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“Love’s Perfection? *Eros* and *Agape* in Lars von Trier’s *Breaking the Waves*” *Studia Theologica* 63/1 (2009): 126-41. This is the accepted version of this essay please cite the final published version that you can find here: <https://doi.org/10.1080/00393380802559873>

In Lars von Trier’s *Breaking the Waves*, the protagonist Bess McNeill is often viewed as a Christ-figure, in particular, as an image of Christ’s love. In this essay, I address the feminist critique that taking Bess in this way represents a serious distortion of Christ’s love, arguing that Bess need not be seen as endorsing a self-destructive and victimizing form of love that feminist critics rightly reject. Instead, I suggest that we can view her love as an indictment of the institutions structuring its expression. Finally, I argue that Bess’s love for Jan combines aspects of love that have typically been segregated into *eros* and *agape* in a way that enriches our understanding of *agape* and prompts us in turn to re-evaluate our understanding of Christ’s love and death.

According to writer and director Lars von Trier, *Breaking the Waves* is "a simple love story"¹. The film tells the story of Bess McNeill, a simple, devout young woman from an insular religious community on the Scottish coast, and Jan, an outsider who works offshore on an oil-rig. It begins with Bess petitioning the elders of the church to sanction their marriage, which they reluctantly do, warning that such marriages rarely fare well. Nevertheless, Bess and Jan revel in their love and both seem to flourish in their relationship until Jan’s inevitable resumption of his work on the rig. Finding their separation unendurable, Bess earnestly prays for Jan’s return. Soon after, Jan is involved in serious accident on the rig that leaves him paralyzed and often out of his mind. God tells Bess that he has done this to test her love for Jan.² From the haze of his heavily medicated mind, Jan tells Bess that the only way she can save him, the only way she can truly love him, is by prostituting herself to strangers and telling him about it afterwards. At first, Bess finds this request appalling and impossible to fulfill, but in time she is convinced that she must do as Jan asks to keep him alive. Her friends, family and church shun Bess for her commitment to carrying out Jan’s request. In the end, Bess is brutally raped and dies from the injuries she sustains in her effort to fulfill Jan’s wishes. Miraculously, her actions do bring about Jan’s recovery. At the film’s close, we are left wondering about her love. Is "love a mighty power" as she says at one point? If this is a

love story, what are we to make of Bess's love and the course of action it drives her to take? This question, complicated as it is, becomes more so, when we consider Bess as an image of Christ and his love.

Bess McNeill is often viewed as a Christ-figure, in particular, as an image of Christ's love. It is with this image, however, some feminist critics have found fault. Arnfríður Guðmundsdóttir, for example, argues that Bess represents an 'abuse of the cross' and is a 'harmful misrepresentation' of it.³ Her critique focuses on the way Bess is dominated and ultimately destroyed by the men who determine her world. In her view, Bess perpetuates and romanticizes an understanding of *agape* that is destructive to women and counter to the gospel message. In this essay, I wish to argue that Bess can function well as a Christ-figure, and that we need not see her as endorsing this form of love that feminist critics rightly reject as dangerously destructive. Instead, we can view her love and the actions expressing it as an indictment of the institutions structuring its expression. Further, I will argue that Bess's love for Jan combines aspects of love that have typically been segregated into *eros* and *agape*. Taking Bess as a figure of Christ, then, sheds light upon our notions of *agape* and its relation to *eros*, and prompts us in turn to re-evaluate our understanding of Christ's love and death.

I

Arnfríður Guðmundsdóttir offers a helpful analysis of female Christ-figures in film along with a critique of Bess as a Christ figure. According to Guðmundsdóttir, mere reference, at the analogical or figurative level, to the gospel story may not be sufficient to constitute a character a Christ-figure, since such a character may not hew close enough to the message of Christ. Such a figure would offer a distorted image of the person and work of Christ and in her view, therefore, not be a Christ-figure. Guðmundsdóttir offers two criteria to guide us in our evaluation of Christ figures:

1. A character does not *have to be exactly like Christ in all details*, in order to be called a Christ-figure . . .

2. A Christ-figure does *have to have a credible allusion to the person of Christ or his message*.⁴

Guðmundsdóttir recognizes that these criteria are neither perfect nor exhaustive. Her intention with the first is to allow for a good deal of breadth in the way a character resembles Christ. In particular, this criterion allows for female Christ-figures, as well as those differing from Christ in other significant ways. The second criterion allows for the evaluation of figures meeting the first criterion. It restricts Christ-figures to only those references that are “fitting to the life and work of Christ and are not contrary to his message about liberation and love”.⁵ If a figure bids to refer to Christ, but distorts his fundamental message, Guðmundsdóttir argues that we should not consider it to be a Christ-figure at all, but an abuse of the cross. Clearly, determining what is and isn’t contrary to Christ’s message can be messy business, but Guðmundsdóttir is surely right that we cannot simply accept as Christ-figures any reference to the gospel story; a true figure of Christ must in some minimal way be recognizable as Christ.

