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Unconditional Love and Covenant Love

A Comparison

by John C. Free

You may have seen the coffee mug with this little ditty on it:

*The wonderful love of a beautiful maid
And the love of a staunch true man
And the love of a baby unafraid
Have existed since time began.
But the most wonderful love
the love of loves
surpassing the love of a mother
is the wonderful, infinite, passionate love
of one drunken sot for another.*

Popular is the notion that you can be any sort of person, do anything that suits you, say anything that comes to mind, and yet be on either the giving or receiving end of the highest, purest form of love: unconditional love. Some say that unconditional love is our birthright, our most basic need, and its lack is the cause of much, if not most, mean spiritedness. God's love is said to be unconditional; the expression of Jesus' love for us in his death on the cross is said to be unconditional; and the love which Paul describes in 1 Corinthians 13 is called unconditional.

Ironically, no biblical writer employs the term "unconditional" to describe the love of God, Christ, or the love with which we are called to love one another. Embracing the modifier "unconditional" as a way of understanding the nature of the high form

of love to which we are called may be occurring without carefully understanding what is implied. How did the notions about conditionality and unconditionality enter our vocabulary? Did it arise out of a growing understanding of the meaning of biblical terms and teachings, from a popular trend in the culture, neither or both?

I do not know who was the first to write of unconditional love. In perusing some of my books which treat love, observations about the way a mother loves a child prompted these thoughts from Erich Fromm published in 1956,

I am loved. I am loved because I am my mother's child. I am loved because I am helpless. I am loved because I am beautiful, admirable. I am loved because mother needs me. To put it in a more general formula: *I am loved for what I am*, or perhaps more accurately, *I am loved because I am*. This experience of being loved by my mother is a passive one. There is nothing I have to do in order to be loved—mother's love is unconditional. All I have to do is *to be*—to be her child. . . . Motherly love by its very nature is unconditional. Mother loves the newborn infant because it is her child, not because the child has fulfilled any specific condition, or lived up

to any specific expectation.¹

In the 1950s, Carl Rogers was teaching psychology and conducting research on counselor effectiveness. In concert with Charles Truax, Robert Carkhuff and others, he attempted to understand why counseling (psychotherapy) is at times helpful, at times harmful and at times of no measurable effect. Rogers (who for two years pursued a divinity degree) had been trained in psychoanalytic approaches to treating the mentally ill but found them largely ineffective. Following his own instincts, he began to experiment with approaches to working with patients. In time he found that his relationship with them seemed to make a far greater impact on their well-being than did his insights.

Eventually Rogers articulated three elements of relationships necessary for "therapeutic change" to occur. These are: (1) empathic understanding; (2) respect, or unconditional positive regard (expressed as warmth); and (3) congruence or genuineness. Today, regardless of the theoretical orientation in which counselors are trained, most are well schooled in Rogers' "therapeutic triad."

As Rogers developed an understanding of his patients' lives, he observed that "conditions of worth" frequently appeared to harm them. He noted that as children many of his patients had been exposed to a variety of demands (conditions) placed on them which must be met to be accepted and valued (loved). Those who counsel sufferers continue to see this phenomenon. Parents make impossible demands, set impossible standards, sometimes capriciously change requirements, sometimes even require evil of their children. Children feel they must measure up, but they are not quite sure to what, or else they despair of ever achieving the impossible conditions set for them. Conditionality in relationships is universal and, in fact, is often grievous.²

Many Christians found Rogers' (an Fromm's) ideas refreshing and largely compatible with their own thinking. Rogers had broken away from Calvinistic theology with its heavy emphasis on original sin and the depravity of the sinner, a move that was easily laudable among restorationists. Rogers communicated a deep belief in the ability of individuals to solve their own problems, manage their own lives and contribute to their own healing. That belief has similarities to the widely proclaimed belief that any person with an open mind can read the Scriptures, consider the evidence, and come to faith in Christ without the benefit of any outside influence.

