

Hospitality The Apostle John, Jacques Derrida, and Us

Jason Foster

Graduate (M.Div.) of *Reformed Theological Seminary*, Oviedo, Florida

Hospitality is a pressing question in today's society. But among Christians, the very framework of our hospitality is rarely discussed or thought about. Instead, hospitality is often contemplated with little sense of Scripture's considerable emphasis on the subject or how our practices should be grounded in the hospitality worldview that Scripture gives us. Moreover, most Christians do not realize the gravity to which traditionally accepted notions of hospitality have been questioned by some in the philosophical world, particularly Jacques Derrida.

Because New Testament hospitality has been discussed in a number of book-length treatments, we will not rehearse the extensive Biblical data devoted to this subject here. Instead, we will seek to answer the following question, "How is Derrida's understanding of hospitality consistent and inconsistent with a biblical understanding of hospitality, and how should the church respond?" For the sake of brevity, we will concentrate our appraisal of Derrida through consulting the Johannine corpus.¹

Mediterranean Hospitality

Before examining Derrida, an entirely too brief discussion of Mediterranean hospitality practices is necessary to contrast the Johannine backdrop of hospitality with Derrida. Malina skillfully analyzes Mediterranean hospitality as a "*process* of 'receiving' outsiders and changing them from strangers to guests."² In the NT era, the rise of so-called "wandering charismatics"³ resembling apostolic emissaries who were instead spreading

¹ I am deliberately choosing a section of the NT that is not often considered in studies of biblical hospitality. John Koenig's *New Testament Hospitality* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985) is an unfortunate example of this. While the Lukan and Pauline corpuses may exhibit more concern about hospitality, the Johannine corpus has a great deal to say on this topic and has not been adequately mined for its contribution to this discussion.

² Bruce Malina, "Hospitality," in *Biblical Social Values and Their Meaning*, ed. by Pilch and Malina (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1993), p. 104. See also his "The Received View and what it Cannot Do," *Semeia* 35 (1986): pp. 171-194.

³ See Gerd Theissen, *Sociology of Early Palestinian Christianity* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1978).

false doctrine was a special danger that required a degree of caution in receiving strangers into one's home/house church.⁴ Therefore, the ultimate reception of a stranger occurred in three stages.⁵ First, the stranger was tested in order to determine if they would subscribe to the norms of the community and not threaten its purity. Second, the stranger takes on the role of a guest of the host. The roles of guest and host were culturally well defined, with requirements concerning duties and manners being placed on both, including reciprocity.⁶ Third, the stranger leaves the company of his host either as a friend or an enemy. When the host rejects the guest as an enemy, the one who is ultimately aggrieved will often seek satisfaction.⁷

As can be seen, the contemporary Western idea of hospitality as casual and mostly non-binding does not resemble the culture in which Scripture was written. In the Mediterranean world, hospitality was deliberate, purposeful, and designed to have lasting consequences. To miss this is to neglect a vital motif that very much finds its way into the Johannine literature.

The OT 'Alien'/Sojourner Motif

Abraham was often seen as the prototype for hospitality in Jewish culture. The story of the visitation of Abraham by three strangers in Genesis 18 in which Abraham, in the heat of the day, ran to greet the strangers and fed them, was a model for Jewish hospitality. The emphasis on attentiveness, food, drink, and the reciprocity of the angelic strangers in the form of a confirmation of imminent prophetic fulfillment (the birth of Isaac) set the standard for table fellowship in Jewish society.⁸

⁴ In addition to 2 John below, see 2 Tim. 3:6, and Tit. 1:11 for a demonstration of how live a threat this was.

⁵ For more on these stages, see Malina, "Hospitality," pp. 104-107.

⁶ Malina and many others discount the prevalence of individual reciprocity in Mediterranean hospitality, choosing instead to see reciprocity as a mark of community honor. While this corporate aspect of reciprocity is certainly true, I, for one, think individual reciprocity is clearly part of the process as well, as depicted in numerous episodes in Homer's *Odyssey* as just one example of many that could be cited. See *Odys.* 4.589-592, 8.430-432, 15-54-55, 1.316-318, 24.284-286, 1.102-324. The notion of individual reciprocity is dominant in both OT and NT depictions of hospitality as will be seen.

⁷ I take this to be a fair summary of the relationship between God and Pharaoh in Exodus 1-14. Pharaoh had enslaved the people of God and was repeatedly inhospitable to them in his refusal to let them go in compliance with the commands of God. By treating the Israelites as enemies and rejecting the ministry of Moses, it was God whom Pharaoh ultimately rejected, and God sought satisfaction for this rejection through the sending of the plagues.

⁸ A somewhat similar pattern can be seen in Gen. 24:1-49.

In particular, Jewish hospitality took seriously the sojourner motif of the OT.⁹ In the Mosaic administration, the nation of Israel was repeatedly commanded to remember what it was like to be orphans in Egypt and how it felt to be strangers (Gen. 15:13; Ex. 2:22; 18:3) and then delivered by God their great Host, and to do likewise to the orphans around them (Ex. 22:21; 23:9; Lev. 19:33-34; Deut. 10:19; 23:7). The protections of the Law applied not only to Jews, but to the 'aliens' among them (Lev. 24:22; Num. 9:14; 15:16, 29; Deut. 1:16; 24:17; 27:19; Josh. 20:9). Importantly, Numbers 15:15 declares that because the same Law applies to both Jews and 'aliens', the Jews and 'aliens' will be the same in God's sight. God loves the 'alien' and provides for him (Deut. 10:18; Ps. 146:9).

