



Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

Focus Article:

📖 Untamed Hospitality
(*Hospitality*, pp. 11-19)

Suggested Article:

📖 Host and Guest
(*Hospitality*, pp. 50-52)

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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Untamed Hospitality

While our culture reduces “hospitality” to friendliness and private entertaining, Christian hospitality remains a public and economic reality by which God re-creates us through the places and people we are given. How do we shift gears to practice untamed hospitality?

Prayer

Holy God our Host,
be our guest this day.

We welcome you

and seek your welcoming presence among us. Amen.

Scripture Reading: Psalm 23

Reflection

When the Apostle Paul urged the Roman Christians to “present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God” (Romans 12:1 ff.), he specifically instructed them to “be transformed [from the empire’s way of thinking] by the renewing of your minds,” “hate what is evil,” and “be patient in suffering” – all serious business for a persecuted little band in Nero’s capital city. Then this command: “Extend hospitality to strangers.”

What was he thinking? Today we view hospitality through the decorous images of *Southern Living* or *Ladies’ Home Journal* as “delicious dinners and polite conversation in one’s own beautiful home.” If it’s more than a private time with friends, we leave it to professionals in the “hospitality industry” of hotels, restaurants, and cruise ships. How could hospitality possibly be at the countercultural heart of early Christians’, and our, discipleship?

Christian hospitality flows from realizing we have been brought by the Holy Spirit into the very life of God. With this good news it builds communities that can welcome outcasts and strangers, and it publicly challenges the status quo of the culture.

We learn such “untamed hospitality” in public worship, for there “we do not gather ourselves; God gathers us; God invites us in,” Elizabeth Newman writes. “As divine host, God through Christ in the Spirit draws us into communion with himself and others, giving us desires we had not previously even imagined.”

We are taught to be not only guests, but also hosts in God’s Kingdom. As our worship spills over into all of life, we learn to:

- ▶ *share our resources in gratitude to God.* “The love displayed in God’s life,” Stanley Hauerwas has written, “is not a zero-sum game but one of overflowing plentitude.” Yet we find it hard to embrace the radical abundance of Christian hospitality, Newman concludes, “because we have been so deeply formed by living in a market society.... Consumerism, competition, and individualism already shape our lives.”
- ▶ *“stay put” in commitment to others.* Our culture shapes us to be ready to move for more money, a more “fulfilling” church, a less difficult marriage. We are taught “that through our choices we are our own creators, which is exactly what a market society with its relentless advertising campaign would want us to believe.” Christian hospitality “does not aim for self-fulfillment through



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autonomous choice...but for allowing God to re-create us” through faithful relationships.

- ▶ *honor and learn from those whom society has abandoned.* Newman admires the L’Arche communities where people with handicaps live alongside those without such handicaps. Founder Jean Vanier writes, “We have discovered that we have a common spirituality of humility and presence, close to the poor and the weak; a common call to live with them, not to change them, but to welcome them and share their gifts and their beauty; to discover in them the presence of Jesus—Jesus, humble and gentle, Jesus, poor and rejected.”

“Such hospitality is not an individual or even a communal achievement,” Newman emphasizes. “It is rather a gift to be received, and its faithful reception makes us part of something larger than ourselves: Christ’s own body.”

Study Questions

1. How, according to Elizabeth Newman, has the market “hijacked hospitality in a public and visible way” through the hospitality industry?
2. What distinctive features of Christian hospitality do we learn through public worship? How is each feature exemplified in your congregation’s worship services? In its ministries?
3. Newman commends the journey of Chicago First Church of the Brethren. How has it learned to practice a more faithful hospitality in the household or dwelling of Christ?
4. Discuss how Allori’s *Christ in the House of Mary and Martha* depicts our dual roles as host and guest in God’s Kingdom.
5. How are the virtues of Mary linked to those of Martha in Gerhard Tersteegen’s hymn, “God Is Here Among Us”?

Departing Hymn: “God Is Here Among Us”

God is here among us: let us all adore him
and with awe appear before him.

God is here within us: soul, in silence fear him,
humbly, fervently draw near him.

Now his own who have known God in worship lowly
yield their spirits wholly.

Come, abide within me; let my soul like Mary
be your earthly sanctuary.

Come, indwelling Spirit, with transfigured splendor;
love and honor will I render.

Where I go here below, let me bow before you,
know you, and adore you.

Gladly we surrender earth’s deceitful treasures,
pride of life, and sinful pleasures.

Gladly, Lord, we offer yours to be forever,
soul and life and each endeavor.

You alone shall be known, Lord of all our being,
life’s true way decreeing.

Gerhard Tersteegen (1729), altered

Tune: ARNSBERG (WUNDERBARER KÖNIG)

Untamed Hospitality

Lesson Plans

<i>Abridged Plan</i>	<i>Standard Plan</i>
Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)
Questions 1, 2, and 3	Questions (selected)
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

Teaching Goals

1. To review how our culture tames and distorts hospitality and to contrast this with the Christian practice of hospitality.
2. To interpret worship as our training ground for “untamed hospitality.”
3. To examine the relationship between our dual roles as guest and host in God’s Kingdom.

Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 2-3 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 article before the group meeting. For the departing hymn “God Is Here Among Us” locate the familiar tune ARNSBERG (WUNDERBARER KÖNIG) in your church’s hymnal or on the Web at www.cyberhymnal.org.

