



Creating An Open Atmosphere for Conversations

Hospitality

I am normally the first to arrive at my church each Sunday morning. As I unlock the building, I've made it a conscious habit to pray for those who may be walking through the doors. I pray that as they enter they would encounter the loving presence of God among His people as we worship, learn and fellowship together. I pray that God would make His people into a holy people who authentically welcome others with arms (and lives) wide open.

We understand that God calls us to build godly relationships with others. But how do we unlock the doors of fellowship, creating a genuine environment of openness to others? How do we become a church where “outsiders” are genuinely welcomed to become “insiders,” sincerely accepted into congregational life and ministry? How do we create an atmosphere for spiritual conversations within the church? Certainly it's the work of the Spirit in establishing unity in love among us. Yet we still play a crucial role in allowing God to establish us into a holy people, marked by Christ's love and a concern for openness to others outside and inside the church.

Hospitality played a crucial role in the mission of the early church. Acts chapter 2 provides a window through which we see the early church's effectiveness in becoming an authentic community of acceptance and love. Luke paints the picture of a “missional” church who served as an open door to others.

“All the believers were together and had everything in common. Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he had need. Everyday they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people” (Acts 2:44-47a).

It was a contagious kind of fellowship. Outsiders were drawn within by their love. Nothing was hidden. All was shared. We're told the effect this

kind of Spirit-filled hospitality had on people: *“the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved”* (Acts 2:47). The apostle Paul was clear and concise in his instructions to the Christians in ancient Rome. *“Practice hospitality”* he told them (Rom. 12:13). It was a vital key to unlocking the door to genuine fellowship with one another.

The Greek word for *“practice”* literally means to *“pursue.”* It speaks of an intensity of effort in earnest pursuit of another, as in chasing down a criminal. Paul uses the term in a positive sense to reinforce the energy and intensity with which Christians are called to welcome outsiders. The Greek word translated *“hospitality”* implies offering friendship to strangers. Paul’s instruction to the church to practice hospitality was a call to be ministers of God’s reconciliation to a world estranged from Him. It was a call to pursue those who weren’t already intimately connected within the circle of fellowship, for the purpose of demonstrating the loving friendship offered by God.

Reflect on this...

How would you define hospitality?

Who are the people that we may consider “strangers”?

From Acts 2:44–47, what were the characteristics of the early church?

In ancient eastern culture hospitality was as much a gift of necessity as anything else. It was long before the days of *Holiday Inn*. Those required to travel beyond their own community needed shelter. Offering weary travelers shelter in their time of need was more than a gift; it was a highly-valued expectation. While hospitality should never come at the price of anyone's safety, it's certainly clear from the Scriptures that Christian hospitality is critical to a church marked by loving acceptance and openness.

The contemporary church has in some ways lost sight of the true value of hospitality. We are extremely disconnected from one another. We don't really know each other. We may desire a sense of authenticity in our relationships, but we're too busy running our kids to and from soccer practice to create the time and space needed to truly know and be known by each other. And who needs to invite people we barely know into our homes when there's plenty of rooms at the *Motel 6*? Besides, getting the house cleaned up for guests takes a lot of work. Right?

Reflect on this...

In what ways do you see hospitality practiced in the church?

In what ways do you see hospitality lacking in the church?

Read Romans 12:9-13 and reflect on how these verses relate to the Church.

I'm convinced that two of Satan's most useful contemporary tools are the vacuum cleaner and the garage door opener. They keep Christians from offering God's gift of hospitality and the deep and meaningful relationships that often emerge. The vacuum cleaner and garage door opener both serve as easy excuses for keeping the doors of intimate fellowship locked tight.

One of the excuses often cited for not inviting others into our homes is that the house is too messy. We don't want anyone to see the stacks of papers that pile up on the kitchen table, or the dirty dishes in the sink, or the dirty socks in the hallway. Heaven forbid anyone might think our home doesn't always look like a photo out of *Better Homes and Gardens*. We worry incessantly what guests might think if our house isn't completely spotless. The vacuum cleaner becomes an excuse for not going the extra mile to invite neighbors inside, to see us as we truly live, dirty socks and all.

The garage door opener also aids in fostering shallow relationships. The clicker has made it incredibly easy to never leave the comfort and safety of our own home. We don't have to go outside. We need not be inconvenienced by encountering our neighbors face-to-face. We need not learn their names, let alone sacrifice the time and energy necessary to build a meaningful relationship. No messy spiritual conversations required. We can just smile and wave as we pass by from the comfort of our vehicle. The incessant demand for convenience often comes at the price of genuine friendship.

Building meaningful and intimate relationships requires time, energy, and sacrifice. There are significant risks we take when we invite strangers into our lives. Openness and vulnerability can leave us wounded. If we unlock the doors of our soul some might take advantage of us. Letting those who have a different viewpoint engage us in conversation may challenge what we believe. Engaging others in love is hard work. Of course, the gift of hospitality

implies something much greater than just allowing someone to physically enter our home. At the heart of hospitality is a willingness to allow others into our lives. To see us as we truly live. To know us and to be known by us. When we refuse to welcome others to see us as we truly are is to deny them the opportunity to share with us the grace that God extends to them.

An atmosphere of openness takes root as we release our incessant need to display a life that's always tidy, refusing others the chance to see God's wisdom and power at work in our confusion and weakness. While the Scriptures tell us that God desires our hearts be cleansed from sin, we must guard against thinking that we can come to a place where we no longer need to confess our sins to God or others. The fact is we are a work in progress. We all unintentionally misunderstand, disappoint, or even hurt others. One key to unlocking openness is to admit that, just like everyone else, God is still working on us.

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We must be willing to allow others to see that God is transforming us. That kind of transparency is inviting to others (who also don't have their lives all squeaky clean). And in a culture that fosters and encourages lying, that kind of honesty can become part of the transforming work God seeks in all our lives—insider and outsider alike.

Ultimately, a church that is characterized by genuine openness is one in which each member is obediently following our loving Savior. We cannot replicate the genuine love of Christ for the stranger in our midst apart from each member of the body surrendering fully to the work of the Spirit. Only as we allow Christ to dwell in us will we receive that same kind of passionate

love for others that Paul stirs up within the Church in Rome when he calls them to practice hospitality.

If you desire to be a church marked by openness, then go unlock the doors. Invite neighbors into your home. Give them an open door into your lives. Take the time to get acquainted. Enter into conversations that lead to a deeper walk with Christ., Let them see you for who you truly are, daily needing and benefiting from the cleansing and sanctifying work of God through Christ. ●

Reflect on this...

What are the barriers to building meaningful relationships?

What are the ways you can begin to create an atmosphere of genuine openness to others?



NOTES:

Handwriting practice lines consisting of 20 horizontal rows. Each row is defined by two dashed yellow lines, with a solid yellow line in the center of each row to guide letter height.