But this idea stands side by side with the disdain of foreign practices that were hostile to God and the repeated OT admonition to have nothing to do with such things. It seems as if a distinction was made between 'aliens' who wished to become part of God's covenant community (Ex. 12:48-49) and were therefore hospitably embraced and treated well (Ex. 23:12; Lev. 19:10; 23:22; 25:35; Deut. 5:16; 14:29; 24:14; 24:19-21), versus those 'aliens' who not only stood outside the covenant community, but actively opposed God through their practices (Deut. 12:30-32; 18:9-14; 20:18; 29:16-18). Hospitality is not extended to the Canaanites or the Philistines, but rather, warfare and destruction.

The nation saw itself as a pilgrim people (Ex. 6:4; Deut. 26:5-22; Ps. 105:23) and as guests of God on Earth (Ps. 39:12). The idea of God as the great host, inviting and entertaining "his people" (and only his people, though they are a people from all nations) as eschatological guests is prominent in the poetical books (Ps. 23:5) and especially the Prophets (Amos 9:13-15; Joel 3:18; Is. 14:1; 25:6-8, etc.). Isaiah 58:7 pronounces that hospitality is greater than fasting, and in the midst of his torment, Job cites his hospitality as a demonstration of his own righteousness (Job 31:31-32).¹⁰ In Ezekiel 22:7, 29, God declares that Jerusalem's mistreatment of the 'alien' is one reason why he sent Babylon to destroy the city and send the people into exile (cf. Ps. 94:6; Jer. 7:5; 22:3).

The emphasis on hospitality extends into the Second Temple period. Zechariah 7:10 reiterates the desire of God to see his people treat the 'alien' well (7:10) and not oppress him, while Malachi 3:5 laments the renewed abuse of the alien. But as before, the post-exilic period also witnesses a renewed wariness of those outside the community who stand in opposition to God. Ezra 9 is a lengthy account of how hospitably fraternizing with those who oppose God's Law is frowned upon rather than celebrated. The literal building of the wall in Nehemiah 4 is also representational of the insider/outsider motif that we find in the Johannine writings as well.

⁹ Abraham himself was a sojourner in the land, but was also God's friend (2Ch 20:7; Is. 41:8; Jm 2:23).

¹⁰ One wonders if this claim by Job is in response to the accusation of Eliphaz in 22:7.

Johannine Hospitality

In the interests of brevity, I will discuss four passages from the Johannine corpus to get a representative sample of hospitality in the corpus.¹¹

The Fourth Gospel (FG) Prologue of John 1

While hospitality is rarely if ever mentioned as a theme of the FG as a whole or the Prologue, a robust doctrine of hospitality in seed form is presented here, which the rest of the FG expounds upon mainly through historical narrative.

John 1:5 introduces the contrast between light and darkness that is so prominent in the FG. In the FG, darkness is associated with unbelief and even evil (3:19; 8:12; 12:35, 46). So already in v5, the hospitable light of Jesus Christ is set in contrast to the inhospitable darkness of the world. In vv7-9, the universalism of the *kerygma* is stressed. The universal offer of the gospel message conveys a hospitable entrance of the gospel into the world that erects no outward boundaries among people or peoples. Yet in vv10-11, the inhospitable reception of the message by the world and 'his own' is stressed. The 'receive' language of hospitality is first introduced through the use of *paralambano*. Here, it is used negatively in describing how 'his own'¹² did not receive Jesus. Verse 12 then softens this lament by proclaiming that a faithful remnant did indeed receive Jesus.

In seed form, v12 provides an adjusted picture of the Mediterranean hospitality process discussed above.¹³ Through the Incarnation, Jesus the divine host of all creation (1:3-4) proactively (3:16, 15:16; 1J 4:10-19) enters the world as a stranger (guest) and is hospitably received by some. Jesus then reciprocates this hospitality by giving them the right to become children of God in a way no one else can give. This covenantal framework highlights the lasting consequences of hospitality, since these children of God who hospitably received Jesus will never fall away as a result. In v14, the Incarnation is given its boldest expression, in which Jesus tabernacled among 'us'. Brown believes the 'us' should be taken universally to refer to humanity in general.¹⁴

Again, the hospitality of Jesus to all men is depicted. However, the verse goes on to say that only 'we' have seen his glory. Both Brown and Carson regard the 'we' more

¹¹ Unlike virtually any Johannine scholar that I'm aware of, I think the entirety of the Fourth Gospel can be seen as one big thematic presentation of hospitality. In the Fourth Gospel, story after story, episode after episode either explicitly or implicitly touches on matters of hospitality.

¹² This could be referring to the world as 'his own', and therefore be talking about all people. But the masculine form of *hoi idioi* favors the idea that the Jewish nation is in particular view here.

¹³ Culpepper skillfully sees the Prologue as a chiasm with v12 in the middle, thus, emphasizing its importance in the Prologue. *The Gospel and Letters of John*, IBT (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1998), p. 116.