Begin with a Story

Chicago’s First Church of the Brethren shifted to untamed hospitality after the government began requiring them to obtain a “proof of poverty” from everyone who received surplus agricultural commodities through a government-sponsored program at their church. The assistant pastor Gilbert Bond notes, “The comic absurd part of the requirement became apparent when one reflected upon who else would wait in the Chicago winter outside a church for several hours to receive a five-pound brick of processed cheese if they could afford to buy it or a better grade of cheese in a grocery store.” In this dehumanizing situation, one young man erupted, “What in the [blank-blank] do you think all these people come here for?... Everybody lining up here is poor. If we weren’t poor we wouldn’t be here.”

Realizing that their distribution program was “incapable of mediating God’s hospitable Kingdom,...the congregation developed an alternative ministry of neighborhood fellowship meals that involved eating, singing, and praying together,” Newman writes. “Fewer people were served, but neighborhood children eventually started coming to church. Sitting down at a common meal with the folks in their neighborhood was much more risky (and less controlling) than giving food to people in line, yet it also made possible genuine hospitality. The economic practice of First Church moved from an impersonal handout to a faithful hospitality that enabled receiving as well as giving” (*Hospitality*, 17).

Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently. Conclude by reading the prayer printed in the study guide responsively. The leader begins and the group reads the lines in bold print.

Scripture Reading

Ask a group member to read Psalm 23 from a modern translation.

Reflection

This study guide introduces the Christian practice of hospitality by contrasting it with a contemporary, market-shaped view of hospitality. A companion study, “Entertaining Angels,” reviews the origins of Christian hospitality in the biblical story of Israel and the ancient Mediterranean practice of hospitality. It may seem odd to

talk about *Christian* hospitality, rather than acts of hospitality that happen to be done by Christians. The Apostle, after all, simply teaches us to “extend hospitality.” Yet every practice must be embedded in some story-shaped way of life. Thus, Paul is commending a hospitality that flows from the great arc of the biblical story, which is (in Newman’s words) “the strange truth that in Christ God has entered and redeemed our time and place.” Scripture offers many rich images of God’s hospitality, including Psalm 23 and the story in Luke 10:38-42 of Jesus’ visit to Mary and Martha, which frame this study.

Study Questions

1. While she is not opposed to eating at restaurants, sleeping in hotels, and enjoying a cruise ship vacation gift from her parents, Newman worries that the market is reshaping our view of hospitality in dangerous ways. She mentions that “hospitality is reduced to private entertainment, almost always extended to people more or less like oneself in terms of status and class.” Furthermore, when hospitality is consumer-oriented, we grade it by how much people are willing to pay for it. This pushes our hospitality toward a competitive performance, where we are ashamed to welcome others unless our homes are *Southern Living* beautiful and our meals are Martha Stewart tasty. She notes that “a marketed hospitality depends upon each day being just like every other, so that all days are interchangeable. Time is defined by consumption rather than by history, tradition, or personal relations.”
2. Newman highlights three distinctive features of Christian hospitality: it is a gift rather than an accomplishment or performance, expresses an economy of abundance rather than scarcity and competition, and is political rather than separate and individual. Worship reminds us that God first graciously welcomes us as a guest in God’s Kingdom, and then teaches us to be hosts to one another in this distinctive community. Second, God calls us into a community in which we learn to be faithfully committed and generous to one another, because God has first loved us in this way. Finally, we cooperate as members one of another, rather than treat one another as individuals bound by legal duties and operating by legislative procedures. Our hospitality is something we do together, as members of the Body of Christ.
3. After “the congregation came to realize that [a government food distribution] program, based on calculating who was really poor, was inherently violent and that some institutional structures are incapable of mediating God’s hospitable Kingdom,” Newman writes, they “developed an alternative ministry of neighborhood fellowship meals that involved eating, singing, and praying together.” Their welcome became more personal, risky, and open to honoring and learning from the people at the margins of society. Encourage members to discuss Newman’s observation that “such hospitality is a way of *being* before it is a way of *doing*.” What does the congregation’s new ministry communicate about the gospel?
4. Allori depicts Martha as a virtuous *host*, while Mary is Jesus’ *guest*, learning at his feet and holding a Bible in her hands. Yet Jesus is not rebuking Martha for her role. The painting reflects a long tradition of interpreting “Mary’s and Martha’s actions (and, by extension, the two women) as representing the crucial *vita contemplativa* (life of contemplation) and *vita activa* (life of action) respectively,” write Hornik and Parsons. “As Allori evocatively suggests in this painting, we must balance the contemplative Christian life with active work in our Christian communities. These two activities – thoughtful action (like welcoming the stranger) and meditation on Scripture – are complementary. Discipleship requires both.”
5. Tersteegen focuses on Mary (her sister Martha is not even mentioned in the hymn), yet she is presented as a *host*, which is Martha’s role in Luke 10:38-42. Mary invites God to “abide within me” as “your earthly sanctuary,” and offers to serve the Lord (“yours to be forever”) by “surrendering earth’s deceitful treasures” to him. In this way the hymn writer pictures worship as simultaneously hosting God and resting in God’s presence as a guest.

Departing Hymn

If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the hymn text in unison or silently and meditatively as a prayer.