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Eros and *Agape* in Karl Barth's *Church Dogmatics*

David Clough

Abstract: This analysis of *agape* and *eros* in the *Church Dogmatics* argues that although there are real difficulties with Barth's development of these concepts in the *Dogmatics*, a careful reading of the material suggests that these difficulties are not so serious as may first appear and may be overcome. This interpretative work also facilitates a dialogue between Barth and two contemporary ethicists working on the concept of Christian love, a dialogue in which Barth proves to be a worthy and rewarding partner.

Barth's treatment of *eros* and *agape* in the *Church Dogmatics* poses three difficulties for his interpreters. First, he attaches five different meanings to 'eros' in the course of the work and it is not clear that they are consistent with one another. Second, the relationship between *agape* and this diffuse understanding of *eros* is problematic: Barth states that the two are enemies of one another, but also rejects a simple opposition and attributes to *eros* qualities he identifies with *agape*. Third, the meaning of *agape* is rendered uncertain by Barth's ambiguity regarding its proper object. My aim in this article is to set out each of the three difficulties and in each case determine whether it represents a real problem in Barth's account, and, if so, whether there is a way to overcome the problem. I conclude that there are real difficulties with Barth's description of *eros* and *agape* in the *Dogmatics*, but that none is incorrigible, and that the tensions in his attempts to wrestle with *eros* and *agape* are instructive for our own contemporary struggles with the meaning of Christian love.¹

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The five meanings of eros

Barth's references to *eros* in the *Dogmatics* can be classified under five headings: *eros* as a power of human creativity, *eros* as sexual desire, the *eros* of Greek philosophy, sanctified *eros* between husband and wife, and *eros* as self-love.²

The first appearance of *eros* in the *Dogmatics* is as a broad human fecundity not restricted to sex, and carrying a positive evaluation as a proper human activity.³ In explaining why the miracle of the Virgin Birth is necessary, he explains

The sinful life of sex is excluded as the source of the human existence of Jesus Christ, not because of the nature of the sexual life nor because of its sinfulness, but because every natural generation is the work of willing, achieving, creative, sovereign man. No event of natural generation will be a sign of the mystery indicated here. Such an event will point to the mighty and really cosmic power of human creaturely *eros*... The event of sex cannot be considered at all as the sign of the divine *agape* which seeks not its own and never fails.⁴

On the following page he again identifies *eros* with this human creativity, noting that 'willing, achieving, creative, sovereign man, man as an independent fellow-worker with God, man in the impulse of his *eros*' cannot be 'a participator in God's work'.⁵

In his doctrine of creation, Barth treats *eros* as purely sexual desire. He is struck by how unusual Genesis 2 is in its preparedness to speak of love between man and woman. The Old Testament considers human sexuality 'almost exclusively in connexion with the procreation of the holy seed and therefore the hope of Israel, and therefore its determination and Messianic expectation', Barth notes, and the only other place in which erotic love is treated more than

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incidentally is the Song of Songs.⁶ For this *eros*, he observes, 'there is no such thing as

shame' and he asks how the authors found the courage to treat their theme in this way, 'speaking so bluntly of *eros* and not being content merely with the restrained and in its own way central reference to marriage and posterity'.⁷ Barth's answer is that at these two points an 'inner necessity breaks through every reservation, God the Lord and sexual *eros*, well known in Israel especially as a dangerous *dæmon*, are brought into close relationship'. This necessity is that the authors of these passages see beyond the broken covenant of Israel: 'they know that the broken covenant is still for God the unbroken covenant, intact and fulfilled on both sides; that as such it was already the inner basis of creation, and that as such it will again be revealed at the end'. Love and marriage

become to them in some sense irresistibly a parable and sign of the link which Yahweh has established between Himself and His people, which in His eternal faithfulness He has determined to keep, and which He for His part has continually renewed. In this way they irresistibly see even this most dangerous sphere of human existence in its old and new glory.⁸

In this context, then, Barth qualifies the *eros* he is discussing by the term 'sexual' and sees it as dangerous, but nonetheless capable of representing the covenant.

Later in the doctrine of creation, in his section on Christian anthropology, Barth discusses the *eros* of the Greeks. After defining the basic form of humanity as a glad being with one's fellows, he is quick to distinguish this characteristic of humanity from Christian love. He then comments that *agape* and *eros* can be too easily played off against one another. In Greek religion, *eros* was

the sum of human fulfilment and exaltation of life, the experience, depicted and magnified with awe and rapture, of the end and beginning of all choice and volition, of being in transcendence of human being, of that which can take place in sensual or sexual (and thus in the narrower sense erotic) intoxication, but also in an inner spiritual encounter with the suprasensual and suprarational, with the incomprehensible yet present origin of all being and knowledge, in the encounter with the Godhead and union in it. *Eros* is humanity as *dæmonism* in both the lowest and the highest sense, and as such it is a kind of divinity.⁹

