



Missional Journal

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The Missional Congregation-Part 5

In recent issues of the *Missional Journal* I have reflected on certain qualities needed by churches that want to embody missional expressions of the gospel. In this issue we will consider the need to recover ancient practices of hospitality.

Contemporary western culture is characterized by high levels of alienation and fragmentation. In our families, churches, neighborhoods, and workplaces, many live as strangers even to those they rub shoulders with on a daily basis. Typical responses to strangers include suspicion, withdrawal, and fear. **Christian hospitality is the art of sharing with others the gracious welcome that we ourselves have received from God.** It is therefore a profoundly missional practice distinguished from mere notions of "entertaining."

Biblical Hospitality

Scripture describes hospitality as the way of life of the people of God. This hospitality is primarily the welcome we extend to outsiders, not to family and friends. In the OT it was particularly the outsider, or alien, who was the object of hospitality. Aliens were to be protected in the knowledge that the Lord himself loves the alien (Deut. 10:18) and watches over him (Ps. 146:9). Aliens live in a situation of high vulnerability to injustice and oppression; therefore, the Israelites are commanded to treat them like the poor, the fatherless, and the widows--with mercy and justice (Lev. 19:10; 23:22; Deut. 24:17-22; Jer. 22:3).

The Israelites' own experience taught them the appropriate response to strangers: "Do not oppress an alien; you yourselves know how it feels to be aliens, because you were aliens in Egypt" (Ex. 22:9). What Israel has experienced from the Lord, she is to extend to others.

The NT also teaches the importance of hospitality toward strangers (Rom. 12:13; Heb. 13:2). It is a basic requirement for positions of ministry and leadership in the church (1 Tim. 3:2; 5:10; Titus 1:8). **But it is in the ministry and teaching of Jesus that we are especially confronted with the profound implications of hospitality for mission.** Jesus regularly

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received hospitality from others while at the same time extending to his hosts the welcome of the kingdom of God. Thus, the tax collector Matthew and the other "sinners" invited to dine at his home experience a welcome from Jesus that offends the religious sensibilities of the Pharisees (Matt. 9:10-13). Jesus' practice of eating with the wrong kinds of people was an activity subversive to the social and religious status quo.

Hospitality is a critical component in the expansion of the kingdom. The hospitality offered to Jesus in the household of Peter (Luke 4:38-44) likely provided him with a headquarters for more extensive ministry in Galilee. The Lord's commission to the 72 kingdom preachers exhorts them to accept hospitality from those who are responsive to the message of shalom (Luke 10:5-7).

In the Gospel narratives, shared meals are a customary feature of hospitality, providing fruitful opportunities for grace-filled actions and conversations. The final words of Jesus to his disciples are delivered in the context of a meal in which Jesus is the host. The paschal celebration and the institution of the Eucharist are linked not just to themes of death, sacrifice, and redemption, but also to themes of friendship (John 15:15) and the fullness of divine hospitality that will be enjoyed when "many will come from the east and the west, and will take their places at the feast with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven" (Matt. 8:11; cf. Lk.22:29).

In the apostolic church, table fellowship played a critical role in the demonstration of the gospel. Peter's endorsement of Gentile baptism for the household of Cornelius (Acts 10) is supported by his willingness to accept the centurion's hospitality. Peter's later hesitancy to eat with Gentile believers in Antioch is sharply challenged by Paul as an affront to the gospel (Gal. 2:11ff.). Inequalities in table fellowship at the church in Corinth also surfaced tensions that Paul was compelled to address (1 Cor. 11:20-22).

Recovering Hospitality for Mission

In earlier issues of the *Missional Journal* I have discussed the need for us to speak the good news and embody it. In a culture of alienation, hospitality becomes a powerful means of incarnating the truth that God in Christ has welcomed us. Christine Pohl, in what is arguably the best book on the topic, writes: "In hospitality, the stranger is welcomed into a safe, personal, and comfortable place, a place of respect and acceptance and friendship. Even if only briefly, the stranger is included in a life-giving and life-sustaining network of relations. Such welcome involves attentive listening and a mutual sharing of lives and life stories. It requires an openness of heart, a willingness to make one's life visible to others, and a generosity of time and resources" (*Making Room: Recovering Hospitality as a Christian Tradition* [Eerdmans, 1999], p. 13).

