

A Cross Vision of G. Boyd's *Cross Vision*

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Abstract

This paper critiques Greg Boyd's *Cross Vision: How the Crucifixion of Jesus Makes Sense of Old Testament Violence*. The paper commends Boyd's recognition that the God of the Bible prefers to extend grace and life instead of judgment and death, but addresses Boyd's woefully inadequate hermeneutic—a hermeneutic based on a radically minimized concept of “revelation.” The paper addresses three basic concerns with Boyd's approach: first, how Boyd's hermeneutic fatally undermines the very concept of “inspired revelation”; second, that Boyd's hermeneutic of “Christ crucified” is accurate but woefully incomplete; and third, that Boyd's hermeneutic in continually contradicting major biblical themes is fatally hostile to Scripture.

Key Words: Greg Boyd, Cross Vision, biblical inspiration, inerrancy, hermeneutics, progressive revelation, atonement, penal substitution

No shrinking violet, Boyd's *Cross Vision: How the Crucifixion of Jesus Makes Sense of Old Testament Violence* tackles what he calls “the elephant in the room”: that is, trumpeting confidently the “God of love” on the one hand while holding to God as portrayed in the Old Testament (OT) on the other. Boyd argues that the OT presents “some portraits of God ... [that] are, quite frankly, really ugly! How else can you honestly describe a depiction of God, for example, ordering his people to mercilessly annihilate every member of the Midianites except for the virgin girls...?”¹ And how does this OT picture harmonize with the New Testament Jesus, who came to self-sacrificially give his life for sinners rather than to take their lives? The answer, according to Boyd, is that it doesn't.

Boyd is quite right that OT divine violence is a difficult issue. That said, I find that Boyd's hermeneutical principle—his method of interpreting the Bible—is an even more difficult issue. Boyd has simply replaced one elephant in the room with another; and one that romps about far more destructively than the first one.

Boyd's hermeneutical principle has two prongs. First is his “Jesus crucified” principle whereby the OT should always be interpreted through the lens of its New Testament (NT) fulfillment, which is Jesus—specifically “Jesus crucified.” He calls this his “cross-centered hermeneutic” or his “cruciform hermeneutic.”² By cross-centered he does not mean Christ's atonement and propitiation for sin on the cross, he means as a revelation of Christ's “self-sacrificial” and “non-violent” loving character.³

¹ G. Boyd, *Cross Vision: How the Crucifixion of Jesus Makes Sense of Old Testament Violence* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2018), 4.

² Boyd 2018:65 and the sub-title of volume one of Boyd's 2017 work.

³ Boyd 2018:xi and Boyd's sermon “The Non-Violent Warrior,” *WH*, April 2, 2017 at:

<https://whchurch.org/sermon/the-non-violent-warrior/>. “God is cruciform love.... Which is to say, there is no aspect

Boyd's second hermeneutical prong is his "accommodation" principle, whereby God accommodates "the fallen and culturally conditioned state of his people,"⁴ allowing them to believe falsehoods about him and subsequently to record those in Scripture as Scripture. He writes:

God who has always been willing to appear to be whatever his fallen people need him to be. His love for his people, and his refusal to coerce people into embracing true conceptions of him, frequently led God to appear guilty of crimes that were actually committed by other human or angelic agents....[W]hen his people proved incapable of trusting a God who could accomplish his goals non-violently and needed to instead believe Yahweh was a more ferocious violent warrior god than the gods of the other nations, Yahweh humbly stooped to take on the appearance of a rather typical ANE [Ancient Near East] warrior deity who commands and engages in violence.⁵

Boyd's hermeneutic does look to God's word as his inspired revelation. But for Boyd, rejecting as he does the OT portrayal of a God of anger and violence, "inspired" does not mean "inerrant." He takes a sort of middle way between skeptics on the one hand who reject altogether biblical inspiration and, on the other hand, standard Evangelical approaches where every word reveals God's thoughts. He writes:

One option that some people take [to escape the OT Yahweh as cruel] is to simply reject passages that depict God in violent ways. This solves our dilemma, but it conflicts with the fact that Jesus repeatedly endorsed the OT as the inspired word of God. If we confess Jesus as Lord, I don't see how we can reserve for ourselves the right to correct his theology. I thus don't feel I'm free to simply reject anything I find in Scripture....[M]y conception of progressive revelation ... differs from the way most Evangelicals conceive of it today. To protect a particular understanding of biblical inerrancy, many Evangelicals argue that, while God's revelation progressed over time, God never needed to accommodate error....If my proposal to reinterpret Scripture's violent portraits of God strikes you as radical and novel, this is why. These portraits have been taken at face value for the last fifteen hundred years!⁶

I have three basic problems with Boyd's above approach: first, his hermeneutic fatally undermines the very concept of "inspired revelation," which is the make or break factor for the Bible as God's word; second, his hermeneutic of "Christ crucified"—the driver behind his whole approach—is accurate but woefully incomplete; and third, his hermeneutic in continually contradicting major biblical themes is actually hostile to Scripture, along the lines of the adage, "With friends like this, who needs enemies?" Each of these prongs are developed below.