Christianity has frequently defined *eros* badly as the *eros* of 'the Dionysius-Zarathustra, the superman, the man without his fellow man'. *Agape* has then been

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'far too unthinkingly accepted merely as an antithesis to Greek *eros* and thus unconsciously depicted and extolled in the contours and colours of the original'. We have to ask seriously 'whether what is called *agape* is not really a spiritualised, idealised, sublimated, and pious form of *eros*'.¹⁰ Barth suggests that 'a calmer and more objective solution' to the problem of the relationship between *eros* and *agape* is to escape the simple opposition between them by introducing a third term: humanity. We can then see that, while 'Greek *eros* is ill-adapted to be a definition of humanity', nonetheless, it 'contains an element which in its visible form and even in its essence is not evil or reprehensible, but of decisive ... importance for the concept of humanity.'¹¹ This element is being gladly with the other: The Greeks with their *eros* - and it was no inconsiderable but a very real achievement - grasped the fact that the being of man is free, radically open, willing, spontaneous, joyful, cheerful and gregarious.¹² In this section, Barth sets out a detailed and nuanced description of the Greek form of *eros* and celebrates this element of gladly being together as an important insight into human nature.

The fourth meaning Barth ascribes to *eros* is found still later in the doctrine of creation, in his account of human creatureliness as male and female. Here he criticizes the critics of *eros* again. While he balks at the attempt to portray *eros* as a way to Christian love,¹³ he asserts that 'The Christian discrimination against *eros* as such is undoubtedly a very old mistake. It never meant anything but that the Church would not and could not see male and female in their real encounter, which must always be to some extent erotic.'¹⁴ And again in his discussion of marriage, Barth's criticism of Schleiermacher's idealism is tempered by the recognition that it 'is in any event more human than the hostility shown to *eros*' by the authors he cites who claim that love is not an important aspect of marriage.¹⁵ Barth himself is far from hostile to *eros* in this section:

But good care must be taken that what takes place between true lovers is understanding, self-giving and desire. When the matter is understood in this breadth and order, it may be safely and fearlessly described by the well-known term *eros*. If we think of *eros* only as or primarily in the sense of desire, and more particularly of physical desire, we must not suppose that we have really understood what is here in question. As the desire of love, of true *eros*, desire is legitimate ... when it is preceded by self-giving and thus controlled, not by the need of the other, but by the joy of being his and of willing to belong to him,

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the confidence of being well-placed with him, the willingness to make common cause with him. Again, this self-giving, as that of love, of genuine *eros*, is legitimate... This then, in this totality and order, is love, the genuine *eros* sanctified by the command of God.¹⁶

Of the four meanings of *eros* surveyed to this point, two do not raise problems of consistency. When Barth qualifies the term, as he does in his treatment of 'sexual' and 'Greek' *eros*, there is no difficulty. The problems in interpretation arise when Barth uses the term without qualification in ways that are not in agreement with each other, as he does when he calls *eros* as a 'willing, achieving, creative' human power in I/2, or as 'understanding, self-giving and desire' in III/4.

These problems are exacerbated in IV/2 when Barth introduces a further unqualified description of *eros* as self-love. In an extensive comparison with *agape*, Barth here characterizes *eros* as a love with its origin in 'a distinctively uncritical intensification and strengthening of natural self-assertion'. This love is 'hungry, and demands the food that the other seems to hold out', which is 'the reason for its interest in the other'. It is the 'desire to possess and control and enjoy' what the other promises. It is finally selfish: 'however much [man] may seem to give what is his, lavishing and dissipating it on the object of his love, he does not really give it up, but uses it as the means to win or keep or enjoy this object of his love'. The movement of the love is circular: 'It seeks the infinite in a transcendence of everything finite, but from the very first it is disposed in such a way that (even by way of the infinite) it must always return to its beginning". It

may direct itself to 'the good, the true and the beautiful' rather than the sensual, or 'may even reach out to the Godhead in its purest form and thus be a most wonderful love of God'. But 'in all its forms it will always be a grasping, taking, possessive love - self-love -and in some way and at some point it will always betray itself as such'.¹⁷ Barth refers here to Greek *eros* as one of the forms of this love, which may begin to give us hope of some kind of reconciliation of some of the previous uses of *eros* we have identified. What he called sexual *eros* is obviously also an aspect of this kind of love. The more difficult question is how the two unqualified definitions of *eros* as willing, achieving and creative power, and as understanding, self-giving and desire, fit with this depiction.

