

BOERSMA, THE ATONEMENT, AND THE HOSPITABLE GOD

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This article is published posthumously in honour of the late author, a gifted student at Houghton College, New York, who died prematurely in February 2013. It considers attempts to develop a doctrine of the atonement that avoid the misconception of God as an arbitrary, wrathful monarch. Drawing upon the work of Hans Boersma it moves toward an affirmation of God as a hospitable God, and argues that the absence of pneumatology in Boersma's work calls for a more thoroughly Trinitarian model. Despite the violence of the world, the hospitable God draws near to sinners and receives them as prodigal children.

Introduction

The theologian is burdened with proclaiming the perennial truths of God to the contemporary situation.¹ This demands a relentless self-criticism that discerns the spirits of theological discourse, inquiring whether theologians are speaking life into our world of death and decay or merely recycling platitudes. At times Christian motifs fail to convey anything significant; now more than ever, the symbol of the cross is appalling, confusing, and almost certainly not one of hope.² This has led some to retreat from the historic Church confessions, either to reframe the content for modern moral sensibilities or to discard the need for the symbolic crucifix entirely. While this exemplifies a necessary willingness to eradicate tertiary matters of tradition if they threaten to corrupt the eternal message of Christianity, we must ask whether it is premature. With this caveat, I proceed.

¹ 'A theological system is supposed to satisfy two basic needs: the statement of the truth of the Christian message and the interpretation of this truth for every new generation.' Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1967), 1: 3.

² Hans Boersma, 'Eschatological Justice and the Cross: Violence and Penal Substitution,' *Theology Today* 60 (2003): 199.

I. The Problem of the Atonement

The problem of the atonement is a loaded and complex one, one which has puzzled Christian thinkers for centuries. It seems unnecessary at best and grotesque at worst. While its most appalling elements certainly deserve treatment, its necessity provides a good starting ground for conversation. Why do we need atonement?

Within this question is a more fundamental one - what does atonement indicate and involve? Atonement, literally 'at-one-ment,' means reconciliation between two parties. In this sense, its legal connotations become apparent. A punitive measure is overridden or resolved by the offending party's amendment of its wrongdoing. The debt, having been paid, no longer hangs over the head of the debtor.

In Christianity, however, we are debtors who lack the means to pay our debts.³ We owe God, the creator of life, recompense for squandering the life he created us to live. This debt is both abstract and concrete, and nevertheless remains insurmountable. Abstractly, sin separates us from God, causing unbearable alienation. Negatively, it is the despair that robs life of its ultimacy; positively, it is a torturous execution that paradoxically forces life to continue whilst securing its termination.

According to Christian doctrine, this is the root of our problems, and what must be atoned for. Lamentably, zealots today describe sin as a particular action that transgresses a moral code. Interestingly enough, this code usually resembles the legal infrastructure of a given religious community. In seeking the eternality of the Christian promise, they lose it in the flux of becoming, elevating their form of life to the realm of divine ordination. The often belligerently exclusive community this attitude fosters can lead to animosity and pride, even resulting in violence.

This strays tragically, however, from the Christian understanding of sin. Sin is not just an immoral action, but a failure to be like God with our very being.⁴ We are born uncertain of our origin and apprehensive of our destination. 'Existence,' Nietzsche states in an early essay, 'basically is – a never to be completed imperfect tense.'⁵ Two parts constitute an imperfect tense, a gerund and a past

³ Eberhard Jungel, *Theological Essays II* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 2000), 176.

⁴ 'Sin is not acts of negation against God, but a position before Him.' Cf. Soren Kierkegaard, 'The Sickness unto Death,' Religion Online, <http://www.religion-online.org/showchapter.asp?title=2067&C=1866> (accessed April 28, 2012).

⁵ Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Advantage and Disadvantage of History for Life* (Indianapolis: Hackett Pub Co, 1980), 9.

participle, which combine to make an action preserved in the past ongoing. So life continues, seemingly without end, yet it has no evident meaning or overarching purpose.

Faced with this, we want to find meaning, but are many times unsuccessful. This creates a deep-seated rage, one that has historically found catharsis through violent acts of military aggression, interpersonal abuse, and self-deprecation. Fundamentally, this rage is a rebellion against God. Psalm 139:7 describes God as inescapable: the Psalmist despairs, 'Where can I go from your spirit? Or where can I flee from your presence?'⁶ This is essentially the human predicament, that we cannot, even in the crux of total abandonment, release ourselves from the impending condemnation of the eternal judge. Unsure of where we came from, we are furious that all attempts to locate meaning surrender to the ebb and flow of life. God, the creator of our lives, then becomes the object of our rage.

