

God Himself: His Gracious Hospitality Toward Us

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So why should Christians, above all people, show hospitality? Why should they *welcome strangers* into their lives? We can appeal to the commands of Scripture as the reason. But before we look there, we see that hospitality is grounded in the nature of God Himself. There is a fellowship of love between the Persons of the Trinity from all eternity and the Triune God created man to share in that fellowship with Himself. This is the *foundation* for the practice of Christian hospitality: God's hospitality toward us!

The Holy Bible: The Story of God's Hospitality

The entire Scripture, from beginning to end, is about God's hospitality toward us! The Bible opens up with God making a home for man in His kingdom; a home for man to fellowship with Him. God even sets a table before him. As one writer appropriately says, "Genesis 1 ends with a menu." God said to our first parents, Adam and Eve, "*See, I have given you every herb that yields seed which is on the face of the earth, and every tree whose fruit yields seed; to you it shall be for food*" (Genesis 1:29). How our hearts should be rekindled when we read of the generosity of our gracious Host: "*Of every tree of the garden you may freely eat*" (Genesis 2:16). The Bible also concludes with a festive table in the new creation: "*Blessed are those who are called to the marriage supper of the Lamb*" (Revelation 19:9)! To this, "*the Spirit and the bride say, 'Come!' . . . And let him who thirsts come. Whoever desires, let him take the water of life freely*" (Revelation 22:17).

In between, throughout the rest of Scripture, we hear about a table of fellowship restored to God's people, a fellowship man broke by his disobedient act of eating (Genesis 3). Though man rejected God's table, His food (as it were), yet the Lord God in His grace and love opens His home again for us—strangers and sinners—by sacrificing His only begotten Son, who so "*loved us and gave Himself for us.*" Now He welcomes us into His home Sunday after Sunday through Word and sacrament. He talks to us and feeds us. He speaks to us by His Word and shows His covenant love for us in Christ, setting before us the table, really a feast, nourishing and strengthening our souls that we might never hunger and thirst again. What hospitality!

I'll never forget the words of my professor of Old Testament at seminary: "Kingdom and covenant are the unifying themes in Scripture. But so is food and the table." He encouraged us to read through the entire Bible, Old and New Testaments, marking all references to eating and feasting. As we read the Bible through these eyes, we become aware that God's covenant is something we not only *hear* about but also that we taste, see, touch, and smell! Covenant is not an abstraction but concrete and practical. (As a passing note: is it possible that the lack of hospitality among us is one reason why the language of covenant is less and less understood among so many in our Reformed churches?) One liturgist expresses the Bible's theme in this way: "Eating and drinking in the kingdom of God form one of the most significant images we can find to express the concept of [covenant and] communion."

In the life of God's people, the table has a significant, even central, place (Psalm 23:5; 128:3; Luke 14:12–15). For example, in the Holy Place of the tabernacle, God's dwelling among His people, was the table of showbread, with bread and wine (pitchers) on it. Though the bread and wine came from the people's harvest, and though only priests were allowed to enter the Holy Place, it was as though the Lord Himself were offering bread and wine to the people, picturing His intimate fellowship with them. Today, we as God's people, as it were, are welcomed into God's

own living room, the Holy of Holies! At the divinely appointed hour when Christ died on the cross, offering Himself as the atoning sacrifice for sinners, the veil of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom, signifying that He has opened the door for us into the very heart of His home! And so He graciously feeds us at His table, “*Take, eat; . . . Drink from it, all of you*” (Matthew 26:26–30).

The stupendous mystery of His glorious incarnation shows just how close God is to man, giving Himself to us, even sacrificing Himself for us unto death in order to bring strangers like us into fellowship and communion with Him—even to sit with Him at His table!

The Church: God’s Home and Table in the Midst of Strangers

One of the chief manifestations of love is the grace of hospitality. The Holy Bible is the story of God’s hospitality toward us. This is God’s nature, and we, who have been re-created according to the image of Jesus Christ, now begin to image God’s hospitality toward us. Steve Wilkins in *Face to Face: Meditations on Friendship and Hospitality*, writes that hospitality “is the open, free, natural expression of covenant communion with Christ. We who have received so freely from Him, now gladly and freely give to others.” It’s this practical point that the Lord wanted His covenant people, already in the Old Testament times, to hear again and again. In Deuteronomy 10, God says to His people, “*Therefore, love the stranger.*” What reason does the Lord give? “*For you were strangers in the land of Egypt*” (v. 19; see also Leviticus 19:3).

When we hear our Muslim neighbor, in a conversation, tell us how he treated his roofers, who put a new roof on his home, to three free meals a day, or when we see our seventy-nine-year old Roman Catholic neighbor regularly hobbling over to the street to bring two bottles of juice to those who pick up his garbage, we cannot help but think: “They do it out of the kindness of their hearts.” How much more should we, now overflowing with the love and grace of God, “carry the gospel

on a platter of love for the foreigner.” We have so much more to share!

True . . . an open home, a table and conversation around that table is not *all* there is to hospitality. But be careful. Often when we argue this way, it may become an excuse *not* to open our home and fill those *additional* chairs God has given us. After all, is God’s hospitality toward us not about an open home, a festive table, and His life-giving Word? An open home, a ready table is a concrete expression of a thankful delighting in God’s hospitality toward us. We enjoy what God enjoys. It’s a love whereby we “give ourselves away.” This is what it means to be renewed in His image in very practical terms. *This practical grace shows that we have received and experience God’s hospitality toward us.*

Having considered **God Himself:** His Gracious Hospitality Toward Us, we will look more extensively at **The Church:** God’s Glorious Image of Hospitality, and finally **The World:** God’s Sincere Invitation Visualized Through Our Hospitality.