To address this, it is helpful to follow Barth's comparison with *agape* here a little further. Barth identifies it as 'the direct opposite of Christian love', but also recognizes that there are reasons to be careful in criticizing it. The first is that 'in a crude or subtle form (and perhaps both)' all Christians love in this way too; the second, that 'this other love can claim some of the greatest figures in the history of

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the human spirit'; the third that we all 'exist in a world which in its best and finest as well as its most basic phenomena is for the most part built upon this other rather than Christian love'.¹⁸ Barth is consistent in stressing the importance of not forming 'too impoverished a conception' of *eros*, or seeking it only in degenerate forms. It is a human phenomenon reaching back to the beginnings of history, its power evident in the way it 'invaded Christian thought' in *caritas*. 'As long as men love', Barth observes, 'even though they are Christians they will always live within the framework of *eros*'.¹⁹ This description of *eros* as a historical phenomenon of human creativity undoubtedly incorporates the willing, achieving, creative cosmic *eros* from Volume I. Despite this high view of *eros*, however, Barth insists that Christian love and *eros* are 'two movements in opposite directions' so that there can only be conflict between them. The first sense of *eros* we found in I/2, then, is incorporated into the definition of *eros* as always finally self-love in IV/2. This does require a re-evaluation of *eros* - in I/2 Barth spoke more positively of it - but it is clear that Barth is discussing the same topic.

With regard to the first difficulty in Barth's account of *eros* and *agape* I identified above, then, my provisional conclusion is that, while Barth does not attempt to make his uses of *eros* consistent, three of the senses of *eros* I have identified - *eros* as willing and achieving, *eros* as sexual desire, and the Greek concept of *eros* - can all be understood in Barth's terms under the heading of the *eros* that is always finally self-love. In the case of Greek *eros* this manoeuvre requires a little more work: the glad fellow-humanity Barth recognizes as part of the positive component of Greek *eros* in III/2 is clearly not self-love. Both in III/2 and III/4, however, Barth includes this fellow-humanity as part of his description of humanity.²⁰ With this part of Greek *eros* already incorporated in Barth's doctrine of creation, we need only find room for the remainder of the Greek idea of *eros* under the heading of self-love, which fits much more readily. The remaining sense of *eros* not incorporated under self-love is the 'sanctified' *eros* of marriage, which bears on the second difficulty with Barth's account of *eros* and *agape* I identified at the outset: the relationship between *eros* and *agape*.

The relationship between *eros* and *agape*

The first problem with Barth's account here is that the 'sanctified' *eros* he describes in III/4 has affinities with both *eros* and *agape*, since it includes both desire and self-giving. There seem to be three possibilities in interpreting Barth's intentions, none of which is immediately attractive. First, we could say that this *eros* belongs with all the other uses of *eros* we have identified: a love with some attractive

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features but at root a love of self in conflict with *agape* and from which Christians must escape. This has the virtue of tidiness, but it makes little sense to say that God sanctifies an action that is an enemy of Christian love, it makes love in marriage incompatible with Christian discipleship, and it puts Barth in the same category as all the enemies of *eros* he criticized. We must reject this alternative. The second possibility is that this sanctified *eros* has nothing in common with *eros* as self-love, but in fact is an aspect of *agape*. Barth defines it as including desire, however, which seems to make it more similar to

eros, and, while this sanctified *eros* incorporates self-giving, Barth insists that it legitimately includes an interest in and choice of the other, which is no part of the pure self-giving of *agape*. Barth deliberately chose to call the love in marriage *eros* instead of *agape*, and complained that the church had failed to understand in the past that there is always an erotic element in the relationship between man and woman. It is not fruitful, then, to undo this by reincorporating this sanctified *eros* into *agape*. The third possibility we are left with is that by the grace of God it is possible for an element of *eros* to be transformed and sanctified into something holy between marriage partners. I think this possibility is what Barth has in mind, but it does not fit easily with the deep gulf and either/or between *eros* and *agape* he develops in Volume IV, which is perhaps why *eros* in marriage receives no attention there. While this interpretation of the relationship between sanctified *eros* and *agape* does not combine them in the manner of *caritas*, which Barth rejected, it does suggest an accommodation between the two loves that does not seem possible in the context of the '*simul... simul*' dialectic. *Eros* is no longer wholly at enmity with *agape*, but part of it may be redeemed and sanctified into something harmonious with it. This weakens the rhetorical power of the opposition between *eros* and *agape*, perhaps, but this is a small cost compared to the difficulties with the alternatives above, and retains both the uncompromising quality of *agape* as the way God loves, and Barth's insight that marriage legitimately includes a different kind of love alongside this one.