Guiding Hermeneutical Principle Deadly to Biblical Inspiration

My first criticism against Boyd's hermeneutic addresses not its first prong—its truncated "cross-centered hermeneutic" in which God's self-sacrificing mercy overshadows all other aspects of

of God that is not characterized by the nonviolent, self-sacrificial, enemy-embracing love that is revealed on the cross." (Boyd 2018:46)

⁴ Boyd 2018:98-99.

⁵ G. Boyd, "Yahweh as Dark Night," *ReKnew.org*, April 17, 2017, at: <https://reknew.org/2017/04/yahweh-dark-knight/>

⁶ Boyd 2018:xi, 74, 77.

God's character—but its second prong: his “accommodation” principle whereby God accommodates the fallen understanding of his people, allowing them to not only believe falsehoods about God, but also to record those falsehoods in Scripture as if they were truth.

So, for instance with Moses, according to Boyd, God had non-violent methods in mind for displacing the Canaanites by a comparatively benign means: “by making it unpleasantly pesky” and “send[ing] the hornet ahead of you” to “drive them out ... [I]ittle by little.”⁷ But instead, “what Moses's fallen and culturally conditioned ears *heard* was, ‘I want you to slaughter the Canaanites so my people can dwell [there]....’” And similarly with Jeremiah, with what Boyd describes as his “macabre representation of Yahweh” who confuses what “God *said*” with “what Jeremiah *heard*,” Jeremiah hearing “God, with a raging heart, saying: ‘I will judge Judah by mercilessly smashing families together.’”⁸

That Scripture is thus full of interpretive falsehoods—spoken by prophets who believe their words are mirroring God's revelation and by God-ordained leaders who believe they are echoing God's commands—does not seem to disturb Boyd. Rather, he finds it charming, a sign of God's humility in fact (“Yahweh humbly stooped to allow them to view him this way.”) But this, I suggest, evidences a deeply dangerous misunderstanding of the nature of biblical revelation. In the apostle Peter's understanding of biblical revelation, “men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit” (I Pet. 1:21). In Boyd's version there is a lot more of “men speaking from their erroneous cultural views” than there is “from God.” That cannot be right.

Misunderstands Nature of Biblical Revelation: Word-deed

What is Scripture? Scripture is revelation. But revelation of what? Evangelicals have classically argued that it is the revelation not just of the acts of God but of the very thoughts of God; revelation, that is, of both what God has done and also the meaning of what he has done. Professor G.E. Ladd calls it “deed-word” revelation:

While revelation has occurred in history, revelatory history is not *bare* history. God did not act in history in such a way that historical events were eloquent in and of themselves. The most vivid illustration of this is the death of Christ. Christ died. This is a simple historical fact that can be satisfactorily established by secular historical criticism. But Christ died for our sins.... These are not ‘bare’ historical facts....

The historical events are revelatory *only when they are accompanied by the revelatory word*.... We would therefore be more accurate if we spoke of the deed-word revelation....

[T]he event is always accompanied by words.... The event is never left to speak for itself, nor are men left to infer whatever conclusion they can draw.... Therefore, not the deed by itself, but the deed-word is revelaton.

.... *Christ died* is the deed; *Christ died for our sins* is the world of interpretation that makes the act revelatory.⁹

⁷ See Boyd 2018:114-115. One comment here, whether God drove the Canaanites out by armies' warfare or hornets and wild animals tormenting hardly seems to make a difference as to always-accommodating, non-violent nature of God that Boyd advocates.

⁸ Boyd 2018:117, 53, 165 (italics in original).

⁹ George Eldon Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1974), 30-31. Ladd was professor of New Testament exegesis and theology at Fuller Theological Seminary until his death in 1982.

So Scripture conveys not just God's acts but God's "message"—and a message consists of words. Thus it is that the question, "Did God say?" became a central point of contestation in Scripture, and remains so in these hermeneutic issues that Boyd raises.

In rejecting countless biblical stories' take on God-ordained violence, Boyd discounts and overthrows this understanding of Scripture as "deed-word" revelation.¹⁰ This is deeply troubling. He discounts the biblical writers' interpretations as mere "accommodations" by God to the "culturally conditioned" mindset of men bound by an "Ancient Near East warrior" mentality. Instead of accepting OT biblical statements at face value, he is at every turn urging the reader to "discern" the deeper significance beneath apparent surface meaning. Rejecting violence as he does, he is convinced that "something else is going on" in these violent scenes.¹¹

Traditional Hermeneutic?

