

AGAPE AND EROS

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NO one can read Bishop Nygren's great work *Agape and Eros* without gratitude and much delight. This is one of those monumental works of which only a very few are produced in any generation and which help to clarify and mould the thinking of men everywhere. Agape and Eros are words which are here to stay in our theological vocabulary because they express the two great motifs underlying the more inclusive word "love". They enable us to distinguish these elements and to handle them with more precision and understanding of what they mean. All preachers and theologians have suffered in the past in attempting to clarify what is involved in the Christian idea of love, whether it is the love of God to man, of man to God, of man to his neighbour, or the meaning and place to be given to self-love. We now have a clear word for two aspects of what are commonly called love, and for this we must be forever indebted to Bishop Nygren's clear and searching analysis. He has helped us to resolve much of this ambiguity.

Nygren distinguishes two types of love. One is the love of desire. It is the love which values and seeks to possess some good in its object. It is motivated by that good. We love that which is good, that is, that which is good for us. Such a love is self-centred. However lofty the object on which it places its love, essentially it sees that object as a good to be possessed. Fundamentally it loves and seeks its own good. This is the kind of self-centred love which is natural to man. To this kind of love Nygren assigns the name of Eros.

His use of this term is based on Plato's description of love, especially as found in the *Symposium*. Here love seeks for beauty as a form of the highest good. Enjoying glimpses of this good in lowly and sensual things, it is led up from these to seek its highest good in Beauty itself, beyond all entanglement in sense or even in thought. Eros, then, is man's aspiration after the highest good he can conceive. It is a struggle upwards. It is an activity of man. God Himself can hardly be said to love in this sense, since there is no good which he lacks or can desire. Our love is inspired not by any activity of His, but by His own inherent loveliness and desirability. God Himself is Love in the sense of Eros only in the sense that He is Himself His own highest good. Such love as can be attributed to Him is therefore a form of self-love. And in its ultimate analysis this is what Eros always is, however spiritualised its object and form may be.

Men in their natural state know of no other love than this. It is taken for

granted that no one can love another unless he sees in him some good to be loved. If we apply this conception to God, it means that God can only love us in so far as He sees in us something good and lovable. To be loved by God we must earn or deserve that love by our own goodness. Man, therefore, aspires to rise to God's level and to find fellowship with Him upon His own level of holiness and goodness. This is the basis of legal forms of religion such as Judaism, or of mystical religions. They are religions of ascent, by which man attempts to climb up to God's level. Their aim is the enjoyment of Him as their highest good. All religions of this kind, which place the self, its good or its enjoyment, at the heart and which seek to rise by their own effort, Nygren calls religions of Eros.

In contrast to all these is the Christian teaching of love as Agape. Where Eros can only doubtfully be attributed to God Himself, the meaning of Agape is wholly determined by its presence in God. It is the unmotivated love of God, which is directed towards us, not because of any value or worth in ourselves, or because of any good which God is looking for in us, but because love in God is the spontaneous outflowing of Himself. "God revealeth His love towards us in that while we were yet sinners Christ died for us." This text is the key to the meaning of Agape. Where natural man would think it immoral to give love and fellowship except on a basis of like to like, God's love knows no such limitation. Its nature is revealed just in the fact that it has no such basis at all. Men naturally love their friends, those who do them good or from whom they expect some good. But men who are filled with Agape will love their enemies. Their love, like that of God, does not find its motive in the character or attitude or value of those loved. It is simply out-flowing, self-giving love which needs no other motive than that it loves.

This Agape then, is the love of God flowing down to us. We cannot deserve it or win it or rise to it. It seeks us at our own level, in our sin, and gives us fellowship. As such it is in complete contrast to Eros, which is man's love and always seeks to rise to God's level. Agape we can only accept. God's love and our fellowship with Him are founded purely on His will, not on anything that we are or that we can achieve for ourselves.

