

A RE-VIEW ON JOHANNINE UNDERSTANDING OF LOVE COMMANDMENT

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Abstract

The historical and sociological situation of the Johannine community it seems that the author of the fourth Gospel has written it for his own small exclusive community. Therefore, the ethics in the Gospel of John cannot be described fully by means of the love command. From the perspective of the sectarian understanding of love, the objects of Christian love is limited only to those who belong to the community under the Word, or who are elected to belong to it, that is the brotherhood of Jesus.

Introduction

The use of the Scripture in moral theology is varied at different historical periods. Since Vatican II greater stress is given to the role of the Scripture in moral theological discussion than has been given in the past and we use different scriptural texts for dealing with ethical problems. Our study aims at understanding this trend of the critical use of the biblical texts in moral theology. Kenneth R. Himes identifies four tasks which the theologian must face to relate scripture and moral theology in a critical fashion. "First, the exegetical task: determining the meaning of the text in its original context. Second, the hermeneutical task: determining the meaning of the text for today. Third, the methodological task: using scripture in moral reflection. Fourth, the theological task: explaining the relationship of scripture to other sources of moral wisdom."¹ According to Gustafson Scripture is one of the informing sources for moral judgements but it is not sufficient in itself to make any particular judgement authoritative. Biblical texts are produced in many different contexts over a very long period of time without editorial direction. Therefore, it cannot be treated as a direct source of timeless moral rules. Biblical authors were interested in the virtues or conduct that would best express fidelity to God for their own communities. Our circumstances may be different and may demand different responses.² However, the role of the Scripture in ethical questions is undisputed and Christians always believe that the Bible should have special role in their moral lives.

In this paper we try to analyse the Johannine commandment of love (13: 34, 15:12) as an ethical principle of Christian life. A contrasting feature of Johannine Gospel promotes us to take up this theme. On the one hand the love commandment is exemplified as the "guiding principle of Christian morality,"³ as well as "core and substance" of Jesus' preaching in John's Gospel.⁴ On the other hand the sectarian nature and alleged anti-Judaism and vision of hatred in the Gospel invite us to rethink the different nuances of the love commandment critically.

1. The Commandment of Love in Johns' Gospel

As in the Synoptic Gospels love command, love is one of the most important themes in John's Gospel. For John the very essence of God is love and this love is manifested through Jesus. The Johannine commandment to "love one another" is at the very centre of the moral and spiritual legacy which is presented in the farewell discourses followed by the act of foot-washing (13:1-35, 5:12).⁵ The Synoptic commandment to love God and to love one's neighbours as well as one's enemies is quite absent in the Johannine writings.⁶ Unlike such a universal love commandment of the Synoptics, John restricts his love command within the community. He doesn't explicitly demand us to love our neighbours or our enemies. For him the divine love is the foundation and calling of the Christian community and therefore the love of the disciples has to reflect the Trinitarian nature of love. This means that the focus on love within the community shows from John's interest in presenting the unity of the Father and Son and the unity of the Son and the community in a hostile world. When we take this love commandment in John's gospel as the basics principle of Christian morality we have to consider the extensive sectarian attitude existing in his Gospel and its impact in a pluralistic community.

2. SECTARIAN NATURE OF LOVE IN JOHN'S GOSPEL

The determining factor in the milieu of the Johannine Christians was its conflict with the synagogue. In this sense the Johannine community was a sect, to use a contemporary sociological term; a group whose experience of rejection by its parent body (the synagogue) had pushed it into an increasing sense of alienation from the world at large.⁷ This expulsion caused painful wounds and left scars on the community's tradition. The Christianity of the fourth Gospel was a particular example of an alienated community and the conflict with its parental religion is reflected most clearly in the three references to their expulsion from the synagogue (9:22, 12:42, and 16:2).⁸ The excluded community reacted to this bitter experience in the synagogue in several ways. There is an opinion that these negative experiences to a certain extent are responsible for the Johannine exclusivism. The exhortation to love within the community sounds less exclusive and more like an urgent appeal for unity within an oppressed community. The strong language in the Johannine debate also suggests that the community is an estranged group, alienated from the local society, intensely loyal to all within, but hostile to those outside. In this stage Johannine Christians began to see themselves as a community separated and distanced from Judaism. Those who belong to the community are the children of God (John 1:12) but the opponent are the children of the devil, the father of lies (8: 39-47). It is at any rate within the frame work of this bipolar existence that we must understand the Johannine commandment to "love one another."⁹ While the synoptic Gospels have Jesus command "to love your neighbour", the fourth Gospel has it as "to love one another," Apparently the consistent use of the term 'one another' in place of neighbour is a conscious delimiting of scope of love. Biblical scholars (Kasemann and Lindars, for example) hold that the command to love one another (13:34) does not extend to the opponents and find a splendid example of a sectarian community. The negative attitude is seen in John's approach to the Jews as a whole and apparently in the way the Jews are referred to. For example, the repeated stereotypes phrase 'the Jews' calls for our attention to anti Judaism. This is understandable when we realise that the Johannine community was shut off not just from the synagogue but also from the Jewish world at large. The hatred from the Jews had to be balanced by love inside the community. In this context the new commandment becomes the very core of their existence.

