Is love ‘unconditional’?
By Martin Stokley

It is common place today in society to hear the phrase ‘unconditional love’ used. It is found in conversations about parenting and relationship. It is also usually found in popular psychology and self-help books to describe how we should respond to others and how others should respond to us. This phrase has not always been common and is in fact a fairly modern invention in the history of ideas. One important development has been that the phrase has not remained in the realm of the popular psychology and self-help literature, but it has been adopted into the language of the church to describe the nature of Divine love and consequently human love. It is especially found in popular Christian books and is sometimes used by people to sum up the totality of what love is. In this essay we shall make a tentative exploration regarding the origin of the phrase and ask the question as to whether the adoption of it to describe Divine and human love is appropriate in light of the Christian faith.

The Development of the concept of ‘Unconditional Love’

The historical development of the phrase ‘unconditional love’ is not something which seems to have been delineated in a systematic way, probably because we are still within a couple of generations of the origin of the widespread use of the phrase. A trawl of the internet did find two articles which indicated the possible history of the phrase. Firstly, in an article in the Clarion Herald (The official newspaper of the Catholic Archdiocese of New Orleans), Archbishop Alfred C. Hughes notes that:

“In the Scriptures and the ‘Catechism of the Catholic Church,’ we will not find God’s love described as ‘unconditional.’ Both the Scriptures and the ‘Catechism of the Catholic Church’ use the word ‘faithful’ more often than not.”

Hughes is right in this regard, as we look at the idea of love expressed throughout the history of theology we search in vain to find the phrase ‘unconditional love’ in the writings of people such as Augustine, Aquinas, Luther etc. It only seems to make an appearance in the 20th century. It cannot be denied that in the history of Christianity we may find language that implies some sort of ‘unconditional’ nature in love but we do not find the actual phrase ‘unconditional love’ as a summary of either the Divine or human loves. Hughes then goes onto say that he believes that the use of the term ‘unconditional’ is rooted in the non-directive psychology of Carl Rogers. Rogers believed that in counselling the counsellor should show unconditional acceptance of the client and this would lead them to becoming more self-accepting.

In a second article, Anne Karpf in the Guardian makes the same connection to Rogers in regard to the origin of the phrase. However she also points to an earlier usage by Erich Fromm:

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2 A good example would be C. H. Spurgeon’s sermon on Hosea 14:4 called ‘Grace Abounding’ given in March 1863 (available at http://www.spurgeon.org/sermons/0501.htm; accessed 1st April 2008) however it is certain that Spurgeon would not want to affirm some things that those who use the phrase ‘unconditional love’ today would affirm.
“Coined by German psychoanalyst Erich Fromm in 1934, the concept was developed in his 1956 book, The Art Of Loving. Fromm naively believed that a father's love was always conditional - upon success, good behaviour, etc - while a mother's was unconditional, and couldn't be forfeited by sins or transgression.”

Karpf then notes how Rogers seems to develop and refine Fromm’s concept of unconditional love in his theories.

After the initial developments of the concept by Fromm and Rogers, their ideas became more common in society in general. It is in this context that we see the use of the phrase becoming more common in the church. An example of this would be the ideas of Fromm and Rogers being especially drawn upon in the area of pastoral counselling. We can therefore see that the phrase ‘unconditional love’ is a relatively modern concept, especially in the church.

Language and Meaning: The Key Issues

Anne Karpf in the article we mentioned above notes that the idea of unconditional love can be helpful or unhelpful depending on the content we breathe into the idea:

“The idea of unconditional love taps into a human yearning to be accepted for what we are. At its best, it’s a plea for tolerance. But, at its worst, it articulates a modern narcissism that demands perpetual approval and regards criticism as assault.”

Some of the usage of the phrase ‘unconditional love’ today leans towards what Karpf would call its worst use. This kind of ‘unconditional love’ means that we expect people to affirm everything about us. In terms of God this means he accepts us just as we are and does not make any demands on us. If people or God do challenge us, we then condemn them for not loving us enough.

