

The Faces of New Testament Hospitality

Turn to 3 John please. Today we'll survey half a dozen New Testament Scriptures to get a feel for how the early believers understood hospitality. The New Testament has changed my thinking about hospitality, and perhaps yours will change too.

The Lord's Instructions to the Twelve

Jesus began this when he sent out the twelve in pairs to preach and teach. He told them not to take along extra sandals or coat or money. He told them that when they entered a home, they should stay at that home, and receive what they were given. He also told them that labourers have earned their wages.

Jesus wanted the disciples to be confident that they were earning their keep by preaching and healing. The disciple pair would come into the town or village and begin to teach and preach. Then some hospitable household in that town would invite them to stay in that home. The people of the town would accept the disciples and their message and be hospitable.

That home would provide for them. And if their shoes or their clothes wore out, then that home or others in that town would provide new shoes and clothes, and whatever else they might need. This is how the early churches provided for the different travelling ministers that went from church to church. Early Christians continued what Jesus taught here.

These instructions might surprise us, but they probably seemed familiar to the twelve, because Jesus and his followers had probably already been living like this. Jesus and the twelve counted on hospitality from the town they were visiting. The middle eastern world prized hospitality. You brought honour to yourself by treating your guests well. So this was not new to the twelve.

A note on labourers earning their wages. In the Bible, spiritual care for material care is a fair exchange. This is an Old Testament principle, the priests and Levites received tithes on that basis. Jesus confirmed this, and so did Paul in a couple of places (Rom 15:27; 1 Cor 9:4).

So we don't just give where there is a need. We also give materially where we are receiving spiritual care. In God's economy, that needs to be happening: spiritual resources one way, material resources the other way. This is not a problem in our church, but it does need to be said once in a while.

Hospitality to Strangers – 3 John 5-8

Old John wrote this short letter to Gaius, a man John loved and trusted. Gaius was part of a church that John was worried about. John did not trust all the leaders in that church. But he trusted Gaius, and sent this letter to him. Here are verses 5-8:

Dear friend, you are faithful in what you are doing for the brothers and sisters, even though they are strangers to you. They have told the church about your love. Please send them on their way in a manner that honors God. It was for the sake of the Name that they went out, receiving no help from the pagans. We ought therefore to show hospitality to such people so that we may work together for the truth.

John had sent messengers to Gaius, and even though Gaius had never seen these people before, he was good to them, he took care of them. But the hospitality of Gaius was not yet complete. John asks Gaius to send them on their way “in a manner that honours God.”

That means, don't be stingy. When people like John's messengers travelled from church to church, each church would take these believers into their homes, to give them food and shelter and a place to sleep. And when these ministers were ready to go to the next church, hospitality included giving them what they needed on the journey to the next church.

If, for example, someone came like this came to serve our church, and then was driving to Regina, we would make sure that the person had food for the drive to Regina, or money to buy lunch, and we would give them money to pay for gas, and so on. We'd make sure they were set up comfortably for the trip. If they didn't have a good winter coat, we'd get them one. Once they got to Regina, that church would take over. That's what it means to send someone on their way “in a manner that honours God.”

Look at 3 John 12: *Demetrius is well spoken of by everyone—and even by the truth itself. We also speak well of him, and you know that our testimony is true.* Why do you think that is in there? Who is Demetrius? Why does Gaius need to hear that Demetrius has a good reputation among believers?

Because Demetrius will be another person that's a stranger to Gaius, and he's likely the one carrying this letter. Demetrius has just showed up on Gaius' door with 3 John in his hand. Gaius has never seen Demetrius before. John is giving Demetrius a recommendation, so that Gaius knows that Demetrius is a worthy follower of Christ and should be treated hospitably.

There are several of these commendations in the New Testament. Early Christians were unusually hospitable to each other, and scoundrels tried to take advantage of this. Not everybody that showed up at your door and said they were followers of Christ automatically got Christian hospitality.

But if the stranger carried a recommendation from a believer you knew well and trusted, and you recognized the handwriting, that was a different story. Come on in. So John commends Demetrius to take away any doubts that Gaius might have about this stranger who just showed up out of nowhere.

I Commend to you our Sister Phoebe – Romans 16:1-2

I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a deacon of the church in Cenchreae. I ask you to receive her in the Lord in a way worthy of his people and to give her any help she may need from you, for she has been the benefactor of many people, including me.

Cenchreae was close to Corinth, perhaps 10 km. Phoebe was a stranger to the church in Rome. Paul wrote Romans in Corinth, and she was the one who carried this letter to Rome, and probably the one who first read Romans out loud to that church. They didn't know her, so Paul instructed them and recommended her.

“Receive her in the Lord in a way worthy of the saints.” The Lord expects his people to live up to a certain standard of hospitality, says Paul, so welcome her and treat her like that. Give her any help she may need. Whatever she needs to carry on, make sure she has it. Why? Because she herself has done this for many, including Paul himself.

Here are a few other hospitality lines in Romans: In chapter 12, Paul writes, “share with the saints who are in need, and pursue hospitality.” Those two phrases say much the same thing: there was a lot of overlap between sharing with needy believers and practicing hospitality.

In Romans 15, Paul writes that he wants to visit them in Rome on his way to Spain. He wants to see them as he passes through, and he wants them to send him forward on his journey. Some previous church will have given Paul supplies to get to Rome, and he would like the church at Rome to host him and then give him supplies to go to Spain.

Right at the end of Romans, Paul writes: *Gaius, whose hospitality I and the whole church here enjoy, sends you his greetings.* This will be a different Gaius than the Gaius that received 3 John. Gaius is someone in Corinth, and Paul stays at his house. Gaius was being hospitable to Paul.