Gene Outka notes a further difficulty regarding the relationship between *eros* and *agape*: that Barth claims that human actions are governed either by *eros* or by *agape*, and also claims that human actions are governed by both *eros* and *agape*. Outka concludes that 'nothing very definite is forthcoming about how these claims might conceivably connect'.²¹ Barth is aware of the tension between the two assertions:

Man loves either in one way or the other, and he has to choose whether it is to be in the one way or the other. If in fact he loves in both ways at the same time, as is often the case even with the Christian, this can only be with the disruption, the 'falling out', which we had occasion to discuss in relation to 'conversion'.²²

It is illuminating to follow Barth's reference here. In his treatment of conversion, Barth describes this 'falling out' - he laments the lack of an English or French term to translate *Auseinandersetzung* - as resulting from the individual being under a twofold determination, '*simul (totus) Justus, simul (totus) peccator*'.²³ Barth stresses the impossibility of any sort of coexistence between these two determinations: 'In the twofold determination of the man engaged in conversion we have to do with two total men who cannot be united but are necessarily in extreme contradiction. We are confronted with mutually exclusive determinations.'²⁴ The situation is untenable:

Its whole will and movement and impulse is to fall out or to fall apart, and to do so in the direction unequivocally characterised by the radically different content of this twofold determination; not dualistically in a division or re-stabilised coexistence of an old man and a new, a sinner and saint; but monistically in the passing and death and definitive end and destruction of the one in favour of the development and life and exclusive, uncompromised and inviolable existence of the other.²⁵

Applying this back to the relationship between *eros* and *agape* makes Barth's intentions here clearer. The two loves exist in a dialectical relationship in the Christian, who at once loves wholly with *eros* and wholly with *agape*, but for whom this existence is no easy accommodation, but an experience of being totally at odds with himself or herself. *Eros* is how the world loves: it is creative and achieves greatness; in the Greeks it gave insight into human nature as glad fellow-humanity; in its form as sexual desire it is familiar and dangerous; it is capable of superlative heights of wondrous love of God, but is always finally a melancholy love of self. *Agape* is not merely the antithesis of this worldly love, but is a new thing, a joyful giving of ourselves, thereby a renouncing of the idea that we belong to ourselves, and an exaltation that we may love as God loves. The Christian loves in both these ways, but this is an unhappy and unstable tension that must be resolved in the end of eras in the death of the sinner, and the exclusive existence of *agape* in the life of the saint.

The results of considering the difficulties in Barth's account of the relationship between *eros* and *agape* are mixed. First, there is a genuine difficulty with Barth's description of 'sanctified' *eros*. It undermines the opposition he sets up between *eros* and *agape*

in IV/2 because it contains elements of each, and, when we seek to locate this hybrid love in relation to *eros* and *agape*, even the best alternative is not wholly satisfactory. Second, the apparent difficulty with the way *eros* and *agape* relate to each other in the life of the Christian proves not to be problematic. Appropriating the dialectical element from Barth's account of conversion results in

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a consistent and persuasive depiction of the struggle within the Christian between the old person and the new, the one whose love turns out always to be love of self, and the one who is able to transcend this self-love and love the neighbour for their own sake.²⁶ This leads us to the third difficulty in Barth's account of *eros* and *agape* in the *Dogmatics*, however, since it is not clear who is to count as our neighbour.

The object of agape

One of Barth's central questions in his description of Christian love is the question of the lawyer in Luke 10:29: 'Who is my neighbour?' His usual answer is that the neighbour is not every human being. Love for other persons, Barth argues, 'presupposes that the one or many who are loved stand in a certain proximity to the one who loves - a proximity in which others do not find themselves'.²⁷ The Bible certainly speaks of relationships with others beyond this proximity, but not in terms of love. The issue is then who is in this proximate relationship and who is not. Barth addresses this question in the first volume of the *Dogmatics*, with an exegetical treatment of the parable of the Good Samaritan. The meaning of the parable is clear, he notes, 'though obstinately surrounded by traditional exposition'.²⁸ The parable is told in response to the lawyer asking who his neighbour is, and he answers Jesus' question at the end of the parable by identifying the neighbour to the wounded man as the one who showed compassion to him.²⁹ Barth draws the obvious but nonetheless surprising conclusion that the neighbour is the one who shows compassion to us: the true form of the neighbour is 'the bearer and representative of the divine compassion'.³⁰ The neighbour 'proclaims and shows forth Jesus Christ within this world',³¹ and through my neighbour, 'I am referred to the order in

which I can and should offer to God ... the absolutely necessary praise which is meet and acceptable to Him'.³² This means that not everyone is my neighbour: not everyone stands in this relationship to me. Yet it is not only members of the church who can be neighbours:

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As the Bible sees it, service of the compassionate neighbour is certainly not restricted to the life of the Church in itself and as such. It is not restricted to those members of the Church who are already called and recognizable as such. Humanity as a whole can take part in this service. The Samaritan in the parable shows us incontestably that even those who do not know that they are doing so, or what they are doing, can assume and exercise the function of a compassionate neighbour.³³

