

Jesus the Missionary – Final Paper

“Hospitality: An Essential & Transformative Practice”

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When I was in high school my best friend, Ken, and I shared something beautiful which we called the “walk-in policy.” The essential element of this policy was that neither one of us had to knock or ring the door bell before entering the other persons house. Our doors were never locked and we could simply walk in. Typically, the only people that enjoy this privilege are family members who live together. Therefore, what this policy communicated to us and everyone else was that I was family as far as Ken and his parents were concerned and Ken was like family to me and mine. But it didn’t stop there. It wasn’t just that we could come over uninvited to walk in unannounced. More than this, once we were inside we had unrestricted access to all that was there. Nothing was off limits. Ken’s food, television, ping-pong table, and clothes were my food, television, ping-pong table, and clothes, and vice versa. It truly was a thing of beauty and one of the greatest examples of hospitality that I have ever experienced.

Virtually everyone know of at least one other person that unconditionally welcomes others in a way that makes them feel accepted, cared for, and loved. These people have a special place in our hearts and we never miss an opportunity to be near them if we can. These people, consciously or not, are embodying what the Bible calls hospitality.

The aim of this paper is to call our attention to the unfortunate way in which the practice of hospitality has either been truncated or lost altogether in the church of Western culture.¹ To do so, we will examine the practices and teaching of Jesus which communicate the centrality of hospitality to Christian individuals and communities as well as the implications of other biblical teaching. Finally, I will use my current ministry context as a means of illustrating how one conceptualize the notion of hospitality becoming normative and describe what we might hope to achieve by doing so.

Hospitality in the Biblical Witness

Old Testament

The idea of hospitality, for the Jew, is as old as Abraham. “Much of the lore about hospitality in ancient Judaism centered around the figure of Abraham, for it was he and Sarah who had welcomed the three

¹ Eastern cultures are categorically better at this than Western ones. This makes the situation doubly sad as western cultures are the more affluent of the two.

heavenly visitors at their tent by the oaks of Mamre and received from them the promise of Isaac's birth."² Further, for Jews of Jesus day, the theme of exile and return was foremost on their minds. They had spent much of their history in exile and therefore depended on the hospitality of their rulers for their survival as a people. Consequently, God reminds them, "When an alien lives with you in your land, do not mistreat him. The alien living with you must be treated as one of your native-born. Love him as yourself, for you were aliens in Egypt. I am the LORD your God."³

Another aspect of hospitality that has roots in the Old Testament is that sometimes the host, in showing hospitality, actually becomes the guest. The clearest example of this is found in 1 Kings 17. Elijah is a prophet of God and God calls him to go to the house of a widow. The widow shows him hospitality in inviting him in and supplying him with food in a time of famine and drought. In fact, when Elijah meets her she is convinced that she and her son are near death. In the midst of this act, God miraculously and continually provides food and even uses Elijah to bring her son back to life when he suddenly dies. Thus the author of Hebrews would later write, "Do not forget to entertain strangers, for by so doing some people have entertained angels without knowing it."⁴

New Testament - Gospels

So, when Jesus steps on the scene he wasn't inventing the practice of hospitality. Rather, as he did with so many other practices, he reclaimed and radicalized it. "The Synoptic Gospels show Jesus challenging exclusivism wherever it was officially sanctioned or accepted as normal. Above all, the challenge is dramatized in stories about Jesus' association at table with the marginal people known as tax collectors and sinners."⁵ Jesus, in associating and eating with those that the rest of the population deemed unclean, unworthy, and disdained in general, would have been painfully reminding Israel of how neglectful of this practice they had become.

² Koenig John, *New Testament Hospitality* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1974). pg. 15

³ Leviticus 19:33-34 (NIV)

⁴ Hebrews 13:2 (NIV)

⁵ *Ibid.* pg. 20 – See Mark 2:13-14, Luke 7:36-50, Luke 19:10, Luke 15:1-2

Jesus often describes the Kingdom of God as a banquet of sorts. Or in other words, gratuitous hospitality. In each instance Jesus seems to indicate that the banquet ends up being for the very people that those listening to the parables would have been most likely to reject. These parables most likely have a double meaning. First, Jesus was conveying just what kind of Kingdom God was ushering in. God was welcoming all who would come regardless of ethnicity, morality, or background. Secondly, Jesus was attempting to help Israel recapture her calling as the nation who was supposed to ask in accordance with this Kingdom. In other words, Jesus was saying both, “This is how God is acting,” and “This is how you should be acting.”

