“FAITH MEETS LIFE:
The Irruptive Atonement Theology of
René Girard & James Alison”

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ABSTRACT

Rev. Gordon S. Wiersma

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Since its inception in 1862 as the “first-to-use-English” Dutch Reformed Church congregation in Holland, Michigan, Hope Church has lived out a progressive ministry relevant to contemporary issues. Hope Church’s ministry has been carried out alongside a default substitutionary atonement theological paradigm, but this paradigm neither fits nor supports the lived ministry of Hope Church. In continuing to be a progressive presence in the RCA, Hope Church will be well served by an atonement theology paradigm that grounds and nurtures its ministry of justice and inclusion. My lifelong spiritual path is similar to that of Hope Church, as one with a progressive faith in the midst of a conservative religious culture and theology, and this dissonance has led me to seek an alternative atonement theology. My thesis is that the “irruptive” atonement paradigm that I draw from the work of René Girard and James Alison offers a life-giving theology to empower Hope Church’s ministry. My vision is to design ways in which to incorporate the content and language of the Girard/Alison irruptive paradigm into the worship life and pedagogy of Hope Church, aligning atonement theology with life and ministry. I have developed resources to provide longitudinal support to Hope Church in giving theological voice and nurture to the irruptive atonement paradigm which I assert that Hope Church embodies. My approach in doing so is not through direct teaching of Girard/Alison theology, but through the use of language, images, and programs that are imbued with the irruptive atonement paradigm and incorporated into the fabric of Hope Church life. This approach will support the faith and ministry of Hope Church and will evoke creative expressions of justice and inclusion.
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What do you do when so-called orthodox theology is at odds with real life? What do you do when a received theology is at odds with faithful living as a Christian community?

One possible answer is simple: you ignore it. That is what I did for many years when it came to a certain expressed and received orthodoxy of atonement theology, staunchly stated in my tradition in the language of substitutionary atonement. For me, real life and Christian living did not sync with substitutionary atonement theology, but over time I displayed a remarkable ability to ignore the existence of this inconvenient truth.

A more interesting answer is less simple: you do something about it. That has been my particular challenge over the last decade of my ministry, seeking to put in sync a theology of atonement with the realities of life and faithful living. This has not been a straight path, but my determination to name the dissonance between theology and practice and to find a place of resonance between the two has been a journey of rich discovery.

This thesis explores that path of discovery, tracing the trail back into my faith formation and exploring fruitful ways forward as a pastor of Hope Church. This thesis flows from a renewed atonement theology based on the work of René Girard and James Alison, putting atonement theology and Christian living into faithful conversation, creating space for a generative orthodoxy that nurtures Christian community for participation in Christ’s reign of life. The research approach of this thesis is to implement projects through which this renewed paradigm of atonement intersects with the worship life and spiritual formation of Hope Church. This is done with the delightful conviction that these projects bring to light a faithfulness already present in this community, while also fostering a deeper connection to an atonement theology spoken in the language of life.
Hope Church has a progressive spirit in its DNA. Officially organized in 1862 in Holland, Michigan, Hope Church was the fruition of an English-speaking place of worship established several years earlier, primarily for new professors who had come to Holland to teach at the Holland Academy (now Hope College). 19th-century Holland was a Dutch Reformed immigrant community, and Dutch was the presumed worship language. The arrival of English-speaking professors spurred some to go against this Dutch grain by establishing an English-language Hope Church. This progressive spirit was reflected in various ways: early on in welcoming of Catholic and Methodist families; in the 1940’s by replacing the Sunday evening service with a “School for Christian Living”; in the 1960s with a turn toward societal issues, supporting women’s leadership, civil rights, and anti-nuclear efforts, and as an early voice for civil rights for gays and lesbians.

In the late 1970s, Hope Church went through a process to develop a Mission Statement (Appendix A). When I arrived as a pastor in 1999, I soon noticed that the Mission Statement was regularly referred to in ministry conversations and that the founding “English-speaking” story was often told. When the statement was reworked in 2012, it had substantial continuity with the original themes. The Mission Statement has served to codify Hope Church’s identity as a congregation, linking a pioneering history with a contemporary call to progressive ministry.

I have a progressive spirit in my faith DNA. My parents each came from a conservative, Dutch-immigrant, white, Christian Reformed Church culture, but together they embarked on an atypical path. In 1968 they settled in Grand Rapids, Michigan, for my Father to join the faculty of Calvin College. There they joined a small, multiracial, CRC congregation in a mostly black downtown neighborhood. Grace Church focused on neighborhood ministry, advocated for women’s leadership in the CRC, and proclaimed God’s expansive grace. As I grew, I became
aware that my church and family held different theological and political views than much of the Dutch CRC culture, and I embraced and enjoyed that identity. As a progressive presence in the midst of a conservative Reformed subculture, Hope Church and I share similar faith-DNA.

And then there is Sherman’s DNA. Sherman is my younger brother, so we also share DNA, but Sherman’s DNA is a little different. In the process of embryonic cell division, Sherman developed an extra 21st chromosome, resulting in the developmental disability known as Down Syndrome. I am four years older than Sherman, and I grew up with an awareness that Sherman’s disability was a distinguishing characteristic of our family. I don’t know when I first heard my Mother tell the story of Sherman’s birth, but at some point, the story settled deep in my soul:

When Sherman was born, many Christian friends told me that Sherman having Down Syndrome was God’s will, so we had to be grateful. But all I could do was cry. And then Jim Kok, our pastor and friend, came and just sat with me and cried with me. And then he told me that God loved Sherman, and that God loved us, and that God’s love would never let us go and would provide a way. Jim doing that made all the difference for us in finding a way forward after Sherm was born. And it probably saved my faith.

It was clear to me that something important was going on in what my Mother was telling me. I knew that I wanted to believe and live in a way that was like Reverend Kok and like my Mother.

In bringing together the stories of Hope Church, my life, and my brother Sherman, it is my crucial assertion that in doing so I have been tracing the contours of a theology of atonement, a salvation narrative. This may be a surprising assertion, given the typical concept of substitutionary atonement theology. Such theology portrays salvation as an individual reckoning with God for one’s sin, with sin paid for through the death of Christ on the cross. This deeply entrenched paradigm is well expressed by the 20th century Dutch-American theologian Louis Berkhof:

The penal substitutionary or satisfaction doctrine...is the doctrine clearly taught by the word of God. When man fell away from God, he as such owed God reparation. But he could atone for his sin only by suffering eternally the penalty affixed to transgression...however, God appointed a vicar in Jesus Christ to take man’s place, and this vicar atoned for sin and obtained an eternal redemption for man.¹

Berkhof’s extensive explication of this doctrine was a standard in Reformed circles through much of the 20th century, and he continues to have considerable influence. In both church and society, I have found some version of this theology to be the primary atonement concept associated with Christian faith, ubiquitously expressed in a succinct transactional formula: “Jesus died on the cross to save me from my sins.” Even in my progressive subculture I was taught this theology: sin against God was the problem and the death of Jesus on the cross to pay the price was the solution.

In my church upbringing it was understood that this formula was simply how salvation worked, but the lived practice of Grace Church fostered a dissonance within me. Pastor Van Harn preached about God’s love and grace for all, expressing compassion to people who were hurting. Grace Church wonderfully embraced Sherman with deep love and inclusion, and there was no anxiety that Sherman’s eternal destiny required him to accept Jesus as his Savior. These were the gracious dynamics of church life that shaped my faith, yet all of this went on side by side with substitutionary atonement themes in hymns, prayers, sacraments, and curriculum. My faith was shaped by a progressive, grace-filled, justice-focused ministry, but substitutionary atonement remained the author of the salvation script; then a baptism started to flip the script.

My first call as a Pastor was to Longview Community Church, RCA, in Phoenix, Arizona, and two years into my ministry, my first child, Anna, was born. As I baptized her, I felt Anna enveloped in a story of life and hope flowing from God’s love and grace, and somewhere just beneath the surface percolated the thought: “What if that is salvation? What if that is atonement theology?” In that moment, I had an intuition in which much of my past and future was present, a pull toward an atonement theology in which Hope Church DNA, my faith DNA, and Sherman’s DNA all had a place. The dissonance from my upbringing turned out to be a source of generativity and creativity, and over many years ahead various threads wove together around my baptismal
intuition, taking form as a garment of salvation fitted to real life and faithful living. The coming together of that garment, a renewed paradigm of atonement theology, is the substance of this thesis. To delve further into this substance, we must return to the particular DNA of Hope Church.

In the mid-1990s the issue of homosexuality first received heightened attention at Hope Church. A person who was gay was elected to serve as an Elder, and some in the congregation raised concerns. This courageous man realized that Hope Church had not adequately addressed this “new” issue of a gay person in leadership, so he agreed to decline his election, but only if the congregation agreed to a discernment process about this issue. The resulting report, published in 1996, found no scriptural basis to exclude anyone from leadership based on sexual orientation, but deferred from ordaining homosexuals due to ongoing denominational discussions on the issue.

When I came to Hope Church in 1999, this process and policy were well known in the congregation, and my full acceptance and celebration of the LGBTQI community was just coming onto firm theological footing. Early in the 2000s, Hope Church no longer deferred from full inclusion in ordained leadership, which resulted in increasing tension with the RCA denomination. Hope Church joined with a small, strong cohort of RCA congregations in becoming a “Room for All” congregation in 2010 (Appendix B). This brought fruitfulness in fully receiving the gifts of LGBTQI members and also brought tension with the increasingly strident voices in the RCA that desired to codify opposition to LGBTQI inclusion through polity and discipline.

As I along with Hope Church came to a full embrace of and blessing from LGBTQI persons, this issue was a fulcrum point at which the progressive values of Hope Church encountered a tension that could be creatively engaged by an overtly expressed alternative to substitutionary atonement theology. I do not claim there was a clamor in the congregation for me to articulate such a theology, nor am I unaware of or unappreciative of the many at Hope Church
who in their own way were pondering and articulating such a shift in theology. Rather, this thesis fleshes out my sense of Hope Church’s innate DNA receptivity at this particular juncture in church life to fully engage with an atonement paradigm which syncs with progressive faith and practice.

The roots of this receptivity can be seen to be implicit in the Hope Church Mission Statement. The Mission Statement affirms unity, reconciliation and justice, as it expresses a core identity of growing in faith, pioneering, being open, and Christian action. What the statement does not mention is any of the typical substitutionary atonement themes of sin and forgiveness, of personal salvation, heaven, and hell. However, this absence of typical atonement theology points in fact to the presence of a different sort of atonement theology being expressed, one focused on God’s reign of life touching all aspects of life: a theology present in Hope Church’s progressive DNA from the start.

It is these threads of my life, Hope Church’s mission, and my curiosity about atonement theology that have come together in my tenure as a pastor at Hope Church and that are drawn together in this thesis. In asserting a renewed atonement theology that speaks to real life, practices of worship and pedagogy can be fostered which more deeply resonate with and better nurture Hope Church’s mission. So, I now turn to an explication of an atonement theology that I believe offers a paradigm which both exegetes the DNA strands I have identified and opens up a lifegiving path forward for Hope Church and for all seeking an atonement theology in which faith meets life.
THEOLOGICAL PARADIGM: AN IRRUPTION OF INSIGHT

René Girard

I was first introduced to the work of René Girard through a book group in 2010 at Hope College. The group was organized by a member of Hope Church who is an English professor at Hope College and who knew of my interest in nonviolent theology. The book chosen for discussion was *I See Satan Fall Like Lightning*, and reading it was a transformative experience. Girard’s insights on mimetic theory intrigued me, his biblical exegesis often delightfully stunned me, and the book started me on a path of reading more of Girard and soon also reading the work of James Alison, one of Girard’s primary theological interpreters.

As is often the case with transformative experiences, my receptiveness to the insights of Girard and Alison had been prepared for by prior engagement with other thoughtful scholars. The work of Walter Wink was of particular import for me, as Wink’s theology first introduced me to the crucial concept of “The Myth of Redemptive Violence.” Wink uncovers how this myth operates in culture and religion as it “enshrines the belief that violence saves, that war brings peace, that might makes right. The Myth of Redemptive Violence is the pervasive myth of the modern world. It, and not Judaism, or Christianity or Islam, is the dominant religion in our world today.”

Redemptive violence establishes “good” violence as a culturally and religiously necessary and effective solution to conflict, as it also promotes a binary distinction of good and bad in the world.

Wink’s provocative insights on redemptive violence came to fruition for me with Girard. Trained as a medieval historian rather than a formal theologian, Girard’s wide-ranging study of literature, culture, and religion led him to see in Scripture a counter-narrative to themes of violence.

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and sacrifice. Central to Girard’s work are his insights on mimetic theory, paired with the concept of the scapegoating mechanism at work in myth and religion. Girard’s mimetic theory is based on the concept that all human desire comes from imitation of another. More than simply a developmental stage in the formation of infants and children, mimesis is a central operative force shaping human behavior throughout life. Girard sees this deeply rooted mimetic desire as primarily operative on an unconscious level, which he explains in two important ways. First, while human nature tends toward a self-concept of “excessive individualism…that presupposes the total autonomy of individuals, that is, the autonomy of their desires” (Girard’s emphasis), in reality, human actions actually “consist in doing more or less automatically and unconsciously what everybody around us is doing.” Second, human desire is based not on desire for an object itself but instead is rooted in the object belonging to another: “we assume that desire is objective or subjective, but in reality it rests on a third party who gives value to the objects.”

Such mimetic desire based on the other leads to rivalry, and it is rivalry which is at the core of all human violence, as humans are convinced that the acquisition of what another has will satisfy their desires. Girard deftly connects this concept to the scriptural prohibition of the tenth commandment, “you shall not covet,” noting that what is prohibited is to desire what is the neighbor’s. While “covet” has come to be a negative term in Christian culture, the Hebrew word has a neutral quality, simply “desire.” Thus, the focus of the commandment is not on desire itself but on the rivalrous desire that is the source of conflict and violence. In this way “the tenth commandment sketches…a fundamental revolution in the understanding of desire.”

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4 Girard, I See Satan Fall Like Lightning, 8.
6 Girard, I See Satan Fall Like Lightning, 9.
7 Girard, I See Satan Fall Like Lightning, 11.
8 Girard, I See Satan Fall Like Lightning, 9.
desire is at the heart of all the violence prohibited in the preceding commands, showing that “if we respected the tenth commandment, the four commandments that precede it would be superfluous.”

Here it is important to clarify that Girard affirms that “mimetic desire is intrinsically good,” as even in its propensity to violence, desire is also a source of freedom and creativity which is “responsible for the best and the worst in us, for what lowers us…as well as what elevates us.”

This positive quality of mimetic desire is what Jesus speaks to in the Gospels. When Jesus calls his followers to be like him (John 13:34; John 15:9-10), “what Jesus invites us to imitate is his own desire…to resemble God the Father” (Girard’s emphasis). In doing so, Jesus directs us to “imitate his own imitation” of the generosity of God who is gracious to all, as in God we are given a model for our desire which provides a path away from violence.

