

The Church: God's Glorious Image of Hospitality

2

The practice of hospitality has been mostly forgotten in the church today. Why this is we will see later as we consider the enemies of hospitality. But we need to be clear that its practice within the church is a practical living out of God's covenant with us. Hospitality is not so much a task "as a way of living our lives and of sharing ourselves" (Pohl, *Making Room: Recovering Hospitality as a Christian Tradition*).

It's a life lived out of the gospel.

A Distinguishing Mark of the New Testament Church

One cannot read the Book of Acts without being struck by the fact that one of the chief manifestations of Christ's love in the early church was the grace of hospitality. Believers were living out the gospel, and it showed! It showed in the grace of spontaneously opening their homes to one another. They broke "*bread from house to house, they ate food with gladness and simplicity of heart, praising God and having favor with all the people*" (Acts 2:46–47). And look at its glorious result: "*And the Lord added to the church daily those who were being saved*" (v. 47). The practice of hospitality was a *way of life* in these early Christian households.

The role and use of the home was significant in the life of the early church but also in her evangelistic activity. Jason risked personal loss to home and property and even his life by harboring Paul and Silas in his home in Thessalonica.

But of greater concern to him than damage to his home were those perishing souls in the city. Moreover, what a blessing to the city! His home became well known throughout the city as a result of his open heart, open home (Acts 17:1–9). Likewise, Paul stayed at the home of Justus, who lived next door to the synagogue in Corinth. Through this venue, the Lord used Paul to open the heart of Crispus, the ruler of the synagogue, to believe with all his household (Acts 18:7–18). Lydia’s home and the home of the Philippian jailer were also used as impromptu evangelistic centers (Acts 16:15, 34). Stephanus, one of the first converts in Corinth, used his home for serving the saints (1 Corinthians 16:15). Homes were used for prayer meetings (Acts 12:12), for nights of prayer, worship, and instruction (Acts 20:7), and for meetings in order to hear the gospel (Acts 10:22).

It may be argued that in those days there were few church buildings and hotels and so people’s homes were used (Romans 16:5). That may be true, but the key point here is that their hearts were open to the stranger. They were “giving themselves away” for the sake of the gospel. According to Green, people saw “in church groupings and individual Christians the caring, the joy, the fellowship, the self-sacrifice and the openness which marked the early church at its best.”

Among the people to whom we minister, we often hear this expression, “*my house is your house*.” It’s a way of saying, “you are really welcome. Come to us; share with us; let’s talk.” Christian homes among those of South Asian descent are many times used as gathering places for prayer, worship, and food in addition to regular Sunday worship. The occasion may be a birthday, a prayer meeting, a memorial, or the opening of new business or the buying of a new car. Recently we were invited to a prayer meeting of a dear Christian family who bought a new home. It was a day of celebration, singing, hearing a meditation from God’s Word, and in addition, a big dinner offered by the new home owners. The joy was heard throughout the neighborhood.

We might argue, “Well, that’s not my culture.” But this is a powerful expression of a Christ-culture, is it not? This image is

throughout all Scripture. Is this way the *only* expression of true hospitality? No. Moreover, one may have an open home and yet have a closed heart. No doubt. But an open home, in the name of Jesus, is a powerful image of God's hospitality toward us. This will, in turn, reflect a truly open, warm, welcoming congregation where visitors are not only greeted formally in the narthex by an assigned member for a Sunday but, ideally, guests will be overwhelmed by numerous invitations from church members "to a table set for them." How fitting for the Lord's Day, the day of feasting! How often do we not hear, "I have been in this congregation for four years and I can count the number of times on my one hand we have been invited into the home of a fellow member"? Sad. Why is this? Do you understand why?

Again, someone may argue, "This is only fluff. You're advocating a social gospel." But isn't the gospel relational? An elder from a Reformed church is very clear on this matter: "Hospitality is the gospel in action. It is right doctrine in practice . . . it is not social gospel."