Probably the most radical teaching of Jesus in regard to hospitality comes in the final section of Matthew 25. Jesus is describing the criteria by which God will ultimately separate the sheep, or the righteous, from the goats, the unrighteous. He says,

I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me. Then the righteous will answer him, “Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?” The King will reply, “I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me.”⁶

In saying this Jesus doesn’t seem to be implying that it is acting like this that *makes* a person righteous, but rather that this *is* how the righteous act. It is only when a person realizes just how deeply God has loved and forgiven them that they are compelled to reciprocate this love and mercy to those around them.

New Testament – Letters

Amidst a flurry of exhortations for the church in Rome, Paul reminds them, “Practice hospitality.”⁷ The Greek word Paul uses for practice is, *dioko*. Literally, this word means to pursue or run after and figuratively it means to pursue something zealously. In keeping with his tone in the rest of the immediate context, it should be noted that Paul is not merely suggesting this as a good idea, but passionately exhorting them to forcefully lay hold of the calling God has bestowed upon them.⁸

⁶ Matthew 25:35-40 (NIV)

⁷ Romans 12:3b (NIV)

⁸ Zondervan Reference Software, Dictionary of New Testament Theology.

Peter also encourages his readers to “Offer hospitality to one another without grumbling.”⁹ What we should take away from this is that hospitality is not something to be offered with reluctance or under compulsion. Presumably the most common form of this is found in those people who offer some form of hospitality and then look for chances to let other know just how big of an imposition it was.

The biblical witness is clear; we as Christians are “aliens and strangers” in this world who have been shown cosmic and unending hospitality by a heavenly Father. God has both permanently adopted us as his sons and daughters and has lavished us with provision and good gifts. We, therefore, ought to be passionately enthusiastic about (re)demonstrating this grace to any and all who will receive it.

Forms of Hospitality

Hospitality can and should take on many different forms. As all Christians are called to be known for hospitality, each will naturally do so in ways which come most naturally. This is not to say we should ever shy away from showing hospitality in ways that are more difficult or don’t come as naturally. Rather that as the body of Christ is unified in its diversity and reliance on all working together, that it is quite alright, in fact necessary, for each individual to offer hospitality in ways that bring them the most joy. We will only survey a few forms below.

Healing (Holistically)

When Jesus first sent the disciples out to proclaim the Kingdom of God he did so in expectation of mutual hospitality. They were to show hospitality in large part by healing. We read that Jesus “gave them power and authority to drive out all demons and to cure diseases, and he sent them out to preach the kingdom of God and to heal the sick.”¹⁰ He also told them to make use of the hospitality shown them by those that took them in and to shake the dust off their feet in places where hospitality was not extended. It seems quite easy for us to focus on the word preach in the list of things Jesus commissioned his disciples to do, but rarely hear much said about the more prevalent components of driving out demons, curing diseases, and healing the sick. Intrinsic to the nature of being a host is looking to care for the needs and ills of our guests.

⁹ 1 Peter 4:9 (NIV)

¹⁰ Luke 9:1-2 (NIV)

“God wills the ultimate healing of all spiritual, psychological, and physical sickness.”¹¹ Not only should we be acutely suspicious of the lack of a vibrant presence of physical healing in the Western church,¹² we must also reassert the power of Christ in believers to deliver people from emotional, spiritual, and psychological ailment. Approximately 18.8 million American adults have a depressive disorder. Over 19 million have an anxiety disorder. Roughly 30,000 people committed suicide in the United States in the year 2000.¹³ How many of these tragedies could be avoided by communities and individuals offering hospitality to those in need?

Christians show hospitality when they aim to heal by lending a listening ear, offering a sympathetic and compassionate heart, and praying an earnest prayer. God may work through the prayers of the church to banish cancer, restore a limb, or recover sight. God may use a person or community to heal broken relationships and marriages. Often people find healing in appropriate physical contact – the hug between a pastor and an estranged homosexual, a handshake shared between theological enemies, or the touching and embrace of victims of AIDS or skin diseases. These are all forms of hospitality aimed at healing.

Serving (Without expecting return)

“The greatest among you will be your servant.”¹⁴ These words of Jesus leave little room for doubt that God’s standards are different than ours. We aspire to leadership and control, God aspires to servitude and humility. In our eyes it is those who are served who are great, in God’s it is those who serve. Paul tells us, “You, my brothers, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the sinful nature; rather, serve one another in love. The entire law is summed up in a single command: “Love your neighbor as yourself.”¹⁵ We serve our neighbor by loving them.

