

This Could Change Everything in Your Church Hospitality

What is the first thing that comes to mind when you hear the word hospitality? For most people, images emerge of entertaining around meals or inviting friends into our homes for a night of fun and games. Now let's be clear. There is nothing wrong with sharing a meal with friends and family. Genuine, biblical hospitality, however, is much more than entertaining.

One simple distinction between biblical hospitality and entertaining is that the latter puts the focus on the host. In doing so, it can actually become an issue of pride. As the host, we are concerned what others will think about our home. We wonder, how will our home reflect on us? There is a desire to impress our guests. We want them to like us and the place we live. We worry about making everything just right. If our home isn't perfectly clean and decorated, how can we possibly entertain guests? This sort of hospitality can easily become more about *appearances* than *persons*.

With biblical hospitality, the focus is not on us as hosts. Instead, it is on our guest. Our concern is not on the appearance of our home, but on the needs and concerns of those invited into our homes. What do we have to learn from our guests? What do they have to share? What needs do our guests bring with them that we can address? What promise are they carrying with them that we need to receive? What about our guest can we celebrate during our time together? Soon, we discover the distinction between host and guest proves to be artificial. Our differences evaporate into a mutual sense of being included.

Scripture gives further clarity on the concept of hospitality, as well as its crucial importance. The Bible holds hospitality—especially toward strangers—in high regard. The laws prescribing holiness in the book of Leviticus include reference to hospitality:

When a foreigner resides among you in your land, do not mistreat them. The foreigner residing among you must be treated as your native-born. Love them as yourself, for you were foreigners in Egypt. I am the Lord your God (Leviticus 19:33-34).

We are not only to do no wrong to those outside of our community; we are to actively love the "foreigner" as we love ourselves. In this passage, the better translation of "as yourself" (*kamocho*) is "for he is like you." We, too, were aliens once—outside the community—yet God treated us as native-born. The point is reiterated in Deuteronomy 10:19: "... you are to love those who are foreigners, for you yourselves were foreigners in Egypt."

In the New Testament, the Greek word for "hospitality" is the word *philoxenia*, which is a combination of two words: love (*phileo*) and the word for stranger (*xenos*). It literally means "love of stranger."

Another aspect of hospitality is important to note. It is not just for the benefit of the other. There is also something extraordinary that is gained when we receive the stranger.

When you give a dinner or a banquet, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or rich neighbors, lest they also invite you in return and you be repaid. But when you give a feast, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, and you will be blessed, *because they cannot repay you* (Luke 14:12-14, ESV).

The practice of biblical hospitality is unique because it reaches out to those who cannot reciprocate. In most cases, when we invite friends into our homes for dinner, there is an expectation that they will return the “favor” and have us into their home. But the point of this passage is that customary “pay back” hospitality is of no great merit to God. The very best hospitality is that which is bestowed, not exchanged.

Reflection Questions

1. Where do you have space in your home and in your life, that could be opened up to others? Do you have room in your heart to love and serve someone who is unwanted, unloved, and uncared for? Do you have room in your home to welcome someone, even temporarily?
2. Who in your neighborhood, your place of work or in the places you hang out is living a relationally impoverished life? How can you turn a stranger into a friend this week?
3. Besides welcoming people into our homes, in what other settings might we be more hospitable?

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