¹⁴ R. Brown, *The Gospel According to John*, AB (New York: Doubleday, 1966), I.13.

narrowly than the 'us', in that it refers to a finite group of believers during the earthly ministry of Jesus.¹⁵ This hints that the universal hospitality of Jesus was only received by a subset of people. But for these people, grace upon grace has been 'received' (v16).

So, the Prologue gives us a working grid of hospitality and inhospitality that permeates the rest of the FG. The Incarnation was an incredible act of hospitality on the part of God the host to vividly reveal himself as a guest to a lost world (host). The *kerygma* is universal in its hospitable invitation, and to those who receive the message and the Messenger, they become the people of God through divine covenantal reciprocity.¹⁶ But as in the Exodus account, a failure to receive the supreme Emissary of God carries with it the divine satisfaction of the Father who is ultimately being rejected.

The Samaritan Woman Account of John 4

Jesus' encounter with the Samaritan woman is critical in seeing the hospitality motif in the FG as it relates to outreach to outsider groups and communities. The FG has by far the most developed narrative concerning the ingrafting of Samaritans into the following of Jesus. This is an extraordinary act of hospitality on the part of Jesus (as indicated by the inhospitable reaction of the disciples (4:27)).¹⁷ Like the Gen. 18 event of Abraham being visited by angelic 'strangers', Jesus is the divine stranger in the John 4 account of the Samaritan woman.¹⁸ Like Abraham, the woman, and later on, the entire community extends hospitality to the tired Jesus by first giving him a drink¹⁹ and then eventually inviting Jesus and his disciples to stay with them for two days (4:40).²⁰ Like the Abraham event, Jesus reciprocates by plainly revealing himself as the Messiah and

¹⁵ Brown, *John*, I.13, D.A. Carson, *John*, PNTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), p. 128. Unfortunately, Brown sees this distinction as an indication that v14b was a later addition by the redactor and not part of the original thinking of the Evangelist.

¹⁶ In saying this, I recognize there is a danger of portraying the hospitality of God in *quid pro quo* terms. Carson takes strong exception to this (*John*, p. 131), and in one sense he is correct. Unlike human hospitality, the two parties are not equal in this equation. But the uniqueness of Biblical covenantal dynamics is their suzerain nature which preserves divine sovereignty and human responsibility. That's what we have here.

¹⁷ The reaction of the disciples is understandable, given the stress on Jews seeking hospitality only from fellow Jews (Gen. 24:15-27; Judg. 9:12; Tob. 5:6; 6:11; 9:5). This makes Jesus' act of requesting hospitality from a Samaritan woman positively radical.

¹⁸ See Bultmann, *The Gospel of John* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1971), p. 181.

¹⁹ This is admittedly an inference on my part. But as the OT makes clear, it was not uncommon for travelers to seek hospitality at a source of water (Gen. 24:17; Ex. 2:15; 1 Sam. 9:11-13).

²⁰ The practice of staying with someone for two days eventually became standardized in the *Didache* 11.5.

breaking down the exclusivity of temple worship.²¹ Of all people, it is the Samaritans, the ultimate outsiders, who are portrayed as being in the same mold as Abraham regarding their hospitable reception of a divine visitor. But as in the Prologue, Jesus as guest and the Samaritans as host are fluid roles, for Jesus' offer of living water to the Samaritan woman is a clear mark of Jesus as host and the woman as guest. The woman receives the hospitality of Jesus, and the ingrafting of the Samaritans into the Kingdom begins. That the Samaritan also happens to be a woman is also significant, since in one person, she embodies two outsider groups of her day.

2 John 10-11

Because we are dealing with a hospitality scenario here, this passage has to be seen in light of the hospitality process, and more particularly, the practice of testing. In this passage, the Elder offers uncompromising instructions to the congregation to not welcome those who bring a false teaching. But to say that the churches were to have no contact or interaction at all with the traveling teachers²² makes little sense in light of v10. How is one to know whether someone brings a false teaching unless there is enough interaction to determine what the teacher's views are? What's happening here is that the author is assuming the practice of testing as normative (cf. 1J 4:1-2), and then working from there.

What is forbidden is extending a hospitable welcome after the teachers have been questioned and it has been determined that they bring false teaching with them. The author is not forbidding all contact with travelers, even heretical ones, since the orthodoxy of their teachings can't be gauged without the practice of questioning and testing that is part and parcel of the hospitality process that is assumed as the framework for the author's admonitions.²³ The doctrinal test being put forth by the author in v10 presupposes the test step of the hospitality process, and this step is impossible if the community had adopted a stance of sectarian separation, as many scholars suggest. Having said that, it is obvious that the doctrinal test being insisted

²¹ It is noteworthy that Mt. Gerizim is mentioned in this exchange, since in Jewish tradition, Mt. Gerizim was associated with Zeus, and the Samaritan temple on Mt. Gerizim had once been renamed 'the temple of Zeus the God of Hospitality.' Jesus is showing the woman who the true God of hospitality is here. For more on the connection between Zeus and Mt. Gerizim in Jewish thought, see Emil Schurer, *The History of the Jewish People in the Age of Jesus Christ (175 B.C. – A.D. 135)*, ed. by Vermes and Millar (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1973), I.521.

²² This is the view of a number of scholars, including Lieu, *The Theology of the Johannine Epistles*, NTT (Cambridge, 1997), p. 112. See also Glenn Barker, *2 John*, EBC, Vol. 12 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1981), p. 365. Strecker thinks the spirit of the command is to prohibit "every kind of human contact..." *The Johannine Letters*, Hermeneia (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996), p. 244.