Particularly important for modeling the gospel is hospitality directed to those living on the margins--the poor, the handicapped, the infirm, the immigrant. Jesus actually warns against throwing parties for friends, family, or rich neighbors. Such hospitality may have more the character of commercial exchange than of gift. Instead he counsels inviting those who cannot themselves repay. In this, he says, "you will be blessed.

Although they cannot repay you, you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous" (Luke 14:14).

I will be the first to admit that such hospitality is a challenge to western Christians. Most of us have little contact with people on the margins. We are often too concerned with our own safety and security to provide a safe place for others.

The busyness of life also diverts most of us from effective missional engagement. The practice of hospitality is quickly experienced as an intrusion: "It requires one to stop a busy, demanding routine for a period of time and focus attention on the stranger for the sake of the stranger. . . . It is an act that forces us to confront how our lives are driven by agenda and by demands that push away any relational encounter with another" (Alan Roxburgh and Fred Romanuk, *The Missional Leader* [Jossey-Bass, 2006], p. 157).

Next Steps

What concrete steps might our churches take to develop or deepen a lifestyle of hospitality? I've gleaned a few suggestions that you may find helpful:

1. **Reflect.** In his book *Soul Banquets: How Meals Become Mission in the Local Congregation* (Morehouse Publ., 2007) John Koenig suggests that local congregations take an inventory of church-sponsored meal events that are already taking place. Which of these occasions seem to have the greatest missional impact? As suggested by the title of the book, Koenig is particularly interested in "soul banquets" where body and soul are both nourished.
2. **Teach!** We need to spend time educating congregants on the biblical-theological understanding of hospitality and the related practical questions that arise in our culture. Such learning will only take place through practice. Perhaps younger (or less experienced) Christians could be paired with those who are particularly gifted and skilled in this area, and together they could engage in some hospitality "experiments."
3. **Be realistic.** If hospitality is not currently practiced in a congregation, it will not help to set expectations too high. Roxburgh and Romanuk suggest that church members experiment with welcoming a stranger into their homes once a month. They further recommend that the stranger be someone from the broad circle of their acquaintances: "Fear of the stranger is so high in this culture that inviting someone far outside the circle of acquaintance is too great a first step" (p. 157).

This is a wise place to begin, but missional churches will eventually need to move beyond this to ask the even more challenging questions: **Where are the marginalized strangers in our community who most stand in need of the**

church's hospitality, and in what concrete ways can we provide hospitality to them?

4. **Embrace risk.** Elizabeth Newman writes that ". . . Christian hospitality is cruciform. It has the shape of the life, death and resurrection of Christ. Taking this seriously can be frightening. Who wants to suffer?" (*Untamed Hospitality* [Brazos, 2007], p. 169). As I mentioned above, the hospitality of Jesus was subversive, and for that he paid the ultimate price. And if our churches recapture biblical hospitality, we will also pay a price for challenging the status quo. On the other hand, Christian hospitality may be one of the best spiritual practices to help us swim against the current of some of the most powerful idolatries of our culture--safety, security, comfort, and affluence.
5. **Take the pressure off.** False expectations of what it means to be host or hostess can become a dreadful burden. Confusing hospitality with entertaining leads to expectations defined more by Martha Stewart or *Good Housekeeping* magazine than by Scripture and historic Christian practice.
6. **Don't think of Christian hospitality as another marketing tool** to be employed in the service of church growth--even though we are not opposed to church growth!--nor as an opportunity to "fix" our guests. Task-oriented people like me need to be reminded that nobody wants to be my hospitality "project." God has freely welcomed us strangers to his table; now that we have received the gift, he directs us to extend that welcome to others.

What is your experience with hospitality? What can you add to this discussion? Please use the blog link in the left column to share your thoughts.

In the next issue of the *Journal* I will reflect on the biblical concern for justice and mercy and how this affects the way missional churches understand the gospel.