Modern atheism offers no substantial contention here. Whether or not God is materially absent is the domain of philosophic speculation; that God is hermeneutically lost in subjectivity looms over all attempts to live meaningfully. The primordial rage of our own lives makes futile our attempts to create a meaningful world picture, such as the Christian God once provided. Atheism thus opposes Christianity with a privative challenge rather than a nugatory one. As Eberhard Jüngel declares, 'Faith cannot speak of God's presence, without conceiving at the same time God's absence, just as it has never been certain of God's presence without experiencing his hiddenness.'⁷ The mere existence of a being, particularly if God's being remained unaffected by God's death, offers no illumination to the shadows of life.⁸ Here theology lives on the blood of interdisciplinary dialogue.

II. Sacrifice and Atonement

Understanding the human dimension of sin with apophatic methodology requires a thorough consideration of the anthropological human. Mark Heim, delineating the Girardian

⁶ Psalm 139: 7, New Revised Standard Version.

⁷ Eberhard Jüngel, *God as Mystery of the World* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1983), 55.

⁸ Hegel termed this 'speculative Good Friday,' describing the death of God as an intellectual event rather than an event in God's very being. Cf. Jüngel, 64-102.

school of thought, says that ‘reconciliation in the blood of the innocent’ is the foundation of both religion and culture.⁹ The rage we cannot escape needs a target, and is tragically dissatisfied with all but innocence. This action numbs the inner chaos, distracting the murderers momentarily. After the brief euphoria, the cycle continues, and vengeance must be exacted on a victim. It seems that this is irreducibly human.¹⁰

This essay will not undertake an exposition of Girard’s theory of atonement considering the copious literature available that offers more insight than this author can. Gleaning from such literature has brought me to the conclusion that, though compelling, this theory fails to get at the heart of the matter. ‘Girard’s solution,’ as William Placher criticizes, ‘lies mostly in a realization.’¹¹ Realizing the grip of sin, though an indispensable step toward reconciliation, is not definitive in itself. If sin is, as we established, a failure to be like God with our very being, something much more decisive must occur. One need not be a moral teacher to expose the problem of a divided will or disruptive desires.

The apostle Paul describes this conundrum with memorable depth: ‘I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate...Now if I do what I do not want, it is no longer I that do it, but sin that dwells within me.’¹² People, Christian and non-Christian, alike can relate to this division. We possess a dividedness of our very person, unable to will what we truly will. Recognizing this requires a moment of sober clarity; changing it requires something capable of affective transfiguration.

The only one capable of changing this state, according to Christian doctrine, is God, and this was accomplished when Jesus Christ died on the cross. He did die as a sacrifice, but not one locked in the mechanisms of primitive sacrificial ritual. For Girardian thought, Christ is a type of sacrifice which acts as the inevitable role of victim in the theatre of human sin. Death here allows the murderers a chance to escape their cycle of blame and exposes it for what it is. It functions as an object of collective sacrifice.

⁹ Mark Heim, ‘Christ’s Death to End Sacrifice: Visible Victim,’ *Christian Century* (March 2001): 20.

¹⁰ René Girard, *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning* (Leominster, Herefordshire: Orbis Books, 2001), 87.

¹¹ William Placher, ‘How Does Jesus Save?’ *Christian Century* 126: 11 (June 2009): 25.

¹² Romans 7: 15, 20, NRSV.

This type of sacrifice, however, remains just that, an object; detached from the actual guilt and sin of its murderers, it accomplishes an esoteric morality, but with universal claim. Though in this view the life of Christ is a morally superior one, even one that bears divine endorsement and conquers the threshold of sin, it remains only the life of Christ. This emphasizes the key tension between this understanding of Christ's sacrifice and traditional theories.

For the sacrifice of Christ to be meaningful, it must not only *expose* the power of sin, but *substitute* for its deathly grip. It is not what he requires us to do, but 'what he *has done for us* in our place.'¹³ This differs from a mythological fabrication of the human plight, such as the one implicitly formulated in Girard, because it declares that God became human and took our place. It declares that we must not only see the one who bears our death, but confess that our sin leads us to that death. Only in this can we be freed from it, when God dies the death we cannot. Because we were never whole, we could never die a death capable of making salvation possible.¹⁴

It should come as no surprise that such a conception of sacrifice falls hard on modern ears. Unlike the archaic understanding of sacrifice which Girard thoughtfully describes, now sacrifices are a sort of begrudging gift. Platitudes of this sort abound; marriages require 'sacrifice,' just as all ethical imperatives. Sacrifice no longer identifies with its victim, now that humanity just offers intangible sacrifices to itself.¹⁵ A sacrifice of this type, even from God, would only liberate the moral dimension of creaturely life from evil propensities. It would yield no salvation or eternal reconciliation.

For Christ's death to truly defeat sin, as the earliest model of atonement maintained, sacrifice must have a deeper relation with those it involves. It must not just be the life and death of one man, even the God-man, if this life is to be isolated from those who bring it to its end. Thankfully, the Christian faith declares that the 'life of Christ shares itself in a singularly unique way with the rest of humanity.'¹⁶ It shares with our inability to be like God, or to live the life God has called us to live. Because God is whole, in our inability to be like God we are divided and broken, just as the earlier analysis of human will demonstrated. This is why, simply put, 'to sacrifice is

¹³ Eberhard Jüngel, *Theological Essays II* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark Publishers, 2000), 149.