²³ See Arterbury, *Entertaining Angels* (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2005), p. 119.

upon by the author takes the wandering schismatic threat very seriously, and appropriately so. There is an expectation that this doctrinal test will result in certain teachers who are dedicated to infiltrating the church and spreading false teaching being denied hospitality as a result.²⁴

Revelation 19-22

Revelation gives us an essential picture of the new heavens and new earth that impacts everything we've said about hospitality. While the hospitality of God has broken into the world through Jesus Christ, the world is still often hostile to God. As we've seen, both hospitality and inhospitality are the result during this period of redemptive history. But Revelation discloses that a time is coming when this dynamic will end with the consummation of history.

The great marriage banquet of the Lamb in Rev. 19 depicts the great feast of victory and final reconciliation. Rev. 19:9 uses the language of hospitality in calling all those²⁵ who have been invited to this great marriage supper blessed. God is the host of his faithful guests in a supper of final triumph.

Revelation 21-22 describe the end goal of redemptive history; the perfect and eternal communion of God with his people. The descent of the New Jerusalem harks back to the Prologue in the FG in which now, the dwelling of God is with men and God will live with them forever. Revelation draws full circle back to Genesis 1-2 with the final reconciliation of heaven and earth becoming complete. This great and final transformation will be ushered in by God alone as the great final act of hospitality. God's glory will be fully revealed, and pure eschatological hospitality will be achieved (cf. Ps. 23:5).

We have seen that both hospitality and inhospitality have roles to play in the life of the Christian and the church during this stage of redemptive history. The practice of testing is considered normative, and those who are determined enemies of Christ are treated inhospitably. In doing this, we are imitating Christ who himself acted both hospitably towards his friends as we've seen, and inhospitably towards his enemies.²⁶ But in

²⁴ The hospitality instructions of 2 John are reinforced by the *Didache*. Did. 11:1-2,12 stress the necessity of correct teaching as a condition for receiving traveling teachers. The early church considered the Elder's instructions here to be normative, rather than an aberration with limited applicability. It is also noteworthy that there are similarities between the Elder's instructions in 2 John and Jesus' own teachings to his disciples in John 10:5, 10.

²⁵ This, of course, includes people from every nation and tribe (Rev. 7:9; 15:4).

²⁶ On this, see especially John 8 to see Jesus' inhospitable interaction with 'the Jews'. Both Brown and Martyn strenuously insisted that the FG's negative depictions of Jesus' harsh interaction with 'the Jews' are not historically accurate, but are merely reflective of the later Johannine community's anti-Jewish sentiments. Elsewhere, I have critiqued

imitating Christ in this way, we, like he, look forward to a much better state of affairs at the consummation described in Revelation. The Johannine story of Jesus gives us a Christ who, as host of the cosmos, became a guest of the world through the Incarnation and received hospitality in specific settings during his earthly ministry. But the culmination of the Johannine story of Christ is when he hosts the meal in which we who are willing to receive his body and blood (John 6) receive life, and ultimately partake in the glorious banquet in Revelation that he hosts.

The Hospitality of Derrida

In his writings, Derrida focuses greatly on one's hospitality toward the "other." There is a sense of transcendence in Derrida's writings, but definitely not in the Christian sense of the term. Derrida, mirroring Schweitzer in many ways, gives us a view of hospitality that is an eschatological concept throughout. In stressing the eschatological nature of hospitality, however, Derrida strongly opposes any particular or determinate messiahs, opting instead for a "messianicity" that has a stance of absolute openness to the future. He says that his vision of hospitable messianicity is "the opening to the future or to the coming of the other as the advent of justice, but without horizon of expectation and without prefiguration."²⁷ From this, we can see that Derrida's vision of what he calls "pure hospitality" is that it is absolute in character, requires an indeterminate future, and can never be realized.²⁸ But for Derrida, "[o]nly pure hospitality...is adequate as an answer to the violence that particular belief systems introduce."²⁹ This pure hospitality stands in contrast to the actual hospitality of humanity, which Derrida believes is inhospitable in the exclusionary elements it contains and perpetuates.

For Derrida, a radical and unconditional openness toward the future is essential, no matter what that future may look like. Pure hospitality for Derrida means the complete foregoing of all judging, analyzing, and classifying other people that he believes are hallmarks of "actual hospitality". Derrida believes we must forego all "violence" that tries to conform anyone into our own image through the setting of behavioral conditions on our extension of hospitality, or by slotting people into our own predetermined categories. An attitude of pure hospitality embraces an utter unconditionality and readiness to give

this position in some detail and have found it wanting. The Johannine depictions are historically accurate.

²⁷ Derrida, "Faith and Knowledge: The Two Sources of 'Religion' at the Limits of Reason Alone," in *Religion*, ed. by Derrida and Vattimo (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), pp. 17-18.

²⁸ On the impossibility of achieving pure hospitality, see Derrida and Dufourmantelle, *Of Hospitality*, trans. by Bowlby (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), p. 135; Derrida, *On Cosmopolitanism and Forgiveness* (London: Routledge, 2001), p. 16; idem., *The Gift of Death* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), p. 70; idem., *Adieu to Emmanuel Levinas* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), p. 50.