The Lord, through the apostle Paul, instructed the congregation in Rome, "*Receive [or welcome] one another, just as Christ also received [welcomed] us to the glory of God*" (Romans 15:7). Again, we may argue that this does not necessarily mean "into our home." True enough, but opening your home is a good way of showing that God has also received us in His grace. Our response to the gospel should not be "how little can I give" but "how much can I give myself away?" The home is not so much the issue as is our heart. One writer wisely suggests that "a first step in making a place for hospitality may be to make room in our hearts. Whether or not we can always find room in our houses, welcome begins with dispositions characterized by love and generosity."

We need to be reminded of the importance of this practice through the apostolic commands scattered throughout the New Testament.

Biblical Commands to Practice Hospitality

As we have seen, the whole of the Bible is a book of God's hospitality toward us, showing that hospitality is a way of life for the believer. The Book of Acts demonstrates it. However, from time to time, we need to be reminded of the specific commands in the Bible, including the command to practice hospitality. Christians, even in our churches, tend to say, "That's not *my* gift," or "I'm too busy; he can do it," or "I've done it, now it's someone else's turn" (as if there is some measurable quota!).

But in Scripture, hospitality is not a "take it or leave it" command. It's not an option. It's a command for *all* believers. If we truly belong to Christ, this should show in our willingness to sacrifice, in giving away ourselves, to others. Let us consider a few of these compelling commands.

- **Romans 12:13** Here the apostle Paul instructs all believers to "*be . . . given to hospitality.*" Knowing what God has done for us in Christ, we are now called to offer up ourselves as living sacrifices, holy and acceptable to God, which is our reasonable service (12:1). One of the ways is through our love (12:9), and one of the obvious manifestations of this love, says Paul, is to be "*given to hospitality*" (12:13).

The word "given" means to "pursue tirelessly" or to be "devoted to the chase." The image here, as Wilkins observes in *Face to Face*, "is that of a cheetah chasing a gazelle . . . the virtue of hospitality is far from being passive. We had better go after it, chase it down, and not stop until we have wrestled it to the ground." In other words, we shouldn't be waiting for someone else to ask, but we should be more than eager and willing to offer that person a ride to worship back and forth (rather than say, "He can take the bus"); invite a single, lonely, or unlovable person to our family Christmas dinner; offer a meal or make a visit or a phone call to the grieving; or invite a stranger to Sunday dinner with Grandma.

• **1 Peter 4:9** Here, under intense circumstances of opposition and persecution, you would think that the apostle Peter might go easy on this command. But no; the apostle Peter instructed his readers to continue in their practice of hospitality without grumbling. “*And above all things, have fervent love for one another, for love will cover a multitude of sins. Be hospitable to one another, without grumbling.*” It’s not only a command to all but also it’s a command to be practiced in all kinds of situations; such as situations in which you were hurt by inconsiderate words, and now you sit on the opposite side of the congregation, opposite of him, and say a gruff hello to him, without looking at him as you walk by him. Love covers a multitude of sins, and hospitality is a powerful way of showing this Christ-like love to our least-liked brother.

• **Hebrews 13:1–2** In his final instructions to the Hebrews, the apostle writes, “*Let brotherly love continue. Do not forget to entertain strangers, for by so doing some have unwittingly entertained angels.*” He reminds us, “*Do not forget!*” Having the natural tendency to serve ourselves, we can easily overlook this practice. The kind of love you show your own family members should naturally overflow into the body of Christ. The example of Abraham in Genesis 18 comes to mind. On a hot day, he is sitting in the tent door. When he sees three strangers standing near him, he runs to meet them. He welcomes them. In effect, he says, “Come in! Wash yourself up and rest awhile. I’ll bring some food to you, and then you can go on your way again.” He quickly goes inside the tent, instructing Sarah, his wife, to make dinner. Abraham himself runs to the herd to find the finest calf to butcher and eat. In Hebrews 13:2, however, Douglas Wilson reminds us in *My Life For Yours* that “He is not promising us angelic visitations but rather unexpected blessings.”

