

HOSPITALITY: A Group Study with Discussion Questions

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Introduction

How would you define *hospitality*? What difference does hospitality make in the life of a congregation? Why should we focus on hospitality and not friendliness? What must a congregation do to provide genuine hospitality? What must an individual or team in mission have or do to create a hospitable environment? Those who lead the mission of a local congregation must address these questions to be faithful to the Gospel. As you complete this lesson, feel free to add questions that apply to your particular mission or ministry.

Let's start by comparing and contrasting two congregations. One congregation is relatively young—less than 25 years old—and the other is well-established at 100 years old. The young congregation is near a military base in a community of constant transition. The older congregation is in a town in which the majority of people have lived most of their lives. Church consultants and patterns of church life agree on two principles. Principle number one says that the older the congregation, the less flexible it becomes in welcoming the new, such as new ideas and new people. Principle number two states that the more stable the community, the greater the likelihood that a congregation will operate as a closed system.

“Revolving door” could be the metaphor for the younger congregation. By its 20th anniversary, only two of its charter members remained in the area. After being transferred to another base, one charter member returned upon retirement. The early years saw a constant need to recruit Sunday school teachers, youth workers, and persons to serve on various boards and committees. Since most of the members are military-related, they move in, quickly join, volunteer for roles and responsibilities within the life of the congregation, and then just as quickly be transferred out, sometimes within 18 months. Every willing servant is welcomed and appreciated.

Along with new people come new ideas. The younger congregation experiences a constant flow of ideas and experiences from other places. Nothing is rejected out-of-hand. This acceptance of new ideas adds variety to the congregation's programs and life, and builds excitement among members about possibilities and potentials offered by others' experiences.

First-time guests never leave a worship experience without 20 or 30 people coming to welcome them. Guests are often among the last to leave as friendships are begun. And by the third Sunday attending worship, many guests identify five or six people as friends within the congregation. No one believes that he or she must know everyone within the congregation. It is almost impossible to keep up with the constant turnover in attendance and membership. However, every person senses the importance of extending his or her circle of friendship at every opportunity. While not every person in attendance feels the need to belong to a circle of friendship, every person knows that she or he is welcome and accepted. Diversity of interests,

backgrounds, and educational experiences as well as diversity of belief are accepted and valued. Among the many churches I served and visited as a pastor, I never experienced another congregation with such a genuine culture of biblical hospitality.

“Extended family” could be the metaphor for the older congregation. At its 100th anniversary, three distinct family trees dominated the congregation’s life. Other families are also present, but most of them have been part of the congregation for 40 years and are seen as vital parts of the church. Many of these families are related by marriage, and all of the families have lived in the immediate area for generations. While there is constant discussion about the need for new people to serve as Sunday school teachers as well as committee and board members, in reality, the new people are often “screened out” if their beliefs do not quite measure up, if they suggest new ideas, or if they question the congregation’s programs, practices, and decisions.

A first-time guest is overwhelmed by the initial friendliness of the congregation. As many as 20 people specifically approach to say “hello” and to learn about the guest. But members do not follow up to build friendships when a guest attends a second or third time. The circles of friendship are already well-established within the congregation, and it is difficult to break into these existing circles. It seems that only the hardy and the strong-willed remain long enough to claim the congregation as their spiritual home. Among all the churches that I served and visited as a pastor, this church is the most difficult to break into. As I focused on biblical hospitality for my doctoral work, I was shocked to realize to my dismay that, even as a pastor, I was still an outsider who might never be fully welcomed into their circles of friendship.

Let’s take a moment to reflect.

1. Remember a time when you came as a stranger into an existing group and were fully welcomed. What was the spirit like within the group? What actions did the group members take to enable you to feel welcome? Write down key thoughts, actions, feelings, and attitudes that you believe contributed to the welcome.
2. Remember a time when you came as a stranger into an existing group and were unwelcome. What was the comfort level of the group, and what was your comfort level with the group? What actions communicated that you were unwelcome? Write down key thoughts, actions, feelings, and attitudes that you believe contributed to the sense of being unwelcome.
3. Based on these reflections, start your own definition of *hospitality*. Provide this definition to the online forum for discussion.

