



Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

Focus Article:

📖 Entertaining Angels:
Hospitality in Luke
and Acts
(*Hospitality*, pp. 20-26)

Suggested Article:

📖 Finding Home
(*Hospitality*, pp. 67-70)

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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Entertaining Angels

In the books of Luke and Acts the ancient practice of hospitality — the custom of welcoming travelers or strangers into one's home and establishing relationships with them — becomes the prism through which Jesus' disciples can view one another and others as valuable children of God.

Prayer

Scripture Reading: Acts 9:43-10:48

Meditation[†]

Let all guests who come be received as Christ would be, because he will say, "I was a stranger and ye took me in".... By bowed head, or body prostrate on the ground, all shall adore Christ in them, who, indeed, is received in their persons.

St. Benedict of Nursia (ca. 480-543)

Reflection

For the early Christians, giving and accepting hospitality were essential to loving God and neighbor. This is especially clear in Luke's writings, where the practice of hospitality is an effective bridge for evangelization in the early Church and helps to unify congregations composed of members from diverse cultures.

In Acts 9:43-10:48, Luke weaves together three stories of hospitality to depict a crucial turning point in the spreading of the gospel — the welcoming of Gentiles into the Church. Peter accepts hospitality from Simon the tanner in Joppa (9:43 and 10:6), provides hospitality to Cornelius's messengers — even while he is a guest in Simon's home (10:17-23), and then accepts hospitality from Cornelius, a Roman soldier in Caesarea (10:24-48).

To fully appreciate this tapestry of stories, we must see them in light of the ancient Mediterranean practice of hospitality and the role it plays in the larger biblical narrative.

- ▶ *The practice of welcoming travelers emerged in antiquity to "neutralize potential threats — both threats to strangers and threats to one's community,"* writes Andrew Arterbury. The host protected a traveler from abuse by fearful townspeople and won the traveler's goodwill for the town. "If they both agreed, a host and guest might exchange valuable gifts that symbolized the formation of a long-term, reciprocal guest-friendship or alliance between the two of them and their families."

Why would anyone extend hospitality to a complete stranger, since it was so risky? A Greco-Roman host might welcome a traveler to avoid offending Zeus, the patron of hospitality, or to establish a strategic alliance. But in a Hebraic or Christian context, "a follower of God showed love for God and others by extending hospitality to complete strangers. In addition, though it was not the primary motivation, some followers of God likely were motivated to extend hospitality to strangers by their desire to cultivate God's blessings upon their own lives and households."

- ▶ *Hospitality is central in the biblical narrative.* The Church is "the household of God," inviting us to dwell with God (Ephesians



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2:19-20; 1 Timothy 3:15; 1 Peter 4:17). The instruction in Hebrews 13:1-2, "Let mutual love continue. Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it," echoes the stories of Abraham's and Lot's welcoming strangers who were actually Yahweh or Yahweh's angels (Genesis 18:1-16, 19:1-23).

Likewise, the risen Jesus mysteriously appears as a traveling stranger to disciples on the road to Emmaus (Luke 24:13-35). Arterbury notes how this story provides guidelines to Christian hosts: "Rather than shunning strangers, Jesus' disciples would do well to journey alongside them. Rather than exclusively *speaking* to those they encounter along life's journeys, Jesus' disciples would do well to *listen* first. Rather than deeming others to be foolish, ignorant, and of no benefit, Jesus' disciples would do well to assume that God might have revealed himself to strangers. Rather than taking things at face value, Jesus' disciples should realize that the Spirit is at work in the world around them."

Luke's writings on intercultural hospitality remain timely today, Arterbury says, for "even more than in the ancient world, we encounter travelers and strangers from vastly different regions and cultures. Some are traveling by choice (e.g., students and immigrants), while others travel by necessity (e.g., evacuees from natural disasters and refugees from war-torn regions)."

To share the gospel and mold congregations that reflect God's love in our mobile world that has grown defensive and harsh, we must allow God to move us past our prejudices. "Through the practice of Christian hospitality the church participates in God's peaceable kingdom," Darrell Gruder has observed. "Such hospitality indicates the crossing of boundaries (ethnic origin, economic condition, political orientation, gender status, social experience, educational background) by being open and welcoming of the other. Without such communities of hospitality, the world will have no way of knowing that all God's creation is meant to live in peace."

Study Questions

1. What roles did hospitality play in antiquity? Why would hosts welcome complete strangers into their homes?
2. What guidelines does Luke suggest for Christian *hosts* in the story of the encounter on the road to Emmaus (Luke 24:13-35)? How does Peter exemplify these in Acts 9:43-10:48?
3. What guidelines does Luke record for Christian *guests* in the commissioning of the seventy disciples (Luke 10:1-16)? How does Peter exemplify these in Acts 9:43-10:48?
4. How was hospitality essential to spreading the gospel and forming new communities of disciples? Is it necessary today?
5. Why does Kathy Callahan-Howell believe *listening* "is what makes hospitality the life-giving thing it is"? Do you agree?

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

† St. Benedict, *The Rule of Saint Benedict*, translated by Cardinal Gasquet (New York: Cooper Square Publishers, 1966), 91.