There are those who would like to frame the whole issue regarding the use of phrase ‘unconditional love’ in terms of the question of whether psychology should be integrated with Christianity. If we can say ‘no’ to the question of integration, then we can simply reject the term ‘unconditional love’ because it appears to have originated from psychology through Fromm and Rogers. Problem solved.

However, David Powlison frames the issue differently by asking three questions:

“What words will do to describe the love of God that takes me just as I am but makes me over? That accepts people, yet has lifelong agenda for change? Does it work to apply the label ‘unconditional love’ to what God does – and to what godly parents and leaders are supposed to do, speak, and model?”

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4 Anne Karpf, ‘An Empty Kind of Love’ in The Guardian (London, 7th December 2002); Available at http://www.guardian.co.uk/Columnists/Column/0,854320,00.html (access 1st April 2008).
From the insights of Karpf and Powlison we see that the question regarding the phrase ‘unconditional love’ is not one first and foremost of integration. Firstly, it is one of the appropriateness of language ie. does the phrase adequately describe or is it consistent with the Christian story and truth revealed in scripture. It might be that a Christian model of love which is consistent with scripture is highly conditional and therefore the phrase ‘unconditional love’ is an inadequate description. Secondly, and related to the first, there is a question of the meaning ie. if we decide that it is appropriate to describe Christian love as unconditional in some way, what exactly does this mean? What does unconditional love look like in the Christian context and what does it not look like? It will surely have a unique meaning in comparison with the psychological models of unconditional love suggested by Rogers and Fromm because it is based on the Christian tradition.

The appropriateness of using ‘Unconditional Love’ to describe Christian love.

Let us begin by asking the question of whether the phrase ‘unconditional love’ may be an adequate model of Christian love. A starting point may be to look at the Greek words used for ‘love’ in the New Testament (NT). Agape is the most dominant word used for love in the NT. The Greek language had several words for love, but those who translated the Septuagint and the writers of the NT and the settled on Agape as the dominant way to express Christian love at the expense of other Greek words such as eros (desire or sexual love) or philia (friendship). The reason being? Brady gives an explanation:

“In classical Greek the meaning for agape was broad; it was used to suggest a variety of loves, such as affection, fondness, and contentedness. The translators probably chose this term because its use was less common and its meaning more unspecified than either philia or eros.”

Brady then goes on to argue that because the translators chose this word due to its broadness of meaning (ie. that it was not centred around meanings which the translators did not want to imply) the meaning of the word agape is found in the context that it is used, more than the linguistic meaning of the world. This means that if we are to ask if ‘unconditional love’ is an adequate model of Christian love we should not turn to the dictionary or linguistic meanings but the contexts in which the words for love are used in scripture.

If we consider the contexts in which the word love appears it is obvious that the phrase ‘unconditional love’ is an appropriate description of certain aspects of Christian love as found in scripture. In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus calls his followers to love their enemies (Matthew 5:43-47) and we find a picture of God’s love where he “causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends the rain on the righteous and unrighteous” (v45). Here ‘unconditional love’ is a perfectly adequate phrase to speak of God’s goodness to all of humanity as God’s goodness is

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7 All scripture quotes in this essay are from the New International Version (NIV)
not dependent on the state of humanity. We could add other examples from scripture which show the unconditional nature of God’s love (and we will do so later), but here we simply recognise that it is appropriate to speak about unconditional love in a Christian context.

The meaning of ‘unconditional love’ in a Christian context

We have observed that the phrase ‘unconditional love’ is appropriate for describing Divine love. However in other scriptures we do find a love which looks more like a conditional form of love. For example in Malachi 1:2-3 where God says “Jacob I have loved, Esau I have hated.” Here God is expressing his unique covenant love which was expressed to Jacob but not Esau.\(^8\) From this, we see that although the phrase ‘unconditional love’ is adequate to describe Christian love its meaning needs qualifying in important ways for it to be distinctively Christian.

Before we come to explore the unique meaning of ‘unconditional love’ in the light of Christian revelation and theology it is necessary for us to make a couple of observations.