Along with mimesis, a second foundational concept of Girard is the scapegoat mechanism, which is a particular function of violence operative in religion and culture through a victim. Girard observes that violence in human culture is like a contagion which threatens to undo and annihilate human culture itself. The paradox identified by Girard is that humanity has come to use a form of regulated violence as the means by which to contain contagious violence. Essential to this social stability through violence is the use of an identified victim, a scapegoat, as a “victimary mechanism that appeases human communities and reestablishes, at least provisionally, their tranquility.”

The utility of such violence is that through the victim the scapegoat mechanism provides both an apparent explanation of violent contagion and a means by which to contain it. Such victimary violence is like an “analgesic or tranquilizer” that gives a community a sense of relief

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and stability.\textsuperscript{14} Although spoken of as a “mechanism,” this is primarily an unconscious process in which people become caught up and which becomes engrained in culture because of its perceived effectiveness.\textsuperscript{15} But the insidious reality of this mechanism is that the appeasing effect of a scapegoat is always only temporary. Violence always reemerges because rivalry always persists, and it is in the repetition of this mechanism that it becomes ritualized in religion and myth.\textsuperscript{16} A divine power becomes ascribed to the stability which scapegoating provides, and the perpetuation and ritualization of this cycle become central to human culture.\textsuperscript{17} The tragic irony of this repetitive violence is that through such ritualization humanity hides the insidious flaws of violence from itself, reinforcing violence as necessary and redemptive. This is the heart of evil in the world, the power of Satan, as violence is deeply entrenched both in rivalry and in its “solution.”\textsuperscript{18}

It is Girard’s reading of the Gospels which sparked his unique insights on and unmasking of the mechanisms of violence. On the surface, the Gospels present the familiar mechanism cycle of crisis resolved by violence. The vital difference Girard observes is that in Jesus the myth of violence - with “myth” connoting an entrenched cultural and spiritual narrative - is being subverted through the renunciation of violence as a divine power. Jesus is not a victim to appease either God or a community, rather Jesus submits himself to human violence in order to subvert, expose, and save humanity from the victim cycle in which it is trapped.\textsuperscript{19} The Cross (Girard capitalizes) is a revelation which exposes the scapegoat mechanism as “only a temporary end to collective violence,”\textsuperscript{20} and the victory of the Cross is its renunciation of both human and divine violence.\textsuperscript{21}

\textsuperscript{14} Girard, \textit{I See Satan Fall Like Lightning}, 87.
\textsuperscript{15} Girard, \textit{I See Satan Fall Like Lightning}, 28.
\textsuperscript{16} Girard, \textit{I See Satan Fall Like Lightning}, 88.
\textsuperscript{17} Girard, \textit{I See Satan Fall Like Lightning}, 106, 123.
\textsuperscript{18} Girard, \textit{I See Satan Fall Like Lightning}, 34.
\textsuperscript{19} Girard, \textit{I See Satan Fall Like Lightning}, 131.
\textsuperscript{20} Girard, \textit{I See Satan Fall Like Lightning}, 3.
\textsuperscript{21} Girard, \textit{I See Satan Fall Like Lightning}, 140.
Girard builds on this understanding of the Cross in describing the event of the Resurrection (again Girard capitalizes) as revealing the truth of the Cross. The Resurrection is the revelation to Jesus’ followers of God’s overcoming of the mechanism of violence, the “reversal of the violent contagion” present in humanity.\textsuperscript{22} The Resurrection is miraculous not only in its controverting of physical death, but also in its revelation “of a power superior to violent contagion,” the power of the Spirit of God to create a community of life without need of victims.\textsuperscript{23}

Thus, for Girard, the life, Cross, and Resurrection of Jesus are the antithesis to any understanding of God participating in violence. Rather, in the life, Cross, and Resurrection of Christ, God in God’s own self frees humanity from its futile hunger for victims, unmasking violence as a deception which claims to unify but which in reality only perpetuates itself. God in Christ is the One who does not condemn but rather reclaims our humanity, giving us the Spirit of Life to empower community formed around inclusion and true life rather than violence and death.

James Alison

With this profound foundation from Girard in place, theologian James Alison serves as a primary theological interpreter of Girard. Alison is appreciatively referred to by Girard in Girard’s later works, as Girard saw the need for theologians to carry forward the implications of his work. Alison sees Girard’s insights as infusing Christian theology with a life-giving paradigm of who God is and who we are as followers of Jesus.

Alison carries forward the work of Girard by asserting the resurrection of Jesus as the starting point and central principle of his theological framework.\textsuperscript{24} The resurrection is Alison’s essential hermeneutical principle not only for scripture but also for humanity and for God. Alison

\textsuperscript{22} Girard, \textit{I See Satan Fall Like Lightning}, 125, 149.
\textsuperscript{23} Girard, \textit{I See Satan Fall Like Lightning}, 189-190.
\textsuperscript{24} James Alison, \textit{Knowing Jesus} (London: SPCK, 2012), 3.
initially unpacks this resurrection hermeneutic through the Emmaus story in Luke 24, noting that Cleopas and his companion do not initially recognize the risen Jesus, but as they walk “Jesus interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures” (Luke 24:7). Here Alison sees the Risen Christ portrayed as a living hermeneutic through which to see both God and our humanity in a new way. The risen Lord is revealed as “the irruption of something utterly new” who creates access to a relationship with God that is absent of death and shaped by true life.

Thus, the resurrection is not simply an event but a revelation, shedding light both back onto the life and death of Christ and forward onto the path of those who follow the Risen Lord. In this way, Alison recasts Girardian theology in the language of “the intelligence of the victim,” a crucial concept which expresses the full revelatory impact of the resurrection. The intelligence of the victim is a new understanding made possible about God and humanity in the Risen Jesus, the crucified, risen and forgiving victim. This intelligence is not a “sort of intellectual brilliance” that makes some smarter than others, rather it is a “creative understanding concerning God and humanity which Jesus showed in his life leading to his death and which was made manifest…by his resurrection.” This is intelligence in the sense of a paradigm shift that could not be made on its own, in which the enculturated patterns of rivalry, victims and violence are disrupted by the reality of the risen Christ. At the same time, manifestations of this intelligence of the victim are found present throughout the overarching biblical witness: society is formed by violence and exclusion, but the revelation of God is found with the victim in creative inclusion.

It is with this concept of a new intelligence that Alison often uses the terminology of

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26 Alison, *The Joy of Being Wrong*, 76.
27 Alison, *Knowing Jesus*, 34-37.
29 Alison, *Knowing Jesus*, 41-43.
“irrupt” and “irruption” – i.e. “new intelligence was able to irrupt into the lives of the disciples” – which has become important to my comprehension of Alison’s thought.30 The resurrection irrupts into the entrenched cycle of victims and violence with the good news that God is the One who stands with victims and who frees humanity from its cycle of violence.31 This sense of bursting into, of breaking into, that “irruption” expresses is a profound way of linking incarnation, cross, resurrection, revelation and redemption all as manifestations of God’s active grace toward God’s world. Alison’s key concepts of “the intelligence of the victim” and “irruption” are given a profound summary in the title of his remarkable seminal work, The Joy of Being Wrong, as the title succinctly expresses the irruptive revelation given in the risen Jesus: what breaks through to us is that we are wrong about God’s need for victims and wrong about humanity’s need for violence, and this is true joy.

These insights from Alison provide the dynamic material with which to form an alternative atonement paradigm. Central to any atonement theology is a concept of sin, as traditionally sin is posed as the presenting issue that makes human beings in need of reconciliation with God. It is fair to assert that sin is historically and still typically described in Christian circles as a human action that is an offense against God, and thus sin requires God’s forgiveness by some means. As Alison moves to break down this understanding of sin as flawed and to reimagine an alternative understanding, he does so by first appropriating the Girardian concept of rivalry, expressing sin in terms of the theological concept of exclusion and inclusion. Thus, for the typically used definition of sin, one could express sin as a human moral defect that excludes us from God, which then leads to a search for a means of punitive atonement by which humans can be again included by God.

Alison challenges and subverts this common definition of sin with a new understanding,

30 Alison, Knowing Jesus, 41.
31 Alison, Knowing Jesus, 43-44.
and he uses the story of the healing of the blind man in John 9 in order to do so. Alison frames the story of John 9 as a series of exclusions and inclusions, tracking in ways both obvious and subtle who is included or excluded at any given moment according to the leaders of the temple on the one hand and according to Jesus on the other. While the dynamics of inclusion and exclusion are connected to many characters in the story, in particular the central figure of the blind man cycles a number of times through exclusion and inclusion. Finally, at the end of the story he is officially excluded by the religious leaders, and so, by their definition, excluded by God; at the same time, he is directly included by Jesus, and so, by Gospel definition, included by God. The Gospel leaves no room for uncertainty as to whose conclusion about the blind man the reader is meant to trust.

In this way, the endpoint of the John 9 story offers a new beginning for the understanding of sin, a “re-forging of the meaning of sin” in the revelation that “sin ceases to be a defect which excludes and comes to be a participation in the mechanism of exclusion” (emphasis from Alison).32 Put another way, “sin is resistance…to the creative work of God which seeks to include all.”33 This means that sin is not at its heart primarily a concern of God’s judgment or punishment, nor even primarily a matter of morality. Rather, sin is human participation in and captivity to the mechanism of exclusion, and the only way out from sin is the irruption of God’s creative inclusion. Alison’s exegesis enables a comprehensive view of sin, broadly exposing the dynamics of exclusion and inclusion: in our relationships; in our communities; within and beyond Christianity; in the structures of politics, economics, race, gender, and sexuality; and even within ourselves, as one is always both excluder and excluded.34

With this reforged definition of sin in hand, Alison moves to offer a comprehensive

33 Alison, *Faith Beyond Resentment*, 17.
theological paradigm for atonement in sharp contrast to substitutionary atonement. As Alison summarizes the familiar substitutionary script of atonement, deeply engrained in many whether Christian or not, he contends that substitutionary atonement theology is inadequate in describing both human reality and divine activity.\footnote{James Alison, \textit{On Being Liked} (New York: Crossroad, 2003), 18-19.} Alison unravels substitutionary atonement and reweaves a new theological paradigm, which I term “irruptive atonement,” by identifying problems in substitutionary atonement and then offering alternatives that shape a new irruptive paradigm.\footnote{Alison, \textit{On Being Liked}, 20-31.} These problems and alternatives are:

1) \textit{The problem of theory and the alternative of narrative}: Substitutionary atonement states salvation as an equation or transaction, making atonement into an intellectual concept and static formula. Irruptive atonement speaks of atonement as an ongoing narrative, unfolding as one becomes a participant in a story through which God reveals who God is and who we are.

2) \textit{The problem of retribution and the alternative of God’s restorative love}: In substitutionary atonement, retribution on the cross is at the core of God’s actions, and Alison believes that many rightly have no stomach to worship such a God. The radical revelation in irruptive atonement is that God’s love has nothing to do with retribution, rather, God’s love is the desire made incarnate in Christ to free us from violence and restore us to true life.

3) \textit{The problem with sin and the alternative of God}: Alison makes the compelling insight that in substitutionary atonement sin is in fact the central directing power. It is sin which requires satisfaction on the cross without exception and in this way sin “runs the story,” as in some versions of substitutionary atonement God even seems reluctantly \textit{compelled} to take payment. In irruptive atonement, God’s creative love and grace are the main characters, revealing the power of life and exposing the chronic cycles of violence, both human and divinized, which control us.
4) The problem of morals and the alternative of creative participation: Substitutionary atonement frames life as a set of morals to hold and rules to follow. This inevitably leads to a rigid paradigm for life, prone to judgmentalism and cut off from compassion. Salvation in irruptive atonement is a creative participation in relationship, discovery, and fruitfulness. Salvation is an ongoing “undergoing” of God’s creative love, shaping us as creators of community and life.

5) The problem of “in/out” and the alternative of inclusion: The inevitable dynamic of substitutionary atonement is the perpetual tracking of who is “in” and who is “out,” entrenching exclusion at the heart of religion. Irruptive atonement is the revelation that God breaks down all barriers and rivalry, all violence and exclusion. At the heart of faith is a creative inclusion, which is the organizing and sustaining power, the Spirit, of true community.

These problems and alternatives lead Alison to echo Girard in asserting that atonement is neither a final satisfactory sacrifice to God nor a perfect substitution to fulfill divine retribution, rather it is a “substitution for substitutions” which unmasks the myth of redemptive violence and empowers a new way to live. Atonement is the inversion and subversion of the sacrificial system, as Jesus is the “scapegoat” who reveals that a scapegoat is neither effective nor needed.37

The compelling heart of this irruptive atonement narrative is that it offers freedom as the essential image, experience, energy, and creative power of salvation.38 This can be understood as the dynamic power both of freedom from and of freedom to. Salvation in Christ is freedom from: from cycles of rivalry and violence; from believing God is violent and retributive; from the lie of redemptive violence; from shame and victimhood; from destructive patterns in self, with others, and in systems; from being defined by defect or illness. Salvation in Christ is freedom to: to receive true humanity; to witness to God’s boundless generosity and love; to live creatively, as we do

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38 Alison, On Being Liked, 42.
justice and love mercy; to live courageously, trusting that the Spirit of Life is with us always.

In this way, atonement is not a static transaction with God, but rather salvation is an ongoing revelation from God that speaks true life to all manifestations of death: injustice, violence, suffering, diminishment of self and others, prejudice, illness, despair. In Christ we are freed to create communities in which we live with self, others, and God as God created us to live, witnesses in the face of death’s fraudulent power to the truth of creative love and abundant life in Christ.

James Cone

This theological case concludes by putting the irruptive atonement paradigm into conversation with theologian James Cone, who offers insight which informs the irruptive paradigm both for historical critique and for current application. One overhearing this conversation could conclude that while Girard and Alison recovered for me the salvific power of the life and resurrection of Jesus, that Dr. Cone recovered for me the salvific power of the cross. In the substitutionary milieu of my raising, the cross was identified with punishment and shame, and so despite the nurture of a progressive faith community, there was imbued in me a sense of repulsion and guilt that God punished Jesus instead of me. Dwelling in this paradigm of punishment and shame, my encounter with Alison’s starting point of the resurrection as the hermeneutical key for salvation was energizing, leading me also to a new sense of the entire life of Jesus as a vital irruption of God’s reign. But with this focus on the life and resurrection of Jesus, the cross faded in importance, other than to emphasize that it was not a place of punishment and payment.

To such an impoverished theology of the cross, The Cross and the Lynching Tree speaks:

- “The cross symbolized divine power and ‘black life’, God overcoming sin and death.”
- “Jesus achieved salvation for the least through his solidarity with them even unto death.”
- “The cross speaks to oppressed peoples in ways that Jesus’ life, teachings, and even his resurrection do not…the cross places God in the midst of crucified people.”
- “It was Jesus’ cross that sent people into the streets to change the structures of social oppression.”
“For (King), the cross represented the depth of God’s love for suffering humanity, and an answer to the deadly cycle of violence and hatred.”

“A symbol of death and defeat, God turned (the cross) into a sign of liberation and new life. The cross is the most empowering symbol of God’s loving solidarity with ‘the least of these.’”