Eating and Drinking Unworthily – 1 Corinthians 11

There was trouble in how the Corinthians handled the Lord's Supper meal. Paul tells them up front that they don't really care about it being the Lord's Supper, they just each want their own supper. As a result, he says, one stays hungry and another gets drunk. In the next line he says that the believers are humiliating those who have nothing. And at the end of the section he says, “when you gather to eat, wait for one another and eat together.”

We can figure out what was happening. First of all, the Lord's Day, the first day of the week, was not a day off work anywhere in the Roman world. It was a normal working day, and they met for supper and church service after the day's work. Sunday was not ever a day of rest in any New Testament churches.

So they gathered, and they had a potluck meal every Sunday evening, and the Communion was part of that meal. In the church there were poor people, as there were in every church. There were people who did not have enough food, and literally did not have anything to bring to the potluck meal. They came with empty stomachs and empty hands.

The poor people also worked the longest hours. Many of these will have been slaves, who work long days and of course cannot bring food to the potluck meal. Paul said, “you humiliate those who have nothing.” When the poor people finally get there, those who have nothing, there was no food left, because those who were more prosperous and got there earlier had eaten it all.

Imagine those in the church who don’t get enough food in a week. Once a week the church has a generous potluck supper, where those who were more prosperous would bring lots of food. So the poor people can have one real good meal, and they can take home leftovers, food for another day or two. If you are really not getting enough food in a week, that generous potluck meal plus leftovers could make a huge difference in your week, in your physical health.

There was no foodbank in those days, no welfare program. So every church did this every week to help the poor believers among them.

But in Corinth, some went hungry, and the poor were humiliated, because the wealthier people would not wait, they just ate it all up. THAT, my brothers and sisters, is eating and drinking unworthily. Paul was more upset with the lack of love to the poor and hungry among them than he was that some got drunk at the Lord’s Supper.

That is eating and drinking unworthily, which has nothing at all to do with how faithful I have or have not been in the last week. There were many failures in the Corinthian church, but this was the only one that was bringing God’s punishment down on that church. When Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 13 about “the greatest of these is love,” he’s talking about their Lord’s Supper. Hospitality.

Daily Breaking Bread in their Homes – Acts 2

All the believers were together and had everything in common. They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need. Every day they met together in the temple courts, breaking bread in their homes, and eating together with glad and sincere hearts.

These words describe the 3000 who believed on the day of Pentecost. There were many poor people among the 3000. Think about why they would eat together daily in their homes. They have everything in common. They sell possessions to give to any who have need. At least part of the reason they are eating together daily in their homes is that some of these 3000 do not have food.

They were all together daily at the temple for the prayers, and then those with food invited the needy into their homes. Eating together does the same thing as selling possessions: it cares for their needy brothers and sisters. They probably had the Lord's Supper, and they enjoyed themselves, but feeding brothers and sisters without food can hardly not be a part of this.

Dead Faith – James 2

Suppose a brother or a sister is without clothes and daily food. If one of you says to them, "Go in peace; keep warm and well fed," but does nothing about their physical needs, what good is it? In the same way, faith by itself, if it is not accompanied by action, is dead.

For James the Lord's brother, hospitality to brothers and sisters was a fundamental demonstration of faith. No hospitality, no faith. John would agree: *If anyone has material possessions and sees a brother or sister in need but has no pity on them, how can the love of God be in that person?*

James and John are getting this straight from Jesus: Jesus said, "I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me. ... Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me."

Conclusion

From my younger years, all I remember about hospitality was "don't neglect hospitality to strangers" from Hebrews 13, and the preachers took strangers to be unbelievers. If we read what Hebrews says in that whole paragraph, the writer almost certainly means "strangers" as in 3 John – strangers were needy believers whom we have not seen before.

Peter says, "be hospitable to one another without grumbling." That should be the famous biblical hospitality verse. If we are not hospitable to the brothers and sisters we know, the rest does not really matter. It begins with one another. Peter understands that hospitality can be a tiresome burden. Peter gets that, calls us out of it: hospitable to one another without grumbling.

It is common in our church circles to make the real measure of a church the amount of hospitality the church shows to unbelievers. If a church has a program of hospitality to those outside the church, they are showing themselves to be a real church. That's wrong. If the Bible is telling us the truth, and it is, that's just plain wrong. The New Testament does not pull us that way, it pulls us to one other. We're not to fix the old society, we're to be the new society.

The Lord's Good Samaritan parable in Luke 10 tells of generous hospitality to someone definitely not a brother or sister, generous hospitality to an outsider and an enemy. As we have opportunity, says Paul, let us do good to all. When someone like that shows up on our path, we take care of them. For sure.

But Acts and the New Testament Letters do not urge hospitality outside the faith. They don't discourage it, of course. It just doesn't really come up. But Acts and the Letters often urge different ways of taking care of each other.

There are good examples of hospitality going on among us, and have been for a long time. I'm not preaching on this because our church needs to get going. I felt a strong pull to teach this, and I'm not even sure why. The one thing I do want to make clear is that our care for one another, and to all believers, is at the centre of the Lord's call to us.

Now about your love for one another we do not need to write to you, for you yourselves have been taught by God to love each other. And in fact, you do love all of God's family throughout Macedonia. Yet we urge you, brothers and sisters, to do so more and more. (1 Thess 4:9-10)

PRAYER:

O God, you have already led us down this path. You have taught us also to love each other. We want this to include your whole family, Lord, not just our church. And we ask that you will lead us to do so more and more. Amen.

BENEDICTION:

May the God of peace, who brought back from the dead our Lord Jesus, that great Shepherd of the sheep, equip us with everything good for doing his will, and may he work in us what pleases him, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen. Go in God's peace to love and serve the Lord.