The Biblical Practice of Hospitality

Hospitality is at the heart of the Gospel. One literal definition of hospitality is “the welcoming of the stranger.” How we treat our friends is not the true test of hospitality. We have our best and truest form of hospitality in the actions of God. He extends hospitality through reaching out to include all who are strangers and aliens. (See Ephesians 2:12 and 19) At the core of our being, those of us who now follow Jesus Christ were aliens and strangers. We were without God and without hope. And yet, after we find ourselves in the fellowship of the saints and have claimed our membership in God’s family, it is so easy to forget this simple truth. We rejoice in our belonging but forget that it is only by God’s grace that we have been included. We who are “in” may in turn fail to extend the grace that we have received to others. Although we have been welcomed by God, we may neglect to welcome the stranger.

When my sons were growing up, my wife and I shared with them a basic principle in seeking a potential mate: Look at the parents and notice their characteristics. The characteristics of the parents will probably show up in the life of the children. This principle has been true for my wife and me. I see in my wife many of the characteristics of both her mother and father. And my wife sees in me many of the characteristics—good and bad—of both my parents. This observation raises a key question: If we are members of God’s family, shouldn’t we demonstrate the characteristics of God? Shouldn’t a genuine part of our faith practice be to demonstrate toward others the same graciousness, the same love, the same hospitality that God has shown toward us?

Clear examples of God’s hospitality exist wherever you begin reading the Bible. In the Old Testament, God took a “nobody” (Abram) and welcomed him as a partner in God’s salvation plan. God also took a group of “nobodies” (the Israelites in Egypt) and claimed them as God’s own people for divine purposes. Included among those who came out of Egypt were many Egyptians who chose to identify with God’s people. They were never treated as second-class citizens or made to feel less important. In fact, often the very opposite is true—God would use an “outsider” to fulfill redemption’s plan. God included Rahab, Ruth, and others who would normally have been excluded.

But the continual practice of hospitality by God in the Old Testament did not always affect the practice (or lack of practice) of hospitality by the Israelites. Tension existed in the community. At times, the community of Israelites was welcoming (those leaving Egypt); at other times, the community was exclusive (the returning exiles under Ezra).

The tension carried over into the New Testament church. While the simple Gospel of new life in Jesus Christ was good news for all people, at times the early church was hesitant to extend that hospitality to others. Leaders of the Jewish believers in Jerusalem heard about a new community of believers in Antioch. While this exciting news of the spread of the Gospel was welcome, the news that gentiles were also among the followers of Jesus introduced a dilemma. Are the gentiles fully part of God’s new humanity or not? A group within the early church (the Judaizers) believed that the gentiles should first become like Jews and then become followers of Jesus. This belief was not fully addressed until the council in Jerusalem after the first successful missionary journey by Paul and Barnabas. The final decision was simple—God has welcomed

them into this new humanity, and we should neither stand in their way nor do anything that would make them feel like second-class citizens. The welcome mat was placed in the world by God for all to use. When we extend hospitality to others, it is our demonstrating the heart and mind of God toward others.

Of course, this concept is most clearly seen in the life and ministry of Jesus, who was perfectly comfortable with the poor and rich, the insiders and the outcasts. Jesus both received and extended hospitality. In reality, genuine hospitality means that both the host and guest are on the receiving and extending ends. Jesus could not have fulfilled his ministry without receiving hospitality. He had no home, except the homes of those who welcomed him. While he was the guest at the home of a Pharisee, he became the host who welcomed the repentant woman who washed his feet with her tears. Jesus accepted the hospitality of the Pharisee, although the Pharisee did not extend the hospitality to its fullest. (The Pharisee failed to provide for the washing of Jesus' feet upon his arrival.)

Jesus received the gift of a drink of water by the Samaritan woman at the well but then extended the gift of "living water." Jesus received the crowds while the disciples tried to send them away because they didn't have the resources to feed them. Jesus received the children, although the disciples felt that the children did not deserve his attention. Jesus welcomed Zacchaeus but then became the guest at his house for a meal that day. Hospitality has both a giving and receiving end, in which both guest and host each give and receive. The disciples of Jesus saw him practice hospitality—both giving and receiving—so often that it became a clear mark of his personhood. As we read in Luke 24, the two on the Emmaus road extended hospitality to Jesus, inviting him into their home for a meal and to spend the night. But it was as Jesus became the host in the blessing of the bread that they saw who this stranger really was!

