

The World: God's Sincere Invitation Visualized Through Our Hospitality

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Hospitality is not merely a duty and responsibility. Nor should it be a burden. It is primarily a response of love and gratitude for God's hospitality, His love, toward us. The practice of hospitality should not be reduced to a program; it is a way of life, a way of life in the covenant community. It emerges from a grateful heart.

Up to this point, we have been illustrating the need for an open heart, an open home between fellow believers within the congregation. This kind of *koinonia* (fellowship) in the covenant home and church has a further blessing; it is an open window to a broken world of God's hospitality toward us. God's sincere invitation to the stranger is visualized through our hospitality; especially in the home.

The Christian (Covenant) Home: The Gospel Visualized

In our fifteen years of cross-cultural, urban ministry, we have come to see that people hear the gospel by *seeing* it. Ninety percent of what they hear is through their eyes. In the home, they *see* the happy relationships between husband and wife, between parents and children. They *see* how Christian parents instruct their children and discipline them; the sitting together around the table, the mutual respect and love, dealing with difficulties, as well as the practice of family worship. And it often sticks out. Seeing a difference, people begin to ask, "So what is the magic pill? What do you do?" They see the powerful effects of Christianity.

No doubt, there are some risks involved. We do live in a fallen world. But these risks differ from family to family and should be handled accordingly. Yet the home remains a key site for ministering the gospel, and in many cases the home becomes the context for the conversion of unbelievers.

In our experience, people often ask questions or invite discussion. At times, people pour out their hearts: “Can you come to my home and talk to my son? He won’t listen to me. Can you teach my children?” We now say, “Hope Centre has a place for children. Come, bring your children to our Saturday class. They will hear and learn about Jesus. If you don’t have a ride, tell us. We can arrange a ride for you. If you want to take a seat and observe, you are welcome.” On a personal note, our prayer is that a Christian (mission) school may open soon, for children of all ethnic and religious backgrounds.

An open heart, an open home is critical, especially in our day, for sharing the gospel. Today, there are many misconceptions, especially among immigrants, about Christianity. There is a general distrust of Christians. Why should they trust us or our church? They see and hear a lot of strange things. In our mission context, people see that we are Canadian. The question is asked, “So how often do you attend the strip clubs?” It is assumed. Why? The prevailing assumption is that Canada is a Christian country and in Canada these things are acceptable. A Hindu family disclosed to us that initially they were afraid to have their children play with our children. Why? In their minds, they were thinking, “Oh, they are Canadian. Be careful. Canadians don’t have a good culture.” Inviting the family into our home opened the way for the gospel and eventually led to an invitation for us to come to their home and share Christ with them. They began to trust us because they saw something different from what they see in Canadian culture.

Green, in *Evangelism in the Early Church*, notes that “one of the most important methods of spreading the gospel in antiquity was by the use of homes.” We have already cited Lydia’s home and the home of the Philippian jailor as examples (Acts 16).

The home was a crucial factor in the spread of the faith. Green then lists the positive advantages in the use of the ancient home:

- a. small numbers involved made real interchange of views possible,
- b. there was an informal and relaxed atmosphere in the home,
- c. the environment was non-threatening,
- d. there was no one to “play to the gallery” as there was in the public space, and
- e. hospitality was natural.

In *Face to Face*, Wilkins likewise comments that “the members of the New Testament church were often together, and the unbelievers noticed this immediately. The unbelievers knew little or nothing of Christian theology, but they did see the love that was manifested.”

Homes remain an important setting for building relationships that cut across cultural and ethnic barriers. Numerous people from other countries express surprise and disappointment at the infrequency with which they are invited into North American homes. In many other countries, inviting a visiting foreigner into one’s home for a meal is an act of ordinary courtesy. There is so much we can learn from their practice. Should we, the church, the members of Christ’s body, not take the lead and demonstrate the warmth of God’s hospitality toward us? Christ’s gospel call is visualized through our hospitality!

In “The Church: The Shopping Window of God,” Wolfgang Simson writes, “The church must again become the place where people can literally see the body of Christ, where His glory is revealed in the most practical of all terms—hands-on, down to earth, right next door, unable to overlook or ignore, living everyday among us . . . He has come to live among us.” Are others able to look in and see and even experience Him who came to live among us?

The church, the body of Christ, is to a great extent, a manifestation or an outgrowth of what lives in the home, in the family. And the doorway for non-Christians into the body of Christ is often through the open door of the covenant home. Regarding the evangelistic impact of the home, Wilkins aptly remarks, “The table is the pulpit and the home, an evangelistic garden, and they teach in subtle and powerful ways.”

Some Ice Breakers

In case you are tongue-tied:

Play a board game, which is a great tension reliever.

Bring out some questions. Many love to tell their story.

Share photos: family, wedding, or a trip.

Invite a few other friends or family members.

Babies and children are great conversation starters.

Have your children and teens participate in the visit.

If guests come from another country, take out an atlas and take an interest in their country.