¹⁴ Jüngel, *Theological Essays II*, 157, 181.

¹⁵ Jüngel, *Theological Essays II*, 165.

¹⁶ Jüngel, *Theological Essays II*, 171.

to make a confession. To sacrifice is to admit to a conflict within one's own being.¹⁷

Again, just admitting this conflict would not accomplish anything. This is why the death of Christ is more than just an example or model; it is a sacrament in which the believer participates, yielding a tangible effect.¹⁸ In beholding Christ, we see not just the victim of an overflow of competitive tensions, but the bearer of sin. As noted earlier, we are debtors that lack the means to pay our debts. In seeing the death of Christ, we see that the weight of our sin ends, and must end, in death. This is why the sacrificial victim cannot be a detached object. Those making the sacrifice see themselves in the victim's fate.¹⁹

The biblical story makes this a painful reality. Many times the Church talks about Christ's death as if it were some abstract reality, locked in a scandalous murder of a primitive society over two millennia ago. Certainly, the historical facticity of Christ's death remains an important part of academic discourse, though much of this has become a rhetorical jousting match between the inheritors of the quest for the historical Jesus, such as Brad Ehrman and the Jesus Seminar, and literalist readings of Scripture. This talk quickly becomes a subterfuge, an abstraction eschewing that Christ died for us. He died for us because it was our sin that killed him. The sacrifice was not some sort of altruistic gift in a divine love story; he bore the sin of the world because we transferred it onto him in murdering the Son of God.²⁰ In other words, Christ's death for us bears ontological significance before it discloses itself to historical scrutiny.

In Christ's death, God damns God's own Son. This shows not a distorted relationship in God's being, but quite the opposite. God, in perfect love, sent the Son to bear our sins so that we could have freedom from their dominion over our lives. It is not Christ in his fullness that God rejects, but Christ in his lowliness bearing the sins of the world. God rejects him because he is too holy to tolerate sin, to holy to tolerate the corruption of his perfection. Unholy as sin renders us, we are unable to bridge this gap.²¹

In the sacrament of sacrifice, we admit that we cannot be like God. We see our failure to be holy, our failure to escape the grip of

¹⁷ Jüngel, *Theological Essays II*, 172.

¹⁸ Jüngel, *Theological Essays II*, 168.

¹⁹ Jüngel, *Theological Essays II*, 176-177.

²⁰ Gerhard Forde, *Christian Dogmatics, Volume 2*, 89.

²¹ Forde, 91.

sin, and turn to Christ. If we accept the gift of the atoning death he experienced in our place, he then reconciles us with God. Contrary to popular opinion, it is not God who needs reconciliation, but us. We lost the sinless life that makes everything whole. By restoring this, Christ allows us to be saved. Just as he was resurrected from the dead, so we can be resurrected from the deathly grip of sin. And this is cause for celebration.²²

Many attitudes toward this divine substitution are not so celebratory, however. The idea of God sending his Son to bear the sins of the world creates a very violent image, one unbecoming to many moral sensibilities. It strikes hearers as offensive or morally debased, not something that should still support a central doctrine of a thriving religion.²³ It seems to encourage child abuse, giving absolute reign to the father of a household. This is a very serious claim, and deserves equally serious consideration.

Many theological traditions have shied away from the violent implications of their claims. Though only radical sects would explicitly condone the use of violence to support their theory, we see historically how the Church has mobilized itself in heartless military ventures. Obviously, the Inquisitions come immediately to mind. The Calvinist tradition also has blood on its hands, with both the political endeavors of Jean Calvin and the religious wars involved with the Reformation.²⁴

However, this is quite a simplistic dismissal of Christianity. Many are quick to condemn religion because of its historically insistent provocation of violence, but this is really an unfair treatment. Religion answers a very particular passion of the human condition, one that seeks to find ultimate meaning and tangible answers to the big questions. Irreligious, atheistic States have provoked an equally horrific amount of violence, as one can see in a survey of the last century's history.

While these accusations are certainly warranted, Christians have a defense to offer. The Calvinist tradition, from which I have drawn significantly in explaining this defense of the atonement, is very clear on the matter of violence. While its adherents may have failed to heed its direction, it only allows violence within very particular moral boundaries. In punishing the Son, God is not falling sway to

²² Jüngel, *Theological Essays II*, 181-183.

²³ Mark Heim, 'Why Does Jesus' Death Matter?: Christ Crucified,' *Christian Century* (March 2001): 13.