Let's take a moment to reflect.

1. Recall your own experience within the community of faith. Was there ever a time when you were not part of a community of faith? If yes, how were you included? What actions/experiences assured you that you were welcome? If you have always been within a faith community, think of the persons who made you feel included (a Sunday school teacher, an older member who took interest in you, or an event to which you were invited). What actions/experiences assured you that you were welcome?
2. What teaching or preaching have you received on the biblical practice of hospitality? How has this been connected to the actions of God?

3. Based on these reflections, attempt a definition of *gospel/good news* that utilizes the language and practice of hospitality. Provide this definition to the online forum for discussion.

God's Directives for Practicing Hospitality

Both Old Testament and New Testament directives exist for the practice of hospitality. Because these directives are so clear, God's people need to remember them and put them into practice. In the Old Testament, the people of God were reminded, first of all, what it was like to live as aliens and strangers in Egypt. Those who had been exiles in Babylon had a more recent memory of what it was like to live as aliens and strangers.

During our college years, my wife had the opportunity to spend a three-month study in Austria. Group orientation prepared the students for the experience of living in a different culture. Although Austria is a modern, Western country with many of the same conveniences as in the United States, the students were warned that their American customs would often be considered offensive and unacceptable. The Austrian hotel was briefed about the students' preferred foods and other expectations. Needless to say, despite the preparations, many bumps occurred during the three months. However, this experience was nothing like what the Israelites faced—spending years and generations in a strange land where they were always treated like outsiders.

What is it like to live as aliens and strangers? Consider the manner in which they would be restricted in places to live (think “ghetto” and “red-lining”). Think about how they would be restricted in opportunities to provide for their families (job discrimination). Think about how they would be made the object of scorn—perhaps treated as less than human (prejudice). Therefore, in many Old Testament passages, God admonishes the Israelites: “Remember what it was like to live as aliens and strangers. You didn't like being treated that way. So you should not treat others that way.”

A second directive to God's people in the Old Testament is to remember that they were aliens and strangers to God, who reached out to make them his own people. It is not enough simply to remember what it is like to be and feel like an alien and stranger. God's people are to reach out to the alien or stranger to include him or her within the community, to ensure that the alien or stranger does not remain as an alien or stranger but, instead, is welcomed into the community.

What does an alien or a stranger need? Suppose you had not been raised in a faith community. What would you need to know to enter and operate in a faith community? The story of Ruth is a good example of an alien who came into the community of Israelites. It was harvest time, but she did not know that the Israelites had a rule called *gleaning*, or gathering parts of a crop that have been left behind after the crop has been harvested. After learning this rule, Ruth

was able to provide for herself and her mother-in-law through gleaning. An alien or stranger needs to know the rules.

What else does an alien or stranger need? Suppose you have occasion to travel into a section of a city with which you are unfamiliar. In many instances, you would see graffiti. For the unknowledgeable, the graffiti may hold no meaning; for those who know, the graffiti may indicate turf for a particular gang that operates in that neighborhood. In this case, you need to know that there may be a risk involved in entering the neighborhood or in moving between adjoining neighborhoods. Someone unfamiliar with the neighborhood needs to know the risk. In the story of Ruth, Naomi counsels her to go to Boaz at night, uncover his feet, and lie down there. I am certain that Naomi informs her of the risks that she faces: the risk of discovery by the other men involved in the harvest, the risk of her intent being misunderstood by Boaz, and the risk that he would refuse the role she and Naomi need him to fulfill. An alien or stranger needs to know the rules.

The third directive by God to the Israelites in the Old Testament is, perhaps, the most crucial. They were to follow the example of their father Abraham. Please take a moment to read Genesis 18 before proceeding with this assignment.