Rogers' style of counseling departed radically from the Freudian approach. Instead of objectively taking notes while a patient freely associated

on a couch, Rogers deliberately attempted to enter the subjective world of the counselee, engaging in dialogue, and radiating warmth, understanding and personal honesty. In traditional analysis the patient stared at the ceiling and the analyst stared at the wall. With Rogers, there was face-to-face contact, an energetic intimacy. Rogers often sat on the edge of his chair. The coldness of analysis was gone and was replaced with a charming charisma. Perhaps the style of Rogers was also compatible with an emerging style in ministry, away from the rational, formal and authoritarian and toward the friendly, warm and personal.

As the ideas and style of Rogers began to catch on, many in the Christian community began to perceive similarities between Rogers' notion of unconditional positive regard and the Old Testament concept of loving kindness and the New Testament ideas about "agape" love. Was it possible that Rogers had unknowingly given an operational definition to what it means to love redemptively? The assertions "love does not insist on its own way" (1 Cor 13:5) and "love covers a multitude of sins" (1 Peter 4:8) do appear to imply that divine love possesses a truly unconditional quality. More important, the doctrine of grace emphatically states that God justifies the ungodly as a free gift, not as a response to passing a test, paying a debt or doing a deed. It was not long until "unconditional positive regard" was "baptized" into the Christian vocabulary and came forth from the mouths and pens of believers as "unconditional love."

"Unconditional love" is often hailed as the purest form of love. It is described as love without strings attached. It is assumed as the motive for giving without thought of what one may receive in return, as Jesus taught us to do (Luke 14:12-14). It is likewise attributed to God. John's assertion "God is love" is sometimes rendered "God is unconditional love."

I would like to return to the ideas of Carl Rogers. In retrospect, we see that Rogers was not operating from Christian presuppositions at all. Rather, his thinking was humanistic to the core. His ideas about what contributes to psychopathology and what makes for constructive change were grounded in the belief that individuals possess within themselves the requisite capacity to discern good from evil. Mental illness, he believed, stemmed from failing to abide by one's own sense of what truth and reality are, what one values as important and what one perceives. Mental health, he believed, was the product of believing in oneself, in one's internal, organismic valuing processes, of accepting oneself and of being completely true to one's own natural

feelings. He believed people should be empowered to form their own judgments and abide by them. He saw little value in conforming to external judgments, whether of other persons, societies, cultures or religions. Consequently, if his own or his clients' valuations of immoral or unlawful acts and experiences were positive, he would easily set aside biblical, social, legal or cultural judgments on such acts. In the early 1970s he wrote:

It fascinates me that as I look over the list of names of the people who have so honestly filled this book with themselves, the great majority of them have, in their struggles for a better partnership, engaged—either in the past or present—in practices which federal state or local laws would class as illegal. To give them their old fashioned names, “living in sin,” “committing adultery,” “lewd and lascivious conduct,” “fornication,” “homosexuality,” “ingesting illegal drugs,” even “soliciting,”—these have all been present in these pages, though when they are actions engaged in by individuals struggling to find a better pattern of partnership, the old-fashioned names are, frankly, ridiculous.

So perhaps one thing we as a culture might do which would preserve this enormously valuable laboratory, these pioneering ventures into new relationship space, would be to relieve them of the ever-present shadow of moral reproach and criminal action.³

It was not until the last years of his life that he would entertain the notion that there may be standards external to the individual by which the value of any human act may be evaluated and that notions such as these may be destructive to society.

Ironically, Rogers may not have been thinking about love at all as he wrote of unconditional positive regard. More likely he was referring to “respect for the intrinsic value of a person” and the ways that respect is communicated. If so, most might have little argument. Psychoanalysis, especially in the early years, was predicated on a relationship of a superior to an inferior: a doctor to a patient. That sort of relationship Rogers repudiated in favor of a relationship among equals in which helper and helpee are joined in an adventure of mutual growth. What Rogers affirmed he brought to the relationship was not expertise but belief; not authority but encouragement; not judgment but an affirmation of respect.

