

Reinventing the Christian Practice of Hospitality Scott Cormode

Hospitality is a Christian practice that extends all the way back to the Book of Genesis. Although, in contemporary America, people use the term to mean catering a meal or putting on a party, hospitality means far more as a Christian practice. How might we recover the Christian practice of hospitality, especially in a way that brings the wholeness of the biblical practice into contemporary life?

Hospitality is the offer to extend the privileges of community to those who do not have the standing to expect it, especially those who are vulnerable because they are strangers. Hospitality often involves sharing meals, but hospitality is about more than eating. Eating is, for example, one of the privileges of being in my family. My kids have the right to expect to be fed every single night. When I share a meal with them, it is not an act of kindness. I owe it to them. When I share such a meal with an outsider, I invite them into my family for that brief period. **Hospitality is an offer to identify with outsiders and to treat them like insiders. Hospitality is extending privilege across difference.**

All of human life begins with God's act of hospitality – with God's making a place for us in the world that God created, a world that we had no claim to inhabit. God knew that this offer was dangerous because we the outsiders might defile God's pristine world. But he welcomed us anyway. "Having been embraced by God," Miroslav Volf says, "we must make space for others and invite them in – even our enemies."¹ **Hospitality is treating outsiders like insiders, just as God treated us.**

Hospitality is integral to the earliest biblical stories. God welcomed Adam into the Garden of Eden. Hospitality is a significant part of Abraham's story in Genesis 12, 14, 18, and 19. Each of these stories turn on the proper (and improper) way to treat a stranger. Later in the Old Testament, Rahab welcomes the Hebrew spies, Elijah receives the hospitality of the widow of Zarephath (I Kings 17-18) and Elisha is hosted by the Shunammite woman in II Kings 4. And God expands the notion of hospitality to include more than meals. It became central to the very identity for what it meant to be the People of God. "Treat the foreigner as your native-born," Leviticus 19 says, "Love them as yourself, for you were foreigners in Egypt. I am the LORD your God" – a commandment echoed in Deuteronomy 10: "You shall love the stranger because you were strangers in the land of Egypt." And, later in the Old Testament, God's prophets remind Israel and Judah that God will judge them based on how they care for "the widow, the orphan, and the stranger in your midst" -- that is, by the degree to which they **provide outsiders with the privileges that automatically come to those who are part of the community.**

In the New Testament, Jesus practiced hospitality and he received it. He ate with sinners and tax collectors. Accepting their hospitality was not just about sharing a meal, it was a way of identifying with them and making them a part of his community – a point the Pharisees both understood and reviled. Luke 9 is a particularly interesting passage for understanding what Jesus was trying to teach the disciples about hospitality. At the beginning of the chapter, Jesus sends out the twelve without provisions. He purposely asks them to rely on the hospitality of others. When we Christians (especially those of us with economic power) read the passage, we focus on the message that the disciples carried. But **Jesus intentionally put the powerful message in the hands of powerless people. He made them dependent.** And what better way to understand the people entrusted to your care than to live with them on their terms? That is what Jesus did in the Incarnation.² When we carry the gospel to our neighbors, it is easy to let our comfort get in the way.

In the same chapter of Luke – right after the disciples return – we see the Feeding of the Five Thousand, which is another act of hospitality. The crowds have overstayed their welcome and the disciples want to send them away (so that the disciples can find food for themselves). And Jesus tells the disciples to feed these strangers – to treat them as if they are insiders, or part of Jesus' crew. The command to provide hospitality makes no

sense to the disciples. So Jesus feeds the outsiders. The disciples were so caught up in their own needs and wants that they did not see the obligation they had to extend their privileges to those outside the band. **Jesus wanted the disciples to treat the five thousand outsiders like they were insiders** in his chosen band.

We have talked about the OT and the NT, but what about the early church? Hospitality in the early church became a basis for evangelism. One of the primary reasons that the gospel spread throughout the Roman Empire was that the Christians practiced a different kind of hospitality.³ Ancient Romans typically practiced hospitality for important people – that is, only for people who could give them something in return. But the Christians became noted for extending hospitality to all, even the least of these. This was a significant part of how the early Church developed a reputation of love.⁴ The early Church loved outsiders as if they belonged.

Why did they do this? Our Christian motivation for extending hospitality to the stranger is our experience of receiving hospitality from God. We were estranged from God with no claims on God. But God, in His great love for us, offered us hospitality while we were yet sinners. He invited us into his household, not just as guests but as adopted joint-heirs with Christ. And **God’s hospitality came at a cost**. His only Son had to suffer and die (and rise again in vindication) so that we might have a place once again at God’s table. Hospitality is at the core of the Christian experience.