On the basis of this analysis, Nygren then takes the position that Agape and Eros, as the Christian and natural conceptions of love respectively, are completely opposed to one another, and cannot be reconciled. A large part of the work is devoted to the attempt to trace the ways by which these two motifs became entangled and confused during the course of Christian history, and the attempts to create a synthesis of them, in which sometimes Agape, but more often Eros, is the dominant. In the Apologists, in the Greek Fathers, in Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, whether Agape or Eros is the term used, or *caritas*, *amor*, or *dilectio*, the Eros motif has generally captured the centre of the stage. Except as enshrined in the doctrine of Creation and Incarnation and in the Cross, the predominating interest has generally been man's attempt to raise Himself up to God and to seek

for fellowship on God's own level. Not until Luther was it possible to see Agape as containing the only Christian basis for fellowship with God, a fellowship initiated and carried through by Him on our level without any contribution from us. Eros is nothing but man's sinful attempt to set himself in the centre of the picture, on a level with God.

We may be grateful to Nygren for the clear way in which he has differentiated the two concepts of Agape and Eros, and for his clear exposition of what he regards as the fundamental point of difference between Catholicism and Protestantism. Yet we may find reason to disagree with his position that Agape alone is the New Testament and Christian concept of love, and that there is no legitimate place for Eros in genuine Christianity. Here, as in so many other cases, a false antithesis is made, an "either-or" which does not represent the true richness and the real Catholicism of the Christian faith. Heresy is a hard word to use, yet it seems legitimate here. For heresy does not mean false doctrine as opposed to the truth, but rather a part of the truth taken out of its context and set over against other truth. It is the over-emphasis on one aspect as against the "wholeness" of Catholic truth. In this sense, it is not Nygren's distinction between these two motifs, but his acceptance of the one to the total exclusion of the other, that is a mark of his heresy and Luther's if he has rightly interpreted him. Both the New Testament and immemorial Christian tradition demand that a place be found in Christian faith and practice for most of those elements which Nygren rejects as belonging to Eros rather than to Agape.

If we examine the New Testament we shall find little to quarrel with in Nygren's clear and moving description of God's love to man in Christ. The Agape by which God in His bounty reaches down to man in his helplessness and sin is certainly the primary message of the Gospel. So far it is true to say that God comes down in His grace to meet man at his own level. But when we ask what is the purpose of this redeeming movement on the part of God we move into an area of the widest disagreement. Nygren would say that there is no purpose. God's love is wholly unmotivated. It is based only on His will to establish fellowship with us as sinners. He gives the impression that this fellowship, initiated at our level, is to remain permanently on our level. It is a fellowship with sinners, and Nygren seems to imply that if we ceased to be sinners in any real sense then fellowship with God would be impossible.

But neither the New Testament nor the Church since has ever regarded the Incarnation as merely due to the unmotivated love of God reaching down to us. It has always seen in it a *purpose* which is a part of the love of God. The purpose of God's love in Christ is our redemption. But what meaning has redemption unless it means that God reaches down in order that He may raise us up? A relationship between God and ourselves which is brought about by God on our level may be a real relationship, but if it stays at that level, it can hardly be called redemptive. Surely it is God's purpose, not merely to treat us as if we had not sinned, but to deliver us

from the inward power and presence of sin, to raise us to holiness. Nygren may have some place for this thought, but it is not apparent. His whole concern seems to be to show that there is no movement of man from his level of sin to God's level of holiness. There is only a movement from God down to our level.

Such a view contradicts important elements of the teaching of the New Testament. While it is true that the word Eros does not occur in the New Testament, yet many of the elements which Nygren regards as characteristic of Eros are present there. It is not true to say that these entered in only as the result of Greek or other non-Christian influences. If they are due to extraneous influences within Judaism itself, then at least many of them are accepted and taken up into the Gospel. And this fact may justify the Church at a later date in taking up and making her own other elements of the Eros motif. Nygren is fond of quoting Nietzsche's saying that "Christianity involves the transvaluation of all previously accepted values". This is true, but it is a transvaluation of them, and a reintegration of them, not their denial.