These theological assertions are certainly not new to Cone in this book nor to black theology, as they reflect themes from decades of his profound work reaching back into the 1960s. Nor are these themes absent from irruptive atonement theology, as Cone’s insights resonate deeply with Girard and Alison. Rather, my particular encounter with Cone in the Cross and the Lynching Tree pushed me to a deeper integration of the content of irruptive atonement and to a deeper understanding of what is at stake in which sort of atonement theology fuels the life of the church.

In Cone’s profound understanding of the cross, he offers clear focus to the salvific meaning of the cross in irruptive atonement as a unique assertion of God’s presence and solidarity in suffering and with the oppressed. This pushes one to more fully understand the cross as a saving act of God, offering hope to those brought low. Cone provides the means by which to creatively explore the interplay of the theological strands of the life, cross and resurrection of Christ, with each aspect containing particular revelations that are woven together in the full fabric of salvation.

But more than just a precursor of or compliment to irruptive atonement, Cone’s theological location in the black experience in America offers insights and resources that stand on their own, as Cone’s work expands both any critique of substitutionary atonement and any application of irruptive atonement. Cone deepens an understanding of the dangers of atonement theology done as a disembodied exercise in systematic theology, as he unmask the vacuous content and deadly consequences of any atonement theology that can exist side by side with and be complicit in systemic racial oppression. In this way, Cone enriches the irruptive atonement paradigm by making

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clear the plumb line for any atonement theology: demanding and showing the way for its embodiment in justice.

**THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: PARABOLIC PROCESS**

The projects for this thesis are guided by the concepts of Appreciative Inquiry (AI) as presented by Mark Lau Branson⁴⁰ and by the theological reflection model of Killen and de Beer⁴¹ paired with the insights of Christina Zaker.⁴² In the following, a summary and application of each of these theoretical approaches is offered in specific connection to the irruptive theological paradigm.

Appreciative Inquiry can be understood as focusing on what is creative and life-giving in a system, discerning and nurturing fruitful narratives and practices. AI is operative in my work in two vital ways. First, AI provides insight regarding the interplay between irruptive theology and the ministry of Hope Church. Rather than giving in to my deeply engrained propensity to a flawed problem-solving model, AI steers my research away from a focus on “the problem of substitutionary atonement” toward exploring the strengths of ministry at Hope Church, strengths which in fact manifest irruptive theology.⁴³ This thesis research offers theological nourishment to those strengths, as “what we focus on becomes our reality.”⁴⁴ Second, AI is a guide in structuring the content and process of this research, as projects are designed to engage the participants as resources for insight and ideas rather than simply as passive subjects to be taught or corrected.

The theological reflection approach of Killen and de Beer asserts that the innate human desire for insight⁴⁵ is best pursued from a “standpoint of exploration.”⁴⁶ My research explores this

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⁴⁶ Killen and de Beer, *The Art of Theological Reflection*, 16.
“movement toward insight” flowing from experience through feelings and images, and toward insight and action. In using the approach of Killen and de Beer, I have adapted their starting point of experience in a particular way. Killen and de Beer acknowledge with their audience that experience is a “massive” category of all that makes up our lives, and so they offer categories of Action, Culture, Positions, and Tradition as a way to parse out significant events for reflection. In doing theological reflection in a church setting, it is my conviction that people often carry with them the stereotyped expectation that topics for experience will be exclusively “religious” in content with an accompanying agenda of propagating established tenets of faith. Therefore, I have developed the strategy of using as a starting point the present-tense experience of the individuals and community. This starting point of “checking in with yourself” (my terminology) offers a triple benefit. 1) Participants take the atypical opportunity to interrupt their flow of life events with intentional reflection on what they notice in that flow, which builds on Killen & de Beer’s conviction that reflection is an innate impulse that can be fruitfully shaped. 2) Participants receive the affirmation that what is happening in their lives is recognized and valued in a “religious” setting. 3) As participants engage with the faith tradition, what they have called to mind in their own lives is more readily present to creatively engage with faith resources.

From this particular starting point of experience, the projects are designed to solicit feeling, images, and insights that arise as content is engaged, and in doing so, emphasis is placed less on systematic theology and more on faith narrative. The flow of experience, feeling and image becomes the creative space in which insight can surface, drawing out what people believe to be the “heart of the matter” for what is at stake in the intersection of faith and life.

48 Killen and de Beer, *The Art of Theological Reflection*, 60.
A final aspect of the research approach for these projects is the concept of “parable” as a means for creative disruption and insight. Killen and de Beer speak of the potential for a parable-like dynamic in reflection, the opportunity to upend assumptions held about our own “worlds” of experience, opening the possibility for insight and transformation.\(^{51}\) The work of Christina Zaker further fleshes out this concept, as she mines the concept of parable as a paradigm for reflection and insight. For Zaker, it is not only the parables that Jesus tells which offer a model for disruptive narrative and creative insight, it is also Jesus himself who is a parable, God’s Parable for us.\(^{52}\) With this insight, Zaker places theological reflection in a “parabolic” paradigm, gaining insight into our lives as we encounter God’s claim on who we are to be as followers of Jesus Christ.\(^{53}\)

These insights on parable provide support for this project, as the irruptive atonement paradigm is sharpened by the concept of Jesus as Parable. The incarnation is cast as a parabolic disruption of the cycles of violence and suffering engrained in human history, with Jesus embodying the irruptive presence of God’s reign of life in human history. Further, the irruptive paradigm is itself a parabolic narrative to the default substitutionary atonement paradigm held in church and culture. Such parabolic irruption into entrenched belief and practice can create space for creative paradigms of faith and faithful living. In this way, this research engages Hope Church with a faith narrative of parabolic irruption, offering insight and wisdom towards faithful living.

Guided by this conceptual framework, this thesis explores the impact of worship and pedagogical resources developed for Hope Church, shaped by the irruptive atonement paradigm of Girard and Alison. With such an undertaking, core issues of faith development and discipleship are at stake. In regard to faith formation, throughout my ministry many parents have shared their

\(^{51}\) Zaker, *Theological Reflection in Parabolic Mode*, x-xi.

\(^{52}\) Zaker, *Theological Reflection in Parabolic Mode*, 64.

\(^{53}\) Zaker, *Theological Reflection in Parabolic Mode*, 83.
own deconstruction of a formulaic substitutionary atonement theology, while being left unsure of what to put in its place for themselves or their children. Addressing this dynamic, this thesis sketches out a vision which gives children, youth, and adults the seeds of a meaningful atonement theology which can bear fruit in a faith relevant to the complexities, opportunities, and needs of life. The irruptive paradigm offers a renewed atonement theology grounded in narrative and fleshed out in relationship, connecting the human story to the story of the incarnation. Such a theology can resonate from young to old, with the depth and breadth to cultivate mature faith.

The issue of discipleship takes on importance as the irruptive paradigm supports faithful living that is communal and creative rather than individualistic and regimented. Across the generations Hope Church has addressed issues of justice and inclusion that are systemic and structural, and this project offers support to such a lived vision of salvation, one connected to God’s shalom for all people. In such ministry, the individual and communal aspects of salvation are joined as integrated expressions of the freedom flowing from God’s inclusive grace.

**EVALUATION & LEARNING: THREE PROJECTS AND A PARADIGM**

Intellectual rigor, comprehensive in approach and clear in presentation, is an important part of doing good theology. The development in this thesis of a theological case for an irruptive atonement theology paradigm has sought to fulfill that need for rigor. But in the life of a congregation, there is desire less for comprehensive presentations of theology and more for faith to be winsomely nurtured, challenged, and deepened. Thus, the challenge of this thesis is to express a rigorous atonement theology paradigm while also asserting the relevance of such a theology by connecting to and supporting the life of a congregation.

In pursuit of this interplay of theology and practice, the research projects focus on spiritual formation and worship life. The design of these projects is for use within the established programs
of Hope Church, developing resources which appreciatively engage with its lived practice of faith and ministry. Each project is designed to intentionally place the irruptive atonement paradigm into the Hope Church system in intergenerational and longitudinal ways. This is done with the conviction that both in the particular engagement with these projects and in the longitudinal formation of a system in which such theological content is experienced, that Hope Church will be creatively nurtured in a faith that witnesses to God’s gift of life-giving community in Christ.

The research is carried out through three projects: a weekend youth retreat developed for 6th-12th graders, held in January 2018; the writing and presentation of a “Children in Worship” story, introduced at a parents’ workshop in February 2018 and told in children’s worship centers and at worship services on Palm Sunday 2018; the writing of prayers for use in the Hope Church liturgy, soliciting feedback to the prayers at a response event held in June 2018.

These congregational projects will be shown to have been impactful and generative in several ways. 1) The projects brought to the fore an awareness that how atonement theology is expressed matters, not as an abstract theological concept but as a living theology for a faith community, impacting understandings of God, of self and others, of the world, and of Christian calling. 2) The projects have made more explicit Hope Church’s desired paradigms for worship and spiritual formation, as a shift away from substitutionary atonement language and the experience of content specifically developed from an irruptive atonement paradigm have imbued a corporate sense of the significance and generativity of irruptive theology. 3) The projects have provided support to Hope Church’s identity of giving witness to God’s love and serving God’s world. While this identity has been implicit in the life of Hope Church since its founding, these projects have given renewed clarity and confidence that such an identity is not an add-on to salvation but rather that justice and reconciliation are at the heart of salvation itself. These aspects
of impact and generativity are woven throughout the following, as I describe the responses to and learnings from each project.

**Youth Retreat Project**

Hope Church has held a youth winter weekend retreat for the past few decades, traveling a couple hours north to a church camp setting to enjoy active days outdoors, to endure uncomfortable nights sleeping on the floor, and to focus on a devotional theme for the weekend. The youth retreat in January of 2018 was the first of the three projects of this thesis, and wrestling with the approach to and content of the retreat was influential in my development of the subsequent thesis projects.

In developing the content for this retreat, I sought to address a need that my pastor colleagues and I have identified for our youth to be nurtured in language and images that offer an alternative to substitutionary atonement theology. We regularly observe that our youth express concerns about the concepts of substitutionary atonement but then do not have language to express an alternative to it, as they may well think there is no alternative. This reflects the broader Hope Church system in which there tends to be a default of received substitutionary atonement language alongside a ministry that is progressive. Likewise, Hope Church youth are often attuned to matters of justice and inclusion, yet they tend to use substitutionary atonement language when expressing faith in a more formal way. Our aim as pastors is to provide content and images for atonement that can support our youth in having a resonance between theology and faith practice. We desire to provide an atonement paradigm that our youth can carry fruitfully and creatively through life, especially given that many Hope Church adults express how a substitutionary paradigm was a negative experience in their youth formation which had to be reworked in adulthood. In addressing this issue, we have adopted the language of seeking a
“sticky” atonement theology for our youth, that is, a paradigm that will “stick with them” as a meaningful presence in their lives.

The guiding concept in developing the retreat material was not to do a direct teaching of Girard/Alison atonement theology, but rather for the content of the retreat both to reflect the spirit of the Girard/Alison atonement paradigm and to engage the youth with care. As to the spirit of the paradigm, the retreat content is not a linear theological formula to learn, but rather an experiential “undergoing” of the “irruption” of God’s freedom and life into human brokenness. As to engaging the youth with care, the retreat format avoids any sense of ferreting out “incorrect” views among the youth that would then be corrected, but rather uses an evocative and invitational approach. The material was designed for the youth to creatively explore what resonances emerge when faith is presented as a community formed around inclusive love, giving opportunity for youth to explore meaningful content while also having their questions and ideas heard. The retreat was led by Hope Church pastors and youth sponsors along with youth leaders from a sister Reformed church. I met with the leaders before the retreat to prepare, and after the retreat I solicited their written feedback and also discussed the retreat with my pastor colleagues.

The retreat content (Appendix C), developed in collaboration with my pastoral colleagues, places popular music alongside scripture, with reflection on the crosspollination between the two. The songs chosen for the retreat present worldviews combining the brokenness of and possibilities for humanity, with the songs then paired with scripture passages which also speak to the human condition and God’s relationship to the world. For example, the song “Born This Way” by Lady Gaga was placed alongside the story of Jesus and the woman at the well from John 4, exploring connections between the song and scripture. Yet with this retreat concept and content determined, it still required all of my Appreciative Inquiry convictions to resist the
still-present impulse to begin with a problem: “the problem of substitutionary atonement.”

Struggling to find another approach, it clicked in me to start the retreat not with “religious” content but rather with the opportunity for youth to simply “check in with yourself” about what is happening in one’s life. This was a crucial creative and theological decision.

This new concept of “checking in” as a starting point was the fruit of heeding the AI caution against using a “problem paradigm” and focusing instead on the Killen and de Beer emphasis on the starting point of experience. While Killen & de Beer identify various categories of experience, my adaptation of their model reflects the conviction that, particularly in addressing atonement theology, it is crucial to start by engaging the varied experiences of daily life that a person carries with them. For the youth retreat, beginning in this way created a “parabolic” dynamic for the youth, as they were unexpectedly invited to first give attention to the content of their lives, rather than immediately having religious content directed toward them. This approach embodies the spirit of irruptive theology, evoking the inbreaking of God into human experience which is at the heart of God’s redemptive action. This starting point of “checking in” was then also incorporated into the subsequent thesis projects. In each case, the projects were not designed for direct reflection on the “checking in” content, instead, to begin with this approach is a way to surface and affirm the “experienced and embodied self” that one brings into interaction with theology and with God.

With all aspects of ministry but particularly so with youth ministry, longitudinal and cumulative impacts outweigh individual events in significance, and with that in mind it can be said that the youth retreat was the most challenging project of this thesis to assess. The retreat itself went well by all accounts, while also dealing with the vagaries of managing a broad age range from 6th-12th grade while combining two church youth groups, not to mention muddy January weather. The written and verbal feedback from the youth sponsors spoke both to the specifics of
the retreat content and to broader reflections on youth ministry, and I quote a number of their responses in the following. The combination of songs and scripture was seen by the sponsors as “making scripture fresh for the youth,” inviting them to “think about scripture in a different way.” Putting songs and scripture into conversation gave “an implicit message that faith is interwoven with all of life and that incarnational life integrates us into the world.” There was a shared sense of the youth engaging the materials well and of their being vulnerable in reflections shared.

Reflecting on broader themes, there was appreciation from the sponsors for the irruptive theological paradigm being offered in a subtle way that “avoided communicating there is a wrong way or a right way to understand the life and death of Christ.” The content was experienced as “gently challenging the youth in a way that was creative and affirming of their perspectives, experiences and backgrounds.” One sponsor offered that the “experience felt like the youths were learning how to do theology, how to reflect theologically” in ways that could continue to serve their faith formation. A conversation with one of the youth sponsors from the sister church joining us for the weekend was of particular interest, as she reflected that they had attended other group youth events where they felt the need to “shield the youth from or debrief with the youth about” the devotional content presented, because it was too often a manipulative “choose heaven or hell” message. This retreat offered to her a fruitful model of having meaningful devotional content in the midst of the equally important focus of developing strong relationships with the youth.