This definition leaves open a great deal of space for figures that put pressure upon our common notions of Christ, since those notions themselves are not always accurate or aspects of them have been obscured by familiarity. The most powerful Christ-figures, in my view, are the ones that ask us to re-evaluate our understanding of the person and work of Christ. Those that merely reflect back to us what we already think are not all that interesting or helpful. It may even be that distorted images, ones that fail to meet the second condition, prompt fruitful re-evaluation on our own notions of Christ. While I want to leave room for saying that such figures do not fittingly represent Christ, it is important to recognize that they too have value. In the end, I think Bess may function both as a direct and a distorted image. My focus, however, will be on the ways her love represents Christ’s love.

Guðmundsdóttir goes on to point out the particular significance and potential of female Christ-figures. Citing Eleanor McLaughlin, she suggests that restricting our imaginations to “*a merely*

male Jesus . . . [limits] the richness of the good news” and in some sense, therefore, is unfaithful to the Gospel message itself.⁶ Guðmundsdóttir cites Carl Theodor Dryer’s *Jeane d’Arcs Lidelse og Død* (1928) as an example of a female Christ figure that probes the ability of women to represent Christ, in particular, she notes the threat to the male-dominated spiritual authorities Joan represents. In the figure of Joan, Guðmundsdóttir seems to argue we can see Christ’s own questioning of the authorities of his time and the violence on his person this questioning prompted. The question to which we now can turn is whether the main character, Bess, in Lars von Trier’s film, *Breaking the Waves* (1996), is herself a Christ-figure.

II

Guðmundsdóttir argues that Bess fails her second criterion and is justly considered a harmful abuse of the cross. She is “a *reverse* Christ-figure, that is, a figure who demands comparison with the gospel story but presents a reverse of Christ’s message about liberation and love”.⁷ It is important to note here that even if Bess functions as a reverse image of Christ, she may still help us to understand the nature of Christ: light shone through the negative exposes the true image. This notwithstanding, it is as an image of divine, *agapic* love that Guðmundsdóttir finds fault with this depiction of Christ. Following Anders Nygren’s distinction, Guðmundsdóttir takes *agape* to be the unselfish, self-sacrificing form of love opposed to the selfish, self-seeking *eros*. On this view, Christ is the perfect embodiment of *agape*, because he lays down his life for the sake of those he loves. Such love, accordingly, is perfected in absolute self-sacrifice, the paradigm of which is Jesus’s own death upon the cross. The feminist critique Guðmundsdóttir draws upon contends that such an understanding of *agape* does not reflect the experience of women, who have traditionally been raised “to think too much about others and too little about themselves”.⁸ The effect of *agape*, then, is to perpetuate the domination and victimization of women. *Agape* in this sense encourages women to willingly submit to

exploitation out of love. In Guðmundsdóttir's view, then, Bess, as a female Christ-figure, masquerades as an agent of love, but in truth is simply a victim of patriarchal violence. Von Trier errs, then, by idealizing Bess's victimization instead of "lifting up the sin of those who either reinforce or simply ignore the harmful effects of the abuse that she endures."⁹

Guðmundsdóttir anticipates and rejects the idea that *Breaking the Waves* represents a critique of traditional understandings of Christ's sacrificial death and substitutionary atonement that sees Jesus's death instead as a consequence of his radical message. According to Guðmundsdóttir, "Jesus chose to overturn the norms and values of the society he lived in, as well as, to live and work on the margins, and thus challenged both worldly and spiritual authorities."¹⁰ On this understanding, Jesus's death reveals both the fundamental injustice of such authorities and the depth of his love for those abused by them. In his submitting to this death, Jesus identifies himself with the outcast and stranger; Jesus becomes what the authorities in his society consign to hell. Guðmundsdóttir argues that Bess cannot be a Christ-figure in this sense, because she lacks the necessary agency and control. If Bess is powerless to determine her own way, if she is herself at every point determined by others, she is merely a victim unable to bear a message of liberating love.

Ultimately, Guðmundsdóttir's critique helps us to see a potentially dangerous distortion of Christ's message of love. If we set up Bess as a paradigm of *agape*, we run the risk of perpetuating the flawed notion that such love requires self-obliteration for its perfection. The consequence of romanticizing this sort of love may well be to perpetuate exploitive social structures by silencing those victimized by them. While I recognize the possibility of seeing Bess in this way, I think there are good reasons for not doing so. I am not convinced that Bess fits so neatly into this characterization of either *agape* or the victimhood associated with it. Instead of perfectly exemplifying this pernicious sort of *agape*, I think Bess's actions might prompt us to reevaluate the nature of agapic love as it is exemplified in Christ himself.

