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"THE GOD OF OUR LORD JESUS CHRIST" Eph.1.17 versus THE GOD OF "UNCONDITIONAL LOVE"

Recently preparing to teach a course on the Parables of Jesus, I've been once again brought up short by their radical conditionality. But in what Pat Buchanan (& even Wm. Bennett, & of course Chas. Colson) likes to call "the culture war," accomodationist Christians have converted Jesus into a preacher of unconditonal love. This bogus conversion has sapped the intellectual integrity & spiritual energy out of many liberal clergy. It is one way of describing the crisis of faith in main-old-line Protestant churches, including my own denomination.

1 Human beings, for their own personal-social & societal health, need to be **judgmental** & **compassionate**. When these virtues get out of balance, things are, respectively, too uptight (Puritan) or too laidback (Cavalier, permissive, French-forgiving ["to know all is to forgive all"]).

For several years I've cried out against supercompassion & am glad to see fellow-criers appearing in the media. Eg, syndicated columnist Debra Saunders' 21 Sept 93 column, "Sacrificing children to compassion." "Judging others has become the ultimate sin. Rather than make anyone feel bad, modern Americans refuse to judge blatantly unhealthy relationships," so girls are thrown into "a den full of [predatory male] lions." "America has sacrificed its children in its quest to be free of social stigmas. The result of this wonderful understanding is a boom market of dysfunctional families and neglected children. This is supposed to represent compassion. Then why does it leave so many children growing up damaged and angry?"

2 Today's mail brought a Foward Movement tract (Spotlight Series #1) titled "Who is Jesus?" I was hoping for a simple classical-Christian accurate statement such as could be handed those I find curious about the question. But what did I get? A propaganda flier for "unconditional love"! Here's the conclusion: "Questions to think about: 1. What does 'unconditional love' mean? 2. What could being loved like that mean to you?"

Get this skewing of Jesus' "the kingdom of God": "The only law of God's kingdom is the law of unconditional love. That means **God lovesus no matter what** [my bf.], and we are to love each other the same way." The Christian life is "life governed by the law of the kingdom of God, the law of unconditional love."

Naturally, 1Cor.13.4-8 is dragooned into the service of unconditional love. But "unconditional" means (RHD^2) "not limited by conditions; absolute." Is that what ἀγάπη *agápē* here, & elsewhere in the NT, means? Certainly not! It's a narrow, technical term of the Christian vocabulary. It's locus is *subjective*, inside the lover. It's focus is *devotional*, on God's **un-self-regarding** self-giving in Christ "for us," for humanity's deliverance from sin & death. It's usus (habit), on the divine model, is nonegocentric, theocentric-heterocentric action--behavior centered not in self-interest but in God &, through God, in others. 1Cor.13 is a paean celebrating the central Christian motif & motive.

3 How does that differ from "unconditional love"? The latter's locus is *objective* (on the recipients of our "love"), its focus is *humanitarian* (with or without benefit of deity), & its usus is steady affirmation of the other regardless of the other's behavior (the particulars, or "conditions," of the other's behavior not being factors in the lover's affirmation of the other: as the tract puts it, "God loves us no matter what"). Of course "the doctor of the soul" (Victor Frankl's term) should have sufficient self-transcendence so that the counselor's self (interests, feelings, memories, fears, hopes, relationships, motives) does not impede the liberating process. But I was with him long enough, & deep enough, to know that he would have laughed at "unconditional love" as sentimental amorality & a gimmick substituting for religious profundity....To see how perverse it is to use 1Cor.13 as warrant for "unconditional love," notice Paul's treatment of the Corinthians & advice to them as to how to treat others! Moral rigor, no sentimental nonsense! Honestly & intelligently interpreted, 1Cor.13 must be read in the context of Paul's whole Corinthian correspondence (apparently four letters, edited in the NT down to two).