Firstly, although in what follows we shall be concentrating to a large extent on the unconditional nature of Divine love and what this means, it is important to remember God’s love is also determinative of human love. Jesus in John 13:34 quite clearly tells his disciples that they should love each other in the way that he has loved them (see also John 15:12). John also writes in his letter that “This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers.” (1 John 3:16) John connects human love and Divine love together so that our love for others should mirror God’s love for us. Therefore any conclusions about the unconditional nature of God’s love also have important implications for our relationships to other people.

Secondly, we need to make some necessary distinctions which will help us in our thinking along the way. Following Augustine we make the distinction between the lover, the beloved (or the object of love) and the love between them.\(^9\)

We now turn to exploring the actual meaning of unconditional love in a Christian context. We shall use six headings which enable us to tease out the meaning and make qualifications as to what it does and does not mean.

1. The Extent of Love

Here we are concentrating on the how far Christian love extends. Does it extend to all people or are there groups of people whom are beyond love? Some ‘loves’ are based very much on the preferences or likes and dislikes of the lover.\(^10\) Some objects are preferred at the expense of others eg. Romantic love or friendship. This means that

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there is discrimination between those who are loved and those who are not. Is God’s love the same as this?

From scripture we find that the extent of God’s love is not limited in any way to one group of people. God loves the whole world (John 3:16). God loves the righteous and unrighteous (Matthew 5:43-47), God loved humanity whilst it was still his enemy (Romans 5:6-11). In the parable of the good Samaritan Jesus proclaims a neighbourly love that overcomes all boundaries in society (Luke 10:30-37) and he demonstrates this kind of love in that he is friend of sinners (Luke 7:34). Even in the Old Testament (OT) we see a glimpse of God’s love for all humanity in the book of Jonah where God calls Ninevah (the capital city of Assyria and Israel’s enemy) to repentance. In Jonah 4 the prophet complains that God relents in his judgement on Ninevah when the people repent. God responds to Jonah by saying: “You have been concerned about this vine, though you did not tend it or make it grow. It sprang up overnight and died overnight. But Nineveh has more than a hundred and twenty thousand people who cannot tell their right hand from their left, and many cattle as well. Should I not be concerned about that great city?” (Jonah 4:10-11). Even in the other OT prophets we see a God who plans to draw all nations to himself.

So in scripture we find that God’s love is a radical kind of love which is universal in its coverage. There is no discrimination or rejection of certain types of people. We see the love of enemies and the love of those who do no reciprocate God’s love. In this sense we can say that God’s love is truly unconditional because reception of God’s love does not depend on who you are.

Gene Outka sums up the extent of love by saying:

“At the most basic level there ought to be no exclusiveness, no partiality, no elitism … It is universal in that not a single person is to be excluded.”

God’s love and the kind of love that God calls humanity to reflect is not exclusive.

2. The Motivation to Love

We have already noted that some loves can be based on preferences and how love transcends preferences. However this also leads us to ask questions about the motivation to love. Love is directed to all people but is the motivation to love intrinsic to the beloved or extrinsic. Is love earned?

The scripture passages we quote above regarding the extent of God’s love give an indication that Divine love is not motivated by anything in the beloved. Nygren is probably the clearest expositor of this and he puts it in the following way:

“Agape is spontaneous and ‘unmotivated’ . This is the most striking feature of God’s love as Jesus represents it. We look in vain for an explanation of God’s love in the character of the man who is the object of His love. God’s love is ‘groundless’ – though not in the sense that there is no ground for it at all, or that it is arbitrary and

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11 Quoted in Brady, B. V., Christian Love: How Christians through the ages have understood love, (Washington: Georgetown University Press), p.246
fortuitous. On the contrary, it is just in order to bring out the element of necessity in it that we describe it as ‘groundless’; our purpose is to emphasise that there are no extrinsic grounds for it. The only ground is to be found in God Himself.”