This is another passage with which we are so familiar that we often forget the significance of the story. When we travel today, we expect to find hotels, gas stations, and restaurants that will meet our needs. In the ancient world, there was no such thing as the travel industry. If a person ventured as far as a few miles from home, that person would have to depend upon strangers for such basics as food, water, and shelter. So it was not unusual in all ancient cultures to provide hospitality to a stranger. On the surface, it appears that Abraham welcomed the strangers to his tent and provided what they needed.

But look more closely. Abraham takes it upon himself to ensure that the needs of these strangers are met. What did he provide? First of all, he washed their feet. And second, he provided food. As we read in verses 7 and 8, he gave them milk along with meat. What he did has particular importance for us to practice in our mission. The Jewish people believe that Abraham, the father of their faith, practiced the faith according to God's law. They believe that Abraham was an observant Jew and adhered to kosher laws. A person who is kosher would not serve meat with milk. Jewish biblical scholars note that, by serving milk with meat, Abraham ignored such laws. To provide true hospitality, Abraham was more concerned about meeting the needs of his guests than adhering to Jewish customs. He was willing to break kosher law. He was willing to step outside of his own comfort zone to meet the needs of strangers.

This willingness is a key understanding for God's people. Instead of staying within our perceived levels of comfort and normality—customs or ways of doing things with which we are comfortable—the church is called to provide for the needs of others. To do so, we may be required to step out of our comfort zones to do what makes us uncomfortable but, at the same time, is comfortable for our guests. This willingness to step out of our comfort zone for the sake of others is so contrary to the manner in which many churches operate. How many times have you heard the worship leader say, "It is our custom to have our guests stand [or to remain seated]

while the congregation stands?” Think about how this would make someone feel who has no church background. Who is comfortable, and who is uncomfortable?

If we use hospitality, rather than friendliness, as a measure of what we do, we should ask the question, “What does a guest require to be at home in our midst?” Does a guest need to know where the restrooms are? Most guests would be embarrassed to ask. Does a guest need a coat/cloak room? Does a guest need a guide to help navigate and understand the worship experience? What does a guest need who comes into our midst? A brochure telling them about our church programs? Probably not. A gift to demonstrate our joy at their presence? Perhaps. In most instances, a guest would not identify a gift as a critical need. It may be that we must step out of our comfort zone—and even out of the bounds of what we believe is acceptable/not acceptable—to provide true hospitality.

Let’s turn now to the directives in the New Testament. The first is a continuation of the Old Testament word of God: “Remember how God has taken us into the family. We were aliens and strangers, without hope and without God. We were far off, not having access to God and actually being hostile to God. We were alienated from the commonwealth of God’s people, strangers to the covenant of promise, on the wrong side of the dividing wall. But Jesus has broken down the wall, brought us near by his blood and made fellow citizens” (Ephesians 2:11-22).

The second directive is built upon practicing the reality of our faith. In Hebrews 13:2 we read, “Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers.” The verse holds out a specific image of what happens when we practice hospitality—you may be entertaining angels and be unaware of it. Just like Abraham with the visitors in Genesis 18, he offered common hospitality to strangers. But they were not ordinary strangers. They were God’s servants—angels—who blessed Abram and Sarai. When a church is genuine in the hospitality it provides its guests, it may be welcoming angels—people whom God might use to bless that community of faith.

The third directive makes hospitality more critical. When we are hospitable to strangers, we are actually extending hospitality to Jesus. Do you see Jesus in the guest who comes to worship? Do you see Jesus in the stranger who stands at the door asking for a meal? Do you see Jesus in the child who runs through the building, leaving dirty handprints on the wall and disrespecting God’s house? Let’s be honest, usually we resent someone who needs our attention and time when we have little attention and time to spare. We usually see a beggar who may take advantage of a handout to maintain a habit. Or we may see the children as unruly, undisciplined kids who need a firm hand and a parent who will provide more control at home.

Read again Matthew 25:31-46. Most of the actions described in this passage are acts of hospitality: giving food, providing drink, extending a welcome, clothing the naked, treating the sick and the imprisoned like they belonged to the family. The responses by those who are in judgment are the same: They didn’t see Jesus. Some completed these acts simply because they were living out their family characteristics—love, grace, hospitality. It was not because they saw something special in the needy that deserved these actions. They performed these acts because of who they were—God’s genuine children. Some did not do these acts because they saw these people as worthy of their attention and energy. They were looking for something in these needy

people, something that might earn or deserve some favor. The verdict is the same for both: “As you did it to one of the least of these, you did it to me.” In extending hospitality, we are actually showing our love to Jesus.