III

Before examining the nature of Bess's love, it is necessary to respond to Guðmundsdóttir's feminist analysis of *Breaking the Waves* directly. Guðmundsdóttir's rejection of Bess as a legitimate image of Christ's love turns on the claim that Bess is a 'victim of violence', not an 'agent of love'. She sees Bess as utterly controlled by Jan and God, (and by extension her church since her conception of God is largely a product of its teaching). Bess represents an abuse of the cross, because in her the cross is used to justify the suffering of the powerless at the hands of the powerful. "In this film", Guðmundsdóttir concludes, "God sides with the powerful against the powerless and contradicts the God who is revealed in the person and the liberating work of Jesus Christ."¹¹ While the film allows for this sort interpretation (one that I agree is terrible abuse of the cross), I think it also allows for an interpretation that is consonant with the liberating work of Jesus Christ.

One reason that Guðmundsdóttir's reading seems appealing is that the God whose words we find in Bess's mouth seems not at all different from the God of her Church: cold, austere, demanding, unforgiving, even capricious. This God answers her prayer to bring Jan home by giving him a life threatening head injury. This God demands that Bess choose between her own salvation and Jan's.¹² This God requires her to prove her love to Jan by submitting to his request that she have sex with strangers. In short, this God seems to structure and endorse the course of destructive choices Bess makes out of what we cannot doubt is genuine love for Jan. The reason that this need not be an insurmountable obstacle to seeing Bess as a figure of Christ is that this God is not God at all, but Bess's conception of God—a conception that is largely a product of her male-dominated church and community. Her death does not validate this conception of God, as much as it requires us to question its validity. In a similar way, Jesus's life and death challenged his society's conception of God, even though that conception shaped the path Jesus himself took.

The claim that in Bess we see the suffering of the powerless justified seems to miss the possibility that Bess stands as a condemnation of the powerful, revealing their violence toward love. For instance, when Bess challenges her church's love for God's word because it fails to embrace individual human beings, she is silenced and excommunicated—the spiritual authorities simply will not tolerate her understanding of love. Viewed in this way, Bess's life and death do not stand as a justification of the patriarchal structures that demand her sacrifice, but as an indictment of them. The church, the representation of the powerful, male-dominated religion, does not recognize Bess or her love, but instead shuns her, and at her funeral consigns her to hell. If Bess is an image of Christ, we see this sort of religion revealed as the enemy of christic love. So, far from being a justification of this religion, Bess's death exposes its fundamental violence toward human love. That Jesus was himself a victim of the abuse and violence of the powerful is beyond question. But his death and resurrection did not justify the powerful or their violence. His non-violent love instead exposed the fundamental violence of the human institutions that put him to death. By shifting our focus from Bess's suffering to those inflicting it, we can see more clearly how she mirrors Jesus's own challenge to and exposure of the spiritual authorities of his time.

Finally, the claim that Bess is powerless and as such must be viewed as a victim falsely assumes that the forces constraining the means by which Bess can express her love undermine her ability to act freely. To say Bess is not an agent, to say she is powerless and controlled, is to say she does not act upon reasons that are her own and that her actions are, in some sense, not her own but belong to those controlling her. What Jan asks may be grotesque, unfair, even unloving, but his request does not render Bess an automaton.

Much of the film is about Bess's struggle over how to respond to this outrageous request. Beth both understands and at some level affirms the unequivocal judgment of her church that what Jan asks is gravely sinful. As a consequence, she is very reluctant to do as Jan asks. At no point, do

we see her embracing what she does; resignation and emotional pain are etched on Bess's face each time we see her with another man.¹³ Though Bess is resolved to do as Jan asks, she never seems fully to lose sight of that fact that what she is doing is a painful violation of her fundamental desire to be with Jan and no one else. Bess's recognition of the weight of this request and her subsequent struggle to fulfill it suggest that she is aware of what she is doing and why.

As even Guðmundsdóttir suggests, it is up to Bess to save Jan. Bess chooses finally to sacrifice her own life for Jan. This is a tragic choice, because in choosing to save Jan she gives up her chance to fulfill her desire to be with Jan.¹⁴ We pity Bess because she never ceases to want to be joined to Jan, but nevertheless gives up this possibility so that he might live. The emphasis here is on the fact that she actively and willingly lays her life down. In her final act of love, Bess returns to the ship, where she knows she will be violently raped and possibly killed.¹⁵ She returns in spite of this, because she believes it to be the only way to save Jan. Bess's reason for following this course remains constant: she loves Jan and desires his recovery and their union. Bess's reasons and desires associated with this action are her own: it is up to her whether she wants to love Jan; it is up to her, whether to believe fulfilling Jan's request will save him. There is no reason to think that she would not have selected an alternative way of saving Jan if it had been available to her. In a similar way, Jesus did not desire to express his love through the cross, but freely chose it as the best available means for realizing his desire to effect the recovery of human beings from their paralyzing lack of love. That his love must be expressed this way reveals the horrendous evil of the present order of things, not some lack of agency on his part. So, while Bess's choices are indeed limited, her agency is not: she chooses the path she does, because it is the only one in her view that will fulfill her own desire to save Jan.¹⁶

