



THE HOSPITALITY COMMANDS: A MISSING CROWN JEWEL

(Adapted from Alexander Strauch, The Hospitality Commands [Littleton, CO: Lewis & Roth Publishers, 1993], 5-8.)

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 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.

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An elderly single woman, who now attends our church, related that 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 that she was leaving that an elderly woman in the church invited her home for a meal on her final Sunday.

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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 (13:1-2), the inspired writer implores his Christian readers

Let love of the brethren continue. Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by this some have entertained angels without knowing it.

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

Without hospitality we are missing a valuable jewel in the crown of Christian life and service.

Consider the following quotation:

Indeed, was there ever a visitor in

¹ Mortimer Arias, "Centripital [sic] Mission or Evangelization by Hospitality," *Missiology: An International Review* 10 (1982):69-70.

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:

...it was the Roman church more than any other which was distinguished by the generosity with which it practiced [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, Romans, 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 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.

² 1 Clement 1.2, in *Ancient Christian Writers*, ed. J. Quasten and J. C. Plumpe, trans. James A Kleist (Westminster, MD: Newman, 1961), 1:9.

³ Adolf Harnack, *The Exposition of Christianity in the First Centuries*, 2 vols., trans. James Moffatt (London: Williams and Norgate, 1904), 1:222-223.

⁴ *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, s.v. "xenos," by Gustav Stahlin, 5 (1967):23.

Some Ideas on How to Show Hospitality in our Sunday Gathering:

- *Wear your name tag.
- *Look for people you don't know (or don't know well) and introduce yourself.
- *Ask your brothers and sisters in Christ how they are doing and listen to their answer.
- *Be a good host. Offer to help guests find restrooms, coffee, Sunday School rooms, etc.
- *Make room for more people. Sit toward the front of the auditorium, and toward the center aisle.
- *Sit in a different place.
- *Be on time!
- *Stay for Sunday School.
- *Make contact with the family you are praying for this month.
- *Follow-up during the week with someone who requested prayer over an item. Offer to help meet any needs.