²⁹ Hans Boersma, "Irenaeus, Derrida and Hospitality," *Modern Theology* 19 (2003): 165.

everything we have for any and every other person. Put simply, to place limits or conditions on our extension and practice of hospitality is to commit an act of violence through exclusion and coercive conformity.

Derrida is aware that such a radical take on hospitality carries certain risks with it. He is quite frank in saying that the result of this kind of hospitality might be “terrible because the newcomer may be a good person, or may be the devil.”³⁰ But to Derrida, it does not matter who it is. Pure hospitality is completely unconditional and has no limits whatsoever. The door is always open; the lock is always unlocked.

Pure hospitality is extended and given without any prior knowledge of who we are extending it to.³¹ This is what Derrida means by the “other;” receiving and embracing newcomers we truly know nothing about at all.³² For Derrida, no question or inquiry we might make to a potential guest is virtuous because such questions are merely impure attempts to classify the person into our own predetermined categories of being.³³ The Mediterranean/Johannine idea of testing (and its modern counterpart – sizing people up) is clearly frowned upon by Derrida. Pure hospitality is the unconditional “hospitality of visitation” which introduces radical surprise into hospitality. This stands in contrast to actual hospitality’s “hospitality of invitation,” which makes hospitality a gated and conditional product of our own self-centered preferences, and is extended only on our own terms.³⁴

Derrida believes the actual hospitality of our day is violent in forcing restrictive conformity through enforcing conditions upon those to whom it is extended. In effect, Derrida believes the structure of barriers and restrictions we adopt as the masters of our space when we extend actual hospitality to others renders these “others” as strangers and refugees.³⁵ For Derrida, our actual hospitality rests upon behavioral conditions and prerequisites that tacitly advocate limits on the extent to which we’re willing to be trespassed by our guests. This makes our hospitality inhospitable. Derrida mostly

³⁰ Derrida, “Hospitality, Justice, and Responsibility: A Dialogue with Jacques Derrida,” in *Questioning Ethics: Contemporary Debates in Philosophy*, ed. by Kearney and Dooley (London: Routledge Press, 1999), p. 70.

³¹ *Of Hospitality*, p. 29.

³² Derrida believes that reality is a “chaos of interpretations”. This necessitates that we must be open to “otherness” if we want to live most fully. This entails a rejection of the sanitized and comfortable rationalism that Derrida believes the Western bourgeois has foisted upon us which filters out alternative interpretations of the world and its practical manifestations/ramifications. For more on this, see Murray Jardine, *Speech and Political Practice: Recovering the Place of Human Responsibility* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1998).

³³ Derrida regards such questions as interrogatory, which is hardly hospitable. *On Hospitality*, pp. 27-29.

³⁴ See Brian Russell, “Developing Derrida: Pointers to Faith, Hope, and Prayer,” in *Theology* 104 (2001): 406.

³⁵ See his *Of Hospitality*, p. 135; *Gift of Death*, p. 68.

tends to blame Kant's "universal hospitality"³⁶ for this problem that carried with it accepted standards of conduct, and time limits on its extension.³⁷

Because Derrida's messianic future is indeterminate and beyond the horizon of expectation, pure hospitality, as such, is impossible to achieve and he acknowledges this. His pure hospitality is an eschatological ideal that can never be realized in a violent world.³⁸ Derrida sees the world as thoroughly violent, with violence interwoven into all aspects of society and impossible to avoid. Derrida believes all human hospitality is tainted by narcissism that leads to some degree of insincerity when we extend hospitality to others. When we give, we are always selfishly looking for something in return,³⁹ whether it be a tangible gift or an intangible feeling of self-congratulation for being liked and appreciated by our guests. For Derrida, hospitality is always an economy of exchange, and gift-giving is never purely altruistic.⁴⁰ Thus, pure hospitality is unachievable in Derrida's vision. He longs for a messianic future that he believes will never materialize.

His deconstruction of hospitality is so thorough that it leaves us nowhere, at least in my view. The very nature of actual hospitality assumes and perpetuates a structure of inequality between host and guest that of itself must be eliminated if we are to have true and pure hospitality.⁴¹ Lest anyone think this is simply an issue between individuals, Derrida believes the ramifications are thoroughly global in nature and speak to the reality that "[h]ospitality is culture itself...ethics is hospitality; ethics is so thoroughly coextensive with the experience of hospitality."⁴² But because this "power structure" is the basis for hospitality in the first place and depends on it for its very existence, it is

³⁶ See Kant, *Perpetual Peace*, ed. by Beck (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1957), pp. 20-21.

³⁷ For more on Derrida's rejection of Kantian hospitality, see "Hospitality, Justice and Responsibility," p. 71; *Of Hospitality*, p. 27; *Cosmopolitanism and Forgiveness*, pp. 20-23.

³⁸ Derrida gets to the point where he's not sure pure hospitality even exists. "Hospitality, Justice and Responsibility," p. 71.

³⁹ Obviously, this means that Derrida disapproves of the practice of reciprocity which was a mainstay of Mediterranean, Jewish, and Johannine hospitality.

⁴⁰ Derrida, *Deconstruction in a Nutshell: A Conversation with Jacques Derrida*, ed. by Caputo (New York: Fordham University Press, 1997), pp. 140-151.