You will note that each of these commands to practice hospitality is set in the context of love. Living out these commands are concrete, down-to-earth expressions of Christ's love in us. It is living *out* of Christ.

When we brought our children to college, we asked the president of the college, who is also an elder in his church, to provide us with some of his thoughts on the Biblical command to practice hospitality. He summarizes it this way:

I John 4 strikes me, in that regard, as one of the key passages that should undergird all our response to the needy and the lost in the world around us. If we love one another, the world will see that and marvel. They will be drawn to that love of Christ because this is the greatest hole in their souls—they do not know love (because God is love!), but know that it is the one great treasure they deeply desire. To see love in action among our Christian brothers and sisters is simply glorious and terribly winsome to those around us . . . And to extend tangible, self-sacrificial love to strangers and visitors, with no ulterior motive to gain anything from them, is simply “unnatural.” It is a divine gift that shouts out the love of Christ, the gospel, to them. It is a glimpse of glory that makes all their sinful ways and unholy habits pale in comparison. It is evangelism.

We need to reemphasize: Hospitality is (should be) a way of life for the Christian church. It is a living out of the gospel, a visible expression of God's gracious covenant with us. It is “giving ourselves away.” It is winsome. It needs to be actively encouraged in the church and is an important qualification for elders, to which we turn next.

We are considering the church as God's glorious image of hospitality. Christian hospitality, a reflection of God's hospitality toward us, is a distinguishing *mark* of the New Testament church, and therefore, must be *actively encouraged* among all members of the congregation. How much more this should be encouraged among the leaders in the fellowship of believers. In fact, the

Scriptures say that hospitality is an *important qualification* for elders in the church.

Hospitality: An Important Qualification for Ecclesiastical Office

Hospitality is one of those qualifications that may be easily overlooked in our appointment or selection of office bearers. This qualification is clearly stated in 1 Timothy 3:2ff., “A *bishop then must be blameless, the husband of one wife, temperate, sober minded, of good behavior, hospitable, able to teach, not given to wine, not violent.*” Likewise, we read in Titus 1:7ff. that he “*must be blameless, as a steward of God, not self-willed, not quick-tempered, not given to wine, not violent, not greedy for money, but hospitable.*”

In other words, the neglect of hospitality may warrant exclusion or even deposition from office, just as drunkenness or an uncontrolled temper may warrant the same. Every elder (and pastor) is called to be hospitable, showing an open, gracious heart!

Ultimately, it’s not about getting into people’s homes but getting into their lives! In this, he emulates the open heart of Jesus, the Shepherd of the sheep, toward sinners. A hospitable elder does not mean *merely* having his house door open but his “heart-door” open; his heart is full of grace, especially to the lonely, the rejected, the alien, and the troubled.

Here we must say: elders, nothing can replace the personal face-to-face contact with families and persons in your visits. Email may be inexpensive, but face-to-face contact over lunch or a walk on the street communicates “I have time *for you*. *You* are important to me. I am willing to spend and be spent for your soul.” Nurturing relationships is key. Through personal contact Christian fellowship is nurtured, sins are confessed, relationships are healed. An elder must be given to hospitality, baring his heart, offering guidance and counsel, not just putting out fires when they flare up—but at all times. Talking and sharing are central to hospitality. If Christian fathers were counselors

to their families, mothers were home with their children, and elders were counselors to the flock of Jesus Christ, would there be as great a need for professional counselors as we see in our congregations today? To be a faithful, hospitable elder, one needs to be a faithful, hospitable father to his family (1 Timothy 3:5)!

Our day and age is dubbed “the age of communications,” yet there is so little communication; so little talking! The “word,” “talking,” “sharing,” and “establishing personal relationships” are key to growing a fellowship of believers. How attractive this is in an age of non-communication!