Boyd insists that in taking this approach he is anything but revolutionary; he argues he is only "building on tradition" as "the church always assumed that passages of Scripture can have meaning that go well beyond their plain sense."¹² Here, Boyd is partially correct, but the part where he is incorrect is significant. That is, Boyd is correct that early on, already by the fourth and fifth centuries, it was commonplace for biblical teachers to use four layers of meaning in Scripture: the literal and spiritual sense, with the latter being broken down into three subcategories—the allegorical sense (which included typology), the tropological or moral sense, and the anagogic or future sense.¹³

But there is a key difference between Boyd and these early patristic teachers: for the patristic writers, the three subsequent interpretative layers were all built on the foundation of the literal sense. The literal sense was foundational and taken as read. As St. Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274) later wrote: "all the senses are founded on one—the literal—from which alone can any argument be drawn, and not from those intended in allegory."¹⁴ Factual truth—both in deed and word—was the basis for the later allegory. For the patristic and medieval writers, the meanings may have gone

¹⁰ He writes, "I fully accept the events recounted in these narratives. The only thing that must be questioned in light of the cross is the author's violent *interpretation*...." (Boyd 2018:89) (italics in original)

¹¹ See Boyd 2018:78.

¹² Boyd 2018:61, 66.

¹³ Pauline A. Viviano, "The Senses of Scripture," *National Bible Week 2015*, at:

<https://www.usccb.org/bible/national-bible-week/upload/viviano-senses-scripture.pdf>

¹⁴ St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, trans. English Dominicans (New York: Christian Classics, 1981), I, 1, 10, ad. Quoted in Viviano, "The Senses of Scripture."

As Beryl Smalley, historian and former vice-Principal at St. Hilda's College, Oxford, wrote in her masterpiece, *The Study of the Bible in the Middle Ages*, concerning the layered meanings in Scripture, with the literal and historical simply assumed as complementary, not contradictory, to the more symbolic senses: "The sciences and liberal arts are necessary in so far as they contribute to the understanding of Scripture. The student needs language, grammar and history in order to understand the literal sense, dialectic to distinguish true doctrine from false, arithmetic for number symbolism, natural history for the symbolism of beasts and birds; rhetoric, the crown of the higher education, is necessary not only for his own studies, but to enable him to teach and preach what he has learnt."

"The Bible was the most studied book of the middle ages. Bible study represented the highest branch of learning.... Teachers in the middle ages regarded the Bible as a school book *par excellence*. The little clerk learned his letters from the Psalter and the Bible would be used in teaching him the liberal arts...." (B. Smalley, *The Study of the Bible in the Middle Age* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 1978), xxvii-xxviii, xxxi. 26) The Bible was perceived as adding to ordinary, "secular" knowledge rather than today's reversal, where secular knowledge is thought to detract from the Bible's ordinary historicity.

“well beyond” the original meaning, but they did not go *against* the original meaning. This is a major difference.¹⁵

Boyd claims that his view of God’s “accommodating” his culturally conditioned OT saints parallels what Evangelicals have always believed. He points to the uncontroverted (by Evangelicals) cases of God accommodating the Israelites’ sub-par behavior: so, allowing divorce, multiples wives and the taking on of kings instead of rule by prophets. But these are not parallels for one simple reason: because in none of these cases is there a claim that the Israelites misheard God. The assumption in these cases, in fact, is that they *did* hear God as God lowered his standards. Revelation was unimpaired. Boyd’s accommodation, on the other hand, involves revelation impaired; that God’s people misheard him and then put this misunderstanding into Scripture as God’s truth. That is an entirely different kettle of fish.

Surprisingly, despite Boyd’s variance from these traditional approaches, Boyd still claims to have a preference for what he calls a “Conservative Hermeneutical Principle.” By this he means a hermeneutic “which stipulates I must stick as close as possible to the original meaning of passages.”¹⁶ What is both surprising and problematic here is not just the application issue—i.e. what is “as close as possible” (we have seen that in all cases concerning violence it means to dismiss the original meaning entirely)—but rather the issue of basic rationale. That is, “Why adopt a conservative approach?”

Given that he believes God generously accommodates cultural conditioning to the extent that entirely false statements about God are constantly considered Scripture, why should not the whole lot be considered culturally conditioned—even the passages that he treasures about Jesus? At this point, his decision to believe that the statements are somehow accurate is completely arbitrary. Boyd’s desire to hold to a conservative approach to Scripture is admirable in its way, but without holding to Scripture as communicating inspired truth free from cultural distortions, it simply won’t hold. It is a mere habit passed on from the past when earlier rationales about inspiration supported such a habit; rationales which Boyd has now rejected. An attempt at a conservative practice without a conservative rationale won’t last long. And that is what is dangerous about his hermeneutic.