Here Nygren wants to emphasise that God’s love is not necessitated by anything in the beloved. Nygren also goes on to comment on whether the beloved’s intrinsic value to the lover is a motivating factor in Divine love:

“… any thought of valuation whatsoever is out of place in connection with fellowship with God. When God’s love is directed towards the sinner, then the position is clear; all thought of valuation is excluded in advance; for if God, the Holy One, loves the sinner, it cannot be because of his sin but in spite of his sin. But when God’s love is shown to the righteous and godly, there is always a risk of our thinking that God loves man on account of his righteousness and godliness. But this is a denial of Agape – as if God’s love for the ‘righteous’ were not just as unmotivated and spontaneous as His love for the sinner!”

For Nygren love is then a gift. Love is not based on preference, desire, likes and dislikes. Love is not based on whether the beloved is useful to us or not. Neither is love based on serving the beloved’s interests on the condition that beloved serves the lover’s interests. Gift love is not something than can be deserved by the qualities (good or bad) or actions of the beloved, and neither is it based on something that lover desires to receive from beloved. In applying this to Divine love Brummer points out that this could leave us with a God who is “indifferent to whether we are just or unjust, saints or sinners, believers or unbelievers.” If God’s love is not motivated by the beloved does it matter what they do because with this type of unconditional love every one is winner? If the model of love revealed in scripture stopped here, we would certainly be left with a God who is indifferent to evil. However, as we shall see below (in Sections 3 and 4), although God’s love is not motivated by the qualities of the beloved, it does respond to the qualities of the beloved.

Nygren’s view of love has a sound foundation in history of Christian theology and in the scripture. Luther expressed something of the same ideas when he reflects on human love:

“… a Christian must not derive his love from the person, as the world does, as a young man is attracted by a good looking wench, a skinflint by money or property, or a lord or prince by honor and power. All this is a derived or borrowed love, which cleaves outwardly to the good it sees in a person and lasts no longer than this good can be enjoyed. This love, however, should be a flowing love, which flows from the inside of the heart like a fresh stream that goes on flowing and cannot be stopped or dried up. This love says: I love you, not because you are good or bad; for I draw my love, not from your goodness, as from another’s fountain, but from my own little

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spring, from the Word, which is grafted in my heart and which bids me love my neighbour.”

Luther here indicates that the motivation for human love is not based on anything intrinsic to the beloved themselves. The motivation for human love is based in God. We love because God loves us, he commands us to love and he also enables our love through his Holy Spirit.

The question of motivation when applied to Divine love becomes more complicated. Nygren says that God’s love is not motivated by anything outside of himself, but is motivated by his essential unchanging character. Brummer criticises Nygren for reducing love to an impersonal force. God’s love is necessitated by his ‘unchanging nature’ and is not his free choice, therefore Brummer claims that this type of love can “hardly be called love in any personal sense at all.” Brummer later in his book argues:

“God loves us because he wants to and not because we somehow force or oblige him to do so, not because he is somehow ‘necessitated by his essential nature’, as Nygren seems to hold. God loves us because he wants to and not because he lacks the ability to reject us.”

Brummer wants to describe God’s love in terms of a personal relationship such that the motivation to love is always found in the freedom within God himself. This means that love does not become impersonal. However a rejection of Nygren is not completely necessary. If we base the concept of God’s “unchanging nature” in the Biblical concept of God’s faithfulness to creation, to his promises and to himself this enables us to recast Nygren’s understanding of the Divine motivation to love in more personal terms. God’s motivation to love is then intrinsic to himself and not based on the beloved. It is based on God’s choice to love and his faithfulness in loving.

Theology and scripture emphasises that love is not motivated by the beloved, but what does this mean for romantic love and friendships? Romantic love is obviously based on our preferences and desires which are fulfilled in the beloved. The same is true for friendships as well. Aquinas points out that friendships are based on shared essential values and strong common ground. In other words we choose our friends because of our preferences. If Christian love should not to be motivated by the beloved, does this mean that the so called ‘loves’ which are based on preference (ie. friendship and romantic love) are to be done away with and replaced with the more spiritual type of neighbourly love which is universal and unmotivated? Brummer is helpful in this respect when he notes that:

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16 Luther quoted in Brady, B. V., *Christian Love: How Christians through the ages have understood love*, (Washington: Georgetown University Press), p.186
“In the case of love, our feelings may strongly motivate us to make the relevant commitments, they do not cause these commitments in a way which makes them logically or physically unavoidable.”