⁴¹ Derrida expands this concept onto governmental and national scales, thereby making actual conditional hospitality something of a solidifier of a power structure that perpetuates global injustice! For Derrida, the picket fence and national border security are based on the same societal structures of inhospitality, inequality and exclusion. See *Of Hospitality*, pp. 55, 150-1.

⁴² *Cosmopolitanism and Forgiveness*, pp. 16-17. Throughout pp. 3-23, Derrida applies the ramifications of conditional hospitality to global questions of refugee and asylum rights. Interestingly, he argues on pp. 17-18 that we need to return to the Mosaic idea of 'cities of refuge' that Derrida believes was lost in the medieval period.

impossible to rid ourselves of it, even though the breaking down of this structure of inequality and barriers is the goal of pure hospitality. As Derrida puts it:

Unconditional hospitality implies that you don't ask the other, the newcomer...to give anything back, or even to identify himself or herself. Even if the other deprives you of your mastery of your own home, you have to accept this. It is terrible to accept this, but that is the condition of unconditional hospitality: that you give up the mastery of your space, your home, your nation. It is unbearable. If, however, there is pure hospitality it should be pushed to this extreme.⁴³

But of course, when such a structure is eliminated, the possibility of hospitality as we know it becomes circumvented, because it has lost its basis for functioning.

As with the step of testing, Derrida clearly resists the well defined roles and behavioral expectations of host and guest that are intrinsic in the Mediterranean process of hospitality that is an understood reality of the Johannine corpus. Without ownership and control, there is no longer the possibility of hosting anyone under any real circumstance. The impossibility of pure hospitality is demonstrated each time we extend actual hospitality. The possible highlights the impossible, and actually increases the chasm between the two. This chasm between Derrida's pure hospitality and our actual hospitality is unconquerable, and he knows it.⁴⁴ It is little wonder then, that his interpreter, John Caputo, describes Derrida as a man of "prayer and tears."⁴⁵

A Johannine Response

Derrida is not *entirely* wrong in what he says. In saying that human motivations are always tainted to some degree by sin and self-love is consistent with Reformed anthropology/hamartiology and is certainly consistent with the Johannine view of man that sees humanity as lovers of darkness (Jn. 1:5; 3:19; 1J 2:8-11). But unlike Derrida, we can affirm without apology that the limits of time, space, and ontology necessarily limit our practice of hospitality, in that we have to make decisions about our extension of hospitality on the basis of ontology if nothing else. This does indeed result in a hospitality that is preferential, conditional and not absolutely open.

⁴³ "Hospitality, Justice and Responsibility," p. 70.

⁴⁴ In his *On Hospitality*, p. 79ff, Derrida tries to link pure (impossible) hospitality to actual (possible) hospitality by comparing "the law" of pure hospitality to "the laws" of actual hospitality. Even though the laws of actual hospitality "deny," "threaten", and "corrupt" the law of pure hospitality, Derrida says the law needs the laws in order for the law to be real and not illusory. The law of pure hospitality measures and critiques the quality of our actual hospitality. He says the relationship between the two is an "asymmetrical antinomy." See also *Cosmopolitanism and Forgiveness*, pp. 17-18.

⁴⁵ See Caputo's *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida: Religion without Religion* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1977).

The problem is that Derrida believes this makes our hospitality violent and unjust, and sees little that is redeeming about it. The idea that boundaries to hospitality might be a good thing is anathema to Derrida.⁴⁶ If hospitality is not completely open, it is violently closed to the point where we no longer have the right to call it 'hospitality.' Derrida frankly states, "If you exclude the possibility that the newcomer is coming to destroy your house – if you want to control this and exclude in advance this possibility – there is no hospitality."⁴⁷ But the idea that our hospitality should be condemned simply because it conforms to the boundaries of the created order betrays an over-realized eschatology on the part of Derrida that runs afoul of the Johannine witness. Jesus himself took on the limitations of the created order in his humanity and operated within them (Jn. 1:14). This meant that he was both hospitable and inhospitable as we have seen.

God deals with us today from the standpoint of only a partially realized eschatology, since we have not yet arrived eschatologically or reached the point of pure hospitality untainted by sin.

But even if we could practice Derrida's vision of pure unconditional hospitality, the inevitable result would be more violence, not less. If we openly welcome "devils" along with saints into our homes and churches without distinction or discerning judgment, violence and injustice would be given free reign. In advocating this, Derrida does not take seriously the current eschatological situation of boundaries that God has established during this period of redemptive history.

This necessitates a rather bizarre interpretation of Genesis and Revelation. In Derrida's approach, the hospitable reception of the serpent by Adam and Eve in Genesis 3 must be viewed as an act of great hospitality that should be applauded, while the prohibition to eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil in Genesis 2 must now be seen as a great act of inhospitality by God that violently insisted on Adam and Eve's conformity. On the other hand, the violent destruction of the serpent by God in Revelation 20 that is the triumphal source of the Christian's eschatological hope must now be viewed as inhospitably brutal and should be condemned. When Satan stands poised to eat the newborn child of promise in Revelation 12:4, the snatching up of the child by God and taking him to heaven as an act of divine protection instead must now be seen as an act of inhospitable deprivation toward Satan.

This contradicts the Johannine witness completely. The introduction of sin and death into the world in Genesis 3 through an act that Derrida is obligated to applaud has

⁴⁶ On the virtue of hospitality boundaries, see Caroline Westerhoff, *Good Fences: The Boundaries of Hospitality* (Cambridge: Cowley, 1999).