¹⁵ Dominican theologian and historian M.-D. Chenu’s *Nature, Man, and Society in the Twelfth Century* describes the different Greek-influenced schools of thought within medieval Catholicism (Neoplatonism, Augustinian or neo-Dionysian), noting that even for the highly influential neo-Platonic writer (who tended to look more at the sign value of reality) Hugh of St. Victor taking the Scripture as read and at face value was foundational:

[Regarding the attempt to see] superimposed the *Timaeus* upon Genesis ... [r]espectfully but firmly both Hugh of St. Victor and the masters of Chartres, and surely Peter Lombard himself, discarded Augustine’s idealist view that the successive “days” had only a logical significance; the Bible’s historical orientation and Plato’s realistic physics worked against such a view

... In biblical theology, Hugh of St. Victor and his school were to represent the structure of Scripture – allegory resting on historical foundation – as deriving from ... the double meaning of *verba* and *res* in the Bible.... In turning reality into nothing but a figure, tropology weakens itself. Such an insistence underlay the great exegetical and theological undertakings of Hugh of St. Victor, who asserted the prior necessity of the *fundamentum* before *allegoria*, of the truth of *historia* before *tropi*....

... The universe is a system of symbols ... the potentialities of this system tend readily toward imbalance; symbolic value tends to empty things of their earthly reality, their ontological reality, their conceptual reality.... The whole twelfth century can illustrate the peril of such imbalance – an imbalance, moreover, which Hugh of Saint-Victor condemned.... (M.-D. Chenu *Nature, Man, and Society in the Twelfth Century* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997), 68, 126, 133-134 (ibid., p. 134).

¹⁶ Boyd 2018:67

Immediate Personal Impact

More personally, I can see the negative impacts Boyd's view would have had on my own life and ministry. I think here of the very first book I ever wrote, *Knowing God's Will*. When addressing the first of God's ways in guidance (Holy Spirit Speaking, Reason and the Word, Creativity) I specifically looked to II Sam. 5:19ff as both confirmation and example of God speaking by his Holy Spirit into the specific incidents of our lives. This is where David twice "inquired of the Lord" whether and how he should fight the Philistines. On both occasions God answered, even once giving him specific battle strategies. According to Boyd, David misheard the Lord. Such that these two scriptures serve not as encouragements to seeking the Lord but as warnings of how wrong we can be. They serve not as models to emulate but activities to avoid! – which was precisely the opposite point my book was making. Theory affects practice, and sometimes dangerously so.

Boyd's Focus on and Interpretation of "Christ Crucified"

It is uncontroversial to, as Boyd suggests, interpret the OT through its fulfillment in the NT. Jesus as the interpretive key is embraced by many Evangelical theologians. My problem is not with this general principle; rather it is with the particular Jesus that Boyd uses. His Jesus is far too one-dimensional. It focuses on one aspect of what Jesus did—his dying on the cross as the "sacrificial lamb of God"—and neglects what a quick look at the book of Revelation proclaims, that Jesus was also the "lamb upon the throne." Here Jesus promised, "I will give the right to sit with me on my throne, just as I was victorious and sat down with my Father on his throne" (Rev. 3:21; Rev. 22:3). Jesus was not only Redeemer—Boyd's focus—but also Creator, King and Judge.

The throne, of course, speaks of rulership, but also of judgment. Rev. 20:11-15 shows us "a great white throne and ... I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened.... All whose names were not found written in the book of life were thrown into the lake of fire."

This is no Jesus meek and mild. The sword, an image of violence, is part of his repertoire. "Coming out of his mouth is a sharp sword with which to strike down the nations. 'He will rule them with an iron scepter.' He treads the winepress of the fury of the wrath of God Almighty" (Rev. 19:15). The Jesus of the book of Revelation is also the "wrathful lamb" of whom we read: "They called to the mountains and the rocks, 'Fall on us and hide us from the face of him who sits on the throne and from the wrath of the Lamb! For the great day of their wrath has come, and who can withstand it?'" (Rev. 6:16-17).

Judgment Allowed vs. Imposed

Boyd does attempt to deal with these judgment scriptures, seeking to bring them in line with his vision of a non-violent Jesus. He does so by rejecting the usual perception of these judgments as a "judicial form of punishment ... imposed." He argues that God never actively executes punishment, rather God only passively "allows" the negative consequences (so-called "punishments")—which are the "organic," inherent results of sin—to have their natural result.¹⁷

¹⁷ When it comes to punishment, Boyd makes a big distinction between God "doing" and God "allowing," entitling his chapter 11, "Doing and Allowing." Boyd writes of judgment as something God "must allow people to suffer" arguing that "God doesn't *impose* punishments on people. The destructive consequences of sin are *built into the sin itself*.... With the exception of its violent portraits of God, the Bible *always* describes God's judgments in terms of

But this makes no sense, and for three reasons. First, passively “allowing” judgement is not really passive; it is every bit as active as the “imposed” judicial punishment Boyd wants to avoid. This is clear from the very language Boyd uses elsewhere in describing this allowing. He describes it as an act of God “withdrawing” something, writing: “God sees he must withdraw his protective presence to allow people to suffer the destructive consequences of their choices....”¹⁸ But to “withdraw” is to act decisively. And, according to Boyd, God’s act of withdrawal is done in full awareness of the negative “destructive consequences” to which he is opening the door. These consequences would not follow were he to keep his “protective presence” in place. God is in control of the process: It is up to him whether the person or group suffers the organic consequences or not. But this is not passivity.