Hospitality is an important qualification for elders not only because they reflect the Shepherd, Jesus, in tending the flock, but in so doing (here is a second reason) they also must *model* hospitality for the families in the congregation. They don’t have to *tell* how it is done. They *show*, by example, how it is done, and this, in turn, actively encourages the same among families in the congregation. Elders, give attention to your office!

Many congregations are not prepared or equipped to receive new believers and their families. Why? Because hospitality is not a priority in our lives. Who will be hospitable toward the stranger if this new life in Christ is not being shown among ourselves, and not being exemplified by the elders of our congregation? Alexander Strauch in *Leading with Love* aptly writes, “A cold unwelcoming church contradicts the gospel message. Yet unfriendliness stands out as a frequent criticism of local churches.”

One possible reason for this image of an unwelcoming church to the stranger is that *blood* ties often trump *faith* ties, leaving no extra chair for the stranger at the table, “because son and family regularly occupy the table for Sunday lunch.” Again, elders should lead by example, modeling to the congregation the way of the gospel. Jesus says, “For whoever does the will of God is My brother and My sister and mother” (Mark 3:35).

Elders given to hospitality can model this in a number of ways. In our churches, the congregation is usually divided

into districts or wards, each one under the care of an elder. What about a monthly fellowship meal with your district in the church building or in someone's home? Invite *entire* families—children, youth, parents, grandparents. Is there no time? Make time. Use this time for learning, sharing, growing, and discussing. Make one evening where you covenant with each other: No cell phones; no videos for children. We need to learn how to talk and open up with one another again! One pastor reminded me, “Through small groups, barriers break down, our prejudices and predispositions toward one another are overcome.”

Another practical way of showing hospitality and oversight is encouraging regular district Bible studies. Invite every family and single person of your district to a neighborhood study, even if only 25 percent of the district shows up. Professor G. VanDooren in *Get Out and Get Rid of the Dilemmas* strongly promotes this idea as a tool of evangelism in the neighborhood. It's a way of making the church visible in the neighborhood. Others may see, in a tangible way, what it means to be a follower of Jesus and to be members of one another. The idea, of course, would be to use a simple enough study so that we could also invite our unbelieving neighbors to taste, smell, feel covenant fellowship, the care, the personal counsel and love. As one Indian Christian said to me, we want them “to taste the mango!” Such fellowship serves a twofold purpose: to strengthen the fellowship of believers and to promote Christian witness in neighborhoods.

In these and other ways, hospitality is encouraged and practiced in the congregation.

These matters should surface again and again in our church visitor reports as the practice of hospitality manifests, concretely, God's hospitality toward us. It shows the life of Jesus in us. Elders lead by example.

As elders, if we want to see others converted, then our flock needs some conversion in her practice of hospitality. Lawrence Eyres in *The Elders of the Church* says that “hospitality is a matter of faith—the faith without which no

one can please the Lord . . . it is a faith shown by its works.” Eyres then concludes with the parable of the Good Samaritan as the paradigm for elders: “Go and do likewise!”

We have considered the Biblical commands to practice hospitality. The commands, however, presuppose the existence of real enemies of hospitality *within* us.

Enemies of Hospitality

The real enemy is the *sinful self*, the unwillingness to give oneself away. This enemy manifests itself in two ways in the life of the inhospitable Christian: there are what we may call “*lemon Christians*” and “*coconut Christians*.” This enemy needs to be uncovered so that radical amendment or transformation takes place in our lives by God’s grace.

1. “Lemons” within the congregation. Lemon Christians are sour Christians. They are good at finding fault with others. They provide good reasons why they shouldn’t invite this person or that person to their table. A lemon Christian might not say much. His sourness might not be so overt; it is contained inside the peel! But he has made up his own mind about all kinds of people in the congregation: “He’s no good. He doesn’t make the mark; therefore, he has no place at my table.” There are many who are not worthy of his or her time and love, and hardly worthy of a face-to-face greeting on a Sunday morning. Fellow brothers and sisters are written off from the lemon Christian’s book of life.