The early church took this concept to heart. In his book “The Rise of Christianity: How the Obscure, Marginal Jesus Movement Became the Dominant Religious Force in the Western World in a Few Centuries,” Rodney Stark outlines the growth of Christianity. But its witness and impact in the first centuries came from what could be described as simple hospitality extended by believers to everyone without distinction. While at times Christianity was suspect and persecuted by governmental structures, at all times Christians were highly esteemed—all because of the genuine practice of their faith, including gracious acts of loving hospitality.

I am certain that the early church did not sit down and design a plan. But if they would have had a plan, it would have followed these lines. What is essential that we must have at the heart of our mission? Answer: God’s love shown in simple acts, especially through hospitality. How can we ensure that this becomes the heart of our community and our witness? Answer: It must be practiced (modeled) by our leaders. In Paul’s pastoral epistles, lists outline the qualification of leaders in the young church: bishops, deacons, deaconesses, and elders. In every instance, the key characteristics include hospitality and being highly regarded, or the probable response of gracious hospitality extended to all.

However, the New Testament does not assign the work of hospitality to leaders or to a few who may seem to have a special gift of hospitality. It is a critical practice of faith for all who believe. Romans 12:13 specifically uses the term *hospitality* (*phileoxenia*, or “love of/for the stranger”), while other passages identify practices of hospitality that every believer should demonstrate as a genuine child of God.

Let’s take a moment to reflect.

1. If hospitality becomes central to our understanding of belonging to Jesus and a faith community, how does that change our measurement of who is a genuine disciple? How does this change our measurement of who should be a leader in the church? Write three sentences to describe how this changes our measurement.

2. Examine again the story of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37). The disciples have just returned from their mission assignment. After their experience, Jesus provides them one insight into the reason for their success or lack of success (verse 16). At this time, the lawyer puts Jesus to the test. How does Jesus answer the lawyer in the parable of the Good Samaritan?

3. Remember a time when you visited a church that was new to you. What did you learn about the rules in that congregation? What surprised you about the rules?

The Spreading of the Good News

When the first disciples were drawn to Jesus, they asked him where he lived, where he was staying. He invited them, “Come and see” (John 1). It was an invitation to live by faith—trusting God to supply shelter, food, and everything else they would need for the three years of Jesus’ public ministry. God did provide through women of means and through friends who opened their homes to Jesus and his disciples, such as Mary, Martha, and Lazarus (whom Jesus raised from the dead).

Then there was the on-the-job training that Jesus gave to both the 12 and the 70. He sent them out without suitcases, wallets full of credit cards, or other provisions. The disciples were to rely upon the hospitality of anyone who would welcome them in the communities wherever they traveled. Specifically, Jesus mentions that they were to look for a person of peace in each town. These persons of peace have many important characteristics that those engaged in mission need to rely upon. (These characteristics are another discussion for another time). Primarily, the persons of peace would provide hospitality—an important lesson that the early church applied whenever the apostles and all believers found themselves in a new community.

For example, in his missionary journeys, Paul would first attempt to find where God-fearers would gather. In most instances, a person from this group would be a person of peace who would provide the hospitality needed as a base for ongoing ministry in that place. A good example is found in Acts 16:11ff. Paul finds a group gathered by prayer; he and his message were well-received by those who were present; and one of them, Lydia, insisted that they come to her home to stay for the time they are in Philippi.

This example underscores the importance of what was previously outlined. In true hospitality, the host and guest enter into a reciprocal relationship, in which both become givers and receivers. A free and open exchange of gifts ensues because each one is a gift to the other. Please understand the difference: In our culture, the reciprocal relationship is built on owing, or debts. I do something for you; therefore, you owe me. Or I expect something from you because I have given to you. Neither love nor grace exists in this exchange. It would be like a parent saying, “I fed you and gave you everything you needed when you were young. Now that I am old, you owe it to me to take care of me and help me in my difficulties.” No love and no grace, only debts.