The conclusion of the retreat was an important moment for me to develop and communicate a coherent summary of irruptive atonement theology in a way that was accessible to youth, and I promised a youth-friendly time limit of four minutes for my concluding reflection. In my conclusion (Appendix D), I touched back to the opening time of “checking in,” asserting that only a faith that is relevant to all that is going on in our lives will have the depth and breadth needed as
life circumstances change. I offered the “word picture” of the life of Jesus (Appendix D) as a creative jumble of “compassion, courage, generosity, joy, peace, hope, healing, strength, integrity, gentleness, love, friendship, wisdom, fierceness, inclusion, faith, mercy, hospitality, justice, blessing.” Such a breadth of experience, emotion, and action in the life of Jesus can offer a tangible connection that all which is present in our lives is embraced in the person of Christ.

The retreat conclusion was also one of the first times I spoke of the cross in a way that emphasized the solidarity of God with suffering and as a challenge to the deadly powers of our world, and it was likely the first time for most of the youth to hear such a paradigm. Connecting the solidarity of God’s love at the cross together with the life and resurrection of Christ drew me to express that the heart of the matter for these youth was to know their lives embraced by the “life-giving blessing of God,” a blessing to carry with them and share with the world.

**Children in Worship Story Project**

The development and presentation of a Children in Worship story became a centerpiece of this thesis research, emerging as a significant tool for communicating the substance of irruptive atonement theology. The Children in Worship program at Hope Church is based on the original work of Jerome Berryman on “Godly Play,” which Berryman developed more formally into the “Children and Worship” curriculum with Sonja Stewart.54 “Children and Worship” uses a Montessori-like approach to learning, utilizing “worship centers” for children in which the stories of God are told, wondered about together, and responded to in free form. “Children and Worship” has had a significant presence in RCA congregations, and Hope Church was one of the earliest congregations to adopt the program, beginning in the early 1980s (although the national program is called “Children and Worship,” Hope Church has adopted the terminology of “Children in

Worship” for our program). As a Hope Church pastor, I have been involved directly with the Children in Worship program through administrative support for our talented Children’s Ministry Coordinator and for dedicated volunteers who provide an excellent weekly Children in Worship program. Children in Worship is a central pedagogical program at Hope Church, with broad participation. Children are dismissed from the sanctuary service about twenty minutes into the liturgy following a “Word with the Children,” and they spend the next hour in the children’s “worship centers,” divided into the four rooms for preschool through 5th grade.

Children in Worship provides an approach for Christian nurture that is more evocative and mystical than systematic and logical, inviting the children to enter into the stories of God and to be blessed by the Spirit’s presence. The use of interactive materials, of repeated patterns for movement and language in the stories, and of a weekly “liturgy” that guides the flow of each session, all combine for an experiential theology of welcome, exploration and blessing around God’s word and in God’s grace. This approach provides a fertile format in which to express irruptive atonement as a story, reflecting in particular the narrative emphasis of Alison’s theology. Furthermore, the central role of Children in Worship at Hope Church provides an opportunity to develop material designed to be a longitudinal resource for spiritual formation at Hope Church. Development of the story was also a strategic opportunity to address ongoing concerns from parents about substitutionary atonement theology themes, as parents struggle with how to speak to their children about atonement theology. In particular, parents have expressed their difficulty with questions from their children about the death of Jesus on the cross. In the words of one parent: “I’m not sure what to say about such things to my children, so I either try to avoid the issue or tell them that ‘it’s difficult to understand, but we know that God really is about love.’”
This being the case, the Children in Worship story that I created uses images and narrative to express an irruptive atonement paradigm. Writing the story was an intense creative effort, striving to find an innovative way to use the Children in Worship format to communicate irruptive theology. After initially creating the story concept in early 2018, the story travelled through many iterations in the words crafted and materials chosen for presentation, regularly consulting with my children’s ministry and pastoral colleagues. Upon completing the story, I offered a parents’ workshop at the end of February 2018 to present the story for the first time, and I was anxious, both in the eager and nervous senses of the word, to see how it would be received.

The parents’ workshop (Appendix E) was attended by almost all the parents of the preschool through fifth-grade children who regularly participate in the Children in Worship program. Following the pattern of the youth retreat, I began the workshop time with “checking in with yourself” as a way of listening to what was present in the lives of those gathered. The workshop introduction also included a brief critique of substitutionary atonement theology along with a succinct presentation of irruptive atonement theology. This was done in recognition of what many parents have expressed as their dissatisfaction with and often pain received from substitutionary atonement theology, along with their uncertainty about how to offer a different understanding for their children.

In offering this more explicit critique and alternative paradigm, I could then turn to explore a particular way to nurture children in the alternative, a way best received in story: “The Christian Story” (Appendix F). As “The Christian Story” narrative unfolds with simple words and materials, a wall of separation is imposed into God’s good world through human harm, suffering and isolation. God then enters into this divided world in Christ, and through the life, death and resurrection of Christ, the wall is brought down and covered over with help, love and life.
Telling the story was a profound moment of the Spirit’s presence in shared community. As I reached the end of the story, the deep emotion in my voice reflected the palpable energy of the group’s intense engagement with and receptivity to the story, all of us experiencing a shared sense that the story offered a rich resource for the spiritual formation of our children. The excitement of the initial verbal reactions to the story – “I wish I had heard this story as a child”; “this is a story that I want to be a part of”; “this story connects to my life” – was further reflected in the extensive written feedback referenced below. Using the Killen & de Beer framework, the feedback can be traced with connections of feelings, images, insight and action.

**Feelings:** “Hope/hopeful” was a common response. “Refreshing” and “freeing” were expressed, as the story felt honest and empowering. A sense of God’s love was often expressed, felt for self and humanity and the world. Feelings of being touched by beauty, sadness, and wonder were expressed, along with a sense of God’s presence in community with us and with the world.

**Images:** Most respondents named the “wall” in the story as the most evocative image. To many a compelling aspect of this wall image was that the wall sections of “harm,” “suffering” and “alone” remain in the world but are covered by God’s “help,” “love” and “life,” offering an honest image of life: “removing the wall entirely would discount the realities of life, so transforming the wall to a bridge was powerful.” Several responses touched on the power of seeing that the overcoming of separation in the world is God’s primary concern in salvation.

**Insight:** Respondents shared both their own connections made from the story and the ways in which they could see the story speaking meaningfully to their children. A consistent theme was seeing the relevance of the story to all aspects of life, receiving a sense of how faith connects one with God’s Spirit at work in the world. Responses expressed how the story offers children a clear message of the biblical story of faith, as there were many affirmations of the power of the story’s
images and words. The story was seen as a faith narrative that children could carry with them as they grow, rather than having to “unlearn” some of the pitfalls of substitutionary atonement theology. It was affirmed that the story offers a narrative that “holds together” other Bible stories.

Action: There was excitement of wanting to “share this story with the world,” desiring to connect people in God’s love rather than divide people into “in” and “out.” Many received from the story a clear call to participate with God in the breaking down of walls and the creation of life-giving community: “I am someone joined to God in the story of love and reconciliation in the world.” One parent expressed that the story had her rethinking how to pray with her children, shifting from “forgive us from our sins” to naming “the ways we have harmed/hurt others.” The responses were pervaded by an energy of the story deepening a sense of God’s presence in one’s own life and of a tangible participation in God’s life-giving activity in the world today.

At this point my research took a twist, as it was not my original plan to present the Children in Worship story in the Hope Church worship services, but the enthusiastic reception at the parents’ workshop and the subsequent encouragement of my colleagues led to the development of a plan to also share the story in worship. For Palm Sunday 2018, a plan was coordinated both to have the story told in the children’s worship centers and for me to share the story as the “sermon” at the 8:30am and 11:00am worship services. The story was very different than typical sermon format and content, but the decision to present the story in worship reflected a leadership consensus that it would be meaningful for the broader congregation to share in the story experience.

As Palm Sunday approached, communications with the Children in Worship storytellers reflected their excitement in being a part of presenting the story to the children, and it was meaningful to see the story being fully embraced by these dedicated people who are at the heart of spiritual formation for our children. On Palm Sunday, the storytellers reported that the presentation
of the story in the worship centers went very well, with the veracity of their reports strengthened by their acknowledgment also of the typical intermittent squirming and non-sequitur interjections of the children. In written reflections about telling the story, the storytellers offered rich affirmations and creative ideas for further editing of the story text and images, looking toward future use of the story in the worship centers. Most gratifying to see in their feedback was their energetic brainstorming about ways to refine the story both for fuller accessibility to the younger children and for ongoing engagement as the children moved through the four age-grouped worship centers. Two examples of refinements to the story based on storyteller feedback reflect this generative feedback: for the younger children, there was the idea to add images to the “wall” sections along with words; for the wooden figures, there was input to incorporate many different hues of wood to better reflect ethnic and racial diversity. The storytellers communicated appreciation for what this story offered to the Children in Worship program, and they evidenced the faithful hearts and creative hands that will help tend this story as part of the ongoing curriculum.

Presenting the story also at the Palm Sunday worship services provided a valuable opportunity to express the core message of my thesis work to a much broader swath of the congregation. In the written responses from the congregation after the services, of particular note were comments that spoke directly to the theological heart of this thesis. One response, “I loved how God burst into the world with a saving power for all,” offers a powerfully concise expression of irruptive atonement theology itself. An insight offered that “this story upends the whole entrenched story, but does so subtly and profoundly,” resonates profoundly with the parabolic paradigm of Zaker at work in irruptive theology and captures the parabolic nature of the incarnation story. In this way, the story which began as a way to bring the irruptive paradigm into children’s spiritual formation, developed into a way to bring the larger congregation together
around a shared story of that paradigm. For many, the story affirmed and deepened their sense that we are “to be in the world, connected with all people and all creation, to bring Christ’s message of life, love and connection,” which is insight and action that goes to the heart of this thesis.

One concluding interaction exemplifies what is at the heart of the matter in this Children in Worship project. In the process of developing “The Christian Story,” I had several conversations over a period of months with a fairly new member of Hope Church who has recently been elected to a leadership position. He was raised in the Reformed tradition, and he and his wife have a preschool child. As I’ve shared updates on my DMin work with the congregation, he has expressed that he could understand my concerns with substitutionary atonement, but that his scientific-oriented mind was still drawn to some sort of formula for atonement and that my work didn’t seem to offer an alternative formula. He also shared that he was uncertain of how to make sense of the death of Jesus on the cross as his young son was beginning to ask about that. My response affirmed his appreciation of formulas but expressed my belief that relationships at their deepest level, such as his relationship with his son, simply don’t fit formulas. I wondered what it would be like to speak about atonement within the paradigm of a relationship, expressing to his son: that God had created him with talents to enjoy and gifts to bless others with; that nothing could ever separate him from God’s love; that God’s forgiveness is stronger than his mistakes, God’s healing is stronger than his hurts, and God’s peace is stronger than his fears; that he is part of a faith in which Jesus includes everyone and through which the Spirit nourishes him to be a blessing to all. This parent agreed that this was a meaningful way to talk about faith with his son, and together we affirmed that such a faith could grow and be carried with his son wherever life leads. When this parent witnessed the “Christian Story,” he deeply appreciated how it captured our conversations.

The heart of the matter for this parent was for faith and salvation to make sense, and a
formula could seem best for that. But for him and for many others who heard this story, salvation told as a relationship that is about the whole person and about all of life offers a deeper kind of “sense,” as the irruptive paradigm offers a genuine way to speak to our children and to each other about redemption. That is what people saw, felt, and resonated with in “The Christian Story.”

Prayer Project

The final project of this thesis is a piece that I have actually been pondering for decades, as in my many years of wonderings about atonement theology a particular focal point has been my wrestling with the role and content of the Prayer of Confession in Reformed liturgy. Traditionally, the Prayer of Confession has focused on individual sin which must be forgiven by God, with the prayer then followed by an “assurance” of God’s forgiveness and saving grace. However, I have long had an internal dialogue that goes something like: “if a woman came to worship who is suffering abuse from her husband, does she truly need to confess her sins and receive the assurance of God’s saving forgiveness?” I was cognizant of the complexity in this, realizing the varied individual circumstances and communal dynamics that are brought together in a congregation gathered for worship, and also aware that no single element of worship fully addresses all those needs. But my internal questions were persistent, pushing me to wrestle with the content of the Prayer of Confession so that it would be meaningful too for the circumstances of those “sinned against.” For such circumstances, I began to wonder if it would be meaningful for confession to also express realities such as despair and isolation, fear and suffering, weariness and confusion, and then to speak of God’s assurance as being about such gifts as presence, courage, and guidance. In doing so, this calls on the broader meanings of “confession” as an honesty about one’s life and also as a statement of faith that God is present to all aspects of life. This led me to begin to introduce
prayers of confession with the spoken invitation to “open our lives before God’s grace” and drew me to incorporate themes of both sin and suffering in the Prayer of Confession.

Thus, the prayer component to this project was the fruition of decades of internal theological wrestling and the fulfillment of a long-held desire to develop liturgy resources that reflect such a theology as I have now found in the irruptive atonement paradigm. Using the core irruptive concept of freedom as a creative catalyst, encompassing both freedom from all brokenness and freedom to true life in Christ, I wrote new prayers weekly for the Hope Church liturgy from Advent 2017 through Eastertide 2018 (Appendix G), and an example follows:

**PRAYER FOR RECONCILIATION**

God of unity, we are divided and broken, and we cannot mend ourselves.

*We are divided within ourselves, filled with conflicting desires and fears.*

*We are divided from one another, building barriers that hem in and shut out.*

*We are divided from you, drowning out your voice and losing our way.*

`prayer continues in stillness`

God of grace, we are turned to your Spirit to gift us with wholeness and hope.

*Heal our hearts with your tender love.*

*Heal our lives with your clarion call to justice.*

*Heal our faith with your living word of truth.*

*Through Jesus Christ, your gift of life and our true light. Amen.*

Such a prayer is written not as a theological discourse but simply as an element of liturgy that people can speak faithfully and genuinely, yet in its images and language this prayer is representative of an irruptive theology which over time can deeply shape a particular spirituality of self, others, God and salvation: the prayer goes beyond an individual focus to relational and corporate realities; the language of brokenness in the prayer touches both on actions done and diminishment done to; the prayer expresses themes of relationship, division, and wholeness as the core of what matters to God, to us, and to us about God; God’s grace is voiced as dynamic and restorative, the source of love, justice, and truth which heals both individually and communally; the moment of stillness honors both the heart of the one praying and the presence of the Spirit who
is listening and speaking; the prayers evoke feelings of confinement and yearning, of release and purpose, connecting one to a sense of freedom from brokenness and freedom to true life in Christ. In all these ways, both in the liturgical moment and over time as such themes and images are improvised upon in the weekly liturgy, the Prayer of Confession becomes a critical and creative moment in which the atonement theology of a faith community is voiced and formed. In the collection of prayers found in Appendix G, the improvisation upon such themes gives a sense of the breadth of image, feeling, and circumstances that can be voiced by a community at confession.

In order to research the influence of these prayers, a “Prayer Reflection and Response” event was held in June 2018. Rather than a workshop on irruptive atonement theology, this event was an appreciative inquiry into the evocative energy of prayers written from an irruptive paradigm. The goal was to ascertain how reflections on the prayers might echo the irruptive atonement paradigm used to write the prayers, exploring resonances with faith and faithful living. With close to seventy people attending the event, I again used “checking in” as a starting point, and it was moving afterwards to read the deep gratitude and pain, blessing and anxiety, present in people’s lives. Even as this “checking in” implicitly prepared the participants to connect their lives to the content of the prayers, so too it makes poignantly clear to a pastor all that prayer must speak to in a congregation’s life. In the introduction to the event, I also summarized irruptive atonement theology and spoke to the spark of my theological wonderings about the Prayer of Confession: “how can such a prayer be meaningful for a woman suffering abuse?”