When lemon Christians find fault with others, they are not ready to be hospitable toward others. They are “*judges with evil thoughts*” (James 2:4) while they sing, “*Come, for the feast is spread.*” Lemon Christians have their teeth set on edge, even as the Lord sets before them His gracious table: the bread of life and the wine of gladness. The lemon Christian does not image the Lord’s generous, warm-hearted hospitality. He has no intention of doing so. His hospitality is stingy and cold, souring relationships. No one is good enough for him. His circle is very small, maybe including his family and a few others.

But lemon Christians are really the ones who are showing themselves to be “substandard.” When we say a car is a lemon, the car is bad, unsatisfactory, and defective. So are lemon Christians. The Lord has a word to say to them: “How is it that you come to My feast without a wedding garment” (Matthew 22:12)?

But there is another kind of inhospitable Christian.

2. “Coconuts” within the congregation. Coconut Christians are those whose lives are very hard to get into. You have to break into a coconut in order to get to the milk. It’s not easy to break into. It has a hard protective shell. How many times do you have to knock the coconut with the hammer in order to get into it, in order to taste the finest of fare? Like the coconut, their homes, the way to their table, seems impenetrable.

Coconut Christians don’t want others to know them or what’s inside of them. To open their homes and their tables to the stranger within the congregation is risky business. It means to open their hearts, to become vulnerable. Their tables are not nearly as open as the Lord’s Table. Instead, you see the opposite. They disgrace the Lord by practicing *exclusion* among fellow believers. They exclude others from their tables. It’s safe. It’s secure. It’s all about staying within their comfort zone. They are protective of themselves and their own, using a shell to protect themselves. “No trespassing” would be a good sign at the entrance to their driveway.

Try breaking a coconut some time. It’s never tidy. It gets very messy. Pieces fly all over. And that’s what the coconut Christian wants to avoid: messy situations, the willingness to risk sacrificing his life for others. So he guards his home, fences his table, protecting his armed fortress from others invading his privacy.

What is the motive behind Christians becoming lemons or coconuts? **It is fear . . . is it not?** Fear is the cause. It is fear of the unknown; fear of change; fear of becoming known; or fear of giving ourselves away. So in our fear, we try to find security in

ourselves, not in Christ. It shows in our excuses. We use excuses to cover or to mask our fears. The excuses are many and varied:

- Right doctrine is what matters; hospitality is a “fluffy” command
- I have no time; I’m too busy
- My house is not neat or nice enough
- I can’t afford it
- My children never see my husband except on Sundays
- I’m not a good enough host
- My children are too young and too naughty

There is only one answer to this fear: Christ and His love. God tells us in His Word, “*There is no fear in love; but perfect love casts out fear, because fear involves torment*” (1 John 4:18). Only when God by His Spirit manifests His love in us, a love which He manifested toward us in His Son and powerfully pictures at His table, will love begin to overcome our fear and willingness overcome our unwillingness.

If our security is in Christ, God’s transforming grace in our lives will show, will it not, in the gracious practice of hospitality? His love, which casts out fear, will show in a willingness to give ourselves away. This is the practical living out of God’s covenant and our confession! Through it, people are won over to Christ.

One Biblical image of the church is that of the well-watered garden (Isaiah 58:11; Jeremiah 31:12). A garden, such as the one we know, the Botanical Gardens in Hamilton, Ontario, is a welcoming place to all. It’s attractive. It’s one thing to *hear* about its beauty, but to *experience* its beauty, its sights, and its smells leaves an impression beyond description.

The Bible, likewise, begins with a garden; trees and rivers with a table of God in its midst (Genesis 1:29). The Bible also concludes with the garden, trees, and rivers and a festive table in its midst (Revelation 19:9). In between these is the story of another

tree: the cross. Christ gave Himself for us, ushering us into His well-watered garden again, with His table in our midst! Out of heartfelt gratitude, our tables should image His, overflowing in abundance for one another!