Brummer recognises that feelings, desires and preferences may motivate us to love a certain person BUT we still need to make the relevant love commitments, they do not come naturally. The preferences of friendship and romance need to accompanied with the commitment to love the beloved as a reflection of God’s love. As Tillich says:

“… the philia quality of love establishes preferential love. Some are preferred, the majority are excluded … agape does not deny the preferential love of the philia quality, but it purifies it from a subpersonal bondage, and it elevates the preferential love into universal love. The preferences of friendship are not negated, but they do not exclude, in a kind of aristocratic self-separation, all the others. Not everybody is a friend, but everybody is affirmed as a person. Agape … loves what it has to reject in terms of philia.”

So we see that although romantic relationships and friendships may begin based on preference, so the continuing motivation must be based on a love which moves beyond preference and the qualities intrinsic to the beloved.

3. Equality and love

So far we have seen that love is unconditional in two ways. Firstly, love is universal in extent and secondly, it is not dependent on qualities in the beloved. However, does this mean that God expresses his love to everyone equally (in the same way)? In examining this question we find we have to deal with those passages in scripture which seem to imply that God’s love is conditional. It is here that we find an answer to the questions regarding the nature of love which are posed by God saying things like “Jacob I have loved, Esau I have hated”.

Don Carson notes that God’s love is not as simple as is sometimes portrayed, in that there are different distinctions in the way God’s love is depicted in the Bible. Carson then specifies five different ways (though not an exhaustive list he admits) that the love of God is depicted in scripture:

- The intra-Trinitarian love of God: The love of the Father for the Son and the Son for the Father (eg. John 3:35, 14:31)
- The providential love of God (eg. Matthew 5:45, 6:26, 10:29)
- The saving love of God (eg. John 3:16, Romans 5:8)
- The choosing love of God towards the elect (eg. Deuteronomy 7:7-8; Malachi 1:2-3; Ephesians 5:25)
- Love based on the obedience of God’s people (eg. John 15:9-10; Jude 21)

Carson comments elsewhere:

“Again, Christians often say, ‘God loves everyone exactly the same way and to the same extent.’ Is this true? In passages that speak of God’s love for the just and the unjust, it certainly appears true. In passages that speak of God’s elective love, it certainly appears to be false. And in passages that speak of God’s love being conditioned by obedience, then his love for different individuals will vary on their obedience.”

We can see that love therefore takes many forms (or is expressed in different ways). God’s love may be universal in extent and not motivated by the qualities of the beloved, however God’s love does respond to the qualities of the beloved. God does love all, but his love does not take the same form with all people at all times. An example of this would be the fact that although the Father loves the Son it would be wrong to talk about the Fathers love for the Son in a salvific manner. The Fathers love takes a different form when loving the Son from his love expressed towards fallen creatures. We also see examples of the different forms of love expressed by Jesus in his ministry. One example was the feeding of the 4000 where Jesus had compassion on the crowds and fed them (Matthew 15:32-39), however we do not see Jesus feeding everyone he met in the same way he fed the 4000. Jesus does love everyone he meets, but his love responds according to situation the beloved is in.

It is in recognising that God’s love takes many different forms that we can begin to understand those times when God’s love seems conditional in scripture. Malachi 1:2 ("Jacob I have love, Esau I have hated.") as we stated above is about the unique covenant expression of covenant love by God towards Jacob but not Esau. Hate in the context of this passage is not about strong feelings of emotional aversion but is about the lack of geographic land and covenant which was given to Jacob by God. This does not imply that God does not love Esau in some other way. What we see here in this passage is the fact that God’s love takes many forms. Esau has not been loved in the same form as Jacob.

We can see therefore that there is not an equality in love such that love is expressed in the same way to all people. In the history of theology Aquinas is the most helpful expositor of these ideas. In Aquinas’ model of love we find the differences in the way love is expressed as follows:

- The intensity of love depends on the lover.
- The beloved determines the form of love. Love expresses itself differently according to whether the relationship with the beloved is parent-child, friendship, marriage, enemies, strangers etc. We should not love a friends as if they our spouse. We should not love our child as if they are a stranger and so on.
- The level of unity (or intimacy) depends on the relationship between the lover and beloved eg. you can feel closer to person you are dating than a friend.