²⁴ Richard Mauw, 'Violence, Abuse, and the Reformed Understanding of the Atonement,' *Theology Matters* (Summer 1997): 7.

frivolous passions, but is sacrificing himself in the only way that can save the sins of humanity. In partaking of the sacramental nature of this, believers participate in this event as it happened eternally. This is distinct from imitating its potentially violent themes outside or inside of the church walls.²⁵

Indeed, there is a tension between the apparent violence of traditional theories and the inclusivity of Christ's death. If violence always marginalizes its victims, how can we claim that the atonement of Christ is a truly universal action?²⁶ Because when Christ died, so did the sin of all sinners. In this, the violence that God took upon himself opened up the possibility of freedom to all who believe.²⁷ The boundaries imposed by divine wisdom, the threat of sin, and love of Christ play a role which requires a sort of violence to accomplish its task.

Perhaps this is not a bad thing. Though every act of coercion is an act of violence, not every act of violence is morally reprehensible.²⁸ Violence will persist. It is the nature of our world and human society. Until the testimony of history unanimously suggests otherwise, there is no reason to doubt this. Within the confines of moral boundaries, violence serves to prevent extraneous acts of violence. Its definitive nature can also be seen in our discussion of the atonement.

While at first the idea of Christ acting as a substitute for our sins seems unnecessary, this must be addressed carefully. Certainly, some traditional ways of understanding it were even more violent in their treatment of the text than the skewed story they retold. However, making sense of this theory does not mean discarding it entirely, suggesting that Christ is an example or a way to recognise the origins of human society. Though not the first theory of atonement, it has for whatever reason withstood the test of time, and there is good reason to believe it will continue to do so.

III. Hospitality and the Atonement

The legal element of substitutionary atonement, though fundamental, is not the only facet of the relationship between God

²⁵ Mauw, 7.

²⁶ Hans Boersma, 'Penal Substitution and the Possibility of Unconditional Hospitality,' *Scottish Journal of Theology* 57.1 (2004): 81.

²⁷ Eberhard Jüngel, 'On the Doctrine of Justification,' *International Journal of Systematic Theology* (March 1999): 40.

²⁸ Boersma, 'Penal Substitution', 85.

and humanity. The total openness we spoke of earlier needs to be balanced by the reality of boundaries in which we act violently or show hospitality. Hospitality in this sense is openness on our part, an openness to a future of living in the forgiveness made possible by the atonement. Though Christ was resurrected and opens up to us the possibility of lives that are free from the power of death, our life still exists within a horizon. The paradoxical role of a horizon, which both grounds and limits existence, allows us to thrive in the lives we have been given, conditions and all.²⁹

The horizontal expanse of hospitality does not preclude its eternal height, but is inextricable with it, argues Hans Boersma.³⁰ We can receive and embody hospitality only after it has been extended to us by God in acts of divine hospitality. The act from which Boersma takes his theological impetus is Christ's atoning act on the cross. It is where the divine and human horizons meet, a symbol etymologically faithful to its derivative 'crux.' His integrative, thoughtful account deserves consideration.

As Boersma clearly notes, most attempts to describe divine hospitality can pose insurmountable discrepancies between the love of the God who welcomes home the prodigal son and the violent ways this unfolds in history. The very notion of hospitality suffers serious incredulity by the modern mind. While the West could once affirm, 'the tie between the host and stranger, what is kinder?'³¹ it now accuses its own socio-political structures as irreducibly inhospitable. To demonstrate this skepticism, he draws on the compelling philosophies of Jacques Derrida and Emmanuel Levinas.³²

His account is internally consistent, and it would trespass beyond the scope of this article to trace it in extensive detail. One insight from each thinker is beneficial, however, to frame the rest of the discussion. From Derrida, we can consider the challenge that all of our hospitality suffers from incurable 'hospitable narcissism.' My guest is always welcome to enjoy *my* home, partake of *my* luxuries, and owe *me* gratitude. Even if unintentionally, this locks the recipient into a gift exchange where she cannot truly accept the gift

²⁹ Boersma, 'Penal Substitution', 94.

³⁰ Hans Boersma, 'Theology as Queen of Hospitality,' *Evangelical Quarterly* 79, no. 4 (2007): 291-310.

³¹ Aeschylus, *The Oresteia* (New York, N.Y.: Penguin Classics, 1984), 208.

³² Hans Boersma, *Violence, Hospitality, and the Cross: Reappropriating the Atonement Tradition*, annotated edition ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006), 25-38.

unless she returns the favor. Derrida's solution is to make hospitality so indeterminate and render the self so porous that one should welcome even the devil into the home.³³

Perhaps this is excessively destructive; abolition is not the only response to predisposed evils. If 'politics, understood as the epitome of what people do with and make out of the world, becomes fate,'³⁴ then it seems the Western appraisal of the autonomous self is preclusive of any truly selfless reception of the other. In despair, Derrida essentially suggests that we destroy ('deconstruct') the conception of self. What if, rather, we accept fate's gift and allow the potentially narcissistic self-love to pour over into love of the other, allowing humanity's relational character to be fulfilled?