While Guðmundsdóttir's acknowledges the possibility that *Breaking the Waves* be viewed as a critique of the "church and its patriarchal attitude towards women" rather than an endorsement of the traditional view that *agape* is perfectly represented in the sacrifice of self for others, she doubts that von Trier himself sees his film in this way. Citing *Dancer in the Dark* (2000) as evidence that "he idealizes rather than questions such female self-sacrifice in the victimization of the main female characters in his films".¹⁷ The weakness of this argument is that it fails to take *Breaking the Waves* on its own merits and makes a hasty generalization about von Trier. Furthermore, it isn't clear that von Trier does consistently represent female characters in this way. *Dogville* (2003), for instance, breaks with this paradigm by having its main female character lash out in a blaze of retribution at its close. And, von Triers adaptation of Euripedes' *Medea* (1988) gives us a central female character that isn't this picture of idealized victimization. Medea, like Grace in *Dogville*, resorts to violence in a bid to avoid even being perceived as a laughable victim of Jason's exploits.

Finally, von Trier's understanding of Bess itself suggests that he sees her fundamentally as an agent and not a victim:

She is a strong person taking full responsibility for her life, even though others might think that she is not capable of doing so. Bess is made strong by her belief and by her love. So strong that she masters even rebellion against the strict suppressing rules of the little community and the church that once was so dear to her.¹⁸

As I said at the outset, Guðmundsdóttir's reading is plausible and offers us a helpful perspective on this film and on female Christ-figures generally. Nevertheless, I think she offers no compelling reasons for rejecting a reading of Bess as a Christ-figure that might illuminate our understanding of Jesus's love and our concept of *agape* and its relation to *eros*. In some respects, Guðmundsdóttir's critique itself enables us to see the contribution this film makes by revealing the

aspects of love that the traditional notion of *agape* neglects to acknowledge, namely, its *erotic* elements.

IV

In this section, I want to consider briefly the concepts of *eros* and *agape* operating in Guðmundsdóttir's critique of *Breaking the Waves*. Then, following Robert Adams, I want to suggest that *agape* and *eros* are not the exclusive categories Nygren supposes them to be. Finally, I will return to *Breaking the Waves* and suggest how Bess herself fits Adams' account of *agape* and how this may shed light on our understanding of Christ's love.

The understanding of *agape* that fuels Guðmundsdóttir's critique of *Breaking the Waves* draws on Anders Nygren's account in *Agape and Eros*, first published in the 1930s.¹⁹ According to Guðmundsdóttir, "Nygren pits *agape*, unselfish love, in opposition to *eros*, which he deems to be a form of selfish love".²⁰ When Nygren contrasts *eros* and *agape*, he represents them as polar opposites. *Eros* is motivated by the qualities of the beloved: self-interested and acquisitive. *Agape* by contrast is unmotivated by the qualities of the beloved: disinterested and giving. The epitome of *agapic* love for Nygren is the cross of Christ, and there we see that *agape* "is a love that gives itself away, that sacrifices itself, even to the uttermost."²¹

The worry that Guðmundsdóttir has is that if Christian love is characterized in this way, it seems to deny the legitimacy of any self-love. Nygren's suggestion that notions of proper self-love that have entered the Christian tradition represent an intrusion of *eros* and a compromise of *agape* supports this worry. "*Agape*" he says, "recognizes no kind of self-love as legitimate."²² As Gene Outka puts it, Nygren's *agape* "completely dispossesses and annihilates self-love."²³ *Agape* characterized this way naturally makes self-sacrifice—even self-destruction—the apogee of love's perfection.

