

Abstract

“OUR SACRIFICE OF PRAISE AND THANKSGIVING:
RENÉ GIRARD AND THE EUCHARIST”

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This paper reviews mimetic theory described by Rene Girard. The mimetic cycle of mimetic desire, mimetic rivalry, mimetic conflict, the scapegoat mechanism, and generative violence craft a portrait of human society as founded on conflict and violence. Girard’s non-violent view of atonement as understood through the gospels presents an alternative to penal substitutionary atonement theory. Jesus’ death was intended to free humanity from the traps of mimetic theory and the scapegoat mechanism. This paper provides a brief survey and review of Anglican Eucharistic Theology, especially the concept of sacrifice and in the context of Jesus’ meal ministry. Since Jesus knew that he was to be betrayed and denied, the author comes to the conclusion that the Last Supper is consonant with Christ’s meal ministry of restoration. Therefore, communion is an attempt to craft a positive mimesis wherein Jesus teaches reconciliation even as the scapegoat mechanism begins to close in around him. Sacrifice in this context is not the prescribed death of Jesus but the peaceful offering of love and reconciliation before the forces of evil and death. In Girardian language, Jesus chose to present a role model to mimic in order to provide a positive mimesis that could stop the scapegoat mechanism and

prevent the violence that has long plagued humanity. The Eucharist was and is and should be a powerful symbol of that positive mimesis of forgiveness and reconciliation.

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Our Sacrifice of Praise and Thanksgiving:
René Girard and the Eucharist

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Contents

Title Page		1
Table of Contents		2
Chapter 1	Introduction	3
Chapter 2	Mimetic Desire and Mimetic Rivalry	10
Chapter 3	The Scapegoat	23
Chapter 4	The Passion	37
Chapter 5	An Anglican Understanding of the Eucharist	51
Chapter 6	Girard's Understanding of the Eucharist	68
Chapter 7	Girardian Theory and the Eucharist	82
Chapter 8	Scripture and the Eucharist	93
Chapter 9	A Sacrament of Intentional Reconciliation	108
Chapter 10	Epilogue	119
	Bibliography	123

Chapter One Introduction

The brain is hardwired to mimic others. Articles in psychology, biology, and evolutionary biology all confirm that mimicry is the fundamental way that human beings interact and learn. The idea is quite simple. When in social contact with one another, humans unconsciously copy the movements and even vocal patterns of those with whom they interact. Infants mirror their caregivers and thus develop empathy and a gradual sense of self. When lovers grow in intimacy, they begin to unconsciously imitate the gestures and actions of one another. As research in this area has increased, scientists have discovered that portions of the brain, now labeled mirror neurons, specifically work to reinforce these behaviors. In fact, many scientists now believe that humans have entire “neural networks that activate when we perform an action or experience an emotion, and also when we observe someone else performing an action or experiencing an emotion. This might explain why mental states are contagious.”¹ Human beings are designed to imitate one another consciously and to mirror others unconsciously. In imitating and mirroring each other, homo sapiens learn what it is to be human.

Even more fascinating, evolutionary thinkers increasingly believe that this process of mirroring connects to the desire to tell stories. People tell stories as a way “to practice key skills of human social life.”² The progression goes something like this: babies start off learning by watching and mirroring others and then continue to grow through stories which teach with both good and tragic examples. As Jonathan Gottschall says poetically,

¹ Jonathan Gottschall, *The Storytelling Animal: How Stories Make Us Human* (Boston: Mariner Books, 2013), 60.

² *Ibid.*, 57.

“We are, as a species, addicted to story. Even when the body goes to sleep, the mind stays up all night, telling itself stories.”³ Humans constantly mirror each other unconsciously, choose to imitate each other consciously, and then try to work out the meanings and possible repercussions of these interactions through story. The theory is that stories serve as training simulators where homo sapiens “learn about human culture and psychology, without the potentially staggering costs of having to gain this experience firsthand.”⁴

It is fitting then that René Noël Théophile Girard’s *mimetic theory*⁵ began as literary criticism. In his first work, *Deceit, Desire and the Novel* (1961), Girard demonstrates that great literature exposes our desires as not wholly our own and reveals that this interaction is filled with envy, jealousy, rivalry, and violence. For almost fifty years, he developed, revised, and amended his theory on mirroring across the disciplines of psychology, anthropology, literature, and religion. In each field he demanded a serious and critical approach to his work as well as the stories he examined. Whether analyzing the Oedipal myth, reflecting on the works of Freud and Nietzsche, or exploring the meaning of the Passion narratives, Girard sought the story behind the story -- the meta-narrative that drove human relationships. In the stories of fiction as well as the stories of faith, Girard believed that the careful critic could discern the origins of human culture as well as the means to overcome humanity’s violent tendencies.

³ Ibid., xiv.

⁴ Ibid., 28.

⁵ In his various writing, Girard would italicize key words like *mimetic desire* and *mimetic rivalry* among many others. In his earliest work, he chose to capitalize specific words involved in his theory like Self, Mediator, and Other. For the purpose of clarity and continuity, the practice will be continued in this work.

For Girard, the human utilization of mirroring leads to violent results. The central concept is that humans learn through interaction and mimicking. He understands that humans learn from one another through a process he calls *mimetic theory*. In that process of learning by mirroring others, homo sapiens discover what is desirable. The key result is that humans borrow their desires from each other. Said differently, objects become more desirable as others want them. Known as *mimetic desire*, this process can lead to competition which, if not carefully controlled, will lead to *mimetic rivalry* where the object of desire is gradually forgotten and people become obsessed with competing with one another. The only solution for this rivalry and growing violent contagion in the community is violence focused on a victim or conversion to a different relationship with Self and the Other. Over the course of his career, Girard refined his theory into a mimetic cycle:

Proliferation of scandals [which] leads sooner or later into an acute crisis at the climax of which unanimous violence is set off against the single victim, the victim selected by the entire community. This event reestablishes the former order or establishes a new one out of the old. Then the new order itself is destined someday to enter into crisis, and so on.⁶

Girard argues that all of culture is based on this violent and eternally repeating pattern.

The stories contained in the Bible interrupt the cycle by revealing its very existence. The advent of the innocent victim in both the Old and New Testament helps peel back the veil covering the evil in the system until Jesus becomes the final, revelatory sacrifice. With the Passion narrative, the world now knows and understands the scapegoat mechanism that has so long dominated human culture and relationships.

⁶ René Girard, *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning*, trans. James G. Williams (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2001), 30.

Girard is particularly concerned with the concept of sacrifice as understood in this context. Sacrifice is not something done to appease an angry God or to atone for the sins of the community. Instead, sacrifice is an imperfectly understood and definitively human understanding of how to control violence through the use of violence. Girard proclaims God as one who is wholly non-violent and condemning of sacrifice. In essence, he understands his work as more anthropological than theological. In other words, Girard reads the Bible and his work as explaining human culture first and God second. His focus is first on the *mimetic cycle* and the violence that permeates society and secondarily on Jesus' teaching and work which reveals the cycle. While his theory of atonement certainly reverses much of the negative connotations of an angry God, the key unexplored territory is how the church understands this theory in the context of the Eucharist and in the worship of the community.

Soteriology is one of the animating features of Girard's theory and is best understood in the context of communion. John McIntyre, a Scottish theologian, makes a compelling case that the church has always worked out God's saving actions in the context of the Eucharistic prayer. Different early writers certainly posited theories about how Jesus saves, but the Church councils chose not to make a definitive statement. McIntyre argues that the surprising lack of concern on such an elemental issue of the faith rests with the community gathered in prayer:

The first, and very important reason for the absence of a full blown soteriological definition comparable to the Trinitarian and Christological creeds, from the early Canons of the Church, must surely be the centrality not only of a soteriological theme, but of the direct connection between the death of Christ and the forgiveness of sins, to all the eucharistic liturgies of the church.⁷

⁷ John McIntyre, *The Shape of Soteriology* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1992), 20.

In other words, the action of remembering Christ's Last Supper in community was where the church's understanding of atonement was enacted and received.

The great Eucharistic prayers of the church always feature a storytelling element where Jesus' crucifixion is explained or at least remembered as part of God's greater action. Echoing Jonathan Gottschall, the church tells the story again and again to find deeper meaning, unexpected connections, and some halting understanding around sacrifice and the Last Supper. For Dom Gregory Dix, the tale is retold and specific parallels made in order to reinforce Jesus' lessons taught on the last night of his earthly existence:

The Messianic, redeeming, sacrificial significance which the whole primitive Jewish church unhesitatingly saw, first in His death, and then in His Person and whole action towards God, is the proof that this meaning was grasped by that church primarily through the eucharist, which arose directly out of what he has said and done at the last supper. There and there alone, He had explicitly attached that particular meaning to His own death and office.⁸

G.K.A. Bell, the Bishop of Derby, makes a similar and more direct declaration in *Mysterium Christi*: "the doctrine of sacrifice (and of atonement) was not read *into* the Last Supper; it was read out of it."⁹ The five biblical narratives related to the institution of communion have plenty to say about soteriology and are remembered in the church with prayers over bread and wine.

A more nuanced reading of McIntyre's short chapter reveals an understanding that the soteriology contained in the Eucharistic prayers was an experience received by

⁸ Gregory Dix, *The Shape of the Liturgy*, Third Impression (Westminster: Dacre Press, 1947), 77, quoted in John McIntyre, *The Shape of Soteriology* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1992), 9.

⁹ G.K.A. Bell, *Mysterium Christi* (London, 1930) quoted in John McIntyre, *The Shape of Soteriology*, (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1992) 9.

the community in worship. While this theory is more difficult to test, the concept does explain why the church never formalized a doctrine of soteriology. The Church did not feel a need to explain how Jesus saved because they experienced the benefits of that salvation in the breaking of the bread.

The invitation then is to explore soteriology in the context of the Eucharist. McIntyre argues that “the understanding of the death of Christ, especially in relation to the forgiveness of human sin, lay at the heart of the eucharist.”¹⁰ When theories of atonement and salvation are explored in the context of worship, the consequence is a reexamination and deepened understanding of the benefits of communion. Such exploration produces an articulation of these benefits very much in line with the definition of the Eucharist which is spelled out in the catechism of the 1979 *Book of Common Prayer*: “the forgiveness of our sins, the strengthening of our union with Christ and one another, and the foretaste of the heavenly banquet which is our nourishment in eternal life.”¹¹ This paper seeks first an understanding of the anthropological and ultimately soteriological works of René Girard and then examines briefly Anglican Eucharistic theology. Ultimately, both of those concepts must be held up to the biblical witness of Jesus’ meal ministry and the Last Supper.

Much ink and blood has been spilled on what happens to the elements of bread and wine. Almost as much has been used to debate how Jesus saves. When brought together, Girard and the Eucharist wrestle with the deeper question, “Why?” Not simply the questions of “why did Jesus die?” or “why do we tell the story to understand it?” The

¹⁰ Ibid., 10.

¹¹ *The Book of Common Prayer* (New York: Seabury Press, 1979), 859-60.

question instead revolves around the meaning of a demonstrative pronoun that has no clear antecedent. What did Jesus mean when he says, “Do *this* in remembrance of me?” What does Jesus ask us to do in his memory? Girard’s theory features a surprising and challenging revelation which the Anglican Communion has echoed without realizing Christ’s call for deeper action.

Chapter Two

Mimetic Desire and Mimetic Rivalry

The backbone of René Girard's theory is *mimetic desire*. Drawing on the psychological concept of mirroring, he understands that humans do more than simply imitate each other. They copy, emulate, mimic, and follow each other. In short, there is absolutely nothing, "or next to nothing, in human behavior that is not learned, and all learning is based on imitation."¹² On an elemental level, homo sapiens learn what is safe and what is unsafe by carefully watching one another. Which food is edible, how to prepare it, where to live, what is needed for a deep winter, etc., are just a quick list of examples learned through imitating one another. Girard realized that the effect went beyond the basic processes of life and infiltrated all aspects of existence: "I was incapable of seeing a thing unless a desire to do so had been aroused in me by reading."¹³ Worse still, he noted that this desire could be compounded. If more people wanted the same object, then it became even more desirable. Regardless of the object of affection, "every desire redoubles when it is seen to be shared."¹⁴ Girard discerned a greater and more invasive force at work than simple imitation or mirroring. *Mimetic desire* is how humans acquire information and knowledge and is also part of a larger and more complex system of human interaction.

¹² René Girard, *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World*, trans. Stephen Bann and Michael Metteer (Stanford: Stanford Univ. Press, 1987), 7.

¹³ René Girard. *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel*, trans. Yvonne Freccero (Baltimore: John Hopkins Univ. Press, 1965), 31.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 99.

For Girard, *mimetic desire* always involves at least three parts: the Self, the Object, and the Mediator. The Self or the protagonist in the novel is always impacted by an Object of affection or desire. In most instances, the novel is how one person pursues the Object of her desire. For Girard only the greatest authors reveal that there is a Mediator who has shaped and molded that desire and done so quite plainly:

Each and every time Proustian desire is the triumph of the suggestion over impression. At its birth, in other words at the very source of its subjectivity, one always finds a victorious Other. It is true that the source of the ‘transfiguration’ is within us, but the spring gushes forth only when the mediator strikes the rock with his magic wand. Never does the narrator simply wish to play, to read a book, to contemplate a work of art; it is always the pleasure he reads on the faces of the players, a conversation, or a first reading which releases the work of the imagination and provokes desire The interior garden so often praised by the critics is therefore never a solitary garden.¹⁵

The key to understanding *mimetic desire* is the Mediator, the person who directly or indirectly creates the desire through their actions. The power of this Mediator is extraordinary. By simply expressing an interest in an object or event, the Mediator can transform that Object in the eyes of the Self or protagonist. What before had no impact on the protagonist can suddenly become an obsession with transformative and ethereal results. In reflecting on Proust’s *Remembrance of Things Past*, Girard notes: “the narrator experiences an intense desire to see Berma, the famous actress, perform. The spiritual benefits he hopes to gain from the performances are of a truly sacramental type. The imagination has done its work. The Object is transfigured.”¹⁶ *Mimetic desire* transcends simple imitation. A desire shared between two people results in the very

¹⁵ Ibid., 33.

¹⁶ Ibid., 29.

transformation of an Object as well as in the characters involved. Even more, the Object becomes “sacramental”, an outward and visible sign of a, inward and significant change. The impact on the Object, the Self, and the Mediator is profound. As Girard proclaims simply but powerfully, “mimesis is what the modern mind sees it as, the cohesive force *par excellence*.”¹⁷ The triangle of *mimetic desire* reveals that homo sapiens are elementally a communal animal.

Girard holds up his theory against the modern ideal of the original individual. If the statement “our neighbor is our model for our desires” is true, then the high value placed on originality is false.¹⁸ It is a logical fallacy to presume that someone can be completely original if they have learned who they are through *mimetic desire*. Contemporary society will proclaim that heroes never imitate anyone. In response, Girard proclaims, “our heroes are false. They are false because they flatter our illusion of autonomy.”¹⁹ Instead, modern heroes are like anyone else who attempts to be independent in a communal world that is communally learned if not communally understood:

. . . the process of mediation creates a very vivid impression of autonomy and spontaneity precisely when we are no longer autonomous and spontaneous. Recapturing the past is to welcome a truth which most men spend their lives trying to escape, to recognize that one has always copied Others in order to seem original in their eyes and in one’s own. Recapturing the past is to destroy a little of one’s pride.²⁰

¹⁷ Girard, *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World*, 17.

¹⁸ René Girard, *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning*, 10.

¹⁹ Girard, *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel*, 258.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 38.

The great irony in the modern pursuit of originality or independence is that humans must mimic one another to achieve it, essentially a conformity to non-conformity. Girard says more bluntly, “the will to autonomy gives rise to slavery.”²¹ Consciously or unconsciously every human being mimics another. With the ideal of being original, autonomous, or independent, the individual must pursue an impossible concept and ultimately become a slave to the ideas of others.

Unpacking this problem over several works, Girard discovers an insidious shadow side to this false ideal, “all the heroes surrender their most fundamental individual prerogative, that of choosing their own desire.”²² In surrendering that desire, those heroes suffer “the anguish of one who is set apart, the individual being.”²³ The concept of the autonomous human being that never needs another creates an isolated soul who is alone in the world. Even to ask for help proves that one is not reaching the ideal of originality and independence. The effects can be devastating:

Why is there this illusion of solitude which doubles the agony? Why can men no longer alleviate their suffering by sharing it? Why is the truth about all men locked up in the deepest recesses of each individual consciousness? Each individual discovers in the solitude of his consciousness that the promise is false but no one is about to universalize his experience.²⁴

Girard proclaims that the concept of the autonomous individual is a logical fallacy and, worse still, prevents humanity from alleviating the suffering this ideal creates. The process creates additional suffering because it isolates the individual while others appear to be together.

²¹ Ibid., 259.

²² Ibid., 55.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid., 57.

The problem of this false ideal is made plain where Dostoyevsky succinctly proclaims, “*I am alone, and they are together.*”²⁵ The result is isolation, alienation, and divorce from the community. In many cases, the ideal of autonomy pushes humanity to act out in desperate violence:

The more desperately we seek to worship ourselves and to be good ‘individualists,’ the more compelled we are to worship our rivals in a cult that turns to hatred. The conflicts resulting from this double idolatry of self and other are the principal source of human violence.²⁶

These impossible ideals not only isolate they ultimately seek to destroy the Other in the process. As Girard proclaims, “the romantic has put into circulation a group of symbols and images intended not for communion but for universal separation.”²⁷ The desire to be unique and individual is thus a fool’s errand that isolates the individual from the community and from themselves. Said differently, “we do not know how to join in Dostoyevsky’s laughter because we do not know how to laugh at ourselves.”²⁸ The laughter can only come from realizing the foolishness and absurdity of becoming the ideal individual. We should laugh at ourselves for believing that we can act as an island with the realization we always need others. As communal animals that learn through mimesis, from mimicking one another, all we have comes from someone else. By denying that truth, we become sad, isolated individuals doomed to ignorance. Or worse still, we become caught in a vicious cycle of *mimetic desire* and violence.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Girard, *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning*, 11.

²⁷ Girard, *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel*, 261.

²⁸ Ibid., 262.

Girard claims that *mimetic desire*, and the interactions that it creates, drive much of human existence. He believes that the Gospels understand those human relationships deeply:

The Gospels reveal all kinds of human relationships that at first seem incomprehensible and fundamentally irrational. These can and must ultimately be reduced to a single unifying factor: mimeticism. Mimeticism is the original source of all man's troubles, desires, and rivalries, his tragic and grotesque misunderstandings, the source of all disorder and therefore equally of all order through the mediation of scapegoats.²⁹

Mimetic desire is driven by the triangle between Self, Mediator, and Object. The spiral that springs from this grouping ultimately drives humanity. The first step or part of that process is "*acquisitive mimesis*, that is, the object that the two mimetic rivals attempt to wrest from one another because they designate it as desirable to one another."³⁰ Since the Mediator has expressed a desire for an Object, the Self then discovers an equal desire to obtain the Object. In other words, "rivalry does not arise because of the fortuitous convergence of two desires on a single object; rather, *the subject desires the object because the rival desires it.*"³¹ However, what at first appears symbiotic gradually becomes oppositional. The Self and the Mediator begin to compete with one another for the Object. This competition for the same Object is called *mimetic rivalry*.

Mimetic rivalry grows as two people value the same Object. Girard notes that as the rivalry grows over the Object a curious pattern develops, "the value of a relic depends on its closeness to the saint . . . thus desire always increases in intensity as the Mediator

²⁹ René Girard, *The Scapegoat*, trans. by Yvonne Freccero (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1986), 165.

³⁰ Girard, *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World*, 15.

³¹ René Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, trans. by Patrick Gregory (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1977), 145.

approaches the desiring subject.”³² The physical and emotional proximity of the Mediator directly impacts the conflict. The more the Mediator desires the Object, the more the Self desires it. The vicious cycle grows and grows until there is a bitter realization, “the revered object has come close; it seems within reach of the hand; only one obstacle remains between subject and object – the mediator himself.”³³ The Self and the Mediator come into closer and closer competition for the same Object until their desires are gradually transformed. The Self and the Mediator do all they can to obtain the Object until the Object is removed gradually from the equation as the Self focuses on the Mediator. The result is conflict on multiple levels.

As the distance between mediator and subject decreases, the difference diminishes, the comprehension becomes more acute and the hatred more intense. It is always his own desire that the subject condemns in the Other without knowing it. Hatred is individualistic. It nourishes fiercely the illusion of absolute difference between the Self and the Other from which nothing separates it. Indignant comprehension is therefore an imperfect comprehension -- not nonexistent as some moralists claim, but imperfect, for the subject does not recognize in the Other the void gnawing at himself. He makes of him a monstrous divinity. The subject’s indignant knowledge of the Other returns in a circle to strike him when he is least expecting it. This psychological circle is inscribed in the triangle of desire. Most of our ethical judgments are rooted in hatred of the mediator, a rival whom we copy.³⁴

Understanding this movement from *mimetic desire* to *mimetic rivalry* is key to understanding the process that follows. Girard sees a process where the shared desire becomes so great it ultimately destroys or ignores the Object, “this adoring hatred, this admiration that insults and even kills its object, are the paroxysms of the conflict caused

³² Ibid., 83.

³³ Ibid., 85.

³⁴ Ibid., 73.

by *internal mediation*.³⁵ The purpose for this turn has nothing to do with the Object. To focus on the Object is to miss the point of mimesis as a phenomenon. *Mimetic desire* is a process that understands that “the impulse towards the object is ultimately an impulse toward the mediator.”³⁶ Once the underlying factor is understood as a conflict and interaction between the Self and the Mediator, then the conflict and rivalry that can result becomes comprehensible. As the two come into ever greater rivalry, a moment is reached where they come face to face.

Again, reflecting on Proust’s *Remembrance of Things Past*, Girard sees this process clearly:

The event is truly a revolution in the existence of the subject. All the elements of this existence seem drawn to the mediator as if to a magnet; he determines their hierarchy and even their meaning. Thus we can readily understand why the hero does all he can to put off the experience which is bound to be very disruptive . . . he experiences the inevitable disappointment. He finds the same mediocrity, the same clichés as in other salons . . . Marcel searches for an answer which would reconcile the sacred prestige of the mediator and the negative experience of possession. He almost manages to convince himself, that first evening, that it is his presence which has profaned and interrupted the aristocratic mysteries whose celebration cannot be resumed until he leaves.³⁷

Mimetic rivalry is a conflict which creates chaos. All of the ideals in pursuing the Object and even in vaguely recognizing the Mediator that were raised up in the Self are torn away. As the Mediator comes into the orbit of the Self, all differentiation is stripped away in both. The two discover that they are more alike than they knew. They become *mimetic doubles* as they “forget the object of their quarrel; they turn against each other

³⁵ Ibid., 42.

³⁶ Ibid., 10.