Levinas also despairs over the boundaries that prevent a true breaking through from one to another. Because the metaphysical tradition made becoming subservient to being, and infinity a mere piece of totality, selfhood is static and unchangeable, indifferent to the particularity of the other. The being of knowledge then becomes a self-destructive concept: 'The concept [of knowledge] has nothing static about it; it aspires to riches beyond the frontiers...[T]he problem of the being of the infinite depends upon the reconciliation...between the dynamism of the infinite and the fullness of actuality.'³⁵ Knowledge, then, for both Levinas and Jüngel, is an 'interruption' of our being.³⁶ In a theological essay, Jüngel annexes this claim into Christological territory, declaring that the death of Christ '*interrupts* the unholy person's sickness unto death.'³⁷ It is clear that the laments of Levinas and Derrida both shape and anticipate the possibility of hospitality, whether divine or public.

With these pertinent caveats, Boersma then continues to explain the divine face of hospitality. As a Reformed theologian, the problem of 'limited hospitality' or 'limited atonement' in the thought of John Calvin demands his immediate attention. The Reformed tradition has undergone unrelenting criticism for obscuring the divine love of

³³ Boersma, *Violence, Hospitality, and the Cross*, 34.

³⁴ Eberhard Jüngel, *God as Mystery of the World* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1983), 52.

³⁵ Emmanuel Levinas, *Alterity and Transcendence* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000), 58.

³⁶ Jonathan Case, 'The Death of Jesus and the Truth of the Triune God in Wolfhart Pannenberg and Eberhard Jüngel,' *Journal for Christian Theological Research* 9 (2004): 7, <http://www2.luthersem.edu/ctrf/JCTR/#Volume%209>.

³⁷ Jüngel, *Theological Essays II*, 172.

God to affirm the violent expressions of God's sovereignty. Boersma forges a balanced path forward, standing in contention with the violence of uncritical Calvinism whilst proposing the necessity for limited hospitality in a finite world.

Boersma proceeds with serious sensitivity toward this tension. He admits, 'it would be difficult to worship a God who would engage in violence at whim.'³⁸ What he goes on to criticize is not the violence of God's hospitality, but the misconceived whimsicality of it. In Christ, God confronts sin scandalously to our particular historicity. 'To expect that in such historical circumstances God could correct evil in consistently nonviolent ways is to underestimate the persistence and power of evil.'³⁹ This leads to Calvin's connecting his understanding of election with the atoning salvation of Christ. God elects from eternity, regardless of human merit. Discursive clarity of this notion is sparse; this does not just mean that God elected people *before* they were born, for that is still describing eternity in temporal categories. The very being of the elect has always been known by God, with their temporal genesis notwithstanding.

According to Boersma, Calvin maintains this 'precisely because of his desire to uphold God's hospitality.'⁴⁰ His success in this regard remains a matter of inquiry. Instead of treating violence constructively, he ascribes it to mystery, at once the truest point of departure and the greatest subterfuge for all theologians. This 'hidden will' throws into opacity the love of God, with sovereignty remaining the only justification. Boersma concludes, 'Calvin obscures the hospitality of God in Christ. The hidden will takes precedence over the revealed will. Violence trumps hospitality.'⁴¹ The violence that prevails here is not the necessary violence of our spatio-temporal existence, but an arbitrary violence that dilutes the purity of divine hospitality.⁴²

So, Boersma provides cause for this 'necessary' violence. He explains, 'giving universal, unconditional affirmation would mean that God would let human violence run amok.'⁴³ The necessity of election is prefigured, he contends, in the covenantal history between YHWH and the Israelites. The election is hospitable; it does

³⁸ Boersma, *Violence, Hospitality, and the Cross*, 54.

³⁹ Boersma, *Violence, Hospitality, and the Cross*, 53.

⁴⁰ Boersma, *Violence, Hospitality, and the Cross*, 55.

⁴¹ Boersma, *Violence, Hospitality, and the Cross*, 61.

⁴² Boersma, *Violence, Hospitality, and the Cross*, 72.

⁴³ Boersma, *Violence, Hospitality, and the Cross*, 84.

not demand the submission of the Israelites, but rather thrives on mutual love and hospitality. This remains a position of election because of hospitality's peculiar place in the continuum of violence and acceptance. While unnecessary violence undermines hospitality, so does the refusal to ever be hospitable. As Boersma declares, 'For hospitality to flourish, the host somehow needs to embody the desire for fellowship. When election is made dependent on human merit, the divine quest for fellowship loses its hospitable character.'⁴⁴ Thus, the covenantal election of the Israelites serves as both a temporal prefiguring for the cruciform embodiment of hospitality and a reminder that divine hospitality initiates human response.