Secondly, Boyd’s emphasis on “allowing” does nothing to eliminate the “judicial punishment” nature, as becomes clear the moment one asks “why” God abandons his people to their fate. Clearly God does not act on a whim. And if it is not done on a whim then it must be done for reasons of righteousness and justice. He has clearly decided it is the right thing to do. That is, God must assess whether it is “right” or “wrong,” “just” or “unjust” for people to suffer the consequences. At that point we are back to the “judicial” in a flash.

Thirdly, Boyd errs in his basic assumption that to be judicially-minded is to be somehow unloving; that it is “vengeful” and mean-spirited.¹⁹ C.S. Lewis faced-down this very view—which Boyd sadly joins—in his 1953 essay, “The Humanitarian Theory of Punishment.” The argument ran: “According to the Humanitarian theory, to punish a man because he deserves it, and as much as

divine abandonment.... God doesn’t need to punish sinners by killing them, for when their sin becomes ‘full-grown,’ it naturally ‘gives birth to death.’” (Boyd 2018, 143, 148-151)

¹⁸ G. Boyd, “Four Principles of the Cruciform Thesis,” *ReKnew*, July 13, 2017 at: <https://reknew.org/2017/07/four-principles-cruciform-thesis/>

¹⁹ Boyd not only insinuates judgement is vengeance, but directly asserts it, writing, “Whenever God sees he must withdraw his protective presence to allow people to suffer the destructive consequences of their choices, he does so with a grieving heart and with redemptive rather than vengeful motives.” (G. Boyd, “Four Principles of the Cruciform Thesis,” *ReKnew*, July 13, 2017 at: <https://reknew.org/2017/07/four-principles-cruciform-thesis/>) Agreed, but there is no contradiction between a wrathful judgment and a simultaneous grief on God’s part. Only see them both simultaneously in evidence as God looks upon the earth in Noah’s time: “The Lord saw how great man’s wickedness on the earth had become.... The Lord was grieved that he had made man on the earth and his heart was filled with pain. So the Lord said, ‘I will wipe mankind ... from the face of the earth....’” (Gen. 6:5-7) He is grieved even as he wipes man from the earth. At the same time he makes a covenant for their preservation in the future.

Boyd cannot abide punishment that is not redemptive. Not only does this negate the validity of judgment as judgment, but also calls into question the concept of eternal punishment. If punishment is only valid when redemptive, then it follows that eternal punishment—i.e. punishment wherein ultimately there is no redemption—is immoral ... and God cannot do anything that is immoral.

In a similar vein, Boyd also attempts to distance Jesus from the older concepts of judgment by removing the very concept of the “wrath of God” associated with these judgments. A wrathful God is uncomfortably close to a violent God, the very thing he will not allow. So he writes, “Yahweh’s ‘wrath’ was nothing other than abandoning his people....” (Boyd 2018:150) That is, he explains it as God’s activity—abandonment of sinners—dismissing entirely the clear emotional content. Here the hurdle is not only the interpretive hurdles necessary—how to make “wrath” not mean “wrath”—but the simple ethical test: Have we really managed to produce a more ethically attractive view of God by imagining a God who can sit unmoved and dispassionate on the sidelines as the weak are oppressed and violated? Is not anger the appropriate and even required sentiment.

Boyd cannot help but admit—and inconsistently—every once in a while, God’s anger: “Well, I am sure that God is angry at sin.” (See G. Boyd, “What does Paul mean by God’s wrath?” *ReKnew*, March 25, 2020 at the 2:50 minute mark, at: <https://reknew.org/2020/03/what-does-paul-mean-by-gods-wrath-podcast/>) But even here Boyd’s focus is “on sin” versus “on sinners.” But again, this makes no sense, as one must ask “Who is it who performs the sin?” People. Sin is not some abstract thing out there separate from people. Without actors there is no act.

he deserves, is mere revenge, and, therefore, barbarous and immoral. It is maintained that the only legitimate motives for punishing are the desire to deter others by example or to mend the criminal.”²⁰ Lewis responded that without the “just deserts” concept, the deterrence motif had no boundaries and quite logically became a tool of totalitarian control. In other words, to have a “just” society one needed the concept of “justice” (i.e. tit for tat):

My contention is that this doctrine, merciful though it appears, really means that each one of us, from the moment he breaks the law, is deprived of the rights of a human being. The reason is this. The Humanitarian theory removes from Punishment the concept of Desert. But the concept of Desert is the only connecting link between punishment and justice. It is only as deserved or undeserved that a sentence can be just or unjust.... There is no sense in talking about a “just deterrent” or a “just cure”. We demand of a deterrent not whether it is just but whether it will deter. We demand of a cure not whether it is just but whether it succeeds. Thus, when we cease to consider what the criminal deserves and consider only what will cure him or deter others, we have tacitly removed him from the sphere of justice altogether; instead of a person, a subject of rights, we now have a mere object, a patient, a “case”.