⁴⁷ "Hospitality, Justice and Responsibility," p. 70. This is a formidable argument, especially in light of his *Cosmopolitanism and Forgiveness* where he applies the same reasoning to forgiveness. For Derrida, we must forgive the unforgivable: "If one is only prepared to forgive what appears forgivable...then the very idea of forgiveness would disappear." (p. 32) This is a formidable statement, in that it sounds very appealing. But clearly, it runs afoul of Mt. 12:31/Mk. 3:29, not to mention 1 John 5:16.

resulted in all of the violence and injustice that Derrida now speaks against. In contrast, the violent elimination of the source of all violence and injustice in Revelation 20 ushers in the pure hospitality that Derrida longs for, yet he must condemn the means by which this becomes possible, not to mention its messianic particularity. There is something inherently amiss about a philosophy of hospitality that seeks to end violence and injustice by giving them the exact tools they need to prosper – a friendly forum and a hospitable audience.

Derrida's conundrum ultimately boils down to his attempt to erect a doctrine of pure hospitality without God. Pure eschatological hospitality is unreachable in his program, and this reduces Derrida to tears. But the Johannine documents put forth a God that is in control of history and has established the parameters and boundaries through which history will progress. The Fourth Gospel's depiction of Jesus as one who knew when his time would arrive and what would happen as a result⁴⁸ makes clear that history is moving in a particular direction and is not completely open. In addition, Revelation in particular gives us a vision of the new heavens and new earth where sin and death will be finally defeated and the pure eschatological hospitality hoped for in vain by Derrida will be fully realized. By rejecting any particular manifestations of messianism in favor of a nondescript messianism, Derrida has eliminated the one truth that would get him to the goal of pure hospitality – the Revelation account of Jesus as King over the new heavens and new earth.

That Derrida has to condemn the violence and determinate messianic particularity that is necessary to achieve this state of pure hospitality reflects a secular over-realized eschatology in which humans are in complete control. He has replaced ontology with eschatology. The ironic result is that pure hospitality will never be realized because his eschatology is over-realized. This leaves him with the truth of the universality of sin, but with no remedy for it other than our very imperfect and impossible attempts to extend pure hospitality no matter what the cost or consequence, and with no expectation that anything good will come from it due to his insistence on non-determinacy.

It needs to be pointed out that Derrida is not being consistent here. Nonviolence, equality, and justice are determinate in Derrida's philosophy,⁴⁹ and he builds his doctrine of hospitality with the achievement of these goals in mind, even though he doesn't believe they can be achieved. But if the future is completely open and we cannot insist on anything determinate, on what basis can we proclaim anything to be the goal of hospitality? Moreover, on what basis can we declare pure hospitality itself to be the goal? On what basis can we have any goals at all, since goals are determinative and even restrictive because they attempt to move history toward a particular and determinate point rather than absolute openness? By saying that pure hospitality is the goal, and that this goal achieves other goals, Derrida is introducing determinacy with one hand while insisting against it with the other.

⁴⁸ Jn. 2:4, 4:21-23; 5:25-28; 7:6-8, 30-39; 8:20; 12:31; 13:1; 17:1. See also Rev. 1:3; 3:3; 11:18; 14:15; 22:10.

⁴⁹ In Derrida's terminology, they are 'undeconstructable.'

Derrida condemns "hospitable narcissism"⁵⁰ but in the end, such narcissistic acts are all he can appeal to in striving for something better, and he realizes the impossibility of it all. In contrast, Revelation puts forth the remedy of the conquering Christ defeating the sin that leads to inhospitality,⁵¹ and being in control of the time and space in which it will be accomplished. Contra Derrida, the Johannine witness is that the boundaries, restrictions, and determinacy of the created order and of redemptive history lead to pure hospitality, rather than forever suppressing it. As Christians, we follow the example of Jesus Christ in both our hospitable and inhospitable acts during the already/not yet period of redemptive history we find ourselves in.⁵² But this period of redemptive history is neither permanent nor ideal. We look ahead to the great consummation of history described in Revelation as the time in which there will be no more inhospitality because the great goal of history, God's permanent and perfect dwelling with his people, will have been achieved.

This extends onto the global theater as well. Jesus took the initiative in hospitably entering an inhospitable world in order to reconcile God with his people. We should likewise carry on the mandated ministry of reconciliation (2 Cor. 5) by being proactive in breaking down unbiblical boundaries between peoples through hospitality.⁵³ Clearly, boundaries have been established by God as part of his creative and redemptive plan. Contra Derrida, all boundaries are not bad; but some are. The Johannine witness offers us examples of good boundaries which should be preserved, as well as bad boundaries which should be fought against. We must be in a constant state of subjecting today's boundaries to Scripture, and be prepared to either enforce or fight against such boundaries depending on their biblical legitimacy.⁵⁴ While we must reject most of

⁵⁰ Derrida, *Points...: Interviews, 1974-1994*, trans. by Kamuf et al. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995), p. 199. Derrida uses this phraseology as technical shorthand to describe actual hospitality as acts in which there are always strings attached to our hospitable deeds that make them violent tools of bourgeois manipulation.

⁵¹ In saying this, I am obviously taking an infralapsarian position on the question of decretive election.