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Aquinas also clarifies further what inequality in love means:

“… we have unequal love for certain persons … through our loving some and not loving others. As regards beneficence we are bound to observe this inequality, because we cannot do good to all: but as regards benevolence, love ought not to be thus unequal.”

In other words we cannot do good acts to all people because we are limited in resources but our wish for the good of people should be universal in extent. This makes sense if I think of a person who lives halfway across the world to me. I can love them in the sense of benevolence (wishing them well) but I cannot easily love them in the sense of beneficence (doing good acts). Augustine observes the same inequality in love and says we should concentrate on expressing love to those whom we have closest contact with:

“All other men are to be loved equally; but since you cannot be of assistance to everyone, those especially are to be cared for who are most closely bound to you by place, time, or opportunity, as if by chance. Thus suppose you had an abundance of something which it would be well to give to someone else who lacked it, but you could not give it to two. If two came to you of whom neither took precedence either in need or special connection with you, you could do nothing more just than to decide by lot which one should be given that which you could not give to both. Thus in the same way among man, not all of whom you can care for, you must consider as if selected by lot each one as he is able to be more closely associated with you in time.”

It could be argued that this encourages favouritism in love, however if we understand what Augustine says as natural consequence of humans being limited creatures then this gives us no permission to discriminate against people in preference for those who are closest to us.

Brummer after arguing that each object of love should be seen as unique and individual sums up by saying that we need to acquire the ability to:

“…differentiate our loves in the appropriate way. The ideal of universal love does not require us to bestow equal quantities of identical love on all persons. However, as Singer points out, it does require us to love indiscriminately, ‘in whatever way is relevant to the other’s reality and our own’. Although such love will vary from object to object, it will exclude no human being a priori. It is not equal in strength or configuration, but in availability.”

We can see therefore, that human and Divine love is not expressed in equal ways to all objects. Love is not indifferent to the object but responds to the object. We could probably even go as far to say that Christian love could be considered to be conditional in this sense. However it is important to note that although love takes on

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30 Quoted in Brady, B. V., *Christian Love: How Christians through the ages have understood love*, (Washington: Georgetown University Press), p.111
many different forms in response to the beloved, love always seeks the good of the other. It is in this way that love can be connected with equality (and therefore is unconditional). Whatever form love takes in relation to the beloved, it will always and equally seek to do no harm (Romans 13:10).

4. Love and Approval

We have already hinted that one of the problems of the phrase ‘unconditional love’ in our society is when it is used to imply that love should mean continual approval and any criticism is seen as denial of love. Does ‘unconditional love’ imply complete and total approval of the qualities of the beloved? It is obvious that a Christian model of unconditional love is not one which is indifferent to the qualities of the beloved. We have already pointed this out in relation to the forms of love, but here we specifically are focusing on the fact that love is not indifferent to morality.

In the OT when we see how God deals with wayward humanity and Israel, we do not get any indication that God’s love leads him to a blanket approval. In the NT we see God’s specific saving love as evidenced in Jesus Christ. God loves humanity not for what we are, but in spite of what we are. Humanity was still God’s enemy when he worked through Jesus to enact his saving purposes. We do not find revealed a God who loves and approves of humanity, but we find revealed a God who provides salvation for all humanity and calls them to repentance in the context of his love. In addition to this, God’s love also takes a special form (discipline) which seeks to bring people to holiness (Hebrews 12:6,10). We can see that unconditional love does not provide blanket approval. The oft quoted phrase is helpful here: “God loves us as we are, but loves us too much to leave us as we are.” This means that love for enemies and sinners can never mean we are indifferent to their qualities. In agreement with Augustine we have to see love as including soul care as well as physical care. Love always urges the beloved towards God and this means that necessarily we direct our neighbours away from sin. Love becomes evaluative. Brummer comments on this:

“My attitude toward your wishes and will involves both appraisal and bestowal. In loving you I will feel an intimate concern about the continuance of your good characteristics and the diminishing of bad ones. This requires my objective appraisal of your characteristics, actions, opinions, wishes, desires, etc. If I did not attempt to appraise these objectively, I would not be taking you seriously.”

