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Disciplinary Responses to Theology Brief Preview

CAN WE TALK ABOUT LOVE RESPONSIBLY WITHOUT CROSS-CULTURAL HERMENEUTICS?

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Love is beleaguered in a world that is increasingly polarizing and violent. Can we even begin to talk about “love” that can mend the rifts caused by “irreconcilable” opinions about “love”? In times like these, I appreciate the refreshing and succinct insights of Prof. O’Donovan’s Preview on Love (hereafter OPL). Despite the lack of shared understanding across disciplines and among different cultural, political, or religious groups, I’m encouraged by Prof. O’Donovan’s work to offer hope for “a shared commitment” and a “moral reflection” on love that works toward shaping communities of diverse peoples, nations, tribes, and languages (Revelation 5:9, 7:9, 13:7, 14:6). [1] Christian moral reasoning about love matters.

Reading Prof. O’Donovan’s brief Preview, which he will surely develop more fully in his Theology Brief, I’m quickly reminded of the cross-cultural and cross-disciplinary lenses I have used previously. I think OPL is correct, that discerning the four tenets in “The Love-Command as a ‘Fulfilment’” will be foundational to our moral reasoning about love. Nevertheless, I don’t think we can assume that all peoples have shared understandings of meanings attached to the English word “love,” or indeed of various biblical and theological understandings, and even more of love as it is understood outside the biblical canon or Christian traditions, such as the Confucian *ren* in the *Analects* or the Platonic *erōs* in the *Symposium*. For instance, the same Greek word, *agapē*, is used in the Bible with very different meanings. In 2 Samuel 13:1, 4 (Greek Old Testament) *agapē* is used (translating the Hebrew word *ahav*) to describe Ammon’s love for his half-sister Tamar whom he raped. In John 3:19 *agapē* is used to describe “people [who] love darkness rather than light.” In John 3:35 *agapē* is used to describe “the Father [who] loved the Son.” Linguistic, historical, and cultural contexts reveal surprisingly diverse meanings of even a single Greek word for love.

OPL alludes to the “stark alternating” of *agapē* and *erōs* in Anders Nygren’s understanding. A similar error of sharp differentiation among four different kinds of love in C. S. Lewis’ *The Four Loves* is still prevalent in sermons and lectures today. In his book, *Exegetical Fallacies*, D. A. Carson names Lewis’ “semantics fallacy” of four different kinds of love as “linguistic nonsense,” [2] which can be overcome by paying attention to how a word is used in its linguistic context and historical culture. [3] Sharp differentiation

among meanings of “love” does not work when cultures may be radically different.

Thus, to talk about love responsibly I propose that there is much value in applying a cross-cultural and cross-disciplinary method such as those found in the biblical texts, the Patristic hermeneutics, and also even more widely in the non-biblical commentaries on Chinese classics such as the *Analects* of Confucius. The OT understanding of love is *itself cross-cultural* in its multilayered ancient Near-Eastern contexts, and the NT understanding of love is *inherently* both cross-cultural in its highly intersected Greco-Roman and Jewish contexts; and cross-disciplinary seen in the NT’s myriad ways of interacting with the OT. The *Analects* is composed of Confucian teachings which engage with prior traditions and older texts in ancient China. [4] Paying attention to context and culture in various texts about love might be a significant step for a responsible discussion.

EndNotes

- [1] See Oliver O’Donovan, *Common Objects of Love: Moral Reflection and the Shaping of Community* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009).
- [2] Anders Nygren, *Agape and Eros*, Philip S. Watson trans. (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1953); C. S. Lewis, *The Four Loves* (Boston: Mariner Books, 1971), understands distinctively *storgē* as “affectionate love,” *philia* as “friendship,” *erōs* as “romantic love,” *agapē* as “selfless love.” D. A. Carson, *Exegetical Fallacies* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1984), 26.
- [3] As a start in one’s biblical exegesis, use J. P. Louw, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament: Based on Semantic Domains* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1999).
- [4] See Per Andreas Källström, “Confucius in History and Tradition: A Historical-critical Analysis of Literacy in the Time of Confucius” (MA Thesis, Language and Linguistics, Lund University, 2023).

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