.... It will be in vain for the rest of us ... to say, "but this punishment is hideously unjust, hideously disproportionate to the criminal's deserts". The experts with perfect logic will reply, “but nobody was talking about deserts. No one was talking about *punishment* in your archaic vindictive sense of the word. Here are the statistics proving that this treatment deters. Here are the statistics proving that this other treatment cures. What is your trouble?”²¹

Only if Lewis’ view is correct—that judgment must be rooted in a punishment rationale revolving around tit-for-tat payback²²—only then is the biblical view as expressed by Paul justified, his view captured in his writing to the Thessalonians:

God is just: He will pay back trouble to those who trouble you and give relief to you who are troubled, and to us as well. This will happen when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven in blazing fire with his powerful angels. He will punish those who do not know God and do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. They will be punished with everlasting destruction and shut out from the presence of the Lord and from the majesty of his power.... (II Thess. 1:6-9)

That’s New Testament, not just Old: pay back ... blazing fire ... punish ... everlasting destruction!

All this is crucial in assessing Boyd, because the entire motivation driving his radical hermeneutic is not simply his revulsion against particular acts of OT violence; it is his revulsion against the anger-infused, non-redemptive, judgmental punishments of God justifying this violence. He sees

²⁰ C.S. Lewis, “The Humanitarian Theory of Punishment,” *Res Judicatae*, Vol. VI, June 1953, 224-230, 224 <http://classic.austlii.edu.au/au/journals/ResJud/1954/30.pdf>

²¹ Lewis 1953:225.

²² No-one is saying that punishment and judgment cannot be both remedial and retributive; no-one, that is, is denying remediation as a worthy goal. The point is simply that without the foundational retributive aspect, remediation has no right to even enter the picture. You cannot justly remediate and discipline a person “for their good” if they do not first “deserve” this discipline.

this as being anti-Christ. If he is wrong on this—as I argue in this section—then the entire driver behind his radical hermeneutic disappears. It becomes unnecessary.

Guiding Hermeneutical Principle Guts Too Much of the Bible

The third reason I reject Boyd’s hermeneutic is that it simply contradicts too many central biblical themes. One ends up with a 21st century version of “Jefferson’s Bible.” That is, Thomas Jefferson, loving the moral heroism of Jesus but imbued with the spirit of the rationalistic Enlightenment, decided to rewrite the life of Jesus by taking out all the miraculous bits.²³ He ended up, of course, with a Bible completely unrecognizable to believers today; the Bible in shreds and full of holes—his own sort of “hole-y” Bible. Boyd takes a similar path with this difference: rather than any anti-supernatural bias, his scalpel is driven by an anti-violence motif. The result, however, is equally a hole-y Bible.

Guts Too Many Central Biblical Themes

In only five pages of his *Cross Vision*²⁴ Boyd manages to gut central biblical passages of their key factual thrust. They fall like flies:

- Noah and the Flood’s wiping out the earth—certainly didn’t happen as described;
- Abraham fleeing Sodom and Gomorrah judged by God—God would never do that;
- Moses’ and his complicity in the ravaging of Egypt—no merciful God would so treat a nation;
- Moses and the punishment of Jews for their golden calf idolatry—how savage;
- David’s fame for his killing prowess—such a distortion of God’s character;
- Babylon as a vehicle of God’s judgements upon Israel—you must be kidding.

All of these incidents, at least as recounted in Scripture, were misunderstandings according to Boyd! God did not command any of this. Boyd is not done. His scalpel moves on to yet another absolutely central biblical motif: the Jewish sacrificial system. This too must go. Calling them “bizarre instructions” he writes:

... the cross reveals a God who has always been willing to appear to be whatever his fallen people need him to be.... For example, when his fallen and culturally conditioned people needed to believe Yahweh demanded and enjoyed animal sacrifices, Yahweh humbly stooped to allow them to view him this way, which is why he takes on the appearance of a typical ANE sacrifice-demanding deity within the biblical narrative.²⁵

²³ Seen T. Williams, “Why Thomas Jefferson Rewrote the Bible,” *History* Aug. 1, 2019 at: <https://www.history.com/news/thomas-jefferson-bible-religious-beliefs>

²⁴ Boyd 2018:10-14

²⁵ G. Boyd, “Yahweh as the Dark Knight,” *ReKnew*, April 17, 2017 <https://reknew.org/2017/04/yahweh-dark-knight/> and Boyd 2018:89-90.