An appraising love however should always approach the beloved who is in sin with humility. Jesus spoke very clearly on the need to examine ourselves before we try to deal with another’s sin (Matthew 7:1-5). The reason for this is that as well as appraising the beloved we also need to appraise ourselves because it is perfectly possible that in my appraisal I might not be working for the good of the beloved.

A negative appraisal of a person (ie. acknowledgement of sin) does not give us license to reject love in relationship to them. Love and disapproval are not mutually exclusive. Brady sums up Thomas Aquinas on this:

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32 Brady, B. V., *Christian Love: How Christians through the ages have understood love*, (Washington: Georgetown University Press), pp.103-104
“Does caritas require that we love sinners? Thomas’s answer is again nuanced. We are to love sinners but in a certain way. We are to love them in their nature but we are to hate them in their guilt. Love the sinner; hate the sin. Indeed as Thomas says, ‘hatred of a person’s evil is equivalent to the love of his good.’ As sinners have the capacity for eternal happiness, they must be loved. But what if one’s friend is a sinner? Thomas reckons that it is the duty of one to help a friend in sin to recover virtue.”

So we see that love does not imply a blanket approval of the person and is not indifferent to the beloved, but any negative appraisal does not mean the end of love either. Using an idea we discussed above we can say: Love, when faced with negative appraisal of the beloved then takes a different form which seeks to urge them towards God and redemption. Love is therefore unconditional in the sense that its existence doesn’t depend on the qualities of the beloved, however it does respond to the qualities of the beloved. The form of love does not just depend on the relationship we have with the beloved but also the qualities of the beloved.

5. Love and Endurance

The discussion we have just had regarding affirmation leads naturally onto the question of whether a Christian model of ‘unconditional love’ can ever come to an end. Is it possible for love to be overwhelmed?

From all that has been said so far we would have to give an emphatic no in answer to this question. Love is universal and therefore encompasses all. We acknowledge that the form of love may need to change in relation to the object of love (eg. neighbour love may need to be transformed into a love of enemies as the beloved changes) however ultimately love should always persevere.

We see this persevering and enduring nature of love throughout scripture. Numerous times in the OT God is described as “slow to anger and abounding in love” (eg. see Exodus 34:6; Nehemiah 9:17; Psalm 145:8; Jonah 4:2 etc.). We also find in Hosea 14:4 that even God’s judgement on his people ends up giving way to his love. This is an example of what is called in Jeremiah the everlasting nature of God’s love (Jeremiah 31:3 cf. Psalm 136). In the NT we find Paul describing a love which is patient, that bears with people and is always persevering (1 Corinthians 13:4-7; Ephesians 4:2). This love is reflection of God’s love. It is common to read in the Christian theology of love the idea that love is a commitment and not dependent on desire. Therefore, Christian love is “stable and enduring; it is not subject to the ups and downs of emotions.”

This persevering nature of love however does not lead to manipulation and control of the beloved. God wants for us to love him, but he also gives freedom:

“The longing and restraint are characteristic too for the way in which God loves us. In his love, God identifies with us and longs for us to come and be reconciled with him and

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so to receive salvation and eternal happiness … This divine longing is accompanied by restraint … God does not coerce or oblige us to return his love, but has infinite patience in waiting on us to do so. He never gives up his willingness to forgive those who turn to him.”

We see that love is unconditional in the sense that it is persevering and enduring. It never gives up on the beloved and never allows anything the beloved does to overwhelm it. God’s love not only covers all, but it covers all at all times.

6. Self-sacrificial love

Jesus’ death on the cross is an example of the self-sacrificial nature of love. Here Jesus loves at the expense of self, giving himself completely. The nature of love is not self-centred as it is willing to disregard self for the sake of the other. We can see that love may therefore include and element of suffering for the lover. In this sense love shows an unconditional nature that it is not dependent on the interests of the lover being served.