One might serve another by doing for them what they cannot. In the winter, one might shovel the driveway of one who is elderly, prepare a meal for those stricken by grief in time of loss, temporarily adopt a teenager who is at odds with their parents, or change the oil the car of a single mother who is without

¹¹ Blue, Ken, *Authority to Heal* (Downes Grove, Ill: InterVarsity Press, 1987) pg. 69

¹² This is another practice that is more common in Eastern cultures

¹³ All statistics taken from the National Institute of Mental Health (www.nimh.nih.gov)

¹⁴ Matthew 25:11 (NIV)

¹⁵ Galatians 5:13-14 (NIV)

time, money, or know-how. These are all examples of showing hospitality through service. In each instance the message is loud and clear, “Because I love you as I love myself, I will do for you as I would have done for me.”

Servanthood, in its truest form, is always exists without any desire for reciprocity. If I serve in order to get something in return, my motives are mixed and hospitality becomes depraved. This is not the same as aspiring to create a community in which hospitality abounds amongst the members. It is one thing to expect a community to practice hospitality and quite another to demand one’s actions on account of your own.

Sharing (Possessions and Meals)

I am convinced that this form of hospitality will be the hardest to come by in affluent Western culture; and probably, therefore, also the most significant and powerful. The other forms are less personal. In that I mean that one doesn’t necessarily have to give much up other than time. Sharing rubs on the twin nerves of Western culture – materialism and consumerism. Many people today, even if not consciously, buy in to the lie that “You are what you have.” We fool ourselves into believing that what we possess is actually ours – that we earned it. We fail to realize that all that is belongs to God and any ability we have to achieve or accumulate was also given to us by God. Some of the most powerful expressions of hospitality come by way of the sharing of possessions and meals. I will address each component briefly.

Jesus said,

And if you lend to those from whom you expect repayment, what credit is that to you? Even “sinners” lend to “sinners,” expecting to be repaid in full. But love your enemies, do good to them, and lend to them without expecting to get anything back. Then your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High, because he is kind to the ungrateful and wicked.¹⁶

We are to continue on the pattern of our Father who is a gracious giver not bothering to distinguish between worthiness. Sharing freely and generously not only sets us free from the grip of greed and idolatry, it also serves to help meet the needs of others and both display the incomparable worth of God. I have had the rare pleasure of knowing people who have sold homes and cars and bought smaller ones so they could

¹⁶ Luke 6:34-35 (NIV)

contribute to the needs of others. I have known others who have made permanent decisions of sharing in adopting unwanted children. When we show hospitality through opening our homes, lending our things, selling our possessions and sharing our resources we have the opportunity to embody and speak about a God who gives without measure and who expects nothing in return.

Another form of sharing, which we have already seen was essential to Jesus' ministry, is the sharing of meals. As someone who has served in youth ministry for 8 years, I can personally attest to the fact that there is something mysterious about food and eating. In any house I have ever set foot in for any sort of meeting or gathering, without fail, we will end up congregating in the kitchen. Why? That's where the food is. What's the best way to get people talking to one another? Give them a doughnut or a cup of coffee. When we share meals with one another we talk, our lives start to unfold before one another and we are effortlessly grafted into someone else's story. How wonderful it would be then for the body of Christ to make use of this mystery in making a conscious effort to share meals with those searching to belong somewhere? More often than not, as with Elijah, it is often those who initiate the sharing of a meal of end of being the greatest recipients in the act of hospitality.

Limits of Hospitality

Hospitality has its limits and there are more than a few ways that its God given intention can be both complicating and distorted. Christine Pohl raises some interesting questions.

Can we say yes to everyone who comes to us? If we limit our hospitality do we risk turning Jesus away? If we say yes to everyone, how will we keep what we offer from becoming diluted, more and more inadequate and impersonal? If we welcome a very troubled person, how will the people we have already invited into our lives be affected? Do we have a special responsibility to them? Do we have to be careful about our own needs – will our strength be sufficient for the task, no matter how much we take on? If we burn out in six months, what then?¹⁷

Her response to these questions is essentially to remind us that our finitude and limited resources are not sinful. Therefore, though these tensions never go away, their presence ought not dupe us

¹⁷ Pohl, Christine, *Making room: Recovering Hospitality as a Christian Tradition* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1999) pg. 132

into believing something is wrong with us, our thinking, or our theology. Even Jesus said, “The poor you will always have with you...”¹⁸

Another problem associated with hospitality is its potential distortion. Since the days of the New Testament, Christians have fallen into the trap of utilizing hospitality for selfish gain by hosting the influential and powerful. Jesus and his brother James both addressed this problem. The rub of hospitality in this sense comes not with whom we show it to, but why we are showing it to them. To be sure, much could be gained by showing counter-cultural hospitality to the influential if our aim is to help them see the value in reciprocating to others, especially the poor and needy.

