

It seems reasonable to hold that theism, properly so-called, necessarily involves the use of personalistic concepts and symbols, in that it conceives and symbolizes strictly ultimate reality as an eminent person, insofar like ordinary, noneminent persons who relate to one another as well as to the eminent person by relations of love, knowledge, judgment, care, and so on. But, then, it would seem equally reasonable to expect that there may be the same ambiguity in thinking and speaking about the eminent person's love as in thinking and speaking about the love of ordinary persons.

Specifically, it may be ambiguous whether God loves unconditionally or only conditionally—whence the crucial difference that Marxsen points up between the kind of theological ethics represented by Jesus himself as well as Paul the Christian, on the one hand, and the kind that he takes to be represented by Paul the Pharisee as well as John the Baptist and Pharisaism generally, on the other hand. Of course, in point of fact, a God who loves only conditionally is a God who may either love or not love, God's loving being in every respect contingent, in no respect necessary. But, then, I should insist, contra Marxsen, that the God of Jesus and Paul the Christian is not only a "different" God (whence their "different" ethics), but also a "better" God (whence an ethics that is likewise "better")! Why? Well, because a God who cannot not love is "greater" than a God who can either love or not love, just as (and for the same reason that) a God who cannot not exist is "greater" than a God who can either exist or not exist. That there is the closest possible connection between conceiving God as necessarily loving all others as well as self and, in Luther's sense, "letting God be God" seems clear enough.

Question: Isn't the traditional Roman Catholic understanding of salvation against which Luther protested in all essentials the same, existentially considered, as the Pharisaic understanding of God's gracious willingness to forgive? In other words, although salvation is precisely by works as well as by grace, God can nonetheless set limits to God's righteousness by graciously overlooking the sins of those who, on balance, do good instead of evil. Thus, while God is indeed gracious on this conception, God's grace must be earned or merited by doing good works—and, at the outset, prior to grace, "by doing what in one lies."

Of course, even the Reformers themselves continue to think and speak in terms of a conditionalist, works-righteousness frame of reference—with the important difference that the only conditions or works held to be necessary to God's loving are provided by God Godself in the active/passive obedience of Jesus Christ, apart from which God is not free to be a loving God. Therefore, while the Reformers succeed in making clear that we are saved unconditionally, *without works of our own*, they are still caught in assuming that God does not, and cannot, save unconditionally, *without works simpliciter*, because of the role they continue to assign to the work of Jesus Christ as "meritorious cause" or condition of salvation.

Another question: Shouldn't the whole Lundensian argument—especially as represented by Nygren's *Agape and Eros*—be reconsidered? For what is involved in distinguishing, as it does, between the different basic motifs of *agape*, *eros*, and *nomos*, if not something like a distinction between, on the one hand, two ways of understanding love as conditional—namely, *nomos* (the Hebrew-Jewish way) and *eros* (the classical-Hellenistic way) and, on the other, one way of understanding love as unconditional—namely, *agape* (the normative Christian way, given the teaching of scripture and the insights of the Reformers)?

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