³⁷ Ibid., 90.

with rage in their heart. From now on each sets upon the other as a *mimetic rival*.³⁸ The Self and Mediator now become locked in conflict directly. Each action requires a reaction, a mimetic response as it were. What was once a communal process of learning, now becomes the individual cycle of hatred. Girard later declares that *mimetic rivalry* “could also be called envy or jealousy.”³⁹

The response to *mimetic rivalry* that Girard observes in human society is an escalating pattern of vengeance. The *mimetic doubles* become locked in conflict. Gradually, other people are brought into this conflict through *mimetic desire* until the entire community is eventually engulfed in the conflict. This cauldron of anger, vengeance, competition, and rivalry is what drives humanity to outright action and violence. For Girard, “mimetic violence is the heart of the system.”⁴⁰ The strange, almost incomprehensible insanity of the mob can always be brought back to *mimetic desire* leading to *mimetic rivalry* which results in *mimetic conflict* until the entire system reaches a dangerous boiling point. For Girard, what was previously a mystery in society can be explained and understood.

As this conflict grows in intensity and feeds on different slights across the community, society gradually experiences a loss of differentiation. The rules and laws that previously governed appropriate behavior and attitudes are broken. Girard understood those laws, both civil and religious, as a means to keep violence and *mimetic rivalry* in check. As a result, “the transgression of religious prohibitions does in fact

³⁸ Girard, *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning*, 22.

³⁹ René Girard, *Reading the Bible with René Girard: Conversations with Steven E. Berry*, edited by Michael Hardin (Lancaster, PA: JDL Press, 2015), 80.

⁴⁰ Girard, *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World*, 13.

increase the risk of renewing the cycle of *mimetic rivalry* and vengeance . . . the infraction of any particular rule, no matter how absurd it may seem objectively, constitutes a challenge to the entire community.”⁴¹ A simple mistake can lead to a misunderstanding which can begin a chain of events that results in a dissolution of the boundaries of society. The process is a vicious and virtually unconquerable cycle: “For if all violence involves a loss of difference, all losses of difference also involve violence; and this violence is contagious.”⁴² While this may begin with a crime as simple as shoplifting, the inability for an independent authority like the church or the state to deal with it means a gradual and total loss of faith in those institutions. The result is a *sacrificial crisis* where the old forms and methods of dealing with violence lose their ability to contain it.

The *sacrificial crisis*, that is, the disappearance of the sacrificial rites, coincides with the disappearance of the difference between impure violence and purifying violence. When this difference has been effaced, purification is no longer possible and impure, contagious, reciprocal violence spreads throughout the community.⁴³

The *sacrificial crisis* is at a point of no return. The old methods of containing vengeance are lost. Human society begins to break down as all of the rules and regulations disappear in a search for an equilibrium that is not coming. Society is on the brink of uncontained violence and an endless vengeance which could consume all.

The great irony of this disaster is that no one wants this conflict. Girard notes wryly, “it is not enough to convince their fellows that violence is detestable – for it is

⁴¹ Ibid., 41.

⁴² Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, 281.

⁴³ Ibid., 49.

precisely because they detest violence that men make a duty of vengeance.”⁴⁴ The great evil of this situation is that vengeance is an all-consuming force. In any fight or conflict, regardless of location or intensity deals with the problem of “reciprocity . . . at least half the combatants always believe that justice has been done since they have been avenged, while the other half try to reestablish that same justice by striking those who are provisionally satisfied with a blow that will finally achieve their vengeance.”⁴⁵ Girard posits that there was an early human community that experienced an endless cycle of violence thanks to *mimetic desire*, *mimetic rivalry*, and *mimetic conflict* or vengeance. Somewhere in the mists of pre-history homo sapiens almost wiped each other out as they sought to take an eye for an eye.⁴⁶ As a result, there is a natural fear when society begins to break down in the middle of *mimetic conflict*. People ultimately “feel powerless when confronted with the eclipse of culture; they are disconcerted by the immensity of the disaster.”⁴⁷ After all, stopping another human being might well be possible, but as the conflict progresses “vengeance itself must be restrained.”⁴⁸

Writing as a young academic, René Girard charted his idea of *mimetic desire* across various works of fiction. He recorded the first half of his theory, *mimetic desire*, *mimetic rivalry*, and *mimetic violence*, in the work *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel* (1961).

⁴⁴ Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, 15.

⁴⁵ Girard, *The Scapegoat*, 86.

⁴⁶ Sarah Coakley and others have taken umbrage over Girard’s concept of a violent, founding moment. Girard countered that he still understood creation as good but merely understands this mysterious, violent beginning as coming after the Fall narrative and the introduction of sin in the community. I have chosen not to get drawn into this debate since the purpose of this paper is how Christ works to save us from violence and sin instead of how do we understand its origins.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 14.

⁴⁸ Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, 17.

The works he reviewed did not feature a move towards a victim or a scapegoat. Instead, Girard noted that great fiction featured a significant change in the characters -- one that fundamentally changed the narrative. At the time, he was an agnostic, yet he understood the possible solution to the *mimetic crisis* in terms of conversion. He first notes that one option is to clearly and definitively choose the Mediator:

Just as three-dimensional perspective directs all the lines of a picture toward a fixed point, either beyond or in front of a canvas, Christianity directs existence toward a vanishing point, either toward God or toward the Other. Choice always involves choosing a model, and true freedom lies in the basic choice between a human or a divine model.⁴⁹

The other option is for the Self or protagonist to go through a journey of discovery. In that process, the hero discovers the reality of *mimetic desire* and *mimetic conflict*. He chooses to free himself from the tyranny of *mimetic rivalry* and seeks a greater knowledge of Self and the Other. For Girard, conversion can be understood as follows, “to triumph over self-centeredness is to get away from oneself and make contact with others but in another sense it also implies a greater intimacy with oneself and a withdrawal from others.”⁵⁰ The hero is transformed by coming to a knowledge of Self and a healthier view of her place in the world. Through this hard-won revelation, the protagonist of the novel transcends and escapes the world of cyclical violence and *mimetic desire*. According to Girard, conversion is a reorientation of Self and relation to the Other.

Can one maintain that all these conversions have the same meaning? Two fundamental categories seem to be distinguishable from the outset: those conclusions which portray a solitary hero who rejoins other men and those which portray a ‘gregarious’ hero gaining solitude If our interpretation

⁴⁹ Girard, *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel*, 58.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 298.

of conversion is correct, if it puts an end to triangular desire, then its effects cannot be expressed either in terms of absolute solitude or in terms of a return to the world True conversion engenders a new relationship to others and to oneself.⁵¹

All great novels feature this conversion. Girard concedes that many literary critics balk at this movement and declared the novels destroyed on the final pages. Meanwhile, Girard understood this as the great solution to *mimetic desire*. Where there was once conflict and violence, “the novelistic dénouement is a reconciliation between the individual and the world, between man and the sacred . . . the theme of reconciliation.”⁵² Girard’s concept of conversion would help him develop his key to understanding how to provide an alternative to the cycle of violence that is central to *mimetic desire*. The story, as always, provides the way.

⁵¹ Ibid., 294-5.

⁵² Ibid., 308.

Chapter Three The Scapegoat

With an understanding of *mimetic desire* growing, Girard began to analyze scripture which gradually led to his conversion in 1961. He developed an understanding of violence within the salvation stories that followed his literary analysis of great fiction. The narrative, in time, gave him a solution for the collective anger in the system. Caught in a web of cyclical violence and vengeance, human beings make a curious and clear choice. Humans choose to reenact the conflict between the several or many and focus on the one: “If *acquisitive mimesis* divides by leading two or more individuals to converge on one and the same object with a view to appropriating it, *conflictual mimesis* will inevitably unify by leading two or more individuals to converge on one and the same adversary that all wish to strike down.”⁵³ Girard initially calls this person the surrogate victim but eventually comes to the more powerfully evocative image of the scapegoat. In order to solve the problem of an undifferentiated society caught in a violent cycle of vengeance, human beings find someone to sacrifice.

The victim is a scapegoat. Everyone has a clear understanding of this expression; no one has any hesitation about its meaning. Scapegoat indicates both the innocence of the victims, the collective polarization in opposition to them, and the collective end result of that polarization. The

⁵³ Girard, *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World*, 26.

persecutors are caught up in the “logic” of the representation of persecution from a persecutor’s standpoint, and they cannot break away.⁵⁴

The interesting logic of Girard’s theory rests in the last full sentence. When humans are caught in the scapegoat mechanism, they become blinded to reality and complete the ritual. The only solution to a loss of differentiation and the escalating violence is the death of the scapegoat.

Even the selection of the victim makes a certain dark sense. Individuals are chosen who cannot retaliate and have no one who can seek vengeance. At the same time, the person must be a part of the community or there is a risk of creating a war with another community. Even if they are innocent they will be accused of various crimes: “In order to blame victims for the loss of distinctions resulting from the crisis, they are accused of crimes that eliminate the distinctions. But in actuality they are identified as victims for persecution because they bear the signs of the victims.”⁵⁵ While the crowds condemn the scapegoat for various crimes, the reality is that the scapegoat is marginal to society yet a part of it. They are chosen precisely because they are different from the mainstream, and “the further one is from normal social status of whatever kind, the greater the risk of persecution. This is easy to see in relation to those at the bottom of the social ladder.”⁵⁶ The scapegoat is therefore someone part of the community but marginal to it, someone with connections but unable to seek vengeance, and someone who is analogous to the victims of a societal breakdown but not one guilty of extreme violence. This understanding of victim selection helps explain the release of Barabbas who is a

⁵⁴ Girard, *The Scapegoat*, 39.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 21.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 18.

known insurrectionist and murderer and the choice of an innocent Jesus (Mark 15:7). Often the scapegoat is at the bottom of the society but, “the odds of a violent death at the hands of a frenzied crowd are statistically greater for the privileged than for any other category. Extreme characteristics ultimately attract collective destruction . . . crowds commonly turn on those who originally held exceptional power over them.”⁵⁷ The scapegoat, once chosen, bears the cumulative weight of all the *mimetic desires*, *mimetic rivalries*, and *mimetic conflicts* of the community. Violence and death is the only solution to this compounded force.

Violence is the secret to religion and to human society in the eyes of René Girard. On this point Girard is so clear and unequivocal that he declares, “Violence and the sacred are inseparable.”⁵⁸ His theory would develop and change over the course of his career and life, but he is crystal clear in his early writings that the term “sacred” should purely be understood as violent sacrifice.⁵⁹ The scapegoat then is part of primitive or archaic religion. Girard understands that the scapegoat mechanism is born from that primordial human society where vengeance could not be abated. Only by collectively choosing a victim and offering them as a sacrifice was society restored to some level of order. The great and dark truth then is that “finding a surrogate victim constitutes a major means, perhaps the sole means, by which men expel from their consciousness the

⁵⁷ Ibid., 19.

⁵⁸ Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, 19.

⁵⁹ While I intellectually understand Girard’s definition, I find his use of the word “sacred” understood purely as sacrifice difficult. In comments a year before his death, he chooses to differentiate between sacred and holy when discussing items set aside for God. For this paper, I live in Girard’s definitions but do so for clarity’s sake over agreement.

truth about their violent nature.”⁶⁰ Said differently, homo sapiens discovered that violence could cast out violence.

Girard calls this strange movement of collective murder *generative violence*. The community comes together and chooses a victim on which to focus their anger, fear, hatred, and ultimately purge themselves of this violence. The sacrifice of this victim appears to solve the crisis therefore “the purpose of the sacrifice is to restore harmony to the community, to reinforce the social fabric.”⁶¹ In other words, the purpose is not a random act of murder but a deliberate action and choice that has a benefit for the larger community.

At present we have good reason to believe that the violence directed against the surrogate victim might well be radically generative in that, by putting an end to the vicious and destructive cycle of violence, it simultaneously initiates another and constructive cycle, that of the sacrificial rite – which protects the community from that same violence and allows culture to flourish.⁶²

Ultimately, *generative violence* is the mistaken belief that the only way to drive out violent, undifferentiated chaos and restore order is more violence.

Part of the mystery of the *mimetic cycle* and the scapegoat mechanism is that the crowds do not fully comprehend this process. The community only knows that they are in crisis and must solve the problems of violence and a lack of social order. Borrowing Aristotle’s critique of tragedy, Girard uses “the word *katharsis* [which] refers primarily to the mysterious benefits that accrue to the community upon the death of a human

⁶⁰ Ibid., 83.

⁶¹ Ibid., 8.

⁶² Ibid., 93.

katharma or *pharmkos* [scapegoat].”⁶³ Anthropologists and theologians have long opined on the connection between worship and the theater. Here Girard makes that connection explicit, “Tragedy thus shares a fundamental experience with ritual. Both have advanced to the very brink of that terrible abyss wherein all differences disappear.”⁶⁴ Both also experience an emotional release and a return to natural order. Because the community shares that experience and a return to order, the scapegoat is often then revered for the gift of order. Girard calls this *sacralizing* the scapegoat. What was once an outsider, an evil infiltrating the community that must be destroyed, becomes a blessing and divinity to the same community for the gift of returning order. For many this complete reversal looks like insanity and chaos, but “once we have recognized the role of generative violence, it becomes clear why the sacred is able to include within itself so many opposites”⁶⁵

The hallmark of the scapegoat mechanism is the benefit to society. If there were no accrued results, then the scapegoat process would have no point and ultimately be murder. Girard proclaims that the offering of the victim “represents less of a loss of life than a return of life and the founding of a new community.”⁶⁶ Here is the key to understanding all of human society according to Girard. The community is not born from altruistic goals but as a benefit of *generative violence*. Girard notes that the Bible even proclaims that after killing his brother Abel, Cain goes and starts a human city.

How does Cain go about founding the first culture? The text itself does not pose this question, but it gives an answer by virtue of focusing on two

⁶³ Ibid., 287.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 292.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 258.

⁶⁶ Girard, *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World*, 39.

themes: the first is the murder of Abel; the second is Cain as the founder of the first culture. This culture is clearly presented as the direct extension of the murder, and it cannot be distinguished from the ritual, nonvengeful developments stemming from this murder.⁶⁷

Once humans discovered a way to contain the contagion of *mimetic desire*, *mimetic rivalry*, and *mimetic conflict* with the scapegoat mechanism and *generative violence*, culture developed and flourished. Sacrifice, and specifically the idea of a scapegoat defusing a violent situation, is the heart of society:

Sacrifice lies behind everything distinguishing humans from animals, behind everything enabling us to substitute properly the human desire for animal instinct, namely mimetic desire. If becoming human involves, among other things, acquiring *mimetic desire*, it is obvious that humans could not exist in the beginning without sacrificial institutions that repress and moderate the kind of conflict that is inevitable with the working of *mimetic desire*.⁶⁸

Girard almost gleefully points out that this process is far from the ideals of the Enlightenment and the primacy of reason for human society. In fact, if *mimetic theory* and the scapegoat mechanism are accurate, then “the true guide of human beings is not abstract reason but ritual.”⁶⁹ Even more, this is a ritual only partially understood and haltingly acknowledged. He then takes a further step by proclaiming that “religion is simply another term for the surrogate victim, who reconciles mimetic oppositions and assigns a sacrificial goal to the mimetic impulse.”⁷⁰ Girard will clarify this statement by saying that archaic religion uses the scapegoat mechanism. He sees a great role for Judaism and Christianity in this process.

⁶⁷ Girard, *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning*, 44.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 90.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 92.

⁷⁰ Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, 307.

The reality that the community does not understand what they are doing is critical to the movement from vengeance to the scapegoat. Girard says this in different ways but always maintains that “sacrifice contains an element of mystery”⁷¹ and that the “sacrificial process requires a certain degree of *misunderstanding*.”⁷² If the community realizes that they are offering up an innocent bystander, then vengeance could be ignited and the violence could begin anew. Even worse, if the community understands what they are doing, then it cannot receive the benefits of *generative violence* and the conflict will worsen and seek more victims.

Its vitality as an institution depends on its ability to conceal the displacement upon which the rite is based. It must never lose sight entirely, however, of the original object, or cease to be aware of the act of transference from that object to the surrogate victim; without that awareness no substitution can take place and the sacrifice loses all efficacy.⁷³

In many instances, there is a willful ignorance. The chaos and loss of order in society is so terrifying that the community chooses to ignore the reality of the victim to escape the violence and loss of differentiation. Humans so yearn for a return to order that they choose to ignore logic and reason and instead focus on the positive and hoped for results of a scapegoat -- a return to order. With this chosen ignorance in mind, the scapegoat mechanism becomes more clear:

The victim is not a substitute for some particularly endangered individual, nor is it offered up to some individual of particularly bloodthirsty temperament. Rather, it is a substitute for all the members of the community, offered up by the members themselves. The sacrifice serves to protect the entire community from *its own* violence; it prompts the entire community to choose victims from outside itself.⁷⁴

⁷¹ Ibid., 1.

⁷² Ibid., 7.

⁷³ Ibid., 5.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 8.

For Girard, this concept of *generative violence* operates as the basis for all human society. Violence casts out violence so that the community can survive the *mimetic crisis* of vengeance. Culture can flourish in the restored order thanks to sacrifice, and thus “the unanimous mimeticism of the scapegoat is the true ruler of human society.”⁷⁵

Archaic religion takes part in this process. In some cultures, it literally sacrifices the human or *pharmakos* or scapegoat while in other contexts it offers up an animal sacrifice in place of the firstborn. Because the process is filled with mystery and essentially unrecognized, the religious community was charged with solving the problem of vengeance. In this context of offering up a scapegoat to violent sacrifice, Girard can declare that, “*the sacred is violence . . . [and while] religion is entirely concerned with peace, the means it had of bringing it about are never free of sacrificial violence.*”⁷⁶ These archaic religions from almost every culture continued using the scapegoat mechanism. There was a deep need to keep violence and vengeance at bay and an even deeper need to keep the details obscure. The result is countless rituals and rites that enact the scapegoat mechanism for the benefit of all.

Early in his career Girard rather gloomily declared, “Given the fundamental importance to mankind of the transformation of bad violence into good and the equally fundamental inability of men to solve the mystery of this transformation, it is not surprising that men are doomed to ritual.”⁷⁷ The rites operate to remind the community of the initial *mimetic crisis* without having to endure the cycle of violence, the loss of

⁷⁵ Girard, *The Scapegoat*, 145.

⁷⁶ Girard, *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World*, 32.

⁷⁷ Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, 115.

differentiation, and the chaos that ensues. In many instances, the sacrifice is even reenacted instead of offering up a human or lamb. In Girard's mind, the purpose is clear, the "*Rite* is the reenactment of mimetic crises in a spirit of voluntary religious and social collaboration, a reenactment in order to reactivate the scapegoat mechanism for the benefit of society rather than for the detriment of the victim who is perpetually sacrificed."⁷⁸ This understanding of archaic religion, of perpetually sacrificing the victim, will come into play again with the medieval understanding of Christ's sacrifice in the context of the Eucharist. Religion must walk a fine line here. The *mimetic crisis* and the scapegoat mechanism must be reenacted to preserve the order and hold violence at bay, but the details must be obscured enough to prevent the community from fully understanding the process and revealing the murder present in the system. On the one hand, "If ritual imitation no longer recalls precisely what it is imitating, if the secret of the primordial events has been allowed to slip from its memory, then the rite involves a form of delusion that has never subsequently been understood" and becomes ineffective.⁷⁹ On the other hand, if the community begins to fully comprehend the details of *mimetic desire*, *mimetic rivalry*, *mimetic conflict*, and the scapegoat mechanism, then the benefits are lost and the community is thrust into a new crisis and the rite becomes ineffective.

Religion must condemn violence even as religion and culture benefit from *generative violence*. The result is a fascinating process where each generation must condemn violence even as they benefit from it and often engage in it. The obfuscation of

⁷⁸ Girard, *The Scapegoat*, 140.

⁷⁹ Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, 103.

truth is part of the process. Girard notes this cycle powerfully when Jesus condemns the Pharisees for the murder of the prophets in Matthew 23: 29-32: “In the murder of the Prophets people refused to acknowledge their own violence and cast it off from themselves . . . paradoxically, it is in the very wish to cause a break that the continuity between fathers and sons is maintained.”⁸⁰ Each generation claims that they would not have engaged in the scapegoat mechanism, would not have committed such violence, would not have killed. Yet they are caught in violence and living in a society based on violence and sustained by violence which must be obscured. This willful ignorance connects each generation with those that came before, such that “the whole of human culture is based on the mythic process of conjuring away man’s violence by endlessly projecting it upon new victims.”⁸¹ The result is a never-ending cycle of mimetic violence which leads to a scapegoat. Because no one is willing to name or understand a different process it continues unabated. In archaic religion, mythology and even much of modern culture, the refusal to take ownership in the process of *generative violence* means “that the persecutors’ accounts of persecution are never really compromised or threatened.”⁸² If the mechanism is never revealed and there is never a realization of human violence, then the system repeats. This endless cycle is what Jesus condemns in the Pharisees. The same is true today, as “children repeat the crimes of their fathers precisely because they believe that they are morally superior to them. This false difference is already the mimetic illusion of modern individualism.”⁸³ Whether modern individualism or a willful

⁸⁰ Girard, *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World*, 160-1.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 164.

⁸² Girard, *The Scapegoat*, 105.

⁸³ Girard, *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning*, 20.

ignorance of the scapegoat mechanism, society chooses not to understand in order to preserve the power of *generative violence*.

Girard believes religion must work to preserve the *generative violence* that produces culture. Therefore, a trace of “very real violence persists in the rite, and there is no doubt that the rite succeeds at least partially because of grim associations, its lingering fascination; but its essential orientation is peaceful.”⁸⁴ The irony of the situation is that religion wants to preserve the order and peace born from the founding sacrifice but must reenact violence to accrue the benefits. Humanity abhors violence but is caught in this strange cycle of violence casting out violence and can do little to stop it. “This is where *generative violence* plays its role; its basic function is to get rid of the truth, to transpose it beyond the realm of human activity.”⁸⁵ Religion serves as at least a partial shield, preventing understanding of the system to preserve its efficacy. If the truck and trade of archaic religion was the keeping of the sacred, the violent sacrifice to preserve the community, then its role at both the center and the margins of society becomes more understandable.

The modern tendency to minimize religion could well be, paradoxically, the last remnant among us of religion itself in its archaic form, which seeks to keep the sacred at a safe distance. The trivialization of religion reflects a supreme effort to conceal what is at work in all human institutions, the religious avoidance of violence between the members of the same community.⁸⁶

The willful ignorance that preserves the order becomes the norm. Religion makes peace with violence in order to preserve peace.

⁸⁴ Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, 103.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 275.

⁸⁶ Girard, *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning*, 93.

With this definition of religion as keeper of the violent sacred and preserver of society, the now common trend of abandoning faith begins to make sense. The fear of vengeance and reciprocal violence no longer dominates human society thanks to the judicial system and law enforcement programs. The purpose of religion to keep violence at bay is seemingly lost:

Certainly we have no need of religion to help us solve a problem, runaway vengeance, whose very existence eludes us. And because we have no need for it, religion itself appears senseless. The efficiency of our judicial solution conceals the problem, and the elimination of the problem conceals from us the role played by religion.⁸⁷

Girard's argument is that the judicial system's work simply occludes the reality of religion. Because the courts prevent vengeance, society has forgotten that violent reciprocity can become an all-encompassing danger to society. The temptation is to ignore or marginalize religion not realizing the primary importance of the founding mechanism.