To this worry we may also add that insofar as it is unmotivated and disinterested, such love seems abstract and impersonal. If it cannot find value in its beloved and does not find any reward in helping the beloved to flourish, *agape* bears little resemblance to what we would recognize as ideal in marital love, which is so often used as a metaphor for God's love for human beings, and is the chief metaphor operating in *Breaking the Waves*. Both of these worries are underwritten by Nygren's over-emphasis on the exclusion of *eros*—and *philia*—from the concept of *agape*.²⁴

In his article, “Pure Love”, Robert Merrihew Adams challenges the notion that *agape* and *eros* are contraries. “The ideal of Christian love includes not only benevolence but also desire for certain kinds of personal relationships, for their own sakes.”²⁵ *Agapic* love does not merely desire the well-being of the beloved, but desires to be the one who brings it about, and similarly, is concerned not to be the cause of the beloved's harm. *Agape* has an erotic element insofar as it desires personal relationship, for its own sake, apart from the good of the individuals in the relationship. God, on this reading, does not disinterestedly desire our good, as he would if *agape* were simply benevolence. Rather, Adam's contends, “The Bible depicts a God who seems at least as interested in divine-human relationship as in human happiness *per se*.”²⁶ Such love, then, would be unfulfilled if the beloved achieved happiness at the cost of the relationship. Benevolence, on this view, is not a sufficient condition for *agape*, but is a necessary one. No *agape* can lack benevolence; but pure benevolence by itself falls short of the sort of relation *agape* represents.

To read Bess's love as aimed at sacrifice for its own sake is to see it as pure—albeit misguided—benevolence and to miss her erotic commitment to relationship with Jan. Recognizing that it is desire for relationship with Jan that motivates Bess's actions, benevolent though they are, helps us to see that her sacrifice is neither a necessary consequence of love, nor its most perfect realization, but instead the consequence of a world dominated by loveless power.

With Adams' account of *agape* in mind, I want to turn back to *Breaking the Waves* to see what sort of love Bess has for Jan and what insights we might glean from it as an image of Christ's love. If we consider Bess as an image of *agape* in Adams' sense, we can see that Bess has suffered a real loss in her sacrifice. She has given up the contemporary possibility of being in relationship with Jan, something that she values for its own sake, in order to be the agent who brings about Jan's recovery. So, while Bess does sacrifice herself, she does not do so disinterestedly, she does not do so because she sees this as the ideal and end of perfect love. She sacrifices herself because it is the only way to express her love in her circumstances. Because we know her desire is to be joined with Jan, her death is tragic. She restores Jan in body and mind, rendering him capable of relationship, rendering herself incapable of participation in the process. Her erotic desire for relationship, then, is subverted.

The bells at the films close offer us a rich image of this tragic subversion of her love's perfection. They are at once wedding and funeral bells. As the latter, they signify Bess's death and heavenly reception, as the former they remind us of the union that now seems impossible. In their tone, they also echo the sound of Bess hammering a crane with a pipe in an expression of her anguish over Jan's leaving her to return to his work on the rig. There, she rages at their separation, because she desires the intimacy that only his physical presence allows. The bells, then, toll Bess's continued longing for relationship with Jan.

Jan's own reaction to the bells is ambiguous. Confused wonder, perhaps, describes it best. He cannot be altogether happy at her reception into heaven, because that implies her absence from him. Now recovered in mind and body and capable of reciprocating Bess's love, she is no longer there.

If we take Bess as Christ-figure, we have a fine picture of what it is like for both Christ and believers. Christ's death has brought restoration that will make relationship possible, but there is

nevertheless a separation that makes full union impossible for the time. Like Bess, Christ values and therefore longs for relationship with his beloved. Following the passage from Paul's epistle to the Ephesians quoted at Bess's wedding, we see that Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her . . . that he might present her to *himself* in splendor . . ." (5.25-27). The end of Christ's *agape* is not merely redemption, but relationship.

This approach to *agape* is similar to that proposed by some feminist theologians who have questioned the notion that agapic love is fundamentally exemplified in self-sacrifice. According to Barbara Hilkert Andolsen, *agape* should be rooted in mutuality and reciprocity,²⁷ where each engages in "the active affirmation of the goodness and beauty of the other."²⁸ Citing Beverly Harrison's work, Andolsen explains how this view of *agape* challenges the idea that the crucifixion lifts up self-sacrifice as an end to be sought for its own sake, and as a paradigm of *agapic* love.

Jesus did not desire death on the cross as a manifestation of total self-surrender. Rather he accepted death as the consequence of his unswerving commitment to mutual love. Jesus remained faithful to radical love even when this fidelity resulted in a life-endangering confrontation with the forces of loveless power—forces which threaten the dignity of persons.²⁹

I think we can see Bess in a similar way. Committed to mutual love with Jan, Bess confronts the loveless powers of her male-dominated world. The men on the ship who rape and ultimately kill her represent the most extreme threat to her dignity as a person. But their disregard and physical abuse of her person is no less a threat to her dignity than her church's assault on her soul. The church silences Bess, casts her out, and ultimately consigns her to hell.³⁰ Unable to embrace her or her conception of love that is directed toward human beings not words, it seeks her destruction. Even the God of her mind does not seem to regard her dignity, calling her a 'stupid girl' and toying

with her genuine love for Jan. Finally, Jan himself, though he loves her, does not affirm her goodness and beauty in his requests, but instead inflicts suffering and pain. But insofar as Jan's requests stem from a misconception of what is good for Bess, which in turn is a product of Jan's not being in his right mind after his accident, we should not see him as the ultimate cause of Bess's suffering even if he is a proximate one. In my view, there is a sense in which God, more than Jan, is the author of his horrendous requests. It is God after all who inflicts these injuries on Jan to test Bess's love. Accordingly, even God as Bess seems to conceive him plays the role of a loveless power lacking respect for her person.

