

## Foreword

Few today would doubt the claim that violence seems pervasive in contemporary society. Whether reading the local newspaper or the global online news, whether watching the latest film or listening to the newest music, violence of one sort or another seems omnipresent. The violence of our late-modern age, furthermore, seems embedded in competing claims about boundaries and identities and what some philosophers call our relationship to “The Other.” Some people cheerily claim that boundaries are (or soon will be) no more, since modern technologies are shrinking the walls and distances that separate us. Such shrinkage will, these optimists argue, render violence a thing of the past. Others claim that the promise of such technological mastery is illusory. These cultural observers worry that the next technology is just domination by another name. Meanwhile an all too precious few worry about the plight of refugees and strangers in our midst and strive to offer hospitality to those who are homeless in an increasing number of ways.

In his fine book *The Gift of the Other*, Andrew Shepherd dives into these deep waters and presents a timely and powerful argument for why we Christians ought to resist the multiple forms of violence that tempt us and why we ought to offer hospitality to the homeless in this age of multiple displacements. In the first half of the book Andrew explains and critiques the views of postmodern thinkers Emmanuel Levinas and Jacques Derrida. While finding much of merit in Levinas and Derrida, Andrew also identifies how they view alienation and hostility as intrinsic to human being-in-the-world. Despite their best intentions these thinkers conceive of human existence as inevitably adversarial and thus they cannot construe the world in terms of an ontology of peace and communion. For Derrida especially, violence is inescapable, since intersubjectivity itself is always already violent, and hence there is no credible hope that hostility can be overcome.

In the second half of the book Andrew cogently argues that the Christian doctrines of the Trinity, creation, sin, and redemption—properly understood—provide robust resources for a theology and practice of

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genuine homemaking and homecoming. Violence need not be, since we humans are persons gifted, called, and named by the triune God of love. In essence, Andrew presents a careful case for a theological rehabilitation of the concept of hospitality. By attentively reading Scripture, mining the riches of the Christian theological tradition, and engaging contemporary thinkers, Andrew roots the practice of hospitality to the stranger in rich theological soil. This soil includes some of the wisest of aged saints, such as Irenaeus, Athanasius, and Gregory of Nyssa, along with more recent voices such as Barth, Bonhoeffer, Moltmann, and Zizioulas.

As Andrew insists, pace many of the postmodern philosophers, violence is not woven into the warp and weft of creation but a distortion of the shalom-filled way of being God intended for all creation. Difference does not necessarily mean conflict. Mutuality and reciprocity are potentially achievable and real—both the work of human hands and the gift of divine grace. Self and Other are not necessarily engaged in a Hobbesian war of all against all, but capable of authentic communion. What Andrew in *The Gift of the Other* calls ecclesial hospitality reminds me of what Brian Walsh and I, in our book *Beyond Homelessness: Christian Faith in a Culture of Displacement*, call sojourning community. We are neither well-ensconced home-dwellers, safe and secure in our fortresses of sameness, nor are we nomads perpetually peripatetic, on the road, heading nowhere. We are neither eternal dwellers nor eternal wanderers, but Christ-following sojourners at home on the way, traveling with others as people of memory, community, and hospitality.

God's blessings to you as take up and read this stimulating work of timely scholarship. May you in reading it be inspired to engage in the practice of ecclesial hospitality—the disciplined habit of offering a gracious and joyous welcome to the strangers at your door. In so doing, you bear witness to God's great good future of shalom.

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