After his conversion to Christianity and his greater study of the Bible, Girard came to a different understanding of this process of using violence to quell violence. This cycle in which humanity is chained can be understood as evil. More directly, Girard proclaims, "Satan denotes the founding mechanism itself – the principle of all human community . . . Satan is absolutely identified with the circular mechanisms of violence, with man's imprisonment in cultural or philosophical systems that maintain his *modus vivendi* with violence."⁸⁸ Satan is the force that tricks humanity into believing that peace can only come through *generative violence*. Even more, Girard goes back to his original theory and attaches evil to the process of learning and the growth of rivalry: "Satan could

⁸⁷ Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, 18.

⁸⁸ Girard, *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World*, 162.

be said to incarnate *mimetic desire* were that desire not, by definition, disincarnate.”⁸⁹ Moving from an anthropology to a theology of sorts, Girard works to not give evil any greater weight than necessary or to create a rival to God. Instead, he understands that “the mimetic concept of Satan enables the New Testament to give evil its due without granting it any reality or ontological substance in its own right that would make of Satan any kind of god of evil.”⁹⁰ By defining the *mimetic cycle* and the scapegoat mechanism as not simply evil but Satan himself, Girard is attempting to make a clear delineation of violence. The use of violence, whether generative or vengeful, is not just wrong but against God. Girard sees the problem simply that “whoever uses violence will in turn be used by it.”⁹¹ Violence then is a contagion that must be stopped, an evil that must be opposed, a force that must be overcome.

Even with this definition, violence continues, *generative violence* is still maintained, and culture stands on its violent foundation. Consciously or unconsciously, humanity has come to believe that “everything depends on the sacrifice.”⁹² The process of *generative violence* and the sacralization of the scapegoat have led to two violent theologies which maintain the order:

One of the two great theologies to evolve as a result of the sacralization of the scapegoat: the theology of *divine caprice*. The other theology is *divine anger*, which provides still another solution to the problem that faces religious belief when the victim whom it thinks is truly guilty becomes the means of reconciliation. If those who benefited from the mechanism were

⁸⁹ Girard, *The Scapegoat*, 166.

⁹⁰ Girard, *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning*, 44.

⁹¹ Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, 261.

⁹² Girard, *The Scapegoat*, 63.

able to challenge the scapegoat's responsibility, there would be no reconciliation and no divinity.⁹³

Divine caprice is the concept of a trickster god or a bumbling deity. Like the god Loki in the Norse legends, the trickster god delights in chaos and confusion. He does not always intend evil with his actions but evil often results. As result, things go haywire and someone must set things right. In this theology, a scapegoat must be found to reestablish order. On the other hand, *divine anger* features an otherwise loving god who must be temporarily evil to correct the errors of human ways:

He who loves greatly punishes greatly. The solution, though less happy than the preceding one, is more profound in that it introduces the rare idea among men that their scapegoat is not the only incarnation of violence. The community shares the responsibility for evil with the god; it begins to be guilty of its own disorders. The theology of anger comes very close to the truth, but it is still closely tied to the representation of persecution.⁹⁴

Vengeance is handled by an angry god. In both theologies, violence is still the force *par excellence*. The cycle of violence is maintained even if the second features a partial ownership of guilt by the faithful community shared with a violent god.

Girard has laid out a tight and concrete anthropology where human society learns through *mimetic desire*, becomes competitive and violent with *mimetic rivalry*, loses all concept of differentiation with a *mimetic crisis*, turns in violent unanimity on a scapegoat, and restores order through sacralizing the victim of their violence. This *mimetic cycle* of violence casting out violence Girard has called evil, destructive, generative, and Satan. The question remains, "Is there a way for humanity to break this vicious cycle?"

⁹³ Ibid., 84-5.

⁹⁴ Ibid., 85.

Chapter Four The Passion

For René Girard, the stories of the Bible present a great critique and powerful alternative to *mimetic desire* and the scapegoat mechanism. The Bible presents a movement away from human sacrifice from the binding of Isaac to the offering of animals to the Passover meal. Of course, Girard gets this order slightly wrong since animal sacrifice coexisted with the Seder until the destruction of the second Temple. The great discovery for Girard came from Max Weber who in his work *Ancient Judaism* (1952) comes to the conclusion that “the biblical writers have an undeniable tendency to take the side of the victim on moral grounds, and to spring to the victim’s defense.”⁹⁵ This movement to refuse the willful ignorance of the scapegoat mechanism and to proclaim the innocence of the victim stands alone in human culture. Here is something new that can begin to undo the violent cycle inherent in religion and the sacred. “In myth the expulsions of the hero are justified each time. In the biblical account they never are.

⁹⁵ According to Girard, *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World*, 147.

Collective violence is unjustifiable.”⁹⁶ Gone is the myth of *generative violence*. In its place, the Bible proclaims the innocence of the victim and points the finger at the gathering crowds. Over and over again, in the stories of the patriarchs, the psalms, the suffering servant of Isaiah, and the gospels, the story is told to align with the victims and not the persecutors. The result is that “the world of the Gospel is unique in really problematizing human violence.”⁹⁷

No longer able to ignore or deny their culpability in the scapegoat mechanism, the people come face to face with the evil that ensnares them. Once humanity realizes its guilt, then the theology of the angry god no longer holds sway. Homo sapiens alone are responsible for the violence their desires, rivalries, and competitions create. By refusing to worship or deify victims, the Israelites and the Bible have done something new: “The deity is no longer victimized. For the first time in human history the divine and collective violence are separated from one another.”⁹⁸ For Girard, the great challenge of this revelation is that so many scholars relegate the Bible to the status of myth. The effect is that there is nothing to be learned in the stories and nothing of interest for understanding human culture. Girard responds with great snark, “We might be wise to listen to myths, especially when they contradict ideas that we take for granted.”⁹⁹

Girard does not limit this insight to the New Testament. He detects this pattern of revelation throughout the Bible. The story of Moses is an example of revealing the

⁹⁶ Girard, *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning*, 109.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 184.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 119.

⁹⁹ Girard, *The Scapegoat*, 70.

scapegoat and starting something new as a result, the movement from slaves to freedom both literally and metaphorically:

As he [Moses] himself causes the sacrificial crisis that ravages Egypt (the Ten Plagues), Moses is evidently playing the part of the scapegoat, and the Jewish community around him is associated with this role. So there is something absolutely unique in the founding of Judaism. In order to ‘function’ normally, in the sense of the myths that we have already dealt with here, Exodus would have to be an Egyptian myth; this myth would show us a sacrificial crisis resolved by the expulsion of the trouble-makers, Moses and his companions. Thanks to the expulsion, the order that Moses disturbed would have been re-established in the society of Egypt. We are indeed with this kind of model, but it has been diverted towards the scapegoat, who is not only made human but goes on to form a community of a new type.¹⁰⁰

In other words, Judaism springs from an explicit rejection and critique of the scapegoat mechanism. Girard goes through story after story, looking at Joseph’s innocence despite the charges and the evil of his brothers. The psalms explicitly side with the broken, the lost, the widowed, and the orphaned. Even Jonah can be understood through this lens. Chosen by lots and thrown overboard to end the storm, Jonah is another scapegoat, of course a guilty one in the eyes of the text, but “the sign of Jonah is yet another sign of the collective victim.”¹⁰¹ In each instance, the collective victim is held up and redeemed.

Girard spends a great deal of time reflecting on the Suffering Servant in Isaiah.

Judaism’s greatest critique of the scapegoat rests in these verses in his estimation:

The most striking aspect here, the trait which is certainly unique, is the innocence of the Servant, the fact that he has no connection with violence and no affinity for it. A whole number of passages lay upon men the principal responsibility for his saving death. One of these even appears to attribute to men the exclusive responsibility for that death. ‘Yet we esteemed him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted. (Isaiah 53,4). In other words, this was not so. It was not God who smote him; God’s responsibility is implicitly denied.¹⁰²

¹⁰⁰ Girard, *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World*, 153-4

¹⁰¹ Girard, *The Scapegoat*, 117.

¹⁰² Girard, *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World*, 157.

Humanity instead must own its culpability in sacrifice. Homo sapiens are found guilty of the communal violence that has both provided culture and seen its demise. Humans alone stand accused of the evil cycle of *mimetic desire* and the scapegoat mechanism. In each instance, God is freed from the bonds of violence. God no longer demands death. God is now removed from the cycle of violence. In order to break “the power of *mimetic unanimity*, we must postulate a power superior to violent contagion.”¹⁰³ The only power is the Judeo-Christian God who rejects violence. Once loosed from the cycle of violence, God can become the force that can save us from its grasp.

René Girard sees the Passion as the seminal moment that forever shatters the scapegoat mechanism by revealing its very existence. The concept is that Jesus willingly offers himself as a scapegoat to expose the entirety of the *mimetic cycle*. For Girard, the real meaning and function of the Passion is “one of subverting sacrifice and barring it from working ever again by forcing the founding mechanism out into the open.”¹⁰⁴ Jesus does this by becoming a scapegoat and revealing the sacrifice mechanism. Once revealed, the sacrifice can never work again because the guilt and sin of the community cannot be transferred to the innocent victim. Therefore, Girard can easily say that “the Passion is presented as a blatant piece of injustice. Far from taking the collective violence upon itself, the text places it squarely on those who are responsible for it.”¹⁰⁵ Of course, the key is that the Passion is completed without fully revealing its critique until the story has been told.

¹⁰³ Girard, *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning*, 189.

¹⁰⁴ Girard, *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World*, 181.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 170.

Interestingly, Girard begins not with the Last Supper or the foot washing but with the betrayal. His attention to this area becomes important later in this work. Girard begins by saying that “this betrayal is not anecdotal; it has nothing to do with the psychology of Peter. The fact that even the disciples cannot resist the effect of the scapegoat reveals the power exerted by the persecutors’ account over man.”¹⁰⁶ The power of *mimetic unanimity* in choosing a victim and ultimately sacrificing him is virtually unassailable. Peter and all the disciples are caught up by the crowds and the rush to condemnation. *Mimetic desire* is revealed as evil, as Satan, as a force that cannot be easily resisted. In the Gospel of John, Pilate literally goes back and forth between the crowds calling for blood and Jesus. The narrative shows “Pilate torn between two influences, between two poles of mimetic attraction.”¹⁰⁷ Despite this push towards judgment and the desire for collective murder, the gospels resist the call to sacrifice. Throughout the story “neither the Gospels nor the Psalms accept the cruel illusions of these cruel crowds . . . the victim’s guilt is the mainspring of the victim mechanism.”¹⁰⁸ By refusing to accept the false judgment of Pilate and the crowds, the Gospels prevent the scapegoat mechanism from working in their reflections. Girard notes that while the term is not used explicitly, there is a metaphor employed throughout the New Testament that speaks to the power of the scapegoat:

The expression scapegoat is not actually used, but the Gospels have a perfect substitute in the *Lamb of God*. Like ‘scapegoat,’ it implies the substitution of one victim for all the others but replaces all the distasteful and loathsome connotations of the goat with the positive associations of the

¹⁰⁶ Girard, *The Scapegoat*, 105.

¹⁰⁷ Girard, *The Scapegoat*, 106.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 103.

lamb. It indicates more clearly the innocence of this victim, the injustice of the condemnation, and the causelessness of the hatred of which it is the object.¹⁰⁹

Jesus is described as the Lamb of God throughout the New Testament, especially in the Gospel of John. The word connotes innocence and gentleness, offering readers yet another critique of the scapegoat mechanism.

Girard pays particular attention to Jesus' choice to die in this way. Jesus does not commit suicide. Instead his death is the inevitable result of living a life of love in the midst of violence. "It is absolute fidelity to the principle defined in his own preaching that condemns Jesus. There is no other cause for his death than the love of one's neighbor lived to the very end."¹¹⁰ A clear understanding for Girard is that Jesus does not make this choice easily or lightly. Even more importantly, Jesus makes this choice not simply for those who love him but expressly for those caught up in the *mimetic unanimity* of the scapegoat mechanism: "Jesus suffered, for he is totally devoted to those who persecute him."¹¹¹ In Greek myth, there are a wide variety of scapegoats including some who willingly go to their death in order to effect the re-ordering of society. There are some who choose to be a victim to the violence in order to help re-establish society with that very violence. Girard understands Christ's death as wholly unique:

One can call him an incomparable victim without any sentimental piety or suspect emotion. He is incomparable in that he never succumbs in any way, at any point, to the perspective of the persecutor – neither in a positive way, by openly agreeing with his executioners, nor in a negative way, by taking a position of vengeance, which is none other than the inverse reproduction of the original representation of persecution, its mimetic repetition. This total absence of positive or negative complicity with violence is what is

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 117.

¹¹⁰ Girard, *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World*, 211.

¹¹¹ Girard, *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning*, 128.

needed for a complete revelation of its system of representation and the system of every representation apart from the Gospels themselves. This is true originality; it is the return to the origin, a return that revokes the origin as it reveals it.¹¹²

By choosing to die for love and in self-offering, Jesus reveals the system for the broken and violent cycle that it is. He is not a sacrifice in the sense of one killed for others because Jesus chooses to die to expose the system. As a result, nowhere in “the Gospels is the death of Jesus defined as a sacrifice . . . Certainly the Passion is presented to us in the Gospels as an act that brings salvation to humanity. But it is in no way presented as a sacrifice.”¹¹³ In other words, the saying “Jesus died for our sins” does not have a penal substitutionary form for Girard. Instead, the concept is that Jesus died to reveal our sin and save us from that vicious cycle of violence and death. For Girard, this is the key to undoing *mimetic theory* and is ultimately the kerygma of the gospels:

Jesus has come in order to place men in possession of this key. Within the perspective of the Gospels, the Passion is first and foremost the consequence of an intolerable revelation, while being proof of that revelation.¹¹⁴

The great power and final revelation comes with Jesus’ final words. He begs God, “Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do” (Luke 23:34). Here is the final affirmation that Jesus chooses love. Here is the moment where Jesus understands the power for *mimetic unanimity* and chooses to forgive it. Jesus has been betrayed, denied, abandoned, and crucified for the twisted benefit of the community, yet “without ever leaving its narrative framework the biblical account pursues a reflection on violence whose radicalism is revealed at the point where pardon replaces the obligatory

¹¹² Girard, *The Scapegoat*, 126.

¹¹³ Girard, *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World*, 180.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 166.

vengeance.”¹¹⁵ The ancient pattern is revealed. The evil of Satan found in *mimetic desire* is conquered. Humanity is freed from the burden of cyclical violence.

Of course, Good Friday does not end with the world understanding this revelation. On the contrary, the classic form continues. The scapegoat is offered up to the crowd and all goes according to the long established plan and pattern:

The outcome is quite favorable from the point of view of the *pax Romana*, of which Pilate is the guardian. The procurator feared a riot, but owing to the Crucifixion it did not occur . . . The spectators are satiated with that violence that Aristotle calls ‘cathartic’ – whether real or imaginary it matters little – they all return peaceably to their homes to sleep the sleep of the just.¹¹⁶

Girard’s theory is that the powers and principalities of the world go through with the plan that has sustained their authority since the foundation of human culture. Kill the one who creates disorder and restore order through violence. In this moment, Girard echoes Origen’s false bait theory of atonement. Believing that evil has won, Satan takes Jesus into hell which Christ then conquers. In this instance, Satan follows his usual pattern not realizing that the great lie of *mimetic violence* has been revealed and his power destroyed:

The memory of Jesus’ death will be important in a far different way from what the rulers wanted. Its importance will not be immediately apparent in all its incredible newness, but it will gradually pervade all the converted, teaching them how to recognize the persecutors’ accounts of persecution and reject them . . . Men will finally be liberated by means of this knowledge.¹¹⁷

¹¹⁵ Girard, *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning*, 111.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 37.

¹¹⁷ Girard, *The Scapegoat*, 108.

The scapegoat mechanism is revealed as evil and broken. The mob gathered in *violent unanimity* must be seen as murderers and not as justified. “The essential factor, though it is never perceived by theology or human sciences, is that the persecutors’ perception of their persecution is finally defeated.”¹¹⁸ The victim is now and forever understood as innocent and must be set free. The work of *generative violence* is undone.

For René Girard, this moment is apocalyptic, when all is revealed. After all, the best and most important “apocalyptic writings say nothing except that man is responsible for his history.”¹¹⁹ While he wants to declare his theory anthropology, he still talks plenty of theology. Humanity may well be responsible for their actions and especially for their violence, but Girard notes that in “the first part of Jesus’ preaching, the tone is in fact quite different; there is no trace of apocalyptic prophecy; the texts mention only the reconciliation between men that is also the Kingdom of God, to which all are invited to belong.”¹²⁰ By removing violence as motivation and founding mechanism alike, reconciliation and love become the hallmarks of Christ’s preaching. Right union with the Self, with God, and with one another is the antithesis of the vengeance of the *mimetic cycle*. From the incarnation through the resurrection, Jesus proclaims a teaching of non-violence and unity. While *mimetic desire* and *mimetic rivalry* can lead to disaster, “the Kingdom of God means the complete and definitive elimination of every form of vengeance and every form of reprisal in relations between men.”¹²¹ The Kingdom of God is the ultimate alternative for the fallen human culture born of violence. The great

¹¹⁸ Ibid., 109.

¹¹⁹ Girard, *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World*, 195.

¹²⁰ Ibid., 196.

¹²¹ Girard, *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World*, 197.

mystery that Christ presents is God's detached generosity and loving indifference toward humanity. God allows the rain to fall on the good and the evil alike (Matthew 5:45). In freeing God from the cycle of mimetic violence, Girard's theory presents "one God, Yahweh, who encompasses all divinity and does not depend at all on what happens among humankind. This is the God who reproaches humans for their violence and has compassion on their victims."¹²² Christ comes in an attempt to restore human relationship. Jesus lived and taught to give an alternative to the cycle of violence. The Lamb of God came to free humanity from the scapegoat mechanism so individuals and communities can be in healthy relationships. Said differently, "any synthesis is incomplete which ends in an object or an abstract concept and not in a living relationship between two individuals."¹²³ Much of Girard's theory comes back to this point.

While analytical in nature, the concern is ultimately with how individuals interact. By unveiling the cycle of violence, a new and healthier relationship can develop. But first, Jesus' revelation on the cross must expose the lie of *generative violence* to reveal a new way.

Violence is the enslavement of a pervasive lie; it imposes upon men a falsified vision not only of God but also of everything else. And that is indeed why it is a closed kingdom. Escaping from violence is escaping from this kingdom into another kingdom, whose existence that majority of people do not even suspect. This is the Kingdom of love, which is also the domain of the true God, the Father of Jesus, of whom the prisoners of violence cannot even conceive.¹²⁴

¹²² Girard, *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning*, 119.

¹²³ Girard, *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel*, 178.

¹²⁴ Girard, *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World*, 197.

With this understanding of the Kingdom of God, Girard turns to the resurrection. On that sacred day, Christ rose victorious from the powers of violence and death. Even more, for Girard, “the Resurrection is not only a miracle, a prodigious transgression of natural laws. It is the spectacular sign of the entrance into the world of a power superior to violent contagion.”¹²⁵ Satan and the powers and principalities of this world are revealed as broken and evil. The lie of *generative violence* becomes clear. The scapegoat mechanism can be understood as the murder and genocide that it has always been. All that was understood has been reversed and inverted. “The Resurrection empowers Peter and Paul, as well as all believers after them, to understand that all imprisonment in sacred violence is violence done to Christ. Humankind is never the victim of God; God is always the victim of humankind.”¹²⁶

Humanity now lives in a world where this revelation is partially if imperfectly understood. Virtually everyone knows what a scapegoat is and has a general idea of what the concept means. However, this partial knowledge has created a crisis of its own and “the main dimension of every crisis is the way in which it affects human relations.”¹²⁷ Modern society has become obsessed with the scapegoat but instead of rejecting violence and seeking reconciliation, the new *modus operandi* is raising up the victim and persecuting the persecutors. A large portion of Rowan Williams’ *Resurrection* attempts to reclaim the concept of the original and innocent victim who is Jesus from this flawed understanding.¹²⁸ Girard also notes that there is a certain humility needed in this process:

¹²⁵ Girard, *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning*, 189.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*, 191.

¹²⁷ Girard, *The Scapegoat*, 43.

¹²⁸ Rowan Williams, *Resurrection: Interpreting the Easter Gospel* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1982), 9-22.

Those in our day who are most proficient in discovering other people's scapegoats, and God knows we are past masters at this, are never able to recognize their own. Almost no one is aware of his own shortcoming. We must question ourselves if we are to understand the enormity of the mystery. Each person must ask what his relationship is to the scapegoat. I am not aware of my own, and I am persuaded that the same holds true for my readers. We only have legitimate enmities. And yet the entire universe swarms with scapegoats. The illusion of persecution is as rampant as ever.¹²⁹

The difficulty in discerning scapegoats, especially those of our own creation, has resulted in a simple inversion. Instead of persecuting the scapegoat collectively, humanity chooses to persecute relentlessly the persecutors. The same quixotic zeal to condemn has been shifted. Violence is still the norm and *mimetic rivalry* thrives in unsuspected places:

The concern for victims has become a paradoxical competition of *mimetic rivalries*, of opponents trying to outbid one another. The victims most interesting to us are always those who allow us to condemn our neighbors. And our neighbors do the same. They always think first about victims for whom they hold us responsible.¹³⁰

The concern for the victim, even though misunderstood, has created a deep angst in modern society. Around each corner is someone who might have been offended or hurt by actions of one group or another, intended or accidental. With each group also defending "the same illusion of autonomy to which modern man is passionately devoted," the result is an endless supply of victims who are unrelated to one another except through the experience of discomfort or violence.¹³¹ Since the victim is almost universally right, the power of victimhood has become irrevocable. Every group,

¹²⁹ Ibid., 41.

¹³⁰ Girard, *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning*, 164.

¹³¹ Girard, *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel*, 16.

regardless of their power, wants to claim the status of innocent bystander or victim. As a result, “the modern concern for victims obligates us to blame ourselves perpetually.”¹³²

Girard is quick to point out that this revelation is a twisted understanding of what Christianity has given the world. Jesus came expressly to love those who were persecuted AND those who persecute. All become a part of the Kingdom of God reflecting God’s detached generosity and loving indifference toward humanity.

The modern obsession with the victim is a perversion of Christ’s work in the world, an inversion of the all-encompassing Kingdom of God, and a reversion to the power of violence in the world merely directed at a different community. The powers and principalities have found a way to revivify the scapegoat mechanism by directing the violence to a new group with a similar force of the previous *violent unanimity*. Girard draws a parallel to this action with the Antichrist:

The New Testament evokes this process in the language of *Antichrist* . . . the Antichrist boasts of bringing to human beings the peace and tolerance that Christianity promised but has failed to deliver. Actually, what the radicalization of contemporary victimology produces is a return to all sorts of pagan practices: abortion, euthanasia, sexual undifferentiation, Roman circus games galore but without real victims.¹³³

The biblical term antichrist only appears four times in scripture, I John 2:18, 2:22, 4:3, and II John 1:7. Interestingly, the usage of the term in the Johannine corpus refers to those who leave the community. Said differently, the Antichrist or antichrists are those who break communion and divide the community. This biblical understanding of the word would actually serve to reinforce Girard’s point that the Kingdom of God is for all,

¹³² Girard, *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning*, 165.