The former concerns the next section of Boersma's treatment. On the cross, Christ bears the tension of divine hospitality and human finitude. One dimension of this finitude is that of language. As many disciplines including theology, phenomenology, and hermeneutics have recently made an axiom, language itself is metaphorical. Our signifiers always already carry their being in a matrix of referential associations, consigning them all to indirect communication. Boersma mentions this mainly to note that while atonement discourse is inevitably metaphorical, that does not make the language a relegation to vague symbols. He contends that emptying these symbols of content is just as much a violation of their depth as reductionistic generalizations.⁴⁵

This allows him to begin an exposition of the three traditional atonement theories from which he hopes to glean the truth and sift the evil in a synthetic reappropriation. First, he examines the moral exemplar theory, began by Peter Abelard and recently reified in the work of René Girard. Again, the scope of this essay does not allow for a substantive exposition of Girard. Boersma does make one criticism to which I hope to return, however. He implores Girard to devote 'more emphatic and consistent attention to the role of the Spirit.'⁴⁶ I am not convinced he follows his own advice.

He then proceeds to the substitutionary theory of atonement. Navigating through the murky streams of violence and wrath conjured by this theory, he hopes to honor 'the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ as the climax of divine hospitality.'⁴⁷ To escape the excessively violent overtones of both the Anselmian and

⁴⁴ Boersma, *Violence, Hospitality, and the Cross*, 83.

⁴⁵ Boersma, *Violence, Hospitality, and the Cross*, 108.

⁴⁶ Boersma, *Violence, Hospitality, and the Cross*, 150.

⁴⁷ Boersma, *Violence, Hospitality, and the Cross*, 154.

Calvinist articulations of this theory, he turns to its historical expressions with a critical lens. His indictment is threefold: the Western treatments of this doctrine have been 'juridicizing, individualizing, and de-historicizing.'⁴⁸ The Church has juridicized the symbol by proclaiming it to be primarily a legal transaction; Christ broke the curse of the Law because humanity could not bear its curse. This has been done in strictly individualist language; it is not the nation of Israel that failed, but each individual person. In making that claim, the atonement is de-historicized; the Law is a sort of a-temporal, or perhaps pan-temporal entity that alienates individuals before, during, and after Christ from salvation.⁴⁹

Though flawed, this is not irredeemable in Boersma's eyes. He draws on the Pauline passage in Galatians 3:6-14 to find a hermeneutical key for undoing these assumptions rather than perpetuating them. In Christ, God breaks the economy of exchange with unadulterated hospitality. The representative nature of Christ is not so much that he died instead of us, but that the collective humanity was represented in his death. This 'representation' is not via example as for Abelard, but a re-presencing which makes all present in the death. Because this meets us in our human condition, it calls not for absolute hospitality on our part, but a conditional hospitality which proceeds from the divine theatre. As Boersma states, 'the resurrection mandate of pure hospitality needs to be tempered, therefore, by the wisdom of conditional hospitality.'⁵⁰

Lastly, he turns to the *Christus Victor* theme, mainly as rearticulated by Gustaf Aulén. With nuance, he suggests that this theory explains not the mechanism for the atonement, but the climactic achievement of the cross. The cross, contrary to much conceptualization, stands not as an event removed from the life of Christ, but is rather the fulfillment of his moral, spiritual, and physical overcoming of evil throughout the entirety of the incarnation. The Word made flesh speaks life over death with triumphant finality, relinquishing the deceptive grip of the evil one.

This thematically concludes Boersma's understanding of the 'cruciform face of hospitality.' Deriving as an impetus both the Irenaean notion of 'recapitulation' and N.T. Wright's idea of 'reconstitution,' he sees the three predominant theories as complementary in proclaiming the threefold office of Christ. The

⁴⁸ Boersma, *Violence, Hospitality, and the Cross*, 169.

⁴⁹ Boersma, *Violence, Hospitality, and the Cross*, 173.

⁵⁰ Boersma, *Violence, Hospitality, and the Cross*, 178.

moral exemplar theory depicts Christ as prophet, reinforcing the covenantal demands of love, justice, and peace. The substitutionary model affirms Christ as priest, entering the holy of holies as representative of all sinners. Finally, the *Christus victor* understanding proclaims Christ as King, conquering death and ruling over all creation.⁵¹

To remain consistent with his theory, Boersma understands that this glorious image is insufficient; to leave Christ hanging on the cross would be to de-historicize the event. So, he proceeds to the continual, relational domain of hospitality. He begins with a memorable claim for both ecclesiology and Christology, 'the Church, in a real sense, is the presence of Christ in the world.'⁵² In other words, it is the milieu of divine hospitality on earth. To say it is the embodiment 'on earth,' is not a spatial localization as much as a qualification. The Church cannot escape the limitations of expressing divine hospitality to a world of brokenness and finitude. It 'cannot escape the tension between hospitality and the violence that exists in all of human life.'⁵³ What it *can* do, however, is to invoke the resurrection life as a center of forgiveness and reconciliation.

This includes ministry to people both inside the church walls, such as in liturgical confessions, baptismal invitation, and Eucharistic participation, and outside the church walls as agents of reconciliation. In this, divine hospitality is embodied. While the Church cannot transcend its own limitations, true 'hospitality reaches outside the boundaries of the community.'⁵⁴ This is our glorious hope, that hospitality is possible not because we can flee from violence, but because God, the truly undeconstructable, escapes the power differentials of a violent world, reconciling it to Godself. As a body of believers, we can participate in this divine activity in the way of furthering this reconciliation as well as joining Christ in his sufferings, as Paul suggests.