Jesus showed respect for all sorts of people,

including those with whom he differed. Sometimes that respect was the beginning influence toward

Loving each other as Christ has loved us is the essence of Christian living.

constructive change in the lives of people. However, at no time did Jesus seem to imply that they could do everything they needed done for their redemption by themselves. He understood that his work had a place in their redemption.

Ordinarily, Rogers worked with sufferers. But what about sociopathic people, criminals, pedophiles, Satanists? Will the experience of unconditional love influence any and all in a positive way? We have seen people who have been loved without strings attached and whose responses have been willful and destructive. We have also seen mentally disturbed individuals remain “blissfully disturbed” though loved deeply, warmly and genuinely by very decent folks. Recall the caution of Isaiah, “When favor is shown to the wicked, he does not learn righteousness, in the land of the upright he deals perversely, and does not see the majesty of the Lord” (Isa 26:10).

If I were a believer in the universal salvation of the human family, I might have few or no reservations about the concept of unconditional love. I could readily solve the dilemma of those who wonder how God could condemn people to eternal punishment and destruction. I could say that God will save everyone because his love flows without conditions equally to those who receive and reciprocate it and to those who do not. But the notion of a judgment of the wicked and unbelieving and an execution of retribution “on those who know not God and obey not the gospel” implies that there may be conditions for those who are the objects of his love.

I would like, briefly, to consider with you the nature of the love of God, specially as manifested in OT history and in Christ. It is very clear that believers are called to a fellowship of the love of God, and that his love is meant to characterize believers’

love toward others. Loving each other as Christ has loved us is the essence of Christian living. Jesus referred to it as his new commandment, possibly replacing the commandment to love your neighbor as yourself. If one should ask, "what is the will of God?" the best answer is that we love God and each other.

The Scriptures assert that God is love (1 John 4:8). We understand this to mean that it is God's nature or disposition to love. His character is good will. God's love does not flow to us because we have earned it or because we are good. It flows to us because he wills that our lives (which he has created and to which he attaches value) be redeemed. We see an anticipatory quality in the love of God (cf. Eph 1:3-6). It has both object and purpose. Before our common ancestors separated from him by their disobedience, he had provided for our return and reconciliation. But that does not make the love of God unconditional. Rather it makes his love **characterological**. For God's love to be unconditional it must flow eternally and beneficially to all, without regard to their status (sinful or saintly) or possible outcomes from being unconditionally loved (refusal of such love or reciprocation of such love).

The principal term in the OT for love, whether of God or man, is *ahabh*. It is a very general term and may refer to love that is either personal (for another person) or impersonal (for any inanimate object such as food). The Song of Solomon portrays the romantic and explicitly sexual love of a man and a maiden. The Psalms portray the utterly faithful love of God manifested in his mighty acts for the nation of Israel. And Isaiah wrote of the love of God not just for Israel but for all peoples and nations.

Two questions may properly be asked: (1) What motivated Yahweh to bind himself with covenants to Israel? and (2) What motivated him to renew Israel's devotion to the covenants with acts of chastisement, pursuit, and forgiveness when Israel abandoned her relationship with him? An understanding of the notions conveyed by the second term, *hesed*, should be considered.

Hesed is variously translated "steadfast love," "loving kindness," "mercy or mercies," "goodness."⁴ In several passages it is a term used to describe the character of Yahweh. For example, when Moses was summoned to Mt. Sinai the second time to receive the tablets of the covenant,

the Lord passed before him and proclaimed, "Jahweh, Jahweh, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love (*hesed*) and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and trans-

gression and sin, but who will by no means clear the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children and the children's children, to the third and fourth generations" (Exod 34:6-7).