¹³³ *Ibid.*, 181.

that God calls together the persecutors and the scapegoat alike, that Christ comes to free all from the power of violence and evil.

The Bible as a whole and the Passion specifically strive to reveal the vicious cycle of *mimetic desire* and the scapegoat mechanism. Jesus' choice to die as an innocent scapegoat pulls back the veil of ignorance and demonstrates the evil of the system. The myth and lie of *generative violence*, the illusion of persecutors doing good by killing various scapegoats, and the general ignorance of the community in its actions all are destroyed. While humanity still stubbornly clings to aspects of the scapegoat mechanism and have even chosen to deify victim status, the work of Jesus on the cross reveals that all are invited to the table, all are forgiven their parts in the Passion, and all are part of God's kingdom. This understanding of Jesus' refusal to participate in the system is not simply a rejection of violence. The power of the story can be found when Jesus knows at the Last Supper that he will be denied, betrayed, and killed and still chooses to walk the way of the Cross as an innocent who does not invoke revenge. Far from it, Jesus actively and repeatedly forgives. In the Passion, humanity can begin to see God's detached generosity and loving indifference toward all humanity. In the Passion, the church can begin to understand Jesus' great desire for reconciliation at all costs.

Chapter Five
An Anglican Understanding of the Eucharist

From the beginning, the Church of England and Archbishop Thomas Cranmer made a definitive stand against the medieval Roman Catholic popular understanding of the mass as a repeating and re-presentable sacrifice of Jesus. Each successive generation of the Anglican Church carried the understanding that Calvary offered a once and for all moment of salvation while adding layers and bringing other sources and controversies into conversation. Sadly, there has been a terrible tendency in this process to create false oppositions and anachronistically to intrude with new information or nuanced definitions that were not available to other eras in ancient debates. The result is a collection of often shifting definitions and minutiae. In-depth studies of this subject fill bookshelves with ponderous and lengthy tomes attempting to address every issue. In spite of these disparate and varied materials, the Anglican Communion has developed an understanding

of sacrificial Eucharistic theology. The purpose of this chapter is to take a brief tour of the Anglican approach to the Eucharist and its nuanced theology of sacrifice.

For any reflection appropriately to be labeled Anglican, the work must begin with the dual witnesses of scripture and the Church Fathers. The central problem is that much of the debate that would consume the church in the sixteenth century was not a point of discussion or a remote concern in the birth and early witness of the church. Worse still, the very concept of sacrifice in Second Temple Judaism was complex and indisputably in flux. Scholars of that era cannot agree on the number and types of sacrifices recorded in the biblical witness, seen in historical records, or developed from archaeological evidence. Even when broader definitions are presented, there is debate and confusion over which form or type of sacrifice is most applicable to the Eucharist. Michael Vasey sums up the difficulty of the situation perfectly: “We are dealing not with a simple rite but with an interlocking and developing system. There are at least five types of sacrifice and these are undergirded by intricate rules of procedure.”¹³⁴ Despite this multi-layered complexity, most modern liturgists draw a direct and consistent connection between the Jewish *berakah* as the most likely source and parallel of the Eucharist. Since “the *berakah*, the act of blessing, was understood to be sacrificial, in a spiritual sense,” the Eucharist was likely informed and shaped in its earliest iterations as spiritually sacrificial.¹³⁵ While the Jewish tradition would have clearly impacted the understanding and practice, the exact nature of that influence is more guesswork than historical fact.

¹³⁴ Michael Vasey, “Eucharist, Sacrifice, and Scripture,” in *Essays on Eucharistic Sacrifice in the Early Church: A Sequel to Liturgical Study no. 31—Eucharistic Sacrifice: The Roots of a Metaphor*, by Rowan Williams Edited by Colin Buchanan. (Bramcote, Notts.: Grove Books, 1984), 6.

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*, 28.

Perhaps even more interesting and evocative of the *berakah* is that in the earliest accounts and records, the eucharist was “regarded as a spiritual sacrifice, as a sacrifice of praise, as, indeed, the embodiment of the living sacrifice, in which Christ is celebrated.”¹³⁶ Of course, the challenge is that connections are made between the cross and sacrifice in the New Testament and even more can be found between sacrifice and worship, but communion is not explicitly mentioned in those varied and overlapping metaphors. What becomes clear is that “the New Testament never speaks of the Eucharist as sacrifice, and the early church very quickly began to do so.”¹³⁷

Rowan Williams attempts to bridge this gap with the well-reasoned approach that the earliest Christians were forced to live in, engage, and defend themselves in a culture saturated with sacrifice. As a people who did not participate in sacrifice, Christians had to craft an apologia to their surrounding communities who worried that this new faith was antithetical to tradition, cult, and even the public realm as a whole. The resulting writings of the era tend to be fluid and connections to sacrifice differ widely between writers as they attempted to answer local questions across a wide range of issues. With those caveats, Williams believes a theocentric concept of sacrifice exists in those first centuries which can most easily be summed up as: God acts to save God’s people to which God’s people respond with a spiritual sacrifice of joy and thanksgiving. He makes this point by summing up Irenaeus’s argument from *Adversus Haereses* as follows.

God is characterized in all he does by utterly gratuitous generosity (munificentia) -- i.e. he needs nothing, because in himself he has the fullness of praise and glory: Word and Father give glory to each other eternally. What God asks of us is for our good, not his . . . To see sacrifice as

¹³⁶ Joris Geldhof, “The Eucharist and the Logic of Christian Sacrifice: A Discussion with Robert J. Daly,” *Worship*, 87 (2013), 305.

¹³⁷ Michael Vasey, “Eucharist, Sacrifice, and Scripture,” 7.

propitiatory is to fall into the trap of supposing that God needs things from us: like all ordinances, sacrifice is meant to keep God's people from idolatry and to guarantee their grateful remembrance of him.¹³⁸

Williams stresses this theology of God's generosity in God's giving of his Son which preserves God's sovereignty throughout his writings. Ignatius of Antioch follows in a similar vein where the Eucharist can be seen as a symbol of unity with God and one another thanks to the primary gift of salvation: "[this concept is] manifested in the unity of the Eucharist, where believers are brought together in sharing the sacrificed flesh and blood of Jesus."¹³⁹ For Ignatius, Irenaeus, and the author of Hebrews, worship is only made possible by the primary saving action of Jesus in his death on the cross. Williams states this understanding of the Eucharist plainly by saying that "all other offerings depend on this prior act, and are to some extent therefore memorial and thanksgiving sacrifices, rather than having independent efficacy."¹⁴⁰ Williams has found in these early sources the core doctrine that would later animate Thomas Cranmer and much of the Reformation. God saves through the giving of Jesus to the world. The faithful can only seek to respond as an offering of praise and thanksgiving.

The intervening twelve centuries saw a clear shift towards explicit sacrificial language and practice. The anaphoras of the Roman Catholic Church after the fall of the empire took on a tone of penitence and sacrifice. In a dance that is difficult to untangle, the priesthood gradually took on greater prominence as the Eucharist evolved into an ever grander and repeatable sacrifice. Said differently but in the same vein of logic, the

¹³⁸ Rowan Williams, *Eucharistic Sacrifice-- The Roots of a Metaphor* (Nottingham, UK: Hassall and Lucking Publishing, 1982), 9.

¹³⁹ Williams, *Eucharistic Sacrifice*, 19.

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 20.

Roman Catholic Church's emphasis on the Eucharist "as a sacrifice of propitiation for the living and the dead, for the remission of sins and for others was, at least in part, to bolster the ordained priesthood."¹⁴¹ While the Church Fathers had no clear and unified declaration of the Eucharist as a propitiatory sacrifice, that is a reconciliation and forgiveness through the offering of Jesus, the popular piety of medieval Roman Catholics clearly reflected a desired offering of Jesus for the community, living and dead. The Council of Trent sought to affirm a version of this liturgical theology with the assertion that "the Council itself pronounced on the fact that in the Mass the victim is closely identified with the cross, and that the Eucharist is a bloodless offering of a propitiatory kind in which Christ offers himself 'by the ministry of the priest'."¹⁴² In this one statement, the high clericalism of the era is tempered but displayed along with an understanding of the mass as sacrifice. This was at odds with the Reformers who had proclaimed, "all agree that sacrifice has already taken place, and that, in consequence, the Eucharist is one of 'pleading' only, the very act of pleading being the work of Christ in the believer."¹⁴³

Using scripture as the core of their critique, the Protestants came quickly to the same conclusion across countless other dividing lines. The book of Hebrews and its concept of Jesus as High Priest who makes a once and for all offering for humanity becomes a rallying point for the critiques of the repeating sacrifice of Christ in the Mass. In virtual unison, the Reformers "approach the sacrifice of Christ: as a once-for-all event

¹⁴¹ John H. McKenna, "Eucharist and Sacrifice: An Overview," *Worship*, 76 (2002), 396.

¹⁴² Kenneth Stevenson, *Eucharist and Offering* (New York: Pueblo Publishing, 1986), 171.

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*, 155.

in the past, which is dynamically effective today in and through the unchanging ministry of Jesus.”¹⁴⁴ Of course, as a collection of very different men reacting against and attempting to reform an issue, the correctives are just as varied. Calvin hews closely to a reading of scripture and the patristic sources that preserves God’s sovereignty and saving act by viewing worship as response above all else. His main objection was that there was no priest who could ever hope to offer such a sacrifice and that the “sacrifice of the mass . . . is an insult to the priesthood of Christ.”¹⁴⁵ Zwingli became the very antithesis of the Roman Catholic position by claiming that the eucharist is nothing more than a memorial of Christ’s work on Calvary. Luther weighed in with an attempt to preserve God’s authority and choice to act with a hint of sacrificial response.

Into this swirl of ideas, theology, politics, and debate, Thomas Cranmer found a way to preserve a Protestant view of Jesus’ sacrifice as a once and eternal event while recalling a need for an ongoing connection with God through Christ’s sacrifice. In his work *A Defence of the True and Catholic Doctrine of the Body and Blood of our Saviour Christ* (London: Reynold Wolfe 1550), there is “an argument for a revised understanding of the oblation and sacrifice of Christ, in which Cranmer argued against the notion of Christ’s repeated sacrifice in the mass, suggesting instead that the communicants should offer themselves as sacrifices of praise and thanksgiving.”¹⁴⁶ One of the Archbishop’s first liturgical moves was to link the offering of alms for the poor with sacrifice over and against the elements of bread and wine. Successive generations would conflate

¹⁴⁴ Nicholas Sagovsky, “Doing Theology in Heaven,” in *Essays on Eucharistic Sacrifice in the Early Church*, 24.

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 23.

¹⁴⁶ Daniel Marrs, “Real Presence, Spiritual Presence: Assessing Thomas Cranmer’s Appropriation of St. Ambrose’s Eucharistic Doctrine.” *The Anglican Theological Review* 97 (2015), 68.

Cranmer's concept with the offering of the elements but his theology was clear, "we are *not* offering gifts, we are *not* offering Mass, but we *are* offering ourselves."¹⁴⁷ He also employed the concept of spiritual sacrifice in the post communion prayer with the phrase "sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving" as well as teaching the once-and-for-all nature of Jesus' sacrifice in the text of the eucharistic prayer, "who made there (by his oblation once offered) a full, perfect, and sufficient sacrifice, oblation, and satisfaction, for the sins of the whole world."¹⁴⁸ Certainly, Cranmer is making the claim that Jesus' work on the cross is complete for eternity and not repeatable.

In employing the word "sacrifice" in two other locations, the Archbishop has a second movement in mind apart from the saving sacrifice of Christ's work. Cranmer specifies that there is another sacrifice to be made apart from Christ's propitiatory sacrifice which is "made of them that be reconciled by Christ, to testify to our duties unto God, and to shew ourselves thankful unto him. And therefore be called sacrifices of laud, praise and thanksgiving."¹⁴⁹ In this vein, Cranmer is echoing Irenaeus, Ignatius, and many of the Church Fathers who believed that the Eucharist was a response to God's salvific act at Calvary instead of any repeatable offering of Jesus' sacrifice. While clear to Cranmer, this two-part teaching with three-part mentioning of sacrifice may well have confused the subject. Certainly, liturgical scholars have spent some time attempting to unpack his doctrine. One scholar, Brightman, in reviewing the 1552 *Book of Common*

¹⁴⁷ According to Stevenson, *Eucharist and Offering*, 173.

¹⁴⁸ *The Book of Common Prayer 1552*. London, 1552.
justus.anglican.org/resources/bcp/1552/Communion_1552.htm

¹⁴⁹ Colin Buchanan, *What Did Cranmer Think He Was Doing?* Second Edition (Nottingham, UK: Grove Books, 1982), 6.

Prayer “suggested that for Cranmer, there are three sacrifices: (1) the Church’s commemoration of Christ’s oblation on the cross; (2) a sacrifice of praise for the benefits of the passion; and (3) the offering of the faithful of themselves in response to Christ.”¹⁵⁰ Other scholars believe that there are only two sacrifices since the second and third were one and the same in the Cranmer’s thinking. Regardless of the analysis, Cranmer believed that the church could only recall the once and for all sacrifice of Jesus which then allows the community to offer their sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving in joyful and penitent response.

Also key to understanding Cranmer’s rite and theology of sacrifice is his concept of presence. The *Sursum Corda* invites the community to lift up their hearts into the heavenly realm with the physical and living Christ. As a result, the church is made part of the high priestly ministry of Jesus and is drawn into his death and resurrection. This concept led, in turn, to a decidedly lower view of the elements of bread and wine:

In [Cranmer’s] understanding no such presence of Christ in the eucharist as would enable us to offer him to the Father, and no instituted action to be fulfilled with the elements except the eating and drinking of them. This position is then reinforced in his fifth book by an exposition of the Epistle to the Hebrews, which makes it clear that we have no propitiatory sacrifice to offer to-day at all, and no earthly priest who could possibly be a candidate for that task.¹⁵¹

Again, by connecting the church to Christ the Great High Priest while preserving the sovereignty of God to act and save, Cranmer rejects the Roman Catholic piety of the age and renews a connection to the earliest history of the Church. In the decidedly blunt view of Kenneth Stevenson, Cranmer’s movement toward a written and enacted theology in the 1552 *Book of Common Prayer* “is a brilliantly constructed liturgy of

¹⁵⁰ Stevenson, *Eucharist and Offering*, 145.

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 6.

anthropocentrism, bringing the people before God to remind them of the saving event of Christ and to eat and drink together.”¹⁵² This theology and liturgy that reclaimed Patristic history and thought would gradually become the hallmark of Anglicanism for some four hundred years by rejecting a view of sacrament and priesthood as propitiatory sacrifice and charting a new course of worship and reception as sacrifice and praise. Stated more elegantly, “the Prayer Book of 1552 represents a landmark in the development of Eucharistic offering, with the dual foci of Christ in heaven and human beings on earth; Christ has bridged the gap, and it only remains for the Church to make it obvious.”¹⁵³ This focus on Christ in the life of the faithful in the Eucharist is a renewal of early Patristic thought and gradually became a hallmark of Anglican Eucharistic theology.

Richard Hooker reinforced much of Thomas Cranmer’s theology in his master work *Of the Lawes of Ecclesiastical Politie*. Perhaps in an attempt to bridge the gap between heaven and earth, Hooker introduced the nuanced idea of participation as a major aspect of eucharist and sacrifice. His desire was “to hold on to the Eucharist as an activity of the Church, not basking in the afterglow of Calvary. It happens *now*, not in the past, not in the mind, still less in the printed book.”¹⁵⁴ Hooker’s focus then is on the church’s participation in communion where God and humanity are united in a present reality thanks to the past work of Calvary. To a degree, this concept approaches the later descriptions of *anamnesis* as a making present of a past event through remembering. However, care should be taken with the anachronistic use of this liturgical term.

¹⁵² Ibid., 148.

¹⁵³ Ibid., 148.

¹⁵⁴ Henry R. McAdoo and Kenneth W. Stevenson. *The Mystery of the Eucharist in the Anglican Tradition* (Norwich: Canterbury Press, 1995), 140.

Both Cranmer and [Stephen] Gardner agree that the Greek *anamnesis* means “remembering”-- the frequent use of “remembrance” and its cognates never seems to include the idea popularized in the twentieth century that a “memorial” is either a recalling objectively into the present of the sacrifice of Christ, or a pleading that sacrifice before the Father. Argument about eucharistic sacrifice is conducted on different lines.¹⁵⁵

For Hooker, Cranmer, and Gardner then, the eucharist recalls Calvary and encourages the church’s participation in the sacrament as paramount, but it is not salvific. The greater movement for Hooker is the location of the presence of Christ. Cranmer proclaimed that Jesus was present both in heaven and on earth through the sacrament. Hooker famously shifted the focus from debates over the bread and wine and moved the divine presence into the heart of the faithful, “The real presence of Christ’s most blessed body and blood is not therefore to be sought for in the sacrament, but in the worthy receiver of the sacrament.”¹⁵⁶ This movement was later declared receptionism by detractors but would be a guiding force in much conversation.

Anglican theologians largely carried forward the Cranmerian concepts of sacrifice and response with minor tweaks or improved rhetoric. Lancelot Andrews joined the fray and proclaimed to the Roman Catholics of his era, “Willingly we allow that a memory of the sacrifice is made there. That your Christ made of bread is sacrificed that we will never allow.”¹⁵⁷ In this era, the Church of England continued to make connections between the Church Fathers and Cranmer’s rite. The continued emphasis on sacrifice in conversations with the Patristic sources demonstrate that “Anglicanism was already developing a critical and erudite approach to early Christian tradition with the kind of

¹⁵⁵ Buchanan, *What Did Cranmer Think He Was Doing?*, 7.

¹⁵⁶ Richard Hooker, *Of the Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity*, edn. Keble, 1865. Book II, 84.

¹⁵⁷ McAdoo and Stevenson, *The Mystery of the Eucharist*, 127.

struggling for definition in contemporary terms that the term ‘anamnesis’ requires.”¹⁵⁸ A significant development came with the teachings and work of Thomas Rattray, a Bishop in the Scottish Episcopal Church. Rattray was largely responsible for connecting the 1764 Scottish Communion with the Eastern Orthodox rites which specifically included the addition of an epiclesis. As a result, the Holy Spirit was restored to the conversation and a view of the whole liturgy as consecratory and sacrificial was employed in the argument: “What is offered is not the sacrifice, but its commemoration, in which the Church pleads the merits of that sacrifice.”¹⁵⁹ The progression through the centuries of this thought process preserved the once and for all sacrifice of Calvary but began a movement towards a nuanced understanding of recalling that sacrifice in the present for the benefit of the faithful gathered.

The twentieth century witnessed some of the greatest revisions to Anglican Eucharistic theology as Cranmer’s rite gradually gave way to local liturgies as well as engaging in profound ecumenical dialogues. One of the most instrumental in this transformation was Dom Odo Casel and his theology of the “mystery presence.” Casel helped to free the Roman Catholic Church from an understanding of constantly re-offering the sacrifice. Instead, Christ was mysteriously and faithfully present in communion and, through the priests, effecting the reconciling benefits of the sacrament:

It was now possible, when thinking of the celebration of the Eucharist, to speak of the real presence of the once-for-all sacrifice of Christ, along with its saving benefits, without at the same time suggesting that the sacrifice of Christ was somehow ‘repeated’ as a work of the Church.¹⁶⁰

¹⁵⁸ Stevenson, *Eucharist and Offering*, 156.

¹⁵⁹ McAdoo and Stevenson, *The Mystery of the Eucharist*, 134.

¹⁶⁰ Robert J. Daly, *Sacrifice Unveiled: The True Meaning of Christian Sacrifice* (New York: T&T Clark, 2009), 194.

By focusing on the benefits to the gathered faithful, Casel moved Protestants and Roman Catholics alike to look towards the reconciling benefits of the sacrament. The Liturgical Renewal Movement and the accompanying work of reclaiming the Patristic theologies and liturgies augured well for the Anglican Communion. Centuries of careful reflection and analysis of those texts had long informed the *Book of Common Prayer*. Now Roman Catholics and countless other denominations added their voices to the theology found in those texts and liturgies. The critical movement was the reclamation of baptism as the first and primary sacrament of Christian identity. This action led to a renewal of the concept of a priesthood of all believers, of the faithful as *alter Christus*. This concept revolutionized the Eucharist. The return to Augustine's great theology of the Eucharist as a celebration by the community and of the community was restored and renewed. Rowan Williams summed up this connection by reflecting on those early sources:

The eucharist and baptism are both inseparably the receiving of the Holy Spirit, constituting believers the dwelling place of the Spirit, a temple in which pure offering can be made. Our offering – in prayer generally and in the eucharist especially – “invites” the transforming action of the Holy Spirit, because it is offered by the baptized who are already kindled by the Spirit. The idea that we are already, in baptism, united with the self-offering of Jesus is a central point in this complex of ideas.¹⁶¹

Here we have a clear headed unity of baptism as initiation by the Spirit into Christ's life, death, and resurrection elucidated by the Patristic Fathers -- a process which will be understood later by Girard as well. With this high theology of baptism and its unity with the sacrifice of Jesus, the theology of both the Eucharist and ordained ministry were radically transformed and freed from a need to offer and reenact a propitiatory sacrifice.

¹⁶¹ Williams, *Eucharistic Sacrifice*, 23.

The Second Vatican Council continued this process of renewing the baptismal identity of the church as Christ's body, readjusting the ordained ministry to be a portion of that baptismal identity, and releasing the Eucharist from a repeating sacrifice. The fruits of this council to the larger Christian community were extraordinary. By incorporating language from the Eastern Orthodox anaphoras, adding an epiclesis to their liturgies, and shifting focus to the baptized as the body of Christ and a priesthood of all believers, the Roman Catholic Church began to look more and more like her sisters and brothers across the globe. Ironically, this internal reformation of the Church of Rome was a gradual return to a non-propitiatory sacrifice along the lines of the Patristic Fathers, Thomas Cranmer, and even Thomas Aquinas who operated with the idea that "it is up to the institutor of the sacrifice to determine form, and Christ chose a memorial meal as that form."¹⁶² The major theological protests of the Reformation were seemingly adopted and incorporated into the Roman Catholic Church almost overnight.