The practice of hospitality is not *the* answer to the woes of the church; but it is a vitally missing piece of the whole. As with any practice it may be misunderstood, twisted, and idolatized. When drawing attention to the gradual weaving of this practice into the fabric of a community of believers, we must be certain to constantly evaluate our methods and motivation lest we end up doing more harm than good.

Integrating Hospitality

I serve in the context of an extremely wealthy community and a church with nominal spiritual vitality. I ask myself all the time, “What would God have to do in the midst of this situation to create a spiritual awakening.” All the people I know are genuinely nice, fairly gracious, and very well-off financially. I know several individuals who could write a ten-thousand dollar check for some worthy cause without bothering to remember to include it in balancing their check book! How does hospitality look in a setting like this? Would it even have any impact?

If we say that hospitality is a valuable way of understanding God’s nature and if we further say that God desires for those who follow God to emulate this characteristic, then, I think, we must affirm that hospitality, when practiced rightly, will always have a desirable outcome. However, it may not be the same in all settings. If the aim of hospitality is to draw attention to God’s worth and not our own, then chances are hospitality will have to take on a countercultural dimension. For example, Jesus showed

¹⁸ Mark 14:7 (NIV)

hospitality to sinners and tax collectors by eating with them. This was a countercultural act of hospitality that drew attention to what Jesus must have believed about God. In my particular setting one may choose to have dinner with tax collectors (IRS agents) and sinners (those who don't attend church) and it really would be no big deal. Now this is still showing hospitality and therefore has value, but it's hospitality without real cost. Costly hospitality in my context would be a family deciding to take in a homeless person off the street or selling both of their BMW's and buying less expensive used cars in order to open an AIDS clinic. These acts of hospitality would be radically controversial and equally telling of what one believes about God. The point is not drawing attention to oneself, but at the same time practicing **only** the kind of hospitality which is seen as normal will never disclose the true worth and glory of God.

I take this to be the point that Jesus was making in the passage quoted above from Luke 6. In essence he was saying, "What's the big deal if you just do what is expected? Anybody can do that. You need to go above and beyond and do what other people think is crazy."

It should go without saying that vital to any attempt to awaken people to the call for radical hospitality is praying, fasting, and specific, biblical teaching. However, we cannot overlook the essentialness of modeling radical hospitality. In many ways, a single example of radical hospitality would probably serve the same purpose as a dozen sermons. Jesus did not just teach about hospitality, he was indeed the embodiment of hospitality and practiced it in every area of his life.

Hope and Promise of Hospitality

More and more people are talking about reclaiming hospitality in the church. I fear that many may simply be using the angle of hospitality as a kind of hook to get people in the church. This idea seems to be foreign in the mind and practice of Jesus. Jesus did not make demands of the people he dined with. We are never told of an altar call following his meals. Jesus healed many who turned away from him. He told his disciples plainly that despite their activities of healing many would not respond hospitably. Hospitality does not have to be seen as a means to an end. God intends that we should joyously practice hospitality on account of the hospitality we have been shown. To be sure, we should hope against all hope

that in the midst of our practice of hospitality people would inquire as to our motivation and join us in following the way of Jesus, but this is not promised to us.

We do have a promise however. To those who follow the pattern of Jesus and feed the hungry, quench the thirst of the parched, befriend the stranger, clothe the naked, care for the sick and visit the prisoners, Jesus says, “Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world.”¹⁹ In practicing hospitality as Jesus did we show ourselves to be children of God with a claim of all the rewards and riches found in Christ.

The Glorious Paradox of Hospitality

To sum up, there is a glorious paradox of hospitality to be found in the person of Jesus. He invites us to his heavenly banquet in the kingdom and encourages us to welcome him as our guest. He is both the cleanser of sin and washer of feet. Jesus is both our nourisher and our nourishment. He is the Ultimate Servant and the Lord whom we serve. Jesus is both host and guest.

I find this to be a unique and wonderfully enlightening way of conceptualizing the nature and essence of God’s Kingdom and reign. By God’s mercy may we be ever captivated and changed by this glorious paradox!

¹⁹ Matthew 25:34