It is impossible to be 'absolutely outside the Church', Barth maintains here, since everyone exists with the church 'in the space between the ascension and the parousia of Jesus Christ'. Therefore simply as a fellow human being, any person can be a neighbour to me.³⁴

In the fourth volume of the *Dogmatics*, Barth is inconsistent regarding who should be the objects of Christian love. In IV/1, when he turns from the vertical dimension of Christian love to the horizontal, he clearly means that Christians and non-Christians should be loved: the love of Jesus Christ is the coming together of all persons with one another, and 'there is a solidarity of all persons in the fellowship with God in which they have all been placed in Jesus Christ, and a special solidarity of those who are aware of the fact, the fellowship of those who believe in God, the Christian community'.³⁵ In this passage, Barth calls love towards all persons love to the 'neighbour', and love towards other Christians love to the 'brother'. Confusingly, however, further down the paragraph Barth refers to Matthew 25:31-40: Jesus' teaching that what persons do to the least of his brothers, they do to him. Barth is clear that both Christians and non-Christians belong in the category of Jesus' 'brothers'. They represent Jesus Christ

as the neighbour, as the one who fell among thieves, and as the Good Samaritan... They are not identical with Him. But He cannot be had without them, nor can reconciliation with Him nor conversion to Him. He cannot be had without gratitude for their witness and a willingness to be witnesses to them, without love to them, without their indispensability to each one whom God loves, without that one seriously setting out and never ceasing to seek and find them, both in the community and therefore in the world as well, Christian and also non-Christian neighbours.³⁶

In IV/2, however, Barth gives a different account of who the neighbour is, which does not fit easily with the Good Samaritan: 'the one who apart from God is loved in the act of Christian love, being necessarily loved together with God, is the fellow human being who stands in a definite historical relationship to the Christian who

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loves'.³⁷ This historical relationship is salvation history, so it is only 'those with whom we find ourselves in this context of the history of salvation' who can be the objects of Christian love.³⁸ Barth is quick to say there should be no 'restriction in principle' to this group, as our knowledge of who are neighbours are in this sense is never complete. Nonetheless, there is a proper 'practical and provisional' restriction of Christian love to the circle of sisters and brothers in Christ.³⁹

This ambiguity regarding the identity of the Christian's neighbour is the result of Barth's commitment to affirm the special status of the church in relation to the rest of the world:

It is here in this people that Jesus Christ has His body, the earthly-historical form of His existence. It is here that God speaks with humanity and is heard by them... His purpose is for all persons, and He addresses Himself to the whole world. But - without prejudice to His fatherly providence over all creaturely happening - He does so here and only here. For it is here that His love is active as an electing, renewing and creative basis of the response of human love.⁴⁰

God's love in this community must elicit a response in love that is not found outside it,

and since the neighbour we are called to love is someone in proximity to us, it seems the object as well as the subject of this love must be within the church. Yet in the two places cited above where Barth introduces the parable of the Good Samaritan, he is forced by the text to conclude that our neighbour may be foreign to us. This is the cause of the ambiguity we find here in response to the question of who the neighbour is.⁴¹

There are two resources earlier in the text of the *Dogmatics* that help to overcome this ambiguity. The first is Barth's claim in the first volume that everyone exists with the church between the ascension and parousia of Christ. We share this salvation history with all persons - though not all recognize it - and this can be the basis for seeing them as proximate to us, and therefore neighbours. We can then say that while we might expect to see the fullest expression of Christian love among those who know themselves to be called into fellowship by Jesus

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Christ, the Good Samaritan makes clear that Christians will both find others loving as Christians are called to do, and be called themselves to love the stranger wounded at the side of the road. The second resource from earlier in the *Dogmatics* that is helpful here is the section 'Near and Distant Neighbours' in III/4.⁴² There he notes that a common language, geographical location, and history mean we are closer to some persons than others. We must neither ignore this particularity, nor make it an end in itself, but hold onto our near neighbours with one hand and reach out to our distant neighbours with the other. Barth resists making near and distant neighbours two separate spheres, insisting that we are always on the way from one to the other. He seems to have this passage in mind when in IV/2 he suggests Christians 'must be ready and on the way to love for all'.⁴³ Using the categories of near and distant neighbours allows us to recognize the truth of Barth's claim that love means being in a particular relationship with those we find ourselves close to, while recognizing that the categories of those close to us and those far from us are fluid, not determinate, and that we must be open to being required to love the stranger who suddenly comes near.

With respect to the third difficulty in Barth's account of *eros* and *agape*, that of the

uncertainty in the object of *agape*, my conclusion is that Barth is ambiguous concerning whether the objects of Christian love should be restricted to the Christian community, but that texts elsewhere in the *Dogmatics* provide grounds for developing a more nuanced and inclusive theory of how Christian love should be exercised in relation to those near to and far from us.

