Hell and Hospitality
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God hosts us in the world—as finite creatures in the physical universe; as members of families, cultures, and institutions; as members of local and global communities of faith. God hosts us paradigmatically at the Lord’s Table. Even before we knock, God graciously opens the door for us. The theme of the banquet table where God serves as generous host is one of the most pervasive images of salvation in Scripture. Isaiah 25:6, for example, depicts a multicultural picnic on Mount Zion: “On this mountain the LORD of hosts will make for all peoples a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wines, of rich food filled with marrow, of well-aged wines strained clear.” When Jesus says, “I have come to call not the righteous but sinners” (Mark 2:17//Matt 9:13), the verb καλέω is most naturally construed as to call to a meal or invite. “Everything is ready! Come to the banquet!” sums up his message (see Matt 22:4//Luke 14:17). Salvation is eating in the kingdom of God.

The scandal is that the guest list for the eschatological banquet appears selective. With unnerving regularity the yes of God’s hospitality to some is paired with the no of exclusion to others. While the great picnic for Israel is going on at Mount Zion, the despised Moabites are cast down into the dung pits to drown (Isa 25:10–12). In Isa 65:13, God taunts the faithless in Israel, saying, “My servants shall eat, but you shall be hungry; my servants shall drink, but you shall be thirsty; my servants shall rejoice but you shall be put to shame.” This theme of exclusive divine hospitality permeates some of the best-known passages in Scripture: in Ps 23:5,

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God prepares a table before me “in the presence of my enemies”—who, presumably, stand hungrily by; in the Magnificat, Mary proclaims that the Lord “has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty” (Luke 1:53). God’s saying yes and saying no seems to divide the recipients of divine hospitality from the rest of humanity.

The refusal of table fellowship is one of the most haunting images of divine judgment in Scripture, with damnation often depicted in terms of God’s ultimate inhospitality. Zephaniah 1:7 voices God’s judgment on faithless Judah by perverting the whole theme of divine hospitality; the prophet portrays Judah not as a guest at God’s table, but as the sacrificial offering: “For the day of the LORD is at hand; the LORD has prepared a sacrifice, he has consecrated his guests.” Matthew 22:13 describes damnation as being thrown out of the banquet hall into the outer darkness where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth. Revelation 19:17–21 provides one of most vivid images of divine judgment in all of Scripture, with its horrifying caricature of the “marriage supper of the Lamb” (Rev 19:9): “With a loud voice he [an angel] called to all the birds that fly in midheaven, ‘Come, gather for the great supper of God, to eat the flesh of kings, the flesh of captains, the flesh of the mighty, the flesh of horses and their riders—flesh of all, both free and slave, both small and great’;...and all the birds were gorged with their flesh.”

God’s redemptive hospitality towards human creatures is often depicted in Scripture as partial and particular, a practice that involves saying yes to some people and no to others. What’s even more troubling is what theologians have done with these depictions. Much of Christian eschatology is testimony to the dangers of cutting scriptural images of divine judgment and damnation loose from their moorings in communal practices. I would argue that passages about God’s ultimate inhospitality to some people function less as a reliable guide to future eschatological events than as a warning or encouragement to a particular community in its practices of hospitality. What Wayne Meeks has asserted about the Pauline literature applies to Scripture more generally: “The end-time language does not work by an abstract logic of its own..., but always within the context of a particular community’s situation.”\(^1\) Often its effect is to relativize and restrain human judgments. For example, the people banished to outer darkness in Matthew are not the ones we’d expect to end up there, not the sort of people to whom we’d be tempted to deny hospitality ourselves. So the parables are a judgment on our hospitality practices, not a corroboration of them.

Sometimes scriptural images of divine inhospitality goad us to say yes to God by warning us of the dangers of responding to God’s offer of hospitality with inhospitable indifference or violence. God’s practice of hospitality demands from us a hospitable response. God graciously hosts us; but God also desires to be hosted by us, to dwell in our midst (Zech 2:10), for the Holy Spirit to take up dwelling in us.

(1 Cor 3:16), for Christ to dwell in our hearts (Eph 3:17). God knocks on our door, and asks for hospitality from us; responding requires both interior transformation and outward patterns of action. The eschatological warnings reflect the urgency of a hospitable response to divine hospitality, a “saying yes” that affects both our relationships to God and to neighbor. There is a deep congruity between God’s yes to us and our neighbor, and our yes in response.

