



Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

Focus Article:

- 📖 Toward a Welcoming Congregation
(*Hospitality*, pp. 75-83)

Suggested Articles:

- 📖 Pass the Potatoes, Please
(*Hospitality*, pp. 71-74)
- 📖 Revelers
(*Hospitality*, pp. 46-49)

What do you think?

Was this study guide useful for your personal or group study? Please send your suggestions to Christian_Reflection@baylor.edu.

Christian Reflection

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Toward a Welcoming Congregation

In a world that has grown frighteningly guarded and harsh, Christian congregations are called to imitate the “table manners” of Jesus by being sacraments of God’s hospitality in the world. How do we become these kinds of congregations *in the Church* and *for the world* today?

Prayer

Scripture Reading: Luke 14:1, 7-14

Meditation†

The Jesus of Luke’s Gospel always enters upon the scene as a guest in need of hospitality. He has nowhere to lay his head, unless a kind host obliges. But on another level this man without a home is obviously the supreme host, the welcomer par excellence to God’s kingdom.

John Koenig

Reflection

“How do we forge bonds of friendship with the very persons we are trained to view suspiciously?” Paul Wadell asks. More often, he admits, “we build barriers because of ethnic and racial differences. We build barriers on the basis of economic, social, or political differences. Barriers pop up when differences of gender, physical or mental ability, educational background, or religion render us closed and inhospitable. Or we settle behind barriers on account of prejudice, grudges, unhealed hurts, or painful memories. Instead of nurturing friendship and intimacy, we foster disconnection and estrangement.”

Christian congregations are not immune to these forms of barrier building. “Christians tend to break bread within socioeconomic monocultures, homogenized enclaves where nearly everyone is of the same color and tax bracket,” Patrick McCormick has written. Some churches rally around political agendas of the left or right, and pitch their programs to an ideologically chosen few. Their evangelism looks suspiciously like brand advertising. “From the gospel’s perspective,” warns Wadell, this is “a dangerous predicament because it directly contradicts the behavior of Jesus who gladly sat down at table with anyone.”

To create congregations that “do not mimic and mirror the disorders, divisions, and discriminations of our societies, but work to overcome them by witnessing something more hopeful and promising, something truly of God,” Wadell urges us to:

- ▶ *embrace our Christian vocation of hospitality.* “In a world of terrorism and war, school shootings, road rage, and pervasive anger and discontent, it is no wonder that concern for safety and security frequently triumphs over hospitality to the stranger,” Wadell admits. Yet this environment “is toxic for the hospitality and generosity that enables us to see the poor, the homeless, the hungry and the needy, immigrants and refugees and prisoners, not as dangerous threats, but as Christ’s presence among us.” It diminishes our humanity, for we “are created for the communion and intimacy that are the fruit of an ever-expanding love.” Precisely in this culture of fear we must see hospitality as our Christian vocation, “because it is through hospitality that we offer



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the most compelling witness of who God is, who we are called to be, and what the world through God's grace can become."

- ▶ *focus our worship to celebrate God's hospitality.* Authentic worship, which praises and glorifies God rather than consoles and affirms ourselves, "schools us in the upside-down ways of God. At worship we hear the story of a God who is passionate about justice to the poor, vigilant in concern for widows, orphans, and refugees, and jealously protective of the vulnerable of the world." God's banquet – Eucharist, or Communion – "connects us to all the biblical scenes of feeding, welcoming, sheltering, and caring – scenes that vividly reveal *who God is* and *who we are called to be*." It reminds us that everything we possess is a gift, and this should make us both grateful to God and generous to one another. "In the household of God we are not owners but stewards, people entrusted to do good with whatever we have, especially to those strangers who are most in need."
- ▶ *become persons and communities formed in charity.* Wadell sees charity, following Thomas Aquinas, as "a life of friendship and fellowship with God through which the 'friends of God' model their lives on the incomparably expansive love of God." It is the opposite of "safe neighbor love," which is "calculating, selective, and restricted to all those we prefer to love because they are easy to love."

Study Questions

1. Do you agree with Wadell that we are living in "a culture of fear" characterized by increasing distrust, suspicion, and anxiety? What are some sources of this fear?
2. What barriers between people do some congregations build (or accept from the wider society)? How do these barriers deform those congregations' practice of hospitality?
3. How can true worship train us in gratitude and generosity? What are the main obstacles to such worship in our culture?
4. What comes to mind when you hear the word "charity" today? Discuss Thomas Aquinas's definition of charity as a life of friendship and fellowship with God. How would our hospitality be transformed if we embraced Aquinas's insight?
5. Discuss Jimmy Dorrell's observation that "reared in a culture of fear – of television broadcasts of crime, threats of litigation, and insurance disclaimers – we dismiss the scriptural appeals for hospitality as out of touch with reality."
6. Why was Veronese called before the Inquisition in 1573 to answer for his hedonistic painting *Feast in the House of Levi*? What does the Inquisitors' decision reveal about the Church's memory of Jesus' hospitality?

Departing Hymn: "Come, Brother, Sit with Me"

[†] John Koenig, *New Testament Hospitality: Partnership with Stranger as Promise and Mission* (Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press, 1974), 90.

Toward a Welcoming Congregation

Lesson Plans

<i>Abridged Plan</i>	<i>Standard Plan</i>	<i>Dual Session (#1)</i>	<i>Dual Session (#2)</i>
Prayer	Prayer	Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading	Luke 14:1, 7-14	Luke 5:27-32
Meditation	Meditation	Meditation	Meditation
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)	Review the focus article	Discuss the two suggested articles
Questions 2, 3, and 4	Questions (selected)	Questions 2, 3, and 4	Questions 1, 5, and 6
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

Teaching Goals

1. To discuss why our culture is characterized by increasing distrust, suspicion, and anxiety.
2. To examine how this “culture of fear” is a toxic environment for Christian hospitality.
3. To consider how congregations can become more welcoming.

Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 10-11 and ask members to read the Bible passage in the guide. Distribute copies of *Hospitality (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article and suggested articles before the group meeting.

Begin with a Story

Paul Wadell describes seeing an icon in an abbey in Austria. “In the background of the picture was a small town or community. People could be seen walking the streets of the town as they attended to the tasks of the day. In the foreground was a large table. Seated around the table were people sharing a meal. Everyone in the icon looked quite ordinary except for one thing—a glow or halo encircled the head of each person. The icon was entitled ‘Xenophilia,’ love and friendship for strangers.

“This title invited me to look at the icon differently, for it suggested that not everyone walking those streets or sitting at that table was a citizen of the town. Some were strangers and outsiders, immigrants from elsewhere... [yet they] could feel at home in this town because everyone was welcomed as friend. Instead of ‘xenophobia,’ the fear of the stranger that increasingly grips our society, this little town embodied the befriending hospitality of God. Everyone who walked its streets glowed with holiness because they truly had learned to love whatever neighbors came their way, especially those neighbors it is easy to fear and, therefore, exclude. Everyone in the painting radiated the goodness of God because whether they were host or guest, citizen or stranger, love was being given and received. It was a holy exchange that characterizes all true hospitality” (*Hospitality*, 75-76).

Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently. Conclude by asking God to overcome our fear of strangers with the welcome of divine friendship.

Scripture Reading

Ask a group member to read Luke 14:1, 7-14 from a modern translation.

Meditation

Invite members to reflect on the meditation during a period of silence.

Reflection

Paul Wadell sketches the self-understanding that animates a congregation to become more welcoming and practice Christian hospitality in our culture. The congregation (1) embraces hospitality as a specific vocation or calling that responds to the culture of fear, so that it sees hospitality as central to its discipleship; (2) repairs its

worship so that members are formed in gratitude for God's gracious gifts and in generosity toward one another; and (3) becomes a school of charity, where members become friends of God who imitate God's welcoming love.

You might extend this discussion to two sessions. In one session, review the current environment of fear and distrust that is hostile to true hospitality and discuss the self-understanding that animates a congregation to become more welcoming community. In the other session, review two specific examples of hospitality—Jesus' visit to Levi's house (Luke 5:27-32), which is depicted in Veronese's *Feast in the House Of Levi*, and the welcome that Jimmy Dorrell's family offered to three homeless men—for insights into Christian hospitality today.

Study Questions

1. What recent events make us afraid to travel to other countries, meet strangers, and so on? Discuss how we learn about violent local crime, international war, and dangerous diseases today. What role does partisan politics play in how we perceive others?
2. Congregations may intentionally or inadvertently erect barriers based on ethnic, racial, economic, social, political, or gender differences, as well as physical or mental ability, educational background, or religious differences. They might nurture "grudges, unhealed hurts, or painful memories." What are some subtle ways that congregations make the unwanted feel unwelcome?
3. Wadell highlights the role of Eucharist, or Communion, in uniting our hearts and training us to be grateful to God and generous to others. How can other acts of worship—singing together, praying with and for one another, meditating on Scripture, reciting words of an ancient tradition—train us to welcome others? A main obstacle is focusing on ourselves, rather than God. Our worship becomes a self-conscious performance measured "to uplift us, to satisfy us, to entertain us, or to meet our needs and make us feel good about ourselves."
4. "We typically equate charity with people who are thoughtful, nice, tolerant, and kind," Wadell writes. We may think of giving alms or helping the needy. Aquinas understood charity as an ongoing relationship with God in which we are drawn by God's goodness and model our lives on God's expansive love. "Animated by charity, [we] work to show to others the same befriending love that God shows to us. Any love modeled on the divine love cannot be cautious, narrow, or safe. It must always be willing to make room for the other, especially those others who come to us hungry, forsaken, homeless, or alone."
5. Discuss why many of us think it is unreasonably risky to share a simple meal or a common activity with the "poor, crippled, blind, or mentally ill people, ex-offenders, immigrants, or addicts." "Like most spiritual discipleship, movement toward hospitality to the stranger comes through baby steps, through consistent and growing acts of kindness in guided institutional settings," Dorrell notes. "Before we invite the homeless man into our home, we can visit the local soup kitchen or shelter to gain a new level of comfort among people who may come from a completely different background. We can volunteer at the food bank, lead a Bible study at an alcohol and drug treatment facility, mentor the child of an incarcerated parent, or tutor a young person in juvenile detention. With each visit, familiarity overcomes formerly imagined fears; we begin to notice our commonalities instead of our differences."
6. Examine the center of the painting and you would guess (correctly) Veronese was depicting the Last Supper. The Inquisition, following the Council of Trent's decree that Christian art should instruct the faithful in an appropriate manner, judged the painting was an irreverent treatment of its subject. Veronese did not change the image, but removed any irreverence by renaming it *Feast in the House of Levi*, a reference to Jesus' eating with tax collectors and sinners (Luke 5:27-32; cf. Mark 2:13-17). "We should realize that even the Inquisition had no problem with Jesus being the featured guest (and host) at a feast with a party atmosphere," Heidi Hornik notes, "as long as it was not identified as the more solemn Last Supper."

Departing Hymn

"Come, Brother, Sit with Me" is on pp. 53-55 of *Hospitality*. If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the hymn text in unison or silently and meditatively as a prayer.