With the theological groundwork now carefully laid by charismatic leaders and the Holy Spirit, the body of Christ as understood within multiple denominations could finally discuss common ground and even hint at reconciliation. Churches and councils began to meet to gain clarity around concepts that had long divided them but were increasingly viewed as different ways of saying much the same thing. Even the old specter of sacrifice and propitiation were addressed and handled with a certain grace. For example:

It invites a careful distinction to be made between sacrifice and atonement/propitiation. Sacrifice involves a group of actions that is most easily described as "three-dimensional prayer." Behind it lie notions such as thanksgiving, intercession, supplication,

¹⁶² McKenna, "Eucharist and Sacrifice," 398.

dedication – but not atonement (at least in the Scriptures). The argument as to whether “expiation” or “propitiation” is the better translation of *hilsak*-terms is pointless, because both sides assume that *hilaskomai* falls into the category of sacrifice. In Hellenistic terms it may, but not in Christian or Hebrew thought. Although there is an element of atonement behind all acts which relate to sinners’ relationship with the Holy One, the concept of atonement was primarily related in ancient Israel to the Day of Atonement, and in Christian thought was taken up in the death of Christ. When this distinction is made, we can gladly acknowledge eucharistic *sacrifice*, but exclude eucharistic *atonement*.¹⁶³

With this and similar distinctions made regarding an established difference between sacrifice and atonement, the various councils and committees meeting around the world could find a common ground for a Eucharistic theology. While a repeatable communion sacrifice once divided the body of Christ, now churches could claim quite clearly that “all today deny that we can speak of eucharistic *atonement*.”¹⁶⁴

In a moment of amazing synchronicity and providence, two different groups published monumental agreements on the Eucharist within a year of each other: The World Council of Churches presented *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry* in 1982 and the Anglican Roman Catholic International Commission (ARCIC) presented their report from Windsor in 1981. Both of these ground-breaking works held to a similar Eucharistic theology. The once and for all nature of the sacrifice of Calvary was maintained while communion was upheld as a response of the faithful. Thus worship and the Eucharist were understood as an action of praise and thanksgiving. For *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*, this concept was clarified by saying that the “eucharist is the

¹⁶³ Charles Sherlock, “Eucharist, Sacrifice, and Atonement: The ‘Clarifications’ of ARCIC,” in *Our Thanks and Praise: The Eucharist in Anglicanism Today*. David R. Holeton, editor (Toronto: Anglican Book Centre, 1998), 124-5.

¹⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 125.

anamnesis of the sacrifice of the cross.”¹⁶⁵ For the ARCIC report, this theology was very similarly summed up by proclaiming that “the eucharist not only gives thanks for a past event, but supplicates God for the present and future.”¹⁶⁶ These statements were and are breathtaking for their clarity and unity. For some five centuries, the Roman Catholic Church and numerous Protestant churches fought bitterly over a wide range of issues but always viciously over the theology of the eucharist. After these long and sectarian battles, the statements from the World Council of Churches and ARCIC remain a lasting balm to heal many of the wounds of division. As scholars and critics have pored over these documents, the sweeping and revolutionary nature of them gradually took hold. Some thirty years later, these ideals are just now being accepted and lived into by the leadership and by the baptized faithful alike. The implication of these documents was stated by Charles Sherlock reflecting on the theology of ARCIC, “Christ’s work was and remains the only atoning act, but the Gospel ministry of word and sacraments (baptism and eucharist) remains the Christ-given way by which the Spirit ministers the atoning work to us.”¹⁶⁷ In many ways, Christ’s body, the church catholic, is finally living into her creedal theology.

The result of these councils and committees is a theology which sounds similar to the Patristic sources mediated through the Reformation and with a slightly different concept of offering: “to let God work in us, that is what Christian sacrifice is all

¹⁶⁵ William R. Crockett, “Eucharistic Theology and Anglican Eucharistic Revision,” in *Our Thanks and Praise: The Eucharist in Anglicanism Today*, 44.

¹⁶⁶ McAdoo and Stevenson, *The Mystery of the Eucharist*, 130.

¹⁶⁷ Sherlock, “Eucharist, Sacrifice, and Atonement,” 128.

about.”¹⁶⁸ For some, this concept of sacrifice is alien and unknown but it echoes the work of Richard Hooker on participation as a hallmark of Anglican Eucharistic theology. This theology can be seen clearly in the 1979 *Book of Common Prayer* that was “so constructed as to keep the internal unity of the Eucharistic prayer by stressing the once and for all nature of Christ’s work and the way in which the Eucharist is both the continuation of that work by Christ himself and the response of the Church in its worship and service.”¹⁶⁹ The challenge in this shifting and changing landscape is to recognize our theological limits as well as the distinctions that are being made. As the Anglican Communion talks with Roman Catholics about sacrifice and offering, about Eucharist and propitiation, we are discovering that often enough we are speaking in similar ways with some important and subtle differences. As Charles Price notes, for Anglicans “the act of pleading or representing has in general not been called a sacrifice, and with considerable energy and intentionality, precisely in order to preserve the unquestionably and obvious once-and-for-all character of the sacrifice of Christ.”¹⁷⁰ While he makes this critical distinction, Price goes on to note that the differences between our positions are increasingly small but may be significant between “the priest sacrifices the once-for-all sacrifice and that the priest pleads and represents the sacrifice And that the congregation of faithful Christians participates in the sacrifice.”¹⁷¹

¹⁶⁸ Geldhof, “The Eucharist and the Logic of Christian Sacrifice: A Discussion with Robert J. Daly,” 306.

¹⁶⁹ Stevenson, *Eucharist and Offering*, 209.

¹⁷⁰ Charles Price, “Anamnesis and Sacrifice in Episcopal Ecumenical Dialogues,” *Worship*, 69 (1995), 393.

¹⁷¹ *Ibid.*

The great challenge of the current era is the very use of the term ‘sacrifice’ where it “is often rejected as meaningless in contemporary Western culture because it is looked upon as the antithesis of self-fulfillment, success, and self-realization.”¹⁷² Where first century Christians had to craft apologetics for a lack of sacrifice in worship, modern scholars and clergy have to work to create explanations of how sacrifice is understood in our daily life and rituals. Many critics have begun to question the very concept of sacrifice, especially one of violence and immolation. Modern Roman Catholic theologians like Louis-Marie Chauvet, James Allison, and Robert Daly as well as Evangelical leaders like Brian McLaren have turned to René Girard for a possible solution to this conundrum of sacrifice. These theologians understand a shift in the understanding of sacrifice that returns to the very earliest beliefs of the cross as a sacrifice which ends sacrifice.

The tension in this topic is complex and palpable. The terminology is inexact because of shifts in definitions and understandings across the centuries. With a culture shifting away from sacrifice or any substantive understanding of it, the church has a conundrum to face. How does the church speak of sacrifice? How does the church understand this connection in a manner that makes sense to congregations and people? This work is not easy or simple. Thankfully, the Eucharistic theology of the Anglican Communion is clear enough to address this topic. Jesus seeks reconciliation between all of God’s children. In the Eucharist, Christ’s once and for all sacrifice invites the faithful into communion with God and their neighbor with praise and thanksgiving.

¹⁷² R Kevin Seasoltz, “Another Look at Sacrifice,” *Worship*, 74 no 5 (2000), 387.

Chapter Six
Girard's Understanding of the Eucharist

With the primary focus of his work being on sacrifice and violence, René Girard does not give a systematic account of the Eucharist. His concept of *mimetic desire* leading to competition through *mimetic rivalry* which gradually becomes *mimetic conflict*

and escalates to the sacrifice of a scapegoat resulting in the restoration of the community does not cast an endearing light on mimesis or religion in general. In the midst of that process, he does provide alternatives with his concept of conversion in literary heroes and the Passion in the gospels. By revealing the scapegoat mechanism, Girard believes that Christ has forever destroyed the grip of violence over humanity. Even with this scope he has paid little attention to the teachings of Christ or the Last Supper. However, his books and articles after the year 2000 show some notable differences that directly impact a Girardian Eucharistic theology.

In his earliest works, Girard looks at archaic religions and cannibalistic communities. In those societies, the warriors would kill the scapegoat and the community would then devour the flesh of the person or animal offered. Since the sacrifice proved to be a form of *generative violence*, the community revered and even worshipped those offered. Religion sacralized the victim and declared them sacred. In this context and with this understanding, Girard proclaimed, “the eating of sacrificial flesh, whether animal or human, can be seen in the light of *mimetic desire* as a veritable cannibalism of the human spirit in which the violence of others is ritually devoured.”¹⁷³ The point is a spiritual union with the sacred regardless of the community’s level of awareness of what they do. After Girard’s conversion to Roman Catholicism in 1961, these words and their understanding of internalizing the victim would become the basis for his occasional commentary of the Eucharist.

Girard’s theory of communion is grounded in his non-violent sacrificial view of the Passion. Jesus chooses to allow himself to be sacrificed to uncover the evils of the

¹⁷³ Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, 277.

system at work. Therefore, the self-offering of Christ is the highest good. Jesus dies to reveal the full horrors of the scapegoat mechanism and end its control of human society. The Passion “is the revelation of sacrifice as false worship; it is nothing more than the result of a false accusation against the victim.”¹⁷⁴ Since the scapegoat mechanism is revealed as broken and evil, the attendant theories of *divine caprice* and *divine anger* are rendered null and void. God did not demand the death of Jesus to satisfy God’s honor or in payment of sin. Instead, humanity chose to kill Jesus to resolve the *mimetic crisis* in the hopes of receiving some benefits from *generative violence*. As a result, violence is seen for what it is and not as part of God:

Self divided against self (mimetic rivalry) and the expulsion of expulsion (the scapegoat mechanism) are principles of both decomposition and composition for human societies . . . Once the basic mechanism is revealed, the scapegoat mechanism, that expulsion of violence by violence, is rendered useless by the revelation . . . God is not violent, the true God had nothing to do with violence.¹⁷⁵

God is freed from violence. However, Girard later admits that there is a problem with this language and his understanding of sacrifice. Initially, he defines sacrifice purely in the context of the scapegoat mechanism and the evil of killing an innocent human or animal to benefit the whole of society. As he examined the Passion in greater detail, he amended his position to include in the definition of sacrifice the offering of Self for the good of others. But, he cautions, this understanding of the good of self-sacrifice cannot lead to the deification of victim. If the community comes to the aid of the victim and condemns the persecutors, then the old and violent form of sacrifice has simply returned in a new guise: “They are mixing the two meanings of sacrifice because they are using

¹⁷⁴ Girard, *Reading the Bible with René Girard*, 110.

¹⁷⁵ Girard, *The Scapegoat*, 189.

sacrifice as self-sacrifice, which comes from Christianity, but they really mean killing the enemy too, which is the old meaning of sacrifice.”¹⁷⁶ Girard therefore makes a distinction in his later writings between the concept of self-sacrifice and sacrifice even while using the same term:

It’s a mystery that we use the same word [sacrifice] for both, but in a way accentuate the solidarity of the two, because we’re not merely in a judicial world where we condemn the term sacrifice wherever we find it. Unfortunately, I did this a little bit in my first book on Christianity.¹⁷⁷

While Girard appears to open the door to a beneficial sacrifice, he works diligently to insure the old concept of *generative violence* is forever removed from what he terms a “Christian understanding of sacrifice.” Jesus offers himself freely to help others which is the good understanding of sacrifice. Violent sacrifice which can be understood generatively is a reversion to Satan and the forces of darkness.

This is the essential theme, repeated time and time again, of Jesus’ preaching: reconciliation with God can take place unreservedly and with no sacrificial intermediary through the rules of the kingdom. This reconciliation allows God to reveal himself as he is, for the first time in human history. Thus mankind no longer has to base harmonious relationships on bloody sacrifices, ridiculous fables of a violent deity, and the whole range of mythological cultural formations.¹⁷⁸

Humanity is freed from cyclical violence as much as God. Both can benefit by basing relationships and human culture on reconciliation and peace.

Girard’s Eucharistic theology combines his studies on cannibalistic culture with the Roman Catholic affirmation of transubstantiation. The result is an account that stresses the literal body and blood of Jesus in the Eucharist. He reflects first on the

¹⁷⁶ Girard, *Reading the Bible with René Girard*, 100.

¹⁷⁷ Ibid., 112. [*Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World*. Translated by Stephen Bann and Michael Metteer. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1987]

¹⁷⁸ Girard, *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World*, 183.

Passover meal. From his understanding, the Jewish Seder features “eating the lamb together [which] is no longer defined as a sacrifice. It’s the eating of the lamb, not killing of the lamb, that’s important.”¹⁷⁹ Consumption becomes the hallmark of the holy meal. As a result, Girard can hold that the sacrificial understanding of communion is still in place but only in terms of Jesus’ self-offering.

The Eucharist is really related to sacrifice, but rather than representing the violence against the victim, of it being the victim that you eat, you eat the total refusal of violence, which is Christ. It’s a reversal, but it’s still the same symbolism.¹⁸⁰

In other words, the Eucharist is no longer a continual or continuing sacrifice of Jesus throughout history but is instead a deep connection to Christ’s self-offering. This concept is still consonant with much of Anglican and Reformation thought on communion. The difference and generative moment in his thought is Girard’s understanding of Christ’s self-offering as a total refusal of violence. He goes on to clarify his thinking by saying, “Anthropologists who want to say, ‘Look, the Eucharist is exactly like a sacrifice.’ No doubt, but there is no blood . . . there is no doubt that there’s a recalling of all the sacrificial history of mankind.”¹⁸¹ Said differently, the Passion is a revelation of the broken system that has enslaved humanity in cyclical violence. Therefore, the Eucharist is a means of recalling that system and rejecting it. James G. Williams, in introducing Girard’s thought, first made these connections between cannibalistic societies and communion:

There is also a similarity between myths in which the central figure is dismembered and consumed and the Christian Eucharist, in which believers

¹⁷⁹ Girard, *Reading the Bible with René Girard*, 110-1.

¹⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 114.

¹⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 112.

consume the body and blood of Christ . . . and those who henceforth ‘eat’ his flesh and blood renounce any participation in killing the innocent victim and feast on the spiritual body of love and forgiveness he has offered them.¹⁸²

Over a decade later, Girard chose to pick up this line of reasoning, connecting his early work on cannibalistic societies with his understanding of Christ’s self-offering forever rejecting violence:

It means the end of violence, yet at the same time it shows the continuity with a whole history of religion. So when anthropologists tell you, ‘Hey, that’s cannibalism,’ you should answer, ‘Yes, of course, cannibalism is part of human history and the Eucharist summarizes it all in nonviolence.’¹⁸³

His thinking appears to unapologetically endorse transubstantiation as a connection to the rejection of the scapegoat mechanism. He makes the connections between cannibalism and transubstantiation explicit by further defining one of the benefits of communion as a rejection of violence. The cannibalistic societies believed that “if you absorb [the scapegoat’s] flesh, you become them, just as if you absorb the flesh of Christ, you should become a little bit nonviolent, more than you were before.”¹⁸⁴ The logic appears sound but the order of events in the Passion becomes a key issue.

When talking about the self-sacrifice of Jesus, Girard works carefully and tenaciously to avoid the appearance that Christ’s death makes him sacred or holy. While the scapegoat mechanism would dictate that the innocent victim becomes a god or sacred to the community, Christian theology would cry heresy in applying such a thought to the Incarnate Word who pre-existed all of creation. Jesus is divine completely independent

¹⁸² James G. Williams, introduction to *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2001), xiv.

¹⁸³ Girard, *Reading the Bible with René Girard*, 115.

¹⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

of his self-offering sacrifice. Girard employs this understanding to further describe how Jesus' self-offering sacrifice is a critique of an evil system and not strictly then a scapegoat sacrifice:

If Jesus' death were sacrificial, the Resurrection would be the 'product' of the Crucifixion. But this is not so. Orthodox theology has always successfully resisted the temptation to transform the Passion into a process that endows Jesus with divinity. In orthodox terms, Christ's divinity – though it is obviously not external to his humanity – is not dependent on the events of his earthly life. Instead of making the Crucifixion a *cause* of his divinity – which is a constant temptation for Christians – it is preferable to see it as a *consequence* of the latter.¹⁸⁵

In other words, Jesus was God before the crucifixion and was crucified because of his divinity and willingness to offer himself. Girard understands this at least partially as an order of events. Jesus was first divine and then incarnate, crucified, died, and buried. Much of his theory rests on the progression of events in a linear fashion. First there is *mimetic desire* where humans learn what is desirable from others. This desire leads to *mimetic rivalry* as two or more people strive for the same item. In time, the rivalry leads to *mimetic conflict*, violence and loss of differentiation which is the *mimetic crisis*. The only solution to this dangerous cycle of vengeance and violence is the scapegoat and the idea of *generative violence* to restore order or establish a new one. If these steps are reversed or transposed, the logic of the system breaks down and additional explanation is needed or perhaps the theory is disproved. Yet, Girard and James Williams choose to invert the order to connect cannibalism, transubstantiation, and the Eucharist. To follow the argument and fully connect *mimetic theory* with these other items, then Jesus would have instituted communion *after* his resurrection. After all, even the cannibalistic societies chose to wait to eat their victims until after they sacrificed them. Only the meal

¹⁸⁵ Girard, *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World*, 233.

as practiced by the faithful after the resurrection could be said to follow the correct order but the same cannot be true of the Last Supper before the crucifixion. Kathryn Tanner, following a similar linear logic, critiques the understanding of the crucifixion as means to union with God because God chooses communion with us first.

Sacrifices are acts done in order that we may cleave in human union with God. This sacrifice gives us access to God, as the epistle to the Hebrews says. But here God, by virtue of the incarnation cleaves to us before the performance of any expiatory sacrifice on the cross; this expiatory sacrifice thereby loses the character of being a condition for the maintenance of communion with God . . . This expiatory rite is not then a preparatory rite for communion sacrifice; communion has already occurred in Jesus' person by way of the incarnation.¹⁸⁶

Since Girard also rejects the cross as a reconciling event with God, his desire to connect the Eucharist with the sacralized victim and cannibalism feels forced. His order is inverted and his argument for communion as a benefit of crucifixion becomes blurred at best.

The better understanding for the Eucharist comes from Girard's deeper understanding of conversion. In his first work, he understood this as a right understanding of the Other and the Self drawn from the understanding that all humanity mimics one another. Freed from the need to unconsciously mimic a Mediator, the Self could consciously choose to engage the world in more helpful ways and through reconciliation. With his conversion to Christianity, Girard began to adapt this view so that "the best way of preventing violence does not consist in forbidding objects, or even rivalistic desire, as the tenth commandment does, but in offering to people the model that will protect them from *mimetic rivalries* rather than involving them in these rivalries."¹⁸⁷

¹⁸⁶ Kathryn Tanner, "Incarnation, Cross, and Sacrifice: A Feminist-Inspired Reappraisal," *The Anglican Theological Review* 86 (2004), 54.

¹⁸⁷ Girard, *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning*, 14.

He first understands that new model to be the teachings of Christ. So, he points to reconciliation and love as the ideals for overcoming the old violent contagion; “the Gospels tell us that to escape violence it is necessary to love one’s brother completely – to abandon the violent mimesis involved in the relationship of doubles.”¹⁸⁸ In time, Girard comes to realize, without saying it, that following religious prescriptions is not sufficient. There must be a good Mediator who can help heal humanity. He ultimately declares that following Jesus as a new Mediator is the highest and best ideal. After all, Jesus asks humanity to follow him:

It is not due to inflated self-love that [Jesus] asks us to imitate him; it is to turn us away from *mimetic rivalries* . . . What Jesus asks us to imitate is his own desire, the spirit that directs him toward the goal on which his intention is fixed; to resemble God the Father as much as possible. The invitation to imitate the desire of Jesus may seem paradoxical, for Jesus does not claim to possess a desire proper, a desire ‘of his very own.’ Contrary to what we ourselves claim, he does not claim to ‘be himself’; he does not flatter himself that he obeys only his own desire. His goal is to become the perfect image of God.¹⁸⁹

Girard sets God as the ideal as mediated through the life, teachings, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. This classic orthodox view of faith features a return to Girard’s earliest theory of *external mediation*. *External mediation* is the concept of having a Mediator that can never lead to conflict because of the distance between the two. By establishing God as the great Mediator, Girard further reveals the system that previously had hold over humanity:

Once we imitate Jesus, we discover that our aspiration to autonomy has always made us bow down before individuals who may not be worse than we are but who are nonetheless bad models because we cannot imitate them

¹⁸⁸ Girard, *Things Hidden Since the Foundation of the World*, 215.

¹⁸⁹ Girard, *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning*, 13.

without falling with them into the trap of rivalries in which we are ensnarled more and more.¹⁹⁰

Speaking without the benefit of Girard's *mimetic theory*, Bob Dylan best summed up the human predicament when he sang, "You gotta serve somebody."¹⁹¹

Subtle in this movement toward conversion is Girard's shift on *mimetic desire*. His long held positions on the topic were universally negative. The mirroring process he called *mimetic desire* was always doomed to conflict and violence. With his revelation that Jesus could be a positive mediator, he boldly claimed, "*mimetic desire* is intrinsically good."¹⁹² Amazingly, he goes on to praise mimesis as a great gift to humanity even if it bears a shadow side of conflict and violence:

Mimetic desire enables us to escape the animal realm. It is responsible for the best and worst in us, for what lowers us below the animal level as well as what elevates us above it. Our unending discords are the ransom of our freedom.¹⁹³

The movement is profound and has been noted by many, including Sarah Coakley, a thorough critic of his work.¹⁹⁴ In an interview with Rebecca Adams, Girard further refines his thinking on *mimetic desire*. He flatly rejects that his theory is "something static, a bunch of dogmatic propositions about the way things are."¹⁹⁵ He recognizes transitions and even outright changes in his theory. While he initially rejected the book

¹⁹⁰ Ibid., 14-5.

¹⁹¹ Bob Dylan, "You Gotta Serve Somebody," in *Slow Train Coming*, Special Rider Music, 1979.

¹⁹² Ibid., 15.

¹⁹³ Girard, *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning*, 16.

¹⁹⁴ Sarah Coakley, *Sacrifice Regained: Reconsidering the Rationality of Religious Belief*. An Inaugural Lecture by the Norris-Hulse Professor of Divinity given in the University of Cambridge, 13 October 2009 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 27.

¹⁹⁵ Rebecca Adams and René Girard, "Violence, Difference, Sacrifice: A Conversation with René Girard," *Religion & Literature* 25 (1993), 22.

of Hebrews as anathema to his work, he later concedes that he had made an error.¹⁹⁶

Even more, he begins to make clearer and clearer distinctions between positive mimesis and negative mimesis. Pointing again to Jesus as a positive mimetic example, Girard rejects a simple definition of *mimetic desire* as evil:

What Jesus advocates is *mimetic desire*. Imitate me, and imitate the father through me, he says, so it's twice mimetic. So the idea that *mimetic desire* itself is bad makes no sense. It is true, however, that occasionally I say "*mimetic desire*" when I really mean only the type of *mimetic desire* that generates *mimetic rivalry* and, in turn, is generated by it.¹⁹⁷

The most extraordinary turn comes next in this same interview. Girard finds a redeeming action in negative *mimetic desire* by reflecting that, "Mimetic desire, even when bad, is intrinsically good, in the sense that far from being merely imitative in a small sense, it's the opening out of oneself."¹⁹⁸ These movements are profound to anyone attempting to understand Girardian theory, especially his critics. He does not reverse any of his major theory or reconfigure the process that leads to the scapegoat mechanism. However, Girard has created a new construct where narcissism is the greatest evil and self-offering of almost any kind is the greatest good.

With this revised understanding of Christian meaning as fundamentally a movement beyond the self and a generous offering for the greater good, Girard gently but powerfully revised many of his earlier theories. He began to discover in biblical texts "tremendous aspects that no one has yet discovered that fit the Christian meaning."¹⁹⁹ He

¹⁹⁶ Ibid., 28.

