

Loving One's Neighbor is Loving God

I. Introduction

Karl Rahner investigates in *Reflections on the Unity of the Love of Neighbor and the Love of God* whether love of one's neighbor is the fruit of the love of God or whether love of neighbor is an act of love of God in itself (TI IV 236). Rahner eventually concludes that love of neighbor is love of God, not simply a fruit of the love of God (236).

By loving his or her neighbor, a human being loves God. Loving God by loving neighbor is possible, because God is "the origin and destination of an act directed toward the world," like love of neighbor (244-245). Rahner states that we should love our fellow human, not so that we might love God, but so that we might genuinely love our neighbor, and in loving our neighbor, we love God (244). Loving one's neighbor is a person's response to God's self-communication of love by grace (243). Love for his or her fellow human beings is the whole of a human life, as that life is meant to be - a response to God's self-communication (243). Rahner claims that we love our neighbor in response to God's love, because God, who is unlike all other objects, cannot be the object of our love as human beings are (244, 247). God loves us, not so that we might love God in return, which Rahner claims we cannot do directly, but so that in return we might love our neighbor (235). Rahner claims that the "God in us" is the God we can love directly (235).

I whole-heartedly agree with Rahner that love of neighbor is love of God. However, I find Rahner's claim that we cannot love God directly, because God is an object unlike us and unlike other objects, problematic (235, 244, 247). I agree that human beings can never repay God for God's undeserved love, and that the relationship between human beings and God is

decidedly one-sided. I further agree that human beings should certainly love neighbor and that that is one means of loving God. However, for human beings to be incapable of directly loving of God is problematic. That is a limit imposed upon human freedom. If human beings are unable to love God in return, they cannot be truly free.

Rahner would respond that human freedom is experienced when one loves God by loving one's neighbor. He would argue that because loving neighbor is the central action of human life, humans are lifeless and have no freedom without it (243). After all, Rahner reminds us that saying "no" to the love of God is to damn oneself to self absurdity and loneliness (242).

Loving neighbor, according to Rahner, is how we love God. It is the freedom of human life and it is the response to God's self-communication by grace.

II. Rahner's Argument- Love of Neighbor is Love of God

God is love (CSM 1797). And God's love is the cause of all beings that are not God (1802). God, who is self-sufficient and so not in need of the world, willed, in a free act of love, to need the world because God wanted to communicate Godself to the world (1802). God communicates Godself, love, to human beings by grace.

God's self-communication demands a response. Specifically, God's self-communication demands obedient love (1802). Human beings respond to God's self-communication by directing their lives toward sharing God's life through the virtues of faith, hope, and love (1795-1796). Striving for a response to God's love and a chance to share in God's life is the whole of a human life (1794). Love of neighbor is not one act among other acts, but it is the central act of human experience as it is a response to God's loving self-communication by grace (CSM 1805, TI IV 241). It is, according to Rahner the only real response to God (CSM 1805). God's self-

communication by grace is received by a human being who is already “in the world” as he/she exercises his or her freedom to love the world around him/her (TI IV 245).

Rahner says that there is often an incorrect assumption that love of neighbor is merely a response to the love of God; it is a fruit or touchstone of the love of God (1805). Love of neighbor is not a preparation, effect, or touchstone of love of God; it unites human beings, supported by God’s self-communication and grace, with God (TI IV 236). Love of neighbor is love of God (236). God is “the origin and destination of an act directed toward the world,” like our love of our neighbor (244-245). The act by which neighbor is loved is the act by which God is loved (CSM 1805). God loves us, not so that we might love God in return, but so that we might love our neighbor (CSM 1804, TI IV 235). Love of neighbor manifests itself in giving real help to one’s neighbor (TI IV 231). The neighbor must be the object of our love, no matter how love of neighbor relates to love of God (238). Love for God’s sake does not mean love only for God, who is in our neighbor, or that our neighbor is seen as an opportunity to love God, but instead that we love our neighbor, him/herself (244).

A human being’s love of his or her neighbor is not just a moral act, but is instead, the sum total of his or her achievement (243). When one loves one’s neighbor, which is the only categorical act by which a human being loves God, a human being fulfills his/her potential (246). Love of neighbor is a specific obligation of Christianity, without which there can be no salvation (CSM 1805). To choose not to love one’s neighbor is to imprison oneself within “the deadly lonely damnation of self-created absurdity (TI IV 242).” Love of God and love of neighbor is love of Jesus Christ, who is both, God and human (CSM 1805). Love of Jesus Christ is a “yes” to God, a “yes” to salvation. To love one’s neighbor to love God is to be saved.

The “God in us” is the God whom we can love directly (235). “God in us” is reached by love of neighbor (235). The categorical, explicit love of neighbor is the way in which we love God (247). A person can love God, whom we do not see, only by loving our neighbor who we can see (247).

Rahner concludes that love of God is love of neighbor, which is the response to God’s self-communication by grace. Because God is an object unlike other objects, we can only love God by loving our neighbor whom we can see and love as an object like us (244, 247).

III. Objection- We Must Be Able to Love God

I agree with Rahner that love of neighbor is love of God. It is not a preparation for loving God. It is not an effect of loving God. I further agree with Rahner that this stems from the fact that God is in us. We are created in the image of God, so to love another human being is to love God through that human being. If one chooses not to love one’s neighbor, one cannot be saved.

However, when Rahner says that we love God whom we cannot see only by loving our neighbor who we can see, I disagree. Loving neighbor is not the only way to love God. It cannot be so. We must be able to love God directly, though our love is inadequate to repay God for God’s love for us.

If we cannot respond to God’s love directly, saying “yes” or “no” to God’s love directly, by loving God directly, it seems that God’s love is imposed upon us. We cannot choose not to love God and respond “no” to God while still loving our neighbor. While that seems comforting, it also seems to significantly limit human freedom.

IV. Rahner’s Rebuttal- Human Freedom is Loving God and Neighbor

Rahner's response to my objection might be that loving God by loving neighbor is human freedom. Choosing not to love God is not freedom, but is choosing not to be free. Loving God by loving neighbor is the central act of human existence (CSM 1805). Without loving God through neighbor, there is no freedom, because human existence is stunted and purposeless.

Furthermore, Rahner would remind us that God is an object unlike other objects that cannot be loved in the way that human beings can be loved (TI IV 244). But we love God by loving human beings because God is "the origin and destination" of human action directed toward the world (244-245). Thus, Rahner would argue, loving one's fellow human being is loving God and is human freedom.

V. Conclusion

Because God is not an object toward which we can direct our intentions, or our love, Karl Rahner asserts that we love God by loving our neighbor (236, 244). An act in which we love neighbor is an act in which we love God (CSM 1805). Loving God is human freedom, so loving neighbor is human freedom. Loving neighbor is the free response to God's self-communication of love by grace and is, thus, the central act of human life (CSM 1805, TI VI 241).