That is what makes hospitality different from entertainment. When we entertain guests in our home, we do all of the work, and the guest provides nothing or little. We are expected to have everything just right and meet everything that is expected in such a social setting. The pressure is on to perform, to be the perfect host. And when the evening is over, the host expects

the guest to entertain at some time in the near future. After all, if you are a good friend, you will do this. Correct? In hospitality, the host simply creates space, where all parties are welcomed as equals, where there can be a mutual exchange, and where every person is perceived as a gift. And no reciprocity is needed.

John Koenig has written the classic book on hospitality, “New Testament Hospitality: Partnership with Strangers as Promise and Mission.” On page 8, he provides this definition: “Hospitality has to do with the establishment of committed relationships between guests and hosts in which unexpected levels of mutual welcoming occur, whether or not the participants are already known to one another . . . it always tends toward a greater inclusiveness.” John Westerhoff talks about the importance of creating space for the stranger to enter the faith community. However, we often see the stranger as a threat, an intruder, an annoyance—a person with whom we do not want intimacy. In fact, we may not want them to be present.

This brings us face-to-face with our issues. Consider the manner in which we often approach others. Don’t we have a tendency to construct “we/they” divisions? Because we have a tendency to remain within the confines of what is culturally and personally comfortable, don’t we have a tendency to fear strangers (xenophobia)? Because we act out of our human nature, don’t we look to construct our world on our conceptions, rather than God’s concepts and mission? Because we often define ourselves by what we can and cannot do, don’t we draw lines that keep people out?

In an amazing way, when the faith community provides genuine hospitality for guests, the church receives as much as it gives. When God’s people in mission look for or create a hospitable space in the midst of the mission field, God’s work is advanced and multiplied beyond anyone’s wildest dream. When the church changes its treatment of strangers to welcoming angels and providing for Jesus, an entirely different approach is taken toward those who are not currently part of the community of faith. The love and grace of God should become a genuine experience for all.

James dealt with this issue in the early church as found in James 2:1-13. It didn’t take long in the early church for the insiders to begin treating the rich with deference and great respect, while treating the poor with little respect. Could it be that the early church looked at the rich as possessing gifts that they could use—money, power, influence—while they believed the poor had little or nothing to offer as gifts to the church? If the poor are angels coming into the midst, if the poor are providing opportunities to demonstrate love and grace as unto Jesus, then every person who comes into the gathering of believers needs to be shown the grace and love of God.

Hospitality should be built into the life of the faith community. The standard of hospitality is a starting point for dealing with issues around ministry, fellowship, mission, worship, and spiritual leadership. Hospitality must become a way of life for all the members and not just the responsibility of a few. And when hospitality is practiced in homes, fellowship between church members and the unchurched creates a natural bridge by which unchurched people can come into fellowship with God and with other believers. A hardy handshake and a smile are insufficient if the unchurched are to experience biblical hospitality with the hope of

moving them from being strangers to being part of God's people. (Ed Stetzer, a respected church planting leader, believes that, in our time, persons will need two conversions. The first conversion will be to identify and belong to a faith community, and the second conversion will be to become a disciple of Jesus. The first conversion is largely dependent upon hospitality.) After all, God invites all believers to be participants in the Kingdom work to be done here on earth. Hospitality is a simple and basic way in which every disciple can participate.

Let's play missional hospitality.

1. Recruit a small group to visit two other congregations inognito. They should neither announce their visit in advance nor indicate their purpose upon arrival. This group is to experience the level of hospitality (or lack of it) in these congregations. Have this group report back to deacons or other official leadership group within the congregation. Discuss implications of what is being done and what needs to be changed to improve the level of hospitality offered within your congregation. Who will be responsible for initiating these changes?
2. Identify a group—such as an open Alcoholics Anonymous meeting, a neighborhood bar or pub, or a local civic or volunteer organization—within your congregation's vicinity. Visit the organization to experience the hospitality (or lack of hospitality) provided. Observe the attempts and initiatives of hospitality being extended to the team, and observe and record the team's response toward the hospitality offered.