The political dimension of social life is also included in this process. Turning to the political sphere, Boersma hopes to dismantle the church and state binary. Hospitality is not embodied privately in the endeavors of the Church and publicly in attempts to establish justice; rather, the Church, 'with its public proclamation of the

⁵¹ Boersma, *Violence, Hospitality, and the Cross*, 181-201.

⁵² Boersma, *Violence, Hospitality, and the Cross*, 206.

⁵³ Boersma, *Violence, Hospitality, and the Cross*, 208.

⁵⁴ Boersma, *Violence, Hospitality, and the Cross*, 210.

gospel, is the primary space where we witness the *public* face of hospitality.⁵⁵ The Church must reach outside its own boundaries in pursuing justice as a common aim. These words should arouse suspicion in the critical reader, due to the ghastly history of Calvin's theocratic naivety. To this, Boersma again extends his own insight; in parochial focus on the legal element of justice, we saw in Calvin the dangerous propensity to 'juridicize, individualize, and de-historicize' the needs of a given geo-political situation.⁵⁶

This is also a continuum. The danger of monopolising the Church's reign is countered by the equally demonic tendency to oppose injustice with violence. This latter vision can be seen in liberation theologies. Boersma accuses both of ignoring that 'secular' government can be a positive counteraction to violence and injustice. While punishment can be abusive, and this certainly should not be omitted, it can also be restorative. The way to maintain this tension is seen as Christ bearing the crux of evil itself, conceptualized in the aforementioned atonement models and embodied in the life of the Church.⁵⁷

Boersma's work is innovative, careful, and deserves an ongoing place in the continual conversation. My own reading of him has shaped greatly my reflection on the matter, and to him I am greatly indebted. That notwithstanding, part of reading seriously is reading critically. My 'hermeneutic of suspicion' remains unsatisfied on two main points of contention. Firstly, as a Reformed thinker, I am self-consciously attuned to the megalomaniacal history and tendencies of Reformed theology. There is reason to suspect that despite Boersma's consistent transference of absolute power unto God, he is still conducting an epistemic power-play. Secondly, I recall to the reader Boersma's desire that Girard dedicate more space to the role of the Holy Spirit. I turn that same criticism onto Boersma's work, finding it pneumatologically destitute.

Boersma meritoriously declines the self-deprecating implications of Derridean hospitality. To remove all boundaries and rely on a truly indeterminate hospitality deadens its mutual character. In fear of marginalizing the recipient, the host spends all of herself, leaving nothing left to give. Though sympathetic, this eschews real hospitality. In giving, there is the humble hope of reception, and in receiving, there is the mutual joy of transformation. Certainly, an

⁵⁵ Boersma, *Violence, Hospitality, and the Cross*, 238, italics added for emphasis.

⁵⁶ Boersma, *Violence, Hospitality, and the Cross*, 239.

⁵⁷ Boersma, *Violence, Hospitality, and the Cross*, 254-255.

indispensable tenet of the Christian faith is the courage to 'lose one's life in order to find it,' but even this has its place. To embrace a Derridean faith would be to bleed out while ascending Golgotha, before the cross is even put into place.

Observations of a similar tone require Boersma to place the power somewhere. He locates unconditional love and absolute power in the Godhead, with the humble hope that the Church will embody it despite finite means and evils. However, one article reveals startling notions as to his conception of theological hospitality. This piece, entitled 'Theology as Queen of Hospitality,' sustains an allusion comparing the discipline of theology to the tattered protagonist of *Babette's Feast*. In this film, Babette is forced out of a life of prestige as a renowned chef and into refuge in an austere Danish community. When she wins a lucrative prize in the lottery, she spends every last cent repaying her guests with a lavish feast.

Boersma compares this to the deposition of theology since Galileo's famous remark, to which the title of the article alludes.⁵⁸ He declares, 'the last thing theology should do is acquiesce in her dethronement as queen...[T]here seems to me no greater role, therefore, than that of a discipline that draws people into the truth, the goodness, and the beauty of divine Love.'⁵⁹ But how can it reclaim its throne without violent means? Boersma vaguely explains that this reclamation of power is extrinsic to the natural order, done from a place of humility that ushers its guests to truth without viewing them as inferior.⁶⁰

However, I fear Boersma forgets his own repeated advice. To suggest that theology should reassume the place of epistemic power is to de-historicize our situation. As my professor once boldly suggested, 'to be a theologian after the holocaust is to be one who *dares* to speak of God.'⁶¹ Theology is not only interdisciplinary; it sits at the mercy of other disciplines. In less melodramatic tones, it takes its impetus from the advancements and structures of philosophy, linguistics, anthropology, the natural sciences, and the

⁵⁸ In a letter, Galileo calls theology 'the queen of all the sciences.' Cf. Galileo Galilei, 'Modern History Sourcebook,' Fordham University, <http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/mod/galileo-tuscany.asp> (accessed August 10, 2012).