¹⁹⁷ Ibid., 23.

¹⁹⁸ Ibid., 24.

¹⁹⁹ Girard, *Reading the Bible with René Girard*, 115.

looks to points he has previously made about the Passion and expounds on them. For instance, he has long declared that the Gospels reveal the guilt of the persecutors in the text and God's rejection of that violence: "Like the Heavenly Father, the Gospels have no favorites; their only interest is in the unanimity of the persecutors."²⁰⁰ While the early, strident Girard would proclaim the evils of sacrifice and Christ's work to reveal the scapegoat mechanism, he begins to see something different at work in the text that moves from self-obsession to self-offering and reconciliation. He sees a progression in Paul where humanity starts with sacrifice as a sort of baby food and moves to a

mature food in which you sacrifice yourself in order not to sacrifice your neighbor. If you don't understand that, you also don't understand the Kingdom of God, because the Kingdom of God tells you not to do to others what you don't want them to do to you, even if people harm you or do violence to you. There are to be no reprisals. Forgiveness is the new way we are called to handle hostility.²⁰¹

Again, his thinking here is consonant with his early writings, but the purpose of teaching self-offering is a new development and now an intrinsic part of *mimetic theory*. So much so that Girard redefines much of his nomenclature. He starts to equate self-offering as a good *mimetic desire*. "Christian" becomes a code word for self-offering and even sacrifice is further defined as laying down one's life for another. Girard may have been responding to critiques about how he chose to use those words monolithically or simply may have responded to the realities of the world around him such as when he observes that "when we say 'sacrifice' today inside a church or religious context, we mean something which has nothing to do with primitive religion."²⁰² With a refined

²⁰⁰ Girard, *The Scapegoat*, 109.

²⁰¹ Girard, *Reading the Bible with René Girard*, 113.

²⁰² Adams and Girard, "Violence, Difference, Sacrifice: A Conversation with René Girard," 29.

understanding of *mimetic desire* as well as an understanding of sacrifice that can also be a self-offering, he begins to reconcile himself to the use of this language within the church and society. As a result, he can proclaim that “the world can become Christian only if this good reciprocity replaces the bad reciprocity that is normal in human relations.”²⁰³

Perhaps the most helpful choice is to reexamine his definition of sacred, a seminal thought that in the early Girard can only equate to the violence of offering a scapegoat.

The sacred is nothing but violence, it's only insofar as you don't see this that violence is the sacred. The real sacred – or let us say the holy, let's not use the same word – is love, divine love: not human love, which is a miserable imitation of divine love, but real divine love. Mysteriously, God is using human violence to bring the human animal to the level where we will try to teach it love.²⁰⁴

While the young Girard once declared that the revelation of the scapegoat mechanism was a once and only event that humanity must come to terms with quickly and effectively, he later describes as a divine progression moving accordingly to plan, in fits and starts.

Of course, Girard at any age has made it clear that this transition, this conversion is not easy or simple. He admits that declaring that God has revealed the scapegoat mechanism is infinitely easier than living into a new reality, especially when the world often maintains the old order at tremendous cost. Yet, his understanding is clear for the way forward, that “if we imitate the detached generosity of God, then the trap of *mimetic rivalries* will never close over us.”²⁰⁵ A love marked by self-offering does not discriminate against anyone, no matter how good or evil. Instead, humanity is called to

²⁰³ Girard, *Reading the Bible with René Girard*, 113.

²⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 116.

²⁰⁵ Girard, *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning*, 14.

mimic God. Girard profoundly notes that this work is incredibly difficult if not impossible.

We come to understand what is involved in the Kingdom of God and why it does not represent for men an unmitigated blessing. It had nothing to do with a flock of sheep grazing in an eternally green pasture. It brings men face to face with their hardest task in history.²⁰⁶

Humanity must expose the scapegoat mechanism and reject expulsion of any kind.

Homo sapiens must then somehow seek communion and be reminded of that primary role of reconciliation. In many places, humanity only has a partial understanding of this new anthropology. Many live in a community that has chosen a new sacrificial system that simply reveres the victim and offers up the persecutors. As the Kingdom of God comes, the realities of the old system and this new broken system will be revealed: “that is why the coming of the Kingdom of God means destruction for those who only understand destruction and reconciliation for those who always seek reconciliation.”²⁰⁷ Still, God seeks reconciliation and through the very violence of the systems attempts to teach love and reunion.

While Girard’s stated understanding of the Eucharist is heavily tied to cannibalistic societies, the concept of consuming the victim, and transubstantiation of the elements, his own progression of thought reveals a greater nuance to the sacrament. With God teaching humanity slowly and with great patience the violence of their ways and inviting them into an all-reconciling love, the focus of communion gradually shifts as well. The initial declarations are often maintained but Girard begins to understand that reconciliation is the “effect of the sacrament of the Eucharist among the first

²⁰⁶ Girard, *The Scapegoat*, 192.

²⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 191.

Christians.’²⁰⁸ This deep and lasting reunion was what brought the community back together again and again in worship and thanksgiving. The previous and imperfect *mimetic desire* was transformed through the once-and-for-all-sacrifice of Jesus on the cross into a powerful self-offering *mimetic desire* intended to build a new community based on reconciliation and love. The Eucharist, however imperfectly understood, is a hallmark of the Kingdom of God where self-offering and reconciliation rule.

Chapter Seven
Girardian Theory and the Eucharist

²⁰⁸ René Girard, *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning*, 132.

Girard's work on the Eucharist was tangential to his overriding concerns for understanding *mimetic desire* and the scapegoat mechanism. Most of his interviews and writing that discuss communion were published well after his primary books on *mimetic theory*. As a result, Girardian theorists and critics alike have engaged the texts on their own terms. Girard's understanding of a violence-free God and a new community gathered in reconciliation shine through their various analyses.

Several Girardian critics have examined what is commonly labeled the meal ministry of Jesus. The most noteworthy instance of Jesus' meal ministry for Girardian theorists is the feeding of the five thousand. For James G. Williams, the miracle of the feeding accounts revolves around Girard's declaration that the faithful are called to imitate Jesus the Son as Jesus in turn imitates the Father. The miracle is all but set aside. The critical point is "that the disciples are supposed to be learning the good mimesis of the Son of God-Son of Man. The account centers on the mode of sharing the little food available, and the sharing itself takes on Eucharistic dimensions."²⁰⁹ The lesson to be learned through example is one of sharing which can be later discerned in the offering of Self. Gil Bailie looks deeper at this miracle found in all four gospels. He acknowledges the apparent miracle of feeding a multitude but notices a greater event happening, "Curing a crippled leg is not as miraculous as curing a hardened heart of a despairing soul."²¹⁰ Bailie understands the feeding ministry as a conscious teaching by Jesus to break down barriers. Jesus intentionally creates a small crisis by inviting the crowds to

²⁰⁹ James G. Williams, *The Bible, Violence and the Sacred: Liberation from the Myth of Sanctioned Violence* (San Francisco: Harper, 1991), 221.

²¹⁰ Gil Bailie, *Violence Unveiled: Humanity at the Crossroads* (New York: Crossroads Publishing, 1995), 213.

sit down together and eat. While both Roman and Jewish tradition organized society around patriarchal allegiances and dining choices, Jesus asks all those who follow to sit and eat together in direct opposition to those traditional barriers.

The point of the feeding, in my opinion, was not food; it was the breaking down of the religious and social barriers that Jesus had been challenging as spiritually inconsequential in his preaching. It was hands-on learning. It was practice for living in the kingdom.²¹¹

Those meals of great number sprinkled across the texts all served this one and the same ideal. If the primary feature of God is a “detached generosity” towards all, then Jesus chooses to express that by feeding all.

The miracle was a new kind of community, one generated by prayer and inclusion, a “new generation.” Transitory as it may have been, it remains a model of new community, one on which all human culture one day have to be based. The social bond that gave the community that Jesus inspired its coherence had one conspicuous feature: the breaking down of religious prejudice.²¹²

In this context of indiscriminate feeding and barrier breaking, Bailie believes the greatest miracle “of Jesus’ ministry was reconciliation – with God and with others.”²¹³

Sadly, both Williams and Bailie give short shrift to the meal ministry of Jesus. After all, both Matthew and Luke feature accusations that Christ is a drunkard and a glutton (Matthew 11:19 and Luke 7:34). The most common interpretation given to the dining preferences of Jesus is an inclusive, radical refusal of purity laws. This largely anti-Semitic reading also misunderstands all that Jesus accomplishes. Certainly, Christ is known to dine with prostitutes and tax collectors, those on the margins of first century

²¹¹ Ibid., 214.

²¹² Ibid., 215.

²¹³ Ibid., 213.

society. At the same time, Jesus also intentionally dines on numerous occasions with Pharisees and Scribes. In those contexts, Jesus can be seen debating the law and engaging fellow Jews that are often portrayed as the enemy. When reviewed with a broader scope, the meal ministry of Jesus is one of seeking out actively the folks with whom he disagreed or with whom a man of his standing would have a natural reluctance to engage. Williams and Bailie get the conclusion of reconciliation correct but follow a short-cut that misses the depth of the work of Jesus' ministry.

Girardian and Eucharistic scholars agree that the purpose of communion is to live into the example set by Jesus' life, ministry, and death. James Farwell proclaims, "the logic of participation in the New Testament material holds in which the eucharistic meal is a ritual that both nourishes and signifies an entrance into the paschal mystery in which, by the pattern of their lives, disciples enter into the embodiment of Jesus' continuing ministry in the world."²¹⁴ His understanding of that mystery is likely different from the scapegoating model of Girard but shares the core belief that discipleship is always an imitation of Christ. The great issue and concern for the faithful is what this imitation might mean. After all, regardless of the anaphora used, from the complex to the simple, "there is in the eucharist little specificity of the life into which we are called."²¹⁵ While Farwell is comfortable linking the Eucharist to greater discipleship, he is not as comfortable in describing the life into which the faithful are called or the example Jesus calls the church to imitate. Into this breach of the unknown, the Girardian scholars leap to proclaim a life of non-violence and the revelation of the scapegoat mechanism.

²¹⁴ James Farewell, "Baptism, Eucharist, and the Hospitality of Jesus: On the Practice of 'Open Communion'," *The Anglican Theological Review* 86 (2004), 224.

²¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 226.

Girard and his followers understood that Jesus' death is not a sacrifice according to the traditional or archaic religion but instead reveals the scapegoat mechanism. Jesus dies but the two critical differences are that he chooses to die without becoming part of the system and he is presented as unrelentingly innocent. For Girard and his fellow theorists, Jesus must die because everyone else is part of the system and unable to understand what is happening. The only prayer for humanity is for someone outside the scapegoat system to expose its evil and reveal its dark secrets:

If we are to be free from it, something outside the cultural matrix must break in on us. Structurally and anthropologically speaking, there is only one thing truly outside of this matrix: the victim whose expulsion brought the system into being in the first place, the stone rejected by the builders of all culture, the Lamb slain since the foundation of the world.²¹⁶

Jesus is that innocent victim that can unveil the secrets of *mimetic desire* and the scapegoat mechanism. The hinge point is how to explain this revelation to the community.

While someone outside the system must unveil its structure, the language and teaching must be recognizable to those caught inside this cycle. Therefore, as James G. Williams notes, "sacrificial language is used, necessarily, in order to break out of a sacrificial view of the world. In this sense, the Son of Man as a 'ransom for many' is the Son of Man as a revelatory way, a means of access to community and nonviolence."²¹⁷ So, the Gospel uses the terms and ideas of the sacrificial system to proclaim the work of the Passion as well as what happens in the Last Supper. However, the literal meaning

²¹⁶ Bailie, *Violence Unveiled: Humanity at the Crossroads*, 220.

²¹⁷ Williams, *The Bible, Violence and the Sacred*, 224.

and traditional understanding of a bloody sacrifice is systematically replaced with a new and non-violent interpretation:

When Jesus stood before the disciples and offered the bread and wine, his words can be taken in two ways at the same time, both important. “This is my body” means that this bread stands for my body, and reminds you of the death I suffer. But it can also mean that this bread is my “body,” that is, it serves as my ritual sacrificing element, taking the liturgical place of the dead body of a sacrificial victim. In the first case the communion points to the reality of Jesus’ death as a scapegoat. In the second case, it points exclusively toward a substitution, an alternative practice to replace sacrifice.²¹⁸

So the old substitution of Anselm and the penal substitution theory, which is actually a return to the traditional understanding of violent sacrifice and the sacred, is overthrown.

In the place of both the old meaning of words and the literal sacrificial body this revised Girardian understanding demands a new liturgical practice. For Robert Daly, this new practice is the self-offering of Jesus as a pure and holy action designed to be imitated:

The Eucharistic terms “body” and “blood” find their fullest meaning in this Servant-of-God framework. They point not to the death of a passive victim, but to the free and voluntary character of Jesus’ death as an act of self-giving. This, and this alone, is the full means of the “body” in the Eucharistic texts. To sum up: [quoting Johannes Betz]

It is not the idea of cultic sacrifice in which the body is seen as a separable part of the sacrifice, but rather that of a martyr’s offering which signifies the offering of one’s body as the self-giving of one’s whole person. Thus the sacrificial idea is also contained in the words over the bread; but this idea should not be seen in the understanding of the term *soma* as isolated sacrificial flesh separated from the blood; it must rather be looked for in the whole participial phrase and seen in its martyrological coloring.²¹⁹

²¹⁸ S. Mark Heim, *Saved from Sacrifice: A Theology of the Cross* (Cambridge: William D. Eerdmans, 2006), 232.

²¹⁹ Robert J. Daly, *Sacrifice Unveiled: The True Meaning of Christian Sacrifice* (New York: T&T Clark, 2009), 53.

For others, the new liturgical practice is the creation of an entirely new, non-violent, and inclusive community. For S. Mark Heim, “the spiritual practice of making Christ’s own inner life the model for ours is the communion that makes us one . . . The crowd does not gather around a body; it gathers to become Christ’s body in the world, animated by the Holy Spirit of peace.”²²⁰ He develops this idea in much greater detail by looking to the first century practice of sacrifice, meals, and social stratification:

In the ancient world sacrifice was very commonly associated with meals at which the body or portions of it would be eaten. Purity specifications surrounded such meals, as they surrounded the act of sacrifice itself, and the communal ties established by eating together in this way were crucially important social boundaries. They constituted communities and defined who was in and who was out. Sacrifice and the meals around it were the sacred glue that held the social order together . . . Communities are defined by their solidarity in sacrifice.²²¹

If his argument holds true, then Jesus’ action in gathering the faithful for the Last Supper was an act understood as constituting a new community. The hallmark of this community would be radical inclusion of those traditionally separated from one another through purity codes and social conventions. Certainly, the New Testament serves as witness to this along with the challenges it presents to Paul and others as those groups try to find ways to live into this new community. However, Heim is not done. He continues by defining communion with a classic Girardian critique of sacrifice:

The Last Supper can be seen in continuity with Jesus’ practice of table fellowship, giving it an explicitly liturgical tone that casts it in explicit contrast with sacrificial practice. Instead of the rite of scapegoating sacrifice that lies at the base of historical human community, and instead of the cultic rite of animal sacrifice that reproduces its logic of exclusion and violence, this new community is founded on the communion meal. The early church was continually amazed and thankful that this table brought into one circle

²²⁰ Heim, *Saved from Sacrifice: A Theology of the Cross*, 233.

²²¹ *Ibid.*, 233.

those who otherwise would be irrevocably separated by purity boundaries, who otherwise would be scapegoating each other and shedding each other's blood.²²²

Thus, communion replaces sacrifice with a new paradigm of inclusion and reconciliation. Heim understands with Girard that sacrifice in the old system created or renewed a society after a period of violence thanks to the scapegoat mechanism. The Eucharist serves as the “meal of the new community [that] is able to accomplish the peace that sacrificial violence could not, and more.”²²³ The new order established through love and reconciliation and embodied in communion has even more to offer than the old ways of violence and sacrifice. This definition of Eucharist is “the New Testament’s proposal for a *new anthropos* – an alternative way of engendering social and psychological stability.”²²⁴ Equally important for the disciples of Girard, the definition of communion as a new order where reconciliation is the hallmark of faith allows that same community to proclaim, “at this table, sacrifice stops.”²²⁵

While Girard understands the historical and anthropological aspects of the Passion, Karen S. Feldman critiques Girard’s understanding of realism across his works as at least limiting if not reductionist in nature. This problem presents itself first in his literary criticism. For Girard, great literature and scripture both have the function of revealing a truth which should impact the world:

They are themselves real or true because they do or perform a breaking out of representation. What is more, in breaking open the concealment of the mechanisms of scapegoating in their representations, they engage in auto-critique, which means that they break through representation and through the division of book and world, and are thus more than realist; they are real,

²²² Ibid., 233-4.

²²³ Ibid., 236.

²²⁴ Bailie, *Violence Unveiled: Humanity at the Crossroads*, 207.

²²⁵ Heim, *Saved from Sacrifice: A Theology of the Cross*, 236.

effect. They make something happen, they even are a happening. This happening is truth for Girard, in accord with both a Hegelian and Heideggerian tradition in which truth is a matter of the effectivity and unfolding of events rather than of correspondence between language and reality. Realism is therefore not a matter of mimetic representation, but of exceeding the textual plane of representation and constituting a worldly disclosure, as an event.²²⁶

In other words, the work of the great artists like Shakespeare and Dostoevsky as well as the revelation of scripture transcend the page and reveal a deep truth of human society and reality. To return to the opening, stories impact reality because they serve as training simulators where humanity can learn how to interact. For Feldman, this understanding of the text limits the literary power of metaphor and conceals layers of meaning. Therefore, Girard's obsession with a one true interpretation of *mimetic theory* robs the Bible of its theological and even its metaphorical power and nuance. Said differently, "For Girard Scripture does not simply show and does not simply instruct; it is the possibility, in itself, of a world beyond violence."²²⁷ This is a fair critique and a reasonable understanding of Girard. His early understanding of conversion as a change of heart and relationship with the world dovetails with his later proclamation that *mimetic desire* is good if following the model of Jesus Christ. However, he never asks that all other conversations of the text end. His desire is to reveal a thread, one of many, that the text unveils to create a more just society and enact the Kingdom of God. He absolutely understands the text to have real-world implication because he understands scripture and great literature to be agents of conversion. He believes that stories matter.

²²⁶ Karen S. Feldman, "On Girard's Biblical Realism," in *Mimesis, Desire and the Novel*, edited by Pierpaolo Antonello and Heather Webb (East Lansing, Michigan: Michigan State University Press, 2014), 58.

²²⁷ *Ibid.*, 61.

Sarah Coakley further critiques Girard's understanding of sacrifice as purely negative. Focusing exclusively on his early work, she writes to redeem a concept of sacrifice as beneficial. Her critique is certainly valid for Girard's first several decades of scholarship but her words lose their sting as he later accepted a positive, self-offering sacrifice that he terms a "Christian" understanding. Coakley notes that evolutionary biology increasingly points to self-offering as a distinct advantage for any species which employs it. Girard would likely embrace such information as proof of the need for a positive *mimesis* and conversion to a Christian understanding of self-offering or self-giving. Coakley goes on to posit that reclaiming this definition of sacrifice might find its home with the witness of the saints and martyrs of the faith:

Further, are there indeed evidences of supreme manifestations of cultural altruism that far exceed what could be accounted for even in terms of well-calculated projections of genetic cultural fitness? If so, would they perhaps best be accounted for, as part of another argument to the "best explanation," in terms of hypothesized participation in the life of a loving and sacrificial God? Can the lives of the saints, in other words, manifestors of Christian altruism well beyond the calculation of "fitness," provide, at the end of the day, the best argument for God's existence?²²⁸

On this point, Girard would whole-heartedly agree. The old concept of scapegoating and sacrificing the other or the current trend of demonizing the persecutors while seeking to embrace the victims must go away. In their place, the church and the world must begin to look at a positive model of sacrifice that engenders trust and reconciliation. Thinking of our current challenges like global warming and the threat of nuclear war, Coakley declares, "a sacrificial, religious motivation can sufficiently redirect human will to

²²⁸ Coakley, *Sacrifice Regained: Reconsidering the Rationality of Religious Belief*, 27.

undertake the changes we need to save us.”²²⁹ On this point, Girard would universally agree with both her argument and her remedy.

Robert Daly would also agree with both Girard and Coakley. However, his great critique of both would be that understanding *mimetic desire* and the scapegoat mechanism is not enough. Nor is focusing on the example of the martyrs and saints. His focus and critique is real-world action – the very point of Feldman’s critique. For Daly, humanity has the ability to change the world and solve many problems as a society. There is both an intellectual conversion and a moral conversion where homo sapiens can see a need to do better and know that they should do better, but do not. The reason is that humans “are not willing to pay the price, not willing to make the ‘sacrifices’ (using the general, secular meaning of the word) to do it. We are not, in other words, religiously converted.”²³⁰ Only when intellectual understanding and moral nudging leads to action can this process work. *Pace* Feldman’s claim, Daly, Coakley, and Girard all believe that the text must lead to a direct impact in the world. Conversion of heart, soul, and body must lead to action. For Daly, the equation is simple, “if we want to begin, in this life, to see the face of God, then we must look into the face of the victims. True Christian sacrifice will then ‘naturally’ follow.”²³¹

For Girardian theorists and Girard himself, an understanding of the Eucharist must entail a proper Christian understanding of sacrifice as self-giving, a rejection of the old violence of sacrifice and scapegoating, and a conversion in the heart of the faithful to change the world. This can best be explained by the manner Paul uses communion in his

²²⁹ Ibid.

²³⁰ Daly, *Sacrifice Unveiled: The True Meaning of Christian Sacrifice*, 222.

²³¹ Ibid.

discussions with the church in Corinth: “Hence the centrality of the Eucharist to Paul’s discussion: it is the self giving of the victimary body which enables the Corinthians to become one body in Christ. Hence also the necessity, for proper participation in the Eucharist, of a life that is an imitation of the self-giving of the victim.”²³² Girard and his disciples focus on this concept of placing the life, ministry, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ as the heart of a positive *mimetic desire* and a redeemed understanding of sacrifice as self-offering. Of course, the next question is, “Does scripture really support this understanding?”

²³² James Alison, *The Joy of Being Wrong: Original Sin Through Easter Eyes* (New York: Crossroad Publishing, 1998), 176.

Chapter Eight **Scripture and the Eucharist**

The scriptural witness for the Eucharist consists of the synoptic gospels and Paul's first letter to the church in Corinth. The Gospel of John features a final meal and a foot-washing but no narrative or words of institution upon which the church has historically based the Eucharist. For the vast majority of Christian history, the writings and reflections on the Last Supper were directed towards the sacrament and the various anaphora used by churches. The Reformation focused on the matter of sacrifice and presence, but few studies went beyond the connections with the church's sacrament. In the last one hundred years most of the studies and reflections on the Eucharist move in one of two basic directions: either the author turns to the contemporary first century meal practices of Jews and Gentiles in Roman Palestine or the critic looks to the other meals described in scripture for relevant antecedents. Both of these methods bear fruit and both lead towards a deeper understanding of the Eucharist and provide insight into Girard's theory.