So, the sacrificial system was “allowed,” a gracious mistake whereby God simply “accommodated” and “used ... this ancient barbaric ritual ... to prepare the way for the time when he himself would become the sacrifice....”²⁶

In a few sentences Boyd here overturns a central feature (along with the law and covenant, the sacrificial system must surely be the third chief characteristic of OT Judaism) of God’s entire relationship with his OT people. What is so unconvincing about this interpretation is that there is not a hint of this in the NT writer to the Hebrews who specifically addresses this OT system. Indeed, the book of Hebrews strikes the opposite tone. Rather than portraying these sacrificial instructions as a “bizarre and barbaric ritual” he:

- Celebrates and focuses on Jesus as the fulfillment of both the priestly and sacrificial elements in the first covenant which is a “copy” not a “distortion” of heavenly realities (Heb. 8:3-5; 10:1), celebrating a covenant in which the Day of Atonement—with its animal sacrifice as the cleansing focus—was actually central, the high feast of its entire year.²⁷
- Unapologetically insists that the foundation undergirding both covenants was “blood” (“... even the first covenant was not put into effect without blood” (Heb. 9:18))—not a mishearing but Moses acting “as God commanded” (Heb. 9:19-20);
- Explaining that “law requires that nearly everything be cleansed with blood, and without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness.” (9:22)

In all this, the writer to the Hebrews does not “reinterpret” the OT, as does Boyd, but simply “reminds” the readers of their deeper meaning, even as Jesus did to the two disciples on the road to Emmaus (Lk. 24:25-27).

Of course, Boyd can so easily dismiss the OT sacrificial system because he rejects the theology of the cross as “penal substitution” wherein “Jesus stood in our place on the cross and bore our judgment.” He considers this a “destructive myth” barbarously depicting God as “raging against ... his Son.”²⁸ He confesses himself to have “a compassionate heart toward animals” too delicate

²⁶ Boyd 2018:91.

²⁷ We read: ““It is certain that during the time of the Second Temple the Day of Atonement was already considered the greatest of the festivals. It is related that none of Israel’s festive days compared with the Fifteenth of Av and the Day of Atonement...” (“Day of Atonement,” *Jewish Virtual Library* (citing *Encyclopaedia Judaica* © 2008) at: <https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/day-of-atonement>

²⁸ Boyd 2018:138. It is interesting that, contra Boyd who details all the negative consequences of embracing the theory of penal substitution (see G. Boyd, “The ‘Christus Victor’ View of the Atonement,” *Reknew*, Nov. 29, 2018 at: <https://reknew.org/2018/11/the-christus-victor-view-of-the-atonement/>), Father Peter Hocken, the theological advisor to the Alpha program’s “Alpha for Catholics,” specifically applauds it. He explained that it was one of the reasons for the Alpha program’s evangelistic success, and something Catholics needed to learn from their Evangelical brothers, writing:

[A] key element in the success of Alpha is - I suggest - its focus on the good news of the gospel, the basic kerygma of Jesus’s death and resurrection, followed by the gift of the Holy Spirit. The preaching of the kerygma is closely linked to the proclamation of everyone’s need for the Saviour, of our total inability as sinners to save ourselves and be reconciled to God.... It is true that Alpha uses the language common to Evangelical Christians about the death of Jesus. It uses the language of substitution that is not the way that Catholics normally speak. But although this is not common Catholic terminology, it expresses what we Catholics officially believe.... We too believe that Jesus came to do something for us that we could not do for ourselves. The substitutionary

to believe that “Jesus actually sanctioned this animal cruelty.”²⁹ Here again Boyd seems totally out of sync with the writer of Hebrews.

Addressing Boyd’s theory of the atonement—*Christus Victor* (Christ’s death aimed at defeating Satan rather than at propitiating God and his justice demands) as opposed to penal substitution—would take us far afield from this paper’s focus, so I simply let it lie, except to say I believe both atonement views must be embraced to do justice to the Bible. That is, I agree with Boyd that the Bible portrays the cross as a “victory” over Satan (Col. 2:15), but—contra Boyd—the means God used to bring about this victory was “penal substitution.” It was a substitution whereby Jesus took our punishment, going to the cross where he “bore the sin of many,” there being “pierced for our transgressions” such that “the punishment that brought us peace was upon him.” (Is. 53:12, 5³⁰) Jesus bore our sin, the apostle Paul explained, in order that “the righteous requirements of the law might be fully met,” (Rom. 8:3), in that “the law requires that ... without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness.” (Heb. 9:22)

Boyd hopes to “improve” on the OT Picture of God, but his Replacement Picture isn’t Pretty

Boyd’s argument is that God “accommodated” the OT Jew’s misunderstanding, that not wanting to “coerce people into embracing true conceptions” he thus “allowed” them to think he commanded the deaths of multitudes of peoples and animals. At the same time, we know that there are many instances in the OT where God did not allow misunderstandings—i.e., he “coerced true conceptions.” He often spoke correctively to his people. But Boyd argues that on the specific issue of violence, God chose to remain silent. And Boyd seems to think this remaining silent, this “God-allowing” violence, exonerates God. But it does not.