However we must not fall into the trap of assuming love and self-sacrifice are just synonyms. In 1 Corinthians 13:3 Paul indicates that self-sacrifice is entirely possible without love. Love involves self-sacrifice but not all self-sacrifice can be regarded as love. Brady in a discussion of Gene Outka’s theology of love comments:

“The value of self-sacrifice is instrumental; it is not necessarily a good in itself. [Outka] continues, ‘Self-sacrifice must always be purposive in promoting the welfare of others and never simply expressive of something resident in the agent’.”

The self-sacrificial nature of love also must have its limits. As Margaret Farley observes:

“… while we may sacrifice everything that we have, we may not sacrifice everything that we are. We may not sacrifice in our final sense our autonomy. We may not sacrifice our capability for union and communion with God and human persons.”

In other words we cannot completely disregard our independent self-determination which would mean placing ourselves completely under the control of another. Even if we did do this we still could not deny personal responsibility before God. More importantly though Farley observes we should not sacrifice in any way which means we disregard God. In other words, a good expression of sacrificial love would be to give my loaf of bread for the sake of a hungry person. However sacrificial love should not extend to sacrificing my communion with God by stealing a loaf of bread (sin) to feed that same person.

The sacrificial aspect of love is important because mutual love can only be initiated by sacrificial love. Sacrificial love is willing to risk the giving of self, even at the

37 Brady, B. V., Christian Love: How Christians through the ages have understood love, (Washington: Georgetown University Press), p.248 [brackets mine]
38 Quoted in Brady, B. V., Christian Love: How Christians through the ages have understood love, (Washington: Georgetown University Press), p.257
expense of self for the initiating of mutual love. Here again we see sacrificial love showing an unconditional character (ie. not conditional on the self satisfaction of the lover).

Conclusion

We have seen that Christian love can be considered to be ‘unconditional’ and therefore using this type of language to describe love is appropriate. However, its meaning is unique in Christianity as compared with the more psychotherapeutic definitions. In Christianity, the unconditional nature of love can be summed up in the following way:

- Love is extended to all people and does not depend on who the beloved is. *(Extent)*
- Love is freely given (ie. it is a gift) and is not dependent on qualities in the beloved. *(Motivation)*
- The existence of Love does not depend on the qualities of the beloved, but it does respond to the qualities of the beloved. Love takes different forms according to the object of love and love does not necessarily equal approval. However, all will be loved. *(Equality and Approval)*
- Love is enduring, persevering and patient. It covers all, at all times. *(Endurance)*
- Love is willing to disregard self for the sake of the other and is not dependent on self-interest. *(Self-sacrifice)*

There are times when people refer to love as being unconditional and imply that this is the sum total of what love is. However, it would be wrong to assume that labelling love in this way exhausts a complete description of Christian love. There are other aspects of love which we have not touched upon in this essay in any depth which are equally important eg. the uniting nature of love, the link between love and affections, love as the bestowal of value on the beloved, the fact that love always works for the good and building up of the beloved etc. The unconditional nature of love is important, but it is only one part of a total description of Christian love.

Lastly, it is essential to note that we have only explored the idea of the appropriateness of ‘unconditional’ type language from the point of view as to whether it is an adequate description of Christian love. However, there is another type of appropriateness which may come into our consideration of whether it is good to use the word ‘unconditional’ in relation to Christian love. Just as the NT writers chose the word *agape* in preference to *eros* and *philia* because it did not imply certain things, there may come a time when we need to chose words other than ‘unconditional’ to describe Christian love because of what the word has come to be associated with in our culture. If the word ‘unconditional’ becomes overly associated with things we would not want to affirm, then the appropriateness of its use in communicating the Christian nature of love is called in question. In this case another word to describe the same idea may need to be found.

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39 See Brady, B. V., *Christian Love: How Christians through the ages have understood love*, (Washington: Georgetown University Press), p.201 where he is discussing Reinhold Niebuhr’s theology of love.
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