Insights for the current debate

Should we model our understanding of Christian love on the parable of the Good Samaritan or the fellowship of the Last Supper? Is the love we are called to as Christians exhibited best in stopping to respond to the needs of an anonymous stranger, or in enjoying the mutual give and take of life in communion? If we believe it is important to incorporate both the Good Samaritan and the Last Supper narratives in an account of Christian love, how are we to relate them to each other, and how are we to deal with conflicts between them?⁴⁴ These are the central questions in contemporary discussions of Christian love. Gene Outka is the leading exponent of the former approach, and sees universality as the definitive

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characteristic of *agape*.⁴⁵ Edward Vacek's work is an excellent recent example of the latter approach, which views Christian love as rooted in the affections.⁴⁶ Barth's discussion of *eros* and *agape* is a provocative and valuable contribution to this debate, because he occupies a strange middle ground between the opposing camps. On the one hand, Barth denies both Outka's contention that we can speak of a universal love of humanity, and Vacek's view that we can properly understand Christian love by reflection on human emotions and relationships. On the other hand, Barth both affirms Vacek's belief that special relationships are the essence of Christian love, and emphasizes that these special relationships must be extensible to all persons, in the direction of the love for all with which Outka begins. Barth's insight that we can only love those who stand in some kind of proximity to us, together with his account of our dialectical relationship to our near and distant neighbours, is suggestive of a way to proceed that affirms the value and

legitimacy of special relationships, while also recognizing that any person or group, near or distant, may become the neighbour Christ commands us to love as ourselves.

Advocates of the importance of special relationships commonly rely on marriage and family as the clearest confirmation of their case. It is instructive, then, that the central special relationship for Barth is that between members of the church. *Agape* cannot be reduced to a universal love of humanity because that would radically weaken the meaning of the love whose high calling is to bind together the body of Christ.⁴⁷ The love of Christians for one another is a mutual witness to the love of God, interposing themselves for each other and acting as guarantors for one other, a task that cannot have the same meaning with regard to those outside the church.⁴⁸ We should not pass by this point without appreciating the scale of the challenge this view of *agape* represents for the love that should be evident in the church. While the love within the church is the most important special relationship according to Barth, we have seen that he also recognizes the special status of love within marriage, and is prepared to create a 'sanctified eras' for it, despite the difficulties this creates for the opposition between *eros* and *agape* he maintains in IV/2. In the section on near and distant neighbours in III/4, he also considers the special relationship we have with those who share our language, geographical location, and history.⁴⁹

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Barth never directly contradicts his rejection of Christian love as a universal love of humanity, but I have shown that he is equivocal about the identity of the neighbour, and in IV/1 clearly states that love of the neighbour is love towards all persons, Christian and non-Christian. It is significant that this passage refers to the Good Samaritan: it is as if the text is driving Barth to the inclusive view of Christian love he shies away from elsewhere. This parable is the reason we cannot draw the boundaries of Christian love at the church, or the family, or the nation. The Samaritan was of a different religion and nationality from the man left wounded at the side of the road, yet came to his aid and was a neighbour to him. Barth's insight here is that love for other persons, 'presupposes that the one or many who are loved stand in a certain proximity to the one who loves - a proximity in which others do not find themselves'.⁵⁰ The way beyond the

exclusivity of our relationships with those of our faith, family, or nation, therefore, is not to assert that we ought to or can love those who are not our neighbours, but to expand the category of neighbours, which is what Barth does in refusing to draw a clear distinction between those who are near and distant from us. We cannot love those who are not in some kind of proximity to us, but we are called to be always on our way between those who are near to us and those who are far away. The English translation of the *Kirchliche Dogmatik* captures this idea in a near-paradoxical expression that goes beyond Earth in the German. The heading of the third section of §54 in III/4 is 'Die Nahe und Die Fernen' in the *Dogmatik*, literally, 'The Near and the Far'. We have already seen the English heading, 'Near and Distant Neighbours'. No doubt this is a fair rendition of the original, yet 'near neighbour' is close to redundancy and 'distant neighbour' is close to oxymoron. 'Distant neighbour', however, renders exactly the point that we may be in proximity to those who are far from us. Christ does not command us to love humanity in the abstract, but our neighbour, the one who stands in proximity to us. But Barth insists we may not rest content in our circle of those close to us, but must always be moving between our 'near neighbours' and our 'distant neighbours'. 'Neighbour' therefore becomes a category of special relations that is neither rendered meaningless by an abstract universality, nor made exclusive of those beyond our 'neighbourhood', but reminds us that we are called to love the foreigner as the Samaritan did, while recognizing that we have church neighbours, family neighbours, neighbours in our nation, near neighbours, and other kinds of neighbours, alongside our distant neighbours.

