbours and from our neighbours to us, and so through Christ back to God. It is the true nature of things, natural and supernatural: to put oneself deliberately outside this relationship is to choose, against our true destiny, to be loveless – unloving and unloved and unlovable. To be thus is to be under wrath: to remain thus is hell and madness.

When therefore we speak of the moral theology of charity we are not as it were defending an easy option. The charity demanded by Christ is so exacting that full acceptance of its claims is simply heroic sanctity. The partial avoidance, or oblique fulfilling, of its claims is what we commonly do and commonly encounter. But even in our generosity and in our defects there is a true measure of right ordered charity which must be preserved: misplaced heroisms are liable to turn into heresies, and 'enthusiasms' which arbitrarily localize charity in one sort of exercise not rarely carry the taint of hate. To discern these spirits is not an easy matter; and there often may be need of sound doctrine to determine the applications. For this all the sources of theology may have to be invoked, and this does not exclude the moralists and even, dare it be said, the casuists.

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[1] Mt 18, 34; 22, 13.