Entertaining Angels

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 10:1-16 and Acts 9:43-10:48	Luke 24:13-35 and Acts 9:43-10:48
Meditation	Meditation	Meditation	Meditation
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)	Discuss Luke's guidelines for <i>guests</i>	Discuss Luke's guidelines for <i>hosts</i>
Questions 1, 4, and 5	Questions (selected)	Questions 1 and 3	Questions 2, 4, and 5
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

Teaching Goals

1. To consider the expectations and motivations of hosts and guests in the ancient world.
2. To discuss the guidelines in Luke's writings for Christian guests and hosts.
3. To examine the role of Christian hospitality in the spread of the gospel and the formation of new communities of disciples, both in antiquity and today.

Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 4-5 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.

Begin with a Story

"Dinner at Granny's included a table set with linen cloth and napkins, a centerpiece of collected household items, a full set of silverware at each place setting, and even personal salt cellars. Everyone felt like royalty at Granny's table," remembers Kathy Callahan-Howell. "But hospitality at Granny's house extended far beyond cloth napkins and fancy silverware. Hospitality was a way of life, an attitude that honored the guest no matter who that person might be or how unexpected their appearance.... Granny knew how to listen. Guests not only felt welcome, but even valued. Time stood still there in Granny's living room as the visitors lingered, despite having said, 'I'd better be going,' multiple times" (*Hospitality*, 67-68).

Callahan-Howell concludes, "We can easily feel that a ministry of hospitality requires money to share food or lodging, when really the greatest treasure to offer is welcome. That requires little monetary expense but great personal risk, the risk of vulnerability" (69).

The books of Luke and Acts record how wary people from opposing cultures were transformed into new people, God's people, as they listened to one another over shared meals informed by their remembrance of God's welcome. It's a remarkable story of "entertaining angels."

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 for the grace to welcome one another, as well as strangers, as valuable children of God.

Scripture Reading

Ask a group member to read Acts 9:43-10:48 from a modern translation.

Meditation

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

Reflection

As the group reviews the hospitality stories in Acts 9:43-10:48, invite members to explore more generally the guidelines for Christian guests and hosts in Luke's writings. You may expand the study to reflect on the origins

of Christian hospitality in the biblical story of Israel and the ancient Mediterranean practice of hospitality. Put yourself into the biblical story and discuss the implications for sharing the gospel and building congregations that reflect God's love today.

You might extend this discussion to two sessions. In one session reflect on the ethical implications of Jesus' instructions to the seventy disciples about being a *guest*, and consider how Peter learns to be a guest in Simon the tanner's and Cornelius's homes. In the other, discuss the implications for being a *host* in the story of two disciples' encountering the risen Jesus on the road to Emmaus, and consider how Peter learns to welcome Gentiles into the Church.

Study Questions

1. Travelers in a strange land had no place to stay or eat. Robbers might assault them; local townspeople might abuse them out of fear of their power or ignorance of their customs. A host supplied the traveler's needs for food, provisions, and rest before inquiring about their identity, home region, or travels. "If they both agreed, a host and guest might exchange valuable gifts that symbolized the formation of a long-term, reciprocal guest-friendship or alliance between the two of them and their families," Arterbury says. Such "'guest-friends' generally showed more loyalty to their counterpart than to the people of their own region."
"In a Greco-Roman context, hosts were likely motivated by fear of an ominous stranger, by fear of Zeus, the god of hospitality, or by a desire to create politically advantageous alliances with powerful counterparts," he notes. "In Hebraic and Christian contexts...a follower of God showed love for God and others by extending hospitality to complete strangers. In addition...some followers of God likely were motivated to extend hospitality to strangers by their desire to cultivate God's blessings upon their own lives and households." God had blessed Abraham and Lot for welcoming strangers.
2. These guidelines are implicit in the story: "Rather than shunning strangers, Jesus' disciples would do well to journey alongside them. Rather than exclusively *speaking* to those they encounter along life's journeys, Jesus' disciples would do well to *listen* first. Rather than deeming others to be foolish, ignorant, and of no benefit, Jesus' disciples would do well to assume that God might have revealed himself to strangers. Rather than taking things at face value, Jesus' disciples should realize that the Spirit is at work in the world around them." Consider how Peter models these guidelines when he welcomes Cornelius's servants.
3. Arterbury mentions three guidelines: (1) Jesus wants disciples to depend upon hosts, even those who are not aware of Jesus' ministry; (2) they should "be grateful to their hosts and content with what they have been provided"; and (3) "Jesus' identity and message [rather than the disciples' prestige] will provide the focal points in the hospitality relationships that his disciples forge." Discuss how well Peter models these guidelines when he accepts hospitality from Simon the tanner and Cornelius. Is Peter an exemplary guest in other ways?
4. In Acts, "the custom of hospitality functions as the prism through which Jewish Christians are able to see Gentile converts in a new way – no longer as 'profane or unclean,' but rather as covenant partners in the community of Christians," Arterbury says. "As long as Jesus' disciples are imprisoned by the categories of clean and unclean people, they will never be able to enter into equitable hospitality relationships that allow for the spread of the gospel. God's first step in reaching out to the Gentiles consists of overturning the prejudices of God's messengers." Also, when missionaries took the gospel to new cities, some local people (often members of the synagogue) showed great hospitality to welcome them and listen to their message. Acts depicts their mixed responses to Paul and others. Ask members to discuss how cultural, ethnic, and age differences may block Christian community today.
5. Listening allows us to notice when another person needs our hospitality. In listening we "abandon our selves" and fully welcome the other person. She notes, "Our families are often the people the most in need of this gift of hospitality."

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.