These twin commitments - that we can only love those who are in some way proximate to us, and that we can have a certain proximity to those distant neighbours we are always on our way to - do not solve the problem of how to understand special relations in an account of Christian love, but they do represent an approach to the topic that seems promising and that has not previously been explored, and this may be Barth's major contribution to the current understanding of Christian love. Two other aspects of the interpretation of Barth's account of

Christian love I have developed in this article are also worth considering in relation to the contemporary debate. First, his description of 'sanctified *eros*' will be useful as an example of how *eros* may be incorporated into a theology of marriage, combining as it does the claim that the *eros* that is always grasping self-love at its root has no proper place in the life of the children of God, and the claim that an account of Christian marriage that does not recognize the legitimate place of attraction and desire fails to see man and woman in their real encounter, which must always be erotic. Second, the dialectical impossibility, yet reality, of the presence of both *eros* and *agape* in the life of the Christian is a dynamic model of how we may approach the relationship between *eros* and *agape* in the context of Christian anthropology.

It is perhaps unsurprising that Barth's treatment of *eros* and *agape* in the *Dogmatics* is complex and initially problematic, given that he addressed the topic piecemeal over the course of twenty years.⁵¹ The initial difficulties of the definition of *eros*, the relationship between *eros* and *agape*, and the object of *agape*, can, however, largely be resolved by a careful reading of Barth within the context of the *Dogmatics*. Once this work has been accomplished, making Barth a participant in the current debate makes clear the originality, perspicuity, and suggestive character of his depiction of Christian love.

References

- 1 Barth's discussion of *eros* and *agape* does not exhaust his treatment of love in the *Dogmatics*. In a longer project, comparing the ethics of the *Römerbrief* and the *Dogmatics*, I am developing a more extensive account of love in the *Dogmatics*, including his account of God as the One Who loves in freedom (II/1, ch. VI), his discussion of the agential status of human love in relation to divine love, and his extensive discussion of the relationship between the two love commandments.
- 2 Gene Outka observes that Barth means different things by *eros* at different points in the *Dogmatics* (Gene Outka, *Agape: An Ethical Analysis* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1972), pp. 222-4). He identifies three different senses of *eros* in the *Dogmatics*: a glad being with the other found in Greek *eros*, love between man and woman, and the acquisitive love contrasted with *agape* in IV/2.
- 3 Unfortunately, Barth characterizes this activity as more proper to men than women. The 'father of man in the sexual act which man has to thank for his earthly existence' plays the major role in the determination of the person created, just as 'the historical consciousness of all nations, states and civilisations begins with the patriachate' (Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* I/2, ed. G.W. Bromiley and T.F. Torrance, trans. G.T. Thomson and Harold Knight (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1956), p. 193 (Karl Barth, *Kirchliche Dogmatik* I/2 (Zurich: Theologischer Verlag Zürich, 1986), pp. 211-12): page references to the English translation are followed by page references to the German edition in parentheses in all citations that follow). It is therefore particularly significant to Barth that Jesus Christ does not have a male human parent. This is an early anticipation of Earth's more developed theory of gender roles in III/2 and III/4.
- 4 *CD* I/2, p. 192 (210).
- 5 *CD* I/2, p. 193 (211).
- 6 Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* III/1, ed. G.W. Bromiley and T.F. Torrance, trans. J.W. Edwards, O. Bussey, and Harold Knight (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1958), p. 312 (Karl Barth, *Kirchliche Dogmatik* III/I (Zürich: Theologischer Verlag Zürich, 1993), pp. 357-8).
- 7 *CD* III/I, p. 313 (359).
- 8 *CD* III/I, pp. 314-15 (360-1).
- 9 Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* III/2, ed. G.W. Bromiley and T.F. Torrance, trans. Harold Knight *et al.* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1960), p. 279 (Karl Barth, *Kirchliche Dogmatik* III/2 (Zürich: Theologischer Verlag Zürich, 1992), pp. 336-7).
- 10 *CD* III/2, p. 280 (337-8).
- 11 *CD* III/2, p. 282 (340).
- 12 *CD* III/2, p. 283 (341).
- 13 'How can we even dare to say that *eros* in its highest form opens man for the love described in 1 Cor. 13 and thus flings wide the gates of heaven?' Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* III/4, ed. G.W. Bromiley and T.F. Torrance, trans. A.T. Mackay *et al.* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1961), p. 128 (Karl Barth, *Kirchliche Dogmatik* III/4 (Zürich: Theologischer Verlag Zürich, 1993), p. 141).
- 14 *CD* III/4, p. 126 (138).
- 15 *CD* III/4, p. 202 (226).
- 16 *CD* III/4, pp. 219-20. Barth notes earlier in commentary on a work by Bovet that marriage is 'the only perfect form of *eros* and the sexual impulse'. *CD* III/4, p. 137 (151).