Bess for her part remains committed to mutual relationship with Jan throughout, even when his injuries make such relationship impossible. After the accident, Jan is not only incapable of mutual love, his requests seem to run directly counter to it. Jan is physically incapable of making love with Bess and mentally, he seems diminished, intermittently unable to see what is good for either Bess or himself. Bess nevertheless continues to believe in Jan, in his great capacity as a lover, despite his current condition. Throughout her ordeal, Bess sees glimmers of Jan's original love expressed in his desire that Bess to blossom into the good and strong woman he knows her to be. That Jan continues to desire Bess's flourishing after the accident is suggested by his scrawled message to her when he realizes what he doing: "Let me die. I'm evil in [*sic*] head". And later when again he briefly regains his senses, Jan signs the papers to have Bess committed, because he sees that he has become a destructive force in her life. Bess finally acts on Jan's requests because of her commitment to their mutual love, and her belief that these acts alone would restore Jan's capacity for such love. It is, then, her desire for mutual love and her faith in Jan's capacity for it that moves her to act as she does.

Thus, in harmony with Harrison's view of the crucifixion, Bess does not seek sacrifice for the sake of sacrifice, but she seeks to save Jan for the sake of mutual love, to be joined with him

again. In her death, then, we can see her great commitment to love Jan and to restore him, as well as condemnation of the powers that require her life for having such love. By bringing in elements of *eros*—longing for relation—and *philia*—desire for mutual flourishing—the notion of *agape* helps us to see more clearly the christic elements in Bess's actions.

V

We are in a position to consider whether and in what sense Bess functions as a Christ-figure. She seems not to be a *reverse* Christ-figure in Guðmundsdóttir's sense insofar as her death does not so much undermine Christ's message of love as it prompts us to look at it more closely.

Bess's death, like Jesus's, is fueled by passionate commitment to relationship with the beloved, and is required by the spiritual authorities and the God they represent. Her death is an indictment of these authorities as Jesus's was of the authorities of his time. Her embrace of Jan, an outsider whom her church will not embrace, parallels Jesus's own desire to be with those rejected and estranged from his community and presumably their God.

The contrast between her own love and that of her community is nowhere better represented than in the scene that comes just before Bess takes the actions that will ultimately lead to her death. In this scene, we see Bess, still dressed as a prostitute and showing signs of recent abuse, enter the church, while a male congregant prays: "There is only one way for us, sinners that we are, to achieve perfection, through unconditional love for the word that is written, for the law".³¹ Here we see the object of the church's love is God's word and God's law. God is not, in this formulation, even the object of the love that perfects human beings. Bess's response highlights her different conception of love, its proper object and end:

I don't understand what you are saying. How can you love a word? You cannot love words.

You cannot be in love with a word. You can love another human being. That's perfection.³²

For Bess the love of another human being necessarily takes precedence over the love of the law. She is willing to violate the law for the sake of love. Her response indicates her belief that love is fundamentally about relationship. The law cannot be the object of love, because it is incapable of mutual love and relationship.

Bess's challenge parallels Jesus's own denunciation of the Pharisees, whom he accuses of neglecting "justice and the *agape* of God" in the interest of strict adherence to the law (Lk 11.42).

The minister rejects Bess along with her articulation of the love that represents perfection saying,

No woman speaks here. Bess McNeill, the Kirk session has decided this day that henceforth you shall no longer have access to this Kirk. They who know you, shall not know you. Be gone Bess McNeill from the house of God!³³

Bess indicates that she sees her love for Jan as perfecting, yet her church blind to it. Her actions do not support the idea that her sacrifice itself is perfection, but rather that her love for Jan is so strong that she will endure whatever consequences are necessary to bring about his recovery and their union. Since that union is not realized at the film's close, Bess's love remains incomplete. If *agape* were solely about the good of the beloved and not about relationship also, we would find the end wholly good and satisfying. Bess has made Jan well. But she is not with him; they are not in the end joined. So, like Jan, we cannot overlook the fact that their separation represents a real loss, a denial of the relationship at which Bess's love was directed.³⁴

There is nothing wrong with Bess's love; it is not aimed at self-destruction and sacrifice for its own sake; it is aimed at a relationship of mutual love with Jan. The loveless powers demand Bess's sacrifice, not her love. They demand her to give up her life and the possibility of union with Jan to restore his life and along with it his capacity for mutual love. Her actions reveal the depth of her love and its power to restore life, but they also point to the way love remains fractured and unsatisfied. We are left with the gnawing feeling that love in this world may never be complete, that

the relationship we long for may not be fully realized this side of dying. To see *agapic* love as void of *erotic* desire for relationship with one's beloved is to miss this fundamental motive for redemption.