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4 While it was Eliz. Kübler-Ross who gave wide currency to the phrase "unconditional love," the idea had long been common in liberal religion, eg in the many books of **Wilfred Cantwell Smith**, now prof.emeritus of the Comparative History of Religion, Harv. U. To relieve religion of the scandal of particularity, he splits "faith" (which he asserts is religion's essence) off from "beliefs," the species of which the genus is "faith" (thus, "generic" faith, "the faith of all of us" (TOWARDS A WORLD THEOLOGY [Westm./81], 125, 172; 187: the radical distinction between "faith and the intellectual interpretation of faith." See, in ANDOVER-NEWTON REVIEW, Spr./90, 7-19, Harry H. Hoehler, "Faith in the Thought of W...C... S..."). Since it's faith that saves, all "faiths" (belief systems) save. (All? Nazism was a belief system with a whoosh of "faith" as its center & engine. But he's thinking academically, & of the premodern "historic" religions.)

What warrant does he provide for his own faith that all faiths save? He reaches outside his system, back into his Christian roots, & uses the divine sanction derivative from his liberal-nonjudgmental deity (170-71): I believe this "because of what I know of God; by what I find revealed to me of God in Christ. The God whom Christ reveals is a God of mercy and love....compassion and yearning; who delights in a sinner's repentance, who delights to save." Repentance? From what sin? What sins? Black Africa's widespread practice of female circumcision? And how is sin-repentance related to the fact that WCS's God is known to him "in Christ"? How is unconditional love-salvation, through whatever belief-system, available to the impenitent: how does God "delight to save" without "a sinner's repentance"? WCS, by sloppy intellection, conveniently confuses the two deities of this Thinksheet's title.

Though I love transculture, I hate **transreligion**, which WCS's faith/beliefs dualism comes down to. His is the pyrrhic victory of good will over bad logic. He sells well among higher education's "religious studies" teachers, whose courses should be named "Religion Appreciation" (parallel with "Art Appreciation," "Music Appreciation," et al). Religion reduced first to philosophy & then to esthetics! Truth to tell, there's no such thing as "faith" as a universal religious category, but only a sentimental faith in faith, parallel with the B'way song "Falling in love with love"--faith reduced to the objectless "inner quality of personal response" (HHH). Faith is not belief but never exists, abstractly *in vacuo*, without beliefs: generic transcendence is an academic delusion. His goal of interreligious mutual intelligibility is worthy, but his preachment of mutual acceptability is anti-intellectual, amoral, & fatuous. Fact: some kinds of faith are incompatible with other kinds of faith, so pluralism is not the precursor of "a world theology." I have a friend who thinks the transreligion of "unitive love," universal unselfishness, will replace the religions. Religion reduced to ethics is as pathetic as religion reduced to philosophy or esthetics.

In a public meeting, I said to WCS, "When I leave here, I'm going to see a dying Jew, survivor of two of Hitler's death-camps. What should I say to him?" WCS, after a long pause: "I'd say to him, 'I'm deeply sorry about the Holocaust.'" This world-renowned scholar of religion would say to that dying man nothing religious but only something political! So sadly effete had his own religion become after his last book was published.

5 A soft, unconditional-love society will be **criminal**-coddling. It will worry more about court error (punishing an innocent) than about criminals preying on the public. It's focus will be more on "cruel and unusual punishment" (the Eighth Amendment) than on the Constitutional commitment to "insure domestic tranquility" & "promote the general welfare." It cares too little about the civil rights & safety of the many to be an adequate "terror" (1Cor.13.3) to the lawless. In the name of liberty it permits corruption: it does not, in the name of justice, achieve for the citizenry freedom from fear. Eg, the USA, 1993. Bad theology is behind it, & weak moralists, & the failure to preach against the hubris of compassion.

6 Mt.18.34, Mt.25.28/L.19.24, L.13.6-9;18.14, Thomas 97 show Jesus teaching conditional love. The Jesus Seminar, though inclined to unconditional love, considers all these reff. authentic, from Jesus. See THE PARABLES OF JESUS: RED LETTER EDITION: THE JESUS SEMINAR, Robt. W. Funk et al (Polebridge Press/88).