⁵² I agree with Christine Pohl who says that our hospitality as humans is a "reflection and reenactment" of God's hospitality toward the world. See her *Making Room: Recovering Hospitality as a Christian Tradition* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), p. 29. In particular, she correctly calls Christians to imitate the greater hospitality of God "that welcomes the undeserving, provides the lonely with a home, and sets a banquet table for the hungry." (p. 16)

⁵³ As just one example, we should be actively pursuing reconciliation among the races. Interested readers should consult Ed Gilbreath's recent popular level treatment of this issue as a primer for further reflection. See his *Reconciliation Blues: A Black Evangelical's Inside View at White Christianity* (Downers Grove: Intervarsity, 2006). Equally helpful from a Reformed perspective is Anthony Carter, *On Being Black and Reformed* (Phillipsburg: P&R Publishing, 2003).

⁵⁴ For example, I would suggest that the current immigration debate in the United States and Europe is really a hospitality question. Evangelicals with a biblically informed hospitality mindset need to be forthrightly asking, "Is the (illegal) immigrant my

Derrida's hospitality program, his concerns about the fragmentation of peoples and the Western practice of seclusion and exclusion are predominately well placed. The answer is not to adopt Derrida's vision of hospitality or the over-realized eschatology that fuels it, but to more faithfully embrace Scripture's vision of already/not yet hospitality.

neighbor?", or "How should the OT 'alien' motif inform our present day attitudes toward illegal 'aliens'?", or "Are border fencing, walls, and wires harmonious with Revelation's vision of the marriage banquet?" In regards to the immigration debate, it is unnerving that so few evangelicals are even asking biblically-based questions like this, much less answering them thoughtfully.

WORKS CITED

- Arterbury, Andrew. *Entertaining Angels*. Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2005.
- Barker, Glenn. *2 John*, EBC. Vol. 12. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1981.
- Boersma, Hans. "Irenaeus, Derrida and Hospitality," *Modern Theology* 19 (2003): 163-180.
- Brown, Raymond. *The Gospel According to John*, AB. 2 vols. New York: Doubleday, 1966.
- Bultmann, Rudolf. *The Gospel of John*. Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1971.
- Caputo, John. *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida: Religion without Religion*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1977.
- Carson, D.A. *The Gospel According to John*, PNTC. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991.
- Carter, Anthony. *On Being Black and Reformed*. Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2003.
- Culpepper, R. Alan. *The Gospel and Letters of John*, IBT. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1998.
- Derrida, Jacques. *Adieu to Emmanuel Levinas*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999.
- _____. *Deconstruction in a Nutshell: A Conversation with Jacques Derrida*. ed. by Caputo. New York: Fordham University Press, 1997.
- _____. "Faith and Knowledge: The Two Sources of 'Religion' at the Limits of Reason Alone," in *Religion*. ed. by Derrida and Vattimo. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998.
- _____. *The Gift of Death*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995.
- _____. "Hospitality, Justice, and Responsibility: A Dialogue with Jacques Derrida," in *Questioning Ethics: Contemporary Debates in Philosophy*. ed. by Kearney and Dooley. London: Routledge Press, 1999.
- _____, and Anna Dufourmantelle. *Of Hospitality*. trans. by Bowlby. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000.
- _____. *On Cosmopolitanism and Forgiveness*. London: Routledge, 2001.

_____. *Points...: Interviews, 1974-1994*. trans. by Kamuf, et al. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995.

Gilbreath, Ed. *Reconciliation Blues: A Black Evangelical's Inside View of White Christianity*. Downers Grove: Intervarsity, 2006.

Jardine, Murray. *Speech and Political Practice: Recovering the Place of Human Responsibility*. Albany: SUNY Press, 1998.

Kant, Immanuel. *Perpetual Peace*. ed. by Beck. Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1957.

Koenig, John. *New Testament Hospitality*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985.

Lieu, Judith. *The Theology of the Johannine Epistles*, NTT. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997.

Malina, Bruce. "Hospitality," in *Biblical Social Values and Their Meaning*. ed. by Pilch and Malina. Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1993.

_____. "The Received View and what it Cannot Do," *Semeia* 35 (1986): 171-194.

Pohl, Christine. *Making Room: Recovering Hospitality as a Christian Tradition*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999.

Russell, Brian. "Developing Derrida: Pointers to Faith, Hope, and Prayer," *Theology* 104 (2001): 403-411.

Schurer, Emil. *The History of the Jewish People in the Age of Jesus Christ (175 B.C. – A.D. 135)*. ed. by Vermes and Millar. Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1973.

Strecker, Georg. *The Johannine Letters*, Hermeneia. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996.

Theissen, Gerd. *Sociology of Early Palestinian Christianity*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1978.

Westerhoff, Caroline. *Good Fences: The Boundaries of Hospitality*. Cambridge: Cowley, 1999.

This article is provided as a ministry of [Third Millennium Ministries](#). If you have a question about this article, please [email](#) our *Theological Editor*. If you would like to discuss this article in our online community, please visit our [Reformed Perspectives Magazine Forum](#).

Subscribe to Reformed Perspectives Magazine

RPM subscribers receive an email notification each time a new issue is published. Notifications include the title, author, and description of each article in the issue, as well as links directly to the articles. Like RPM itself, *subscriptions are free*. To subscribe to [Reformed Perspectives Magazine](#), please select this [link](#).