Precisely because our rationales for saying no are based on human weakness, we must resist claiming divine authority for them. God’s saying no works by a different logic, and sometimes requires us to extend hospitality despite our vulnerability.

By contrast, we participate in the intersection of divine hospitality and saying no only indirectly and tentatively. While our aim is to say yes to good and no to evil, in the concrete this often involves saying no to particular persons. Saying no to people we perceive as evil, as well as to evil attitudes and actions, is a necessary part of being human. It is a correlate of our finitude. We have to acknowledge our physical and emotional vulnerability, our need for security and protection against destructive forces. I don’t show hospitality to people I think are likely to hurt me or my loved ones. I drive by them on dark roads. I lock my doors against them at night. But I also lock my intellectual and spiritual doors against people who I’m afraid may tempt me to do evil myself. There are things in me that could grow into hell, into a fundamental stance of inhospitality toward God and neighbor, and part of the practice of saying no is rejecting the influence of people who may nurture those impulses in me.² Precisely because our rationales for saying no are based on human weakness, however, we must resist claiming divine authority for them. God’s saying no works by a different logic, and sometimes requires us to extend hospitality despite our vulnerability.

The Johannine communities reflect an intensely corporate, sectarian vision of the practices of hospitality and saying no in a world full of treachery and falsehood. Second John 10–11: “Do not receive into the house or welcome anyone who comes to you and does not bring this teaching; for to welcome is to participate in the evil deeds of such a person.” Stephen Sykes writes about the Johannine recognition of “the ambivalence of the world, of its being both loved by God, and yet a threat to the children of God.” The world that is loved by God “may form itself into structures of resistance and opposition of such might and terrifying potential, that the people of God see themselves as a beleaguered remnant, bearing around in their hearts God’s love for the world, but frustrated of their task

²Not all appropriate refusals of hospitality have to do with saying no to evil. We fail to show hospitality to many people we have no reason to fear, because of constraints of time, money, energy, and geography. Finite persons are capable of only finite hospitality.
to express it.”

Johannine hospitality is concrete and generous, but its exclusive purpose is to bind the members of the community with each other and with God. It requires saying no to all who are outside the circle. God continues to be loving host to the larger world, but the people of God dare not emulate this divine hospitality.

In circumstances of extreme vulnerability, this may be a necessary stance for Christians to take. But it is at best a provisional strategy and a morally dangerous one at that. Allen Boesak has chronicled how the refusal of white Reformed Christians in South Africa to share the Lord’s Table with their black brothers and sisters was initially justified on account of their own “weakness.” But soon the theology of apartheid led to “the acceptance, the idealization, and institutionalization of that brokenness.” Refusing the hospitality of the Lord’s Table to blacks was eventually seen as a participation in God’s will for the church. What starts as an inability to express God’s love for the world can become a denial of it. We always say no as morally compromised creatures; our sense of physical or moral weakness remains a temptation to a sectarian hospitality that only recognizes God’s hospitality to people like ourselves. We are all at risk of falling into Jonah’s predicament, begrudging God’s yes to our enemies, finding God’s gracious hospitality towards them displeasing.

So while we must continue saying no to hospitality to some people, we must be very wary of claiming God’s blessing on it. Our practice of saying no does not include saying no to particular people in any ultimate sense. Our saying no to others is always in brackets, always provisional, always ready to be overturned by the surprising graciousness of God.

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4Allen Boesak, Black and Reformed: Apartheid, Liberation and the Calvinist Tradition (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1984) 89–90. According to Chris Loff, the Dutch Reformed Synod of 1857 “declared that according to the Bible it was clear that difference of race and colour should not cause any difference to be made in the preaching of the Gospel, but that it was also accepted that there was such a strong colour prejudice among the whites that they refused to tolerate the black people in their midst, especially when it came to ‘Christian privileges’ or to Holy Communion. This sinful predisposition of a section of the Church, which came to be called a ‘weakness,’ was accepted and encouraged by people who were in a position of power, in the name of ‘the question of Christ among the heathen.’” Chris Loff, “The History of a Heresy,” in Apartheid is a Heresy, ed. John de Gruchy and Charles Villa-Vincencio (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983) 19–20.