In ethics, there are sins of omission - even as there are sins of commission. Think of irresponsible parents who don’t themselves abuse their children but knowingly allow a child rapist to enter their home and subsequently leave them unsupervised. Such a parent shares responsibility with the child rapist. (I think here of Jesus saying to Pilate concerning Caiaphas the High Priest, “Therefore the one who handed me over to you is guilty of a greater sin” (Jn. 19:11)). But on the heavenly level, this is the situation we have with God in Boyd’s scenario. God is the one in control; he either allows or disallows the violent consequences. God’s omission—i.e. his decision to suspend his protection of the sinner from the consequences of his sin—does not exonerate him if, as Boyd contends, involvement in violence is per se wrong and unloving.

Moreover, Boyd’s depiction of God actually means God falls afoul of Jesus’ criticism of the Pharisees “straining out a gnat while swallowing a camel”! That is, God who steps in vigorously

aspect of our redemption may be not simply a difficulty that can be explained, but a necessary corrective that Catholics often need. For as Catholics we are strong on participation....

It seems highly likely that there is a link between lack of grasp of Jesus's act of substitution and lack of Catholic evangelistic impact as there is between Evangelical emphasis on substitutionary atonement and their greater success in evangelism. I believe that the Holy Spirit is using the critical situation of the Church in much of the world, especially in the Western world, to bring us back to basics.” (P. Hocken, *Alpha and the Catholic Church*, http://www.christlife.org/alpha/C_frhocken.html [no longer available online])

²⁹ Boyd 2018:89-90.

³⁰ The Hebrew word for “punishment” in Is. 53:5 *musar* is found in only two other place in the Old Testament, and in both places it has the connotation of the negative repercussions God actively brought down upon guilty people as a consequence of their sin; i.e. it was a “punishment.” *Musar* is found in Deut. 11:2 describing God’s punishment of the Jews for their disobedience in the wilderness and then of the Egyptians for their treatment of the Jews. The other mention of *musar* is in Jer. 30:11 regarding the Jews in Babylon, exiled there as a judgment.

to correct all sorts of comparatively lesser wrongs—gathering manna on the Sabbath, righting the ark about to fall off a cart as it returns to David, etc., etc.—but remains studiously silent before the slaughter of multitudes, which could have easily been corrected by a clear word. So, for instance, in I Sam. 15 where Saul is stripped of his kingdom because of his disobedience in not killing sufficient Amalekites:

Samuel said to Saul:

“This is what the Lord Almighty says: ‘I will punish the Amalekites for what they did.... Now go, attack the Amalekites and totally destroy everything.... Do not spare them; put to death men and women, children and infants....’” (vs. 1-3)

Then, Saul having relented from total destruction, Samuel steps in:

“What then is this bleating of sheep and in my ears? What is this lowing of cattle that I hear?... The Lord anointed you as king ... [a]nd he sent you on a mission, saying, ‘Go and completely destroy those wicked people, the Amalekites, make war on them until you have wiped them out.’ You have rejected the word of the Lord, and the Lord has rejected you as king over Israel!” (vs. 14-18, 26)

Finally, Samuel amends the situation as far as he can by doing the deed himself:

“Then Samuel said, ‘Bring me Agag king of the Amalekites.’... And Samuel put Agag to death before the Lord at Gilgal.” (vs. 32-33)

All of this was a misunderstanding? Saul was stripped of his kingdom for the wrong reason (if Boyd is correct that God would never order violence)? Saul was closer to God’s heart than the prophet Samuel? Or, if one argues that on this occasion Samuel misinterpreted God’s intent, that God was not really upset by Saul’s disobedience in the slaughter of the Amalekites but rather by Saul’s greedy appropriation of plunder, the view of God is no better: a God who is silent at the slaughter of multitudes but vigorously intervenes only when seeing this piling up of agricultural wealth. Greed is shut down but not mass murder? This is not a winning picture of God.

Conclusion

Boyd is to be commended for properly getting a hold of one side of God’s nature: his grace and mercy. Truly, the God of the Bible prefers to extend grace and life instead of judgment and death. Through Ezekiel God says to his sinning people, “I take no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but rather that they turn from their ways and live. Turn!... Why will you die, O house of Israel?” (Eze. 33:11).

But, sadly, Boyd, while correctly emphasizing this aspect of God’s character is unable to hold onto the complex nuances of God’s character. Our God is not a one-note God, but rather a whole symphony of sound, in which righteousness and judgment are equally central. Boyd simply cannot appreciate this. That’s a failing. And it is a failing he compounds by the way he chooses to argue for it: a hermeneutic based on a radically minimized concept of “revelation”—revelation which is equal parts truth and error.

Boyd’s view of the Bible as filled with mistakes will inescapably have real world impacts. It will, if adopted, in the long run loosen Evangelicals’ hold on the Bible as God’s word. The first generation, like Boyd, will have both a high view of Scripture, albeit severely decreased, and the accompanying habit of Bible reading. The second generation will have just the habit without the rationale. The third generation will have neither the habit nor the high view—and there goes the Bible ... and there goes Evangelicalism.