The written responses to the prayers were a wonderful trove of material reflecting spirited engagement, with responses elicited through feelings, images, insight and action (Appendix H).

**Feelings and Images:** It is notable that in the responses there was a stronger focus on feelings than there was on new images. This likely has to do with that the prayers themselves
contain many images, and many of the feelings expressed were in response to those images. The feelings shared coalesced around intimacy, vulnerability, and safety. Intimacy was felt in being known to God, as well a sense of self-awareness of brokenness and yearning. This was connected to feelings of vulnerability, as the prayers created a space of honesty about shortfalls, pain, and a desire for wholeness, all drawn out by and brought before God’s Spirit. This vulnerability was paradoxically felt alongside a feeling of safety, with a sense that God’s grace and love are able to embrace all that is present in the lives of those praying and in our world.

**Insight:** The responses reflect a strong parabolic quality in the prayers, drawing one into an alternative world which is then recognized as the real world: “real” in the sense that the human heart at its created depth resonates with God’s gifts and is drawn to the renewal needed to hold that faith. The world created and recreated by the prayers brought insights around the nature of God, self, and others, woven together into a deeper wisdom about life. About God, there was awareness of God’s care for and concern about the whole world; about self, there was an awareness of depletion and a desire for meaning, coupled with realizing the need to turn to God for renewal; about others, there was insight of a shared need and calling, together with a feeling of compassion.

**Action:** Strong energy toward action was expressed in ways such as calling, courage, hope, justice, renewal, and challenge. Participants expressed an overall sense of being connected to something greater than themselves: to the life-giving Spirit of Christ and to faithful people within the church and beyond. These movements toward action called people onward and also made them aware of the need for strength and wisdom drawn from the Spirit through these prayers. There was a sense of hope expressed that what one does makes a difference when it is placed in God’s hands.

A notable conversation with a participant in the prayer response event helps to draw these responses together into the heart of the matter for these prayers. This man has in the past expressed
appreciation for the justice ministry of Hope Church but also concern that such justice be nurtured by a sense of God’s love in the good news of Christ, as he perceives that Hope Church’s “headiness” and “action” can cut short its attention to “heart” and “devotion.” After the prayer response event he said to me: “I’ve been happy for you to be enjoying your DMin studies, but I haven’t quite understood what it’s about. But today when you talked about wondering whether a woman suffering from abuse would feel that her life was included in our worship, it all came together for me. It’s so important that we witness to God’s love bringing life to all, and that we connect it to sin and to suffering, to everything in our lives and world. I can see how these prayers and this theology do that, and how they make that woman a part of it. Thank you.”

Hope Church has an identity focused on service and justice, but the rhythm of worship is the weekly communal heartbeat, and it is in worship that this identity is nourished by the Spirit. These prayers reinforce the parabolic nature of worship, drawing the congregation not away from the world nor even toward heaven, but out of the entrenched broken patterns of life and into the reign of life given through the Spirit of the Risen Christ. The conversation after the event pointed to the power of these prayers to evoke a communal “checking in,” through which real life is brought to the surface to be spoken to by the reign of life. These prayers evidence that the irruptive paradigm creates space for an identity of love woven together with action, as God’s love evokes honest confession of our lives and God’s grace speaks creative purpose to our lives. This connects to a consistent appreciation expressed in the responses for the poetic quality of the prayers, as the poetic - sibling to the parabolic - can often evoke unexpected connections. Thus, through these prayers, the heady rigor of irruptive theology and the demanding action of justice are shown to be rooted in the poetic soil of feeling, image, and insight, made fruitful by the Spirit of Wisdom.

What is finally notable about both the prayers written and the many responses received, is
that one finds very little use of the word “sin” to be present. This may seem askew with the Prayer of Confession, but I highlight this paucity of use of the word “sin” in order to evidence the holistic scope of the irruptive atonement paradigm. “Sin” has in many ways had its meaning hijacked by substitutionary atonement theology, confined to a moralistic, individualistic, and penal paradigm.

In contrast, Alison’s definition of sin - “not participating in the inclusive grace of God” - is a meaning very much infused into and wrestled with in both the prayers and the responses. The provocative and evocative focus of genuine confessional prayer and response is made clear: how God’s grace has not been received for our wandering or our pain; how God’s loving presence has not shaped our actions or confronted our fears; how God’s creative gifts have not been infused into our relationships; how God’s creative purpose has not shaped our individual and corporate actions.

What emerges from the genuine engagement with these prayers is a picture of a community aware of and desiring to abide in the irruptive atonement paradigm which reflects and nourishes its core identity. Transactional language about individual “sin” is not missed, and its absence is perhaps less and less noticed. Rather, there is openness to addressing life’s real challenges coupled with a desire to engage these challenges with a yearning and generative faith grounded in God’s reign of life in Christ. Such prayers present in Hope Church’s liturgy will continue to nourish the congregation in this creative interplay of God’s redeeming presence in the midst of real life.

**Implications for Other Ministry Settings**

This thesis makes the case that the projects described have been received appreciatively by Hope Church and that there is the promise of continued fruitfulness in using such resources in the Hope Church setting. For those in other ministry settings, I trust there is benefit not only in the sharing of the materials I have created but also more importantly in leaders being drawn to embrace the creative challenge of nurturing the irruptive atonement paradigm in their own contexts.
While writing the prayers for this project, I shared and discussed some of the prayers with a pastor who serves in a more conservative parish setting. She was excited to receive the prayers, seeing them as a resource to bring into her setting themes of justice which were often absent from worship there but which she felt the congregation would resonate with. This conversation leads me to make a bold assertion, based only on my lifelong church experience and my thirty years as a parish pastor, which is this: many Christians are closet irruptive atonement Christians. By this I mean that while substitutionary atonement theology remains for many as the often-unquestioned atonement paradigm, the way many Christians actually live day to day is with the desire to bring God’s love, grace, and mercy into the world, which is at the very heart of the irruptive paradigm.

Thus, if a pastor is compelled by the theology and resources offered here, then I assert there is opportunity in most any congregation to creatively impact faith formation using language that reflects: God’s love and compassion for the world; our shared brokenness and need for wholeness; a desire to live in creative community with others. Such language will open space for a leader to consistently connect the life, death, and resurrection of Christ, as well as the salvation arc of the whole scriptural witness, to the Spirit’s life-giving gifts of love, wholeness and community. I assert that as a leader does this, few in a congregation will notice the leaving behind of transactional atonement language, as instead their resonance with inclusive grace and mercy is nurtured.

There is no other way to start in this direction but to begin: be intentional about the language chosen for prayer, liturgy, preaching, and sacraments, expressing honestly both our broken circumstances and God’s life-giving presence; be persistent in connecting the spectrum of individual circumstances, community life, and broader events to the redeeming freedom from and freedom to given in Christ; be bold in claiming the gifts of the Spirit that are present in a community of faith to join with the creative work of God for wholeness and justice. As the salvation vocabulary
of a community shifts in this way, the Spirit of Life will in new ways speak creative redemption to daily life and will use the gifts of those same people to bring God’s reign of life to others.

CONCLUSION: DNA REVISITED AND REDEEMED

One might notice that since the opening pages of this thesis, I have not spoken again of my brother, Sherman. So then, does his DNA really represent an important way into what I have explored, and does he have a place on the way out? There is in fact nothing special about a family to whom a Down Syndrome child is born, but it is part of my story, and as such it represents the particular circumstances which mark each life with pain and joy, brokenness and possibility. In a substitutionary atonement paradigm, Sherman must be viewed as an exception to a required transaction and as the object of benevolence. But Sherman is neither an exception nor an object, and a theological paradigm that makes him so is a diminishment of the pain and the beauty of who Sherman is, and such is the case for the particular circumstances that encounter each of our lives.

An atonement theology that reduces lives to transactions and exceptions, and for which circumstances are secondary, is theology destined to distance us from our God and our calling. The circumstances of our lives require much more than a transaction, as our salvation in truth requires the irruption of the One who is the author and redeemer of all of life. And so, for Sherman, and for me, and for Hope Church, and for all, the story of circumstance is encountered with the story of Life in which we are all characters. Such is a salvation narrative which embraces all of life with grace and for grace: a salvation which I participate in for Sherman, and he for me, and all of us for each other, and God for us all. Such is a salvation that enters and redeems real life.

What do you do when a so-called orthodox theology is at odds with real life? This thesis has described one effort to do something about it. You listen to pain and joy. You listen to a community of faith. You listen to the Spirit. You try to find resonance between theology and life,
and in doing so an unraveling and renewing begins. You simply add two words to the RCA communion liturgy, as I first did fifteen years ago: “Jesus died on the cross for the sin and suffering of the whole world.” And you watch with gratitude as all who lead communion at Hope Church now add those words also: “and suffering.” And it makes a difference. You welcome those on the margins and find that you are the one blessed. You seek justice and find that you are the one made whole. And it makes a difference. You try for years to explain salvation, only to realize it has been explaining itself to you for a lifetime and for generations, irrupting all around in the parabolic lives of faithful people participating in this persistent, insistent, narrative: good is stronger than evil, love is stronger than hate, light is stronger than darkness, life is stronger than death.55 This is the salvation you speak of. And it makes a difference.

As the projects for this thesis were completed, I had a conversation with the chair of the Personnel Committee about my Doctor of Ministry work. She expressed appreciation that my work has affirmed Hope Church’s progressive spirit through the generations, and she also saw that there was a current need for that spirit to be supported. “Hope Church is realizing in this time that it has a voice to be heard and that we need to speak out to our denomination, and to our community, and to our world. That story you told, the prayers you’ve written, what you’re communicating to our youth and children and all of us; this is a time when support like that is needed. It’s helping us to claim who we are and to make the claim that love, inclusion, and justice are what God wants for this world.” Such is the heart of the matter for this thesis: to support a community of faith in its calling to faithfulness, joined to and nourished by Christ’s reign of life. To be a part of such a calling is a rich blessing for which I am deeply grateful, and it is my continued calling to nurture such faithfulness by listening together to God’s story of salvation, told in the language of life.

55 With thanks to Archbishop Desmond Tutu.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


1977-2012

HOPE CHURCH ~ STATEMENT OF MISSION

“Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit, and there are varieties of service but the same Lord, and there are varieties of working, but it is the same God who inspires them all in everyone.” (I Corinthians 12:4-7)

Hope Church affirms the unity which binds together diverse people as the Church Universal. Unity is possible and diversity is celebrated because the Church is the very Body of Christ.

No single congregation can fulfill equally all of the functions for which the Spirit equips the whole people of God. Hope Church recognizes that she is one representative, in one special time and place, of the Body of Christ. In this spirit, Hope Church has established the following goals:

TO PIONEER: Aware of our own heritage as a pioneering people, Hope Church aspires to creativity and excellence in worship, Christian nurture, governance, and outreach. We aim to experiment courageously and when an experiment proves unsuccessful, to press ahead in new directions and with new methods.

TO BE OPEN: Hope Church seeks to maintain the diversity in which she finds strength. We welcome people with varied interests, talents and backgrounds. We strive to be a community in which each member listens to and has genuine concern for all other members.

TO GROW IN FAITH: Hope Church aims to grow - not merely in numbers - but, more importantly, in depth of Christian commitment. We seek to be faithful to our calling as the people of God by identifying and eliciting each member’s particular gifts and directing these in obedience to God’s Word.

TO LEAD IN CHRISTIAN ACTION: Hope Church seeks to be servant to the human community, both locally and worldwide. We aim to serve both institutionally and through the total lives of our people.

"For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ.
For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body - Jews or Greeks, slaves or free – and all were made to drink of one Spirit.” (I Corinthians 12:12-13)

2012- Current

HOPE CHURCH, RCA ~ STATEMENT OF MISSION

OUR FAITHHope Church is called by God and equipped by the Holy Spirit to be a witness to the unity, reconciliation and justice given in the saving grace of Jesus Christ. These touchstones drawn from the Belhar Confession give voice to the historic Christian faith in our time and place.

“If anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation! God has reconciled us to himself through Christ and has given us the ministry of reconciliation.” II Corinthians 5:17-18

OUR MISSION Hope Church affirms these values to be at the core of our calling:

TO GROW IN FAITH: We seek to grow not only in numbers but, most importantly, in depth of Christian commitment. We seek to identify and engage each person's particular gifts and to direct all our gifts in faithfulness to God's Word.

TO PIONEER: Founded as a pioneering congregation, Hope Church is willing to experiment courageously and to press ahead in new directions. We continue to seek creativity and excellence in worship, nurture, governance, and outreach.

TO BE OPEN: We celebrate and proclaim God’s welcome of all people. Hope Church is blessed and strengthened by the rich diversity of background, race, gender, sexual orientation, culture, gifts, and interests present among and around us.

TO LEAD IN CHRISTIAN ACTION: Hope Church is committed to service, both locally and worldwide, and we support the work of justice and compassion by all people of good will. We serve both as a congregation and individually through our daily living.

“There are varieties of gifts but the same Spirit, varieties of service but the same Lord, varieties of working but it is the same God who inspires them all in everyone. To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.” I Corinthians 12:4-7
Appendix B: “Room for All” Affirmation

AFFIRMATIONS OF “ROOM FOR ALL” CHURCHES:
Welcoming & Affirming Congregations in the Reformed Church in America

Because we...

Affirm the face of God in all:
We are intentionally inclusive of people of all sexual orientations and gender identities. Within our congregational life, we make a conscious and deliberate decision to celebrate the Creator’s diversity as uniquely embodied in lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) people.

Because we...

Confess the harm done to LGBT people in the name of God:
We challenge theologies, beliefs, and doctrines that oppress or exclude anyone of any sexual orientation or gender identity who seeks to follow Jesus from full participation in the community of faith. We intentionally design church systems and structures that include every such person in the full life of the church.

Because we...

Embrace the inclusive love of Jesus Christ:
We seek to proclaim Christ’s selfless and unconditional love in what we teach and in how we live together within our congregation and our community. We encourage persons of all sexual orientations or gender identities to pattern their relationships after the model of Christ’s love.

Because we...

Recognize the need for greater understanding of LGBT people within our faith community:
We walk with each other on our identity/orientation journeys, encouraging lives free of shame or fear. We continue to study, to learn and to deepen relationships in order to share the concerns of LGBT persons and families, so as to be equipped actively to resist and to overcome exclusive practices.

Because we...

Look forward to the time when the Reformed Church in America lives consistently with its baptismal affirmations recognizes that all persons belong to God fully welcomes and includes people of all sexual orientations and gender identities into the life and ministry of our denomination:

We encourage and advocate for the full inclusion of LGBT followers of Jesus within our congregation, our classis and our regional synod, as well as within the General Synod. We support the mission of Room for All with our prayers, words, actions and gifts.
Appendix C: Youth Retreat

Cran Hill Youth Retreat
Lyrics for Life
January 26-28, 2018

Friday Evening Check-In
Say “hello” to yourself! (give yourself a few compliments if you’d like to) – and let yourself know that you’re going to ask yourself a few questions. Be sure to tell yourself that there are no right or wrong answers, but that honest answers are most helpful. You can share some of this with the group if you want to, but otherwise this is just with yourself, and with God, and with the fresh Cran Hill air.

