



Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

Focus Article:

📖 **Boundary and Hospitality**
(*Hospitality*, pp. 84-89)

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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Boundary and Hospitality

In an increasingly pluralistic society, our words and practices of inclusion often reflect sentimental, sloppy thinking. To say everyone is included in our family of faith confuses *inclusion* with *welcome*—receiving another with pleasure, delighting in their being among us for a time, being hospitable.

Prayer

Scripture Reading: 1 Peter 4:7-11

Reflection

Caroline Westerhoff has good memories of her three days of spiritual retreat in a Trappist monastery. Through the monks' hospitality she sensed God's grace and in the quietness of their community she received God's direction. Bending herself to the distinctive rules and schedule—the Trappists observe a vow of silence in the workday, which begins with vigils at 4:00 a.m. and is punctuated by five prayer times and a worship service—was no hindrance at all, but rather a significant part of receiving the community's gracious hospitality. Nor did she feel unwelcome, she notes, when "a graciously worded paragraph reminded me that while I was welcome to attend daily community masses, as a non-Roman Catholic, I could not receive communion; prayer for the unity of the Church would be appropriate."

Westerhoff was comfortable because she knew that the rules and restrictions were boundaries to establish the monastic community, not barriers to keep her away. The monks made her feel welcome, though she was not included in their community. "One of the things my visit to the monastery stirred up in me was my long fascination with boundaries" which define identity, she writes. "Neither good nor bad in its own right, a boundary determines something that can be pointed to and named: a person, a family, a geographical region, a city, a town, a nation, a parish church, a denomination, a faith. A boundary provides essential limits, for what is not limited, bounded, merges with its context and ceases to exist in its own particular way."

How do barriers and boundaries function differently within a Christian community? Our rules, schedules, and restrictions become barriers when we deploy them to keep strangers out. Barriers form when we arrange our common life (many times carelessly and inadvertently, but in some cases intentionally) to encourage only "our kind of people"—those who look, live, think, and vote like we do—to join us, because they make us comfortable. We have many subtle ways of making the unwanted feel unwelcome. But this is not how the Trappist monks ordered their community. Their rules and guidelines of community prayer, Scripture reading and meditation, and manual labor are carefully designed boundaries that define their community apart from the world. They proclaim, "This is who we are; this is what we do and don't do." Yet outsiders (like Westerhoff) are graciously welcomed and cared for, provided they honor the monastic boundaries.

While barriers oppose the practice of hospitality, boundaries are essential for it. "We must have something into which we can extend authentic invitations," notes Westerhoff. That is why "the concept of boundary, put in a theological framework, can give us guideposts for faithful participation in God's reign."



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“We must have something to which we will give our lives if the Church is to endure with integrity and perform with courage, if the Church is to be at all different from the culture in which it finds itself,” she concludes. “We preach that Jesus is Lord of the Church, his Body.” Yet this central conviction opens us toward others. “Like Jesus, we are to welcome strangers and sinners into our midst, just as we ourselves have been welcomed into God’s hospitable company. But we first must have the baptismal identity and its boundaries intact before we can genuinely welcome all those who choose to come.”

The biblical call to practice “untamed hospitality” and welcome strangers into our community can make us nervous. We hear an inner voice warning, “That’s so difficult and dangerous today.” Is this nagging refrain the counsel of wisdom, warning us to establish good practices and necessary boundaries? Or is it our inordinate fear of strangers and our laziness urging us to erect barriers? We need hearts tuned to God’s grace and minds transformed by God’s wisdom to discern the difference.

Study Questions

1. How was Caroline Westerhoff *welcomed* but not *included* in the life of the Trappist monastery?
2. What would it mean in the life of your congregation to *welcome* but not *include* someone? Who would you not include?
3. Discuss the difference between a *barrier* to and a *boundary* for hospitality. Why are boundaries important? For Westerhoff, what boundaries are appropriate for a Christian community?
4. How are the boundaries for the Church described in 1 Peter 4:7-11, even as it calls for mutual love and hospitality?
5. “Spoken and written [boundaries] take on shape and power often through stories,” Westerhoff claims. “A shared common story is necessary for a community of faith.” Do you agree? From what story should Christian boundaries arise?
6. How does “In Memory of the Savior’s Love” express the central conviction and establish boundaries for the Church?

Departing Hymn: “In Memory of the Savior’s Love”

In memory of the Savior’s love
we keep the sacred feast,
when every humble, contrite heart
is made a welcome guest.

Symbolic of his broken flesh,
we take the broken bread,
the cup in token of his blood
that was for sinners shed.

Under his banner now we sing
the wonders of his love,
and so anticipate by faith
the heav’nly feast above.

Thomas Cotterill (1805)

Tune: ST. PETER (Reinagle)

Boundary and Hospitality

Lesson Plans

Abridged Plan	Standard Plan
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 distinguish between *barriers* that oppose Christian hospitality and the *boundaries* which are essential to its practice.
2. To discuss proper boundaries for a hospitable Christian community.
3. To examine whether the rules, guidelines, and practices of our congregations are functioning as barriers or boundaries.

Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 12-13 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 before the group meeting. For the departing hymn "In Memory of the Savior's Love" locate the familiar tune ST. PETER (Reinagle) in your church's hymnal or on the Web at www.cyberhymnal.org.

Begin with a Story

"Upon arrival and checking in, I easily found my sparsely furnished, pleasant room," writes Caroline Westerhoff about her three-day silent retreat at the Cistercian Our Lady of the Holy Spirit Monastery. "A single sheet of information on the small desk told me where I could go and provided the schedule for meals and times of prayer. A graciously worded paragraph reminded me that while I was welcome to attend daily community masses, as a non-Roman Catholic, I could not receive communion; prayer for the unity of the Church would be appropriate. I spent the rest of the time before vespers at 5:30 p.m. exploring my surroundings, soon discovering that signs on doors and fences gave me all the directions I needed: 'Women's Toilet,' 'Women's Shower Room,' 'To the Church,' 'Silent Area,' 'Please Do Not Enter—Cloistered Area.' I began to feel more at ease: paradoxically welcomed, greeted hospitably, as I became aware of the boundaries" (*Hospitality*, 84).

This experience prompted her to reflect on the need for boundaries. She was surprised to discover that the monks' strange rules, fixed schedules, and even convictions she does not share were a significant part of their gracious hospitality. These monastics were able to make her feel *welcome* even though she was not *included* in their community.

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 give the group generous hearts and discerning minds as they consider the proper boundaries of a Christian community.

Scripture Reading

Ask a group member to read 1 Peter 4:7-11 from a modern translation.

Reflection

We tend to be wary of rules and practices that exclude anyone in our 'do-as-we-want-to-do' culture. Because of this, we often confuse *welcoming* strangers with *including* them in our family or community. Caroline Westerhoff helps us see the difference. Hospitality requires proper *boundaries*, which define the family, group, or congregation

into which we welcome the stranger. It is helpful to contrast these proper *boundaries* to the *barriers* that oppose hospitality. The idea of barriers is developed in a companion study guide, "Toward a Welcoming Congregation."

Study Questions

1. She is given a modestly furnished but pleasant room. Meals are served on a strict schedule. Some parts of the monastery are cloistered. She may attend prayer services and the community mass, but she cannot take Communion because she is not Roman Catholic. She is a welcome guest, not a member of the community.
2. Discuss the privileges and responsibilities of members as opposed to short- or long-term guests of the congregation. Are these boundaries well-defined? Describe the expectations or explicit requirements of members in regard to beliefs and commitments, attendance and participation, financial support, and faithful practices of prayer, personal worship, and study. What congregational roles (of service or guidance) are restricted to members? Discuss how a guest could participate in and benefit from the life of the congregation.

What beliefs and practices would the congregation accept in a short- or long-term guest, but not in a member? Discuss why the boundaries are drawn in these places.

3. Paul Wadell ("Toward a Welcoming Congregation") says a *barrier* is allowing an important difference (e.g., in ethnicity, race, economic and social class, political ideas, gender, physical or mental ability, educational background, or religious belief) or past grudges, unhealed hurts, or painful memories, to render us inhospitable to a person. "Instead of nurturing friendship and intimacy, we foster disconnection and estrangement." These barriers can be occasional and unthinking, or we may institute them in explicit rules and restrictions. A *boundary*, on the other hand, involves shared "beliefs, understandings, and values or...[agreement] to abide by the same rules, regulations, and guidelines." It defines and establishes what a community stands for, but it does not prevent friendship with and caring for outsiders. With experience and increased understanding, boundaries can be modified.

"We preach that Jesus is Lord of the Church, his Body," Westerhoff writes. "This is why the Church's requirements and preparation for baptism are so important; why obligations of financial stewardship and participation in worship go far deeper than merely being means to pay bills and fill pews; why I believe the Lord's Supper is the meal of the baptized, not a social occasion of hospitality. This meal re-memembers us into the Body of Christ."

4. 1 Peter 4:7 alludes to the moral disciplines that shape our hearts and minds for prayerful attentiveness to God. Practices of mutual love, hospitality to strangers, and wise stewardship of gifts (of money, resources, and abilities) are mentioned explicitly (4:8-11). Our speech should be judged by God's self-revelation and our service should be humble (4:11). Jesus Christ is the measure for these moral disciplines and practices of the heart and mind (4:11).
5. Westerhoff writes, "For us in the Christian family, every time we gather for worship we are remembering the foundational story of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus and making it ours anew." She notes that it is important not only that we tell the *story*, but also that *we* tell it. "When children ask again and again to hear a story, they are really asking us to tell them who they are, to remind them of the fundamental definitions giving meaning and shape to their lives. But even if the story itself is slight, lacking in substance, the act of storytelling itself sets boundaries that speak volumes about safety and consistency. Any parent trying to cut short the bedtime ritual and stopped cold in the process can attest to this." How does telling the story of Scripture to one another build a relationship of mutual love and hospitality? What does this imply about our relationship to the beliefs and practices of Christians in earlier generations, from whom we heard the story?
6. The story of "the Savior's love" calls us to accept strangers as welcome guests. The boundaries are expectations on our guests (they have a "humble, contrite heart") and ourselves (we live "under his banner" and are oriented in faith toward "the heav'nly feast above").

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.