The first century meal practices of Roman Palestine are difficult to fully engage. Most if not all scholarship point to a system where dining with immediate family was valued and primary, much as with modern society. Second to family dinners was the choice to sup with individuals or families with power or those who could confirm family social status. Judaism of that era featured a deep stratification, likely reflecting a similar model across the Roman Empire:

Second Temple Judaism thus, in many respects, saw the drawing of even sharper boundaries between pious Jews and unclean outsiders. Table fellowship could intimate friendship, so it was increasingly reserved for those whom a person deemed the right kind of companions who ate the right kinds of food . . . Basic to the rationale behind this behavior was the conviction that the power of the unclean to defile the clean far outstripped the ability to sanctify the unholy.²³³

A note should quickly be made regarding the concept of purity codes and a Judaism defined purely by boundaries. Certainly, a stratification of society existed but “sinners and tax collectors are not ‘cast out’; rather, they are people who violate the welfare of the community and who have deliberately removed themselves from the common good.”²³⁴ The tendency to declare the ministry of Jesus as all-inclusive as opposed to a hateful, caste-like system of Judaism is an oversimplification of the situation and anti-Semitic in nature. Even more problematic, this argument drives a wedge through Jesus himself. By claiming Judaism is divisive and Jesus is all-inclusive, a none-too-subtle move is made where Jesus cannot be fully Jewish. The reality is a more complex and nuanced situation. Judaism has a long and clear history of working towards caring for the widow, the orphan, the sick and the homeless. Countless examples in scripture point to the reality that “not only does the Jewish soul wed table and hospitality [but it] does so in a distinctive spirit of inclusion.”²³⁵ The better understanding is that “a proper Jewish meal was a worship service in which believers honored God by sanctifying the most ordinary

²³³ Craig Blomberg, “Jesus, Sinners, and Table Fellowship.” *Bulletin for Biblical Research* 19 (2009), 44.

²³⁴ Amy-Jill Levine, “Bearing False Witness: Common Errors Made About Early Judaism,” in *The Jewish Annotated New Testament*. Edited by Amy-Jill Levine and Marc Zvi Brettler (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 503.

²³⁵ Edward Foley, “Which Jesus Table? Reflections on Eucharistic Starting Points,” *Worship* 82 (2008), 44.

details of their lives.”²³⁶ Ultimately, the reality of the first century is the same as the twenty-first: social status, power, wealth, background, ethnicity, nationalism, and religion are just a few of the many ways humans choose to divide themselves into smaller, tight-knit groups. In turn, those groups like to eat and relax with one another. While the tendency is to paint Judaism as an unyielding and discriminating community, the reality is that “the early church was scarcely known for its high tolerance of the most notoriously sinful of its society.”²³⁷

John Dominic Crossan, a leader in historical Jesus research, enters this discussion with his use of the term “commensality.” In defining the term, he quickly reveals his governing use of the concept:

Multicultural anthropology uses the term ‘commensality’ for those decisions about what we eat, where we eat, when we eat, and, above all, with whom we eat. Taken together, these decisions form a miniature map of our social distinctions and hierarchies. Jesus, in rejecting this cartography of discrimination, advocates an open commensality.²³⁸

First century Judaism and Christianity both feature distinctive processes for dining together. While Christianity often held up the ideals of breaking down barriers, both faiths struggled to break down social or cultural taboos with their dining habits. Both communities lived into a reality that “the longest journey in the Greco-Roman world, maybe in any world – [is] the step across the threshold of a peasant stranger’s home.”²³⁹ In reflecting on the Eucharist through the lens of anthropology and religious custom, the

²³⁶Barbara Brown Taylor, “Table Manners,” *The Christian Century* 115 (Mar 11 1998), 257.

²³⁷ Craig Blomberg, “Jesus, Sinners, and Table Fellowship,” *Bulletin for Biblical Research* 19 (2009), 47.

²³⁸ John Dominic Crossan, “The Life of a Mediterranean Jewish Peasant,” *The Christian Century* 108 (Dec 18 - 25 1991), 1195.

²³⁹ Ibid.

tradition is clearly to dine with those who share the same beliefs, similar socio-economic background, and general understanding of faith and the world. Judaism and early Christianity both seek a uniformity of thought in their sacred meals.

Into this understanding of a rigid social structure and set dining patterns of commensality, the scriptural witness of Jesus' meal ministry bursts onto the scene. For many scholars, Jesus' meal ministry is almost without form. They proclaim that it is "Jesus' indiscriminate dining pattern."²⁴⁰ The easy and quick caricature, which has already been rejected in this paper, is that Jesus spurns Judaism and embraces the outcast. This concept can be summed up in the phrase, "his table fellowship with sinners is legendary."²⁴¹ These critics point to the accusation that Jesus "eats with tax collectors and sinners" (Matthew 9:11). The argument, advanced by Crossan and others is that Jesus' dining choices directly impacted his perception in the larger community and proved dangerous. "What is striking is that Jesus favors these moral outcasts with his presence, rather than becoming contaminated by them, a feature not found in conventional symposia *or* Jewish feasting."²⁴² By eating with prostitutes and those considered outside of the community for various reasons, Jesus upends society and creates chaos: "It is this unusual and dangerous act of table hospitality which, more than any other, embodies the discontinuity of Jesus' hospitality with that of his coreligionists and ultimately leads to his death."²⁴³ Said more succinctly by Robert Karris and other

²⁴⁰ Ibid., 349.

²⁴¹ Foley, "Which Jesus Table? Reflections on Eucharistic Starting Points," 45.

²⁴² Blomberg, "Jesus, Sinners, and Table Fellowship," 48.

²⁴³ Foley, "Which Jesus Table? Reflections on Eucharistic Starting Points," 46.

scholars, “Jesus got himself crucified with the way he ate.”²⁴⁴ This simplistic and binary understanding of Jesus’ meal ministry allows John Dominic Crossan and other critics to make several declarations. First is that “the heart of the original Jesus movement, [was] a shared egalitarianism of spiritual and material resources.”²⁴⁵ Secondly and more insidiously is the implied critique of Judaism as broken and discriminatory.

Jesus certainly ate with sinners of all stripes and was heavily criticized for his choices. Girardian theorists could inattentively point to this lack of differentiation as part of the crisis that leads to the scapegoat mechanism and Jesus’ crucifixion. The problem is that this understanding is intellectually lazy and does not point to the larger meal ministry of Jesus. As Edward Foley earlier noted, Judaism has a rich history of hospitality and open meal ministry. The result is a more complex and nuanced portrait of Jesus and Judaism:

It is in this broader Jewish context that one recognizes both the continuity and discontinuity of Jesus’ table ministry. Well versed in law and tradition, Jesus was called to the same table hospitality as his forebears, and is celebrated for his diversity of table companions. He feasts with religious leaders (Luke 14:1-24) and old family friends (Luke 10:38-42). He dines with the rich (Luke 5:27-39) and in the homes of the poor (Mark 1:31). He shares intimate meals (Luke 10:38-42) and breaks bread with multitudes (Matt 14:13-21). There are women (John 4:4-42) and men (Luke 19:1-10); newlyweds (John 2:1-10) and children (John 6:9); Jews (Luke 11:37-54), Gentiles (Mark 8:1-9) and Samaritans (John 4:4-42); the revered (Luke 7:36-50) and the reviled (Luke 19:1-10) . . . Jesus not only embraces the Jewish virtue of table inclusivity but sometimes does so in clear contradiction of Jewish law, and more often against the sensibilities of other Jews.²⁴⁶

²⁴⁴ Cited in *ibid.*, 49.

²⁴⁵ John Dominic Crossan, “Open Healing and Open Eating: Jesus as a Jewish Cynic?”, *Biblical Research* 36 (1991), 11.

²⁴⁶ Foley, “Which Jesus Table? Reflections on Eucharistic Starting Points,” 44.

In other words, Jesus knows what he is doing as he seeks to bring together disparate groups with food.

The key part that is often missing is an understanding that a distinct feature of Jesus' meal ministry is that he chooses to dine with Pharisees, one of his major opponents, as well. Many theorists credit the imagination or divinity of Christ for his parables but his dining choices clearly informed parts of his teaching. Perhaps the best way to understand the Prodigal Son parable is viewing Jesus' meal ministry as an enacted lesson long before he tells the story. By going out and eating with a diverse group of dining companions, Jesus appears to be drawing them together or at least working to convert them gradually to a more open theology of God's love in the world:

Precisely to enhance the possibilities of genuine repentance for those alienated by standard Jewish separationism, Jesus "mixes it up" with the notorious and the riff-raff of his world. Scarcely fearing that he will be morally or ritually defiled by them, in many instances he winds up leading them to God to true ceremonial and spiritual wholeness. Or to put it more succinctly, holiness, not impurity, turns out to be the most contagious.²⁴⁷

The Prodigal Son story can thus prove to be informative of Jesus' meal ministry. At the opening of the tale, neither son is reconciled with the father. Both dwell in alienation due to their choices, not from a formal religious declaration of social order. Both sons are invited to the feast. Only one chooses to come. Jesus' ministry is about seeking to reconcile the two to God and one another to varying degrees of success. Therefore, Jesus' meal ministry is about seeking the broken, lost, and alienated, both sinner and Pharisee alike.

²⁴⁷ Blomberg, "Jesus, Sinners, and Table Fellowship," 62.

While Jesus did this work, neither Judaism nor early Christians appears to follow suit. For the historical Jesus movement, this is a strange proof of the authenticity of these scriptures: “But apparently few in either religion dared emulate Jesus’ scandalous disregard for appearances in dining with these overtly immoral groups, so neither Jew nor Christian is likely to have made up a description of Christ such as this.”²⁴⁸ Sadly, this same argument could reveal a tragic misunderstanding in the work and ministry of Jesus. If Jesus’ meal ministry was about intentionally reaching out to those disaffected by the community of faith, then has the Eucharist served to enact and continue this understanding or has it willfully ignored the implications by focusing on the faithful alone? Said using a Girardian vocabulary, Jesus appears to seek out *mimetic rivals* realizing that each Self has a Mediator with whom they compete and conflict. Each group has that Other that is not as accomplished, not as pure, and not as good. Jesus dines with each group seeking to diffuse the conflict and reconcile the community. Does the Eucharist resonate with this concept of reconciliation or serve to reinforce those rivalries?

Dining practices of the first century were intended to define communities, alliances, and families. Jesus’ choice to eat with the Other, defined in dozens of different ways, flaunted that hierarchy. For many, Jesus’ meal ministry is over-simplified as “the inversion of the observant and the sinner in the Reign of God.”²⁴⁹ The deeper understanding is likely that the meal ministry was intended as a source of reconciliation in the community. Jan Michael Joncas deftly notes that Jesus is doing something new in

²⁴⁸ Ibid., 54.

²⁴⁹ Foley, “Which Jesus Table? Reflections on Eucharistic Starting Points,” 48.

the Last Supper. By breaking the previous identity politics and dining habits of first century Roman Palestine, Jesus' very guest list reveals a transformation:

Jesus replaces the commensality established by blood relationships with a new table-bond between himself and his disciples, forged by commitment to the Reign of God as revealed in his person and his preaching. Note that among the disciples who share Jesus' table are at least four members of the *am ha-aretz* [people of the land/peasants] (Peter, Andrew, James, John), a tax collector collaborator collaborating with the hated Roman occupying force (Matthew/Levi), and Zealots (Simon, Judas Iscariot) – all Jews who would normally never share a common meal.²⁵⁰

While early studies viewed Jesus alone as agent, recent scholarship has increasingly revealed that all of society understood the system on one level or another. Folks knew where they fit in the culture because of where and with whom they ate just as modern folks do. As a result, the disciples knew Jesus was doing something different and new and joined him in it.

With this understanding of first century dining practices and Jesus' broader meal ministry in mind, the Eucharist comes into sharper focus. Jesus' table ministry deliberately critiques the hierarchical social codes of first century Roman Palestine and begins a process of powerfully recasting the world:

It is no longer plausible to think of Jesus and his earliest companions as a bunch of country bumpkins who couldn't tell a baked squash from a roast leg of lamb. They were well aware of the way meals function both within Jewish family life and within the larger context of Hellenized Mediterranean culture. They understood the table's power to include or exclude, to create debts and obligations, to symbolize dominance and power. In short, they understood that to change dining habits was, quite literally, to change the world. For at table, everything that creates a world is present: economics, politics, the potential for rivalry and competition, bonds among friends, boundaries against enemies . . . Jesus' table ministry was, in fact, a strategy for rebuilding a human community on principles radically different from those of his surrounding social and religious culture

²⁵⁰ Jan Michael Joncas, "Tasting the Kingdom of God: The Meal Ministry of Jesus and Its Implications for Contemporary Worship and Life," *Worship* 74 (2000), 348.

– different from the ideology of honor and shame, of patrons, clients and brokers, of “us” against “them.”²⁵¹

Joncas, though not remotely or intentionally engaging Girard, has used the same verbiage to reflect on the Eucharist as a symbol of reconciliation for overcoming rivalry. His comments even refer to the ancient meal customs as possible sources of such *mimetic conflict*. Jesus’ broader meal ministry seeks to overcome those divisions with which Paul would later struggle in the early church.

The antidote to the scapegoat mechanism then is to engage, listen, pray, and eat with those on the edges and those in authority alike -- with rivals. In theory, this prescription sounds easy to follow. In practice, the results surprise even Jesus:

Jesus himself discovers that when you offer food to the hungry, you do not then choose who will show up. When Jesus enacts a kingdom in which people are fed and valued, we see that he too is challenged, that his initial understanding of how life will renew his own covenantal people begins to break wide open. A Syrophoenician woman asks that he look beyond his own preconceived notions of who matters, for whom his ministry is offered (Mark 7:24-30, Matthew 15:21-28).²⁵²

While scholars often struggle with this scene where Jesus appears to learn about a more expansive Kingdom of God from the Syrophoenician woman, the story conveys that reconciliation can and does penetrate all boundaries with Jesus’ apparent blessing.

The scriptural understanding of the Eucharist reveals even greater echoes of Girard and a concept of reconciliation. Paul’s first letter to the church in Corinth, featuring the first recorded reference to the Last Supper, focuses on the unity of the church. With this broader theme for First Corinthians, “Paul’s criticism of the

²⁵¹ Ibid., 356.

²⁵² Martha Smith Tatarnic, “Whoever Comes to Me: Open Table, Missional Church, and the Body of Christ,” *Anglican Theological Review* 96 (2014), 291.

Corinthians for their failure to discern the unity of the body of Christ as they come together to consume the body of Christ assumes that this meal has a specific character they are to understand and respect.”²⁵³ For Paul, the specific character is proclaimed explicitly to be reconciliation and unity.

In the context of Second Temple Judaism, the words of institution may well connote a clear concept of love and reconciliation. Jesus and the disciples all knew from experience that “at the feasts of Passover, Pentecost, and Tabernacles, the Bread of the Presence would be brought out for everyone to see, lifted up, and these words spoken: ‘Behold God’s love for you!’”²⁵⁴ With this background of bread as God’s very presence coloring the narrative, the bread of the Eucharist should be understood as love as much as reconciliation. For Robert Brawley, this understanding of God’s presence in the Eucharist offers a direct rejection of religious sacrifice. Without invoking Girard, he understands a progression from human sacrifice to animal sacrifice to symbolic action: “Jesus’ claim that the cup is his blood of the covenant implies that he rejects the cultic sacrificial system as the guarantee of the covenant. The wine presumably takes the place of human blood just as the blood of animals substitutes for human blood in cultic sacrifice.”²⁵⁵ With an understanding that the bread is God’s love incarnate and the wine is a substitute for human blood, the concept of a scapegoat offering is explicitly rejected. In its place are powerful symbols of love and reconciliation. Jesus offers the detached generosity and love of God in the form of food.

²⁵³ James Farewell, “Baptism, Eucharist, and the Hospitality of Jesus: On the Practice of ‘Open Communion’,” *The Anglican Theological Review* 86 (2004), 222.

²⁵⁴ Tatarnic, “Whoever Comes to Me,” 294.

²⁵⁵ Robert L. Brawley, “Table Fellowship: Bane and Blessing for the Historical Jesus,” *Perspectives in Religious Studies* 22 (1995), 26.

While many look only to the meal ministry as a means for reconciliation, Rowan Williams notes that Christ's healing ministry also strengthens the community. In many instances, Jesus heals those whose illness has separated them from most if not all of society. One of the seminal requests Christ makes of those whom he heals is that they present themselves to the religious authorities in the Temple, effectively commanding them to return to the community. The result is that even "Jesus' healings involved touching the polluting outsiders to bring them into communion."²⁵⁶ If Williams is correct and the reading of the meal ministry as a means for rapprochement is accurate, then Jesus' ministry from start to finish is about reconciliation and the unity of the community.

The offering and understanding of the meal must then focus on an embrace of love and reconciliation, but exactly who is brought into the fold becomes a matter of concern. Robert Brawley reveals that the words of institution offering the body in the Eucharist is all of Jesus and not simply a part, echoing Girard's call for a total assimilation of Jesus in the heart and body of the believer. Even more interesting, by looking at the whole table fellowship as important, the question of inclusion becomes paramount:

When Jesus says, "This is my body," he makes an analogy between bread and his own existence. In Jewish culture eating bread frequently was a synecdoche for the entire meal. Thus, Jesus uses the concrete, historical bread of the meal to refer to table fellowship. He confesses to his intimate companions that their commensality constitutes the essence of his own life under the rule of God.²⁵⁷

For many scholars, that last line connotes a sense of limit. While the earlier table ministry was open to all, the Last Supper is delineated as being the inner circle at least

²⁵⁶ Rowan Williams, *A Ray of Darkness* (Cambridge, Mass.: Cowley Publications, 1995), 118.

²⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 31.

and possibly only the twelve. The result is a dichotomy where the meal ministry of Jesus is open and should forever remain open for his followers while Eucharistic communion should be restrictive and should remain so for the same reasons. So, the question for this group becomes, “How do we enact Jesus the prophet’s indiscriminate dining as a sign of the radical equality of all human beings and how do we enact Jesus Christ the Lord’s restrictive dining as a sign of conversion to and discipleship in his way of life?”²⁵⁸ This begs the question of whether or not the Last Supper is understood as consonant with the meal ministry or a separate, private event for the faithful.

If the argument can be made that Jesus’ meal ministry was intended to unite oppositional groups, then what can be said of the Eucharist? While the twelve come from different Jewish backgrounds, “dining with these disciples is not a shattering of the purity codes nor a breach of Jewish table etiquette.”²⁵⁹ So, the binary understanding of Crossan cannot be applied. It can certainly be said that “Jesus and his disciples anticipate the coming of God’s kingdom when they forgive each other in the context of mealtime.”²⁶⁰ This concept would be consonant with the understanding of the meal ministry as reconciling. In the same breath, forgiveness points to sin. All four versions of the Last Supper (Matthew 26:17-29, Mark 14:12-25, Luke 22:14-20, and I Corinthians 11:17-34) specifically reference the betrayal in the context of the meal. Even the Gospel of John makes explicit reference to the betrayal while ignoring the words of institution if not communion itself. The interpretations of this connection have proven difficult and

²⁵⁸ Joncas, “Tasting the Kingdom of God,” 358.

²⁵⁹ Foley, “Which Jesus Table?”, 49.

²⁶⁰ Brawley, “Table Fellowship,” 20.

disjointed. For Girardian disciple, James Williams, “Judas’ betrayal of Jesus is a perfect counterpoint to Jesus’ enactment of the divine self-giving.”²⁶¹ This literary critique of protagonist and antagonist can certainly be instructive but does little more than serve as a character foil for Christ. Most other critics view the betrayal as a secondary addition which has been read into the narratives after the resurrection. The concept is that it has little other function than to note the gathering clouds of the crucifixion; “the betrayal is probably related to the last supper retroactively, but it has little internal impact on the tradition, and its hortatory function is secondary.”²⁶² While many of these critics immediately dismiss the possibility that Jesus could know about his betrayal, René Girard comes forward to note that the Passion and Jesus specifically feature a “wonderful comprehension of human behavior to be found in the text.”²⁶³

In a moment not repeated often in the New Testament, all four gospels and Paul present Jesus as having a clear understanding that his disciples will betray, deny, and abandon him. After spending years together in prayer and ministry, is it too much to presume that Jesus might know his disciples well enough to know how they might act? After all, Peter explicitly rejects Christ’s prediction of death in Matthew 16:22. The disciples are certainly portrayed as lacking understanding in all four gospels. Regardless of historical and textual criticism, Jesus is presented as knowing what is to come. Even worse, in the Gospel of Mark the narration of the Last Supper is accomplished in such a way “that the disciples’ appear in many ways to be ‘causing Jesus’ death through their

²⁶¹ Williams, *The Bible, Violence and the Sacred*, 224.

²⁶² Brawley, “Table Fellowship,” 27.

²⁶³ Girard, *The Scapegoat*, 160.

ignorance and failure’.”²⁶⁴ For Girard, Jesus further knows the scapegoat mechanism and understands that the contagion of *unanimous violence* will carry away Peter and the remaining ten. Jesus knows that of the feet he just washed, one “has lifted his heel against me” (John 13:18 and Psalm 41:9). Therefore, Jesus knows he will be betrayed and yet chooses to feed those who will betray him, deny him, abandon him, and sacrifice/scapegoat him. Taken in concert with the larger meal ministry, Jesus has a private meal only when it is openly revealed that the twelve no longer have the same understanding of love, acceptance, and self-offering. Jesus is shown dining with a small group who will be estranged from him shortly and caught up in sin and separation. All of the disciples will selfishly save themselves and look to the scapegoat mechanism to solve their problems and will be caught up in the contagion of communal violence. In more stark terms, the last supper is not a scene of insiders gathered for a foundational meal but is instead Jesus once again reaching out to reconcile the sinful in a move consonant with his meal ministry.

What if René Girard is right and the work of Jesus is to defuse the time bomb of *mimetic rivalry*? What if Jesus’ work is not random as much as an intentional aspect of his ministry where he actively chooses to enact the teachings of the Prodigal Son by seeking out the lost and the self-righteous alike? What if Jesus is providing a pure and true example to follow which will serve as a rejection of all violence in favor of forgiveness and love? If these concepts are true, then the Last Supper occurs not because of Passover but due to the change in heart of the disciples. Jesus chooses to have a meal with the twelve *because* they will fail first and should be reconciled. Jesus strives to

²⁶⁴ Francis Moloney, *A Body Broken for a Broken People* (Melbourne: Collins Dove, 1990), 30 in Foley, “Which Jesus Table?”, 49.

build a community based on God's detached generosity where sins are forgiven. If Jesus' meal ministry is about reconciliation with the community and God and is typically and intentionally targeted to those alienated from God and one another, then the Last Supper is a sign again of Jesus reconciling those who are lost and is not a privileged meal with a group of insiders who know more. As Girard might proclaim, the Last Supper could well be "a reflection on violence whose radicalism is revealed at the point where pardon replaces the obligatory vengeance."²⁶⁵ Said differently, while some two thousand years of Christian thought were deeply concerned with the menu of the Last Supper and who is worthy to receive it, Jesus carefully and lovingly makes a guest list of sinners and invites them into a community of love and reconciliation.