In this essay, I have argued that understanding *agape* as including both elements of *eros*—longing for relationship—and *philia*—a desire mutual flourishing—helps us to see Bess as a Christ-figure in a way that enhances and enriches our grasp the nature of Christ's love and death. This reading of *Breaking the Waves* also gives us insight into the discourse on the theology of love more generally. I have suggested that Nygren correctly saw that *agape* represented something unique—even unprecedented, but erred in supposing it to be absolutely distinct from and therefore lacking in elements of *eros*. The post-Nygren discussion of *agape* may be construed as series of arguments that aspects *eros* or *philia* need to be woven into our conception of divine love in order to capture its true nature.³⁵ Taken as a whole this reaction to Nygren seems to argue that the notion of *agape* is impoverished to the degree that it excludes the yearning of *eros* and the mutuality of *philia*. It suggests that we should instead see *agape* as drawing these other sorts of love into itself in way that transforms them into something new: a love universal and unconditional and yet at the same time personal and vulnerable. Neither disembodied nor disinterested, this love recognizes and is attracted to the real and unique qualities of the beloved. Differentiating without discriminating, this love is directed to all and each. This inclusive notion of *agape* I would argue captures—better than Nygren's exclusive notion—the longing for relationship that drew God into the world of flesh and blood to endure the brutalization of the loveless in the hope of the reception and reciprocation that would represent love's ultimate perfection.³⁶

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Notes

¹ Lars Von Trier, *Breaking the Waves*. (London: Faber and Faber, 1996), p. 15.

² When Bess prays, she speaks in two voices: her own and Gods. So, whether it is God speaking is never wholly clear. At the very least, these words represent what Bess thinks God would say.

³ Arnfríður Guðmundsdóttir, "Female Christ-figures in Films: A Feminist Critical Analysis of *Breaking the Waves* and *Dead Man Walking*." *Studia Theologica* 56 (2002), p. 35. Linda Mercadante's "The Christ Figure in *Breaking the Wave's*." *Journal of Religion and Film* 5.1 (2004), <http://www.unomaha.edu/jrf/bessthe.htm> makes a similar, though less detailed, argument.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 30.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 30.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 31. The essay cited in this context is Eleanor McLaughlin's "Feminist Christologies: Re-Dressing the Tradition." *Reconstructing the Christ Symbol: Essays in Feminist Christology*. Ed. by Maryanne Stevens (New York: Paulist Press, 1993).

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 38.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 34.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 38.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 35.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² At, one point, Bess asks God whether she will go to hell, and the God of her own voice ask: "Whom do you wish to save Bess? Yourself or Jan?" This scene takes place in the church and after a conversation with Dodo in which Bess has emphasized that in her community, which in this case is constituted by the Kirk, she is expected to honor her husband. Dodo protests that "a woman must choose for herself" and have "a mind of her own" and not blindly submit to the irrational ramblings of a man in a drug induced coma or to a church that would expect such submission. These warnings from Dodo serve to show that Bess makes her decision with her eyes open; she is choosing for herself. She wants Jan to recover.

¹³ Even though she claims to feel a spiritual connection with Jan when she is having sex with other men, in the act, she expresses pain at violating her marriage vows as well as at her own violation. She, who had waited so long to be with Jan, now finds herself having to be with other men to prove her love to him.

¹⁴ Bess's choice is similar in this sense to Agamemnon's in Aeschylus's tragedy of that name. Martha Nussbaum argues that Agamemnon is free when he chooses to sacrifice his daughter for the sake of his ship and its crew. It is a tragic choice: the lives of his crew or the life of his daughter. But, as Nussbaum contends, the choice is Agamemnon's: "he knows what he is doing; he is neither ignorant of the situation, nor physically compelled; nothing forces him to choose one course rather than the other" [Martha Nussbaum, *The Fragility of Goodness*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), p. 34]. Similarly, Bess is not forced to follow the course she does, she knows what she is doing, and chooses that path willingly.

¹⁵ Bess had previously gone to this ship with the intention of prostituting herself to the men there. This was a ship none of the other prostitutes would go to. She soon discovers why this is the case; the two men there enjoy abusing and seeing abuse. Before they can hurt her, Bess escapes. So, when she returns, she knows she will be harmed. The only question is how seriously.

¹⁶ Bess accepts and responds to what she knows is an outrageous request. She condescends to Jan's twisted view of what is good and loving for the sake of his transformation and redemption. Jesus,

similarly, takes on sin and accepts the violation of his body on the cross for the sake of human redemption.