What’s going pretty well, or great, for you in your life? What do you enjoy?

What are some difficult, or really bad, or painful, things in your life these days?

Anything you’re looking forward to or hoping for?

Anything you’re feeling pretty happy about? grateful for?

Some things that you’re sad or angry about? Things in the world that concern or frighten you?

Any things you’re wondering about? would like to pray about? to ask God about?

Note to self: God is with me and loves me now and always.
Nice job, self! – good talk!

Checking in about Faith:
Think about some of the ways that you hear people talk about Christianity…

Are there ways you sometimes hear Christianity described that you have a problem with?

Have you ever heard a summary of Christianity that you thought was really good?

Have you heard people raise questions about Christianity that you wonder about too? – such as...?

How would you describe Christianity? – 1 sentence!...
SATURDAY

SWITCHFOOT  "Meant To Live"

Fumbling his confidence
And wondering why the world has passed him by
Hoping that he's bent for more than arguments
And failed attempts to fly, fly

We were meant to live for so much more
Have we lost ourselves?
Somewhere we live inside
Somewhere we live inside
We were meant to live for so much more
Have we lost ourselves?
Somewhere we live inside

Dreaming about Providence
And whether mice or men have second tries
Maybe we've been livin’ with our eyes half open
Maybe we're bent and broken, broken

We want more than this world's got to offer
We want more than this world's got to offer
We want more than the wars of our fathers
And everything inside screams for second life, yeah

We were meant to live for so much more
Have we lost ourselves?
We were meant to live for so much more
Have we lost ourselves?
We were meant to live
We were meant to live

WONDERING ABOUT “MEANT TO LIVE”
How does this song describe how people experience life? What does this song say about what’s wrong with life and wrong with the world?

What’s the mood of this song? How does it make you feel?

What is there in this song that is hopeful about life and about the world?

God isn’t mentioned directly in this song, but what might this song say about God?

Any questions this song raises? Anything interesting or disturbing?
Luke 15 ~ The Story of the Lost Son from *The Message*

Jesus said, “There was once a man who had two sons. The younger said to his father, ‘Father, I want right now what’s coming to me.’

“So the father divided the property between them. It wasn’t long before the younger son packed his bags and left for a distant country. There, undisciplined and dissipated, he wasted everything he had. After he had gone through all his money, there was a bad famine all through that country and he began to hurt. He signed on with a citizen there who assigned him to his fields to slop the pigs. He was so hungry he would have eaten the corncobs in the pig slop, but no one would give him any.

“That brought him to his senses. He said, ‘All those farmhands working for my father sit down to three meals a day, and here I am starving to death. I’m going back to my father. I’ll say to him, Father, I’ve sinned against God, I’ve sinned before you; I don’t deserve to be called your son. Take me on as a hired hand.’

“He got right up and went home to his father.

“When he was still a long way off, his father saw him. His heart pounding, he ran out, embraced him, and kissed him. The son started his speech: ‘Father, I’ve sinned against God, I’ve sinned before you; I don’t deserve to be called your son ever again.’

“But the father wasn’t listening. He was calling to the servants, ‘Quick. Bring a clean set of clothes and dress him. Put the family ring on his finger and sandals on his feet. Then get a grain-fed heifer and roast it. We’re going to feast! We’re going to have a wonderful time! My son is here—given up for dead and now alive! Given up for lost and now found!’ And they began to have a wonderful time.

**WONDERING ABOUT LUKE 15**

In this story, does the father forgive the lost son? (trick question! 😊)

What does the father do?

What connections can you make between this story and the Switchfoot song?

Use this story as a way to describe what God is like...what is God like?!

If someone read just this story, what would she/he see as the heart of Christian faith? Give a summary in 1 sentence!
BORN THIS WAY! Lady Gaga

It doesn't matter if you love him,  
or capital H-I-M  
Just put your paws up 'cause you were born this way, baby  
My mama told me when I was young  
We are all born superstars  
She rolled my hair and put my lipstick on  
In the glass of her boudoir  
"There's nothing wrong with losing who you are"  
She said, "'Cause he made you perfect, babe"  
"So hold your head up girl and you'll go far,  
Listen to me when I say"  
I'm beautiful in my way  
'Cause God makes no mistakes  
I'm on the right track, baby I was born this way  
Don't hide yourself in regret  
Just love yourself and you're set  
I'm on the right track, baby  
I was born this way (Born this way)

Oh there ain't no other way  
Baby I was born this way  
Baby I was born this way  
Oh there ain't no other way  
Baby I was born this way  
Right track, baby I was born this way  
Don't be a drag, just be a queen  
Whether you're broke or evergreen  
You're black, white, beige, chola descent  
You're Lebanese, you're Orient  
Whether life's disabilities  
Left you outcast, bullied, or teased  
Rejoice and love yourself today  
'Cause baby you were born this way  
No matter gay, straight, or bi  
Lesbian, transgendered life  
I'm on the right track baby  
I was born to survive  
No matter black, white or beige  
Chola or orient made  
I'm on the right track baby  
I was born to be brave  
I'm beautiful in my way  
'Cause God makes no mistakes  
I'm on the right track,  
Baby I was born this way  
Don't hide yourself in regret  
Just love yourself and you're set  
I'm on the right track, baby  
I was born this way yeah  
Oh there ain't no other way  
Baby I was born this way  
Baby I was born this way (Born this way)  
Oh there ain't no other way  
Baby I was born this way  
Right track, baby I was born this way  
I was born this way hey  
I was born this way hey  
I'm on the right track baby  
I was born this way hey  
I was born this way hey  
I'm on the right track baby  
I was born this way hey  
Same D.N.A. but born this way  
Same D.N.A. but born this way
**WONDERING ABOUT “BORN THIS WAY”**

How does this song look at life? What challenges and opportunities does it describe?

What’s the mood of this song? – how do you feel when you listen to it?

What is there in this song that is hopeful about life and about the world?

How does this song talk about God? about faith?

**John 4 ~ The Woman at the Well from The Message**

Jesus was journeying back home and had to pass through Samaria. Worn out by the trip, sat down at the well. It was noon.

A woman, a Samaritan, came to draw water. Jesus said, “Would you give me a drink of water?” (His disciples had gone to the village to buy food for lunch.)

The Samaritan woman, taken aback, asked, “How come you, a Jew, are asking me, a Samaritan woman, for a drink?” (Jews in those days wouldn’t be caught dead talking to Samaritans.)

Jesus answered, “If you knew the generosity of God and who I am, you would be asking me for a drink, and I would give you fresh, living water.”

The woman said, “Sir, you don’t even have a bucket to draw with, and this well is deep. So how are you going to get this ‘living water’? Are you a better man than our ancestor Jacob, who dug this well and drank from it, he and his sons and livestock, and passed it down to us?”

Jesus said, “Everyone who drinks this water will get thirsty again and again. Anyone who drinks the water I give will never thirst—not ever. The water I give will be an artesian spring within, gushing fountains of endless life.”

The woman said, “Sir, give me this water so I won’t ever get thirsty, won’t ever have to come back to this well again!”

“It’s who you are and the way you live that count before God. Your worship must engage your spirit in the pursuit of truth. That’s the kind of people the Father is out looking for: those who are simply and honestly themselves before God. God is sheer being itself—Spirit. Those who worship God must do it out of their very being, their spirits, their true selves, in adoration.”

**WONDERING ABOUT JOHN 4**

Jesus was a Jew and a man; the woman was a Samaritan and a woman. What would be the expectation for how Jesus would treat the Samaritan woman? How does Jesus treat her?

What does Jesus say about the woman? (trick question 😊)

Jesus talks about “Living water” – what’s that about?

Make some comparisons to “Born This Way”:

- Read the bold sections in the song and scripture: according to both Lady Gaga and Jesus, what is God most interested in?

Jesus talks about the “generosity of God” – what do you think that means? - if we believe God is generous, what does that mean for how we look at ourselves and others and life?…discuss amongst yourselves!
BLESSINGS ~ Chance the Rapper

I'm gon' praise Him, praise Him 'til I'm gone
I'm gon' praise Him, praise Him 'til I'm gone
When the praises go up, the blessings come down
It seems like blessings keep falling in my lap
It seems like blessings keep falling in my lap

I don't make songs for free, I make 'em for freedom
Don't believe in kings, believe in the Kingdom
Chisel me into stone, prayer whistle me into song air
Dying laughing with Krillin saying something 'bout blonde hair
Jesus' black life ain't matter, I know I talked to his daddy
Said you the man of the house now, look out for your family
He has ordered my steps, gave me a sword with a crest
And gave Donnie a trumpet in case I get shortness of breath

I'm gon' praise Him, praise Him 'til I'm gone
Don't be mad
I'm gon' praise Him, praise Him 'til I'm gone
When the praises go up (Good God)
The blessings come down Good God
When the praises go up (Good God) the blessings come down
( the blessings come down)
When the praises go up, the blessings come down
( It seems like blessings keep falling in my lap)
The blessings come down
When the praises go up, the blessings come down (Good God)

They booked the nicest hotels on the 59th floor
With the big wide windows, with the suicide doors
Ain't no blood on my money, ain't no Twitter in Heaven
I know them drugs isn't close, ain't no visitin' Heaven
I know the difference in blessings and worldly possessions
Like my ex girl getting pregnant
And her becoming my everything
I'm at war with my wrongs, I'm writing four different songs
I never forged it or forfeited, I'm a force to be reconciled
They want four minute songs
You need a four hour praise dance performed every morn
I'm feeling shortness of breath, so Nico grab you a horn
Hit Jericho with a buzzer beater to end a quarter
Watch brick and mortar fall like dripping water, ugh!
(Good God)

I'm gon' praise Him, praise Him till I'm gone (Good God)
I'm gon' praise Him, praise Him till I'm gone
When the praises go up, (Good God) the blessings come down
(The blessings come down)
When the praises go up, the blessings come down
(the blessings come down)
When the praises go up, the blessings come down
( Are you ready for your blessings?)
When the praises go up, the blessings come down
( Are you ready for your miracle?)
When the praises go up, the blessings come down
( Are you ready, are you ready?)
WONDERING ABOUT “BLESSINGS”

How does this song look at life? What blessings & struggles does it describe?

What in this song is hopeful about life and about the world?

What is the mood of this song? – how do you feel when you listen to it?

How does this song talk about God? about faith?

Matthew 5 - You’re Blessed from The Message

When Jesus saw his ministry drawing huge crowds, he climbed a hillside. Arriving at a quiet place, this is what he said: “You’re blessed when you’re at the end of your rope. With less of you there is more of God and his rule. “You’re blessed when you feel you’ve lost what is most dear to you. Only then can you be embraced by the One most dear to you. “You’re blessed when you’re content with just who you are—no more, no less. That’s the moment you find yourselves proud owners of everything that can’t be bought. “You’re blessed when you’ve worked up a good appetite for God. He’s food and drink in the best meal you’ll ever eat. “You’re blessed when you care. At the moment of being ‘care-full,’ you find yourselves cared for. “You’re blessed when you get your inside world—your mind and heart—put right. Then you can see God in the outside world.

““You’re blessed when you can show people how to cooperate instead of compete or fight. That’s when you discover who you really are, and your place in God’s family.

““You’re blessed when your commitment to God provokes persecution. The persecution drives you even deeper into God’s kingdom.

““Not only that—count yourselves blessed every time people put you down or throw you out or speak lies about you to discredit me. What it means is that the truth is too close for comfort and they are uncomfortable. You can be glad when that happens—give a cheer, even!—for though they don’t like it, I do! And all heaven applauds. And know that you are in good company. My prophets and witnesses have always gotten into this kind of trouble.

““Let me tell you why you are here. You’re here to be salt-seasoning that brings out the God-flavors of this earth. If you lose your saltiness, how will people taste godliness? You’ve lost your usefulness and will end up in the garbage. “Here’s another way to put it: You’re here to be light, bringing out the God-colors in the world. God is not a secret to be kept. We’re going public with this, as public as a city on a hill. If I make you light-bearers, you don’t think I’m going to hide you under a bucket, do you? I’m putting you on a light stand. Now that I’ve put you there on a hilltop, on a light stand—shine! Keep open house; be generous with your lives. By opening up to others, you’ll prompt people to open up with God, this generous Father in heaven.

WONDERING ABOUT MATTHEW 5

What kind of life does Jesus describe with what he says? – what is there that is difficult? good?

What connections can you make between what Jesus says and the “Blessings” song?

If you were listening to Jesus, what sort of idea would you have about what God is like?

If someone heard just these Beatitudes/Blessings, what would she/he see as the heart of Christian faith? Give a summary in 1 sentence!
Appendix D: Youth Retreat Conclusion

Begun by revealing poster board with these words:

If everyone would please turn in your booklets to what we started with on Friday night, when you were “checking in with yourself”. We asked you to reflect on questions about what is happening in your life – good things and difficult things; things going well and painful places in life. And I expect that some of you wrote a lot of things and some of you a few things – but
whether or not you wrote a lot, or whether or not you’re used to reflecting on your life that way, I know that all of those different things are happening in all of our lives, yours and mine. There are places of gratitude and of struggle in each of our lives, and that’s how it is in the world around us too. And also on Friday evening we reflected just briefly on what Christian faith is about, both things you’ve heard about faith and some of your ideas – so we had those ideas percolating with us during this weekend too. And I think it’s important to go back to how we started on Friday, because what I want to say to you is that if we don’t have a Christian faith that connects to all of those things that we were checking in with ourselves about, all those things happening in our lives and in the world, then I don’t think that will be a faith that will be able to be relevant or lasting for you in your life.

And I emphasize that because it’s my impression that often in the church, and as I listen to young people, that there is often the impression that the church, that Christian faith, is mostly about being told not to do “wrong stuff” – it’s about a lot of rules which mean that God is mad at you if you do wrong stuff or that you’re good if you do good stuff. But if that’s all that faith is about, then I don’t think it’s going to be something that you’ll be able to carry into all the things that actually make up your life – things that are difficult that you need strength for and things that are going well that you can bring your creativity and gifts to – that’s a much bigger faith, so I think we often make faith too small when it’s just about rules and doing bad stuff. I’ve certainly done plenty of bad stuff in my life, and I need to change those things, and that’s a part of what faith in God is about. But I want to have a faith that’s about much more than that too, faith that connects to all the things happening in my life and in the world.

So that’s what I’m trying to get at with this poster, which I think represents the life of Jesus: that Jesus lived in a way that was about compassion and courage and generosity and joy and peace and hope and healing and strength and integrity and community and gentleness and love and friendship and wisdom and fierceness and inclusion and faith and mercy and hospitality and justice and commitment and blessing…about all of that - and probably some other things too. Because what we see in Jesus is that this is the way God created us to live, the way God made human beings to live together – and Jesus showed and said that we can live as children of God and have all of these things be the substance of our lives.