Helpful Hints for Hosting “Strangers”

1. Share food in times of thanksgiving: a newborn, a new job, a new home, a birthday or a recovery.
2. Make simple meals: you are not entertaining but serving.
3. Be sensitive to religious taboos: vegetarian; some don't eat pork, some don't eat beef.
4. Plan ahead for meals; perhaps include a dish from their country.

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5. Select a simple and appropriate Bible passage ahead of time for the dinner table with guests in mind.
 6. Briefly explain your family custom around the table (Bible reading, prayer, and song).
 7. Pray for your guests by name.
 8. Have family participate in setting up, cleaning up, and conversing in the visit.

Finally, Christian hospitality is a powerful apologetic or argument to the world for the existence of the Trinity, one God in three Persons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. We might also say this in a different way: Christian hospitality is very much a practical outworking of our belief in the Triune God.

Christian Hospitality: An Apologetic for the Holy Trinity

Through the hospitality of the Christian church, the world sees the gracious and sincere invitation of the Triune God to share in fellowship with Him. How does Christian hospitality show this rich fellowship?

A Table and a Song: No other religion in the world has a table and a song. They have no song to sing and no table from which to eat. True Christian hospitality images, on a creaturely level, the eternal fellowship: a fellowship of joy, love, beauty, and unity within the Triune God. Each Person of the Triune God gives Himself to the other. In *Trinity and Reality*, Ralph A. Smith expresses this succinctly: “In the eternal covenant of love the Father gives Himself to the Son by the Spirit, and the Son gives Himself to the Father by the Spirit” (p. 58). God’s people also share in this life of fellowship! In restoring fellowship with His people, God the Father provides the table, the Son sets the table with the bread and wine of gladness through His sacrifice, and the Holy Spirit nourishes the body with this life-sustaining food. There is celebration; there is a song in eternity, in the Christian church and in the Christian home. With a table and a song, we image Him.

Muslims don't know this God. They believe in one God but deny the Trinity, the plurality of Persons. So why would an eternal monad communicate and fellowship when communication and fellowship is contrary to its very nature? How can one Being who is only one person have fellowship? He is a lamentable, pitiful being entirely dependent on his creation for the realization of his desire for fellowship. He has no reason to communicate because there was no eternal fellowship in the first place.

The other extreme is a belief in many gods. In Hinduism, for example, there is no unity in the Godhead. Their gods fight. Though it is possible to imagine the gods communicating in words with each other, there is no unity in purpose, no harmony, and no fellowship. They contradict each other, and not even the most powerful god can be sure that his or her plan will prevail in history.

Only in Christianity is there a table and a song. We have a reason to sing; we have a reason to eat. God has placed a table in our midst. This table is a powerful image of and witness to the fellowship of the Three-in-One throughout all eternity! It's not possible to imagine God not fellow-shiping! We quote Smith again: "The God of the Bible is the God for whom self-giving and fellowship, communication and sharing, are essential to His triune covenantal being" (p. 73).

Unbelievers are not often convinced by theological arguments for the Trinity, but they are often affected when they see God's people image the Triune God in their hospitality.

A Lavish Table Among Strangers: Is this what the world sees in our congregations—a lavish table open to them? Sometime ago, an elder of a confessional Reformed church informed us that they as a church regularly host dinners for residents of a low-income area in downtown. He writes, "We bring them fine food with china settings and crystal goblets and prepare a beautiful banquet for them. One of the women residents who had obviously lived a very difficult life [drugs and prostitution, likely] sat there among the church families who joined them and said this was the first

time in her life that she had ever sat at a table with a linen table cloth, china, and crystal. She was in tears.”

The point is not the china settings and crystal goblets but an open door and a lavish table proclaiming: this is our God!

Recently I was sitting with a Muslim friend on his sofa at his home. This family is well known in his community. In our discussion about the family, he asked if we as churches have any place where abused Muslim girls could receive counseling and friendship. “Is there some place we can send them?” he asked. We are so accustomed to government programs answering the “needs of sinners,” but they offer no gospel and no table! How can we, the church, reclaim our calling in the world and be the table for abused girls, unwed mothers, released prisoners, and addicts? In what ways can we bear witness to the joy and glory of the Triune God?

Our congregation at the Hope Centre is not rich in material resources, but we have learned much about hospitality through our fellow members and visitors. We have our quirks and struggles as any other congregation, but the table is rich and full. Sundays are festive days with refreshments after each service for member and stranger alike. Though limited in resources, our congregation makes a regular practice of meeting in a large place for Thanksgiving Day and Christmas Day services. People from many religious backgrounds come to occupy seats around tables to join the feast. It’s an opportunity for them to hear what the angel told the shepherds at the time of Jesus’ birth: *“I bring you good tidings of great joy which will be to all people”* (Luke 2:10). Thanksgiving Day, likewise being a national holiday, is an opportunity to proclaim to fellow citizens in our nation that God *“did not leave Himself without a witness, in that He did good, gave us rain from heaven and fruitful seasons, filling our hearts with good and gladness”* (Acts 14:17). So the tables are full on these occasions.

Christian hospitality is very much a practical outworking of our belief in the Triune God. We conclude where we began:

the Triune God is the *foundation* for our practice of Christian hospitality. The table, therefore, bears powerful witness to the world of our fellowship in Him!