In the same way, hospitality is often the first experience outsiders have with God’s People (and the loving God we represent). Outsiders measure “warmth” by hospitality – by the degree to which insiders treat outsiders like they belong.⁵ **That means that hospitality must adapt to the experience of the outsider**. Say, for instance, I have a friend who is a vegetarian. When my wife and I invite her to dinner, we don’t serve steak. It would be rude. Part of being friends is that we know that she is a vegetarian. We have listened to her long enough to know how she sees the world. And we accommodated ourselves to her experiences. Accommodation is different from assimilation.⁶ In assimilation, the burden is on you the outsider to change if you and I are going to share a culture. In accommodation, the burden is for me the insider to change. We in the church know the right way to how to treat a friend: we accommodate ourselves to her needs. Yet somehow, when we deal with those outside the church, we often have the attitude that they should be grateful for whatever we offer and that they should change. **But, if hospitality is treating strangers as part of the community, then I owe them the same obligations I owe my friends**.

It is easy to think about hospitality in terms of what food we might offer at a dinner. It is far more difficult (and far more important) to think about what it means to accommodate a stranger when it comes to the things we do as the People of God. We the church-insiders have things just the way we like them. We selected a congregation that sings the songs we like, that meets at the time that works for us, and that has sermons on the things we think are important. But if we are going to welcome outsiders, then we bear an obligation to listen to those people who are not like us and then to change our music, our services, and our sermons so that they reflect the tastes of those we intend to welcome. **Hospitality will cost us**.

What about the “bad guest”? Doesn’t hospitality leave us open to exploitation? And don’t good guests have an obligation to be grateful? Our worries about good hosts and bad guests depend on whether we see ourselves as the hosts or as the guests. We practice hospitality because God practiced hospitality. God invited us humans into this earth God created. And we were (and are) bad guests. We messed up the Garden of Eden and we continue to treat each other poorly. We do not show gratitude to God. Yet God keeps offering us hospitality. The only way that we can ask about the “bad guest” is if we see ourselves as only being the good host – that is, if we forget that **we are the ungrateful guests at God’s table**. We must treat other people the same way we want God to treat us.

If hospitality is extending privilege across difference, then it will change the ways that we invite people to participate in our community. For example, Reuben and Sonja were a homeless couple in their twenties. They showed up at a church on a Friday asking for help with food. They were living with their infant in a van. The

congregational coordinator, Carol, got them vouchers for food and got them into temporary housing. But Carol did something more. In talking to Reuben, she discovered that he played bass; she saw it in the van. So she invited him come back on Sunday to play with the worship band – two days after she met him. She did not ask if he was a good musician and she did not even ask if he was a good Christian. She simply welcomed him in Jesus’ name. And now, a couple of years later, Reuben and Sonja (and their child) are regular members of the church.

How is that a story about hospitality? Let us say that we had a twenty-five-year-old bass player who was a child of the church. Would the praise band welcome him? Of course. Not only that, they would recruit him. Carol extended to Reuben **the privileges that any member of the congregation would have expected**. She treated an outsider like an insider. And, because of that, he became an insider. That is the Christian practice of hospitality.

¹ Volf, *Exclusion & Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation* (Abingdon Press, 1996) 129

² A celebrated theologian of the early church (Gregory of Nazianus) described the Incarnation by saying that for your sake Jesus became a stranger in a strange land. Thus, the God who hosts we humans also made himself subject to our hospitality. Gregory of Nazianus, “Oration on Holy Baptism,” quoted in Christine Pohl, *Making Room*, p. 33

³ Helen Rhee, *Loving the Poor, Saving the Rich: Wealth, Poverty, and Early Christian Formation* (Baker Academic, 2012), esp. “Wealth, Poverty, and Koinonia” 103-138.

⁴ Christine Pohl, *Making Room: Recovering Hospitality as a Christian Tradition* (Eerdmans, 1999) 17-19; Christine Pohl, *Living in Community: Cultivating Practices that Sustain Us* (Eerdmans Publishing, 2012) 159-176.

⁵ The Fuller Youth Institute found that this experience of “warm community” was integral to churches that are growing young. Kara Powell, Jake Mulder, and Brad Griffin, *Growing Young* (Baker Books, 2016) 163-195.

⁶ I have been particularly influenced on this topic by a wonderful overview essay that, although older now, provides a progression for how scholars have discussed assimilation. Russel Kazal, “Revisiting Assimilation: The Rise, Fall, and Reappraisal of a Concept in American Ethnic History,” *American Historical Review* 100:2 (April 1995) 437-471.