There is an association made in the OT between keeping covenant and *hesed* that can be noted in several passages (Deut 7:9, 12; 2 Chron 6:14; Isa 54:10). For Moses, Isaiah and Ezra the idea of steadfast love and the idea of covenant are linked. **The love of God is, and remains, covenant love.** It is selective. It is focused. It endures. It nurtures growth. It is calculating and creative. It is entirely beneficent. It is disciplinary and corrective. It is steadfast, eternal. It is natural. It is expressive of who God is. It is consequential. It is promissory. And, it is conditional.

Covenant love is what a person experiences as he enters into relationship with God as God has ordained it. Unconditional love is what a person experiences as he enters into relationship with God as humankind imagines it. Covenant love is experienced as persons believe in the promises and propositions of the gospel, promises of forgiveness and salvation to those who believe, and of judgment on those who are callous, evil and unbelieving. Unconditional love is experienced as persons reflect on the philosophical ideal of humanism, that man is essentially good, that it is the place of the love of God to inspire the best within the human spirit. Covenant love is eternal. God extends himself in his covenant of grace to abide with humankind for ever.

Unconditional love is transient, often an impossible ideal. Consider the following case. A mother sought help with her marriage and children. I tried to assist her with the issues she raised. However, within a year she left her husband taking her children. In a short time she sold her children's beds and toys to buy beer and marijuana. Her boyfriend rented pornographic films which she allowed her children to watch. Her five-year-old son described watching his mother and her boyfriend engaging in sex. How ought I to love her during this period of her life? Unconditional love requires disconnecting my feelings toward her from her behaviors. Covenant love considers her and her behaviors together. Should I tell her husband that if he really loved her he would allow her to keep their children in the environment she pollutes with her adulteries and mind-altering practices? Would it express the love of God to encourage the court to leave her children with her because she is their (biological) mother?

Covenant love, on the other hand, requires she experience the consequences of her actions (that

her children be removed) until she repents. Unconditional love gives her the “freedom” to make her own choices, live her own life as she feels like living it, perhaps even providing a safety net so she will not hit too hard when she hits bottom. Covenant love confronts her with the character of her actions, challenges her to acknowledge and change (repent), and offers her a new heart, a new identity, a renewed mind, and a sustaining presence to give her the power to overcome her sinful addictions. She may not regain all that she has lost or thrown away, but covenant love offers her more than she had to begin with as far as hope and purpose in life are concerned.

Covenant love is conditional. But is not conditionality in relationships harmful? Not intrinsically. I find nothing wrong with conditionality in relationships per se. The only problem is when the conditions imposed do not promote the well-being and spiritual growth of those who are challenged to meet them. In the same context in which Erich Fromm wrote of the unconditional nature of a mother’s love, he also wrote of the desirable conditionality of a father’s love. It was his notion that conditional love is needed for the healthy growth of the child.⁵ I much prefer my marriage to have conditions of faithfulness and reciprocity expected of both of us. Because of the conditions that are imbedded in the divine covenant, I know with certainty what is expected of me in order to receive the promises of God. I would not want to live my life without that certainty.

It is the nature of love to seek reciprocity. It is so with a mother’s love, a father’s love, a lover’s love and God’s love. Consider the tragic plight of those parents whose children appear to develop normally

for the first few years of their lives only to begin reverting into an insidious autism. The autistic child leaves the world of relationships for the world of self-stimulation. In fully developed cases the child does not respond to love, affection, discipline or nurturance of any sort. Few conditions affecting children are more deeply frustrating and painful to parents than autism. A mother and father from the moment that they know they have conceived anticipate the love their child will bring to them. In no way will the average parent say, “Even if my child does not reciprocate my love, I will be content with knowing that I have loved unconditionally.” Rather, their nurturance, their late night vigils when the child is ill or colicky, their discipline should contribute to the child’s ability to not only receive love, but to give it as well. So it is with the love of God “who disciplines us for our good that we may share his holiness” (Heb 12:10).

I believe covenant love is a far higher form of love, far more beneficial, far more God-like and far more elevating to the human spirit than unconditional love. Jesus said it well, “As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you; abide in my love. **If you keep my commandments** you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father’s commandments and abide in his love” (John 15:9-10).

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