Nygren takes the parable of the Prodigal Son as an example of God's Agape toward sinners, so contrary to the common outlook that God could love only the good and holy. Yet this parable would seem a particularly unfortunate one for the purpose. For in this parable it is the son who takes the initiative in returning home. The Father, it is true, sees him a long way off and runs to meet him, freely accepts him in his penitence and restores him to his status as son in the home. But it is the son who comes to his senses and takes the first steps on the homeward path. And the father waits till the son comes in sight. He does not seek him in the far country. Now it is obvious that the details of a parable cannot be pressed too far. And this parable is not primarily told as a picture of God's love to sinners, though it is often interpreted in this way in popular homiletic use. It is a plea to the elder brother who stayed in the father's home to show sympathy and mercy to his erring brother. The basis of the plea is their relationship as children of the one father. The contrast is drawn between the unforgiving spirit of the Pharisees and God's willingness to receive the penitent. But it is not a very clear picture of God's Agape if this consists wholly in the movement of God to seek the sinner at his level. For it is equally a part of the parable that the sinner himself sets out to return to his father's home. On Nygren's terms he is guilty of presumption in thinking to bring himself back to God's level. His only part ought to have been to recognize his lost state and wait for the father's mercy to reach him.

There is another point in this parable of which Nygren can hardly approve. What were the motives which led the son to decide to return? In the beginning at least they were quite plainly self-centred. He is starving and remembers how his father's servants have enough and to spare. This is the motive which sets him on the upward path. Quite evidently he is seeking his own good. This is not even Eros for the enjoyment of renewed fellow-

ship with his father—he does not aspire to more than a servant's status—it is a lower Eros which looks to the satisfaction of the basic needs of physical life. But it is plainly Eros which inspires him. And so far as we are justified in interpreting the details of this parable—certainly so far as Nygren is justified in seeing in it a picture of God's Agape—we can see it as our Lord's acceptance of Eros as a motive which can really and truly bring a man at least part of the way home to God.

Nygren uses the parable of the Labourers in the Vineyard to establish once more his thesis that God's treatment of us is based on His free love, not on conventional justice. His payment of the same reward to those who had worked all day and to those who had laboured but for an hour is an indication of this. But while there is a valid point made here, the point of the parable is missed. For again, this parable is essentially a plea to the Pharisees, the men who have laboured all day and received the standard wage, to accept the fact that God's dealings with us are not limited by our notions of justice, and that even the late-comers, the penitent sinners, are assured of their acceptance. But it is an unfortunate example for Nygren's main thesis. For the fact of the matter is that it is those who have worked in the vineyard, whether for a long or short period, who reap a reward. There is no indication that those who never worked at all are treated with equal generosity. The labourers are *expected* to do their part, whether they are called early or late. There is no clear statement here that there is nothing we can do to meet God's demands. And one supposes that the workers in accepting employment have at least some thought of the payment they will receive, an egocentric attitude on their part which should come under Nygren's condemnation as Eros, and therefore not to be given any place in a true religious relationship.

There are many others of our Lord's parables and sayings which stress the same truths. Everywhere we find God's love generous and outreaching to the sinner, fittingly described as Agape. But nowhere do we find any indication that man's search for God, his efforts to obey God's will, his acts of natural kindness and goodness, come under condemnation as sin, even when their motives are not altogether disinterested. Rather it seems that God's love is so great and generous that He rejoices in the very least indication that one of His children is turning towards love and goodness, and that He anticipates and rewards all our unworthy efforts in a manner out of all proportion to their deserving.

It would not be difficult to survey the whole of the New Testament writings, and show that while Agape as Nygren describes it is a very central and important element in the Christian Gospel, yet it is not so exclusive as to leave no room for the recognition of a more human love and aspiration. Nygren has done what Luther did quite consciously; he has taken one element of the New Testament, and made it the standard by which all the rest of the New Testament is to be judged. Thus, even though St. John gives expression to the thought that Agape is so characteristic of God that

"God is Agape", yet Nygren sees something uncertain in his picture of God's love. He suspects that the metaphysical basis for God's love in His love for the Son cannot be regarded as unmotivated by the inherent worth of the Son. Consequently it is not genuine Agape. And he sees the same flaw creeping into the concept of God's love for men, "The Father Himself loveth you, *because* ye have loved Me". Again, in the love of the brethren, which St. John emphasises so often, there is something exclusive and motivated, whereas in pure Agape on his view there is no limit and no motivation in the worth or nature of the object loved.

