

'All you need is love.' Is this a satisfactory summary of Pauline ethics?

Whilst it is certainly true that love provides the backbone to Paul's thought, being in his mind the inspiration not only for all ethical behaviour but also for the Christian life itself, it remains to question the statement above as a *satisfactory* summary of his ethics.

Though Paul, in his Letter to the Romans, wrote that to love was to observe the whole Law, what is to him a satisfactory summary is only satisfactory to the modern reader if one understands *love* in the same way Paul did. When Paul writes of love he uses the Greek *agape*. By *agape*, Paul wishes to get across the dynamic, creative, self-giving and life-giving love that is *divine* in origin and is created in us by the action of the Holy Spirit. In his understanding, the Holy Spirit is the source of this 'divine way of loving'; by this gift a Christian is not just helped but is *enabled* to live the moral life. Without this gift it would be impossible to live the moral life as the Gospel demands it, 'to be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect'. The gift of this love enables the Kingdom ethic: 'thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven'. In utterly *free* adherence to God, one takes on the mind of God and acts as God would have one act.

God so loved the world that he sent his Son as saviour. This love, *agape*, is dynamic; it works to transform what is unlike itself to be like itself. The statement above could be criticised as a summary since it does not suggest the dynamism of this love. To some it may imply a passivity; one receives love and one has everything one needs. But Paul, in common with all New Testament authors, sees salvation as a *grace* (a free gift from God) and morality as *response* to this grace. In other words, one receives a new life in the Spirit and one lives a new lifestyle; for Paul salvation meant the transformation from persecutor to tireless apostle to the gentiles.

Furthermore, the statement might give the impression that love displaces traditional rules for virtuous living. Rather it fulfils and perfects the Old Law, containing all other rules rather than displacing them. In many places in his letters Paul is moved to list the kinds of behaviour acceptable and unacceptable according to this love; he is not afraid, at times, to resort to lists of vices and virtues in getting across the demands of *agape*. Reading the statement above as a summary of Pauline ethics may incline one to see Paul as a situationalist, one who would have been at home with Fletcher's ethical stance. But Paul does not verge on the antinomian. He sees the outworking of love into various rules of living and states them against those who would tend to an unconstrained 'freedom of life in Christ' approach, where rules could be neglected.

In fact, the very presence of more detailed rules in Paul's letters suggests to some that he was influenced by his Hellenistic background, wherein lists of vices and virtues and rules for households were commonly used to present morality. Some might even argue that these were as influential in Pauline ethics as the injunction to love, which would render the statement above less than satisfactory as a summary of his ethical thought. However, Paul is very clear on the primacy of love. It is significant that his First Letter to the Corinthians contains both various practical responses (often in the form of specific rules and guidelines) to problems arising in that church and the sublime hymn to *agape*: *Love is patient and kind ... these three remain: faith, hope, and love; and the greatest of these is love*. For Paul, love contains and directs other gifts. His resorting to more specific rules and lists of vices and virtues is a *pastoral* response, making love's demands intelligible to a people used to specifics.

It must also be realised that 'you' in 'All you need is love' refers to the individual as part of the community. One should not infer a 'private ethic' in the statement above. Paul, along with apostolic writers such as John, promoted a *koinonia* ethic. *Agape* creates community, togetherness and harmony of relations. *Koinonia* refers to the 'horizontal union', the family of believers that make up the Church in 'vertical union' with God. The image of Church as the *Body of Christ* (in 1 Corinthians 12) is an elaboration of the *koinonia* reality; it has profound ethical implications which might not be seen in the statement above. The image was used by Paul to stress the unity and interdependence of Christians, whose gifts and talents contributed to the building up of the Body. Baptized into the Body by the same Spirit, a person, whether Jew or gentile, slave or free, is before anything else a Christian and should not let shallower distinctions get in the way of mutual love. Touchingly, he wrote that if one part of the Body is hurt all other parts are hurt with it, as a way of promoting an attitude of care and concern especially for the needy of the Church.

In attempting to understand *agape* as Paul did one must refer to Christ, the Head of the

Body, who is for Paul the supreme model of *agape*. Paul urged humility and generosity on Christians by virtue of Christ's humility, his willingness to become as a slave, and the offering of his life as a ransom for many. Indeed, Pauline ethics might usefully be summarised as an imitation of Jesus in the power of his Spirit. The distance between this and 'All you need is love' is not so far when one realises the origin and transforming dynamic of love as Paul meant it.

Finally, the statement above usefully suggests how Pauline ethics was at odds with observance of the Old Law. Jewish converts to Christianity had a tendency to force observance of the Torah on Christians formerly pagan. This was a source of dissent in the early Church. Paul, once a very zealous Jew himself, is absolutely clear on the futility of observing the Old Law in pursuit of righteousness. Having served a purpose of *preparing* for the law of the Gospel (the law of *agape*), the Torah was fulfilled and superseded by it. From now on, the Old Law could only serve to condemn, given that a person would always fall short of its rigorous demands. Christians are free from the Law because they have been enabled to fulfil the essential demand of the Law, which is love.