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Reflections from the Field: Table Grace and A Biblical Call to Hospitality

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Reflections from the Field: Table Grace and A Biblical Call to Hospitality

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[BACK TO CONTENTS](#)





Vincent de Paul, as the patron of charity, blessing his good works from heaven.

Oil on canvas. Original in the Vincentian motherhouse, Paris.

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Christian hospitality has long been recognized as a vital aspect of the way of Jesus; but as Elizabeth Newman¹ has pointed out, hospitality often has been divorced from the life of worship of God's people and distorted in many ways. It can be spiritualized, privatized, and politicized. Hospitality can be sentimentalized as the art of courtly manners, or reduced to rules of how to give a nice dinner party. The art of being friendly, nice, and welcoming in social situations certainly has its place, but hospitality in the Bible is much deeper than that. The Scriptures talk about hospitality in many different ways, but the following three instances are fundamental to everything else.

First, the gift of hospitality is just that—a gift freely bestowed by the triune of God. The bedrock of true biblical faith is this: We worship and serve a hospitable God. From all eternity, this one God is within himself a holy community of giving and receiving, of mutuality and reciprocity. The eternal triune God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit has chosen to share his divine life with us in the most tangible of ways: as a baby in a manger, as a man on a tree. We are the face of God in the face of Jesus Christ, not only in his teachings, miracles, and example, as wonderful as they are, but also in the fact “the Word became flesh and dwelt among us.”² The mystery of the Incarnation, that “the Creator of the universe tucked himself into the womb of his creature,” is matched only by the wonder of the cross. On the cross, Jesus died as he had lived, with his arms outstretched to the world, his hands held there not by nails but by wondrous love.

Second, because God has chosen to share his life with us through the “unspeakable gift” of his love in Jesus, all who follow the path of Christ are called to share that same love with one another. St. Paul put it this way, “Be kind and compassionate to one another,

¹ Elizabeth Newman, *Untamed Hospitality: Welcoming God and Other Strangers* (Brazos Press, 2007), 236 pp.

² John 1:14.

forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you.”³ In a world marked by division, disunity, and inhospitality Christians are called “to make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace.”⁴

Third, and lastly, throughout the Bible, God’s gracious love and hospitality for his people is meant to be shared with all others: with unbelievers, with strangers, with the poor and disposed. Such hospitality is not calculating, but unstinted. “Evangelism”, said D.T. Niles, “is one beggar telling another beggar where to find a piece of bread.”⁵

These selected Biblical passages highlight the call to reflect on hospitality, to look closer at God’s word not merely as an academic exercise but in order to be transformed by it. We can then come together to listen to one another, learn, confess, praise, worship, and give thanks.



³ Ephesians 4:32.

⁴ Ephesians 4:3.

⁵ See Richard Stoll Armstrong, *The Pastor as Evangelist* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1984), 26.



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