But the thing is, when you do try to live this way in this world, the powers of brokenness in this world are going to get ticked off, and they’re going to try and stop you, and they might even take your life. And that’s what they did to Jesus – they killed Jesus, put him to death – because they thought that doing that meant that they were stronger than the ways of life that Jesus was teaching – ‘we can put that to death’, they thought. And what that makes me realize too when I think of Jesus facing death at the hands of these powers, is that we have a God who understands and is present even in the worst circumstances of life, who even knows what it is to die.
But then Jesus rose again. And that was a big surprise to the powers of brokenness in this world because those powers think they are the strongest. But the truth is, all these things that we see in Jesus’ life never end – the Risen Jesus says that these are the realities you can always count on from God, no matter what, the ways of life are alive in the Spirit of Jesus and are alive in you, present in you like living water that never runs dry – nothing is more powerful than the ways of life that the Risen Jesus gives to us.

And when I hear that kind of story, I really believe that’s a kind of faith that I could carry into all the circumstances of my life – to have a purpose and be creative and be a blessing; to receive strength and healing, forgiveness and hope; to receive wisdom and guidance. And I think when you live that way, other people will notice that and think ‘that’s a story that I can to be a part of too’, that people will see the story of Jesus touching the story of their lives. That’s what we’ve been listening for this weekend in the songs and bible stories we’ve heard, and I’ve appreciated the way you’ve all been a part of reflecting on those together.

When we start by checking in with ourselves about what’s happening in our lives, and as we’re aware of what’s happening in the world around us, what we can realize is that with the story of Jesus we have a faith that makes a difference in all of those circumstances, a God who has everything to do with all that we face in life. Because God gives the blessing of life that nothing can take from you, which means you can be a blessing no matter where life takes you. That’s the story of Jesus that I want us all to be able to hear – that JESUS IS THE LIFE-GIVING BLESSING OF GOD FOR THE WHOLE WORLD - because that’s a story that I think we all could want to be a part of. And I believe that as your life unfolds, that will be a faith in God that you can carry with you – and that’s what I pray for each of you. Thanks for listening.
Appendix E: Parent Workshop for Children in Worship Story

CIW SESSION with PARENTS ~ 2/25/18
Take a moment to check in with yourself: reflect on what’s happening in your life; your children’s lives; in the world. What is going well? What is difficult? What are you grateful for? what are you anxious about? Be aware of your feelings, your thoughts.
Take a moment to be aware that God loves you – God loves your children – God loves this world.
Take a deep breath.

1. As a child, what was most formative for you in your faith in God, either within or outside the church? What things about your faith as a child have you kept? - what things have you left behind or changed?
2. What is most at stake for you in being a Christian? What is it most important to you that your faith in God supports and guides you in?
3. What do you hear from your child about faith? ideas about God? questions about God? How do you respond to those questions and ideas?

DOCTOR OF MINISTRY THESIS ~ McCormick Theological Seminary
Rev. Gordon Wiersma ~ ABSTRACT
Since its inception in 1862 as the “first-to-use-English” Reformed congregation in Holland, Hope Church has lived out a progressive ministry focused on being relevant to contemporary issues. This ministry has been carried out alongside a substitutionary atonement concept as the default theological paradigm, but this substitutionary paradigm does not fit or resonate with the ministry of Hope Church. In continuing to be a progressive presence in the RCA, Hope Church would be well served by an atonement theology paradigm that grounds and nurtures its ministry of justice and inclusion. My lifelong spiritual path is similar to Hope Church, as one with a progressive faith in the midst of a conservative religious culture and theology, and this has led me to seek an alternative atonement theology. My thesis is that in the “irruptive” atonement paradigm of Girard and Alison, scripture offers a life-giving theology to empower the ministry of Hope Church.

My vision is to design ways in which to incorporate the content and language of the Girard/Alison irruptive paradigm into the worship life and pedagogy of Hope Church, aligning atonement theology with ministry practice. The goal is to develop resources that can provide longitudinal support to the life of Hope Church, using language, images and programs imbued with the irruptive atonement paradigm which I believe Hope Church embodies. This approach will support the faith and ministry of Hope Church and evoke creative expressions of justice and inclusion.

PARENT CIW STORY FEEDBACK FORM
1. What about this CIW story was compelling and helpful to you?
   What images/words/themes stood out as important to you?

2. What feelings did this story evoke in you? – about God – about yourself – about the world?

3. How do you think it would be for your child(ren) to hear this story?
   Any ways the story could be changed to make it more clear? - questions you have about the story?

4. If you heard just this story, then how would you summarize what it means to be a Christian?

5. As you think how the workshop began (checking in with what is happening in your life), how did this story speak to those things?
CIW Parent Workshop Notes for Opening & Conclusion

Opening:
I wanted to start the way we have – checking in with yourself, and your faith formation, and what’s essential to you in faith, and what you hear from your children – so that those things can be percolating in you a bit as I describe my Doctor of Ministry project.

As I attempt to do that, want to give you just a few things for background:

On flip chart:
IRRUPTIVE = bursting in, breaking in
ATONEMENT THEOLOGY = the saving work of Jesus
SUBSTITUTIONARY ATONEMENT = Jesus is the substitute taking the punishment for our sins
IRRUPTIVE ATONEMENT = a term Gordon invented that he is going to explain to you
Rene Girard & James Alison = 2 contemporary theologians

So with you percolating and this background, I can do no better to give you the basics of my DMin work than to read with you the abstract for my thesis:

**DOCTOR OF MINISTRY THESIS ~ ABSTRACT**

So that’s pretty much what I’ve been thinking about for the last 10 years really! - since I came across Girard and Alison – and it’s the project I’m doing for this year. And with you hearing that, what I want to do today is try to express why this connection of an atonement theology to how we live as Christian community is something that could matter to you as a Christian and as a parent. And I think I need to do that first by fleshing out what is often the theological paradigm we are given: SUBSTITUTIONARY ATONEMENT; and then offer an alternative that I believe is much more relevant to how we want to live as Christians: IRRUPTIVE ATONEMENT.

I think it is fair to say that the primary way, or I’ve come to say the “default” way, that Atonement theology is talked about in “the church” in general is this: that “Jesus died on the cross to save us from our sins” – that is a tidy summary that I think most anyone within or beyond the church is familiar with. But I want us to notice that even though it is a brief statement, it actually contains in it a whole lot of assumptions and assertions – such as:

- the fundamental problem in human life is that we have sinned against God, and that God must punish us, and that the punishment is a death sentence
- but even though we deserve God’s punishment, God’s love is shown in that God kills Jesus in exchange for punishing each of us
- turns out though, that this saving transaction only works if you accept the saving death of Jesus – and the stakes of this acceptance are high, since if you are saved, you go to heaven - if you are not, you go to hell
- and I want you to notice to, that apparently the death of Jesus on the cross is the most important thing in faith to talk about (there is no mention of the life of Jesus or the resurrection of Jesus)

This theology has come to be known as Substitutionary Atonement – Jesus is the substitute to take on the punishment for our sins. Many people assume it is what the Bible teaches, and it is a theology deeply engrained into the Christian and cultural consciousness.

But let me tell you something I’ve noticed for a long time that doesn’t quite sit right with that theology. In such churches as the one I grew up in and Hope Church, there is not a focus on God punishing people for sin, or on some people saved for heaven by Jesus while others are sent to hell. Instead I notice that Hope Church from its progressive inception was a congregation seeking to be relevant to the issues of the world around it: focused on acceptance, justice, compassion; leading in welcoming the gifts of women and LGBTQ people. And yet, I saw in my church background and at Hope Church, that often alongside this focus on service and compassion there was still the default of using hymns and liturgies and prayers and teaching materials that talk about: “Jesus dying on the cross to save us from our sins” - with all those assumptions and assertions that go along with it.
Well – so what? – if the church is doing good stuff, even though there is still this use of substitutionary atonement theology, what’s the harm? But there is harm: harm when people notice the violent heart of atonement theology and decide they don’t want to believe in a God entangled with such violence, so they lose faith; there’s harm when children sense a disconnect between a God of love and a God who requires the life of Jesus as a punishment for our sins – “Mom: why did God have to kill Jesus?” – and we don’t know how to answer because we wonder too!; there’s harm when you have to unlearn what you learned as a child in order to keep your faith as an adult.

So what if instead there was actually a biblical atonement theology that supported a compassionate progressive faith? – an atonement theology we can teach to our children and keep as adults? That’s what I believe Girard and Alison express so powerfully – and it goes something like this:

- God created people to live in community and compassion, but human beings have become caught in cycles of violence given and received, and people suffer in ways that feel inescapable. And to make things worse, the only way humanity has figured out to deal with violence is to use more violence – and you find that kind of “redemptive violence” in the political state, in religion, and in everyday life.
- The violence and suffering in this world breaks God’s heart, and it is God’s love that reaches out throughout history to a broken humanity
- The incarnation of Jesus is the “irruption” (the breaking in to) of God’s life and love into a broken world, disrupting the cycles of violence and suffering.
- The life of Jesus reveals God as One who is compassion, wisdom, inclusion, justice, grace, love and light.
- The death of Jesus reveals that the deadly powers of this world are opposed to God’s way of life, and such deadly powers try to stop it. But Jesus does not respond to violence with violence; Jesus remains faithful to God’s subversive reign of love. The cross is a place where we see God’s solidarity with suffering; God’s love embracing suffering and death.
- The resurrection of Jesus is a stunning revelation for our lives and world: all that was embodied in the life of Jesus is shown to be stronger than the powers of violence and death. So, through the Risen Christ, the Spirit of Life, we are freed to embody in our lives the very things present in the life of Jesus: compassion, wisdom, inclusion, mercy, justice, grace, love and light. Through the resurrection we are witnesses that our lives and this world do not belong to violence and death but belong to the One who created us for life in community and compassion.

This is Irruptive Atonement (my title – Girard/Alison theology)

So, I could go on for 40 more pages – but that will be my final thesis - so that’s it in a nutshell. It may sound pretty simple or common sense; it may sound complicated or you’re skeptical. But believe it or not, I think that this Irruptive Theology is something that we can nurture in our children – and that I think could be very important to nurture in our children. And it is a theology that I think is well suited to be told as a story - so that’s what I have worked to do in creating a Children in Worship story – and you’re the first to get to hear it! so that’s what we’re going to listen to now.

~ CIW STORY told in Worship Center ~

Conclusion:
What I want to say in closing is what I think nurturing a story, a faith, like this in our children can do:

- 1 is that I think it connects to where we began, which was checking in with ourselves to see what is happening in our lives – and that this a story of God’s presence in all those aspects of our lives: what we struggle with, what we are flourishing in – where there is pain, where there is purpose. It’s a story that connects to all of life.
- So that means also that I think this story defines faith not just as something confined to ‘being forgiven for the bad things we do’ (which is always necessary!) but makes faith about much more; teaches our children that Christian faith embraces service, mistakes, compassion, suffering, love, loneliness, creativity, justice – connects to all of life.
- This is a story that tells about a faith that can stay with them and grow with them – that can connect them to how God is at work in the world – which is what we want most for our children.
Appendix F: Children in Worship Story

**Children in Worship Story: “The Christian Story”**  written by Gordon Wiersma
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=I-0lwqkJd9Q&feature=youtu.be

This is a story about being a Christian. A “Christian” is someone who knows God’s love through the story of Jesus Christ. For Christians, this is a story so big that it goes way back to the beginning…

- In the beginning, God created the whole world, a good world.
  *(place a large green circle for creation – place some rivers and animals)*

- When God created the world, people were a part of God’s creation.
  *(place human figures along the middle line of the circle, in 3 groups of 4 people)*

God created people to help each other, and to feel love and joy, and to live as God’s children

- In God’s world:
  - people did things to help one another
    *(touch the head of some of the figures;)*
  - but people also did things to harm each other
    *(move 2 figures away from each other to both sides of the circles;)*
  - I’ve done both of those things – sometimes I help, and sometimes I harm;
    *(move 2 figures away from each other to both sides of the circles)*
  - in God’s world, the harm became stronger.
    *(put up part of a wall in between that says HARM)*

- In God’s world:
  - people felt love and joy
    *(touch the head of some of the figures;)*
  - but sometimes things were painful – the kind of pain that won’t go away, pain which we call suffering
    *(move 2 figures away from each other to both sides of the circles)*
  - I’ve felt both of those: I feel love and joy, but sometimes I feel pain and suffering;
    *(move 2 figures away from each other to both sides of the circles)*
  - in God’s world the suffering became strong.
    *(put up part of wall in between that says SUFFERING)*

- In God’s world, sometimes people remembered that God created them as God’s children
  *(touch the head of some of the figures;)*
  - but sometimes people seemed to forget about God, they felt alone.
    *(move 2 figures away from each other to both sides of the circles)*
  - I’ve felt both of those things: I’ve remembered I am a child of God, and I’ve forgotten about God, felt alone;
    *(move 2 figures away from each other to both sides of the circles)*
  - in God’s world people forgot about God – people felt alone.
    *(put up part of a wall in between that says ALONE)*

- Look what has happened - it looks like a wall in God’s world:
  People were created to help, but instead harm was strong;
  People were created to feel love and joy, but instead suffering was strong;
  People were created to know God, but instead they forgot and felt alone.

I wonder if the people can even see, can even remember, the way God created the world? It’s like everyone is separated from one another and from God…and there’s no way for the people to make it better by themselves.

- God looked at the world: God saw the harm, and the suffering, and the forgetting - God saw the wall. God felt sad - it was not how God created people to live.
God loved the whole world God had made. God loved the people God had made. So, God did something: God came to the world as Jesus, God with us.

(lift Jesus up over the world)

○ (place Jesus among the HARM group of people)
  Jesus lived among the people, showing God’s way of life.
  (lay down HARM section of wall)
  Jesus did the most amazing things and said the most wonderful things.
  The life of Jesus showed the people that helping was stronger than harming – that to help was the best way of life
  (take the HELP section, show it, and place it over the HARM piece)
  (move Jesus to the SUFFERING group of people)
  Jesus saw and cared about the suffering in God’s world.
  (lay down SUFFERING section of wall)
  Jesus healed many who were sick and welcomed many who had been left out.
  But as Jesus helped and healed, something terrible happened: all the harm that was in the world tried to stop Jesus from telling the stories of God by killing Jesus. Jesus was crucified on the cross and he died.
  (lay Jesus down)
  But even then, Jesus was showing God’s love: Jesus did not give up on God’s ways of help and healing; Jesus trusted that God was with him even on the cross, even in death.
  (take the LOVE section, show it, and place over it the SUFFERING section)

And then, Jesus Christ lived again!

