

The Biblical Call for Hospitality

How should Christians stand out in a society increasingly fragmented and polarized, isolated and lonely, embittered and embattled?

Too often, the temptation is for the church to allow these forces to overwhelm us until we retreat to the safety of a fortress that shuts the door to doubters. But despite its façade of faithfulness, this option is worldly. It's exactly what you'd expect in a society like ours, where ideological tribes keep people with significant disagreements from ever interacting anywhere but online, where epithets and arguments are hurled from Twitter towers and Facebook fortresses.

Instead, we must follow the path of the ancient Christians in their countercultural practice of hospitality. Hebrews 13, Romans 12, the example of Jesus, not to mention the many Old Testament commands to welcome the stranger—all of these prompt us to welcome people into our homes and churches. Like the early church, we ought to display a welcoming posture—confident in our affirmation of orthodoxy and compassionate in our embrace of people made in God's image. The church welcomes.

What makes welcoming difficult these days is that many believe this posture requires an affirmation of identity and behavior. We see this belief most often in matters related to sexuality, but it is increasingly true of political affiliation, whether on the right or the left. That's why I've written that [churches should welcome everybody and affirm no one](#). The church does not exist for the affirmation of its members but for the transformation of its people into the image of Christ.

Still, we welcome. But what does this welcome look like? And what role does hospitality play?

Healthy Hospitality

In traditional Christian circles, we tend to see faithfulness and health in terms of a clear and unequivocal position of orthodoxy on doctrinal and ethical matters. But surely this definition is inadequate. What good is orthodoxy without compassion, or moral standards without love? The sign of a healthy congregation is not merely its statement of faith but also its hospitality toward those who are not members.

Think about the home. A healthy home environment makes space for human flourishing, by inviting people who do not belong to the family to visit and find themselves refreshed. When a family welcomes visitors to the table, the dynamic of the home changes. Yes, the family remains the core, but this outward focus of hospitality renews the visitor and family members alike.

If a family were to see itself *only* as "us against the world," with windows and doors boarded up and everyone huddled together for fear of contamination, the home would turn into an unhealthy fortress, where foibles would develop into pathologies, and where pathologies would hinder the flourishing of the family members. Hospitality is important for the visitor and family member alike; it brings health to the home.

The same is true of the church. Hospitality toward those who are not church members (even toward those who have radically opposing political or ethical views) should be normal, not unusual. This is not a step toward compromise; it's a powerful weapon in our spiritual arsenal. [Feasts are explosions of joy](#) on the battlefield of good vs. evil.

The challenge to Hospitality

The challenge today is this: many people assume that hospitality demands a “come just as you are” posture that accepts and leaves alone the people who are welcomed. To truly welcome someone means you put aside any intention to change them, any push to convert them, any persuasion to convince them. According to this way of thinking, true hospitality means full acceptance, no questions asked.

This idea that hospitality means unqualified acceptance was the position of philosopher Jacques Derrida, and it seems to be “common sense” in this day and age. But we cannot embrace this definition, because it is incompatible with the Great Commission.

What if hospitality, properly understood, welcomes people in order to renew them? Peter Leithart makes this point in [Traces of the Trinity](#):

We don't welcome the naked so they can be naked in our presence; we don't show hospitality to the hungry so they can watch us eat. We welcome the naked and hungry to change their circumstances. We make room for them so we can clothe and feed them.

So too with moral hunger and personal shame. We don't welcome addicts so they can continue in their addiction. We make room for them, and take up residence in their lives, in order to be agents of ethical transformation. We don't receive the prostitute to help her get more tricks. We open our lives to the prostitute so we can deliver her from slavery—to the pimp, perhaps to drugs, to poverty, to a destructive life. Hospitality is not universal approval. It is universal welcome for the sake of renewal. We make room not to tolerate but to transform.

I love this idea of hospitality for the sake of renewal. But there's a danger here. If we begin to see people as projects, and hospitality as merely a tool that is geared toward “fixing” someone in need, we dehumanize the people we've opened our arms to. We turn people into projects.

Hospitality For The Sake of Renewal

So where does that leave us? The idea of hospitality as universal approval is problematic, but so is the idea of hospitality for the sake of renewal if it turns people into projects. So what do we do?

The answer is to ensure that hospitality for the sake of renewal has in mind not only the renewal of the person being welcomed, but also of the group doing the welcoming. Hospitality leads to *our* renewal as well.

When we open our arms to people less fortunate, or when we welcome people with whom we have significant disagreements, we open each other to the possibility of renewal. A hospitable congregation serves the people being welcomed and is transformed in the process. This is the kind of church that will stand out. This is hospitality that renews.

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