The Multiplied Blessings of Hospitality

Only then do we come to see the *multiple* blessings of hospitality, of giving ourselves away. People not only *hear* covenant but also *experience* its beauty, its sights and smells in practical, concrete ways. In this, the Scripture in Acts 20:35 also applies: “*It is more blessed to give than to receive.*” Some of the many blessings include:

1. An open heart, an open home serves to strengthen and nurture relationships within the body of Christ. As fertilizer enriches the garden when the rains fall, so hospitality is in relation to the preached Word. The two work together.

Many immigrants come from very hospitable cultures. They say that the West is a very lonely, closed place to live. Sadly, many say this about the church as well; no rides, no invitations, no table talk. One example comes to mind. Instead of offering a person a ride to worship, we say, “Here’s a ticket for a bus.” We’d sooner throw some money at a situation than sacrifice our time to listen, to develop and nurture relationships. The church may be a community but, often, not a living communion, a well-watered garden.

The great reformer, Martin Luther, saw the value of table talk. Every day he would have some people around his table, and he would talk with them about the Christian life. The table is an opportunity for discussion, counseling one another, as well as sharing joys and grief, for prayer and song. How fitting for the Christian Sabbath! Jesus Himself disciplined and counseled sinners around the meal table. It was His habit. The religious leaders even charged Him with welcoming sinners and eating with them (Luke 15:1–2).

Our Lord's methods are simple and so practical for the church. Moreover, the blessings are numerous. Many of our emotional, mental, and spiritual needs can be met by simply sitting around the table with fellow believers!

2. An open heart, an open home serves as a powerful example for our children and youth. The blessings of a well-watered garden are reproduced from generation to generation. Our children learn by example, imitating our generosity, selflessness, and open-heartedness. We want our children not only to hear but also to *see*, visibly, practically that Jesus gave His life for us. And the first place our children learn this is in the home; otherwise, what they hear is only theory. Wilkins in *Face to Face* rightly warns that "if believers do not raise their children to have big hearts and open hands, the [church] . . . will continue to exist only as a preserved corpse exists. It will go on, but it will be dead and cold."

What a blessing to see children who are not self-centered, who sit around the table, discuss, talk with guests, are eager to learn, ready to help with the dishes, and don't flee from the meal table as soon as they hear "amen." What a blessing when they see love in action and copy your example! How fruitful the tender shoots become in a well-watered garden of the Lord!

3. An open heart, an open home, serves to broaden our horizons. We then begin to see and experience the beauty of the garden in a far richer way: the variety, the colors, the smells, and the tastes. The memories of our homes should be far more than about Caribbean tours, camping trips, wins at hockey games, life spent in our bedrooms alone or on the internet. Ultimately these things are inconsequential; nice but not important.

In the covenant community, our memories should be saturated with stories of God's faithfulness, of trial and triumph—the stories of guests and more guests who have filled our empty chairs over the years. Our memories should be saturated by

fanfare around the table—learning about other people’s cultures and the church globally. Our children, for example, have enjoyed stimulating discussions at the table with people from Africa, India, Pakistan, the Philippines, China, Saudi Arabia, Iran, Iraq, Croatia, and other places. God uses such stories to shape our lives and our perspectives on life. We gain insight and learn from them. This, in turn, enriches the life of the congregation.

By giving of ourselves we are blessed. We receive so much in return as we give ourselves away. Families, congregations are enriched, edified, and encouraged. It brings forth the blessing of greater integration within the congregation and face-to-face relationships among people from all age groups: from baby to great-grandma.

Many may wonder, in discussing the central importance of hospitality in evangelism, why we have been emphasizing so strongly the practice of hospitality among believers, among members, within the body of Christ. The answer is that if we do not image God’s open-hearted hospitality among ourselves, how can we ever expect to draw in the stranger and make him feel welcome? Vital are the lessons for us from the early church: *“They broke bread in homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved”* (Acts 2:46–47).

We finally turn our attention to **The World: God’s Sincere Invitation Visualized Through Our Hospitality.**