⁵⁹ Hans Boersma, 'Theology as Queen of Hospitality,' *Evangelical Quarterly* 79, no. 4 (2007): 305.

⁶⁰ Boersma, 'Theology as Queen of Hospitality': 305.

⁶¹ Jonathan Case, Lecture, Houghton College, 1 April, 2011.

like. It cannot lead people to the truth without proclaiming the 'Word in the words' of our own discursive realities.

Perhaps Boersma would disagree with nothing I have asserted. The treatment, however, is so vague that the reader is left with no methodological locus on how to locate divine truth without unnecessary tension or authoritarianism. Also, the notion of reclaiming power denies culpability. While some critics generalize the crimes of theology into untrue extrapolations, it remains true nevertheless that the theology of Galileo's time implanted the seeds of colonialism, imperialism, and other violations of hospitality. Instead of reclaiming power, what if our power as theologian is precisely in powerlessness? Truly, 'God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength.'⁶² This does not forego the need for critical, relentless thinking; rather it mandates it! In 'proclaiming the Crucified One,' we join in his powerlessness, embodying the hospitality that paradoxically surrenders itself to the violence of the world whilst overcoming by its genesis with divine hospitality. Theology would be prideful to reassert its authority in a post-modern world; I therefore reiterate my first statement that theology must reside in the unbearable tension of seeking eternal truths and resurrecting their meaning to the contemporary situation.

The way of doing so hopefully is the same path out of further obscurity in Boersma's thought. His opus is startlingly binitarian. Not only does this betray the Trinitarian relationality of God in the history of Christian thought, it particularly transgresses the modern situation, where Christian discourse discloses itself in an increasingly Trinitarian fashion. His text begs the question, 'what is the pneumatological dimension of the atonement?' Indeed, it is implicit in his ecclesiological configuration, but it remains almost strictly Christological.

If the Spirit only occupies a numinous, mediating role in the life of the Church, Boersma has once again relegated the Spirit to a subordinationist ontological position. This heresy has enjoyed distinct ancient and modern articulations. For our age, post-Hegelian theology has made the Spirit hardly more than a Kantian necessary concept in consummating the divine self-disclosure. This makes the Holy Spirit nothing more than a divine intermediary, as well as displaces the Spirit to a formal concept over the real revelation of God.

⁶² 1 Corinthians 1:25, NRSV.

In the gospel narratives, we see the Holy Spirit glorified in Trinitarian union. In the vein of Wolfhart Pannenberg, I suggest that we see the immanent rule of the Father (Creator) declared over creation, carried out through the submission of the Son (Redeemer) and sustained by the creative graces and capacities of the Holy Spirit (Sustainer). The motif of creation interests both Boersma and me in conceiving of the atonement. For Boersma, Christ redeems, restores, and ‘recapitulates’ creation by once again establishing the lordship of God. This is done through all the activities of his threefold office.

While this is an appropriate Christological statement, it ignores a glorious spiritual truth of Scripture. In Christ, we are not just a re-creation, but ‘there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!’⁶³ The Holy Spirit enables the resurrection life, ushering in life, love, and joy eternal. Thus, a pneumatological focus dismantles the epistemic power-play potential in Boersma’s thought. As Jesus declares, ‘And this is eternal life, that they may *know* you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent.’⁶⁴ Eternal life here is not a continuation of finite life *after* time, which would once again speak of eternity in temporal categories, but the Holy Spirit declaring the victory of the New Creation despite the persistence of the Old. The Holy Spirit welcomes us into the hospitable graces of the Godhead, lavishing us with gifts that transcend power differentials by their inability to be returned.⁶⁵

Conclusion

In conclusion, the doctrine of the atonement compels the theological situation with urgency. Its role in the misconception of God as an arbitrary, wrathful monarch demands revision. Thinkers like Hans Boersma are admirable here in the careful attempt to ‘reappropriate’ the doctrine without discarding it entirely, such as Delores Williams’s infamous remark at a ‘Reimagining’ conference implies.⁶⁶ Ultimately, what lies at stake is the ability to affirm God as a hospitable God. With a carefully Trinitarian model that takes seriously human sin without overshadowing the moral and

⁶³ 2 Corinthians 5:17, NRSV.

⁶⁴ John 17:3, NRSV, italics added for emphasis.

⁶⁵ Jesus admonishes this way of giving in Luke 14: 7-14.

⁶⁶ She reportedly remarked, ‘I don’t think we need a theory of atonement at all. I don’t think we need folks hanging on crosses and blood dripping and weird stuff.’

sovereign aspects of Christ with legality, a path can be continually forged to declare that despite the violence of the world, a hospitable God comes closer to us than we know ourselves, accepting us as prodigal children.