¹⁷ Guðmundsdóttir, "Female Christ-figures in Films: A Feminist Critical Analysis of *Breaking the Waves* and *Dead Man Walking*," p. 35.

¹⁸ Lars Von Trier, *Breaking the Waves*. (London: Faber and Faber. 1996), p. 20.

¹⁹ Nygren's views are themselves much more complex than this brief description suggests. It is not within the scope of this essay to offer a detailed analysis of Nygren's account of *agape* and *eros*, which continues to be the subject of theological debate. My aim here is to address the notion of *agape* that Guðmundsdóttir critiques, and so I follow the basic lines of her understanding of Nygren. That said, I agree with Guðmundsdóttir's view that Nygren's account of *agape* too neatly excludes self-regard and mutuality.

²⁰ Guðmundsdóttir, "Female Christ-figures in Films: A Feminist Critical Analysis of *Breaking the Waves* and *Dead Man Walking*," p. 33.

²¹ Anders Nygren, *Agape and Eros*. Trans. Philip S. Watson (London: S.P.C.K, 1953), p. 118.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 217.

²³ Gene Outka, "Theocentric Agape and the Self." 24/1 *Journal of Religious Ethics* (1996), p. 36.

²⁴ Nygren's notion that *agape* is unique and exclusive has been challenged from a number of sides, some arguing that it include elements of *eros* and others that it include the relational elements of *philia* (Cf. Colin Grant, "For the Love of God: Agape." 24/1 *Journal of Religious Ethics* (1996), 3-21). In what follows, I argue that if we take Bess as a Christ-figure, then our notion of divine love must include both of these elements, even if it remains unique.

²⁵ Robert Adams, "Pure Love." *Journal of Religious Ethics* 8/1 (1980), p. 96.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 97.

²⁷ This feminist approach fills out the 'relationship' that Adam's identifies as the specific erotic longing of God's love. The emphasis on reciprocity and mutuality might be understood in terms of *philia* or friendship, albeit radically different from that of Aristotle's, which, according to Gregory Vlastos, would find the prospect of a such a love extending to the morally imperfect as simply "absurd" ["The Individual as an Object of Love in Plato." *Platonic Studies*. (Princeton, NJ): Princeton University Press, 1973), p. 34.].

²⁸ Barbara Hilkert Andolsen, "Agape in Feminist Ethics." *Journal of Religious Ethics* 9/1 (1981), p. 77. It would seem that when the other does not or cannot reciprocate appropriately, *agape* may still be manifest in sacrifice. I do not cease actively to seek my lover's good just because my lover will not or cannot reciprocate.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 78. Beverly Wildung Harrison expresses this view regarding the end of Christ's sacrifice most explicitly in her "The Power of Anger in the Work of Love." *Feminist Theology: A Reader*. Ed. by Ann Loades. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1990), p. 211.

³⁰ I take up this scene in more detail in the next section.

³¹ Lars Von Trier (Producer), *Breaking the Waves*. [motion picture] (Santa Monica, CA: Artisan Home Entertainment, 1999).

³² *Ibid.*

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ Unlike the *Guld Hjerte* (Gold Heart) fairy tale that von Trier says inspired this movie, Bess does not get to be with her lover.

³⁵ So, for instance, Gene Outka suggests "*Agape* promotes the realization of *philia* without guaranteeing it, and without ceasing to be love when *philia* is unrealized" ["Theocentric Agape and the Self." 24/1 *Journal of Religious Ethics* (1996), p. 37]. So, while relation is the hope and the end of divine love, it isn't its condition. On the element of *eros*, John Blevins, reflecting on Pseudo-

Dionysius, writes that "the distinctive Christian belief that God became incarnate in Christ is an act of kenotic self-emptying not so much because of agapic love but because of erotic desire" ["Uncovering the Eros of God" *Theology and Spirituality* 13/3 (2007), p. 298]. *Eros*, Pseudo-Dionysius suggests, is God's yearning to be with and to know us. Colin Grant's "For the Love of God: Agape." 24/1 *Journal of Religious Ethics* (1996), p. 3-21 offers an excellent overview of this discussion, though he worries that *agape* ends up being absorbed and distorted in many of these efforts to bring *eros* and *philia* in, and so defends Nygren's exclusive conception of *agape*.

³⁶ I want to express my gratitude to Andrew Carlson-Lier, and the participants in Faith, Film and Philosophy seminar at the Faith and Reason Institute at Gonzaga University, and the anonymous reviewer for helpful comments on earlier versions of this essay. Finally, I want to thank Margie DeWeese-Boyd for many conversations about this film over the years and for her invaluable feedback throughout the writing of this essay.