²⁶⁵ Girard, *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning*, 111.

Chapter Nine
A Sacrament of Intentional Reconciliation

The brain is hardwired to mimic others. René Girard built his entire theory on the anthropological, sociological, biological, and evolutionary truth of mirroring. Human beings learn by watching, studying, imitating, and mimicking one another. This process can lead to towering achievements and the advancement of culture and it can also lead to vengeance and violence. *Mimetic desire* may be the force that has led humanity to primacy over creation. However, there is a desire that precedes this process. The desire to eat.

We are born hungry . . . the baby is literally hardwired in those first telling moments of life to do nothing other than use all five senses, every space ounce of strength, in order to seek food. Before memory, before words or understanding, before acquiring any skills, before neural pathways have begun to form rational thoughts, each of us is born hungry.²⁶⁶

²⁶⁶ Tarnic, “Whoever Comes to Me,” 289.

Before mirroring can take its place as a learning mechanism, the primary focus and instinct of the human animal is the process of eating. Throughout his ministry and in the context of the Last Supper, Jesus taps into this elemental aspect of our nature. He first appears to us in an animal food trough in a town called Bread (Luke 2:1-20). He chooses to cast the Kingdom of God by starting at the beginning with food. In much the same way that *mimetic desire* can draw humanity out of narcissism by focusing on the Other, hunger can open a path to reliance on and interaction with others.

The hunger at the core of our human life can open us to explore relationship with God who is already at work in the lives of all of us; food and nourishment can be found through an encounter between hunger and the Christ who offers his life as bread. *Whoever* comes to me will be never be hungry.²⁶⁷

Jesus chooses a message and ministry of reconciliation around food. Through fits and starts and only partial understanding, the church has sought to follow this model.

Ultimately, it can be said that “the body of Christ begins with the story of a perplexing rebel who embodies right relationship with hunger.”²⁶⁸ Through food and hunger, Jesus teaches a new and better way of reconciliation and love. He chooses to set himself as a positive model for *mimetic desire*.

René Girard’s *mimetic theory* posits that Jesus came to reveal the scapegoat mechanism and free humanity from the sin of violence. With this thesis in mind, much of Girard’s view of humanity in relationship to *mimetic desire*, *mimetic rivalry*, *mimetic conflict*, and the scapegoat mechanism proves to be unflaggingly pessimistic, filled with sin, conflict, and murder. Jesus is understood as remedy to these ailments exclusively

²⁶⁷ Ibid., 295.

²⁶⁸ Ibid., 292.

through his death and resurrection. However, the Anglican understanding of the Eucharist has something more to say.

By focusing almost exclusively on the cross, Girard misses Jesus' fundamental transformation of human interaction. Yes, the cross reveals the scapegoat mechanism and helps to free humanity from the vicious cycle of violence which can and does constrain us. However, his focus on a literal reading of the Last Supper blinds him to the work done there. For centuries the church has heard Jesus' words, "Take eat, this is my body" and "This is my blood" (Matthew 26:26, 28), and sought a transformation of the elements of bread and wine. In a Girardian understanding of Self, Mediator, Object, Jesus is consciously short-circuiting the triangle. He is seeking to prevent *mimetic desire* from turning into conflict. In the Last Supper, he boldly proclaims that the Mediator and Object are one in the same. In effect Jesus is saying, "Borrow my desire for God and understand that I am God. What you desire and the one from whom you borrow that desire are identical. Do not let this grow into rivalry, conflict, violence, and scapegoating. There is sufficient bread and wine to include all. There is abundant blessing to welcome the outcast, the sinner, the broken, and you. There is enough of God to prevent rivalry and conflict and reconcile all to one another."

Girard rightly understands this love extending especially to Christ's disciples as they are caught up in the almost inescapable sweep of communal violence and the *violent contagion* of the scapegoat theory. Forgiveness and grace is extended to the disciples while they are in the midst of their sin. Many of the Eucharistic prayers include this concept with a quick statement before the words of institution, "on the night he was

betrayed.”²⁶⁹ Jesus knows that the disciples will succumb to the scapegoat process and are effectively sinners yet Jesus chooses to feed them and forgive them *before* they actively sin against him. Sadly, Girard only chooses to view this fact through the prism of the crucifixion and the scapegoat mechanism. The more powerful reading is to view this moment of forgiveness and reconciliation as entirely consonant with the life, teachings, and meal ministry of Jesus. Instead of a separate meal for insiders and those of special status, the disciples are fed when they are about to break horribly with their teacher. Jesus provides forgiveness and grace before many of them even know they will sin and, more importantly, Christ provides them with a way home and an antidote to the violence that will consume them. Girard is so focused on the grand sweep of *mimetic theory* that he failed to see the positive mimesis Jesus was about in these moments. Humanity may well be doomed to ritual according Girard but Jesus redeems that negative reenactment by creating a new, peaceful rite in the Eucharist. Communion is meant to bring together the children of God: forgive, reconcile, and feed them. The Eucharist is meant to be an example of how to live a peaceful and forgiving life by mimicking the love and forgiveness Jesus shows to his closest friends who ultimately betray, deny, and deny him.

Strangely, Girard understood this concept of transformation as he began to develop his theory in *Deceit, Desire and the Novel*. Mimetic theory was born in the lines of great literature. The only solution he could see to the triangle of the Mediator, the Self, and the Object was a moment of conversion for the protagonist. The hero is transformed by coming to a knowledge of Self and a healthier view of her place in the

²⁶⁹ *The Book of Common Prayer* (New York: Seabury Press, 1979), 334, 342, 371.

world. Through this hard won revelation, the protagonist of the novel transcends and escapes the world of cyclical violence and *mimetic desire*. According to Girard, conversion is a reorientation of Self and a new relationship with the Other. Those theories were advanced before his own conversion to Christianity, but he would likely agree that it is the very purpose of the Christian faith – right relationship with Self, Others, and God. His initial observation of conversion to a new understanding of life and the Self's place within it are closer to classic Christianity than the simple revelation of the scapegoat mechanism. Girard focuses so completely on the gospels and Christ's work in unveiling the *mimetic cycle* of violence that he forgets to name the very intention of that revelation: to convert the faithful to a better way, to mimic Christ's life and teaching, to enact God's kingdom.

The movement from a human sacrificing God over and over again in worship to the transformation of the heart of the believer as a response to God's work was and is a major touchstone of Anglican Eucharistic theology. Cranmer and the earliest iterations of Anglican theology stressed the non-repeatable work of Jesus as a direct correction to the Medieval masses which sought to remember and even to re-enact that sacrifice. Tragically and ironically, the church was caught up in a ritual which Girard understood as archaic religion: the community recalled the scapegoat mechanism and reenacted it to preserve a certain order and provide the benefits of *generative violence*. One could argue this was how Anselm's substitutionary atonement theory ultimately operated, by casting Jesus' sacrifice as a necessary tragedy which provided lasting benefits for the faithful and society. Anselm, in an effort to provide an explanation for how Christ saves, retold the story in terms almost exclusively related to the scapegoat mechanism. In reacting to the

sacrificial masses, the Reformation and specifically Thomas Cranmer started the church on a road to reclaiming the Eucharist as a sacrament of reconciliation. This process begins by shifting the saving work to God away from the actions of the priests and opens a conversation about conversion in the faithful. As later theologians would succinctly state regarding this Anglican understanding of communion, “we are *not* offering gifts, we are *not* offering Mass, but we *are* offering ourselves.”²⁷⁰ While the early teachers and thinkers were seeking a middle way between transubstantiation and consubstantiation or even simple memorial, the result was a powerful movement toward conversion of life. As Richard Hooker famously proclaimed, “The real presence of Christ’s most blessed body and blood is not therefore to be sought for in the sacrament, but in the worthy receiver of the sacrament.”²⁷¹ This incarnational understanding of communion would serve as a basis for future conversations and a deeper understanding of the dominical sacrament of the Eucharist.

The 1979 *Book of Common Prayer* preserved much of this classic Anglican understanding of the sacrament. The heart of the believer and the community of the faithful are critically important. The catechism lists the benefits of communion as: “the forgiveness of our sins, the strengthening of our union with Christ and one another, and the foretaste of the heavenly banquet which is our nourishment in eternal life.”²⁷² Girard rightfully would point to this understanding of the sacrament as incomplete. While he failed to fully develop a positive mimesis in the example of Jesus, Girard would critique

²⁷⁰ Stevenson, *Eucharist and Offering*, 173.

²⁷¹ Richard Hooker, *Of the Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity*, edn. Keble, 1865. Book II, 84.

²⁷² *The Book of Common Prayer* (New York: Seabury Press, 1979), 859-60.

this definition by adding a line referencing conversion to a life that explicitly mimics the example of Jesus. Amazingly, Girard, a French Roman Catholic, would call the church back to an Anglican understanding of the faith. In this way, Girardian theory and Anglican Eucharistic theology fall broadly into line with one another. The key for both schools of thought is how this theory becomes an action in the world, how the faithful are converted to a new, non-violent way of life, and how rivals are reconciled.

The great temptation of the Eucharist is to make it a closed event that merely affirms the beliefs of those present. Instead of transforming a community or sending a believer into the world, the prayers can become tacit approval for disunity and rivalry. As noted liturgical theologian Gordon Lathrop once proclaimed, “We are often tempted now to make ourselves the center of our celebrations.”²⁷³ Instead, one of the primary goals of worship and the Eucharist should and must be transformation. If the community leaves exactly the same as it enters, then something is not working. The church must be about the task of celebrating Christ’s teaching, death, and resurrection in the present and pointing to God’s continuing work in the world:

The importance of the early biblical (and liturgical) material must be understood in relation to the nature of Christian liturgical practice, which is not mainly *mimetic*, but *anamnetic*. Christian liturgy is not the calming of anxiety in the present by imitation of the past, but the transfiguration of the present and future by remembrance of the past.²⁷⁴

By remembering Jesus’ action, in the mode of a Girardian unveiling of the scapegoat mechanism, the church can place a priority on conversion. Action in this world is needed

²⁷³ Gordon Lathrop, “The Reforming Gospels: A Liturgical Theologian Looks Again at Eucharistic Origins,” *Worship* 87 (2013), 211.

²⁷⁴ James Farwell, footnote 7 in “Baptism, Eucharist, and the Hospitality of Jesus: On the Practice of ‘Open Communion’,” *The Anglican Theological Review* 86 (2004), 219.

to save all of humanity from the devastating cycle of *mimetic rivalry* and vengeance. More importantly, if the Eucharist is understood as consonant with the meal ministry of Jesus and showing a method for reconciling those opposed to each other, then communion must be recast as a sacrament that seeks out the rival and those who deny, betray, and abandon. The sacrament is not to be understood as much as enacted. “The goal of ritual is not to produce a meaning, but to produce an *outcome – a person redefined by grace as God’s own welcoming heart and hand.*”²⁷⁵ In other words, the church can become hospitable by practicing hospitality, can become forgiving by practicing forgiveness, and can become reconciling by practicing reconciliation all in the context of the Eucharist.

For some, this active and intentional purpose of the Eucharist may well be scriptural. Girardian theorist James Alison sees this with the foot washing in John:

It seems to me that it is perhaps for this reason that John does not include at this moment an account of the institution of the Eucharist: not because he does not believe in it, for it will have been the normal practice in his community, but because he wanted much more fully to underline the “existential” sense of “Do this in memory of me,” so that the Eucharist should not be an empty sign but the culminating celebration of a real way of living.²⁷⁶

In other words, Communion should be a moment of conversion that also opens the way to a new and different way of engaging the world. The result of this understanding of the Eucharist as an active event of the faithful could be transformative. The world on virtually every level would be impacted, because “there is no avoiding the economic and political implications of genuine table-fellowship.”²⁷⁷ Instead of the debates over the

²⁷⁵ Nathan Mitchell, “The Amen Corner,” *Worship* 71 (1997), 71.

²⁷⁶ James Alison, *Raising Abel: The Recovery of Eschatological Imagination* (New York: Crossroad Publishing, 1996), footnote 6 on page 72.

²⁷⁷ Joncas, “Tasting the Kingdom of God,” 364.

bread and wine, the church would be forced to recognize that the greatest action is conversion and action. Therefore the work of God in the Eucharist is not confined to the saving act by the Lamb of God on a cross some two thousand year ago but resides in the heart of the believer: “The purpose of the Eucharist is the transformation of *us*, not the bread. Hooker can say, boldly, that ‘there ensueth a kind of transubstantiation in us.’”²⁷⁸ This transformation of the faithful must lead to direct action in the present and future.

The Eucharist was never meant to be a passive reception of elements but the incarnation of the Kingdom of God. Jesus frees humanity from the cycle of violence and sin not simply through the crucifixion but through the entire witness of his life as one faithfully non-violent and loving. The Eucharist is an example to emulate and mimic in order to express that reconciliation between God and others. Said differently, humanity was “delivered by Christ from slavery into freedom; and that freedom is experienced and expressed as indebtedness – not to God, but to each other.”²⁷⁹ The door that is open is one of *theosis*, of becoming more God-like by mimicking the reconciling actions of Christ.

Cyril of Alexandria wrote that, “Participation in the Holy Spirit gives human beings the grace to be shaped as a complete copy of the divine nature.” This is the thinking which lies deep underneath the faith-encounter which takes place in the action of the Eucharist.²⁸⁰

From the beginning, the church has understood communion as a means to draw closer to God. More than that, the Eucharist is a place to not simply encounter God but to mimic

²⁷⁸ Rowan Williams, *Anglican Identities* (Cambridge, Mass.: Cowley Publications, 2003), 29.

²⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 12.

²⁸⁰ McAdoo and Stevenson, *The Mystery of the Eucharist in the Anglican Tradition* (Norwich: Canterbury Press, 1995), 8.

the divine love experienced there. In the words of Orthodox theologian John Zizioulas, the Eucharist features “a realization of *theosis*, as communion of man – and through him of creation – in the very life of the Trinity.”²⁸¹ Once again, the result is that the Eucharist must be understood communally. The reconciling work of God should be found “in the Eucharist, understood properly as a community and not as a ‘thing’.”²⁸²

The key for Girard is the understanding that God draws all of humanity together, good and bad alike. The saving action of Jesus is the reconciliation of rivals of all varieties and sources. Similarly, the Eucharist must be understood as both a community of faith and the reconciling action of God in the world. Therefore, the work of the faithful must be to enact that reconciliation through reaching out to the Other, to the Mediator, to the rival. In the words of our Eucharistic prayer, our sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving must be the intentional inclusion of those with whom we disagree. The hard and scary work of the Eucharist must reflect the key truth that “there is no place where the love of God can’t go. And that is unbearably hard to believe.”²⁸³ The church must find a way to enact this truth in the world and embrace it through action.

Jesus tells the church, “Do this in remembrance of me” (I Corinthians 11:24). The demonstrative pronoun “this” has an indefinite antecedent. The Church has often looked purely at the liturgical actions and not at the context of the whole meal and ministry of Jesus. Do what exactly? Dine with those with whom you disagree. Eat with those who will deny, betray, abandon, and murder you. Feast with those who may never

²⁸¹ John D. Zizioulas, *Being as Communion: Studies in Personhood and the Church* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2002), 211.

²⁸² *Ibid.*, 213.

²⁸³ Williams, *A Ray of Darkness*, 118.

come to your side and oppose you. Seek reconciliation actively around a table. Christ institutes his sacrament and meal in the heart of a negative mimesis and at the peak of the scapegoat mechanism and says simply, “Here is a better way, a healthy *mimesis*.” This is the story that is told again and again in the hopes that it will shape and mold the faithful even if it has been historically misunderstood. If humans dream and tell stories as a sort of training simulator to better live their lives, then the tale must be told as one of radical reconciliation in order to help live better lives and free humanity from endless cycles of violence and retribution. The story should be told as a part of Jesus’ full, loving ministry open to all. In short, everyone must be reconciled and opened to the new Kingdom of God, mimicking God’s own detached generosity toward humanity:

The journey through the rich and random table ministry of Jesus which, more than other biblical lenses, provides the appropriate hermeneutic for breaking open the richness of the Last Supper and sounds the clarion call for contemporary eucharistic practice and theology that is unambiguously inclusive, persistently reconciling, and unflaggingly centrifugal.²⁸⁴

Whether through explicit teaching in the liturgy, an understanding of ‘open communion’ to be an intentional reaching out to the disaffected, or a meal ministry that draws from the example of Jesus, the church has to begin to find ways to reconcile itself to the Other. In this context, the church could proudly live into the old saying, “I saw them eating and I knew who they were.”²⁸⁵

Communion practiced in this way entails a rewritten notion of sacrifice. The sacrifice is not the demand for the death of the Other or the scapegoat but a willing renunciation of our claim to righteous vengeance. In short, the Eucharist should be a radical moment of reconciliation that teaches the faithful to go out and dine with their

²⁸⁴ Foley, “Which Jesus Table? Reflections on Eucharistic Starting Points,” 52.

²⁸⁵ Taylor, “Table Manners,” 257.

enemies as much or perhaps more than with their friends. The Eucharist should be a method to defuse Girard's *mimetic theory*, *mimetic conflict*, and the scapegoat mechanism long before it begins. The Eucharist should be the means for God's love and reconciliation to permeate all human relationships. Understood in these stark terms, the Eucharist could be a sacrament of intentional reconciliation. In this way, the church's sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving could become the story that evokes conversion and become the peaceful contagion that alters the world.

Chapter Ten

Epilogue

I have wrestled with René Girard and his *mimetic theory* for the better part of two years. I was drawn to his writing because he had a better answer to the need for Jesus' death than Anselm's substitutionary atonement. I could never reconcile myself to the concept that God who would demand the sacrifice of his only son to satisfy his honor or righteousness or to pay the debt of humanity's sin. In the end, I found Girard's shift of responsibility from God to humanity logical and far more consonant with Jesus' teaching

and ministry. Jesus chose to die to help free us from sin by exposing our sinful desires to banish the scapegoat, the outcast, the Other. In our current political and economic climate, the scapegoat mechanism has been used and employed by both parties to promote their agendas. While Girard died late last year, his theory has never felt more relevant and clear.

The great struggle with this thesis has been what to do with this information in the context and ministry of the Eucharist and the church. With Anselm's substitutionary atonement theory, the cross pays a debt and humanity is reconciled with God. The deal has been made and the work has been completed. Girard's theory however places an unwavering light on human sinfulness. Christ has done the work to reveal the evil of the scapegoat mechanism and our sinful nature, but this revelation means the work is only started and not done. Instead, the cross serves as a brutal reminder of our constant, ongoing sin. If we do nothing to change our lives or help break this cycle, then we ignore the sacrifice and Christ's desire to reconcile us to God and one another. I can best describe this conundrum by borrowing a line from a modern story, *Sherlock*. In the fourth season, the detective is saved by the wife of Dr. Watson who takes a bullet for him. In a difficult exchange, Holmes says to the grieving Watson, "in saving my life, she conferred a value on it. It is a currency I do not know how to spend."²⁸⁶ In much the same vein, Jesus' choice to die for us to reveal sin confers a value on our lives – it is a currency we do not know how to spend or even engage.

Anglican Eucharistic theology that has been branded receptionist proved the most helpful. Seeking a conversion in the heart, mind, and soul of the believer to a better

²⁸⁶ Benedict Cumberbatch, *Sherlock*, "The Lying Detective," Television series, BBC, 8 January 2017.

relationship with God and neighbor fits Girard's theory. The difficult bridge is how to teach this, engage this, and point to this as a way forward for the church. What does a post-Girardian priest do that a pre-Girardian priest does not?

The clearest answer is to seek reconciliation relentlessly. Plenty of clergy with no knowledge of Girard have done this work. However, a deeper understanding of Girard's *mimetic theory* connected with a broader understanding of Jesus' meal ministry as unitive changes those conversations about reconciliation. To defuse the mimetic contagion, we must seek reconciliation and conversion. One step is to teach the scapegoat mechanism to help the community understand its danger. In Jesus' process, the clergy must still do the same thing Jesus did by setting an example—dine with prostitutes, dine with tax collectors and known sinners, dine with clergy with whom we disagree. The concept is not to convert someone to our side or allow them to convert us to theirs. The purpose is to prevent the *mimetic cycle* of competition and rivalry. The purpose is to open the doors of the church to all, especially those alienated from God and others. The purpose is to prevent the scapegoat mechanism. In that vein, clergy should be reaching out to those explicitly targeted in recent campaigns: Muslims, Latinos, African-Americans, Planned Parenthood. The key is also to dine with those who did the scapegoating. The way to spend the currency that Jesus' lessons and life has conferred upon us is to seek out the Other. This work then becomes more important and critical than the office work, committee work, and business work that can often consume the life of churches and clergy. Jesus calls us outside the walls to be visible symbols of reconciliation and unity.

Another clear invitation would be ecumenical conversations. Those discussions can feel tangential to the daily work of ministry unless the formative ministry of the

church is understood as reconciliation. Then the Church should heed the scriptural and Johannine understanding of antichrist as one who breaks communion. The Anglican Communion has experienced these sad divisions and also perpetrated them against others. A first step might be reaching out between denominations through the gift of the Eucharistic to defuse rivalry and conflict. With this example, the church could bear witness to the purpose of the sacrament.

Girard critiques the modern obsession of being an original, individual hero. With our understanding of mirroring and mimetic theory, the very concept of someone with a new idea unrelated or beholden to anyone becomes laughable and dangerous. Modern society has created a system that isolates and damages. Meanwhile, the church invites humanity into communion. Here is the lesson that I can preach and teach and repeat almost endlessly. While the world says you should be independent and strong, the church and God says depend on each other. While the world demands that you hoard and keep enough so you never need anyone, the church says together we have enough to care for even the least. While the world separates people from one another into generations or demographics or races, God invites us into communion. We are invited into a great collection of sinners and scapegoats. The alternative is terrifying isolation. The faithful priest, understanding Girard and the long teaching of Christ and the church, could simply teach a level of humility for all the faithful and echo Miroslav Volf's pithy proclamation, "forgiveness flounders because I exclude the enemy from the community of humans even as I exclude myself from the community of sinners."²⁸⁷ The difficult but clear invitation would be to invite the faithful to mend their relationships around the table. If the

²⁸⁷ Miroslav Volf, Twitter, April 7, 2016, www.twitter.com.

sacrament is intended to reconcile between God and neighbor, then the most difficult but important invitation would be the one extended to those with whom we disagree, those whom we hate, those who have betrayed or wounded or hurt us. A post-Girardian priest would say that going out and actively seeking the Other is the key to our faith. Risking rejection or conflict or getting caught in larger debates is the way in which clergy and laity alike should spend the currency of Christ' offering on the cross. The Eucharist will only be a full sacrifice to God if humanity can lay aside hatred for the other and its thirst for vengeance. The Christian sacrifice is our choice to forgive instead of demand penance and penalty. In that day when those old scores are forgiven, the Eucharist will indeed be God and humanity's Great Thanksgiving.

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