For John, the command to love focuses on the relations within the community and he presents that the unity among believers as grounded in the unity of the Father and Son. Here our major question is when Jesus himself invites his disciples to love “one another” in an exclusivistic sense, can we apply this sort of morality to human beings at large? “The exhortation to love one another does not answer the question whom do I have to love?”¹⁰ The commandment of love in the Johannine Gospel as a norm of Christian ethics poses another problem. According to Johannes Nissen, “there is a contradiction between the commandment of love and the incitement of hate obvious in the Johannine” text.¹¹ However, the paradox between the language of “love” and language of “hate” is to be understood within the context of the historical background of the community as well as experience of the people.¹² The hatred from outside must be balanced by love inside the community. There for the commandment to love one another is conceived in John as part of the community’s witness to outsiders and as a continuation of Jesus’ own love and possibly of his witness as well.

The love commandment in John is also criticized from the anthropological view because John defines love and hate entirely within the person’s stance towards Jesus. To explain further we may say that the moral teaching of Johannine Jesus can be encapsulated into two phases, ‘believe in the Father’ and ‘love one another.’¹³ The object of faith in John is the Son of God, the eternal word manifested in human reality. Believing or accepting Jesus or rejecting him is the important existential question concerning a person. According to John those who believe in Jesus and believe that he is the Son of God have salvation and they are in the light.¹⁴ As a result those who believe in Jesus will be considered ethically good and those who do not believe in him are condemned as ethically wrong. Those who believe in Jesus become the children of God and those who do not accept the teachings and way of Jesus are in darkness. Here, the norm of ethical consideration becomes the faith in Jesus or accepting his teachings. In other words, accepting Jesus is accepting the love of God and rejecting Jesus is rejecting the Father Himself.¹⁵

CONCLUSION

In this study we tried to bring out the different dimensions of the Johannine text to show his commandment on love as sectarian. From the analysis of the historical and sociological situation of the Johannine community it seems that the author of the fourth Gospel has written it for his own small exclusive community. Therefore, the ethics in the Gospel of John cannot be described fully by means of the love command. From the perspective of the sectarian understanding of love, the objects of Christian love is limited only to those who belong to the community under the Word, or who are elected to belong to it, that is the brotherhood of Jesus. The love command in John’s Gospel is given to a community which needs to find its own identity and maintain its own integrity in the midst of a hostile world. Love for him is not the Christian agape at its fullest and finest meaning because in John God loves only his own and his own are only commanded to love one another. The focus here is on love within the chosen community. Moreover, the prevailing negative anthropology and extensive sectarianism prompt us to rethink the use of this text as the norm of Christian morality. However, this should not cause any alarm because, we understand that Biblical texts are composed in many different contexts over a very long period of time. Therefore, neither scripture nor tradition alone should ever be the ultimate authority for deciding on any moral issues and both are to be subjected to the discrimination of reason. Thus, the Church’s moral world is manifested not only in the *didache* but also in the traditions, symbols, social structures and practices that shapes the community’s ethos.

Bibliography

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- ³ Victor Paul Purnish, *The Love Command in the New Testament* (New York, NY: Abingdon Press, 1972), 329.
- ⁴ D. Moody Smith, ed, *The Theology of the Gospel of John* (Cambridge: University Press, 1995), 148.
- ⁵ Purnish, *The Love Command in the New Testament*, 134.
- ⁶ P. Perkins, *The Love Commands in the New Testament* (New York, NY: Paulist Press, 1982), 146.
- ⁷ D. Rensberger, "Love for One Another and Love for Enemies in the Gospel of John," 306.
- ⁸ D. Rensberger, "Love for One Another and Love for Enemies in the Gospel of John," 305.
- ⁹ Nissen, "Community and Ethics in the Gospel of John," 196
- ¹⁰ Nissen, "Community and Ethics in the Gospel of John," 104.
- ¹¹ Johannes Nissen, "Community and Ethics in the Gospel of John," in *New Reading in John: Literary and Theological Perspective*, ed. Sigfred Pedersen Johannes Nissen (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999), 189.
- ¹² D. Rensberger, "Love for One Another and Love for Enemies in the Gospel of John," in *The Love of Enemy and Non-Retaliatioin in the New Testament*, ed. W.M. Swartly (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 1992), 301.
- ¹³ Frank J. Matera, *New Testament Ethics: The Legacies of Jesus and Paul* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996), 111
- ¹⁴ Matera, *New Testament Ethics*, 101.
- ¹⁵ Spohn, *What Are They Saying About Scripture and Ethics?* , 109.

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