- 17 Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics IV/2*, ed. G.W. Bromiley and T.F. Torrance, trans. G.W. Bromiley (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1958), pp. 734-5 (Karl Barth, *Kirchliche Dogmatik IV/2* (Zürich: Theologischer Verlag Zürich, 1993), pp. 832-3).
- 18 *CD IV/2*, p. 735 (833-4).
- 19 *CD IV/2*, p. 737 (836-7).
- 20 §45.2, 'The Basic Form of Humanity', in *III/2* is devoted to this theme; see also *III/4*, pp. 298-9 (337-8).
- 21 Outka, *Agape*, p. 228.
- 22 *CD IV/2*, p. 736 (835).
- 23 *CD IV/2*, p. 572 (646).
- 24 *CD IV/2*, p. 571 (646).
- 25 *CD IV/2*, pp. 573-4 (648-9).
- 26 This structure puts Barth at odds with those who consider self-love to be a part of the Christian's calling. In his discussion of accounts of Christian love that take self-love to be commanded by God, he maintains 'God will not think of blowing on this fire, which is bright enough already' (*CD I/2*, p. 388 (427)). There does not seem to be a place for mutual love, either, but Barth considers mutuality to be an aspect of *agape* (see, for example, *IV/2*, pp. 635-6 (719)).
- 27 *CD IV/2*, p. 803 (910).
- 28 *CD I/2*, p. 418 (461).
- 29 Luke 10.29-37.
- 30 *CD I/2*, p. 416 (459).
- 31 *CD I/2*, p. 421 (464).
- 32 *CD I/2*, p. 420 (463).
- 33 *CD I/2*, p. 422 (465-6).
- 34 *CD I/2*, p. 423 (466).
- 35 *CD IV/1*, p. 105 (114). I have revised the translation here: the use of 'men' is especially unfortunate when the solidarity of all humanity is being emphasized. The repeated use of 'brother' in the passage which follows is also distracting, but is less easy to avoid.
- 36 *CD IV/1*, p. 106 (115).
- 37 *CD IV/2*, p. 802 (910), translation revised. It is clear that Barth means to identify the neighbour here from the beginning of the excursus that follows this passage: 'What we have been attempting is a general and formal description of the important biblical concept of the "neighbour"' (p. 809 (911)).
- 38 *CD IV/2*, pp. 806-7 (914-15).
- 39 *CD IV/2*, pp. 807-8 (915-17).
- 40 *CD IV/2*, p. 806 (914).
- 41 Outka identifies a different ambiguity regarding Barth's treatment of *agape* in *IV/2*, and suggests that the most probable reading is that Barth has attached two meanings to the same word: a love for the neighbour independent of his attractiveness, and a particular mutuality within the Christian community (Outka, *Agape*, pp. 213-14). My reading of Barth in this section is that even the neighbour love independent of attractiveness is only to be directed towards those with whom we find ourselves in salvation history, and that among this community, such love should be mutual and reciprocal. Barth intends Christian love to incorporate both aspects.
- 42 *CD III/4*, pp. 285ff. (320ff.).
- 43 *CD IV/2*, p. 809 (917).
- 44 Stephen J. Pope characterizes the problem in terms of Good Samaritan and

Last Supper in "'Equal Regard" versus "Special Relations"? Reaffirming the Inclusiveness of Agape', *Journal of Religion* 77 (1997), pp. 353-79. His earlier review article 'Love in Contemporary Christian Ethics', *Journal of Religious Ethics* 23 (1995), pp. 167-97, is a useful survey of the issues between Outka and Vacek, though Pope admits his sympathy for the latter approach. See also Outka's comment on Pope's articles and Pope's reply to the comment (*Journal of Religious Ethics* 26 (1998), pp. 435-44).

- 45 Outka first gave an account of *agape* in *Agape* and has developed his position in the more recent article 'Universal Love and Impartiality', in Edmund N. Santurri and William Werpehowski, eds., *The Love Commandments: Essays in Christian Ethics and Moral Philosophy* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 1992).
- 46 Edward Collins Vacek, S. J., *Love, Human and Divine: The Heart of Christian Ethics* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 1994).
- 47 *CD IV/2*, p. 807 (915).
- 48 *CD IV/2*, pp. 812ff. (920ff.).
- 49 Barth's surprising statement in his treatment of war in III/4 that he believes Switzerland has a divine mandate to defend its borders and that he would defend it if its neutrality was threatened is another indication that he believes in the legitimacy of the special relationship of loyalty to nation (see *CD III/4*, p. 462 (528-9)).
- 50 *CD IV/2*, p. 803 (910).
- 51 Volume I/2 of the *Kirchliche Dogmatik* was originally published in 1938, volume IV/2 in 1955.