(stand Jesus up and move Jesus to last group of people)
THIS was a surprise!
(lay down ALONE section of wall)
As amazing as Jesus’ life of helping was, people were sure that Jesus’ death on the cross was the end. But then Jesus was alive again! – God’s love was stronger even than death. And Jesus said: “I AM Life – life and love are the strongest things of all, because God is life and love.”
(take the LIFE section, show it, and place over it the ALONE section)

When you know the story of Jesus living and dying and being alive again, you know something that is true about God’s world:
- Harm is not the strongest; it is still there
  (show the HARM section of wall under HELP)
  but Jesus teaches us to be a part of help in God’s creation.
  (move Jesus to onto the HELP section, and move some people together onto HELP)
- Suffering is not the strongest; it is still there,
  (show the SUFFERING section of wall under LOVE)
  but in Jesus we see that God’s love is always stronger.
  (move Jesus onto the LOVE wall section, and move some people together onto LOVE)
- Forgetting about God and being alone are not the strongest; those things are still there (show the ALONE section of the wall under LIFE)
  but in the Risen Jesus, God’s ways of life and love,
  God’s gifts and blessing, are with us now and always.
  (move Jesus to the LIFE wall section, and move people together onto LIFE)

This is good news! – good news about God, and about people, and about God’s world.
Remember that word “Christian”? – being a Christian is being part of this good news: the story of Jesus, the saving power of God for the whole world. The Spirit of the Living Jesus is with us to make us a part of that story: to make us strong in God’s ways of HELP and LOVE and LIFE.
And that is living just like God created the world to be.
Appendix G: Prayers for Hope Church Liturgy
written by Rev. Gordon Wiersma

ADVENT 2015:

ADVENT I
We long in our hearts,
at the center of our lives,
to be held in your mercy, O Lord,
for to who else shall we turn?
All that we grasp for around us
and cling to within us
cannot save us, cannot free us,
from the brokenness we know too well.
We turn to you seeking the light of your face
and the strength of your presence,
for in you is the promise
that our hearts yearn for.
Give us trust, patience, persistence,
to reach out for you, O Lord,
with a faith that finds ourselves
held already in your hands,
our true home.

ADVENT III
We long in our hearts,
at the center of our lives,
to find healing in you, O Lord,
for to who else shall we turn?
We are diminished in body and soul
and seek wholeness at every turn,
and yet we find ourselves still in need:
our limits, our fears, our mortality,
take hold of us and leave us broken.
Bind us up and clothe us
with your mercy, faithfulness and goodness.
Make your Spirit to flow in us,
anointing, freeing, filling with your blessings,
that springs of life may restore us
and overflow in abundance
to all of your creation.

ADVENT IV
We long in our hearts,
at the center of our lives,
to find new life in you, O Lord,
for to who else shall we turn?
In the reign of the powerful and the proud,
in the tumult of oppression,
in the quiet of hope waning,
you speak out a greeting of favor
and our spirits find new breath: rejoice!
With the notes of your faithfulness and power,
your love and your mercy,
our lives are turned to greet your presence
and our hearts are tuned to sing your praise.
As you make flesh your Word among us,
fill us with your gifts that make for life abundant,
as we proclaim your faithfulness and goodness
to all generations.
ADVENT 2016

ADVENT I
God of light and life,
of revelation and creation,come among us
to show your presence with us.
In the longings of brokenness
within us and around us,
be with us as a presence of hope.
In the challenge to live as your people
in the face of all that denies you,
be with us as a presence of courage.
In the calling to see your
light in all places and people,
be with us as a presence of grace.
Come among us, Lord Jesus,
desire of our hearts,
liberator of humanity,
O come, Emmanuel, God with us.

ADVENT III
God of light and life,
of revelation and creation,come among us
to show your presence with us.
In the violence that tears apart
lives and communities,
be with us as a presence of healing.
In the moments that call on us
to witness to your ways,
be with us as a presence of life.
In the beauty of your reign
amidst all of our fears,
be with us as a presence of surprise.
Come among us, Lord Jesus,
desire of our hearts,
liberator of humanity,
O come, Emmanuel, God with us.

ADVENT II
God of light and life,
of revelation and creation,come among us
to show your presence with us.
In the suffering of your children
whose lives are diminished,
be with us as a presence of justice.
In the fullness of life
found in worshipping you,
be with us as a presence of wisdom.
In the vision you reveal
for all to live in beloved community,
be with us as a presence of delight.
Come among us, Lord Jesus,
desire of our hearts,
liberator of humanity,
O come, Emmanuel, God with us.

ADVENT IV
God of light and life,
of revelation and creation,come among us
to show your presence with us.
In the weariness of your world
too familiar with pain,
be with us as a presence of mercy.
In the yearning of your world
that catches the breath of your Spirit,
be with us as a presence of new life.
In the promise of your reign
that draws us to abide in you,
be with us as a presence of faithfulness.
Come among us, Lord Jesus,
desire of our hearts,
liberator of humanity,
O come, Emmanuel, God with us.
ADVENT 2017

ADVENT I
God of Life, Spirit of Wisdom,
open our hearts to the strength and beauty
of your presence among us
in our lives and in our world.
Give us eyes to see
the signs of your coming
in the persistence of love and hope.
Give us ears to hear
the song of your coming
in the power of faithfulness and courage.
Awaken us to look for you
in the brokenness and wholeness
of who we are;
for in you is the promise
of Emmanuel, God with us,
for which our hearts truly yearn. Amen.

ADVENT II
God of Life, Spirit of Wisdom,
open our hearts to the strength and beauty
of your presence among us
in our lives and in our world.
Come among us as holy fire
to reveal, to purify, to renew our hearts,
making in us a home for righteousness and peace.
Prepare us with the voices of prophets in our midst
to receive you and to follow you,
that faithfulness and goodness
may spring up in abundance in your people.
Lift us up, bring us low, level us, guide us,
that your Spirit may prepare in us a way
for the One who is true life
for us and all your children. Amen.

ADVENT III
God of Life, Spirit of Wisdom,
open our hearts to the strength and beauty
of your presence among us
in our lives and in our world.
Gather us with your blessing and clothe us
with your mercy, faithfulness, and goodness.
As the sound of good news speaks out
to the oppressed, the prisoner, the desolate,
draw us in to your call of renewal and justice
given by the Promised One to a weary world.
Join us to the movement of your Spirit -
answering, freeing, filling -
that what is sown in the grace of salvation
may flourish in true abundance
for all creation. Amen.

ADVENT IV
God of Life, Spirit of Wisdom,
open our hearts to the strength and beauty
of your presence among us
in our lives and in our world.
In the tumult of oppression,
in the silence of hope waning,
you speak what seems impossible –
the Lord is with you –
and our spirits find new breath.
Hope of the world,
open us to the startling wisdom of your incarnation:
the reign of love and peace for which we are created.
As you make flesh your Word among us,
renew in us the joyful mystery of your coming,
that our lives may proclaim
your faithfulness and goodness
to all peoples, to all creation. Amen.
PRAYER FOR RECONCILIATION 1
God our Creator,
whenever we settle for the way things are
instead of the way you have created them to be,
forgive and renew us.
Whenever we are paralyzed by fear
or intimidated by the powers around us,
increase our trust in you.
Whenever we offer charity
but fail to work for justice,
show us the more excellent way
that your love creates.
Whenever we tire of the struggle
and tomorrow feels overwhelming,
restore our hope.
Whenever we forget
those who have gone before us,
open our ears to the wisdom
of the prophets and saints.

prayer continues in stillness

God our Creator,
awaken us to the movement of your Spirit,
seeking the paths of unity, reconciliation, and justice
as disciples of Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

PRAYER FOR RECONCILIATION 2
God of unity,
we are divided and broken
and we cannot mend ourselves.
We are divided within ourselves,
filled with conflicting desires and fears.
We are divided from one another,
building barriers that hem in and shut out.
We are divided from you,
drowning out your voice and losing our way.
God of unity,
we are divided and broken, and we cannot mend ourselves.

prayer continues in stillness

God of grace,
we are turned to your Spirit
to gift us with wholeness and hope.
Heal our hearts with your tender love.
Heal our lives with your clarion call to justice.
Heal our faith with your living word of truth.
Through Jesus Christ, your gift of life and our true light. Amen.

PRAYER FOR RECONCILIATION 3
God of the prophets and of the people,
of the rulers and of the outcasts,
of the privileged and of the oppressed,
speak your word of truth and life to us
in all the places of power and need
woven together in our lives.
God of fierceness and of gentleness,
of majesty and of simplicity,
of demand and of grace,
speak into our lives
of the brokenness from which you free us
and of the wholeness that your Spirit gives.

prayer continues in stillness

God of infinite love,
soften our hearts, our minds, our souls,
to receive your life-giving presence,
renewing us as your people,
and sharing your true shalom with all.

PRAYER FOR RECONCILIATION 4
God of earth and stars,
Lord of all creatures and creation,
we look to you as the One
who holds all things in your care,
who is faithful through all generations.
We are tempted to see only the powers
that this world tells us to worship,
the powers of force and fear,
of privilege and security,
yet your Spirit calls to us
to hear a different truth,
to trust a different power in our lives.

prayer continues in stillness

Open our eyes and ears,
our hearts and lives,
to your presence of true life among us.
Renew us in the strength of hope and healing,
the vitality of compassion and peace,
the beauty of commitment and trust.
Tune our spirits again
to your Spirit of mercy and grace,
that we may give
thanks and praise to You
as we share your gifts with all.
PRAYER FOR RECONCILIATION 5

God, our Deliverer,
we confess that we are too reluctant
to speak and to live according to your truth.
We grow comfortable with the way things are,
passively condoning injustice.
We see ourselves as “insiders,”
excluding those we consider “outsiders.”

We find it easier to pluck up and pull down,
to destroy and overthrow,
than to build and to plant.
Forgive us, O God, for being timid disciples.
Empty us of fear and shame,
and fill us with love that is humble
and patient and kind.
We pray this in the name of the One who
humbled himself,
Jesus the Christ. Amen.

PRAYER OF CONFESSION 2

Lord God, we thank you for the gift of life,
and we confess the need for guidance in our lives.
We are grateful that you have made us free,
and ask you to lead us and challenge us
in the choices we make.
We are grateful for the forgiveness of Christ
that frees us from sin
and for your healing Spirit that frees us from
despair.
We are thankful you have shown us your will,
and we ask for courage to walk always in your way.
We bring our freedom, our choices, our lives before you,
that your Spirit may renew us
as followers of Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior.

PRAYER OF CONFESSION 3

Jesus Christ, God-come-near,
we seek in this season
to walk with you, to join your path.
Join us to your baptism
in the Jordan waters,
that we may hear God’s voice call “Beloved,”
bathing us in God’s grace
and strengthening us in our walk.

prayer continues in stillness

Jesus Christ, sharing our humanity,
we seek in this season
to be faithful in the daily choices we make.
Join us to your temptation
in the wilderness,
that we may face what is deadly and broken,
and trust in God’s gifts to sustain us.

prayer continues in stillness

Jesus Christ, heart of God and voice of truth,
we seek in this season
to open our hearts, to hear your call anew.
Join us to your good news
of God’s reign of life,
turning our lives to walk with you
as your people.
PRAYER OF CONFESSION 4
God of all generations,
open our ears, our hearts, our lives,
to your call to follow you in faith
and to your promise to be with us in faithfulness.
We doubt that you would use
such people as us,
yet you name us as blessed
and call us to be a blessing.
We resign ourselves to what
is safe and practical
or find ourselves caught in despair,
yet you are the Creator who
calls into being new life and hope
in our lives and your world.
We cling to what is familiar
and fear what we might lose,
but you challenge us to trust our lives
to the true abundance found
in your reign of righteousness and peace.
God of all generations,
nourish our faith in your presence and promise,
that we may walk with our Lord
in the ways of true life.

PRAYER OF CONFESSION 5
God of Exodus, Lord of Freedom,
through your Spirit may we receive your law
as a gift of life and gratitude,
as a blessing of wisdom and strength.
Shape our desires to seek the richness and beauty
of all creation in communion with your ways of life.

PRAYER OF CONFESSION 6
Spirit of Truth, open our hearts in honesty,
that we may confess the ways we turn from your path
of life.
We cling to comfort rather than courage;
we give ourselves to what is harmful rather than whole;
we place our trust in security rather than community.
In your great love and mercy, remove all that is
deadly in us
and lift up in us the gifts that make for true life.

Spirit of Compassion, open our hearts in lament,
that we may confess to you our suffering and
discouragement.
We know pain and loss for ourselves and for others
which leaves us torn and empty,
 depleted of hope and of faith.
In your great love and mercy, bind up what is
broken
and lift up in us the comfort of your peace.

Spirit of Life, open our hearts in hope,
that we may confess our desire
to walk with Jesus in faithfulness.
We praise you that you have created us
to be people of righteousness and compassion,
choosing gratitude and grace as our way of life.
In your great love and mercy, renew us as your
children
and lift up in us the love and light of Christ
to be a blessing to your world.
PRAYER OF CONFESSION
Have mercy on us, O God,
according to your steadfast love.
We are in need of facing our sin
and finding life in your forgiveness.
We are in need of lives cleansed
from what diminishes us and others.

Have mercy on us, O God,
according to your steadfast love.
Teach us your wisdom and truth, O Lord.
Open our hearts to hear your voice,
that we may know your presence
and live as your people.

Have mercy on us, O God,
according to your steadfast love.
Create in me a clean heart, O God,
and renew my spirit with all that is good.
Fill us with the joy of true life
and sustain us with courage and hope.

PRAYER OF CONFESSION – PALM SUNDAY
Hosanna, save us, O Lord!
Save us from the paths that do not lead to life,
doing harm to others, to ourselves, to your world.
Cleanse our hearts with your life of compassion and
wisdom
that we may follow in your ways of blessing.
Hosanna, save us, O Lord!
Save us from our trust in the broken powers of this
world,
of vengeance and control, of exclusion and division.
Renew our hearts with your life
of mercy, justice, and faithfulness,
that we may be a part of your reign of shalom.
Hosanna, save us, O Lord!
Save us from despair when we know only pain,
and touch us with your healing grace.
When courage is required, save us from
convenience;
when hope is required, save us from fear;
when love is required, save us from caution.
Hosanna, save us, our Savior and Lord! –
claim our lives with your blessing of true life
for us and for all the world. Amen.
Appendix H: Response Form for Prayer Response Event

Take a moment to check in with yourself:
jot down a few thoughts as you reflect on what is on your heart and mind; this is not something you’ll be asked to share with others, but for you to look back at later

- reflect on what’s happening in your life - with your family – with friends…
  …on what’s happening in the world

- What is going well for you right now?
  What is difficult for you right now?

- What are you grateful for?
  what are you concerned and anxious about?

Be aware of your feelings, your thoughts, mood.
Take a moment to be aware that God loves you…that God loves this world.
Take a nice, deep, breath.

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Prayer Reflection & Response ~ ADVENT/RECONCILIATION/CONFESSION PRAYER

- Have someone at your table read the prayer for all of you out loud.
- On your own, read through the prayer again:
  - what words or phrases catch your attention?
    is there anything that is surprising or puzzling or intriguing?
  - what feelings are you aware of as you interact with this prayer?
  - what images emerge for you as you ponder this prayer?

  share some of your responses with those at your table

- On your own, read through the prayer again.
  Imagine this was the only prayer you’d ever heard: what does this prayer say about…

  - …who God is? what God cares about?
  - …who you are? what you need?
  - …what is important in faith; in life?

What does this prayer speak to you for your life of faith? for the life of Hope Church?
 i.e. courage; healing; forgiveness; challenge; calling; hope; guidance; repentance; renewal...
Express in a few words or a sentence what this prayer is speaking to you:

  share some of your responses with those at your table