Criticisms of this kind would seem to show that Nygren has not fully grasped even the meaning of Agape itself. He is continually confusing Agape as God's free and outflowing love to sinners with the relationship that it sets up. The former is quite certainly and rightly regarded as independent of the worth or the response of those who are loved. But a relationship between persons can never be a one-sided affair, even between God and man. Whatever word one uses to denote this relationship, fellowship or communion, there is a flow in both directions. But in Nygren's view the movement is all in one direction, from God to man. In so far as man's response to God can be called love or Agape at all, it consists merely in acceptance, obedience, surrender. There can be no motivation in it in the sense of loving God as one's highest Good, because this makes the self the centre. There can be no movement from man's side towards God's level of holiness, because the whole basis of God's Agape toward us is that it is a love toward sinners. Such a view seems to rule out any growth or deepening of fellowship. In his desire to avoid any trace of human initiative or egocentricity, Nygren seems to rule out any real fellowship. If the relationship is as one-sided as this, then surely God is treating us as mere objects, not as persons with whom He will enter into a fellowship of love. One sees no reason why His Agape should not equally manifest itself to animals and trees and stones.

This suggests surely another fallacy in Nygren's reasoning. His strongest point in his description of God's Agape is that to be Agape at all, it must be wholly unmotivated, uninfluenced by any worth or value in the object loved. Here there seems to be a confusion in his thought. He confuses the idea of moral worth or merit with worth or value in the sense of inherent possibilities and potentiality. In the former sense we can agree with him generally that God's Agape is unmotivated by the value of those who are loved. It is sinners whom God loves, and His love flows out to them in their sin. But in the other sense we cannot say that God's love takes no account of the value of its object. It is just because in every man there is a potentiality for fellowship with God, that God can take him as the object of His love regardless of his present moral standing. This can be clearly seen if we ask ourselves why it is man and not some other of God's creatures towards which He manifests His love. Obviously it is because the animal, the tree and the stone have not the capacity to enter into such a relation-

ship. Whatever we mean by personality, it is evidently something which has a value in the sight of God, because it is the indispensable basis for personal relationship. In this sense therefore it is not true to say that God's love is wholly unmotivated by the value of its object. Yet Nygren denies that Agape is motivated even in this sense. He denies that in man there is any spark of the divine—a way of expressing this idea of man's inherent value derived from Greek thought. In this form it may seem too closely bound to the idea that evil is caused by the spirit's association with matter. But he also dismisses the Biblical concept of man created in the image of God. He will not have any likeness between God and man, because he thinks that the nature of Agape will be endangered unless there is an absolute distinction between them. There must be no basis at all in man for God's love, or His love will be motivated and then will not be Agape. This is to confuse value or merit in the moral sense with the value or potentiality of a nature. The former has rightly no place in Agape. The latter is a necessity for it.

There are two further criticisms of Nygren's position from the point of view of the fundamental doctrines of Creation and Incarnation. These two doctrines Nygren regards as preserving the Biblical doctrine of Agape from being completely obscured by Eros pressing in upon the Christian view from the natural world. He does not see that while these two doctrines do enshrine the doctrine of the love of God in the full and complete sense that he desires, yet they also leave room for a human response and activity which answers to God's love, which responds to it, and furnishes the basis for man's ascent to fellowship with God in His holiness. That is, these two doctrines give a home to elements which Nygren identifies with Eros, and rejects.

Nygren's attachment to the doctrines of Creation seems in many ways to be due mainly to the fact that it is a safeguard against Gnosticism and indeed against all forms of mysticism. In his view these always involve the supposition that in man there is a divine spark which is entangled in matter. Matter is the source of evil and in order to rise to fellowship with God man must rise above his material needs and desires. The way of salvation is therefore by mystical and ascetic techniques. But these necessarily involve man's upward striving for a supreme good. However spiritualised, they are built on self-centred Eros. The doctrine of Creation, however, in affirming God's creation of the material world prevents us from finding in matter the source of evil. It is therefore a safeguard against these forms of Eros-dominated ways of salvation. It is chiefly for this negative reason that he values the doctrine.

