

THE HOSPITALITY COMMANDS

BUILDING LOVING
CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY

BUILDING BRIDGES
TO FRIENDS AND NEIGHBORS

by
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To Marilyn

whose love for hospitality grows continually stronger.

1

A MISSING CROWN JEWEL

While on vacation, my wife and I had the opportunity to visit a couple who had previously attended our church and home Bible studies but had since moved away. We were concerned about their spiritual welfare. We were delighted to learn that they were living for the Lord and were actively involved in a small local church. They had one complaint, however. During the past year that they had attended the church, not one person—not even one of the spiritual leaders—had invited them over for a meal or a time of fellowship. So, our friends still did not feel a part of the fellowship and were quite disheartened.

*

An elderly single woman, who now attends our church, related an experience to me that dramatically illustrates why we need fresh teaching on the subject of Christian hospitality. At one time in her life, she had to travel more than an hour by bus every Sunday to attend a small suburban church. Each week after the Sunday morning service, she would eat alone in a restaurant and then spend the entire afternoon in a park or library so that she could attend the evening service. She did this for four years. What left her with sour memories of this church was the fact that in four years no one invited her home to eat a Sunday afternoon meal or to rest. It wasn't until she announced she was leaving that an elderly woman in the church invited her home for a meal on her final Sunday.

*

At times I have traveled as long as two or three hours on a Sunday morning in order to preach at a church. In some instances, when I finished speaking I was handed a check, invited to return, given many friendly handshakes, and bid a warm good-by. But no one thought to invite me home for a meal, to provide rest before my long drive home, or to seek further fellowship with me after the Sunday morning service.

*

These experiences distress me, and so they should! They are examples of lifeless, loveless, inhospitable Christianity. Worse, they are examples of outright disobedience to the clear commands of Scripture. In concluding the Letter to the Hebrews, the inspired writer implores his Christian readers to cultivate a deep, affectionate love for one another as brothers and sisters (13:1). He then immediately warns them not to neglect a vitally important aspect of their brotherly and sisterly love—hospitality.

Tragically, most Christians today neglect the ministry of hospitality. Mortimer Arias, a former Methodist bishop from Bolivia, says,

Hospitality is becoming an almost forgotten Christian virtue in our style of life today, particularly in big cities with their rampant crime on the streets, their locked-in apartments and all their affluent, urban and bourgeois devices which attempt to create privacy in our homes and our lives.

In the New Testament, however, hospitality was a distinctive mark of Christians and Christian communities.¹

If what Mr. Arias says is correct and “hospitality was a distinctive mark of Christians and Christian communities,” then we are missing a valuable jewel in the crown of Christian life and service.

If you doubt that hospitality was “a distinctive mark of [early] Christians and Christian communities,” consider the following quotation:

Indeed, was there ever a visitor in your midst that did not approve your excellent and steadfast faith...or did not proclaim the magnificent character of your hospitality?²

These glowing words of praise concerning hospitality were written in A.D. 96 by the church in Rome to the Christians in Corinth. Corinth’s “magnificent” display of hospitality, however, was not unique. During the first two centuries, nearly all of the Christian churches across the Roman Empire were characterized by loving, Christian hospitality. The church in Rome was the most noted of all. The famous, liberal church historian, Adolf Harnack (1851-1930), reveals that:

...during the early centuries of Christianity it was the Roman church more than any other which was distinguished by the generosity with which it practiced this virtue [hospitality].... A living interest in the collective church of Christ throbbed with peculiar vigor throughout the Roman church...and the practice of hospitality was one of its manifestations.³

In his scholarly study of ancient Greek, Roman, Jewish, and Christian hospitality, Gustav Stahlin makes this remarkable claim: “One of the most prominent features in the picture of early Christianity, which is so rich in good works, is undoubtedly its hospitality.”⁴

Obviously, hospitality was very important to the early Christians. In fact, New Testament writers Paul, Peter, John, and the author of Hebrews made hospitality a scriptural command, a duty! But why should hospitality be made a command? Why should hospitality be important to Christianity? Why should it be considered a Christian virtue? What does hospitality have to do with religion?

As Bible-believing Christians, we need to answer these questions. We need to rediscover the New Testament’s dynamic teaching on hospitality. We need to awaken Christians to their scriptural duty to practice hospitality. We need to show the rich blessings that await all who practice hospitality. We need a fresh vision of hospitality’s potential for strengthening our churches and for reaching our neighbors and friends with the gospel.

The biblical injunctions to practice hospitality are nearly always found in the context of brotherly love. So to understand why the New Testament commands Christians to practice hospitality, let us first explore the extraordinary, supernatural love relationship between Christian brothers and sisters, and the intimate connection of this love relationship to hospitality.