It is possible to present the doctrine of Creation in a more positive way as an expression of God's Agape which delights to create for itself objects of its love. But this is not the immediate question. The fundamental question is whether, if God is Creator, and therefore matter which he has created is good, this does not imply that other elements of the created

world are good also. Can we dismiss any element of man's created nature as something altogether opposed to God? Nygren shows how universal an element Eros is in human nature. He shows how in Plato and others it becomes a highly spiritual concept when directed toward Beauty and Goodness. Yet he regards this whole activity as in fundamental and final opposition to Agape, the only true form of love. He sees in its every form a final egocentricity. It is easy to see in this egocentricity only an indication of man's fallen condition. But this will hardly do. While we may recognise that man's highest aspirations and efforts fall short of the goal at which they may aim, yet there is something perverse and spiritually blind in the point of view which dismisses them as wholly worthless and unpleasing to God. The truth is that we must accept man's very egocentricity as a part of his nature as created by God. The child is born, dominated altogether by his physical needs and desires. It is hard to see how this is in any way due to our fallen nature. Rather it seems an inevitable part or stage in human life itself. It is the basis from which the child advances towards higher goods outside itself, and finally to God as the Supreme Good. The doctrine of Creation forbids us to call anything evil which is genuinely a part of man's created nature. If man's nature is created by God then nothing in his nature will be opposed to God's love. Its proper growth may be perverted; it is this distortion that is in need of redemption. But unless what was created by God is totally destroyed by sin, we cannot say that even Eros is wholly incompatible with Agape. Here perhaps lies part of the explanation for Nygren's curious attraction to Marcion; it lies not only in Marcion's strong affirmation of Agape, but in his rejection of our human nature as created by God. Nygren parts with him where he denies God's hand in the creation of matter, but he reveals unconscious sympathy with him in his distrust of the other parts of God's creation.

But it is in the doctrine of the Incarnation that Nygren shows his lack of understanding of the wholeness of Catholic faith. For it is just here that he finds Agape most strongly exemplified, and Eros most strongly negated. And yet, so far as Eros represents that element in man's nature which seeks to find God and strives to please Him by obedience and goodness, we find this too in the Incarnation and the Cross. To Nygren these are wholly actions of God's love revealing itself to men and redeeming them. To him and others of the same school of thought, such as Barth and Brunner, the whole meaning of the Incarnation is summed up in the words "God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto Himself", and "God revealeth His love towards us in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us". We would not for one moment deny the reality and the importance, even the primacy of this fact. But we may point out that the incarnate Christ is here regarded from one point of view only. He is God acting in the world. His humanity is only the necessary means which He adopts to meet man on his own level. But this is not doing justice to the reality of the Incarnation. For Christ is truly Man as well as truly God.

If there is in His Being a movement of God down to man, there is equally in Him a movement from man's side to God. Nygren has *utterly* failed to see this side of the New Testament doctrine of the Incarnation. The reality of our Lord's humanity is stressed there, not merely to ensure the fact and the depth of God's condescension to us, but to show that in Him and by His real union with our nature we find the possibility and the means to rise in Him to union with God. There is a whole range of thought in the New Testament, and not least in St. Paul from whom Nygren professes to receive his chief inspiration, which emphasises our Lord's mission as Man through whom we have access to the Father. As the second Adam, He makes the perfect offering of humanity, so that a way is opened by which our upward striving can reach its goal. He is the great High Priest, the one Mediator, who is not only the way by which God comes to man in Agape, but the way by which Eros is fulfilled in man's ascent to God. It is in our union with Christ in His humanity that He is not only identified with us, but we are identified with Him, in His death, in His Resurrection and Ascension. "If ye then be risen with Christ, seek those things which are above, where Christ sitteth on the right hand of God." It is in these ways that the New Testament doctrine of our Lord's Person and work fulfils the upward way of mysticism and satisfies the God-given human Eros, refining, purifying, sublimating it, but not destroying it as the real achievement of humanity, since Christ enters as Man into the heavenly places that we might also thither ascend and with Him continually dwell. Here Agape and Eros find their harmony in Him who unites in Himself the divine and the human. There is no denial of the reality of either, nor any final contradiction, though the self-centredness from which Eros takes its start may never be wholly eradicated in this world. In spite of Nygren and Luther, the Church has made no mistake in seeking throughout its long history to do justice to both these motifs. The various forms of synthesis proposed by the Apologists, the Greek Fathers, by Augustine, by St. Thomas may not have found the true intellectual solution; perhaps this can never be finally found; but they were right in attempting to do so. And Luther and Nygren are wrong in attempting to separate them and set them over against one another in fundamental opposition.